

DEADWORLD

Philip Gilliver

ACT 1 - The Purple Land

And then there was silence.

Just after the accident, Jack and his little brother found themselves standing on a railway embankment, as still as silence, watching the police officers cover up their cold, bloodied corpses. Little Ross seemed oblivious to it all. He'd noted that the smaller boy, the one wearing the same coat as him, looked like him.

Jack instinctively covered Ross's eyes with both of his palms. 'It's not something for your eyes,' he said. It was obvious that Ross didn't yet know he was dead. Then he was always slow to catch on.

'Is he going to be alright Jack?' his voice quivered.

'Try not to worry about it!' Jack wondered why it was necessary to be standing in front of their cold bodies. Perhaps somebody was telling them to face the hard reality of the situation before moving on. He didn't want to look, he'd already seen enough after a few seconds. His body - no, it wasn't a body anymore; his soul was locked to the spot like frozen air. He'd tried averting his gaze, but less than seven feet away was a

man whose head was almost separated from his body. He had seen him before the blanket went on him. There was something thin, white sticking out of a hole in his chest where there was bubbling brown foam, one of the man's ribs. It was Jack's assumption that he must have been in the driver's area when it happened. The poor man had been thrown through the window. Ross hadn't caught on that his was the soul standing right next to them.

There were others on the embankment, five in all, two to their right and three to their left, each one in front of the body that until recently they had occupied. The sky, which was the oddest shade of purple, stained everything underneath the same hue, underlining the surrealism of the situation.

'Why aren't we going home?' Ross whined. 'Why are we standing here?'

'Quiet Ross... I'm thinking.' Jack didn't mean to snap, the situation was making him anxious. He turned to the man on his right, a pale, thin man in a dark suit. 'Excuse me, what are we supposed to do now?'

The man's head turned very slowly. It took ages for him to speak, when he did manage to emit words, it was something like a nervous whisper. 'I don't know mate. This is the first time in heaven.'

'Perhaps we should move. I don't think I want to be here for much longer. If anybody was coming for us, they'd have come by now.' In fact, Jack had a very bad feeling, that something horrible was about to happen, and right on cue, as if to speak his thoughts

aloud for him, there came the most disturbing sound from the clouds, like a thousand people screaming all at once, only more animal-like than that, an icy hand stroked his entire body.

All faces turned to the sky, where there were now hundreds of dark shapes, too many to count, enough to turn day into night. Suddenly there was a voice in his head which definitely wasn't his, yelling *'Run!'*

Jack glanced to his left and then his right. The sound appeared to have escaped the others. 'Ross,' he said in his brother's ear, 'when I say run, run!'

Ross's head rubbed against his stomach like a nestling cat. Then he heard it again.

'Don't just stand there you idiots; the Screamers are coming for you!'

'Excuse me,' he cried to his right and left. 'I think we'd better get out of here! I don't know what that is, but it doesn't look like a welcoming committee.'

The next time he viewed the dots, they appeared more alive, like enormous birds.

'Run,' he said to no one in particular and then yelled the words extremely loudly for the whole world to hear. 'Run!'

Jack grabbed his brother's hand and pulled him up the bank as fast as his feet would move. Ahead of them were woods. About half way, something in his head made him want to stop and turn, some morbid

curiosity, to see what these weird hybrids would do.

‘No!’ yelled the voice. ‘Don’t look, just run!’ But by now he didn’t need to see, the screaming and the carnage behind him said it all. In the corner of his eye he could see flashes of light, as if a number of things were exploding at once. Something painful and evil was happening to the other spirits, and now it was too late for them.

Keep running to me, and don’t look back!

‘What’s happening Jack?’ Ross was panting. ‘Where are we going?’

‘I don’t know, but everything is going to be alright, don’t worry! Keep moving!’

Soon they were surrounded by tall firs. Just a few feet ahead of them there was another boy. He was waving frantically. Obviously, feeling that they weren’t moving quickly enough, he started running towards them. ‘Whatever you do,’ he cried out as soon as they’d caught up with him, ‘don’t let them catch you!’

The owner of the strange voice was soon apparent, a boy with a round face, a mop of blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He was about the same age as Jack, fourteen or fifteen only not as skinny. ‘There isn’t much time,’ he said and stretched out his arms. ‘Hold my hands, both of you and close your eyes. Think of nothing but darkness!’

Jack stared at Ross, who was already staring back. He nodded. ‘Let’s do as he says.’

In the time it had taken for their eyelids to come together, all three of the boys had been transported into a dark place, a musty place that smelt of damp peaty earth. But it was warm, safe and comforting somehow, like parent's embrace.

'We're underground?' Jack quizzed.

'Be quiet!' the boy whispered. 'If they catch you they will do terrible things to you.'

'Like what? What can they do to us no we're...?' Jack paused, thinking about his brother, 'here?'

'Believe me, there are far worse things that can happen to you here. Now be quiet!'

Jack did as he was told, and waited for the terrifying noises to pass by before speaking again.

'How did we get down here so quickly?'

'It's something most of us can do. In time, you might be able to do it too, as well as other things. You have to be here for a while first before you know.'

'I'm scared!' said Ross, 'it's too dark.'

'I'll look after you mate,' said Jack, 'I always have haven't I?'

'It's safe now!' said the boy, when the commotion passed over their heads, then added, 'I'm Finch by the way. Excuse me for not introducing myself earlier, only our souls were in danger of being ripped apart.'

'I'm Jack and this is Ross. What the hell was that? What were those things?'

While he was talking, Finch did something else magical that made the roof of the hide dissolve into sky.

Everything was now clear, although significantly purple-grey again. The clouds resembled pink worms inching along dirty sand.

'I told you,' said Finch, 'They're Screemers, and if you see them again and you will, run like hell, and don't stop until your legs drop off, or you can't hear them anymore, and be careful of sharp things. In Deadworld even objects can destroy you.' Finch grabbed one each of their hands again. In the blink of an eye, they were back above ground.

Destroy? Ripped apart? Isn't dying enough? There was so much that Jack wanted to ask now, such as what these Screemers really were, where they were supposed to go now that they were dead? Was there such a thing as being safe in this place? Could he visit the living, and if he did, could they see him? Mostly, he wanted to ask what it was that could possibly happen to them that was worse than death.

From what he had seen so far, there was nothing positive to hang onto at all now, no angels, no harps, no rivers, no divine light. He wondered if this was purgatory, or hell. If so, what on earth had he or Ross done in life to deserve to end up here? All these questions had to wait.

As in the last year of his life, Jack kept his brother close to him. Since their parents died, it had become habitual and because he wasn't all that sure how much they could trust their new found benefactor. Trust, he'd always thought was something that had to be earned. He had trusted their father and been wrong

to do so.

Where they were going now was still a mystery. Jack asked several times on the journey through the woods, but Finch wasn't all that forthcoming. They moved along the dirt path in single file until they reached what resembled an empty area of ground.

'We're here!' Finch announced.

'Excuse me,' said Jack, 'where? We don't appear to be anywhere.'

'Watch this!' Finch stretched his arm out, and seemed to touch something. More curiously, his hand disappeared from sight. 'Follow me!' Then he vanished completely into the air.

As this was happening Jack felt his brother pulling away, as if he had no idea that he was just a ghost of what he was just yesterday.

'It's alright,' he told Ross, 'nothing is going to happen to you, I'll make sure of it.'

They walked into the space that Finch had, and ended up in some large room, with chairs and tables, cushions, books, normal things, and there were more children, who viewed them suspiciously.

'The house is not really here,' said Finch as if to confuse matters further, 'it's a small pocket in nowhere. You can't see it from the outside. Xandra discovered it.'

'And that's a good thing?' asked Jack, 'being nowhere?'

'The Screamers can't get us here. I would say that was brilliant.'

The two boys were quickly encircled by

strangers. There were four around them, mostly the same age as Jack. Sitting curled up in an alcove was a fifth member of the group, a girl with long blonde tied in a tight plat. She looked slightly older than the others although something about her suggested that she wasn't.

Ross clung to his brother tightly. 'I'm scared!' he whimpered.

'It's OK,' Jack whispered into his ear, 'they are just weighing us up, working out if we can be trusted or not.'

Finch addressed the others. 'This is Jack and Ross. I saw them arrive. There's been a crash where the tree fell in the night. There are bodies everywhere. A right mangled mess it is.'

'They still could be spies.' said the tallest of the boys.

'I doubt that, Lucas,' the girl pitched in, 'if they've just passed over what time have they had to become recruited?'

'Recruited by who?' asked Jack.

'The Screamers,' said the girl, 'they can't catch everyone so they need to persuade us to do it. That is why we can't take any chances. There's too much to risk.'

'Don't talk to them!' Lucas demanded. 'I'm in charge. I say don't trust them until they've proved themselves.'

'And what do these spies get in return?' asked Jack.

‘Their freedom!’ said the girl.

‘Why can’t we be free anyway? We’re_’ Jack stopped before he said the dreaded D word. ‘He doesn’t know. I’m going to tell him when the time is right.’

‘I’m still not sure,’ said Lucas, ‘we need establish the facts before we let them stay.’

‘We don’t even know where we are.’

‘Neither do we,’ said the girl. ‘Lucas calls it the Mortex, that’s because he’s a smart arse. You know, it’s supposed to be a play on words - mort for death and vortex. The rest of us call it Deadworld.’

As Lucas seemed reluctant, the girl introduced everybody. ‘In order,’ she said, ‘you’ve met Finch. Next to him is Malen, Lucas and Simo. Simo is the loud one – that’s a joke, he’s really quiet. I’m Xandra with an X. It’s short for Alexandra. Don’t ever call me that.’

Jack addressed this Lucas chap. ‘So, if you’re in charge, what are we supposed to do now we’re here?’ But his words seemed to have dissipated before they’d reached the ears of others.

Obviously sensing the tension in the room, Xandra suggested that she took the others outside for a private discussion. They agreed albeit reluctantly and followed. During their absence, Jack took the opportunity to prime Ross.

‘Mate, I don’t know where we’ve ended up, or if we can trust these kids, but this place is safe. I think we should just do whatever they say until we know what is happening.’

Ross nodded.

The others returned a moment later led by Lucas.

‘Alright,’ he said, his tone was different now, slightly friendlier. ‘So you’re not spies.’ He held out his hand to Jack who after a thoughtful pause shook with him. The same offer was made to Ross who did the same.

‘We’re all happy then?’ said Jack.

Malen, the short, angry looking one, shook his head in a slow and patronising manner. ‘Not quite, there is a little matter of the initiation test.’

‘And what does that involve?’ Jack frowned.

‘You have to get something for us, nothing too taxing, nothing heavy. In fact it’s as light as a feather.’

‘What is it?’ asked Jack.

‘A feather, stupid!’ said Malen.

‘Just get on with it will you!’ added Finch.

For the first time since his death, Jack had this overpowering urge to sit down, but he wasn’t all that sure it was possible when you are a ghost. It was force of habit. There were some chairs by the wall. A curious thought came to him. He wondered if he tried to sit if he would fall right through the seat the way they did in cartoons. So when Lucas offered he gratefully declined just in case the latter was true.

‘So what is so special about this feather then?’ Jack asked.

‘It belongs to a Screamer,’ said Lucas. At these words Jack began to panic.

‘You mean those things that earlier wanted to

rip us to shreds' he bellowed. 'No thanks, I think we'll leave.'

Jack started ushering Ross towards the door, where they were stopped by Malen. He did the special trick that Finch did in the den and made himself appear in the doorway.

'Is all this necessary?' Lucas asked. 'It's all so, ludicrous.'

'Not to mention childish!' Added Xandra.

'You don't have to worry too much,' said Finch, 'I mean you don't have to pluck it from his wing or anything. They fall out sometimes. There will be some around his house.'

'Who's house?'

'Gallow's house!' said Lucas.

'He's a renegade,' said Xandra, 'a fallen one. They say he tortures children's souls like the others do. He doesn't mean to, he's just used to it. He can't fly. He's been forbidden by his council. They took that away from him. So you will have some sort of a chance.'

'If you go you have to be back before dark,' said Lucas, and added again, 'this is a very bad idea.'

'And it gets dark very quickly here.' Malen snorted 'darker than anything you would have ever seen, the blackest black. That's when it's most dangerous. Just because you can't see things, it doesn't mean they can't see you.'

'Don't let him do this Lucas,' said Xandra. 'They're not spies!'

'You'll know it's about to get dark when you see

the veins in the sky,' said Xandra. 'When you see them, run and hide.'

Jack thought for a while. He looked down at his brother and around the room. 'What would be our chances away from this place?' he asked.

'None!' said Xandra, and of all of them he believed her the most.

This is such a stupid, pointless exercise, Jack thought. It would prove absolutely nothing and it was extremely dangerous. They had only been dead for about an hour and before they'd had a chance to get used to the idea there was this.

He originally considered leaving his brother with the others; only he wasn't all that comfortable with the idea. Above them the sky was the same as it was when they'd arrived. How sudden night was going to fall remained to be seen. What an odd world that can experience darkness at the twitch of a serpent's tail.

In order to get to Gallow's house they needed to go due east, or 'Go outside and turn right,' as he had put it so that simpletons could understand.

They hadn't been travelling long when something caught Jack's eye. It began with something sparkling in the air between the trees close to the ground. He told Ross to get down, and there they stayed until he could figure out what it was.

'Stay here and don't make a sound!'

‘What is it?’ asked Ross.

‘Dunno, I’m going to take a closer look.’

Jack began creeping towards it gingerly. When he was close enough, he saw it wasn’t just one light, but many tiny particles concentrated in a tight circle. As he watched, they grew wider apart and then larger and larger, sparkling with a multitude of colours until they formed the shape of a man. He was probably in his late forties and wearing a long, dark coat, which with his scraggly hair made him appear quite rough. The man glanced around him and smiled as if this was somewhere he’d expected to be, as if he was some mad scientist who had stepped into some matter transporting machine.

Jack was just thinking about whether it would be wise or not to approach him, when specs of light appeared again behind him, and he was sucked through a hundred bright holes, screaming, as if the process was causing him great pain.

‘Where are we Jack?’ Ross asked when they were close again.

‘Ross,’ said Jack, as grown up as he could possibly sound, ‘there is something I am going to have to tell you soon. You will have to be brave.’

Ross sounded impatient. ‘Why can’t you tell me now?’

‘We have to complete the mission first. The mission is stupid and pointless, but important. We don’t know much about this place, we need to learn. The new kids will only tell us if we earn their trust.’ Jack hoped

that his brother wasn't going to ask too many questions about where they were. He hadn't adjusted properly yet himself. All that he knew was that they were in a strange place where things are the other way around. This was death, and not like the death he learned about in church. There were no angels here, no choirs, no meadows of lush grass or people dancing. Only flying spectres that swoop out of the sky and take you away to do things to your soul they hadn't been told about yet.

While they were walking Ross asked him about the strange colour of the air. It wasn't cold, yet when he breathed out, there was a black cloud. Jack told him that it was the effects of the crash. They had both hit their heads on the seats in front of them sustaining minor head injuries.

Every now and again they would see other people in the distance. Some were see-through, while others were solid. It was as if this dreadful place was teasing them, by giving them flashes of the world they had just left. For instance, after they had travelled about another half a mile, some of trees ahead of them dissolved and in their place were some dishevelled buildings and a dirty brown road.

Jack heard a car engine near them. When it was close they hid behind a broad oak. He didn't see it before but now some time had passed he could. The car belonged to a park ranger. It stopped just a few feet away where there suddenly appeared a gate. The ranger got out and drew back the metal latch. The ranger's whole body was transparent like a ghost. This was a

world on the cusp of the world of the dead and the world of the living. In this one, the living were the spirits.

If this was true then the inhabitants of either could see the other. To test this theory Jack encouraged his brother to come out of hiding with him and walk past the ranger. As they did so the man didn't even look at them. Jack even pulled a funny face and although it brought a clumsy little smile out nothing happened.

Then the ranger, the buildings, the trees and the road, were gone.

According to Lucas, the Screamer occupied an old, run down shack dug into the side of a hill. When you see the dairy farm on your left, and your bodies are in line with the cow shed, then you are close. Then you head through the trees to your right.

But there was nothing like that yet. Then he remembered what happened with the ranger.

'We must be there by now,' he said to Ross. 'We'll wait here until we see something.'

'OK,' beamed Ross. 'But I'm not tired. Normally I would be by now, but I'm not. My legs aren't hurting or anything.'

Jack wished he could tell him why that was. It would have to wait until another time. He knew that his brother would do that thing he normally did. No matter what you said to him, there would be a million questions coming back. He wasn't sure his head could take that right now.

Soon, it would get dark, although there hadn't

been any signs yet. It was quite light, although dim. Yet there was no evidence of a sun in the sky, nothing moving around the Earth. No fiery ball dipping behind the mountains. Xandra said there was something in the sky before it went dark, now what was that?

As he was musing over all of this, thick hedgerows and cows appeared in a lush field. Now there was a farm nearby with Frisians with bulging udders, a dairy farm.

‘Can we go and see the animals?’ Ross asked, his eyes beaming bright.

‘No!’ said Jack sternly, ‘there isn’t time.’

Then something happened which he just knew was going to change his mind. A man and a woman in ancient clothes materialised several yards in front of them. They were holding hands. The woman was in a lemon Regency dress, the man was wearing a soldier’s uniform, a red, waist-length jacket with tassels, epaulets and gold braiding across the chest, white pantaloons and shiny black knee-length boots. Under the arm that wasn’t linked to the lady, was a black military hat. The woman smiled shyly at Jack and covered her face with the back of her hand. This was the first time he had seen anyone from any other time. The soldier so gallantly helped the lady over a stile and they drifted across the field towards the farm.

This was bad. It looked all too exposed, and somewhere close there was one of those damned Screamer creatures. ‘Hey!’ Jack yelled, before realising that shouting was probably a bad idea. ‘We need to

warn them, Ross. You stay here and I'll go after them.'

'I want to come with you. I want to see the cows.'

'Odd. They must have been dead for centuries, yet they appear to have just got here.' Jack was saying this to himself.

Jack was worried about the dark. What did that Malen kid say? It happens very quickly here?

He wished that he could do that thing that Finch could and magic them there and back with the touch of a hand.

'Please can I come with you Jack!'

Jack looked down, at that annoying cute little round face and those enormous, watery eyes. 'Fine! But you stay close to my side, OK.'

Ross nodded sharply.

They followed the ancients, who were suddenly quite distant now. Jack wasn't sure if he could be heard, but called out again. 'Hey, you two, you need to hide, it's dangerous here!'

Seeing them here, two people from a place so long ago, made Jack realise that the Deadworld occupied a space in the universe that had no grip to time at all.

He scanned the ever-so peculiar skies for danger. Then he grabbed his brother's hand and ran after them furtively, keeping his eyes in all of the places as he could at one time, a skill he would need to sharpen very quickly. They made their way over the stile and into the field; the couple were in full view once

more.

‘Hey!’ he cried out, and his eyes snapped again to the skies. ‘What’s the matter with you? Have your bloody ears fallen off or something?’

They were only a quarter of the way across the field, when there was that awful noise again, the one they had to run away from when they got there, a raucous screeching, like some enormous crows gargling with something painfully unpalatable. Jack knew shouting again would be a very bad thing. He pushed Ross onto the ground and threw himself to his side. Hopefully, the Screamers wouldn’t have seen them.

‘Keep your head down,’ he told Ross, ‘don’t look, OK?’

‘You are always telling me that,’ Ross replied. ‘Why are you always telling me not to look at things?’

Jack’s voice dropped to a whisper. ‘There are some things a small kid shouldn’t have to see.’

Jack had to look though; he needed to be absolutely sure they weren’t going to come after them.

The man and the woman stopped and glanced around them, still carrying the smile they arrived with, which dropped like lead rain. The man withdrew a sword and pointed it to the clouds. Simultaneously, he pushed his companion behind him, and she stuck to him as if people were extremely magnetic. The Screamers came from the direction of the farm. There were only two of them this time, and they hovered over the couple like harpies, tormenting them, taking turns to lash out at whatever they could reach. Now that he

could see them more clearly, he could see just how menacing they really were, and how macabre. They appeared to be a hybrid of man and bird. Their heads were covered in dark brown feathers and they had hooked beaks like birds of prey. Down to about the knees, they were men. After that, in replace of the lower legs were sturdy talons. Operating in twos seemed to work really well for them. The man lashed out at the closest one with his sword, and the other took the opportunity to grab his shoulder. When the Screamer released its grip, streams of swirling white light emerged from the puncture holes caused by the talon. The soldier tried desperately to cover them with his free hand. The woman too, attempted to help, but the holes rapidly turned into tears, and the man dropped to his knees. With the impact, he exploded into white smoke, which caused the lady to shriek.

Jack desperately wanted to help. He was never the kind of person to stand idly by while someone else is in trouble. 'You stay right here!' he told Ross, and waited to see him return a definite nod before doing anything else. Not that he had a plan. All he could think of to do was to try and find something sharp to wave at those horrible beasts. Perhaps if spirits bled light like that, then so did they.

The soldier's sword was lying on the ground without the grasp of a hand, and the Screamers were now focused on the woman. Jack realised that for her sake, whatever he was going to do, he had to do it right now. He stared hard at the sword in want of a hand and

before he could think of any reason not to do it, ran to it as fast as his new spirit legs could carry him. His eyes never leaving the grip until his own hand was upon it, he snatched it into the air and held it over his head.

‘Stay as close to me as you can!’ he instructed the lady, who did that regardless. The two of them spun one way and the other as the Screamers continued to pursue them. But Jack was determined they would not get too close. Viciously, he thrashed the air with the blade, left and right. Both attackers retracted instantly. Jack's thrust were swift and sharp as if absolutely everything he believed in depended on it, as if raw anger was the key to defeating these damned things.

‘What are those wretched beasts?’ The woman whimpered. ‘What did they do to my George?’

‘Questions later, missus!’ said Jack. ‘Let's just concentrate on being safe for now.’

The two Screamers hung in the air for a moment longer and then landed together in front of them. One, the slightly taller of the two, nodded to the other and then spoke gruffly. This came as something of a surprise to Jack. ‘You are wasting your time, child. Once you see a Screamer you have met your end. That is what they say here.’

‘So you speak,’ said Jack. ‘Then you can reason.’

‘Don't waste your time, boy. There is nothing you can say that could be welcomed by ears.’

The birdmen started towards them. Jack held out the sword. ‘Stay back!’ He commanded.

‘You might as well yield boy,’ said the Screamer.

‘If we don't get you now, we will the next time.’

‘Why do you want to destroy our souls?’

‘What does it matter to you, boy? It will be your end and you will not need to worry about it.’

‘You must get something out of it.’ Jack was moving back towards the woods as he spoke, wondering when it would be wise for them to break into a run.

‘Like the world you have left, there is an order to things here. You are all prey, we are predators. We need your energy, and we have to get you before you reach Hevane and before the ground beasts.’

‘Hevane?’ Jack quizzed. They moved back a little further, slowly. ‘Is that anything like, Heaven?’

‘It is said.’

‘So this isn't it, there's another place?’ Jack never believed that even in such a tense situation, he'd be pleased to hear words come out of this creature.

‘Like I said,’ the Screamer replied. ‘You will never get there. Energy prey is important to our continued survival.’

Jack turned his head to the lady first and whispered. ‘When I say now, grab my hand and head to the woods.’

‘Young sir!’ Replied the lady. ‘Holding hands with a stranger would be inappropriate conduct.’

‘Well, who's going to know?’ said Jack. By now, they were close to the dip where hopefully, Ross was still hiding.

The two souls continued to reverse, now more

quickly. Soon they reached the place Jack had left his brother, but to Jack's utter horror Ross was gone. He casted a glance towards the woods, perhaps he was there. He'd once remarked that trees were like tall soldiers that made him feel safe. When he was picked on in school, he would slip the gaze of the teaching staff and head for the park where they were plentiful. There was no sign. When he turned back, the woman shrieked again. There was a talon close to his face. Jack struck out with the blade and the Screamer exploded with a huge, white cloud which shot into the sky with a streak like a rogue firework. As it did so, it knocked the other onto the ground. Well, that was one out of the way at least. The remainder looked just as keen to finish the two off. Of course, Jack thought, this one would be even more so, it would get all of the life force for itself. It took to the air again and flew round them in a wide circle, like a lonely vulture waiting for a starving zebra to drop down dead in the heat. This one was going to come in fast and sharp. Still reversing, he held the sword good and steady at an angle with both hands. 'What's your name?' He asked the lady, who now the reality of the situation had sunk in, was shaking even more.

'Olivia,' she replied with a quiver, 'Lady Olivia Broughton.'

'Olivia, leg it!!'

'What about you?'

'Don't worry about me. Look for a small boy, he's called Ross. If anything happens to me, keep him

safe.'

But that wasn't necessary. Behind them boomed a gruff voice. 'Leave them be, Skaron!'

'Why should I listen to an outcast?' This Screamer had quite a weedy voice for something so menacing.

'Remember I was once your leader, and what I did for you in the war with the Snipers.'

Jack turned around slowly. This was indeed one of their kind. Only this one was a little more weather beaten, as if he'd been around the block, seasoned. His wing feathers had been ruffled and there were scars on his chest, his arms and around his beak and eyes. This one spread his wings out to full span, which forced the other back. He was nervous.

'Come now, Gallow,' it shivered, 'you know you are forbidden by the council to take flight, or act on your betters.'

'Huh?' Gallow scoffed. 'You have never been my better, Skaron. I have never betrayed my legion like you have.'

'Just words Gallow, that's all. No one will listen to you. You are the dirt beneath the feet of the land spirits.'

Jack could feel the tension in the Screamer behind him.

'You would be wise to take to the air,' it said. 'Before I forget which one of us is the better and which one is the dirt.'

With this the other flew off, but not before

firing off another insult at a safe distance.

Jack turned round again, hoping that his instincts were right, and this Gallow was indeed to be trusted. 'What are you going to do now?' He ventured. The sword was now hanging to his side not to come across as a threat, but still in his hand.

'I'm not going to consume your life force,' he said. 'I have been forbidden.'

'Then how do you live?'

'There are mushrooms in dark, damp places. Now be on your way child, before I recall the thrill of the hunt.'

'I need to find my brother first'

Gallow moved aside to reveal Ross, who sitting cross-legged on the ground, he was smiling. 'Take the boy and go,' he said. 'And if you see me again, then run. The urge to kill when you have been doing so for so long, can be strong.'

Jack helped Ross to his feet. He gave one more glance at the strange bird man now walking away from them and wondering if he should have said thank you. While he still had his brother's hand he began pulling him in the direction of the hideaway. 'Well,' he said, 'no feather. You know what? I don't care.' Then just as Jack thought things couldn't get any worse, in one sharp blink it was night.

What a bleak and dreadful place this was, where fear was as abundant as oxygen, where there was nothing pleasant, nothing bright at all and the blackest of nights could fall from the sky like a stone cloud.

Jack wasn't the type of person to let things beat him, no matter how bad these things were. Despite anything ever said of him to the contrary, he knew he was quite bright. It occurred to him that if night could come as sudden as that then so could day. He also knew that they would stand a better chance of avoiding the night patrols if they found somewhere that was not in the open to hide until day returned. The only thing he could think of to do was to go back into the heart of the forest, where they could cover themselves with leaves. Perhaps they could hide their scent by smearing themselves in mud. This wasn't to prove to be an easy task as night of this world was blacker than they had ever experienced. Technically they had both become temporarily blind to the world. Now deeply confused, Jack had to think hard about where the forest actually was. After several careful foot treads, he stretched out his arm and could now feel the hedge. This meant that the forest was close.

Jack told Ross to hold on to his arm and not let go, until told. He said not to worry because everything was going to be alright. Ross responded with a snuffle and a sobby, 'OK!'

Slowly and carefully they moved off. With his spare hand Jack swept air from right to left. Soon the ground at their feet was making a rustling sound, this

meant trees nearby. Jack shuffled his feet as he moved so that it was easier to detect thick layers. But they hadn't gotten far before he lost his footing and they went tumbling down a steep embankment.

'Are you alright?' Jack asked Ross.

'Yes!' Ross whispered back, 'where do you think we are?'

'I think we're back by the railway track. We'll have to find a place to hide. I'm sure we haven't got long before they come.'

Jack felt around on the ground. Quite close there were tree roots. He followed them with his palm and was pleased to find that they led to a hollow at the base of wide trunk.

'Good news,' he said, 'a hole. We can slide in there and cover up with leaves until the light - all cosy.'

There seemed to be plenty quite close, big ones too. They were cold and damp as some time it had rained and the shade had kept them way, but that didn't matter. The boys were snug to a fashion and safe. They were covered so well that if in order to see anything of them you would have to look really hard. Only then all you would probably only see Jack's right eye, which was keeping a very careful look out.

There wasn't all that much to see for a while, just sounds, whistling sounds that could have been the wind and red dots in the sky which could have been a plane off to some foreign land. Then a distant foot snapped a twig and the peace and the comfort was shattered. Jack tried not to be afraid.

‘Try to be still and they’ll pass by!’ he whispered, and hoped very much that would be the case. Only instead of passing by the sound grew louder. Jack could feel the pounding of his brother’s heart against his shoulder and his breathing quickening. Above them something shuffled to a halt. Two hands brushed away the leaves. Jack sensed something tall standing over them.

‘You must come with me!’ a gravel voice said. The boys started to shuffle away. ‘Please don’t harm us,’ Jack pleaded helplessly, Ross sobbed behind him.

‘I am beyond that,’ said the voice, ‘what are you doing in the forest?’

‘We’re new here,’ said Jack, ‘we’re lost. We don’t know this place that well. We thought that if we joined the others we’d stand a chance.’

‘Others?’ There was laughing, ‘do you mean those idiotic children?’

Jack nodded, and then realised how stupid it was in the dark.

‘They think I can’t see them but I can. They think I couldn’t find them if they didn’t want me to but they are all amateurs.’

‘They don’t seem to think so,’ said Jack.

‘Believe me they are.’ There was a cold, long pause and then the voice said, ‘Come and breakfast with me.’

‘Why?’ asked Jack.

‘You ask a lot of questions, ‘that isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It seems to me that you need my wisdom if

you want to survive here. There are things that you should know.'

Jack was confused, 'But aren't you one of those...?'

'No more talk,' said the voice. A hand grabbed his forearm and pulled him to his feet. From the fuss Ross was making, it had grabbed him too. 'I'm Jack,' said Jack, and this is my brother Ross.' They began walking back up the embankment. 'And you are...'

'There are some cultures that still believe that if you know a person's name you can own their soul,' said the Screamer, and then added, 'Jack, the human!' loud and clearly.

'But we know your name,' said Ross before taking a step back, 'we were told by those other boys.'

'Then why did you even bother asking?'

'We thought it was polite to ask anyway,' replied Jack. 'I know who you are now. You are that Screamer who saved us from the others.'

Daylight returned, and they were soon standing at the door of the house. Not that this was Gallow's house, such strange notion that even dead people needed a home.

'Is that how long it usually lasts?' Jack asked Gallow.

'It varies. Sometimes an hour. Sometimes, a minute. Sometimes days.' Gallow stroked the door with his palm and it turned transparent enough to see what was within. What should have been a rundown out house was in fact a proper home with a table, some

chairs, books and pictures on the wall.

Gallow went inside. Ross grabbed Jack's arm and stopped him.

'I'm sure it's OK,' said Jack, 'if he was going to swallow us he could have done it sooner.'

The boys followed Gallow where he was now pouring himself some water from a glass jug. 'So how long have you to been here?'

'It's hard to tell,' replied Jack, 'it feels like since this morning, that was when we took the train.'

'The one that crashed,' said Gallow, 'water?'

It hadn't occurred to either of the boys that they could drink or eat, certainly Jack, who was well aware of the circumstances. Who had ever heard of ghost swallowing water, where was the need?

'You mean because you are d...'

Jack shushed him. Gallow looked at Ross and nodded. 'I see,' he said. 'Well you will have to tell him soon. Only when you know, can you move on.'

Gallow said that in the meantime it would be a good idea for Ross to be distracted somehow. He led the boy, who felt less in danger now, over to the bookshelf and introduced him to some books with pictures in. Then giving him a playful tap on the head returned to Jack.

He pulled out two seats, one for him and one for Jack and they both sat. He then continued.

'Jack, you and your brother have entered a world in between the living and the dead. You may have noticed that things are the other way around here, the

dead appear solid forms and the living resemble ghosts.'

Jack nodded, as disturbing as it was talking to a man with a bird's head.

'This is a terrible place Jack,' Gallow continued, 'a dark place where nothing makes sense. The day and the night are as one and you can never trust your eyes even if you wanted to.'

'Sounds like an impossible place,' said Jack, 'please may I ask you something?'

'Go ahead!' Gallow found another glass and poured some water into it for Jack.

'If you are one of those Screamers, why did you help us?'

'I am not like the others,' said Gallow, 'I am an outcast, a fallen one, I did something I shouldn't have, let us leave it at that.'

Jack apologised. 'What is the purpose of this place?'

'It has no purpose,' said Gallow, 'it is nothing but a corridor to something better or worse.'

'Better?' this was good news, 'there is somewhere else?'

'Yes!' said Gallow, he dipped his beak into the glass and sucked the rest of the contents. 'You say you are doing an initiation test? Well this whole place IS a testing ground. In order to get to be somewhere better, you have to prove yourself.'

'How?'

'There are many things here that you need to overcome, many things to battle, and when you have

defeated enough, completed all of the tasks, then you can get into Hevane.'

'You mean Heaven?'

'Call it what you will,' said Gallow, 'unless you want to stay here for the whole of eternity you must find the battles and win them.'

'So what do we do now? Can we stop here with you?'

Gallow shook his head, 'You cannot,' he said, 'the others of my kind come to check on me every now and again. If they find you here they will take your souls.'

'You mean they don't eat them,' Jack thought about the man and woman earlier.

'Swallowing your soul is just the beginning of a long period of torment,' replied Gallow, 'please don't ask me the rest.'

It was Jack who finally asked for the feather. It was after Ross did that odd stare, as if to spur him to say something.

Gallow looked at him strangely as a man with a bird's face could. 'Very well,' he plucked one from his wing and handed it to him. 'I admire your courage. There aren't many who would dare ask a Screamer to do what I am doing. These things are supposed to be sacred to us. There are those who say that our feathers have mystic powers.'

After they had rested they were directed outside, where they were advised to return to the other boys for their own safety. Extreme caution was also advised,

until they knew them better. At least they had the feather to gain their trust.

So now at least, Jack knew that there was something better, however getting there wasn't going to be easy. He wondered if the others knew about Hevane or if any of them had tried to get there. When he and Ross returned to the hideout there was no sign of anything or anyone. Then he remembered what Gallow had said about never trusting their eyes. Finch had also mentioned that the place was in the pocket of another dimension away from the Screammers. This meant that it wouldn't always be invisible on approach.

'Hey!' Jack called out, 'We've got your feather, how about showing yourselves?' By now he was quite angry. What they had been through had knocked them both about. Their lives had been bad enough without the hereafter being the same.

For a while nothing happened. Eventually a head emerged from the air. It belonged to Finch. Jack held out the feather, 'Good,' said Finch, 'you got it!'

Finch's head vanished again, a few seconds later the doorway appeared. To Jack, this all felt like some bizarre children's story where there was a frozen realm and an ice witch. The Screammers eating the souls had been the worst so far.

It appeared Ross was also confused. On the way back he asked why Gallow was wearing a hawk costume

and what all of the screaming stuff was about. There was a golden opportunity handed out to Jack with both hands to explain the truth. But there was so much innocence in the boy's eyes, so much to destroy. He ended up telling him that they were in a place where people liked to play games, and that people in some places had peculiar customs. Then the tension in his face deflated giving way to a smiling reminder of his old self.

When they re-entered the hideaway they found themselves once again at the centre of a circle of people.

Lucas took the feather from Finch and held it up close to his face. 'Yep, looks like a Screamer feather,' he said and passed it on to Malen who as soon as he received it pulled a face as if he had just bitten into a lime.

'Could be, or could be fake,' said Malen. 'Tail feathers of some birds look very similar to Screamer wing feathers, could be magpie or rook.' He then let it fall from his hand as if it was something disgusting.

This action caused Jack to swell with anger. After what they had just been through this was an insult. He decided to be patient though.

'It's real!' he said loudly, clearly.

'It's not like the ones that I've seen,' Malen sneered. 'I reckon they just found somewhere to hide and sat it out.'

'I believe him,' said Xandra, she came through the door behind them. She was carrying a basket of mushrooms. It seemed that Gallow was right, spirits did

eat after all. 'If the feather isn't enough, asked them to describe Gallow's house.

Jack had a pretty good go. It was more like a shed from the outside, a little more inviting once you step through the door. There were a lot of leaves hanging off the roof, as if to camouflage it from enemy aircraft. When he told them they'd actually met Gallow himself, talked to him and described his voice, they all fell silent and still.

It was Malen who destroyed it all. 'Ha! You met Gallow and you are still here? Come on!'

'He's quite a nice person when you meet him,' said Jack, 'he helped us – twice!'

'He didn't tell you why he was cast out by the others then?'

After a brief discussion, it was finally agreed they were allowed to join the group of lost souls. That afternoon they even laughed about it as they sat around the table eating the mushrooms, the sensation of which was most peculiar. They didn't taste of anything at all, or have any kind of texture. Xandra said that in this place it didn't make any difference if you ate or drank. It was just force of habit from the days when they were alive, routine and habit. However if you had a powerful enough imagination sometimes you did experience something like taste. It was Ross though who was the most bothered by it. Ross would usually ask a lot of questions when something was on his mind.

'It's because you banged your head, on the train,' Jack told him for the umpteenth time.

The time for telling him the truth would have to be soon, he knew that even more now. While they were, or were not eating, he brought up the subject of Hevane and Malen laughed mockingly.

‘Did I say something funny?’ asked Jack.

‘That doesn’t exist.’

‘Has anybody ever looked?’

‘Why do you think we’re still here?’ said Finch, swallowing another ghost mushroom.

‘So you’ve tried,’ said Jack, ‘it’s only that whatever this place is, it’s pretty bleak. There has to be somewhere better when you, you know...’

Xandra obviously felt she should intervene. ‘Tell them Finch!’

‘OK,’ said Finch, ‘when we first arrived, me and Xandra, we saw the Screamers and ran like hell. Somehow we managed to survive. The next day we went to the valley to get further away from them. There are three mountains. The tallest goes beyond the clouds. We started towards that, but...’

‘But what?’ said Jack, curiosity had gripped him by the head.

‘There are other creatures there,’ said Simo. This was the first time that Jack had heard him talk since they got there. He was quiet like Ross, a mouse. Much like Ross did when he spoke he would usually recoil back into his shell straight afterwards.

‘Other things?’

‘You don’t want to know,’ said Xandra. ‘Eat up and I’ll show you some safe places to go to in the forest

if you need to.'

After lunch Xandra was true to her word. Of all of the group Jack liked her the most. She was the warmest and the wisest. He felt like she knew them. He even took time to notice when things were quiet and his mind could wander that she was also pretty. Xandra didn't smile all that much, then for what Jack had seen so far there wasn't all that much to smile about. He didn't get too close to her, even though she was the friendliest member of the group. Finch had given him such a look as they went out of the door.

Ross also went along, another force of habit. Of all the time that he could remember about the time after their parents died there wasn't one day he could recall that didn't contain his brother following close behind wherever he went. He missed the days when he was loud, bouncy and annoying. When that horrible day happened he became a broken toy.

But for him and for Finch, Jack thought he might have liked to have gotten closer to Xandra.

They first went back to the hole in the ground where they hid with Finch and then to five more similar ones.

'These are safe,' she said, 'but only for a short while. As soon as they pass you must run back to base.'

On the other end of the forest there was another one of the dimensional pockets. This one was a lot smaller, like an invisible wardrobe more than anything else. For two people in serious danger it was perfect.

‘So how does that transportation thing work then?’ Jack asked her.

‘You close your eyes and think of a place quite near,’ said Xandra. ‘It only works at short distances though. In another week you’ll be able to do it and telepathy too.’

‘How come?’ said Jack and met a very puzzled expression.

‘What do you mean?’

‘If we can’t do that when we are alive then how come we can here?’

‘Nature!’ said Xandra. ‘When new dangerous things are introduced then prey adapts by evolving new skills that level things out.’

Then, it all sort of made sense somehow. There were creatures which have poisonous skin, long, strong legs, tusks and the ability to look larger and more aggressive. In each case it made up for a biological unfairness. There were trees too that made good hiding places, with deep hollow trunks enough to conceal a whole body if you knew which they were. So much to help you if you could remember where it all was it seemed. Useful places if you couldn’t yet move with the power of thought yet.

Obviously they couldn’t be out long. Xandra said that Screamers could smell a soul on the breeze.

They had to go back but at least Jack knew that they should be safe if ever they were out. They learned more about the were red veins in the sky then it was about to get dark. Xandra had timed it in her head. It

left a twelve minute window to get to one of the safe points. He was glad they set off again when they did. He could feel eyes upon him. Not from the sky this time but from the ground. Then it had already been said that there were many things about to be scared of.

A few days past and the boys were beginning to get used to the place and the people. They knew that Xandra was nice, Lucas was in charge, Simo was the quiet one and Finch was a mystery. One thing Jack noticed about Finch was that his eyes were on him a lot, especially whenever he was talking to Xandra. One explanation for that might have been that they had crossed over together. In life they had been good friends and did a lot together. Quite obviously he was jealous.

Jack tried a few times to appease him. One morning he spotted him sitting alone on a rock and he went over to talk to him. He asked him what kinds of things he liked to do and what he was missing from the old world. Finch erupted like dormant dragon which had been kicked in the head.

So for a while he kept his distance, although Jack remembered that he hadn't properly thanked him for saving him and Ross when they arrived. Jack had the distinct impression that he was beginning to regret doing that.

When a week went by Jack noticed that his head was doing strange things. He was feeling fuzzy, and his thinking was slow. Xandra said that this was part of the change and his powers were coming early.

Xandra was the best person to guide him through this. All the same he made a point of asking Lucas, while Finch was in the room.

Any signs that Ross's powers were coming were non-existent, so Xandra took Jack out into the forest, she insisted. During this time Ross had found a friend in Simo, Jack was happy about that. In life Ross didn't have any friends at all. For the first time in ages Jack went out without him. It was quite liberating if he was honest.

They went where the trees were closer together, where Xandra made him wait while she hid.

'We'll start with telepathy,' she had said, 'that usually comes first. I'll think of a question. When you hear it, send me the answer.'

Jack was inside one of the hollow trees at the time for his own safety. There, he counted to fifty and then closed his eyes in order to focus on the message. As his head was still a little fuzzy concentration wasn't all that easy. He tried to clear his mind in order to let things in from the outside. For a while he thought there was Xandra's voice then he realised that it was just the memory of her giving him instructions. Even the sound of his own breathing was distracting and the sound of birds in the undergrowth. Jack's head had been extremely busy lately. Thinking about nothing at all was difficult. Then he heard the question, loud and clear there was Xandra's voice in his head.

What colour are my eyes?

What kind of a question was that? He thought, and then cursed himself for thinking that.

Blue, he thought, even though he knew too well that they were green, and then hazel. For a joke he settled for the most outlandish colour he could think of, purple. Purple like the sky.

Xandra was very quick to return an answer.

Purple like the sky eh? They are green like sparkling emeralds, you idiot.

When she returned he said nothing for a moment and then burst into a smile. 'Of course I knew they were bloody green,' he beamed.

'Good,' she said, so that works then. Now grab my hand and take us back to the hideout.'

Jack was a little embarrassed about touching her. He thought about Finch's eyes burning into him. Then he recalled what Finch did when he ported them all to the underground place. He grabbed both of their hands and thought of the place he needed to be.

However, when Jack tried it nothing happened.

'Don't worry,' said Xandra, 'that'll come.'

But Jack didn't mind all that much. He got to hold the hand of a pretty girl and exchange smiles.

Over the days which followed Jack thought a lot about Hevane, as well as the spirit creatures there. He asked again what they looked like but received a very stunted response from most. He wondered why they hadn't kept trying to get there. If there was a better place, and there had to be, then surely it was worth always trying.

Jack found himself wondering more and more, with each passing hour. Ross seemed happy enough chatting to Simo, mainly about games they had played. Days before he'd remembered about the train journey and asked when they were going to carry on. Welling up with guilt Jack was finally going to break it to him, but they were interrupted by Malen who warned them that he'd heard Screamers.

Then the worst thing of all happened...

It was on a day which began by feeling quite promising. Jack and Xandra had been off for one of their walks. They were looking for signs of teleportation ability. There hadn't been any veins in the sky for quite some time. It was rumoured that the Screamers were reserving their energy for an attack. Every now and again each and every one would take to the air changing everything from purple to black. It was an all-out assault designed to purge the world of souls, the lull before the hurricane.

Ross, who had been happier than he'd been in ages had opened up like a sunflower. He and Simo were telling the most ridiculous made up jokes and laughing loudly. Finch had been sitting, watching them like a coiled snake waiting to pounce. Eventually his blood turned to a raging fire and he waded in and destroyed it

all.

‘Your brother hasn’t told you yet has he little man?’

‘Told me what?’ Ross asked.

‘You are dead, mate!’

‘No I’m not, stupid,’ said Ross, ‘I’m right here talking to you.’

‘Of course you are,’ said Finch, ‘we all are, didn’t you know? You’re the stupid one, and your brother thinks you are too.’

‘No he doesn’t,’ Ross was starting to sob.

‘Leave him alone, Finch you bully,’ said Simo quietly.

‘Why do you think the sky is purple, why do you think you can’t taste your food, why do you think there are flying hawk-people, why do you think you haven’t pissed since you got here?’

Simo nudged Ross and they went out find something else to do. Finch wasn’t going to be put off that easily. He stood in the doorway watching them for a while, watching them throw leaves at each other and laughing. Laughing at him, mocking him for what was probably going on in the forest.

Malen came back from a foraging mission and asked him what was going on.

‘Looking at an accident waiting to happen,’ he said.

‘What are you going to do?’ Malen asked, ‘I want in.’

‘I don’t know yet,’ said Finch. ‘Where’s Lucas?’

We can't do it while he's around. The guy's like a sergeant major.'

'He's swimming in the lake,' said Malen, 'but he won't be long. He wants to call another meeting.'

Not wanting to stick around Finch went into the forest to find Xandra and Jack. He was filled with rage about what he might see when he got there. In fact in his head they were holding hands and even kissing. Finch had wanted to do that since end of term a year before they passed over, even when they in the back of the dirty, white van and were about to die. Even afterwards and the blood was draining from their eyes, and they could speak for their crushed throats and he just couldn't reach her no matter how hard he tried. But she had always insisted they'd be friends forever instead.

What good was that?

Stuff that, he thought, giving up is for weaklings. However what he did see when he saw them wasn't like that at all. Finch hid behind tall fir and gazed across at the two love-crazed fools by the waterfall laughing. Jack was soaking wet having achieved a semi-successful port. Xandra was wet too. She had been standing by the pool where the water fell when he landed and was caught by surprise.

Finch saw two young people laughing, laughing at him, the stupid idiot who honestly believed he could stand a chance with her.

That was the last straw.

All of this stupid frivolity, all of this sappy lunacy was too much for Finch and he just snapped. He

ported back to Ross and before he had a chance to object, grabbed his arm and ported again. They arrived in a place with wavy hills of lush green grass. A gentle breeze brushed through willow trees and nudged dried leaves along the pathway. Then as they moved further along it became more obvious where they were, they were in a cemetery.

‘What are you going to do?’ Ross asked. A tear rolled down his cheek was diverted to the back of his neck with a sharp jerk of his arm.

‘There’s another trick but only some of us can do it,’ said Finch, ‘you’re going to like it. It’s very revealing.’

He pulled Ross along the lines of headstones, row after row. Soon they arrived at a particular one.

‘Look!’ said Finch, his hands on both of the boy’s cheeks forcing him to face the ground.

Ross’s eyes closed automatically. This was something he did whenever he knew something bad was about to happen.

‘No!’ he said, shaking, ‘I want to go back!’

‘Not until you’ve looked at the grave stone.’

Ross forced his eyes open until they were two little slits in his face. ‘I’m scared!’ he said.

‘Your brother isn’t going to tell you, so I will have to show you. Only then can you move on.’

‘No!’

‘Don’t be such a wimp Ross!’ Finch yelled.

Ross tried really hard to get away, but no matter how hard even as a spirit Finch was strong. With one

swift movement he was able to spin Ross into position right in front of the stone. There with one hand on each cheek he splayed his fingers so that it forced Ross's eyes wide open.

'Read the words!' he ordered him, 'do it!'

Ross was shaking even more now. 'In loving mem, mem..'

'Memory!'

'Memory,' Ross continued, 'of a belo, belo, belo..'

'Beloved!' Finch ranted. 'Damn it, I'll read it. In loving memory of a beloved son, cherished brother plucked from poppy field of life long before his time, Ross_Kinley_Gale! That's you Ross, you are dead. That is you under there.'

'That's not me!' Ross blubbed, 'that's somebody else.'

'So you need more proof, do you?'

But it was too late. Finch did something, Ross didn't know what it was, just that there was a red glow over his head and the air around him was suddenly very hot. The ground began to rumble and shake. The head stone fell backwards and the turf ripped open before his frightened eyes and spat earth into the air. There was an explosion of soil and wind and before them six feet in the ground was a small, shiny, teak coffin.

'I don't want to look,' Ross whimpered, 'I'm frightened.'

'Look little boy!' yelled Finch over the furor.

Ross's face was white and frozen with fear now,

but he had to look, he didn't know what else Finch was capable of.

What he saw was going to haunt him forever. He saw his own blue-grey face wrinkled, mangled, sunken and bloody, his eyes wide open and empty and black.

'You see?' Finch bellowed, 'dead!' And then he moved back and as if the world had been nothing more than some macabre jigsaw puzzle everything fell back into the right places.

Three black funeral cars passed when this was going on. None of them noticed.

When they returned Ross was silent.

'Now you know,' Finch had told him. 'Tell a soul and I will take you to the Screamers who will take you away and torture you forever.'

And boys of Ross's age are always ready to believe such things whether they are true or not.

Over the following few days there was a marked change in Ross which being so close for so long didn't go unnoticed by his big brother. He had gone back to being a mouse and spent most of the time alone. On many occasions Jack approached him and asked him what was wrong and each time he looked back with a fallen face and just mumbled very quietly, 'Nothing'.

Jack wondered if it was jealousy. He and Xandra had been spending a lot of time together lately, or

perhaps he still needed the stability of an older, wiser family member. Family was a word very much on Jack's mind lately. He really felt it for Ross, who even though wouldn't probably admit it, needed family members.

The boys had a sister called Clara. Clara was born somewhere in between them. Since their parents' deaths like them she had gone from foster home to foster home, until a nice couple called the Pritchard's adopted her. Unlike them she hadn't taken the escape option. Amongst other things, she was quite agoraphobic. Not long ago she was down for adoption. Clara wasn't all that keen on the idea. There were some ties that once they are cut cannot be re-tied to other places. Soon, Jack thought when the time was right he would take Ross to see her. She wouldn't be able to see them but they would be there. Perhaps it wouldn't be all that far beyond the realms of possibility for her to feel their presence.

Instead that day he took him to the waterfall. It was such a beautiful place, even if the water looked purple-black in the half-light. He didn't say anything about his new found abilities or that Ross would have them too, nor did he use them in front of him. This would have been a good time to tell him about their circumstances, however the way his brother was feeling probably not.

Jack put his hand in the pool and swished it around. 'It's quite tingly on your fingers,' he said, 'have a go.'

'Nah!' said Ross, 'I want to go somewhere else.'

‘Don’t you like it here?’ said Jack, ‘I know the others can be a bit odd, especially Malen but if you ignore him he’s fine.’

‘I hate them!’ Ross snapped, ‘hate them all.’

Jack placed a hand on his shoulder, the one that wasn’t wet. ‘Is this about me and Xandra?’ he said.

Ross shook his head.

‘Then what is it?’

‘Nothing.’

‘But you were so happy a short while back and now you’re miserable.’

Then Jack heard his brother mumble the words.

‘I hate being dead.’

Jack was stunned, ‘Pardon me?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Repeat what you’ve just said,’ said Jack, ‘it’s very important.’

‘No!’

‘You know don’t you, who told you that?’

There followed a lengthy uncomfortable pause that Jack was soon quite desperate to fill. In the end Ross did.

‘Finch!’ he said.

‘What did he tell you?’

‘That we’re dead,’ said Ross, ‘and I hate it.’

In a strange way Jack was relieved that the burden had been passed on to somebody else.

‘Well,’ he said finally, ‘I found out a few days ago that being dead does have its advantages.’

‘How?’ asked Ross. For a moment there was a

flicker of light in his eyes.

‘Remember what Finch did when we got here?’

Ross’s head dropped.

Jack continued regardless. ‘When we magically moved to that hole in the ground to be safe from the Screemers?’

‘My head was doing odd things,’ replied Ross, ‘I wasn’t thinking straight.’

‘Well I can do that,’ said Jack, ‘and guess what? You can too!’

As soon as he said that the light returned. Ross lifted his head and brushed away a tear with the back of his hand.

Jack pointed to an elm that was about twenty feet away. ‘You see that tree?’

‘Of course I do stupid,’ said Ross.

‘Picture it in your head and close your eyes.’

Ross did just that, ‘OK!’

‘Now think of yourself with your back leaning against it. Feel the roughness of the bark on your back and the sense the branches over your head.’

‘OK!’ and then he was gone.

‘There you go,’ Jack was speaking to himself now, ‘you can do_’

Jack glanced at the elm but there was no sign of his brother at all.

‘Ross?’ he said lightly and then much louder, ‘Ross!’

Jack ran over to the tree, so fast that he was there in seconds. He ran around it and then beyond it.

‘Ross, where are you?!’

Then above him came a very familiar voice, gentle and slightly distressed. ‘I’m up here!’

And there he was hanging by his legs by a thick branch.

‘You were supposed to picture yourself leaning against it not hanging from it like a Christmas bauble.’

‘I guess I haven’t got the imagination you have,’ said Ross.

It soon became obvious after that, that knowing he could do that trick made Ross a little more comfortable with the way things were. Probably because it meant that whenever he needed to he could escape, also it was a very cool trick to be able to do.

Now Ross was able to hop through the air like some inter-dimensional space rabbit at will. Jack made sure that he was always around, and that he only travelled short distances until he got the hang of it.

He was glad Ross was happy again, even if it wasn’t going to last long. Then one day he overheard Finch and Malen talking. Finch was bragging about what he did to Ross and laughing raucously about it.

Jack erupted. He grabbed Finch by the throat and pushed him against the wall. There he punched him hard in the face.

Finch wasn’t shaken at all by this.

And Jack and Ross were banished from the hideout.

Now they were exposed to all the dangers of this new world, and to make matters worse the night fell again before they could move a single metre, accompanying squawking sounds echoing through the sky did nothing to cure feelings of discomfort. Soon the noise was deafening.

There was only one thing they could do.

‘Hold onto my arm,’ said Jack, ‘we’ll go to that underground place. We’ll be safe I promise.’

Luckily, because of Jack’s powerful imagination he was quite confident that they were there. It was the darkest place ever, yet he knew that it was the right place because it smelt of damp earth. Above them he could feel the wooden structure that held the leaves. Quickly he felt for a corner. He grabbed Ross and pulled him tightly into it. There they sat in the cold, damp mud waiting for it to all subside.

The next time Jack noticed anything had changed it was morning. Bright streams of purple daylight streamed in through the gap making diagonal lines from exterior to interior. This was quite a calming experience, it was all very quiet and still.

Jack woke his brother with a gentle nudge. There were dried tears on his cheeks. Sometime in the night he’d woken up and gotten upset again about what had happened with Finch.

They were just about to climb out of the pit when Jack heard signs of life from above, a foot landing on a dry twig and snapping it. Jack’s first reaction was to

put his hand over Ross's mouth, in case he felt the urge to cry out. They were as still as they could be listening hard to the footsteps which were now shuffling through the leaves on the ground, to pass by. But to their horror they only got louder and closer.

'Hello!' someone said above, luckily a familiar, comforting voice.

'Xandra!'

'I thought you might be here,' she said, 'of all the places this is the nearest, the quickest to transport to.'

A hand appeared from the sky and pulled back the roof. It was so good to see Xandra. Although they had been in that place for nearly two weeks now, they were still happy to have someone with them with more experience of the place.

When she said to use the powers again to get to the surface Jack declined. Having these wonderful abilities was all too well, but he recalled their mother always telling them to move around as much as possible or they will have something called "burger bottom."

Once they were up Xandra apologised for her friends' unreasonable behaviour. She believed what had happened to be the truth. After all she knew Finch the most. Finch could be really sadistic when he wanted to be.

'Before I left I told him he was a brainless maggot!' Xandra said.

'I don't regret hitting him,' said Jack, 'he had no right doing such a horrible thing to Ross.'

‘So where will you go?’

Jack didn’t have a clue where they were going to go. They still weren’t all that familiar with the land or the dangers. Neither had they had the opportunity to practise their new found abilities. He knew where he wanted them to go. ‘Hevane ideally,’ he said.

‘I could take you a part of the way there,’ said Xandra, ‘to where they say it is. But it’s a lot further than you might think. They say it’s at the top of the highest of the mountains, through the clouds. Even beyond that they say there are more lands to go before you get anywhere near it.’

Jack wasn’t going to be put off though by any stretch of the imagination. ‘But I want to visit our sister first, in the living world. Is this possible? I only want to say goodbye.’

‘You know she won’t be able to react with you don’t you?’ said Xandra, ‘I did it once. You can only do it a couple of times. Lucas told me. I don’t know how he worked that one out. I went to see my dad. It can be heartbreaking calling out their name to know that they don’t even know you are there.’

‘I still want to do it,’ said Jack. He looked down at Ross, the smile was too much to ignore.

They went on the bus to see Clara, where being dead had its advantages. Being solid forms in what used to be their world they were able to walk through the living as if they were clouds of human-shaped mist, and such a strange sensation it was too. The tingling feeling they all experienced was something quite similar to

immersing your body in a warm bath after a tiring day.

While they were doing this Jack was certain that he could sense the person's thoughts. When they sat down, which was at the back of the bus Xandra pointed out that sometimes it was possible to do this. Usually it was during the times when the level of people's thoughts was at the point when their brains were almost switched off and they didn't have to think about anything much, like what they are going to get for tea or that bit of DIY they need to get around to doing some time.

Porting your body through the air was nice and magical, but it was a reminder of normality to do it travel this way. To amuse Ross Jack went to a where a young man with a suit was sitting. This man had obviously been put out by the fact that a woman who sat next to him was holding a baby, which was making a lot of noise. Jack pretended to put his finger up his nose and wipe it on her shirt. Then he crossed his eyes and told him he had a face like a baboon.

'You see,' he told Ross as he returned to his place, 'it's not all going to be bad.'

Xandra leaned in to Jack. 'We still have to watchful,' she whispered in his ear, 'there are things in the towns that can get us.'

'Like what?'

'Things in the sewers, things in the alleys. Just stay close to me and you'll be fine.'

'Aren't there safe places here?'

'I know one,' Xandra winked.

Buildings and people passed them. The people were mixed, some like them, spirits, and some others living ghosts. Those like them were walking through the living as if they weren't there, those who were brave enough to go into the wide open that is. It was a peculiar sight to behold. There were some in period costume; Victorian, Medieval, Regency, Roman soldiers, all of the periods of history Jack had read about in school, all mixed up with the living as if all of the barriers of time had crumbled and everyone was a part of the same world. These were the spirits of those with what some call unfinished business. Some people die and don't even know it.

Overhead, a squadron of Screamers passed overhead and nothing flinched. Jack wondered if nobody had noticed or if they were just used to it. He asked Xandra about it.

'People are strange even when they are dead,' was her response. 'Nobody thinks it's going to be them who will be picked off today. That's why they wait until they get close enough to tell before they bother to run.'

'Just like life!' Jack remarked.

Xandra continued, 'Then the towns aren't Screamer domain anyway. There are other things, let's not dwell on them, let's find your sister.'

They got off the bus at the station and through the crowds of people moving towards the town centre.

'Whatever you do,' Xandra warned them, 'stay away from the shadows.'

Then the reason why became apparent. As a

young man in a World War 1 infantry uniform approached an alley, two long thin, black arms grabbed him very quickly and pulled him into screaming into the black.

This dramatic event frightened Ross who even though he was shaking wanted to stop and help.

‘This is what you don’t see in life,’ said Xandra. ‘There’s nothing we can do anyway, his spirit is doomed to perish.’ Both she and Jack had to grab Ross’s arms to get him to move. Now they quickened their pace moving to the side of the pavement that was near the road.

‘I don’t know why we don’t just port there,’ said Jack, he thought that it was a valid statement.

‘Two reasons,’ replied Xandra, ‘one, it’s not a good idea to do it too much, and two, what’s wrong with stretching your spirit legs?’

Soon they were in a place where the shops turned into houses and roads thinned out into a narrow fork.

‘Which way now?’ she asked.

‘Left I think,’ replied Jack, and then ‘by the way, why isn’t it a good idea to do that port thing too often?’

Xandra started him right in the eye. It was difficult to determine what she was going to do. In the end she just winked and said, ‘Try it I dare you!’

Wherever they went the three mountains of Deadworld could always be seen quite clearly, such was their size and majesty. At the top of the central one the clouds swirled around like circling dragons waiting to

pounce on their prey. Such a vision made a boy's mind wander, and Jack was keen as well as afraid about setting off to these strange new lands.

Soon they found the house where Clara lived with her adopted family.

Jack had been very much looking forward to seeing their sister and also was dreading it. This was a reminder that things were never going to be the same, and also a goodbye forever.

He and Ross had visited Clara a few times, the last time when they'd ran away from the care home. It was always a bright and breezy place from the outside with its clean, fresh walls, its brightly painted woodwork and its solar panelling. This time however it was somehow soaked in sadness. The purple in the atmosphere painted everything out. Now it looked like the opening shot of some sad movie about a woman who'd been locked away in an attic for years.

'So what are her parents like?' Xandra asked as they stopped at the gate to the drive.

'Adopted parents!' Jack was very quick to correct her. 'They're OK, I suppose, a bit dull though.'

'In what way?'

'Clara said they don't do much, apart from walking up hills, cycling, riding on trains and sleeping in caravans.'

'What's wrong with that?' Xandra shrugged.

'It's not normal!' said Jack.

They all held hands to form a human chain. 'Your call,' said Xandra, 'pick a room.'

Jack closed his eyes and pictured the living room, in a second they were there. Mrs. Pritchard, who was obviously unaware of their presence, was at the hearth. She had a wet rag in one hand and a wallpaper scraper in the other. Very carefully she was removing the paper. When she stopped to go to the kitchen to put more water in her plastic bucket they could see what was happening. On the wall in thick, red letters about three feet high were the words...

BURN IN HELL.

Xandra looked Jack square in the face and sighed. 'Well,' she said, 'somebody doesn't like them.'

Eavesdropping is the easiest thing to do when you are dead. When Mr. Pritchard arrived home the three spirits listened in to a conversation between him and his wife. The Pritchard's were both very lean and short and looked as if you could knock them over if you breathed hard enough.

'She is to stay in her room,' Mr. P said planting himself in a chair that was most obviously his, 'until I can decide what to do with her.'

'What *are* we going to do with her David?'

'We should phone Mrs. Davies and get her to take her back.'

'Let's don't!'

'Talking to her isn't doing any good.'

‘Why would she write that on our walls? She’s normally such a quiet girl.’

Mr. P picked up a magazine and hid his face in it. It was *Caravanning Monthly*. ‘The girl’s one of those gothics, or whatever they’re called. They’re all into this dark, evil nonsense.’

‘I still say it’s not like her.’ Mrs. P went into the kitchen and put the kettle on for her grumpy husband.

‘Do you think she could have written those words?’ Xandra whispered, as if she really needed to.

‘She could be a handful at times,’ said Jack, ‘although it could be communication thing. Clara has never been able to put herself across very well. I wish I could talk to her. She listens to me.’

‘You and Ross go up,’ said Xandra, ‘I’ll keep look out. We can’t stay too long though.’

So Jack took his brother upstairs. Before he took the first step to Clara’s room, Xandra reminded her that she wouldn’t be able to see or hear them and not to let that upset him.

They stood outside Clara’s door for a while before entering. It had dark green paint all over it. Some of it was starting to peel. On the other side it was all quite and still. Often when she was upset she would lie on her bed for hours just thinking about everything and nothing. The brothers exchanged smiles and then one after the other traversed the closed door.

A second later, Clara was right there, coiled up in a tight ball on her bed, with her back to them facing the wall. Her eyes were wide open as if images were

being played in one particular tiny area of the wallpaper.

Jack tried to stroke her arm but his hand passed right through her. Strangely when he did this she shivered.

‘Why did you do such a bad thing?’ Jack asked her softly. ‘You’ve never been that stupid.’

After a small pause something even stranger happened, she answered him.

‘I didn’t,’ she said abruptly, ‘and you know I didn’t. So go back to your friend and tell him to stop getting me into trouble.’

‘Clara,’ said Jack, ‘It’s me!’

Clara rolled over and saw her brothers. ‘Jack, is that really you?’

‘Yes!’

‘But you’re both dead!’

‘We are, Clara, and you’re not supposed to see us.’

‘I can see ghosts sometimes. So good to see you both,’ said Clara, and then not being one to mince her words added, ‘are you on your way to Heaven then?’

‘That’s just like you,’ said Jack.

‘The two of you are ghosts,’ said Clara, ‘that’s really cool!’

Jack smiled awkwardly, ‘To us it’s you who is the ghost. When I touched your arm just now it was like it was made of coloured mist.’

‘I can see the door through you both. You need to eat more,’ Clara joked. ‘That’s what everybody tells me. So why did you come from the other side?’

‘To say goodbye to you, Clara, and I s’pose to tell you we’re going to find Hevane!’

‘Don’t you mean, Heaven?’ said Clara.

Jack’s eyes went on a tour of the room. There were photographs pinned to all sorts of places, mainly of her new family, although there were some pinned to a cork board above her bed of the three of them together sitting on a boat, the three amigos. This brought about warm feelings in his chest.

‘What did you mean just now when you said tell your friend to stop getting me into trouble?’ he asked.

Clara’s face dropped slightly, ‘Did you see the living room?’

The boys nodded in unison.

She continued. ‘He’s been bothering me for months now, Tom his name is and he’s a bloody pain in the arse.’

Clara explained further, lowering her voice having remembered how thin the walls were in the house. Tom was quite a character. Why he had been targeting her was a mystery. Perhaps it was because she could see the dead. She just knew that wherever there was mischief to be had, there he was, on the end of it. There had been talk of moving her to another home. Clara had had enough of that in her life, being shoved from pillar to post, and she was only thirteen.

Clara said that she had seen Tom twice. He had a mangled up face as if he had been at some time involved in some horrific event involving something sharp like a machete or an axe. She had sensed a great

twisted bitterness and hatred in him which terrified her. She hadn't slept properly for more than a month.

This news was related to Xandra and they all had a talk about it. It was decided that before they moved on, as a special favour to a special sister, that they would wait a while to confront this vindictive and spiteful ghost.

It was while he was with his sister, in a real home in the real world, that Jack realised how much since he'd died, that he'd moved away from time. Somehow now it didn't properly exist, as it didn't apply to them. It was Friday and the weekend and Clara had finished with school until Monday morning. He could just about remember what that felt like.

The three spirits slept in the wardrobe that night, so the sight of them didn't scare Tom away. Not that spirits take up a lot of room but it was quite a spacious one built into the wall. Sometime in the night there had been whistling sounds that turned out to be nothing but the wind. By Sunday it seemed that he wasn't going to put in an appearance, and then Sunday night when everyone was in their beds, he came.

This time he was out to do much worse. At eleven o'clock the door to the wardrobe creaked open. Standing in the light of her bedside lamp was Carla. Her hand was over her mouth and nose as if to keep out a horrible smell.

'What's wrong?' asked Xandra.

'Gas,' replied Carla, 'I think there's a leak.'

Jack told Ross to stay put and he and Xandra

went downstairs to investigate.

Ghosts cannot smell things but they can tell when others of their kind are about. They went into the kitchen first where all of the controls to the gas cooker were turned to full. Jack tried to grasp the knobs, but it was impossible with his ghost hands.

‘How did he do it?’ he whispered to Xandra.

‘It’s something that only some of us can do,’ she whispered back. She also tried, but had the same problem. ‘See?’

There was only one thing to do and that was to find some way to convince Tom to do it himself.

They went into the living room to find him with a cigarette lighter. Behind him the gas fire was full on, a forceful roar coming from it.

Tom’s face was much as Carla had described, mutated, down the left-hand side as if it had melted, a blood-red eye was just above his cheek. In the moonlight through the curtains he was a macabre sight.

‘Please stop!’ cried Jack.

But Tom just grinned in the most manic way. He blew breath into the air and suddenly the gas that was already about the room turned red like blood.

‘Why are you doing this?’ Xandra asked him.

‘Because I can,’ was all he was willing to say.

There was another voice coming from upstairs, it was Carla. She was asking what was going on.

‘Carla,’ Jack cried, ‘come down and turn the gas off!’

However, as soon as she did come running

down the stairs Tom blew again and knocked her onto her back. Carla was pinned to the floor in the hall.

The red gas spread very quickly. It soon engulfed her whole body.

Tom laughed loudly, so loud that the room shook. Then like some mad magician he lifted up his hand to display the lighter for all to see. Xandra tried pleading with him this time. 'Let us turn off the gas Tom,' she said, 'and whatever it is that is troubling you we can talk about it.'

But Tom didn't want to listen. In fact he was deaf to everything except his own intentions. He held the lighter over his head and grinned.

'Carla,' said Xandra, 'as soon as we're gone, cut the gas.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Jack over the furor.

'Just trust me Jack!'

In a flash she was gone. Xandra appeared in front of Tom. She was only there for a split second. She grabbed him by both of his wrists and then the two of them disappeared. The room looked completely different. All of the red had gone, although the gas was still present.

'Xandra!' yelled Jack. He was yelling at an empty space by the hearth.

Carla switched off the fire and the cooker and opened all of the downstairs windows. She stopped up all night to be sure that everything was alright. In the morning when the gas had all gone out of the room she

put everything right again.

‘What shall I do now?’ she asked Jack.

‘There is only one thing you can do,’ he replied. ‘You must apologise for the writing on the wall, even though it wasn’t you. Promise you won’t do it again.’

‘But that was Tom.’

‘I know,’ said Jack, ‘but who is going to believe that. Be nice to them, do everything they ask you to do and I’m sure things will be fine.’

Then after an elongated hug which neither of them felt, Jack and Ross went on their way again.

The air became thick with sadness now that Xandra wasn’t around. In life Jack had always looked after Ross. For a while there had been someone to look after him and make him feel safe.

Now he was a car without an engine, a cart without a horse, a blind boy without a Labrador to guide them to Hevane.

And because she wasn’t there to guide them, things were bound to go terribly wrong. Ross was even more afraid now that she wasn’t there and Jack felt it.

‘What are we going to do without her?’ Ross kept saying.

‘Shut up and keep your eyes open for spirit creatures,’ was Jack’s answer each time. They were walking very fast through the town away from the dark

alleyways and alcoves. He was tense, angry and sad, so much that when his brother attempted to hold onto him he did something he would never have done before and pushed him away.

They reached the corner of the road and stopped. Jack grabbed Ross's shoulders.

'Ross,' he said as stern as a schoolmaster, 'you will have to get a backbone. You had one before mum and dad died. It was really hard looking after you and having a life of my own with you holding onto me all of the time. Stop holding on and look after yourself once in a while.'

Ross's eyes were big and round and slightly tearful. 'OK,' he said limply.

When they moved on again there was an uncomfortable distance between them. Jack soon regretted what he had said. He slowed down so that he could catch up. Soon he feared the worse. He turned around sharply.

'Ross I_!'

But Ross had gone and now there was screaming.

Jack ran towards the sound in time to witness the horrifying sight of Ross being dragged off by his ankles into the backyard of an abandoned pub. This creature was different to the Screammers. It was more like a snake than bird, only it had three sets of arms and long, canine teeth. As soon as it saw Jack it wrapped the lower tail half of its body around Ross, probably to make him less accessible, and it bared its teeth and

hissed. The very end of its tail was across Ross's mouth to prevent him from speaking. All the same you could tell that he was scared, terrified. There was a wet patch on his trousers and he was shaking.

'Whatever it is you want my brother for,' Jack pleaded, 'please let him go and let us talk about it!'

'Nooooooooooooooooo human spirit!' it spat its words out like a bad taste in its mouth. 'Human spirit food.'

'He's not food!' Jack yelled, 'Put him down!'

'Go human spirit,' said the creature, 'I eat him and come back for you.'

As it spoke the words its eyes flashed a piercing fiery red.

'He is small,' said Jack, 'eat me instead. The creature was very quiet for a moment and it seemed as if he was about to take him up on his offer. 'He wouldn't make much of a meal,' he added.

'I have idea for you,' it said. 'I take him to place. You find place before he eaten, you have him back.'

Jack reluctantly agreed. 'Don't be afraid, Ross, I'll come for you. Then he looked on helplessly as his brother and the beast dissolve in the air.

Jack had to get his brother back, he had to or at least he had to try. The expression on Ross's face as he was dragged shadows was going to be with him forever embossed on his brain. Numbed and confused he headed back to find the others. His spirit was lifted slightly though when his face met another more familiar one in the town centre.

Sitting on a bench was Xandra. She was besides an old man who being that he was alive, wasn't aware of her presence at all. He seemed to be looking right through her examining a poster outside one of the shops. When she asked where Ross was Jack's face fell.

'A serpent spirit took him,' he said.

'A Sniper?'

'So that's what they are called.'

'They are called that because they act quickly and precisely,' said Xandra. 'They act and then disappear from sight.'

This information wasn't much use to Jack. 'I need to find their lair. Do you know where it is?'

Xandra shook her head. 'Somewhere deep in the ground, but you can't get to it from here. You have to go to Mount Calmanis. She pointed to the nearest of the three. 'But the tunnels are few and far between.' She stared for a moment at the pavement. She knew something.

'What?' said Jack. 'You know something.'

'There is someone but who would know, but it's not a good idea.'

'Who?'

'Gallow!' said Xandra, 'that Screamer you met.'

Jack didn't understand at all. True, Gallow also said they shouldn't return, but he was good to them.

'He just cannot be trusted, believe me.'

'If he is my only choice,' said Jack, 'I'm just going to have to chance it. It's up to you if you want to come with me, you don't have to.'

Xandra followed him anyway. 'It's not a good idea to hang around here for too long,' she said.

Soon they were standing where Jack had been with Ross when they saw the soldier and the woman. Jack took them back up into the safety of the trees and in the direction he thought they went in the dark. It was hard to tell. Gallow's house looked strangely different. The walls were almost purple-black and the eye-like windows somehow more sinister. There was no visible sign that any other spirit was within, neither was it possible to establish any mental link in the way that Xandra had shown Jack.

'We're just going to have to knock and hope that he is in,' he said.

'That'll be you then,' said Xandra.

Jack returned a frown.

'Well he is your friend. He has spoken to you at least. He never usually does that.'

'Well I am blessed then.' Jack walked very slowly up to the door where his clenched hand hung in the air for a moment. He turned around in time to see a very nervous-looking Xandra peering over the hedge. He received very shaky thumbs up. It was little wonder than when he did finally get around to knocking on the door he instinctively jumped backwards. Part of him, only a tiny part, hoped that it wouldn't open. Then he thought about his brother again and hoped that it would. His dead heart sank in his chest when it finally did and there before him was the man with the hawk's head.

Gallow's face sank when he saw what was in the doorway. Two human souls, the very things he had sworn in an oath to stay away from.

'You again!' he said, his voice deep, tuneless yet somehow far away. 'Why have you come back? I told you not to.'

'You have to help me!' said Jack.

'This is not wise...'

'We need your help, please listen to me. My brother is in grave danger. The Snipers have taken him.'

Gallow's feathered head fell to one side and he twitched. 'Snipers? It is best to stay away from them.'

In the boy's face there was a mixture of anger and sorrow. 'And what about my brother?'

'I'm sorry,' said Gallow, 'it is the end for him.'

'But they said if I could find the lair they would spare him.'

Gallow shook his head slowly. 'Surely you do not believe that. They were messing with you child. Your brother is no more, believe me.' And he closed the door.

He could now hear Jack breathing hard on the other side. Felt his grief and his frustration. But what was he to do? He knew the boy wasn't going to give up, and as expected there was a heavy pounding at the door.

Gallow opened it again but only a few inches this time, just enough to expose an eye. 'I cannot help you, please go.'

Jack seemed to be struggling to find words or

thoughts about what to say or do next. Xandra tried to grab his hand but it was as if she wasn't there at all. Jack stepped back onto the lawn and spun around, tears forming in his eyes.

'No!' he said when the feeling subsided, 'I am not having that. He let us in last time and he was even nice to us.'

'That was a mistake,' said Gallow. 'I should have told you to go.'

'Jack!' said Xandra, 'Ross is gone, I'm so sorry!'

'No!' cried Jack, 'I will not believe that. I will not give up on Ross. For all we know he could be in some horrible place waiting for me to save him.'

The girl was looking at him in some knowing way. As if she was somehow able to get through him. It reminded him of his daughter.

'Gallow,' said Xandra, 'if you don't want to take him there, please tell him a safe way to get there himself.'

For a moment, the air was still as if time had itself had died. It was quite disturbing to Gallow, who found himself nodding gently and before he'd realised, the door was open and the children had entered. Everything in his chest and his head told him that this was wrong, but he just had to explain to them why this was.

'This must not take long,' his voice resonated like in an echoey cave.

He led the two of them into the back where the table and the chairs. These things didn't exist in the

world of the living. Ghostly boxes and tools could be seen through what to them were solid.

As the children took a seat, Gallow thought it wise to remain distant. He put his back close to the wall and kept eye contact down to an absolute minimum.

Jack took the initiative to speak first. 'When we were small,' he began, breathlessly, 'something really bad happened. Our parents died and I was left to take care of Ross, my brother. Because mum and dad were no longer around there was a big gap which needed to be filled. Ross didn't know what to do or who to show his pain to. So I forgot my own pain and became strong for him. I swore from that day I would always be there for him, and whatever happened would never let him down.'

'Noble words,' said Gallow, 'but your work is over now. You must concentrate on looking after yourself. Think about keeping yourself safe, from the others who look like me and those you are yet to meet.'

'So you really think he is gone for good?' Jack didn't appear to have heard his words, properly.

Gallow nodded.

'I don't believe that. There was something in the Sniper's eyes. He wanted to play a game.'

'Like cats when they toy with their food,' said Gallow. 'But these are not cats and they do not play games. They take and what they don't consume, they store.'

'If you don't want to help us, fine,' said Jack. 'Just tell me how to get to him.'

‘Why must you go on such a fool’s errand boy?’
said Gallow.

‘Because I made a promise to him that as long as I was around he would be safe. So as long as I am I must at least try.’

For a moment the heavy stillness had returned, as if it had followed them into the room, then in the time that it took for the words to explode into dust and fall to the floor Gallow glided across the room and opened a cupboard on the wall. He took out a rolled-up sheet of paper and threw it on the table. ‘Open it up!’

‘What is it,’ said Jack, ‘a map?’

‘In the old days when I was one of the swarm, we were still at war with them. I was a commander then, a good one too. The map shows the lair. Be warned, getting there will not be easy, their realm is embedded deep in mountains and there are other creatures that can get you between here and there. If one doesn’t get you then the next one will. There are some much worse than Screammers, much worse than Snipers.’

‘Fine!’ said Jack. He looked into Xandra’s eyes. ‘I’m not asking you to come. In fact it might be better if you stayed here.’

‘No!’ Xandra shook her head quite fiercely, ‘you don’t know the terrain. Where will you hide if these things come?’

‘I’ll manage,’ said Jack. ‘I have done most of my life.’

‘Only a fool would go alone,’ said Gallow, he was back by the wall in quite a reflective posture. ‘You

need more than one pair of eyes if you go into the mountain realms, one pair at the back of your head.'

'It's OK,' Jack said to Xandra, 'I have those powers now.'

'They will only save you if you are very lucky,' said Gallow.

'He's telling the truth,' said Xandra, 'listen to him. Gallow, will you at least come with us part of the way?'

'That would be a very bad idea,' said Gallow.

Gallow thought about helping them. These were just children after all, and children should always be kept safe. Part of him, his old, living self wanted to go with them. Apart from helping them there was an opportunity here to redeem himself in the eyes of his people. If he could do what the others couldn't do and get into the Snipers' realm then he might be in favour again, if he wasn't captured that was. The alternative option would be to remain where he was until his spirit faded to nothingness. Then something happened to help him make up his mind. Jack asked him again why he was so reluctant to help.

'Do not ask for the words of a fallen one,' he said, 'I am just a reject.'

'No,' said Jack, 'there's more to you. You are kind, I know that. You saved me and Ross and brought us here. You didn't have to do that.'

'Sometimes I forget why I am here,' said Gallow. 'Sometimes I remember what I once was, not what I am now.'

‘And what are you now?’ Jack’s voice was digging, probing.

This was the question Gallow didn’t want to hear, but there it was. He hesitated before answering. It was because if he had to listen to himself saying the words it would be like living it all over again. In the end he decided that the children deserved an explanation as to why he was so unwilling. He began.

‘I told you I was a commander of one of the sky forces, well that was true. Four-hundred men served under me. It is Screamer policy to waste no souls. Nothing must remain to travel on to Hevane. One day there was word that there had been a gas explosion in a restaurant in the town. Twenty-two people were dead and six hanging on to life by a thread of spider’s silk. I was ordered by my Alpha Prime to take a squadron of ten and devour them all. So I got together my best men and flew there at great speed. Surely enough there were dead. Men, women and children no bigger than you running around scared as if they didn’t know where to go or what to do. We acted fast, jumping onto everything we could until no one remained, that is apart from the ones I told you about hanging onto the world of the living. There was little to do now but wait for them to lose their substance and become prey for us. Gradually one by one they passed over and we took them without mercy. Then we were down to the last two. Two people a woman and a young girl lying on the floor. They were holding hands which like the rest of them were dripping with blood. They were crying in

pain as the paramedics struggled to keep hold of them. They were fighting a losing battle. Finally they died, first the girl and then the woman. The last victim is for the commander, it is the way, the second to last for the second in command, Skaron. We moved in to take the prize then I saw the faces and they saw me. My body, such as it was frozen as I gazed in horror at the faces. I stopped it all there and then, ordered my men including my second in command back to base. The latter was not happy.'

'So who were they?' asked Jack softly, 'the girl and the woman.'

'My wife and my daughter!' said Gallow. 'I couldn't do that to them. I let them go. Skaron reported me to Alpha Prime as soon as he returned. I was lucky though. Normally if you disobey an order like that you are led into a field and the order is given for your own men to devour you. But like I have already said, I was a good commander and have served my people well, and so now I am here talking to you and that is why I am going to help you after all.'

As they were walking away from the house Gallow was reminded of a story his mother used to tell him when he was very young. The story was about a little boy who was asked to take a pie to his father who was working by the river. He was building a bridge with some other men. His father had left that morning without his lunch and his mother was concerned. The boy who was called Saul was told to travel through the forest but to trust no one he met along the way, as most

people weren't what they seem to be.

Saul set out and had been walking for only half a mile when he met an old wood cutter. The man seemed friendly enough, he spoke in a soft, unthreatening voice and wasn't overwhelming in any way. But Saul remembered what his mother had said and ignored him and moved on. A little further along the track he saw a large, black bear with huge claws and sharp teeth. As soon as it saw Saul it ran towards him snarling and drooling. But before it reached him someone shouted aloud. It was the woodcutter who quickly charged the bear swinging his axe.

The bear ran away and Saul was very relieved. From then on Saul decided that he should trust the man after all. With the woodcutter's help he carried on through the forest. Soon Saul became tired and wanted to rest. He sat himself on a log and examined his father's pie to see that it was intact.

But as he was about to thank the man for helping him there was no sign of him. Then as he was just about to start on his way again something jumped out of the bushes and pinned him to the ground. Saul was eaten alive by a wolf. As he was dying he glanced on the ground and saw the woodcutter's clothes at the base of a tree, torn to shreds. Then the boy noticed the wolf's eyes. They were the same as the woodcutter's.

There was a part of Gallow that wondered if he had only agreed to keep them safe from the Snipers was so that he could devour them himself. It had been a very long time since he had tasted human soul. The

desire to do so was still within him, and as long as he was alone he could fight it.

Again, just like in the house, he insisted on remaining a discreet distance from the others, although not too much, all the time using his acute vision to scan the area with the precision of one from a race of spirit hawk men. His hearing too was sharp. Every flutter of every leaf in the breeze, every twig broken underfoot caught his attention. He tried not to think of what his Screamer brothers would do to him if they found him aiding humans.

The way to the Snipers realm was to the first of the three great mountains. The three mountains were called Calmanis, Torponus and Giltanis. Calmanis was the fabled route to Hevane as it was the tallest and penetrated the sky, leaving behind it all that was visible in the world. At the base of Giltanis there was a cave which led to a network of tunnels. To get to these, they would need to get past a spirit beast called Sabil which had a thousand eyes, although nobody had been able to stick around long enough to count them. Sabil never slept which made him an ideal guard. It remained on a ledge over the entrance with its long arms dangling down each side, ever ready to split you in two for ever more.

How he was going to get two children past it when he failed to get a squadron of brave warriors through he didn't know.

He cast it from his mind for now, the veins had appeared in the sky again which meant that darkness

was about to descent upon them. Xandra it seemed had seen them too. She had disappeared very suddenly and then reappeared in the distance. 'There's a pocket over here!' she cried, 'it's big enough for all of us.' Gallow cringed at the thought that she might have been heard by the wrong ears.

Such an interesting ability, he thought though, to be able to detect invisible places. There had been so many stories about humans when they pass over to this place and he didn't know what to believe. For now it was a useful thing to know. Just before the air went black they were inside a translucent womb, a bubble where somehow light was never lost. Xandra explained all about the pockets for his benefit as well as Jack's. During the day they absorbed energy from the atmosphere and charged themselves. Like the one that contained the hideout it stopped you from being seen, yet you could be an observer of whatever is around you. The only fault with dimension pockets was that they weren't sound-proof, so although you couldn't be seen it was still necessary for someone to remain on look-out so that silence could be called upon.

Odd, Gallow thought as he gazed upon the outside world still broad daylight, that you could be so safe yet so exposed.

It wasn't the way of a warrior to rest in such a place, where he could be picked off so easily.

'I will remain alert,' he told the others, 'the rest of you may sleep if you wish.' Xandra and Jack looked at each other at exactly the same time. 'What is wrong?'

he enquired, and then remembered. 'I see. You do not feel that you can trust me not to eat humans? That is understandable. I am more comfortable with the darkness anyway. I will come back for you in the time of light.'

And he slipped out into the black.

Over the days since Xandra had abandoned the group, the fire in Finch's blood became more intense. Strongly resenting the arrival of the new boys he swore to himself never to save another soul, ever. One morning he returned to the waterfall where he'd seen her, the one who spurned him, getting all up close and personal with that stupid Jack. He sat on the edge throwing stones. Sticking out of the centre of the pool was a thick, pointed lump of rock. About a foot of it was visible above the water. In all the other times he had visited this place this was nothing but a rock. Now it was Jack, Jack's stupid mocking body.

Finch stopped throwing things for a moment and stared at it. Then when staring wasn't enough he concentrated really hard. Suddenly the pool began bubbling. Soon meandering fingers of steam appeared wriggling and feeling for the cool air. The ground started shaking, the water rapidly reached boiling point and the rock shattered into dust.

This was the power that the others didn't know about. It is the power that comes from evil, a gift, if you

choose to see it that way.

Finch heard a noise in the sky and looked up. Three dark shapes emerged from a gap in the clouds. As they drew near they turned into humanoid shapes. One by one they glided to the ground spreading out their black wings on impact, three Screamers.

Finch was not alarmed in the slightest. In fact he stood up and looked the tallest of the three, square in the face. It was always the way that the tallest was always the leader. He was called Farl.

‘It has been a while,’ he said, his head raised to the sky.

‘I’ve been busy,’ replied Finch.

‘You haven’t brought us souls for many days. Alpha Prime is concerned about your loyalty.’

‘I had two,’ said Finch, ‘new ones. But they fled before I had the chance.’

‘You are getting careless,’ said Farl, ‘we gave you the quake power and this is how you repay us? I can take it back Finch, all I have to do is devour you.’

‘But you can have souls anytime. People die every day.’

Farl flicked his head in an irritated manner. ‘The old and the weak do not provide us with the fire we need to exist. We need strong, young spirits. The ones who escape us are the ones we must have.’

Finch thought about someone who might fit that description. ‘I know of one,’ he said breaking out into a twisted smile. ‘He is strong and brave enough to feed many of you. I will find him and lay a trap.’

‘How will you find him?’

‘He has been banging on about Hevane. If it does exist then there is only one person he would think of going to for help.’

‘Gallow!’ rasped Farl. ‘He won’t help him.’

‘He will still try. I will ask Gallow. He’ll help me. I will tell them I am working for you and he will have to do what I say.’

With a great deal of reluctance born of suspicion Farl agreed. He nodded to his men and they spread out so that they could take to the air again.

‘There’s just one thing!’ cried Finch.

‘What?!’

‘There is a girl with him. We’ve gotten quite close over the years. I want her left alone.’

Farl nodded, to him and then to one of his men, who pulled something out of his belt and handed it to his leader, who handed it to Finch. It was a leather pouch.

‘What’s this all about?’

‘It contains a glass vial with a green liquid.’ said Farl. ‘Throw the liquid onto Gallow and his spirit will enter the vial. There are also stones, strike them together and we will talk. Be very careful with them both.’ And then without another word, he signaled to his men and with great speed they returned to the skies.

Finch then returned to base where he told the others that he was going out to find new dimension pockets. He knew that they wouldn’t mind anyway. None of the others really liked him. None of them

trusted him. Simo was relieved. As he was standing in the doorway about to leave he reminded them that he would be back soon, so not to get too comfortable. He was looking in Simo's direction as he said it. The sight of Simo crawling behind the furniture gave him a slight lift.

Xandra felt a little guilty about Gallow having to leave, but she still thought that it was for the best, and because he took it upon himself to leave the pocket her opinion of him was raised a little.

'It would be a good idea if we were still cautious,' she told Jack, 'after all, if he doesn't trust himself completely, then perhaps neither should we.'

Jack sort of agreed. 'He does seem like a good chap though. Surely if he was going to eat us then he would have done already.'

'He reminds me of a dog I once had, a Doberman. We had it since it was a pup and it was loyal, wouldn't hurt a fly. Then one day without any warning at all it turned on my father.'

'Really?'

'It wasn't like the same dog at all. It didn't know any of us. It certainly didn't want to respond to any of our voices.'

'And you think Gallow is the same?'

Xandra didn't answer that, she didn't know. She only knew that it was different having these conversations with someone other than Finch. Jack seemed to be more interested, not just hanging on for

juicy bits, gory details. In a way she missed Finch, he was like a crazy brother.

Jack was more of an equal. He was strong and brave like she was, afraid of nothing in a way of having nothing to lose. She knew that like her no matter what the situation was he would head straight in and fight for what was important. It was quite refreshing to have him around.

While they were there Jack asked her how she was able to locate pockets. She pulled out a stone from her jeans. Jack was unimpressed but of course he was. It was just a stone, a smooth, grey, cold stone. Then she rubbed her fingers over it gently and hundreds of bright gold dots appeared.

‘They are gold because we are sitting inside one,’ she said. ‘If we were far away they would be green when I stroked them.’

‘Neat!’ said Jack, ‘where did you get that?’

‘From a man who helped me and Finch when we passed over. He said as long as we had this we’d be safe. That was how we found the hideaway. Me and Finch started that, then the others came.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Jack, ‘if you two were here first then why aren’t you the leaders?’

‘Lucas is noisy and strict,’ replied Xandra, ‘army background, shh!’

They stopped talking, there was a noise outside.

‘Gallow?’

‘I hope so. I don’t think he should know about the stone. Just in case he is in league with his friends.’

They shouldn't know about our secrets.'

'Is that why we haven't been porting while he's been with us.'

Xandra nodded.

Luckily it was Gallow. It was obvious he wasn't sure it was the right place. 'Are you there?' he enquired, 'please answer me!'

'Yes!' said Xandra. 'Has the darkness gone?'

'It has! We'd better get a move on. The end of the forest is close and it is open ground.'

Ahead of them was a field of wild grass and bracken. Beyond that, a road and more land. The three mountains were there sticking out like guardians of the Earth, Calmanis the queen of them all in all her mystery, her shadowy summit obscured by a thick crown of purple-grey clouds. They soon reached the road, and even though it soon became quite busy.

So used to this world the way it was Gallow walked through the cars as if they weren't there. Meanwhile Xandra was left trying to coax Jack to follow. She tugged on his arm several times. In the end she gave up and waited with him for the traffic flow to end.

'You don't have to wait here,' she was saying, 'what was solid in life is like mist to us.'

After another mile of walking they reached a deep valley lined with bushes and small trees. There they stopped and talked about what to do next.

'We have to be very careful down there,' he warned the others. 'Some of the plants you see aren't

plants at all. They are Draklis, beasts which imitate things that grow in the ground. They go for birds mostly that settle on their branches. But beware; they can split you in two, leaving you screaming in agony with no one to hear you. They say it lasts for nearly a year.'

Jack cringed. 'But we have no substance, how are these things possible?'

'They just are,' growled Gallow, 'here all things are possible. The problem is that you will never be able to tell which they are until it is too late. I have lost many men to the Draklis.'

'We should tell him,' Jack said to Xandra who shook her head rapidly.

'Tell me what?'

'We can port. We can get past these things unhindered.'

'Damn it!' Xandra cringed. 'Now all of the Screamers will know. He will tell the others and they will take him back.'

Gallow seemed very offended by this.

'I agreed to take you two children to a place I would never have agreed to go if not for you. Even just thinking about what is ahead brings back painful memories of the recent past. I can still hear the screams in my sleep. We knew nothing of the Draklis back then. The Snipers were only watching the skies and so it seemed a good idea to abandon flight and go in on foot. The idea was to get to the other end and surprise them from the ground at the last possible minute. It was a big

mistake and costly. And say that you have powers that could get us there sooner and you said nothing?’

‘I’m sorry!’ said Jack; it was directed at both of them for two very different reasons.

‘We can’t risk you people knowing too much about us,’ said Xandra, ‘you already know about the stone that finds dimension pockets.’

‘And you believe I still talk to my people? I served them for years and they abandoned me for one mistake, for refusing to do what anyone who still feels wouldn’t do.’

‘So we’re going to be Ok Xandra,’ said Jack.

‘They took away from me the ability to fly and laid upon me a curse because of it.’

‘Curse?’ enquired Xandra.

‘If I break it and consume another soul then my own will shatter into a hundred thousand pieces and I will spend the rest of time drifting on the wind like dust, useless and alone. That is not the way a warrior should be, all because I wouldn’t devour my own wife and son. And you lecture me about loyalty!’

‘Well, we might as well port now.’ said Jack.

Xandra had to agree now the secret was out. ‘I suppose so. We will still have to be careful. It’s hard to judge distance from here.’

‘So what do we do?’ said Jack.

‘Focus hard on the mountains. Try not to think of what is on the ground. Fear can be a dangerous distraction, remember that.’

‘Hmnn,’ said Gallow, ‘so how does it work with

me?’

‘One of us will grab hold of you,’ said Jack.

‘We both will,’ Xandra waded in. ‘Although landing in a safe place, would probably be a good idea.’ She added with a crooked smile.

Now, Xandra thought, the position of trust has altered, although she wasn’t sure about the level of confidence about what they were about to do. A part of her wanted to tell them to forget it until there was a better plan.

But it was too late now to say. Jack and Gallow had their eyes firmly closed. She told them to think of a patch of clear ground in front of a cave. To see the wrinkled, grey stone and the tufts of wild grass swaying in the afternoon breeze. Screamers, even fallen ones didn’t have all that much of an imagination, but he would have to try his best.

‘I am ready!’ said Gallow.

‘Ready!’ echoed Jack.

There was a flicker of light and the next time she looked he was standing in the middle of a cluster of bushes with Gallow. Jack was nowhere to be seen.

For the first time in years Gallow was afraid, not that he was willing to admit it to anyone. Deep down he knew there were times when you just had to be strong for others and face your fears and this was one of them. It had been four long years since his last battle. Even in

those days the feelings were like this. Xandra was still holding his wing, tighter now. Now his hawk vision was never going to be more valuable.

Xandra called out, 'Jack!'

'Do not cry out!'

'But he could be in trouble.'

'If that was the case he would be screaming and it would be too late.'

'What shall we do?'

Gallow turned his head sharply one way and then the other, focusing hard with his razor sharp vision on his surroundings, scanning for anything that appeared to be moving. There wasn't.

'We must move slowly,' he said, 'be one with the plants. Keep your head low. That is all we can do for now. Pick some branches from some of the bushes and cover yourself.'

Gallow did the same concentrating mostly on his wings. Wrapped around the two of them they would make good cover. 'What went wrong?' he asked Xandra.

'I did, I misjudged the distance!'

'It's not you. The plants emit a gas that causes disorientation. It's their main defence mechanism. Can you do that transport thing?'

'My head's fuzzy but I'll try.' Xandra stopped picking leaves and closed her eyes tight. 'It's no good. I can't focus on anything.'

'Then we'd better move. I don't want to be here too long.'

‘Is there any way of telling which are bushes and which are Draklis?’

‘Yes,’ said Gallow. ‘The Draklis aren’t exactly perfect imitators. Their leaves have a shiny gloss to them. If you see a leaf like that you must let me know immediately by squeezing my arm tightly. Do not make a sound, and stay alert!’

Xandra nodded.

They moved on very slowly with their heads down taking notice of everything around them, Xandra’s head under Gallow’s outstretched wing. There was a clearing about half a mile away. From there she’d said, it might be possible to port again, as in theory the air should be clearer.

In the thicket it most certainly wasn’t, as Gallow too began to experience dizziness, and was no longer sure whether the rustling sounds coming from behind them were made by their own feet or not. One thing he did know about the Draklis was that they were cunning and fast. He had to have his wits about him if they were to reach the other end. Ahead of him one thing merged into another. He pinched his cheek and for a while things were a little clearer.

Soon the breeze gathered momentum. The sea was just under a mile from their right and the incoming tide brought its breath to the flora. Gallow was concerned that it might carry their scent to the enemy. Then all of a sudden that wasn’t going to be the problem. All of the bushes in front of them and to the sides moved aside leaving a large clear circle.

Gallow knew what this meant. It was an arena. Draklis who were very cunning would often trick their prey by waiting in clearings. For the past twenty minutes or so they had been walking directly through Draklis without realising it. What was to happen next was going to be pretty horrible. They found themselves in the heart of the circle where they were most vulnerable.

‘What’s going on?’ cried Xandra, ‘is it them?’

‘It is, child!’

‘What are they going to do to us? Try and talk to them!’

But Draklis did not communicate like that. They were single organisms driven by instinct alone.

It wasn’t long before the first emerged to a rousing chorus of rustling from the others, so loud that it was like a deafening, frightening hiss.

‘Try to port!’ cried Gallow.

Xandra tried. It was obvious her concentration was as hard as it could be. Nothing happened.

Then a ray of sunlight shot through the clouds. It felt like something magical and positive was about to happen. One single Draklis moved into the shaft and immediately it began to change in appearance. Its twisted tendrils thickened and lengthened as it stretched. Each one’s tip formed a spike resembling a sharp arrow head. Each leaf turned into a tuft of sinister dark hair and beneath the greenery there was a fiery red glow.

Gallow thought about attempting to take to the air. It had been so long and the right to do so was

removed. The urge to try was ever present.

Soon another Draklis and then another joined the first, each undergoing the same fearful metamorphosis as its kind as they stepped into the light. As soon as the process was complete each one began thrashing their newly formed tentacles in an intimidating manner at the two stranded unfortunates.

Gallow glanced at the sky and weighed up the situation. If he flew again then the others would make sure he was no more. This was all there was for him now, to fade away with dignity, to take up arms in battle for the last time and take the leap into the void.

‘What can we do?’ Xandra was crying.

He looked again and looked into her innocent tearful face as the enemy closed in all around. Gallow held his hands aloft, his nails extended into long, blood red talons; he screamed out the immortal battle cry of his squadron and began his attack.

Jack was worried about suddenly being all alone. He had called out for literally ages without a single response from the others, now his throat was sore. Now he could only fear the worst. Ahead of him in eerie silence scattered around were grey rocks of about waist height. In this place, he dreaded to think, these things could actually come to life. This was the worst place in any dimension of the universe. Beyond them lay the mouth of the cave and the creature that was to forbid him entrance. There were so many monsters here, yet

you were dead already. When your life ended there was supposed to be peace. There was so much to get your head around.

At least there were no veins in the sky, just bony-fingered clouds splayed across a lilac firmament. Behind him the afternoon breeze caressed the bush leaves.

All that was left for him to do was to carry on alone in search of his brother, with nothing else to guide him but pure gut instinct. Almost reluctantly he continued on his way, each step forward feeling as if he'd put on a pair of iron shoes. Then something caused him to stop, a voice in his head. Xandra was crying out in his mind.

I'm sorry I let you down.

Xandra?

We are stranded and this is the end.

Hold on I'm coming!

You mustn't. You will be trapped with us. Find your brother, find Ross.

And then the voice that for a moment gave him hope died in his head. It was too late now. He bid a tearful farewell to his friends. There would be time to grieve later. For the time being there was Ross to think of. Time, which was no longer an issue for his friends, was rapidly running out for him. He began again on his way to the cave of Calmanis to face the Sabil.

Being the skilled fighter he was Gallow at least,

was having some success taking down his enemy. Quick-witted too he was soon able to discover that if he dug his talons deep into the right part of the stem you could render a Draklis weak enough to limit its striking ability. The only problem was there was too many of them. As soon as one went down three, four others stepped in to replace it.

Half an hour into the battle Gallow was severely lacerated about his chest and his cheeks. In Screamer terms these were called courage marks. Green luminous green light penetrated the cuts.

Xandra too was fighting well, he thought. Like him she had harnessed her deepest fear and forged it into courage. And like him she'd forgotten to be afraid, lashing out at them ferociously with a thick dead branch one way and the other and then behind. She too was cut and spilling green light. The arm she wasn't fighting with, covered her stomach. Of course she had mentioned the rumour that creatures such as this could absorb your inner light in seconds like spiritual soup. There was something about seeing her, a mere human fight like this, that reminded him of an eternal truth, that there was always something worth fighting for, even though you know that the end would be the worst and this was a battle for dignity rather than success.

Xandra swung again at the tendrils of one of her enemies and missed. One of the limbs recoiled and then caught her on the neck. Immediately she dropped to her knees as if the force that was keeping her upright had abandoned her. Four, perhaps five Draklis began to

descend upon her.

Gallow managed in time to stave off his own attacker with a swipe with his wing tip and moved in to protect her.

‘Are you alright?’ he asked her, even though he knew the answer.

‘I don’t like giving up but this is hopeless,’ she responded and observed the way her arm now like wet rope struggled to lift her weapon.

‘Can you stand up?’

‘I’ll try!’ and Xandra did. She managed to get to her feet with Gallow’s assistance. But as soon as she tried to move forward she fell to her knees.

This was enough for him to make up his mind.

‘Enough!’ he cried and giving one last lash retracted all of his talons and grabbed Xandra by the shoulders. He extended his wings sending a Draklis either side flying into the others. It had been so long since he’d done this. He hoped that he could remember how to fly. Gallow flapped hard and caught the air under his feathers. The movement of two, enormous wings created a space around them. The Draklis recoiled for a moment at least. He didn’t expect them to do that.

Damn it. The power of the others of his kind, were strong.

‘Try harder!’ Xandra cried pathetically.

Gallow pointed his beak at the sky and flapped with great ferocity. Soon they were hovering above their foe.

Then as they were about to take to the clouds he felt something sharp grip his leg. The spiky thorns hooked themselves into his calf. He kicked sharply in desperation to move it but this did nothing. He was leaking light and wasn't all that sure if he would be able to keep them in the air for much longer. 'I can't move!' he yelled.

'It's worse,' said Xandra, 'look in the sky!'

'What child?' Gallow glanced upwards.

'The veins are back. It's going to go dark again!'

Gallow was pleased. This was a turn of luck. Draklis were dead without soul light to feed them

'It is fine!' said Gallow and felt ease in his chest, their escape a little medicine for the pain. 'Just wait a while.'

The darkness, which had been so reliable up until now took its sweet time.

During their brief flight Gallow was asked by Xandra about the light spilling from her. This kind of wounding was obviously a first for her. 'All that we are after our second death is light,' he said. 'When our spiritual flesh is gone that is all there is of us and we become one with the cosmos.'

'Is it inevitable' she asked, 'or can it be stopped?'

There it is, he thought, that place again.

'Hevane,' he said, 'they say that once you are there you are whole.'

And then he told her to never speak of the place again.

ACT 2 – The Rescue

Just before the last darkness Finch stood at the edge of the valley with Malen, his tortured eyes scanning the greenery below like a hawk, his mind playing out the last meeting with the Screamers. He was told that the second Gallow took to the air he was in breach of the terms of his exile and so things needed to be done. Such happenings ripple through the air and touch the ones who hold the keys to a being. They also knew he had made it to Calmanis unscathed.

‘Why aren’t they doing this themselves?’ Malen asked him.

‘They don’t want to upset the Snipers,’ replied Finch. ‘Farl once told me they are going to have peace talks. If they go in and take him it could destroy any future trust between them.’

‘And what are we getting out of this?’

‘The Screamers will give me Xandra. She will have to be mine forever. Not only that I will get a front row seat to Gallow’s second death. After that, freedom.’ Even just saying these words made him feel powerful. Being amongst the dark ones had filled him with such energy that he felt indestructible. He was after all the first human spirit to ever be brave enough to go near them without being devoured.

‘And me?’ asked Malen. ‘What about me?’

Finch’s lips went like a snake. ‘Always questions Malen. My friends have something for you.’

‘What is that?’

‘How would you like Jack’s light?’

A smile exploded across Malen’s face. Then he didn’t know that this was a lie. ‘Don’t they want it?’

‘They are my friends now Malen. If we bring them Gallow I’m sure Farl will agree to it. You’ll have to be patient though; I want to play with him first.’

‘We will have to get past the Draklis first won’t we Finch?’

Finch nodded confidently.

‘How?’

‘With this,’ Finch put his hand in his pocket. When it reappeared it was holding a stone, one very similar to the one his soon-to-be girlfriend had. ‘There’s a pocket about halfway across. It formed about half an hour ago. We can jump straight to it and wait until they go. Then we can jump the rest of the way to Calmanis.’

To this, Malen laughed. Malen had the most disturbing laugh too. Like some banshee that was on fire falling down a well. Finch always thought that this was down to the nature of his first death. He’d thrown himself off a bridge and when his legs caught some iron railings his body was flipped over and his head was smashed on a large rock. He didn’t die straight away. He’d lived just long enough to see a part of his brain on the ground.

‘Imagine that!’ he would laugh like Igor. ‘A bit of my brain, lying there like blob of pink blancmange and raspberry syrup.’

This was a very difficult image to shake. Tough

as he was, the sound sent shivers all over Finch. He was surprised though that his little twisted assistant didn't ask exactly how they were to bring back a fully-grown Screamer, a boy and a girl. Farl had given him the means to do that.

The darkness seemed to be lasting for longer this time. Only the green light spilling from their wounds gave them any proof of being somewhere other than black void.

Gallow was confident that he had done a good job of tending to Xandra's wounds. Screamer battalions were well educated in the ways improvised field medicine. There was a way in which you can slow the body down so that the light doesn't spill so fast. There was also a way to take away pain long enough to seal wounds. To do this there are certain types of leaves which in the purple world change in shape and texture to behave like skin when placed against spiritual flesh.

Even so, Gallow could still sense unease from Xandra. Some wounds he thought take a little time to heal.

'Tell me why you don't trust my kind,' he asked her. He could see her but not the other way around. He wondered if talking about it might help smooth the situation, like reaching out with just your voice.

Xandra began. 'When me and Finch arrived

here,' she said, 'there was another girl. Not like me, she was quiet. Finch didn't like her much but I did.'

'Why not?' asked Gallow.

'He said she didn't have much about her. But I'm not stupid. He doesn't like me talking to other people.'

'And where were you?' There was an uncomfortable silence. He apologised.

'In the back of a van to begin with. We had no idea where we were going. The man and the woman lied to us. They said they wanted us to help them find their dog.'

'And when did you know that wasn't the case?'

Another pause.

'When they tied us up.'

'Oh!' Gallow wondered whether he should say anything else. He knew that Xandra's first death wasn't a natural one that was why she was in limbo with everyone else.

'You are wondering now why I hate Screammers,' she said, obviously sensing something awkward in the air.

'Yes!' confessed Gallow. 'But it doesn't matter.'

Xandra continued anyway. 'After the couple killed us, the three of us got here. A minute later your lot swooped from the skies. I tried to grab the girl's hand but she just stood there screaming. So four of your friends ripped her to shreds, while she screamed the place down.'

'I'm sorry!' said Gallow.

‘No you’re not,’ said Xandra.

There was a rule. One Screamer to one human. It was their version of fairness.

‘And that is why you hate us?’

‘Yes,’ said Xandra, ‘you prey on the weak, and that poor girl had to suffer being hacked to death not once but twice.’

Gallow decided not to say another word until the darkness ended. Even though there was much he wanted to say, that they weren’t all like that, that even when he was with his comrades he tried to be fair. Screamers were like vampires, they didn’t want to be responsible for the death of another, it was just another unfortunate consequence of their feeding activities. At least he understood a little more about her now. The horror of her death was how she had become strong.

Soon the light returned as if a hand in the sky had flicked a switch. They were surrounded by swirling pink mist and pale purple air. Gallow’s first instinct was, now that his patient was able to look out for danger by herself, to see if there was any sign of Jack.

He got to his feet.

‘Can you see him?’ said Xandra.

‘Nothing,’ replied Gallow. ‘There are some more rocks ahead. He could be amongst them. They can provide good cover when there is danger about.’

‘If he was able to port this far,’ said Xandra. ‘It’s hardly likely as the range doesn’t cover this far.’

‘Still we should look!’ Gallow offered her his hand. It took a while for her to accept it. He pulled her

to her feet, slowly and respectfully and they made their way to the rocks to find Jack.

This place definitely has more than its fair share of monsters, Jack thought as he eyed the slumbering beast sprawled cave across the bridge of the cave entrance. First there were those damn Screamers, then the Snipers, then the Draklis and now him, Sabil. Not all of its one thousand eyes were closed. Assumedly that was the reason it had so many, so that it could sleep and be awake at exactly the same time. The creature stank too, like a rancid old canal. No worse, like an old canal full of month-old urine. Perhaps when you look like that and probably one of a kind there was no need to remain clean. In an odd way it seemed to add to its grotesque character.

Jack thought about how he was going to get past it. Staring into the cave's black mouth he concentrated hard on landing inside it. This proved to be more difficult in practise than theory. Like Xandra said there was a good reason why you shouldn't port too much and he'd travelled further than he should have on the last jump. His head was extremely sore and quite painful in a fuzzy sort of way. This meant that he could do one of two things; he could fall back to the rocks and wait for it to go or take his chances with the thing with a thousand eyeballs. All he could think about

was his brother going through god-knows-what, calling out his name and not being there for him.

No, it wasn't a choice at all once you weighed it all up.

The Sabil was snoring like an old dog he used to have called Smokey. Only something told him it would do a lot more than just try to lick him to death when he tried to pass. It did look dokey in some respects, clumsy almost, as if killing you would be nothing more than a fortunate accident for it. Stealth he thought, would be the best option. Jack got down really low, onto his stomach. Gingerly and quietly he moved himself forward. On his first try he managed to get within one metre of the entrance before anything happened.

The Sabil gave out one of those extra loud snorts and one of its arms dropped over it and swung across it back and forth like a hypnotist's pocket watch. Curiously the hand on the end of the arm only had two fingers and one thumb. Its skin was green, slimy and frog-like.

When it stopped it hung in the centre about four inches off the ground.

'Damn!' he exclaimed with a sharp whisper. Jack looked about him for a clue about what to do next. Words printed on a rock, a magic spell, anything.

Behind him to his right as if conveniently put there by one of his own thoughts was a long, spindly branch. He shuffled across and picked it up. Then he stretched out his arm until the tip was close to the Sabil's suspended limb. Carefully catching it in the Y of

the branches he then used it to move it to the side. Holding his breath he got back onto his feet, keeping the offending thing at a discreet distance he started to sneak through the space he'd made. He was barely in when to his horror the Sabil came to life.

The Sabil knocked the stick out of Jack's hand with hardly any effort, and grabbed him by the throat and in seconds he was lifted into the air until he was gazing into its face. Now he could see the teeth, at least nine rows of the damned thing, long, jagged and thin as if designed for chewing its prey to death in a single bite. They were lined all around its mouth and just like its eyes there were far too many to count, even if he'd wanted to.

Jack couldn't call out; he was in too much pain, and his mouth didn't seem to want to function. On this side of death you couldn't die through choking, only lacerations, but there was nothing to stop you experiencing the agony which went with it. He wanted to cry out for it to stop. He wanted to try to reason with it, to get it to stop. Perhaps there was a side to it that responded to positive words. It was impossible. He could feel the blood pile up in his face or whatever passed for blood in the purple land. He kicked out with his feet and lash out with his fists but neither would go anywhere need the beast.

This was going to be pointless as he felt himself being pulled towards its horrific jaws. The Sabil wanted to study him first. It held him in front of his eyes before starting to devour him, although to Jack it felt like some

sort of sick humiliation. To add to this it even belched out an odious gas like burnt sulphur. The pungent wind blew through his hair and stung his eyes. It occurred to him that this might have served some sort of purpose, like a fly which needed to vomit on its food to break it down before consumption. It certainly burnt whatever it was.

He tried again to kick out as his body moved closer and closer to the creature's mouth. This time Jack's foot caught its teeth which closed around his calf and he felt sharp pain.

Then suddenly he was released and he fell to the ground where he rolled before hitting his head on something hard.

When he looked up again there was Xandra standing over him. He gazed at the cave again and witnessed Gallow battling with the Sabil in the air. Such strength for a man creature. Gallow had it by the arm pulled it skywards. The Sabil was too heavy to be lifted completely. Jack wasn't going to stand by and just watch their unlikely ally struggle. He told Xandra to gather large stones.

Meanwhile, Gallow was slapping the Sabil with his powerful wings as he'd done with the Draklis. Red, blood-coloured steam emerged from its wrists as Gallow dug in his powerful talons. The Sabil let out a harrowing cry.

Soon the children had gathered enough stones. They wasted no time at all and began throwing them hard at its body.

Gallow was flapping ferociously trying to keep it incapacitated. The beast swiped at Gallow with its free arm several times only managing to catch him once. The blow knocked him against the mountain. He was strong enough to take it and deliver him another sharp blow of his own to its mouth knocking out a number of teeth.

From the ground, the rocks were delivered thick and fast. Eventually it collapsed, which came as a welcome relief to Jack. His arm was getting tired and he was aching all over.

Gallow joined them on the ground. He seemed pleased with his triumphant deed.

'Is it dead?' Xandra asked.

The three looked in the Sabil's direction where its entire body had rippled and cracked. Each one of its eyes exploded with turrets of fire. Then it filled up like a hot air balloon before turning into a huge cloud of red smoke and there was nothing left to see.

'It is now!' observed Gallow and led the group into the cave.

Beneath them down in the valley, the bushes stood in thick lines like soldiers ready for battle. Beyond that, dark mystery

'There!' Finch cried out enthusiastically. The stone in his outstretched arm shone out in the purple-grey air like a lighthouse, or to be more to the point, some great orb of destiny. In the midway point to the

left was a pocket for sure. It was to be as simple as that, across the danger zone in just two jumps before the Draklis had a chance to attack.

His accomplice was doubtful. 'And you're sure we can make it?' he said screwing his eyes up in that annoying way.

'You could do with showing more confidence in me Malen,' Finch growled back, 'either that or go back to the hide out and be a soul saver for boring Lucas, or worse, a mushroom picker.'

This seemed to be enough to convince him. If he was honest with himself Finch wasn't sure why he needed to bring someone else along, perhaps it was just for company, or perhaps to have someone to feel superior to.

Yes probably that.

He returned the stone to his pocket and pointed to the first landing place. If they both held that picture in their heads at exactly the same time then they could make it in one piece. The most effective way for them to do this was to hold each other's heads during the port. This was something Lucas had shown him when he and Xandra first passed over. It was because Malen had a terrible sense of direction. He once got stuck down a well for three days and couldn't get out. So Finch grabbed Malen's head and Malen did the same back. In a second they were in exactly the place they needed to be, and there wasn't a single Draklis in sight.

Finch moved his hand in the air and it disappeared from sight. 'Right here!' he announced. 'We

will go inside and as soon as they have made up their mind there is no one here they will go and we can make the second jump.'

Surely enough, as soon as he said that rustling leaves could be heard in the distance from all around. Finch ushered Malen into the pocket and then followed.

There they remained listening hard for the commotion to pass them by. The Draklis came fast. One came very close. Malen could swear that he heard something scratching and sniffing by the entrance. He began to panic. Finch placed his hand over the boy's mouth muffling the whimpering to dull murmur. When Finch was convinced that it was all over they re-emerged into the world, reborn from the invisible womb. Now was the time to port again to safety.

'Are you ready?' Finch grabbed his accomplice's head again.

'As I'll ever be!' was the response.

It was still daylight and so his target was fairly visible. Focus he thought, cast everything else from your mind, fear, second death, everything.

But for some reason it didn't feel the same as it usually did. Each time he tried to capture a picture in his head it swirled away into a muddy swamp. His spiritual brain was numb as if it had been stored away in a deep freeze overnight or as of it was new and hadn't been broken in yet.

This time he stared harder at the caves, forging every line, every crater, every shadow. Then he stared at the huge boulders and grass in front of them. It was

never like this he thought, never this difficult.

‘I am the best porter in the whole of the group,’ he ranted, ‘why isn’t it happening?’

‘Let me try!’ said Malen, and this sounded more of an idea that it would have done an hour prior, as the afternoon breeze now brought with it the sound of the enemy’s return.

But when Malen did try he had the same problem. His face was screwed up tight as he too struggled to insert an image on his mind.

‘Forget it!’ cried Finch and pulled him back into the dimension pocket.

The cave was cold, damp and quite dark.

In order for them to see, Gallow did something completely unexpected, he didn’t do what was in Jack’s mind to do which was to wrap some cloth around a stick, dip it into something oily and ignite it. He simply lit up his eyes. Now they were guided on their journey by two, eerie red beams lighting both sides of the cave walls.

‘I didn’t know he could do that,’ he whispered loudly in Xandra’s ear. The words echoed along the walls. ‘I wonder what else he can do, that we don’t know about.’

‘He did say earlier he could see in the dark’ she replied. ‘Do you trust him now? You seemed unsure before.’

Xandra's face was washed in creepy red. 'My mother used to say, never trust anyone who can't even trust themselves. What about you?'

'I think if he was going to devour me, he had a perfect chance back there in the valley. Remember he flew to save us both. Now he is in violation of everything he promised he would do. His fate is sealed. They will do terrible things to him when they catch up with him.'

This was certainly food for thought. Why on earth would anyone want to make their situation worse when they didn't really need to, especially in this abysmal place? One thing that did jump into his mind was that someone who could break one promise could quite easily break another. He chose not to mention this to Xandra for the time being for fear of worrying her.

The tunnels were most peculiar. It was almost as if they had been designed that way, straighter and smoother. Every so often they would come across an opening that resembled a rubbish disposal chute along both sides. Each one was exactly the same shape and size, an almost perfect circle about a metre and a half in diameter. Gallow pointed out that they should keep a special eye on these, as this was how the Snipers were able to move about so quickly. If they detected your presence, and they did have heightened senses capable of doing so, they could emerge in a single flap of a hummingbird's wing and drag you off into the void nevermore to return.

The red light from Gallow's eyes on the cave

walls didn't do much to put them at their ease. It made them look as if they were seeping blood through their rocky pores. Perhaps it was all just his vivid imagination but there was a damp breeze blowing through the cave that was like breath. A little further along carnivorous tooth-like stalagmites and stalactites added to the feeling that they were inside something that was very much alive. The only thing that was good about this situation was Xandra, who not being that comfortable with the dark was now holding his hand for some small comfort. Perhaps it was the darkness of the cave but feelings were being enhanced tenfold.

They stopped in a place where the way split into three. The channel to the right and to the left went up and the one in the middle went down.

'Don't tell me,' said Jack, 'it's that one.'

Gallow nodded, the lights in his face made the cave appear to wobble. 'And we'd better pray we don't meet one coming up on the way,' he said.

The chute wasn't all that steep although it was wider and higher than the others. It was also smooth and reasonably which gave him a picture of the three of them sliding down on their bottoms like two-year olds. Gallow went first, folding his wings in tight against his body in order to be a better fit. As soon as he entered the chute he vanished from sight. Eager as anything to catch up with both him and the only illumination Xandra went next and Jack last. One by one they landed in some sort of inner chamber, circular in nature, cold and damp with what resembled six luminous doorways

spilling in light from some mysterious source.

‘How can that be?’ asked Xandra, ‘we’re deep underground.’

‘Explain those magic rooms in the air of yours’ replied Gallow. ‘In this place normality no longer exists. This is how the Snipers get to places like the city so quickly.’

‘So one of these might lead to Ross?’ said Jack, at last he felt like he was getting somewhere.

‘Or perhaps right into the middle of a Snipers’ nest,’ said Gallow.

‘Where will he be?’ said Jack.

‘If they have not turned him to light,’ said Gallow, ‘he will be in one of their detainment cells.’

But which door was it? Jack stared at each one in turn. It was so hard to tell, all he could see was light, dancing, spectral light. This wasn’t just a game of chance; this was Russian roulette with doors, doors which could have led anywhere. This needed a lot of thought and there was so little time. There could be ten, twenty Snipers on their back any minute. What a horrible dilemma.

And then Xandra had an interesting idea.

The woman with the grey-blond hair sat very still gazing at the clouds. On days like this which seemed to be longer than the others, loneliness took its selfish grip and there was little else to do but think

about it. An interesting distraction was to do what she used to do when she was a child and allow her imagination to take over. In no time at all there were creatures and things of all manner of shapes; a dog, a whale (the latter chasing a fishing boat), a spider, a tea pot, even a half-eaten sandwich. When this was over her thoughts drifted back to her original sadness. Suddenly it was better to go in search of the planet monsters and let them eat her, at least then it would all be over somehow. Her thoughts then went to someone else, the strange yet enigmatic creature that risked its life to get her where she happened to be. She didn't know his name; he said it wasn't that important. Only that she must rest for a while and then climb the highest mountain in order to find eternal peace.

Yet it didn't quite work out that way. There is a problem with going up when there is something else pulling you down.

And during the day, as if to remind her in a mocking way was the light, a constant bright white flare at the tip of the mountain. She could see it burning in the night. When she relaxed for long enough she could feel it pulling her like a hand from the heavens. But it was all so far away anyway and her legs were tired just walking to her cave and back.

Janie knew she was dead, the bird man had told her that. He didn't say why it was she was able to feel things still, like pain and hunger and loss. She'd had a craving for mushrooms since she'd arrived too, something she couldn't explain. It was the only thing

that was edible on this side of first death, poisonous to the living. These strange little things grew everywhere that was damp and dark such as the shadows in the rock. Unlike the ones in the original world these didn't require soil in order to grow and quite conveniently as soon as you picked one another would appear in its place when you returned the following day. To begin with, they tasted foul even though everything about you told you to eat them. But you get used to them after a while, the curious pink and lime-green striped toad stools, and you even feel stronger. Janie placed six of them onto a flat piece of stone on the fire she'd prepared that morning. They looked more palatable when the sickly colours turned to one shade of dark brown. As she was turning them over she heard that voice again, the whisper that was like a shout. The owner of it who was obviously very afraid was crying for help. It was a small boy who sounded as sad and as lonely as she was. Something about it was familiar though like it belonged to the past. Janie missed her sons terribly, she wondered if they had passed over peacefully and not in this terrible place. Perhaps it was what was preventing her making the ascent to the light.

Finch stuck his head out of the pocket and very quickly retracted it. They were still there, waiting for them to give up and port again. Of course it was possible to remain there forever if need be, but

claustrophobia was something heavily amplified in this place, it usually set in after five days. After then you would struggle to breathe, your chest would become tight and you hungered to be free of it. Already the air was becoming thin and not an entire day had passed.

Finch was very frustrated and disappointed about his plan falling flat. It should have worked; two ports and they should have been at the rocks. There could have only been one explanation, the Draklis had powers which prevented it.

‘How much longer?’ said Malen, who by the look on his face was feeling it the most of the two.

‘I don’t know,’ he confessed. ‘Perhaps they will eventually leave and we can try again. Perhaps their powers are weaker at night and ours stronger.’

‘I don’t think I could wait that long Finch.’ Finch hadn’t seen Malen this pathetic since the well incident. Then he cried like an infant. The dark and small places weren’t all that kind to him.

For this reason he needed another plan. One did present itself, it was while he was talking about what he did to Ross, it made Malen laugh although nervously. That was the first time he’d used that particular power. He could still remember how it felt, the whole buzz about being able to destroy things with his head. The jealousy in Malen’s eyes fuelled the flames even more and in the end he fed upon his own words as if they were the rarest and finest delicacy in the whole of the world.

Outside, the Draklis made the most disturbing

sound. It was a mixture of clicking and whistling and it tapped straight into their souls.

‘Come on then!’ Malen cried. ‘Let’s do that. Let’s crush the bastards!’

In fact he left the pocket first. Finch only followed in order to pull him back. These are things you need to be ready for.

But so confident in his friend was Malen that when Finch reached him he was chanting rude words at the Draklis in order to goad them.

‘No!’ Finch yelled. ‘I don’t know if it will work yet.’

‘Do it Finch!’ cried Malen. ‘Show them!’

Finch tried. Time was now an insect. He closed his eyes tight and thought about what he wanted to do. Immediately the ground shook.

‘That’s it!’ Malen laughed. ‘They’re backing off.’ And they were, although only slightly. As soon as the vibrating stopped they came back stronger, thrashing their spiky tendrils as manically and ferociously as was possible. ‘Do it again!’

‘I’m trying!’ Finch tightened his eyes again and thought about the damage. Something was wrong; this didn’t feel right at all. In the cemetery with Ross it was all so easy but here it was a struggle to move anything. Finch got a headache after just two minutes. He could hear Malen crying and opened his eyes again slightly in time to see him waving at him. But the Draklis were fast. As he was waving the tendrils of one caught him in the chest, the incision exposing a line of sparkling white

light.

Finch tried harder even though it was killing his head. He just couldn't concentrate with all bedlam going on around him.

'Finch help me!' Malen was screaming. One of the Draklis grabbed him from behind quite rapidly while another, on in front whipped his throat from left to right creating a deep cut. Malen couldn't speak now, he couldn't cry out. Then the one which was behind him wrenched Finch's head right back. It was now hanging onto the rest of him by a strand, his exposed neck, which was now gushing like a bright green fountain. Forty or fifty Draklis honed straight in to suck up poor Malen's light.

'No!!!' Finch screamed. In a gap on the piles of green limbs he could see Malen's foot still shaking. Very soon it ceased,

It didn't take long for the Draklis to take all of what was left of him. Finch watched his friend disappear little by little before his eyes.

Soon it was his turn. Before he could think about what to do next something grabbed his legs and then his waist. Finch struggled to break free desperate not to share his friend's fate but to no avail. He tried to hit out with his arms. The Draklis were quick to move in for the kill. It was too late. They descended upon him in one swift move. There was nothing he could do but close his eyes and accept his death.

Then something rather odd happened. He was suddenly able to breathe again. Gone were the plant-like

restrictions from his body. Finch opened his eyes again to find that he was surrounded by large, grey rocks. He had made it. He had managed to port to the other side.

Xandra called for hush and moved around the doorways one by one. Her mind was clear of all things. It was much like moving all the clutter from one room into another so there is space to dance. Now her psychic powers were more enhanced. Now she could connect with the void. She approached the first doorway and stared hard into it. At first it was difficult, hundreds of thousands of voices entered her head all at once, far too many to cope with. Then she began filtering them out in groups. She gathered all of the ones that were too deep to be Ross to the back of her mind and put a wall in front of them. Next she gathered all of the ones that weren't speaking English and did the same with them. This left high pitched voices, the females and the small children. Now she could listen out for the ones that were in distress.

There was nothing like that here.

So she tried the next door and then the next, using the same technique. When she reached the fourth door it felt different. This was the one, she was sure of it.

Jack help me!

'There!' she announced at last. 'It's Ross! And Jack...'

‘Yes?’

‘There’s another voice linked to Ross. I can feel it, somebody else crying out to him, a woman.’

There was no time to pursue that any further. Gallow said that he heard a familiar sound from the doorway at his back, one which sent ripples through his wing feathers, the creaking echo noise that the Snipers made when they came in for the attack. ‘Hurry!’ he demanded.

Xandra went in first followed by Jack, Gallow last defending the rear the gallant soldier he was. As each person passed they were washed in the most brilliant whiteness and silence as if for just one moment they had been taken away from absolutely everything that was real.

Odd, but being outside of everything like that was more peaceful than one could ever imagine. She wondered if second death was like that.

When the whiteness dissolved back into reality she was in a very long corridor with pastel blue walls trimmed with fancy white borders. Every few feet there was a window framed with gold velvet curtains. Each window had multiple panes, square ones about the size of a hand. She stopped to look out of the first one she came to and saw a large rolling green garden and lush grass. What impressed her the most was the air, which wasn’t the pale purple she’d been used to but a striking bright orange-gold, and the clouds were different too, not the streaky bacon ones but swirling white circles.

‘You’ve got to see this!’ Xandra turned to

address the others, but there was no one there to talk to. Instinctively she ran back to where she had come and touched the place where the doorway was. Nothing there now, just cold stone covered with thin paper.

Jack, she said in her head, *Gallow*. But she could no longer feel their presence. Wherever this peculiar place was, she was very much alone.

Or at least that was what she thought. When she turned away from the wall, having finally given up feeling for an opening for the time being there was a boy. He was dressed in colourful clothes made of silk and adorned with frills. His hair was red, curly and shoulder-length and his trousers went to the knees, after that were white stockings and buckled shoes.

‘Hello?’ she said and then, ‘don’t be afraid!’

This seemed to have the adverse effect; the boy disappeared into a turning in the corridor.

‘Come back!’ she yelled. ‘I want to talk to you!’

Jack ran in a panic from one side of the street to the other and there was no sign of either of the other two. The air was filthy and human shapes barely visible because of the smog. The thick, black smoke from the tall factory chimneys and the sour stench from the river made the most disgusting cocktail. There was no sign of the doorway that took him there. He hoped that sometime soon it would come back. This wasn’t a place he wanted to stay for very long. Before moving on he

stopped to make a mental note of where he was. High on the corner of a white stone terrace house with iron railings was a sign.

TURNWOOD STREET.

Jack wandered aimlessly for a while trying to get his bearings. As soon as he was far enough away from the river, the smog began to clear. On both sides of him the living passed by, some holding hands, a nanny pushing a black shiny perambulator. All the men were wearing hats, bowlers, toppers, flat cloth caps. The ones in the toppers had on long coats, silk scarves and gloves, while the ones who obviously weren't so privileged wore things less appealing. While he was absorbing all of this fascinating data something made him jump out of the skin he no longer possessed. Something living passed through his body. He couldn't tell what it was until it was in front of him and then he saw it was a large horse. This was followed promptly by the coalman's cart it was pulling.

Not just a different place he thought, a different time. This was the time that Queen Victoria was on the throne, or possibly her son. Where he happened to have landed wasn't all that much of a mystery. Closer investigation revealed that the stench which had invaded his nose like Genghis Khan and his thousand odorous warriors happened to be coming from the Thames.

This felt like some horrible joke. Still, if the Snipers had doorways to the past then nowhere was going to be safe.

Jack went to the end of the street, all the time staying close to the crowds. Safety in numbers, he kept thinking, some crazy idea that perhaps if he surrounded himself with living people, they may not be able to get at him. Without knowing why he followed the road to the river.

Then he knew. Something was pulling him that way.

‘Ross?’ he whispered softly and stopped suddenly. When the crowds dispersed he could see a tall, dark figure standing on the bridge. It appeared to be a tall man in a long, flowing black cloak, he wasn’t all that sure, the fog from the river swirled around him as if magnetised. The man seemed to be staring right into him. Then as soon as he was sure he’d got Jack’s attention he moved on in a ghost-like fashion. He seemed to want Jack to follow, that was obvious. Every now and again he stopped and turned as if to assure itself Jack was still there.

Jack didn’t know if this was a good idea or not. Something told him that there were answers there. Soon he was able to get quite close. Then its long, slender shape was clearer. He noticed the outline of wings, feathers and when it turned this time a prominent hooked beak.

‘Gallow?’ he said softly, and then cried out, ‘Gallow!’

He attempted telepathy, but something about the air made it difficult. His thoughts were as clouded as the dank water under his feet and as far away as his own

time.

Jack now ran, although it didn't feel very much like running, it was more like wading through jam than air. On the other side of the bridge were more streets, butcher's shops, toy shops, bakers, drapers. Now Gallow was gone completely. Jack turned on his heels scanning the wide circle around him, nothing.

Then from out of a narrow alleyway came a long arm with beckoning fingers. As he approached the hand grabbed him with considerable force and slammed him against the wall.

'Gallow, what are you doing?' said Jack breathlessly.

'Guess again,' the Screamer replied, and the fire in his eyes confirmed the truth.

Gallow touched the wall of the cave, it was cold and damp. Water trickled through his fingers. Ahead of him the tunnel split in two like out-stretched arms.

'Left!' he said to himself. That was the side the water was on. He decided to fall the signs of water to see if they led to the surface. There, he would have a vantage point to then assess the situation with his military skills.

The left-hand fork did indeed have a subtle incline. Gallow moved slowly keeping a sharp watch for the enemy. The red beams from his eyes were still the only light. As he moved further he became aware of natural light spilling along the cave walls and so he cut

them. Before long he was standing on a rock ledge overlooking the valley. This time it looked different, more greenery, more trees. The trees were taller than the ones he'd ever seen with long, narrow leaves that suited what was now a tropical climate. The sky too was a different colour. Not purple but deep scarlet.

Gallow breathed it in all the same, even though it offered no clues as to what to do or where to go, or where his comrades were to be found. To his immediate right there was another opening in the rock. He stepped from one ledge to the one outside it just about managing to keep his footing.

He was just about to enter the opening when his acute hearing picked up a scraping sound from within.

'Who is that,' he asked, 'friend or foe?'

Gallow picked up a rock from the ground and held it with the sharpest part facing outwards. Then he crossed the threshold of the cave. No sooner had he done so than something struck him on the back of the head. The force wasn't severe enough to knock him off his feet but was sufficient to throw him to the wall.

When he looked again to see what it was there was a woman standing in front of him wielding a long, thick stick crudely fashioned into a rudimentary spear. The woman had grey-blond hair and fearful eyes which scanned him thoroughly.

'You are not the one who brought me here,' she cried. 'Who are you, and why have you come, Screamer?'

'I am not a threat to you human,' said Gallow,

trying to sound every bit like that was the case. 'I am looking for a boy who was kidnapped. I came with others. The others have gone.'

'Why should I believe you?'

'I am a trained warrior,' said Gallow. 'If I wanted your soul I would have had it by now.'

These words at least have some effect. The woman withdrew slightly, even though she was still quite reluctant to let go of her weapon. 'You mentioned others,' she said.

'A boy and a girl, we found some doors in one of the other caves. When we passed through them we were separated.'

'And you're looking for a boy?'

'He was taken by Snipers.'

'Then he is no more.'

'Not necessarily,' said Gallow. 'The one which spoke to Jack is playing a sort of sick game.'

'Jack?' there was a spark of light in the woman's face for a moment, as if an invisible butterfly had landed on her nose.

'That is his name,' said Gallow.

'That's my son's name. It's nice to hear it again, even by one of your kind.'

'I am not like the others.'

'I know you aren't all bad. It was a Screamer who brought me here. You were all human once weren't you like us? It's easy to forget there are still some who can be trusted.'

Gallow held out his hand. For a while she was

reluctant to take it. She did tentatively and he was relieved about it. 'I am Gallow!'

'Janie!' said the woman, 'Janie Gale!'

Finch threw another stone at another rock which just happened to look exactly like Jack. Malen was gone now, and it was all his fault. Finch had seen second deaths many times and never twitched a whisker. These were strangers, aliens. Seeing your friend, your ally get his head ripped off like that, watching the life-light explode from his body while he screams for mercy, was something he wasn't something he was going to forget very easily, or forgive. He approached the entrance to the cave half expecting to see the enormous beast, the Sabil or whatever it was supposed to have been called, and there it was only as lifeless as a lump of spent coal.

Finch took the two stones from his pocket given to him by Farl. Strike them together, he had said, do this and we shall speak. Not as good as texting, he thought, crude and tacky.

The collision of the stones produced a small but safe explosion. In the aftermath was green fire which flickered madly for a few seconds and then the flames merged to form a circle. In the centre of the circle a bird-like face appeared, Farl.

'Speak!' he said simply.

'I'm here!' replied Finch, 'on the other side of

the valley, at the foot of the mountains.'

'Where is the other human? There were two of you.'

'He is light! The Draklis...'

'But you are here,' said Farl. 'That is all that matters. Do you still have the vial?'

Finch pulled out the small, leather pouch from his pocket. With the pouch was a vial of blue liquid. 'Yes!' he said. 'It is still intact.'

'Good! You must keep it safe. Only that will incapacitate Gallow. Do you remember what I told you?'

'I will pour it on his chest where his heart was, and then will go weak and his spirit will enter the vial.'

'You do remember!' said Farl. 'Do not used it to defeat Sabil, there is only enough for one dose.'

Finch looked over at the Sabil in case it was only unconscious. He hadn't thought of that. It was still. 'The Sabil is no longer a problem,' he was glad to announce.

'Gallow was one of my best men before he got civilised.'

'And I have your word?' Finch tried to disguise the fact that he was shivering inside.

'What word?'

'That you will spare me if I get you Gallow, and you will give me Xandra?'

Finch could feel the tension through the void, as if Farl was able to reach through with his claws and grab him. Farl let out a most disturbing growl.

‘A Screamer’s word is his bond, child,’ he grunted, ‘are you saying that we are not to be trusted?’

‘No!’ Finch whimpered.

‘Good!’ Farl’s face went back to the way it was. ‘Let me not hear those words again.’

And the fire went out. Finch carefully returned the two stones to his pocket and returned to his quest.

‘Boy?’ Xandra looked under the bed. No he wasn’t there. ‘Boy?’ she looked in the wardrobe. He wasn’t there either. ‘Please come out, I want to speak to you.’

‘I’m not here!’ a tiny voice came back. ‘I’m playing in the garden!’

‘Blimey!’ said Xandra, ‘Your voice carries well.’

The voice came from behind the curtain where there was a somewhat conspicuous bulge in the shape of a small child.

‘As long as you’re playing safely,’ she said to the bulge.

‘I am,’ said the boy, ‘mother insists I don’t go near the well. The hole is bigger than me and I might fall.’

‘So you can see me,’ said Xandra

‘Not at the moment I can’t.’

‘I’m Xandra, what is your name?’

There followed a slight pause and a gulping sound. ‘George!’ the voice said at last.

‘Please to meet you George. Listen, I have a little problem, I don’t know where I am. Do you think you would like to help me?’

‘I think so.’

The curtain quivered and flapped about, suddenly there was little George standing there looking quite awkward.

‘That’s better!’ said Xandra. She was about to ask if she was in a different time then realised how stupid that sounded. ‘Can you tell me what year this is?’

Now George returned the oddest of looks, as if he’d just been asked to cover himself in strawberry jam, stand on one foot and wait for a swarm of wasps.

‘It is the year of our lord seventeen-hundred and eighty of course.’ Under his voice he added, ‘such a strange thing to ask.’

‘Where is everyone else? I take it you are not alone!’

‘They are in the east wing,’ said George, ‘mother wants me to play. She doesn’t like me around when she has guests. I’m too noisy and I am in too many places at one time.’

‘And you can really see me,’ Xandra wondered whether that was because of the time difference. After all in her time the boy would have been long dead. She couldn’t explain it; she was no scientist or historian.

‘Why are you here?’ George asked, a reasonable question for someone who has just magically appeared in your home.

Xandra told him most of the truth, only leaving

out all of the parts that would confuse the lad, time travel, monsters, a half-bird half-man spirit eater. He was still quite impressed, children of that age love adventures. She described Ross as best as she could. It wasn't easy, not only was he small whenever he was about, he was obscured by his brother's body. Why he would be here in the past though, was beyond her. If Snipers could get anywhere in a place in time then miniscule needles and galactic haystacks came to mind. Then when her words began to return blanks she asked if he'd seen anything unusual.

George shook his head slowly.

From her point of view it was quite nice to be talking to a living, breathing human. This of course had happened before with Jack's sister. She had heard once that there were those with powers to communicate with the dead. In life she had laughed off such ideas. When she died and found out that strange things were actually real her opinions changed dramatically. There was so much Xandra wanted to ask George, such as what school was like at this time and what games he enjoyed, not to mention who was on the throne. Then it hit her that if this really was a time in history her being there in at all was going to influence the future.

'So they don't want you around,' she said. 'That must be awkward for you.'

'It is,' replied George. 'They are talking about me, I know they are. I think they are planning a trip.'

'Oh,' said Xandra, 'what makes you say that?'

'I heard them making arrangements, something

about getting in touch with friends and family.'

'I wouldn't worry. I expect they'll tell you sooner or later.'

'Can you do something for me; can you listen in and tell me what is happening?'

Xandra had to think about that. Her curious nature wanted to, but it felt rude. 'What if it's a surprise?'

George was jumping up and down now. How keen he was, was obvious. So with an obliging smile she agreed.

There was a habit she hadn't been able to shake; even in her few years of death, and that was the need to tiptoe even amongst those who couldn't see she was there. In between the room the boy was in and the room his family was in was another room. With the doors on both sides ajar, she was able to see people. A thin lady in a long, dark dress received a hug from an as yet faceless gentleman before landing in a seat. All voices were more like respectful whispers and movement minimal. All of this only made Xandra use more stealth in her approach.

The next room was quite bare in comparison with the one she'd just left. There was a bookcase on one side that went halfway up the wall. About a million miles across an Indian-looking rug, a very lonely looking writing bureau sat with a sheet of blank paper and a quill and ink pot. In between lay some sort of domestic tundra. She allowed herself a momentary gaze at living history before continuing to the doorway. Xandra

turned first and caught George's warm and encouraging smile.

But the image she was met with left her feeling cold. There was a small, ornate coffin in the centre of the room, a child's coffin, painted in pastel blues and gold.

'My poor Georgie,' one of the women was sobbing into a handkerchief. A tall man gently patted her shoulder. Suddenly it was all quite clear, why George could see her, why he wasn't to go in.

What on earth was she going to tell him?

Is there nothing the slightest bit nice in this place? Xandra thought as she reflected on the events of the past few days. Not one thing, not one single positive thing had presented itself in one single day since her arrival in the Purple realm. It never stopped her from keeping her chin up; never had she allowed one thing to spoil her day. Once you have been murdered, everything else that could happen to you had to be a plus. Yet staring into that big, wide, round, white face, those enormous blue flames, suddenly this was the worst thing of all. Gazing back at that sad, tiny box, terrible images returned to her mind, images she had stamped on with a big mental boot and locked in a secret room, how she felt when she saw her own corpse for the first time. It had taken the police literally ages to find her or Finch. The other girl was found in bin bag under a pile of logs in an abandoned wood shed. The police didn't know there were others. All their hands had been taped up tightly and so there were no

fingerprints on the inside of the van. There was no way to tell. It was only after an argument and the killer's cell mate told the governor about a confession, that they continued searching. For weeks Xandra's spirit followed them, each time hopeful of something that would end the never-ending feeling of restlessness eating her up inside. Often this was against the wishes of Lucas, who was ever concerned about the obvious dangers. These were the days before the discovery of secret places and the base was underground. The pain and the distress of her death had cast her from her body. Anything that happened after that was a complete mystery to her, in particular the whereabouts of her dead body. One afternoon she was looking through a window of an electrical shop and the news was on one of the TV screens when she saw an old school photograph of herself. The picture quickly changed to some footage of some farmland which was cordoned off with special blue and white tape and she knew, she just knew.

The picture was so cold, so stark in her head. The next thing she knew she was standing in front of a shiny, black body bag. It was only zipped to the breast bone. She found herself staring into her own face, bloody and white like slaughtered lamb. Her lifeless eyes gazing into the abyss like a doll in a cardboard box. The top of her head had been sliced off by the plough belonging to the farm worker who found her. All above her forehead was brain and mud. If it were possible for a ghost to be sick she would have filled the hole she was in. All she could do was wretch pathetically.

This was the first time she knew she could port.

So she couldn't return to George with this news. This was a gift of coldest ice and could only been given with the right kind of gloves on. Instead she told him he was right, he was going on a trip, which was at least the truth, but for now it was to be a secret. She constructed herself a fake smile from thin air and told him that everything was going to be fine. 'I need you to help me,' she said. 'I need to find someone, a boy like you.'

'Can I meet him?' George asked shyly. Something in his voice told her he didn't see many other boys.

'Maybe,' she said. 'We'll see!'

And then she rubbed his little cheek and thought about which was the best possible way to tell him he was now dead.

The Screamer sniffed the crown of Jack's head and digested the information it seemed to have received from the scent.

'Give me one good reason why I should spare you!' it demanded.

Finding an answer was difficult, he was shaking like a butterfly's wing in a hurricane and a clock was counting down the seconds, as if a trap was about to be sprung. He had to think fast. But he didn't need to try that hard the words came out like a gunshot triggered by fear. 'Because I know there is another like you,' he

erupted, 'one who is separate to the others. We are looking for my brother, he is in great danger.'

'You lie child!'

'I'm not lying, we were together for a while, but I lost him.'

A hand went to Jack's quaking chin forcing his face horribly closer to the bird man. 'Your face is familiar to me human,' he said at last.'

'Are you going to-' Jack paused and swallowed, 'eat my soul?' As he was saying this his eyes inadvertently began furtively searching for a possible escape routes. There didn't appear to be one. Captured by fear it slipped his mind completely that he possessed the ability to disappear and reappear somewhere else.

The Screamer laughed aloud, a dirty Screamer's laugh that was most disturbing, especially the uncomfortable squawk at the end of it. 'Eat your soul? He growled, 'that would not be to my advantage. I want you to do something for me.'

'What?'

The Screamer's face changed, although just slightly. 'A deal,' he announced, 'I can help you find your brother, but you must do something for me too.'

Jack was curious and confused, 'Who?'

'There is a woman,' said the Screamer, 'I brought her to Calmanis but we got separated.'

'Why did you bring her here?' Jack dared to ask.

'Look into my eye!' said the Screamer and turned his head slightly so that the big, dark orb was more visible. As Jack did so, the Screamer's words told a

story which was played out in the bird's own mind like an old video. Swirling mists cleared to reveal him and the woman running through dark woods. The woman's face wasn't very clear and neither was her voice. She had on a long dress, slightly torn by branches and her hair was tied back so that it wouldn't go in her eyes when she ran. She didn't seem to be all that scared of the Screamer, only whatever it was that was chasing them.

'I was supposed to eat her soul,' he continued, 'but I couldn't. There was something about her, in her eyes, her face that made me feel weak. My people have strict rules that have to be obeyed. They were in the skies, thousands of them. That was why it looks dark. You would think it was night when it happened. It wasn't, it was the clearest day I have ever witnessed. They completely smothered the sun. Soon we got too close to the Draklis and they turned back. Now what was there to do? I grabbed her by the shoulders and flew. My arms ached like hell, my wings too having taken the impact of their arrows. Keeping airborne was not an easy task, staying out of reach of the lashing razors on the tendrils of those barbaric plant beasts was difficult to say the least. But we reached the other side.

'This wasn't with complete success though. The pain in my limbs was too much to keep a hold of her and I am sad to say that I dropped her and she is lost.'

'Why is she so special to you' asked Jack, 'did you remember?'

The image ended, the tone of the Screamer's

voice changed to something less reminiscent. 'I am sick of this place,' he said. 'There is only one way for me to get away from this place and that is to redeem myself in the eyes of my people.'

'No!' yelled Jack. 'I am not going to lead you to her so that you can kill her.'

It isn't possible for a bird to smile as their beaks just cannot make the right shapes. Somehow it felt like that was what the Screamer was doing. 'My dear boy,' it said, 'tell me more about this other Screamer.'

Finch hadn't been scared for a long, long time. Now in the darkness of the cave tunnels, there was a stark reminder of what it was like. Images flashed into his mind like scenes from some macabre horror film; the man's eyes, the jagged knife waving over his face with Xandra's bloody corpse at his side, her eyes big and white. She had been killed first because the killer sensed Finch's feelings for her. He knew he didn't mind dying for her if it meant that she may live. Finch hated darkness; it made everything in the head dazzlingly clear. The plan had been to go inside and use his advance sensory powers to detect Xandra and then port to her. Once he knew that she was safe he would carry on with his mission with renewed vigour.

But it was all too horrible. He ran out panting heavily.

'What's the matter with you!' he kept

exclaiming. 'Pull yourself together. Nothing scares you Finch, nothing!'

When he calmed down a little, he began looking for something that would ignite. There was a branch outside the cave. It looked like it had been pulled off a bush or a tree by hand and fashioned into some sort of rudimentary weapon. He found some dry grass and wrapped it around tightly. Then he placed one hand on the ground. Underneath it rumbled until eventually something black and sticky spat onto his hands, black oil. Thinking about his new abilities made him feel happier. None of the others had terraforming skills.

Finch smeared the dried grass with the oil. Then concentrating so hard that he made a noise like an angry baboon, the stick, the grass and the oil became a flaming torch, nothing to be scared about inside the cave now.

Indeed there wasn't, and as long as he didn't lose concentration, the flame would keep on going forever if need be. He followed only the downward paths. As Snipers only ever appeared from below it made sense that their lair would be somewhere beneath his feet. He was now feeling extremely confident, as if nothing on this or any other planet could touch him. With these thoughts he forged ahead like some mighty warrior wielding some fiery sword of doom and destruction ready to cut anything down that would dare to stand in his path, until common sense finally prevailed. This happened when he reached the wormholes the Snipers used, and he calmed down and

introduced more stealth into his movement.

Janie looked out into the great expanse just as she always did when her head was filled with doubt and confusion. Somehow it helped although she wasn't sure how. The tree tops were peaceful, and the mountains colourful, perhaps it was that, perhaps it was the way in which the world stopped turning. Occasionally something would pierce the picture, a small head on a long neck, creatures reaching for the largest, juiciest branches. It was liked watching giraffes in the wild. When she was a small girl she was taken to Kenya with her brother on a photographic safari. Only these weren't giraffes they were prehistoric beasts, Brachiosaurus if her memory served her right. Her youngest son had informed her.

'I've often thought of going out there, just to see if it was possible to feel their skin,' she told Gallow, suddenly at her side.

'It isn't,' he replied, 'they will be ghosts to you. Your hand would go through the flesh as if it wasn't there at all, only it would be you that wasn't there.'

'So it wouldn't see me?' her face met Gallow's nodding. 'All this time being stuck here and I could have always gone down?'

'It isn't advisable,' said Gallow, 'dinosaurs can't

do anything to you. It doesn't mean there aren't other things.'

'I'm passed that now,' said Janie, 'if I'd known before that it was possible to die twice, a final time I'd have let death take me and to hell with it.'

'But you know there is something inside you to stop you?'

The Screamer seemed to know the feeling well. 'Yes!'

'Tell me more about your children.'

'So you can take their souls?' But she told him anyway. It came to her again that if he'd been dangerous she wouldn't be there now talking to him. 'I used hear their voices at night on the wind. It's just my imagination playing tricks but that few seconds of hope is quite rewarding in a way.'

'And what about now?'

'Just the one. The other has abandoned my ears. You forget children grow up and don't need you anymore.'

'It could be their voices calling you,' said Gallow, 'when I was a soldier I met a woman, a mystic. She told me that in this world our subconscious minds can be heard by those who care for us.'

These words were very comforting to Janie, warm like a herbal bath after a long working day. She reached out and touched Gallow's shoulder only to stop short of contact of the closest feather.

'Which one?' Gallow asked.

'What?'

‘You said you only heard one voice now, which one do you hear?’

Janie paused before responding. This was still a Screamer whether it was being kind now or not. It reminded her a little of her sister’s Alsatian Tango, who for years was as gentle as a sigh, and then when they bought another dog it got jealous and bit her on the ankle. Gallow seemed docile for the moment, just like the other one; although at the time just before they parted she noticed anger and frustration in his tone. ‘Ross!’ she said at last.

‘Ross did you say?’

‘My youngest son. Perhaps it comes from his dreams. If what you say is right. Their thoughts must travel here from the world of the living.’

‘No!’ said Gallow. ‘That is not the truth I know.’ He paused before he spoke again, probably to let her get ready for something he was about to say. ‘You must fear the worst Janie, your son may be here with us.’

Janie felt the knees she no longer possessed begin to give way. ‘De..’ she couldn’t complete the word.

Gallow nodded. ‘I am afraid so! You say your youngest son is called Ross, may I ask about the name of your older son?’

‘Jack!’ the word seemed to come out all by itself. ‘Jack!’ she said again. ‘His name is Jack!’

Some invisible bubble landed on the Screamer’s face and burst into something like recognition. ‘Then I’m sorry, that is the case. They are here. What is more I

have met them.'

Janie wasn't exactly stunned at hearing this news, and that didn't surprise her at all. Somehow she knew her babies were with her. At the back of her mind she knew. 'Ross is in danger,' she said when the orchestra at the back of her mind finally stopped playing.

'I believe so!' exclaimed Gallow. 'He is the reason we crossed the valley. It was to find him.'

All of the rest was explained to her, as unsettling as it was for her to hear she listened. It was the duty of a mother to know everything that is happening to your children, even when you cannot see them. She gazed out again at the prehistoric landscape. That was where she'd heard his voice, little Ross. He was out there all alone and terrified. The timid creature could be crying out in pain for a familiar face to respond. 'Come on,' she instructed the bird man. 'We're going to find him.'

What was at the top of Mount Calmanis or whether or not Hevane really existed was a complete mystery. The real truth was behind a thousand locked doors, perhaps a million or even a trillion. It might have all been just a story passed from soul to soul in order to keep a candle of hope lit for those who needed one. It was said that if you made it there, your body would remain whole, that you wouldn't turn into indefinable

light yet remain the same. You would exist again and exist in a place from your fondest ever memory, where you would live it over and over again. Everyone who ever touched your life in a positive way would be there to share it with you and you could do anything, or go anywhere you want and experience anything that you were denied the opportunity in first life, or just gave you the most pleasure.

That was the theory, and that was what Xandra told George when she broke the news. She didn't believe it herself. Good things didn't come from others, they came from you. If you wanted good then you made it yourself from the good things you could do for others. If you wanted good places then you build them out of your own dreams, not from the ones others thrust upon you. She felt like the worst kind of liar.

When George stopped crying he asked about the other boy, the one like him.

'You will like him,' Xandra replied, 'he is about your age and a good sort.'

'What is his name?'

Xandra told him.

'A peculiar name for a boy, what does it mean?'

Xandra thought about it. Her father's brother was called Ross who mentioned it in conversation. 'It's Scottish,' she said confidently, 'old Gaelic for earldom, also headland. So it's really quite noble.'

'And what does yours mean?'

'Xandra?' she smiled noting slight irony, 'It's Greek, it means defender of mankind.'

‘And are you?’

‘I passed over with a boy and ended up with a bunch of other boys,’ she said thinking back. ‘None of them have the brains to find ways of keeping safe. So I defied danger and went out to find ways. I found stones that show you where places are that make you invisible and dug hideaways in the ground, plus I’m the only one brave enough to pick mushrooms.’

George pulled a face and made a Yuk noise.

‘You don’t like them?’ said Xandra, ‘then I’ve got some bad news for you, they’re the only thing you can eat now.’

About that time, something happened down the hall. When she ran to see what the eerie whistling was she saw the doorway again. ‘I have to leave,’ she said to George, ‘I have to find my friends.’ She gave the little boy a peck on the forehead. ‘Would you like to come with me? I think you should. You don’t know how to be safe yet.’

This brought something nice to George’s pale orb. Xandra had told him that there was nothing here for him here and this chapter had ended, and now Hevane was out there somewhere and it was beautiful. He beamed and ran to her. Then together they entered the light to see where they might end up.

When the time came, and when it felt right to do so, Janie and Gallow set out for the valley. The bird

man had suggested that although this was a time period long before the Draklis and there might be unknown dangers that he flew across with her, but she was against the idea. Trust was something that needed to be built up from scratch, not put on like a familiar old coat. He appeared to be alright with that and didn't mention it again. This meant that the journey whether short or long was going to be spent looking over shoulders and sharpening eyes more than ever before.

There were to be no maps involved in finding Ross. Her whole driving force was to be little more than a mother's instinct, the umbilical cord that went from her heart to his, the link to her babies that never faded in all the years they had been alive.

Janie didn't worry so much about Jack, he was always strong. She often thought that if they announced that the world was about to end, he would go to the highest mountain and watch it happen whilst downing a bottle of cheap cider, where his little brother would be looking for the nearest hole in the ground in which to hide until it was all over. There had been a marked change in his voice over time and she knew that since her passing he'd been afraid to be alone.

Instinctively, she picked mushrooms for the journey, a habit that she'd taken over with her from life. It is a mother's duty to be prepared for any needs of her children. After all, what if we got to my boy and he was hungry and there were no mushrooms for miles? Janie filled a bag with them, in a former life this had been a cardigan. With knots tied on the arms and the buttons

done up and the hem crudely stitched up with vine stems it was a handy haversack. She made it quite clear to the Screamer that she was in charge, and he was kind as well as wise enough to give her the space she needed to operate. This didn't mean though that she didn't know that he was used to being the one to lead. She took his apparent co-operation as an exercise in showing respect and a good thing.

She did trust him enough to allow him to find the safest way down from the mountain. The slightest stumble leading to the slightest tear from something sharp could mean that some of her light force could escape. When she first arrived and before the world went back in time several million years, she caught her arm on a piece of rock and panicked. But the other Screamer was there and wise enough to show her what to do. She could still remember how that felt, how weak she was in such short a time, much worse than bleeding.

So Gallow went first. 'Stay close to me!' he said sternly. 'This place is old and so there are no pathways.'

Janie nodded and stuck to his back feathers like a piece of dandruff.

'I never knew how high up it all was before,' she said glancing down. 'I mean you don't get the perspective until you're confronted with the gravity.'

'I wish you would at least allow me to fly us both to the bottom,' said Gallow, 'can you not at least agree to that? It would make things a lot easier.'

But Janie was adamant. 'No,' she said, 'I'm sure gravity will get us there fast,' before swiftly adding, 'one

way or another.’

‘It would take just a minute,’ said Gallow, ‘nothing more than a short glide, you will be quite safe.’

‘In nearly forty years of existence,’ she said, ‘I have never been overcome by any challenge. Out of work? No money to live on? On-no problem! Car off the road? Hey, I can fix that! Losing five pounds to get into a wedding dress designed for praying mantis? Piece of cake! Going up them or down it’s all mountains whether you are alive or dead, everything, everything life or death throws at you, you learn that all it is, is all just another bloody mountain.’

There was silence for a few seconds and then Gallow answered her. ‘We’d better get going,’ was all he would say on the matter.

As fortune would have it, although there were no paths as Gallow had rightly said, the rock wasn’t very sheer. At the cave entrance it there was a slight ledge where Janie had spent many a crisp morning weighing up the day. If she was honest with herself, even though she couldn’t feel the coldness or the ruggedness of anything beneath her bare feet she was looking forward to getting further away from the place that had been her home lately. Even though it was drifting rather than walking, it felt nice anyway. She was advised and quite wisely, that she should make sure that her weight should be close as it could be to the rock so that falling would be less difficult, also to watch where she placed her feet.

‘Nice one Sherlock!’ she had remarked. ‘And I suppose jumping along on a pogo stick is also not

advisable?’ All the same, she became distracted by something that almost caught her off-balance, a flash of light on the ground, pale, electric blue light. And that was the time that night fell again.

‘Janie, are you still there, or did you just fall?’ Gallow’s voice was clear and louder in the dark.

‘I’m still here!’

‘Perhaps you should come closer. Then I will be able to keep you safe.’

Janie wasn’t totally sure but answered in the affirmative all the same. ‘I’m fine, thanks!’

‘It might be a good idea if I wrapped my wings around you until it gets light.’

‘No thank you.’

‘You’ll be much safer,’ said Gallow. ‘You will also be warm. The cold has already begun to descend. There is a possibility that you will lose concentration and fall.’

‘I’ll be OK,’ replied Janie, ‘really!’ But it wasn’t all that much longer when she felt it biting at her bare arms and she caved in. Before she moved even a centimetre she asked the most important question. ‘How do I know I can trust you?’

‘You don’t’ said Gallow. ‘But let me remind you of this, your children trusted me to bring them here safely.’

‘And you lost them,’ Janie reminded him.

‘That was not of my doing,’ said Gallow, ‘this mountain is smooth, with few places to grip onto. The backs of my feet, which are hooked and bony, are firmly

wedged in a horizontal crack so that I will not fall.'

'Whoopedie-do!' exclaimed Janie.

'We do not know how long this night will last or how long the cold will last. Soon the moisture already present on its surface will turn to ice and it will be difficult to hold on.'

'Oh!'

'I thought it was appropriate to point that out.'

So Gallow extended his wing to his side and Janie slid across soft feathers to his side. She had to admit it to herself when it all closed over her and she was captured in warm envelope, all she wanted to do was sink into a long sleep and forget everything for a while. Time was something that didn't mean anything in this place. There were no clocks, no newspapers, no one to say good morning or good afternoon to you. Blink and it was broad daylight and blink then pitch black, no signs or signals from which to measure a thing as meaningless as time. So you had to take your pick about when it was you actually felt tired enough. Although she tried to keep her eyes wide open and appease the strange beast. She did so by talking to it nicely and asked questions to keep its mind busy.

'Do you believe in Hevane, Gallow?'

As expected there was a gentle sigh followed by silence. 'You want to know what is at the very top of this mountain, I shall tell you,' he said reluctantly, finally. 'I know this because our scientists have studied the phenomena for many years. It is light, just light, only this light is intense, so intense that it can destroy

anything. If you walked into it your outer spiritual shell will dissolve and you would become nothing. You will have no substance or essence at all, you would be nothing.'

'How do you know that, has someone recorded someone walking into it?'

'Their analysis is that it is to do with things which rise. For instance, in the living world hot air is lighter than cold, so it rises. Here it is light which does that and when it is unable to go any further into the ionosphere it becomes intense.'

'Hmnn!' said Janie, 'and how do you know that?'

'I told you,' said Gallow, 'our scientists have studied it.'

'Yet your people are reluctant to come here,' said Janie. 'It makes you wonder how someone would be able to study something they are not prepared to get close to.'

Gallow was reluctant to discuss the matter further. He seemed to prefer talking about possible routes across the valley floor.

The others had been gone for so long now. Lucas was just on the verge of giving them up for dead. Every time it was light, he'd gone out looking for them, of course leaving Simo to mind the den. He never liked leaving him alone. No other children of had passed over for ages and he was beginning to feel lonely. With the

older ones gone, there was no-one to talk to about the things he really wanted to. What worried him was that he was starting to enjoy the scenes of violence that were going on. One instance of this occurred just two days ago when during a search he sat on the hill behind the thick trunk of an oak admiring the view, when he heard yelling over the clatter of horses' hooves. He gazed out towards the tumult to see unit of Roman spirit soldiers on horseback charging a sky-borne battalion of Screammers. The Romans fought bravely, fearlessly hacking at their attackers with their gleaming swords, and even though in no time at all, the life-light was bleeding from their bodies into the air, they carried on without a single instruction to do so, from their commander. Lucas thought he'd taken a little too long in turning away, before heads were sliced from torsos, before eyes were plucked from sockets, before any of the screaming began.

He returned to Simo carrying the same thought in his head. It was at least twelve miles to the den. He decided that if he didn't change his mind. When he saw him, he would come right out with it.

He arrived at the den hours later, having never liked porting as that was cheating. Just because you are dead, it doesn't mean that you don't need exercise.

Lucas called out for his childish little friend and his faithful round face appeared smiling and welcoming. How could he possibly come out with these words, destroy the crescent shape of his lips.

He just did. 'Simo,' he said, 'we have to leave

this place.'

Simo returned a quizzical glance as smaller kids did. 'Why?'

'Because we need to find the others,' said Lucas sealing the doorway behind him. 'We can't stay here if it's going to be the two of us. I'm not very good at being with children of your age.'

'But it's not safe...' Simo was on the verge of sobbing.

'I know, but I can't see what else to do. I'll go mad if I don't get any grown-up conversation soon. I've thought about it and I'm sure we'll be safe if keep to the areas where the trees are closer together.'

'The Draklis...'

'I've thought about that too. We don't necessarily need to go that way. The valley might big but the Draklis don't fill it. What we can do is walk around it, it will take a lot longer but at least they won't be able to get us.'

'OK!' Simo's voice was low and distant.

'There is something else you need to know. I don't have any of the stones that Xandra had, so we will have to feel for the safe places. She told me once that it might be possible to do that, although you have to be reasonably close.'

'OK then!'

'I'll look after you Simo.' At least there was some truth in his words, at least he'd try anyway.

Over the years, being quite bright, Lucas had decided that he'd worked out when the day would last

the longest. Like all things there was a pattern if you studied them hard enough. Lucas was quite good at science and observed everything that went on around him with intense interest. He believed that was the key to survival even after first death. All of the times that ever so ignorant Finch laughed at him, as he stared for long periods of time at flies, observing their movements. Then there was all the staring at the sky. How else could you find out about why light rises in this peculiar place, why it clumps together like dazzling candy floss. Nobody else bothered to notice that.

So, because of the correlation of light patterns with the veins in the sky, Lucas knew exactly which was the best time to start out. It was when the day was going to last the longest. He reckoned he had it down to an art form. They would have somewhere safe to hide before the veins even thought about putting in an appearance. The only problem now, was convincing Simo, or worse, believing it himself.

And he did what none of the others ever thought about doing. He made a poncho from all the dead leaves for both of them, so that they would be well camouflaged. He even put together a crude substance to mask their scent made of mud, stagnant water and the most odious animal faeces, anything to hide anything that used to be human. Simo didn't like it at all, but as soon as Lucas told him it was a game and it was what soldiers do he smeared the disgusting slime on his face and chest with slightly less noise.

Following the railway track they headed east as

that was where the landscape dipped the most to meet the valley, unfortunately the longest route.

‘If we go far enough this way,’ he told Simo, ‘we’ll reach the aqueduct, and that will definitely take us to the other side.’

But Simo wasn’t listening as usual.

In the ancient world the immortals in the sky had turned the lights back on. Janie noticed this the most when Gallow’s wings opened like two large doors and the light pierced her eyes bringing a sharp pain in her head.

‘I wish you’d have warned me you were going to do that,’ she groaned at Gallow. It triggered her memory and she recalled the flash of light before the darkness. She told Gallow about it.

‘It could have been ground lightning,’ he replied. ‘Sometimes after a storm, the earth here retains some of the electricity and lets it out in small sparks.’

‘But there hasn’t been a storm,’ she remarked, ‘in fact there hasn’t been one for fourteen and a half months.’

Gallow didn’t answer her. Screamers were notoriously proud and always insisted on be right all the time. Instead he changed the subject again. ‘We’d better get a move on,’ he just said. At that point she noted that her feet were covered. While she was sleeping Gallow had somehow managed to construct a crude pair of

shoes from his own wing feathers so that she wouldn't snag her soles and lose life-light.

Getting to the bottom of the mountain took a considerable amount of time. She tried not to think about having to climb back up it when the task was done and she had her children and it was time to make the journey to the top of Calmanis to Hevane. When she asked her guide how far it was to the top, he said that it was around eighty or ninety thousand feet. She joked to herself about booking a taxi to get there.

Now at least her feet were on good old terra firma with nowhere to fall and someone she only trusted because she had to. What worried her was that she was actually starting to like him, despite his seemingly cold, harsh exterior there was something almost human. The mountains were soon well at their backs and the unknown before them. Gallow remained in front, forging the way through the rough foliage. Every now and again he would stop and turn.

'Which way is your mother's heart telling you now?' he would say and then things fairly similar and she told him. She was quite tempted to tell him to go to where she'd seen the flash of light, and then realised it would have taken them off track. Still she looked to where she saw it, just before the forest, near to where there was a tall grassy mound.

The fact that danger might be around the corner didn't enter her mind at all, and then when Gallow turned around again she saw the long, thick, heavy piece of wood in his hand.

‘Wait!’ she exclaimed a thought struck her as they neared the trees. ‘I can hear him, Ross. He’s calling for Jack.’

‘Is the voice stronger?’

‘I think so!’

‘What else?’ Gallow probed.

‘What do you mean?’

He came closer. ‘Are there any clues? Echoes? Does it sound like he is in a room? A cave? Out in the open? Is his voice obscured in any way by other sounds?’

‘Too many questions!’ exclaimed Janie. ‘And we’re in prehistoric Wales, how the hell is my son going to be in a house?’

‘There are many things about this land in any time,’ said Gallow, ‘you have never ventured from your cave so you could never know that.’

This was true, even if impertinent. ‘I have gone beyond my cave,’ she said cockily, ‘it was to another cave. I was bored with my cave.’

‘Why, was the decor not to your liking?’

‘No,’ said Janie, ‘there was a noise so I ran out.’

They entered the forest and then stopped for a rest. ‘You never told me,’ said Gallow taking one last look around before joining her on a broken log. ‘How did you end up here in the past?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I walked through a door, as did those who journeyed with me, how did you get here?’

Well, Janie thought, there are no *excuse mes* or *if*

you don't minds with this guy, just like there were no pleases, thank yous or sorrys. Screamers, she thought have little or no social skills. She explained anyway, even though she knew that having a man with a hooked beak doing that would soon freak her out.

'A funny thing,' she said, although as she recalled it was anything but, 'it was mushrooms. When the other chap like you brought me I had this awful craving for mushrooms. Even though in life, I could never bloody stand the things.'

'It is common with humans,' Gallow interrupted.

'Well, I had one,' Janie continued, 'and I can't explain it, but I knew exactly where to find them. It was like a sixth sense, or as if my nose had transformed itself into some sort of mushroom detector.'

'I was walking through this tunnel and gazing at the floor because there was a lot of damp and I heard something, like someone whispering. For a moment I thought the other Screamer had come back and was trying to attract my attention. I went to where I thought I'd heard him calling out. There was no sign of him.'

'Where were you at this time?'

'I don't know, in another cave only deeper down. My nose was following the mushrooms and that's where they were. There was nothing there except for two entrances, the one that I came through and another one, a darker, mysterious one.'

'Mysterious?' Gallow scoffed. 'It is a hole in a piece of rock, how can that be mysterious, woman?'

‘Stop mocking me birdman,’ said Janie, ‘it just was. It was mysterious and black, blacker than anything I could think of and I’ve never been scared of the dark before. But I couldn’t stop staring into it. I even moved closer to it. Can you imagine that, going closer to something that scares the heebie-geebs out of you?’

‘No!’ said Gallow.

‘Well I couldn’t help it. Then I realised why. It’s because you always expect things to jump out of the dark. There was this loud hissing noise and there it was as big as life.’

‘What was?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Janie, ‘it was this big face with long, sharp teeth. I couldn’t see much of its body but I could see it was long and snake-like, like those Chinese dragons that dance in the street at New Years.’

‘Ah,’ said Gallow, ‘a Sniper.’

‘Is that what it was called? Well, it looked into me and I looked into it, like we were trying to see what the other was thinking. Guess what happened next?’

‘I know what happened next,’ said Gallow, ‘You ran.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because you are here, sitting on a dead tree talking to me. If you just stood there waiting to see what it was going to do, you would have been torn into light and gone forever more.’

‘Right, yes that’s what I did. Only I didn’t get far when I caught my foot on something and tripped and banged my head. I didn’t know what I was doing after

that only I crawled through tunnels for ages and I only stopped when I saw it.'

'Saw what?' said Gallow, he didn't sound all that interested in what she was saying now.

'Outside,' said Janie, 'can you believe it? I'm deep down in the bowels of a cave and there it is broad daylight shining through a hole.'

'You got here the same way I did,' said Gallow, 'it is obvious. You found the chamber with the time portals.'

'Since then, it's just been me and the dinosaurs, until you arrived.'

'Do you want to know about the time I saw a Tyrannosaurus Rex?'

'No!' replied Gallow rather bluntly, 'I wouldn't. It is time to move on.'

This is different, Xandra thought as she observed the huge, wrinkly creature stomping dangerously close. She couldn't think which dinosaur it actually was, having never being a geek. even though in her short life, she'd come across one or two. The creature was greyish-brown, scaly and awkward-looking in all its armour. It had a stumpy head and a tail with something at the end that could crack a skull if needed. If she had to describe it more accurately she would have to say that it was a fifteen foot high, 30 feet long armadillo. It couldn't see her she knew that but she still

jumped back as soon as she saw it. For a minute she'd forgotten all about the little boy behind her until she was ready to start moving again and when it had trudged off like a tired old man, she noticed the frozen bug-eyed statue.

'Oi!' she waved a hand over his face, 'it's just a dinosaur, get over it.'

'A w-what?' George's lips quivered.

'A big lizard thing, but it can't hurt you because it can't see you,' said Xandra, before speedily adding, 'or at least I don't think it can!'

This meant of course, that she hadn't only gone into the past this time, but further than that. She didn't know which way to go and was more confused than ever. Her only hope, she thought was to keep looking for magic doorways until she came across one that led to Jack's younger brother. She stopped before she carried on and pulled out the stone again from her pocket. George asked her what it was; little boys are so inquisitive she thought.

'A finding stone,' she replied, 'if we're going to keep looking for doors in the air I'd much rather do it near places which are safe.' She thought there was good reasoning in that.

She held the stone in her outstretched palm and swept the air until it began flashing with colours, blue, orange, teal and then bright green. The last one meant that there was a dimension pocket in that direction. Here there was no north, south, east, west and so she just pointed to her far right where there was thick, tree-

high grass and said, 'that way!'

Downwards, the whispery voice inside Finch's head was saying, downwards, and so that's what he did. Now he was in a deep, circular chamber. It had been a narrow escape. Two Snipers had appeared literally out of nowhere and he'd dived into the nearest hole in the rock. There was no time to weigh up the size of it, or his body to see if it was possible to put the two together. Fear it seemed, forces you to things you wouldn't even think of doing at any other time. Actions do have consequences however and he just knew this place wasn't very safe. He couldn't see them but he could hear them. There were boulders in the room as well as a number of odd-looking doors, that should have served some purpose, which worked in his favour as he could easily hide behind one of them if need be. That time soon came, as the noises became louder until they were in the same room.

With his back against the stone and his bottom against the floor he listened in to the conversation with vested interest.

'How is the human child?' one was asking.

'He cries, still,' the response was a subservient one.

'Good, then he is weak. Weak means obedience and obedience means control. Have there been any signs of the other human children?'

'No leader, they are slow coming. Lord, can we

feast on him?’

‘No!’ a voice snapped. ‘You must understand as you all should, the boy is the bait. When the others arrive there will be more to feast on, be patient. Our sources have revealed to me that there are a number of souls converging on this sector, more than expected. The wait will be worth it.’

‘Yes leader!’

‘Is he still in the same place?’

‘The sector of the huge beasts? Yes Lord, my commander thought it would make things more interesting.’

‘Where?’

‘He has been bound to the rib cage of a dead beast. It is quite close to the nest of some large carnivores. He is terrified of them and is convinced that they can see him.’

‘Be careful, this may be true, but there are other creatures that can get to him. Under no circumstances is he to be left unguarded at any time.’

And then there followed a deafening hiss and the talking stopped, they had gone.

When he viewed the evidence of their absence with his own eyes he became mesmerised with the doorways. After the noise faded, what was left was a low, resonating hum. There were no clues about where any of them led to and this was fascinating to Finch, who always considered himself one who was keen to leap head first into the unknown. But which doorway was calling him the most? He felt a sudden surge of

electrical energy similar to that displayed all around him. All of them seemed to whispering *here*, all of them beckoning to him to take a bet on the wheel of chance. Finch began to spin and as he did saw the chamber spin too and soon he was moving so fast that all he could see was white light.

You could still get dizzy in first death and so when he stopped, and he only did so in order to choose which way to go, his head was sore, the world didn't stop for what appeared to be ages and his knees wanted to give in. At least he was face to face with the gateway chosen by fate, and without letting anything hold him back he stepped through with a carefree manic smile.

Suddenly, he was surrounded by cold water unable to breath. Above him the moon shone on the surface. Finch tried not to panic, he knew too well that before he stepped through the doorway that it could lead him anywhere, even to a place where there could be problems from the very start. He started to swim upwards to the moon and as he did so noticed something breaking through the light, a wooden boat of sorts. He aimed his body at that and realising he wasn't all that good at holding his breath quickened his pace. One more minute and not a moment too soon, his head broke the surface and he was clinging to the side of the boat coughing out some of the water he'd inadvertently swallowed on the way to the air.

When Finch got his breath back he climbed inside the boat, to his surprise it was empty.

As he lay on his back with his face to the stars,

he thought about two things, first where the hell in all creation was he, and why on earth would the Snipers need a doorway that led to the bottom of a lake? Perhaps this was Loch Ness and the real monster was one of them, they were after all the right shape. Here, the sky was dark green and the clouds resembled large arrows.

While he was glancing up and just as he was giving thoughts to making his way to the bank, Finch was aware of more humming noises. At first he wondered if there was another door being activated somewhere close and then he saw that it was coming from the sky.

The humming quickly turned into a roar and then a chorus of roars and the source of the furor soon became apparent. The sky which had been so peaceful up until now became invaded by planes, big black planes with four engines each and twin tailed. They were flying quite low and so you could see all of the gun turrets, the ones in the front, rear and top of the fuselage. Yes, he knew what they were. These were Lancaster Bombers, like the ones used during the Second World War. He recognised the shapes from his model kits. He counted nineteen although it felt like more. In the sky they looked different, menacing and black. So he relaxed. These were the good guys, our guys.

That was until he saw that he wasn't floating on a lake at all but a river. Three bombers turned in the sky and made towards him. The one in the middle dropped

height suddenly. As it made its approach hundreds of white flashes came from the ground, simultaneously, the gunners from all three planes opened fire. When it was just a hundred yards away a hatch opened out underneath it and a huge steel ball shot out at great speed. But instead of disappearing beneath the surface, it skimmed it like a pebble, bounced into the air and flew past him narrowly missing his head. He turned to follow it and noticed an enormous dam. His eyes followed the ball and it bounced again several times before it finally sunk. The central plane pulled up and another moved into place of the one that failed.

It quickly came to Finch that this wasn't a very safe place to be. One tiny piece of shrapnel catching him unawares in the wrong place, and there would be no more Finch. He looked about him for oars, there were none. He didn't know much about history but he knew what was going to happen next. Another one or two attempts and the lip of the dam would be broken and the river would go tearing down the other side carrying him and the boat into the black abyss.

His head too muddled to even think about porting, he pawed at the water to try and move himself along. It soon proved to be an impossible task. He wondered whether he'd be better off rowing with a sewing needle. Instead he dropped the idea like a hot brick and just threw his body at the river. There, now in utter desperation under a blanket of noise and destruction he attempted to fight his way to dry land. This was however not to prove to be an easy task. The

water vibrated vigorously with the cacophonous rumbling in the air. If anything was pulling him further away from the bank.

This was so frustrating, what had he got himself into? No this wasn't going to beat him Finch Barlow was no loser. Another ball struck the water quite close, bounced over him. Instinctively his head went under again with the impact.

Anger and frustration welled through his torso, his legs kicked wildly under him and he once again was born into the air. Managing to keep himself afloat and growling with the annoyance of being so helpless he began yelling at the planes and the anti-aircraft guns. Then in all the anger he unleashed something from deep within and a tall tree fell into the river. Landing half a metre away now he was able to lift himself free.

'I've just got to find another doorway!' his loud voice drowned by the noise. There was no way he was going back to the one he'd just come through.

Jack opened his eyes and saw that he was standing in a shadowy room. Oddly there was a stairway in the middle of the floor which mysteriously stopped six feet from the ground, leaving a sizeable gap between it and the ceiling. That was it, he thought, I'm finally losing my mind. At least he was away from that horrible Screamer. He wasn't sure whether he'd look at Gallow in the same way again.

He couldn't believe the price he was expected to

pay for finding his brother, and who was this woman he was expected to find anyway? Somebody's mother, somebody's husband whoever she was. A part of him, a tiny, desperate, selfish part of him whispered out from the darkness and he tried to be deaf. Perhaps he should have agreed, after all he didn't know this woman and who was to say she was a good person in her first life anyway? She may even have been a murderess and deserved it.

Jack told himself to shut up and gazed quizzically at the odd stairway to apparently nowhere. Then, when he looked around he realised he was in an art gallery all alone. All around the walls there were paintings of all shapes and sizes, some French, some Dutch, some distinctly English in flavour. There was no time to look, he wasn't a big art fan anyway, that was for people who drank wine and talked about the wonderful architecture of their homes. There were other things there too, old swords and flintlocks in glass cases. Such a shame he couldn't use them. How useful a rapier would have been against the vile enemies at the door. How he could show them who they were messing with.

Jack turned around to exit the place when a sudden figure made him jump. The man, who was just over six feet in height, was staring at the largest painting in the room. This was the one that was as long as he was. This was the first time he thought how but for the notable absence of a handle it would have made a fanciful door.

The man was dressed no differently to anyone

else of Victorian London who possessed enough money to remain off the street, a double-breasted coat with tails and high collars, pale britches, neckerchief and seal skin top hat tilted at a gravity-defying angle.

Jack tried to ignore him. He placed his hand over the cabinet imagining how his hand would feel clasping the handle of the cutlass.

‘Go on!’ the man said unexpectedly.

‘What?’ Jack turned around sharply.

‘Break the glass lad, I won’t tell the curator.’

‘You can see me?’

‘Is there any reason I shouldn’t, dear boy?’

‘I’m...’

The man finished his sentence, ‘Dead, I know you are.’

This was interesting. ‘How can you see me?’

‘It is really quite rude to be asking so many questions dear boy. Of course I can see you, the eyes in my face work very well thank you, I may be forty-two but that doesn’t mean I am decrepit.’

Now that he could see the man’s face more clearly Jack thought he looked considerably older, not to mention slightly familiar. Then it hit him. This was the man he and Ross had seen in the woods, the one who appeared in thin air and disappeared.

‘Sorry!’ he exclaimed. ‘You said something about smashing the glass, how is that even possible?’

‘Dear boy, there are heroes in the world and there are villains. Heroes need weapons to battle the demons that would grind us to dust or in your case rip

your body into light.'

'I'm sorry but I'm going to ask another question,' said Jack, 'Are you dead too? You must be - right, if you can see me.' As soon as he said that he remembered the conversation with his sister before they left, where some living can talk to ghosts.

'No,' said the man, 'I am not.' He then did something Jack thought was even more odd, he held out his hand as if it was possible for a living person to touch a spirit. 'Go on then, take it!'

Even though the whole notion was ludicrous, Jack did and was surprised at the very least when both of their hands collided as if they were both of the same manufacture.

'How can this be?' Jack was confused.

'The word for it is *Flehspectre*, one who is able to exist in the worlds of both the flesh and the spirits. We are very rare, but I find that this is a good time to be one. There are people here who will pay good money for the opportunity of talking to a deceased relative.'

'You're a medium?'

The man appeared offended by this term. He shrugged his shoulders as if that was where the words had landed and he was shaking them off. 'No,' he said when regained his posture. 'I'm certainly not one of those. Mediums are fakers, I talk to the dead, walk with the dead, shake hands with the dead and where necessary arm the dead, so that goodness and honesty and values can be maintained beyond the grave.'

'Armed?' said Jack, 'what with?'

This time the strange man walked to the cabinet where the weapons were, taking a shiny key from his coat pocket he unlocked it and took out the cutlass Jack had been staring at. ‘This was the one you liked?’

Jack nodded. ‘But that’s solid steel, I can’t hold that.’

‘I beg to differ,’ the Fleshspectre replied. ‘The next time Jack looked it was in his own hand. It had been placed there. ‘Just because you see things in a room, do not be so keen to believe they were put there by mortals.’

Stranger, now that he was holding it in his hand it felt wrong, now that it was real and he was holding a thing that could destroy another creature.

‘Do not be put off by your rash thoughts,’ said the man, as if he had somehow managed to read them. ‘After all, do you think that bird man outside, heading towards this building powered by his own hatred of you would think twice before destroying you?’

Jack looked this Fleshspectre thing straight in the face. He returned a dry and inoffensive smile. ‘How do I get out of here? Where’s the next doorway?’

‘Where indeed! Where indeed!’ was the response. Then obviously noticing the horrid, worried expression on Jack’s face he pointed, pointed up the strange stairway in the middle of the room. ‘Like I said just now,’ he continued, ‘just because you see things in a room, do not be so keen to believe they were put there by mortals.’

‘Mr...’ Jack held out his hand again.

‘Names are not necessary,’ the man waved his hand, ‘off you pop dear boy!’ he said, ‘go rescue your brother!’

Jack didn’t need to hear another word. He ran up the stairs and now sword in hand dissolved into the air like smoke in a sudden wind.

Jack’s body shook. For a split second he thought it was an earthquake. Then it felt as if he was encased in ice and he just knew something was desperately wrong. Instinctively he reached out for his new weapon as whatever it was could be defeated by the strike of a blade. He sprung to his feet and scanned around him. This was the first time he’d seen the world since the gallery when he’d spoken to that strange man, the hybrid.

The scenery had changed dramatically. Gone were the stinking streets, the smoke and the smog. Now, he was surrounded by high hedges. The hedges which had been so neatly trimmed by human hand formed a perfect square. This was his first indication that wherever he’d landed this time, there was definitely civilisation. The air smelt sweet and the sun was out, he was in a garden, although it wasn’t visually apparent as yet. Jack went through a narrow gap only to find that there was another three ways to go, left, right and straight ahead. Then it hit him, he was in the centre of a maze. Worse, he could hear them, the Snipers, that hissing sound they made when they moved.

There wasn’t much time, he had to get out. Jack

got down on his belly and looked for signs of them approaching, there were no visual clues. He held on tight to the sword and kept it in front of him so that he had space to swing it if needed at a moment's notice. He knew nothing of the sword's effectiveness as yet. Could it cut into a living spirit? This was going to be either a good time or a bad time to find out. He took a couple of practise swings, never had his eyes been in so many places at one time, never was he so alert.

It all reminded him of one of the few times he bothered going to school and the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, the maze and the bull-beast. Only if truth be told, he really could have done with Princess Ariadne's ball of string to help him escape. Sometimes he just hated knowing about Greek drama.

There was something deeply intriguing about Gallow. He was dark and far away like some place in the back of your mind you might have thought would be interesting to visit some time, if it was real. Anything about the real man was hard to get to, but Janie was always up for a challenge. Damn it, there'd been no one to talk to for literally ages, she was going to get a conversation out of him somehow.

She decided to take a cue from her kids. When they were little, they were always asking questions, always mithering for the truth about things, whether it was something embarrassing or not. Often at the times

they'd been so probing, she thought about how tenacious with their lines of questioning they were, of just what wonderful reporters they would have made or good lawyers. She didn't appreciate it at the time, there were about a zillion and one other things rattling around her head and many of the questions had been ignored. Janie was regretting it now. Perhaps if she'd just dropped the ironing for a few minutes she might have been able to teach them something useful for that day when she wouldn't be around, the day that came way too soon.

Janie tried not to think about how she came to be there, although it did haunt her thoughts. A spirit haunted by something. That was something to laugh about.

So she tried to open a verbal link with her enigmatic friend. 'Tell me some more about yourself,' she ventured, 'what did you do when you were alive?'

'What do you mean,' Gallow stopped walking for a second and Janie nearly ran into the back of him.

'You weren't born with a sparrow's head,' she japed, 'or were you?'

'That is really none of your business,' said Gallow, seemingly ignoring the comparison to a smaller, less offensive bird.

'I mean,' she continued, 'everything moving on this side of the fence was once alive wasn't it, or have I got that wrong?'

'Yes,' he caved in, and added, 'mostly,' as if he too wasn't sure.

‘So which were you then, a bird or a man?’

Gallow sighed, ‘A man!’ He carried on walking, faster now as if he was trying to put a sizeable gap between the two of them. Janie made up for it and doubled her steps until she was again in earshot.

‘So what were you then?’ she said, and even though he wasn’t facing her she could tell what the expression would be if she could see it.

‘A soldier!’ he ranted, ‘a soldier in life was well as first death! Now please desist with these ludicrous and intrusive questions.’

‘Ah!’ replied Janie and put that little piece of data into a folder at the back of her mind entitled *All about Gallow*.

She left him alone for a while after that and only spoke when it was about the mission as he started calling it.

As in...

‘Keep your mind on the mission,’ he would say with maximum authority. ‘We need to remain focused at all times.’ He would follow that up with a gentle reminder, a verbal glossary which contained of all the horrible creatures which roamed the place looking for a feed, and then speculated about the ones they hadn’t come across yet, the bigger, scarier ones that would probably make the Draklis look like field mice.

All she had to add to that was, ‘You’d better stay close then to be sure.’ Which somehow annoyed her vigilant protector,

They had been travelling through the forest for

a while and the further they travelled, the taller the trees appeared to be. As if the closer they got to where her son was the more intimidating they needed to be in order to scare her away.

All of the trees in this place were prehistoric, and so the needed to be bigger, because the beasts which walked beneath them were big as well. They carried on through them, until Gallow ground to an abrupt halt, hushed Janie and instructed her to join him behind the one he was pressed against.

‘A dinosaur!’ he whispered loudly, ‘A carnivore, I think!’

Janie couldn’t help letting out a small laugh, ‘You know they can’t see us don’t you? We are the dead ones. We are the spirits of beings that, to them at least, haven’t been born yet.’

‘Do not be so naive woman!’ said Gallow. ‘The first rule of survival in the wild is to trust nothing. Here, there is always something that would want to eat you, so that it may live.’

Janie squinted in the direction the dark one was now pointing. In the distance, probably a quarter of a mile away, there was something quite lizard-like, standing upright on two strong back legs. It was a bit like a Tyrannosaur only it wasn’t, the arms were too long. It was feeding on something a lot smaller, something it killed earlier that day. As the one thing was ripping away at the other she noticed its slightly elongated neck.

‘You’re still being daft,’ she said, ‘I bet if I went

over there right now it wouldn't even notice me.'

'I fear woman, it is you who is being *daft*, as you so superficially put it. That creature may be still flesh when you are not, but do not believe for one instant that you will be safe.'

Janie looked again. It seemed occupied enough, and even if it could see her, what on earth could it possibly do. She was tempted to ask her companion, then thought again. There would be another lecture there for sure.

The whole thing reminded her of when she was quite small, around eight years old. The more her parents said that something wasn't a good idea, the more appealing the idea actually was. What made it even more so was remembering all the fun and excitement she'd missed out on these few years.

The meanest, twisted grin came from nowhere, when she noticed that Gallow was facing the other way she made her way slowly to where the danger was. She felt young and naughty again. The idea that she couldn't be seen or heard was fixed deeply in her mind. Still he tiptoed to the beast. She did this by going from tree to tree (just in case bird face was right) until she was only a metre away and she could see quite clearly one dinosaur tearing away at the stringy flesh of another. Everything was a lot clearer now. The skin of the living dinosaur was green and leathery-looking but quite shiny. Its long, dagger-like teeth were stained in blood as it tore into the other's neck, pulled away limp, dark, pink meat. Then it straightened its neck so that it could get it down its

gullet.

‘It is called an Allosaurus!’ Gallow was behind her now and it made her jump. ‘And do not do that again.’

‘I only wanted a closer look.’

‘You have had one,’ Gallow told her, ‘now pull back and stay clear of such things.’ He retracted quite swiftly, beckoning her to join him in withdrawal manoeuvres.

But she glanced at him, moving away and at the two creatures and thought of testing out her theory again.

She decided to just go for it and jump out into the open and make a noise. ‘Woo-hoo!’ she waved her arms widely. ‘Hey dinosaur, over here!’

‘What are you doing?’ Gallow yelled but was cut off by the creature’s roar. ‘Stay perfectly still!’ he cried out.

The Allosaurus was looking around and sniffing at the air now, flicking its agitated head one way and then the other.

‘What’s it looking for?’ asked Janie.

‘You!’ replied Gallow. ‘It knows you are there, it can smell you. It can also hear you so be quiet.’

Janie started moving backwards keeping her eyes focused on the dinosaur. ‘Tell me it can’t hurt me,’ she said, ‘I am a ghost, right?’

‘You are a ghost,’ Gallow replied. ‘Although that may not make much difference.’

The Allosaurus made a few sharp steps in her

direction, whether this was just chance or not it was difficult to tell.

‘What can I do?’

‘Teleport!’

‘What’s that?’

‘It is something that the children can do. They close their eyes and they can somehow move to another place with the power of a single thought.’

‘How do I do that then?’ The thing was getting dangerously close, its musty odour whisked past her nostrils without invitation.

‘I believe there was a clue in the use of my words,’ said Gallow. ‘Close your eyes and think of somewhere else. Think about the place I first saw it. I will meet you there.’

Janie made an attempt at doing that. It didn’t work, when she thought of the place Gallow suggested, perhaps it was a child thing. Perhaps when you are older you lose the ability. ‘I can’t do it!’ she told Gallow.

With this, the dinosaur, which had until this moment been heading off away from her, turned its head sharply around and snorted.

‘Whoops!’ she exclaimed. Now it really did see her and began moving towards her with purpose. In a few seconds it was very close and it lowered its head and hooked its claws as if it was about to pounce on her. This was her cue to try again at that teleporting thing.

Her eyelids came together hard and she tried to picture in her head. A mile back, yes, that was far

enough away from it.

But it didn't feel like it was going to happen. She appealed to her guardian again. 'Can't you just swoop in with your wings and fly me away?' she chanced.

'My wings are too large,' he irritatingly replied, 'the trees are too close together. I would not be able to flap them in time to get enough wind underneath to take off. Try again!'

'It's going to jump on me!' Janie yelled.

'Keep trying!'

Janie pushed her back against a tree. She couldn't feel the rough bark she expected, but almost fell through it. For a moment she forgot she was a spirit. She made another attempt at travelling through the air. Thinking hard again about that place, she was convinced now that she had it. Then the dinosaur emitted a terrifying roar and it all dissipated rather quickly. Then as she opened her eyes again she had the most frightening sight. The Allosaurus chose that exact moment to charge towards her. She moved away as fast as she could, her eyes closed again trying to picture a safe place. But she heard a very loud crack which shook her back into the world. She turned back to see what it was and saw her would-be attacker rolling on the ground. It had hit its head on the bough of the tree. It recovered very quickly and wasted little time regaining course towards its target. Gallow grabbed Janie's arm and began hauling her through the trees with the angry creature in pursuit. Janie didn't give up, it was nearly upon them. She concentrated really hard and

remembered them talking. She remembered how the grass was and how far away it was from where they were now. This time something really strange and wonderful happened. Her spirit body was overcome with some sort of sparkly fuzziness and she felt herself moving through the air like something that had been filmed and replayed in fast motion. It didn't seem real at all but somehow she knew it was. When she landed it was in exactly the right place. Gallow was besides her, looked quite relieved.

'Thank god for that!' she said and nearly patted him on the shoulder and thought better of it.

'No,' he replied. 'Not good, no thanks to anyone. This is very bad.'

'In what way?'

'Did you wonder how it could be that the creature still charged you even when you had gone?'

'No,' said Janie, 'and frankly I didn't care. I was too busy trying to move away as fast as I could, why?'

'The creature still charged you,' said Gallow, 'because your spiritual body left an imprint in front of the tree. In effect you were in two places at once.'

'Why is that bad?' asked Janie.

'Because I think something is happening to this place,' said Gallow. 'I hope I am wrong but it seems to be deteriorating, falling apart.'

'Phew!' Janie exclaimed. 'In that case we need to get my boys and get out of here.'

Gallow appeared puzzled. 'I am not sure that is a good idea. What if it is the end of us?'

‘Where I’m standing,’ said Janie, ‘it is the better of two evils.’

And she hoped for the sake of everything that it was the truth.

ACT 3 – The Decaying World

Finch stared deeply into the flames and into Farl's stone-like face. It was always difficult to tell what was on a Screamer's mind just by looking at him. They had bird's heads and couldn't do expressions. It was only when the words came out of his beak that he knew he was angry. Farl was obviously displeased with him.

'You should be with the others by now,' he screeched. 'Gallow should be incapacitated. You should be on your way back. Where are you?'

Finch wasn't sure what this place was. He'd arrived at the bottom of a lake which turned out to be a river, and then he was in a boat nearly getting head knocked off. Now he was in a field next to a long, straight road.

'Everything looks different,' he said, 'the houses, the cars. An army patrol passed me a few minutes ago. I think they were German. They had that funny-looking cross on the side.'

'You are in another time. You must have gone through one of their doors, stupid child. Why could you have been more careful?'

'I thought it would lead me to them. I was wrong. How can I get back, is there another door master?'

'Try the one you came through,' Farl spat.

'I can't' said Finch, 'I don't want to go back into the water.'

‘Then find another and do not fail me, and one other thing, under no circumstances must Jack Gale be allowed to unite with your friends.’ There were even more questions in Finch’s mind now but they were to be left unanswered for the time being, the fire died as if it had been stamped out by a great foot and the opportunity was lost.

At least there was another way of finding a doorway and it didn’t come to him for ages. It landed on him like a fly while he was thinking about the dark. The veins had returned and he started thinking about the Snipers and their wanderings through time. He pictured them slithering through holes from one place to another and it hit him that he hadn’t seen one doing that.

Of course, he thought, all I should need to do is to look for one and follow it. But where do they go? Anywhere there was death, a cemetery, a hospital, a care home. Finch had no idea where he was, so how could he even know where he was going to find such places?

Any direction was as good as any, so he started to follow the road. Subconsciously, he went the way the Germans went, something told him that death would be close to them. It wasn’t long before night came and he was lit by a large, full, pale blue moon and someone came to him.

The girl, who was probably about ten, called out first and it, was something in German. Still his mind understood what she was saying. As she was so far away he knew she was using telepathy.

Help me! She simply thought.

Are you dead? He asked her bluntly.

I don't know, she replied, *it is all strange and different. Perhaps I am.*

As he neared her, the voice grew stronger.

Hang on, thought Finch, *I need to speak to you.*

Her body made a pathetic silhouette. *There was water. I couldn't breathe. The planes came. I was scared.*

Are you alone? Asked Finch. *Did others die with you?*

Many, thought the girl. He knew her name now, he could detect it, Gretta. *I'm scared, please help me.*

At this exact time, and it happened very fast, like a flash, three and then four and then it could have been a hundred for all he knew, all these somethings came out of the brush and obscured her ghostly body. Suddenly all that was left of her were screams.

Finch frowned and then smiled very quickly before hiding in a ditch. When they were gone he ran up the hill to follow them.

The journey around the valley was taking longer than necessary, Lucas thought. Then Simo was small and roundish and moved along in small bounces. He'd kept telling him to keep up, that the slower they were, the further the others were getting away from them.

The valley was at their left with all the seething creatures at its base. Only it was so far down and the Draklis so small and distant, that things looked nothing

less than completely peaceful. They soon reached a steep incline. With that and his small companion's apparent reluctance to venture past the velocity of a common garden snail, Lucas caved into the notion that they should try to port. As far as he knew, this wasn't anything that Simo had ever done before, quite possibly because no one had the time to show him. He'd always felt sorry for Simo. Simo was small to the point of invisibility.

'Give it a try,' he beckoned. 'I think it's safe now from interference from the Draklis.'

'No!' Simo grumped, 'I won't!'

'If we do that, we won't have to walk much more.'

'Finch does that to frighten me. It's scary.'

'It's not scary.' Lucas stopped and faced him. He knew that this was important. He had to kneel to do it properly, but he knew that people can sometimes read honesty on a person's face, if they really believed in what they were saying. 'Simo,' he continued, 'do you really think if it was a scary thing to do, I would do it. Look at me; I'm the brainy one of the group. I'm the sensible one, the boring one, so they are often keen to remind me.'

'Finch says it burns like fire does and you feel pain all over you.'

'Finch is a fool,' said Lucas. 'He is also a horrible, ignorant boy who never amounted to anything in his first life, and so lacks sense he has made absolutely no effort to change anything in this one.'

‘He said that if you do it when you are my age you end up second dead.’

Finch says too much, thought Lucas, and nothing of any actual use but for negative effect. He stood up and looked down and saw the railway tracks. There were police officers and men in white overalls moving about.

‘I wonder why they are back,’ he said to himself. ‘The bodies were moved a week ago.’ Such a shame that this telepathy thing only worked if you were no longer living, it would have been really interesting to hear what they were saying to one another. He was just about to make one more attempt at getting Simo to change his mind when something odd happened. Simo disappeared before his eyes and he called out.

‘I’m over here, stupid!’ Simo was already on the other side of him making his way on his own. The idea of having to teleport somehow put some steam in his steps.

‘How did you do that?’ Lucas was confused.

‘Do what?’

‘Be in two places at one time!’

‘I wasn’t,’ said Simo, ‘I can’t do this magic stuff that you lot can do.’

Finch thought about it for a second. ‘Simo I want you to do something, a little experiment.’

‘Sure!’

He pointed to the left side of the pathway. ‘Go over there.’

‘OK!’ Simo skipped to the spot.

‘Now run across the path.’

‘Why?’

‘No questions, just do it!’

What he witnessed next was most interesting, and disturbing if you knew the science around it. Simo waited for a signal and when the nod was given he sprinted across the path at a speed. When he did two images could be seen, the one of his starting off and the one of him arriving.

‘Done it!’ Simo sang out.

‘Look!’ Lucas pointed again but by the time Simo’s eyes followed his index finger it had gone.

‘What do you want me to look at Lucas?’

‘Something is very wrong, some sort of time delay. We really need to get to the others fast. We need to find out what’s going on. It could be very bad.’

‘I’m still not going to do it,’ said Simo, ‘so forget it!’

In the end he had to give up, this was the way with Simo, he was persistent to the point of being annoying. This was going to be a long walk and that was for sure.

Ross was tired, but at least he was still alive. The bindings that held him to the ribcage of the beast, were made of some sort of fire, which flickered with electric blue light, at least he couldn’t feel any burning. Watching him, guarding him was one of those horrible

snake things which whirled around the carcass quite dizzily. His mind was taken off it for a moment when he suddenly felt quite cold. Then his whole body shook as if he had been hit by a lightning bolt from nowhere. This caused the guard to stop and gloat.

‘W-what happened to me?’ asked Ross.

‘Do you not know?’

‘It was horrible sir.’

‘I will tell you child,’ said the Sniper, ‘someone has suspicions about the way that you died.’

‘It was a train crash sir,’ said Ross, ‘we were on a train.’

‘A train you say,’ said the snake thing, ‘so there were others who passed with you?’

‘Yes!’

‘Many thoughts lost from bodies on that day, thoughts, memories floating on the air in search of their owners. Your head betrays you.’

‘What do you mean sir?’ But his snake-like guard did not respond. He laughed loudly, manically and carried on encircling Ross’s skeletal prison.

Now, his inquisitive little mind was clicking. This was just like the old days when Jack would plant something in his head, an idea just to see what he would do. Cats walked on two legs when nobody was about, butterflies were really angels, and the sea was salty because it was made of tears. All of these things messed with his head.

So what was all this about thoughts getting mixed up in the air, when there was a crash and people

died? It was a shame Jack wasn't about. He could have asked him what the creature meant. Then it didn't matter as a loud prehistoric roar from the trees was so deafening that it made his captor stop again. This time it disappeared completely in the greenery.

What did Jack say to think when danger comes? It is not real. It cannot hurt me. I am stronger. Ross told himself all of this. Although, now the time had come to say these words, they weren't as magical as he'd imagined. The T.Rex had been coming back and nibbling at what was left of the decaying flesh and then heading off to the lake. On no occasion did it notice him but it terrified him all the same. Ross knew that this was part of his torture, why else would they put him inside something that a giant lizard was going to eat? It was si, sy, psi, something beginning with that which meant they were messing with his head, hurting him but not by touching him, like telling him what their orders were preventing them from doing to him.

The scariest thing about the T. Rex was that you didn't see it straight away, first came the roar and then the rustling leaves which meant that it was close enough to strike. This time was going to be just like all the other times, and it wouldn't happen for much longer. There wasn't much meat left for it now, and he was pretty sure that by the next time it came Jack would have saved him.

Jack would come, Jack promised. Jack always keeps his promises.

But this time was different. This time it came

out of the trees and roared again. Not only that but it stood awhile in the same spot sniffing the air.

This time it turned its enormous head sideways and stared at him, its huge, brown eye piercing his soul.

Janie heard voices and was convinced they were friendly. As expected, she was warned by her self-appointed guardian and protector not to get too close until he could assess the situation. Janie wasn't the type of person to hang around, and so she entered the clearing where the two people were. What she found was a young girl and a boy. The girl was around her son's age in modern clothes but the boy was several years younger and wore odd clothes, bright, shiny, silks and frills, knickerbockers, was that the word for them and shoes with bows on them. He was very old-fashioned to look at, like old oil paintings. She noted Gallow's words of objection.

Damn you woman. Do you not know how to follow a simple command?

It made her laugh inside. Teasing other adults is fun, she thought, even if they do resemble something more suited to hanging around farmer's fields searching for worms. Inevitably Gallow joined them. He was annoyed, he was making disapproving sounds.

The strangers who'd been resting until then rose sharply as they were understandably suspicious. Then when Gallow appeared and uttered the girl's name so

familiarly and the response were smiles she said, 'You know each other then?'

'Gallow is a friend,' said Xandra, 'a trusted one.'

'Oh,' replied Janie and held out her hand. This was the first time since her death she had touched another human soul in this way. They exchanged names, the boy was called George and was shy like her Ross. She experienced a warm yet sad feeling. *Children should never die* a voice said inside her.

'The girl is searching for your sons also,' Gallow said.

'Have you seen Jack?' Xandra enquired.

'We've come here because Ross is calling,' said Janie. 'He's around here somewhere,' then she joked, 'got himself into trouble again I s'pose!'

'Can you hear him?' Xandra asked.

'I can feel him if that's what you mean. Oh no, he's really troubled, worried about what's going to happen to him. He wants Jack, but Jack's not coming. Jack's always protected him.'

'Can you transmit to him, tell him we're coming?'

'Don't you think I've tried that? Every night when he's been crying himself to sleep, I called back telling him someone will be with him soon.'

'There wasn't time to teach him how to harness his powers properly,' Xandra said with regret.

'We need to find him soon,' Gallow said. 'Something is happening to this place, it crumbles like chalk.' He then told them about the incident with the

Allosaurus, of how they weren't supposed to see spirits, of how worlds were merging.

'That's awful!' Xandra exclaimed. 'What is going to happen to us?'

'If this world is indeed crumbling around us, and there is nowhere for us to run to, then we are done for.'

'What about Hevane?' asked Janie. 'I haven't given up going there.'

'This is just a place formed in the minds of the gullible.' said Gallow.

'We may have no choice, but first I want to find my boys.'

There was silence for a short while before anyone wanted to challenge her words, when it happened it was Xandra.

'I don't know if I could go to Hevane,' she said, 'I've heard such nightmare tales about that place. They say you burn, and you scream until a scream is all that's left of you.'

Still, she wasn't going to put off by this. She was going to climb that mountain no matter what. At the summit of Calmanis there was hope, at least to her, and it wasn't screaming that was in her head it was singing, a choir of angels a thousand strong calling to her. The others probably thought she was mad. Then they had no imagination. Ironically no soul.

'I'll prove to you Hevane exists,' she said, 'that Heaven exists. Now we are all acquainted let's find my boy.'

Xandra had an idea, in fact it was the best idea. Gallow wasn't all that keen, then Gallow wouldn't be keen on an idea that wasn't entirely military.

'Have you ever ported?' she asked Janie.

'Ported?' said Janie. 'What's that when it's at home, or out shopping?'

'Teleported! Moving from place to place using just your mind.'

'How am I supposed to be able to do that?'

'You've never tried?'

'Pointless!' Gallow intervened. 'Before you enter into a situation it is important to know if it is safe and if the situation can be manipulated in your favour. You cannot just appear or you risk jeopardising missions and people can be compromised.'

'It can save time,' said Xandra, and she thought that was an extremely important point. 'A captive can be got to quickly and saved, if done properly before the captors even notice.'

'Still,' Gallow insisted, 'we cannot go charging in until we know what we are dealing with.'

'Fine!' said Xandra, and she placed both hands to her temples and closed her eyes.

'What are you doing?' Janie asked.

'Linking minds with Ross,' said Xandra, 'but it depends whether he is close enough.'

Finch got to the top of the hill where the little

girl had been and glanced over the other side. What was once a valley was now a lake, and the scene was both frightening and thrilling. He had never seen so many Snipers in one place and they were everywhere. In the water they resembled sharks and even from that far away, he could see just how sharp and how long their teeth were, and how they glinted in the moonlight. Each one snarled and then shot into the watery depths. A moment later they returned with a soul. What had happened was obvious. There were houses in the valley and the people who inhabited them had no warning that the dam was about to burst. Some were still alive and trying to swim for safety with what was left of their lives. Elsewhere spirits had left corpses and before they had a chance of getting anywhere near the light were being snatched by jaws.

When it was finally over, there was nothing but silence. A smile grew like an enormous anaconda across Finch's face. It had been a while since he'd witnessed anything quite this exciting.

Full and content, the predators gathered on the hillside where he witnessed something else new. Each snake-like Sniper positioned itself one behind the other, each mouth biting a tail and each tail receiving a mouth until they were all in one long, great line. Then, without any notice whatsoever, this serpentine train started off back up the hill towards Finch. Finch hid very quickly in a hollow in the hill that once he was inside, realised that it was a bomb crater. He held his breath and in seconds with a loud whistling noise the train passed right over

him in a singular streak of bright white energy, which although scared him, was really quite exhilarating. When it had gone, Finch launched himself onto his feet and hurtled after it as fast as his spirit legs could take him, making sure that he remained at a safe distance all the way.

The serpentine train followed the road until it met a stone bridge, there it turned sharply and dipped to a river. A small white dot appeared in the air. The dot grew until it was the size of a small plate, which became a spiral. The spiral then exploded into a portal which in seconds absorbed them.

‘There!’ Finch said aloud. ‘There is my doorway!’

But things weren’t to be that simple. Just as he started making his way towards it, something very odd happened to the bridge. After wobbling quite disturbingly, splinters of light began to protrude from the cracks between the stones, and then it exploded into what must have been millions of tiny fragments. Finch was thrown onto his back. What was left was a circle of deep black. When he looked again there were stars, as if the blast had made a hole right through the earth. When he thought that was the end the ground rumbled and with another almighty boom everything, every fragment of the bridge and where it stood returned as if it had all been imagined, only for the time being the portal was still intact.

Now the situation had changed. Now Finch wasn’t so sure he trusted that way back. About this time

a sudden sound alerted his ears. A weapon was being cocked for firing. He turned around to see two soldiers in what appeared to be German uniforms looking down on him, the barrels of their rifles directed at his head.

‘You can see me?’

‘Englander?’ one erupted, followed by words he didn’t understand.

‘This isn’t possible,’ said Finch. ‘You are alive, you aren’t supposed to see the dead.’ Something interesting struck him as he was saying this. Something about the way the soldiers looked. They weren’t see-through like living people were supposed to be. You could probably touch them if wanted to.

‘Vas is das?’ The soldier pointed to the portal, at the top of the bridge there was now a personnel carrier Finch hadn’t noticed before. From the angle they were the top of the vehicle was just about visible over the wall.

‘Do you see that?’ he asked them.

‘Vas is das?’ the other asked this time.

‘You aren’t supposed to. In the living world you are not supposed to see things like dimensional gateways.’

The soldiers seemed mesmerised by the strange phenomenon. Although Finch had the idea that somehow they thought this was all to do with him.

‘Kommen!’ The men seemed angrier this time.

Finch glanced again at the bridge and then back at the Germans. Which was going to be the better gamble, the bridge or the soldiers? Only one thing was

certain, time was running out.

Even now, the portal was beginning to change. Now it was pulsating like a star on the verge of implosion. It all felt very real in either case. He got to his feet and did what he thought they wanted him to do, put his hands on his head and walk ahead of them.

Finch didn't know what to do. Goodness knew what they could do to him. The more authoritarian of the two, jabbed him quite hard in the shoulder blade with his rifle and it hurt. That wasn't right. So what did this mean? Was he still a spirit? They'd all started back towards the road when Finch felt a sudden surge of adrenaline and pushing the rifle butts out of the way he ran back to the portal. The soldiers yelled for him to stop and open-fired. The first shot hit the ground at his heel sending soil and grass into the air. Another narrowly missed his arm and another grazed his neck. When he reached the portal, and there was little time for weighing up the situation further, he took a deep breath and ran right into it. Immediately his body hit the light he felt icy cold, as if where he was about to land was some sort of Arctic Tundra. Only when his feet hit the earth on the other side he felt warm again. A voice said, 'Don't move!' and so he didn't.

Xandra found herself her own quiet space away from the others and relaxed her mind and cleared all mental frequencies. The thoughts of others when they

were anxious like this could be quite distracting at times. Xandra closed her eyes too so that she could focus on listening out for just one voice. The one she heard the loudest was Janie's.

‘Anything yet girl?’

‘No,’ Xandra replied. ‘I’ll need a bit more time than that. Sometimes I think I’m getting something but it goes before my head can grab a hold of it.’

This was a lie of course, or partly. She just wanted the others to give her more time to search the area.

There was something else she could try and it wasn't entirely dissimilar to flying. Apart from porting here and there, there was another method of travel. In the first world it was called having an “out of body experience”. In this world it was slightly different. When your spirit roamed and your body remained, as it had little in the way of substance then it faded into something like a weakly projected hologram. She suggested it to Gallow.

‘Yes I have heard that you people could do that,’ he said, ‘but everything which involves power of that sort weakens the spirit. It would be dangerous.’

‘I’ve done it before,’ she said, even though this too was an untruth.

‘Look love,’ Janie intervened, ‘I’m no expert on this ghost magic stuff but what if something happened, like something came and we had to make a run for it? We would have to leave you here.’

‘I’m sure it wouldn’t take long. I won’t go far,

just above the trees and back again.’

Xandra couldn’t feel much in the way of confidence from her comrades. Then she could sort of understand. There were a lot of odd sounds in the air that you would forget were there, if you were around for long enough they were just normal noises. When you did notice them they were scary. Death part one was like this, you just accepted the bad things because they were normal.

So, if she was going to do this then it would be very much on her own. It was Finch who had told her about it, apparently you have to concentrate on the sky, on one spot. His explanation was that it was like playing darts. Like staring very hard at the number you are going for before practically willing it to land in that space. She saw a cloud that was a similar shape to a pear. Still remembering how sweet one was in her mouth, Xandra imagined herself launching into the air to take a bite of it. The next thing she knew that was where she happened to be. Beneath her were three dots which used to be Janie, Gallow and George.

But the happiness of her success wasn’t to last long, one of the noises hit her ears. Xandra turned in the air and saw a large, black shape, bird-like or bat-like. When it came closer, and it did worryingly fast she saw that it was a flying reptile, a pterosaur. For a moment she didn’t worry, and then she remembered that strange things were happening to this world which meant that danger could take many forms.

She attempted to fly away from it using the

same method that got her into the air, by focusing on another part of the sky. Only it wasn't so easy, it was soon upon her.

They were coming towards her fast and her body just wouldn't move. Two pterodactyls moved about the air, where they hovered for a moment, as if taking the time to think scheming thoughts. Xandra assumed that this was the way that they attacked their prey in flight, by flying straight into them and snatching them in their enormous pointed jaws, just at the right moment.

Maneuvering this way was extremely difficult for her; it wasn't something she was used to. She kept trying to concentrate on other points in which to project herself, but none of them worked, even the ground, where the others were now shouting at the version of her body that was on the ground, their voices killed by the air currents. Not even thought transference seemed to be working.

Perhaps it was all of the tension going on in her mind. Then just when she was about to resign from all her hope of getting to safety the two predators wobbled and then vanished before her eyes.

Now that the stress had left her she tried to move again. First penetrating the pear-shaped cloud, she scanned for another spot. There beyond a stretch of tall trees she could see a clearing. In the clearing was a large dinosaur she couldn't put a name to, a carnivore of sorts. What drew her attention to it was that it appeared

to be agitated about something. Her brain was about to ignore this, but there was a voice inside her head now crying for help. It was Ross, definitely Ross. It was coming from the place the dinosaur was. Ross was in serious danger. Xandra focused hard on her spirit body and the next time she thought about it she was back inside it with Janie's puzzled gaze upon her.

'Weird,' she said, 'but I always thought that you had to have a proper body to do that with.'

'You're not the only one!' replied Xandra. 'I know where Ross is now but we need to move right now.' When she next saw George's face he was the colour of snow. Xandra put a hand on his shoulder. 'Sorry if I frightened you.'

'Did you see my Ross?' Janie asked. 'Is he alright? I thought I could feel him just now.'

'He's quite close.'

Gallow seemed quite cross about what she had just done, probably because she hadn't cleared her actions with him first.

'This is a completely different time,' he reminded her, 'anything could have happened to you.'

'I didn't see you rushing to take to the air,' she said bluntly, 'you're supposed to be the soldier aren't you? You even have wings!'

'Yes,' replied Gallow, 'but to be a good one, you have to know how to follow a command structure. This time holds many dangers both on the land and in the skies. To go anywhere unannounced like that is an act of folly.'

Xandra was rapidly going off her so-called leader. He was only in charge because he was bigger and older than the rest of them, and because he was the scariest. She wasn't scared of him. Screamers were all cowards anyway. Not one of them had the decency to give you a fighting chance, before they took your soul from you. And what was this business about not fighting the Snipers all about? Whatever, there was no time for hanging around and putting every action through a committee.

She shook all of things she really wanted to say from her head. 'Whatever we do,' she said, 'we have to do it now.'

'Is the boy far?' Gallow's tone was somehow calmer now.

Xandra pointed. 'He's about a mile in that direction, just past the next hill.'

'Then what do *you* propose we do?'

'The creatures in the sky can't harm you. Two of them charged me but both vanished before they got even close.'

Gallow went a little twitchy. 'That doesn't mean anything. Whatever is happening to this place, is doing so in an erratic manner, as if switching itself off and then on again.'

Janine was jumping up and down with anxiety, and understandably so. Her little boy was on the other side of the hill. For the sake of not upsetting her, she didn't mention the dinosaur or the fact that he was crying out for help.

‘I think we should take the chance,’ she ventured. ‘It isn’t far. We can fly in or teleport and be there in no time at all.’

However, things weren’t going to prove to be that easy. This place, this terrible, unpredictable place was not about to let them get away with too much success too soon. Xandra looked up to the sky again, as if prompted by another distant voice and surely enough the veins were there again. Different though this time, the veins were thicker and somehow darker and more menacing.

‘Damn it!’ she squealed and grabbed the dimension stone from her pocket to seek out the nearest one before it was too late.

Finch too had noticed the veins and how they were different. ‘Do you see that?’ he asked whoever it was at his back. The instruction he’d been given was turn around at his cost.

‘It will be black again soon.’ The voice was cold and as dark was what was coming.

‘Look, I don’t know who you are but I have something that will find us somewhere safe until it is light again.’

‘Safe is a word that isn’t to be trusted boy.’

‘How do you mean? Let me turn around so that I can see you.’

‘And how will that benefit you child?’

‘If you are going to take my soul then I want to see who is going to do it.’

Loud and disturbing laughter erupted from nowhere. There was something bird-like about it, like raptor.

‘Gallow is it you?’

These words somehow killed the laughter. A hand grabbed the back of his neck. ‘How do you know of Gallow?’

‘I know of him,’ said Finch, ‘he lives all alone in house on the other side of the woods near our den.’

‘Gallow is a name I have not heard for a long time.

‘A friend of yours?’

‘No!’ the man released his grip to Finch’s relief.

‘An enemy?’

‘This is no business of yours.’

‘It might be. If you allow me to be then I might be able to help you find him, if that is what you want.’

‘How?’

‘I’m here on a mission, from Farl!’

‘Farl?’ the voice scoffed. ‘The mighty Farl would not send a boy on a soldier’s mission.’

‘The Screamers won’t come here because they are negotiating a truce with the Snipers, so they sent me.’

‘How can a boy beat one of my people?’

‘Ah,’ said Finch, ‘My people, so you are one of them.’

‘I don’t like your insolence boy!’

'I can do it,' Finch felt suddenly more confident now. 'If you let me turn around I will explain.'

'Do it, if only to stop you from going on.'

Finch turned around very slowly. Indeed it was a Screamer, only not so much like Gallow. This one was slightly taller and stronger looking. Then Gallow had been living alone and rejected by his kind. The past few years hadn't been kind to him. Finch liked this Screamer; you could see his soul was still dark by looking into his eyes. Evil was attractive in many ways. If only he could be like that, it would be his Heaven.

'If we have a common enemy, then we are friends,' he said holding out a hand.

'What am I supposed to do with that?' the Screamer grimaced.

'Take hold of it and shake it,' said Finch. 'It means that we intend to be civil with one another, a human thing.'

The Screamer sneered but reluctantly took Finch's hand. The grip was quite painful; he refused to let it show in his face. 'So what do I call you then?'

'You don't!' the Screamer spat.

'Well, I can't call you Screamer can I?' Whatever his name was, he started to move away from him, as if not wanting to share any space. Then these people were like that, they were very private people for ones who took to the skies in squadrons. Finch followed him, not too close. 'Look, we need to find somewhere safe. I need to know that if you are there with me that I will be safe too.'

‘Ha!’ the Screamer snorted. ‘I guarantee you nothing, just as you cannot find safe places.’

‘I can!’ said Finch. ‘See, some time ago a friend and me found these stones that tell you where to go. There are these places here, but you don’t see them. We call them dimension pockets, because we believe that when you are inside them they take you away from everything that is real.’ Finch looked up again. Now the sky was flickering. It never did that before.

After a disturbingly long pause the Screamer spoke. ‘My Screamer name is Creeg. I do not know my human name; we are not allowed to remember!’ He said. ‘Now, show me one of these places.’

Finch got out one of his special stones and waved it around in the air. There was a glow but a feint one. ‘There’s one over there!’ he pointed, ‘but we’ll have to hurry if we are going to make it in time.’

Creeg was still quite hesitant but when it seemed he’d realised that Finch was right he nodded. ‘Very well! Come here boy!’ He came quite close to Finch until his chest was almost against his face. He ordered him to turn around and grabbed him by his clothing and with a few strong, sharp flaps of his enormous wings they were launched into the air. For fear of dropping it Finch held on tighter to the stone.

‘Which way?’

‘The glow is stronger up here,’ Finch observed. ‘I think it is up here!’

‘In the sky? Your hiding place is in the mid-air?’

‘It would seem so, right a little! Not much

further!

Ahead of them something else was glowing, an S shaped light, a crack in the firmament. As they got closer to it the stone pulsated faster and stronger.

‘That’s it!’ cried Finch, ‘head for straight for that!’

‘That would be foolish!’ yelled Cregg, ‘that is the same burning light that is on the top of Calmanis. It will destroy what is left of us!’

‘It isn’t!’ cried Finch. ‘Trust me!’

And then it all went black, at least they could see the entrance, burning bright orange.

‘I cannot!’

‘It’s safe, trust me!’

‘You had better be right!’

Finch hoped so too. He had to admit to himself that much of this was gut instinct. After all, what if these strange stones were able to detect other things too, such as danger? All the same he experienced an enormous buzz as they flew into it. Both of them emitted a loud, guttural scream as the light consumed them.

They landed inside an enormous bubble room. It was exactly like the one he was in just after Malen was ripped to shreds by the Draklis. Beneath them was the ground as if it was daylight outside and they were inside a glass bottle. Only this one had orange lightning for a door.

Cregg was agitated. ‘What demonic magic is this?’ he ranted. ‘How can this happen?’

‘Good isn’t it!’ said Finch. ‘There are hundreds of these places all over the world, probably thousands or millions.’

‘I do not like being imprisoned like this,’ said Creeg with deep concern in his voice.

Finch spread himself out on the invisible floor. He liked this, for now he was the more powerful of the two. ‘Relax, Creeg!’

‘Why do you speak to me like that, when I can kill your soul with one swift thrust of my talons?’

‘Because the world is becoming unstable, and I am the one with the stone,’ replied Finch.

‘I could destroy you and take it from your hand.’

‘You could, but it wouldn’t work for you. This one is tuned into me. It’s linked to my mind.’ He said this although he wasn’t altogether sure it was even true. It came from something he recalled Xandra saying to him about nature and how things find connections with other things.

‘You will help me find Gallow,’ said Creeg. After a short pause he added, ‘there is one other I must find.’

‘Who?’

‘A woman. Her name is Janie, she travelled with me across the valley.’

‘Why do you need her?’

‘That is my business.’ Creeg’s voice changed. Now it contained a curious mixture of melancholia and anger, regretful.

‘You might as well tell me. We could be here for

quite a while.’

It took absolutely ages to find a pocket. The darkness beat them to it for a change and so they had to crawl to the nearest one on their hands and knees.

This was extremely difficult, as sharp things on the ground could cause lacerations if you caught your limbs on them. This meant that movement had to be incredibly slow.

At least for now, the four of them were safe from the dangers without.

Janie thought that it was quite cosy inside. No air passed through and no cold. Nothing of the real world was allowed to enter this little place; for fear that it might be devoured by niceness and serenity.

They were all spread about watching the outside world pass by in silence. There were some creatures that did come out when it was dark, although she could tell anyone what their names were.

Three, shy, moonlit lizards the size of cats came out from the bushes and fought each other over scraps that must have been dropped by sky lizards, only to scamper off when something larger came clumping by. This one had the look of a herbivore about it. It was also a baby whatever it was. That’s right, Ross would know.

A Stegosaurus. It was quite cute; its eyes were large like something in a cartoon. Its mother couldn’t

have been far behind it.

She thought about Ross and how frustrating it was to be so near yet so far from him. She tried to hear his voice, but those of the others smashed her thoughts as if with a mighty mental sledgehammer.

‘Alright,’ Xandra tried to lighten the mood. ‘Last fond moment.’

‘What is the point?’ Gallow interrupted her. ‘It would only be depressing for everyone.’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Xandra. ‘I believe that you can live in a fond memory if you try. When I died it was the first thing I did. As my soul was slipping away to this place all I could think of, was that day on the beach with my parents.’

‘Where was this - beach?’ George spoke up this time. ‘I like the sea.’

‘Not far from here as a matter of fact. It wasn’t even somewhere special, it was a caravan park, all noise, seagulls on the roof, dirty, scummy sea, rain when you least wanted it and jelly fish every few feet. But we were all together and it was the last time.’

‘How did you die?’ asked Janie. ‘Was it a bad death, it sounds like it was. Sorry don’t answer that.’

‘It’s OK,’ said Xandra, ‘I was murdered with some other kids. I’d rather not say any more.’

Janie apologised again. She didn’t want to speak of her death either, however somehow she felt obliged to now.

‘It was an accident,’ she said, ‘at least I think it was. Me and Huw, that’s my husband, went out in the

car. There'd been a big argument between Jack and his dad over a broken fishing rod Jack had borrowed without asking. They used to row a lot then two. They hated one another. Then one day Huw got laid off at the car factory. We didn't tell Jack. There was no work for Huw to go to, so he gave me a lift to the shops. The roads were busy with parents of younger kids doing the school run, so we took a detour and went down this hill. Then something horrible happened. When Huw pressed his foot on the brakes something snapped. We went hurtling down and hit a juggernaut. I don't know if Huw survived I haven't seen him since that day. I don't want to believe it, but I think Jack cut the brakes on the car. That's stupid. Why would he want to kill his own father?'

Now it was Xandra's turn to apologise.

'No need for that,' said Janie. 'Let's just get my boy and climb back up that mountain.'

Xandra said, 'That doesn't sound like the Jack I know. The Jack I know is kind and loving. OK, he's had a complete sense of humour bypass, but he is a good boy. He's been looking after his brother since you died.'

'Guilt!' said Janie. 'Guilt for what he'd done and guilt for leaving a small child without a mother.'

'We can ask him all of this when we see him, eh!' said Xandra putting a caring hand on Janie's shoulder.

But Janie wasn't sure she ever wanted to see him again.

'I can hear them!' Simo was shivering although it was fairly warm.

'But they can't see us,' Lucas assured him, 'as long as we are quiet we will be safe.' Whether this was in fact true for the moment didn't matter. What did was that the smaller boy in his charge didn't do anything to endanger either of them. It made sense. He did know that they were up wind of the Draklis, he'd planned it that way. He just hoped that the same technique would work with them as it does with lions in the Serengeti.

They had found the tree just in time. What a gift it was to find one with such a thick trunk and a capacious hollow. Then, things were beginning to fall apart in this strange place.

When you don't have magic stones to work with, you have to use what you have in your own intellectual arsenal. The three mountains were quite close. The last thing he saw, apart from the tree, before it all went black were them standing out in defiance against all who dared to challenge them, Calmanis the darkest, deadliest of them all. Something else which got his attention was the unusual behaviour of the Draklis. They were fighting amongst themselves as if something bad was about to happen and all of a sudden it had become every vicious plant beast for itself. The equally unusual thickness of the sky veins hadn't escaped Lucas either. The temperature had risen too, by several degrees. This was something which was normally

reliably constant.

Lucas glanced up and scanned for anomalies. Something distinctly star-like glistened in the heavens like someone waving at him from the far side of the galaxy. Then just as his eyes were fixed to this wondrous yet disturbing sight it grew into a large ball immediately after which it was pierced by a shaft of golden light.

Simo too had seen it. 'It's beautiful!' he observed.

'Yes!' said Lucas. 'It is, very beautiful.' But he was thinking about how things that look so attractive can be deceptive. Nature was replete with such things, things that are meant to fool you into believing they are innocent because they look that way. Usually there was something horrible behind it all, like a venomous barb or a set of razor-sharp jaws. Finch kept all of this to himself. There was no way he was going to be taken in by this seemingly resplendent spectacle.

Simo was quite snug against him, drifting off to sleep. He could feel his chest going up and down against his. He thought that was a lie too. Everyone on this side of the life-death divide had no body, no limbs, no flesh, nothing to drive them at all. So there was no air going into Simo's lungs, because there were no lungs for them to be going into. The after-life was one big joke.

But what was worse was the fact that none of this made any scientific sense whatsoever. The sky shouldn't switch itself on and off, it shouldn't be purple anyway. When you die that should be it. Life has no

more use for you and so it blots you out to be replaced by something else. It was called the balance of nature. Then there were the mushrooms. Why oh why would anyone need to eat, when there was no stomach to fill? Yet this place gave you a hunger for them. And why did Simo require sleep? This place was upside-down, back-to-front and sideways. Determined to stay awake, Lucas allowed such things to occupy his mind. This wasn't to prove as easy as he envisaged. His eyes closed as quickly as if his lids were made of iron. He wasn't to drift off as there was a massive explosion above them which shook them both.

The black sky was gone and in its place was something in between that didn't belong at all. It happened with an eerie clicking noise as loud as thunder. The people who passed him on the street didn't notice at all. To them everything was just acceptable.

Jack was sitting in the doorway of a shoe shop. As the shop had been closed down there was no chance of him getting trodden on, or sat down on, or walked through as what had happened on all of the other occasions he'd rested. Fortunately when he found the doorway was precisely the time the sky lights went off. Still, he had his trusty sword to keep him company, and god help any spirit beast who would try to disturb his peace.

It was a nice change to be somewhere there weren't trees or things chasing you. So far there had been no sign of any of the beasts that were so prevalent earlier. Of course there were other spirits, and as usual they ignored him. This was the way in the afterlife. It was customary, especially among the older historical spirits, to stick with something that was familiar. Roman soldiers, Vikings, Elizabethan sailors, Victorian scholars passed through the living as if they weren't there at all. Animals did the same. The stampeding horses were quite thrilling, as were the two curious large mammals which stopped to sniff his head before moving on. These were like sloths only much larger. Obviously belonging to some post Ice Age era. Jack was just watching the day go by, hoping that an idea would fall into his head about what to do next. All of this going from pillar to post stuff was really getting on his nerves, as did the unpredictability of things since he'd arrived. Jack's eyes were ever as alert as fire for the sudden appearance of the other Screamer. When he was finally bored of this ghastly parade he rose and lost himself in the middle of it. He followed the flow to the end of the street where it split into two. Jack stopped and looked through the window of the fast food restaurant. Quimby's was where he would often go with his parents. Gazing longingly at the plastic tables he could see them all there together again, laughing; Ross in the high chair and his mother apologising to the woman whose trousers caught the French fry with the dollop of ketchup on it. These were happy times, days

before it all went bad.

‘A penny for them?’ the voice behind him was quite familiar. Jack turned around to see the man from the gallery who had given him the sword, the Fleshspectre.

‘You!’

‘The one and the same young sir!’

‘I thought I’d seen the last of you.’

‘You can think what you like. I am my own man, go wherever I please, whenever I please.’

Jack was curious. ‘Why did you come to find me?’

‘I’ve something to show you.’

‘How do I know I can trust you?’

The Fleshspectre raised both of his eyebrows. ‘I gave you a weapon did I not? That thing can cut me as sure as it can cut a Sniper.’

He moved off, obviously assuming Jack would follow. When Jack saw him next he was in front of a newsagent’s shop. ‘So why are we standing here?’ Jack was compelled to ask.

‘Watch!’ said the Fleshspectre and put his hand through the window. His arm stretched like soft rubber and explored the innards of the shop. When it returned it was holding a newspaper.

‘You know you could have just gone inside and shown me.’

The Fleshspectre beamed widely. ‘Where’s the fun in that?’

‘You still haven’t told me your name,’ said Jack,

'I can't keep calling you Fleshspectre.'

'Concentrate boy!' The Fleshspectre shook the newspaper and bloomed into a perfect rectangle. 'Read the headline!'

As it wasn't possible for him to touch the paper, it was held out for him at the right page.

'I can't!'

'You cannot read?'

'I'm,' Jack paused. 'Dyslexic!'

'And what is that?'

Jack explained in the way that his mother explained to him, about the way that words were always jumbled up on the page and putting the letters the right way around was difficult. 'It doesn't mean I'm stupid by the way!' he added defensively.

'It says,' the Fleshspectre continued, 'that mysterious sightings are on the increase.'

'So what, there's always some idiot seeing things that aren't really there.'

The Fleshspectre unfolded the paper almost against his face and he jumped back. There were two photographs under the wobbly words. One was of some soldiers gathered around a large hairy animal with long, sharp teeth. The creature had been cornered down an alley, and was about to be netted, or shot, whichever was necessary. Jack recognised this from picture books of his childhood. It was a sabre-toothed cat. The picture adjacent to that and equally eerie was of a flock of pteradon over Westminster.

'This is bad.' The Fleshspectre winced, 'if worlds

past and present meet then this is bad.’

‘But this could be fake. This could be just to sell papers.’

‘Look at the sky Jack. It is a different colour. Things are fraying and getting merged. Time is shifting and changing. This world is falling apart.’

This news caused him to drop the paper. The pages spilled out on the pavement as if nothing else mattered anymore. ‘So what do we do?’ he heard his own pathetic mouth say.

He felt a pair of deep, cold eyes on his looked up to see the Fleshspectre shaking his head. There was nothing that they could do to end this. He did say one thing, but it was under his breath. ‘Unless you know the fabled route to Hevane. We must gather those close to us and go to it.’

Gallow knew. Then Gallow was nowhere now or anywhere. Jack’s face dropped to the ground to where the pages of the newspaper flitted in the breeze like butterflies stuck on a spider’s web. The leaves turned before his eyes as if some invisible hand. Suddenly there was a picture that shook him. It wasn’t of any giant prehistoric cat or flying reptiles, it was him and Jack. As he was focused on this, like some macabre movie sound effect, the sky rumbled, forked lightning ripped through the atmosphere.

The Fleshspectre, who had his back to him, was waving his hands in the air. Jack assumed this was his way of finding gateways. ‘Wait!’ he beckoned to him, ‘what is this article about?’

But his words seemed to dissolve before they even reached the man's ears.

He tried again. 'Please!'

'We must leave now!' was his only response. 'Come!'

Jack ripped out the page with photographs on and stuffed it into his pocket. Even more now, he wanted to find his brother. Even more now, he hoped that the next gateway would lead them to him.

'Quickly!' cried the Fleshspectre. He pointed across the street. 'There is one in that restaurant. And without another thought or another word they ran through the door to see where it would lead them.'

The day had returned in an eerie form. Now all above and below was locked in darker greyish purple. Never before were things like this, total blackness or bright purple but never anything in between. The noise which accompanied it was terrifying and there was no telling what you would meet on the outside. It was Gallow who exited the pocket first and for once there was no argument. The others followed one by one, George last with Janie's arm around him comforting him. The last few hours had not been good for him. Even in fairly capacious place like a dimension pocket it is possible to get claustrophobic. Gallow didn't like having little ones about, it made him feel uneasy. They required a more watchful eye as their vulnerable nature

could weaken your whole unit.

Gallow turned to Janie. 'Is your boy still here, can you hear his cries?'

'Let me see!' Janie stepped to the place where she last heard Ross's voice and closed her eyes. 'I can hear him', she said shivering, 'he is there although feint. I think he is slipping away.'

'That's it,' Xandra intervened. 'We must go in now!'

Gallow knew there was little point in arguing. The girl was awkward, stubborn and no matter what he was going to say to the contrary, she would push the other way.

So he just said, 'Wait here! I will get him.' And before anyone had the opportunity of telling him to wait, he took to the air strongly and defiantly. As his body glided upwards following the powerful flaps of his wings, he felt an overwhelming surge of significance and importance. Everything beneath was so small; the mountains, the hillocks, the trees, the creatures. It didn't take him long to spot Ross. As he was told, the boy was but an arrow's flight away from where he had started. Ross was hanging limp from the two ribs he was tied to. This meant that there was still a large part of him left in this world. When all the light inside of you is gone, that which resembled the form you had taken in life obliterated and dissolved. For how much longer, it was impossible to tell.

What worked in his favour was, the fact that the Snipers had only posted one guard.

Now there was to be direct contact with his enemy. If this went the wrong way this could be the end of peaceful negotiations. The Sniper Ambassador would withdraw from any further talks, and then the attacks on the Screamer homeland would begin again.

So what he needed was some initiative Gallow flew on further, staying above the clouds to prevent him being seen from the ground. When he was sure that he was clear he descended slightly. Now, by a lake a herd of lizard beings were taking water.

Gallow knew very little about them. They had the look of a leaf eater about them. Things in herds and usually were. These had slender bodies and were watchful of their surroundings, as any predator would be. Whatever they were he came to rest behind them softly, crouched down low and tried to blend in with the background.

‘Damn that arrogant fool!’ exclaimed Xandra.

Janie felt that she should correct the girl’s ignorance, it was only right to do so. ‘He isn’t a fool. He’s a soldier! That means that his head tells him that things have to be done in a particular way and without interference.’

‘What interference?’

‘Us!’ said Janie. ‘We’ve all been seeing him wrong, serious, boring and sensible. But he knows how he needs to do this and he doesn’t want to fail.’

Xandra came in close, too close for comfort. If she wasn't a child and not concerned with personal boundaries she would have had a slap for that. 'But it's your boy out there! Don't you care?' That stubborn idiot could ruin everything if he goes in doing a cavalry charge. Don't you have any feelings?'

'He knows what he's doing.'

'But what if he doesn't, eh? What if he gets captured, what then? I'll tell you what. The Snipers will torture him and he will tell them where we are and they'll come after us.'

Janie knew that this wasn't true. Gallow would never yield under anybody's torture. He was made of sterner stuff than that. Xandra went over to George, who was by now as confused about what was going on around as he ever was.

'It's alright,' she said to comfort him. 'It's just grown up stuff. Now I want you to be a good boy and wait here.'

'Where are you going?' said Janie, 'Don't jeopardise Gallow's mission.'

Xandra's focus was still on the boy. 'I'm going to help another boy, George. He is like you, only he is in serious danger. You must stay here near the pocket where it is safe.'

George returned a slow nod, which appeared to only half-understand. 'Very well miss!'

At half light everything appeared very sinister somehow. You couldn't see people's faces properly, so you couldn't see how they really felt when they were

saying things. And shadows were frightening, pointier. What was visible of the sun, which was behind the three mountains, spilt long, black fingers over the landscape, as if feeling, searching for something. Even this place was against them now, or at least that was how it felt.

When she next noticed Xandra, she was guiding George back into the pocket. Even she had felt the change in this place. But she couldn't let this hot head do anything rash. Rash could ruin everything.

'Perhaps we should wait here,' Janie said,

'You can do what you want Janie,' Xandra replied, almost distant. 'I'm going to save your son.'

Janie paused before speaking. Damn, did this girl remind her of herself when she was that age. 'I'll come with you.' She received a nod for that but no accompanying smile. The girl was angry now and determined. Then she had a good reason. Time was burning away, as surely as someone had soaked it in petroleum and shot it with a flare gun. The truth of the matter was everything inside her wanted to run, and to keep running until she was close enough to look into his beaming blue eyes. There was a part of her that screamed not to go rushing in all guns blazing. It never worked in the past.

Janie Jinx wasn't going to mess this one up. She could feel her boy and soon it would all be over and that was enough.

Xandra grabbed both of her wrists tightly and told her to concentrate on her son's face, she would do the rest. After that there wasn't much else to think

about. She experienced a tingling in her head which spread quickly to the rest of her body. The brightest burning light followed by the darkest black. When the world returned there was her boy, and he was not alone. Now there were ten, eleven, no - twelve Snipers, it was difficult to count them, they were swirling around too much, over, under one another like the base reptiles that they were, snakes in some distorted, mutated Garden of Eden.

And there in the midst of all this chaos was her poor son, hanging limp and helpless, pale and thin as a ghost could be.

His name fell off the end of her lips, as if it was the stub of a finished cigarette.

'R-oss!'

He could not answer her. He seemed to be riding the line of consciousness and sleep. All of this time she thought he would be fine, that he'd be safe. What could happen to you once you are dead, what else was there to worry about? Seeing him like that really brought it all home. She cursed herself for cracking jokes just hours before and trying to be happy. What right did she have to that?

One of the Snipers was slightly larger than the rest. This was one only one who wasn't moving. This was obviously the leader. It, as the gender was undeterminable by appearance alone, emitted a high-pitched whine similar to some electronic warning system. Two of the others broke away and wrapped themselves around the invading human spirits, the first

around Janie and the second around Xandra. The others encircled them, as if their burly grips weren't security for them enough.

'Great plan!' Xandra wheezed under the pressure of her captor.

'It was your idea,' replied Janie.

'I was talking to myself,' said Xandra.

'Don't worry,' Janie assured the girl. 'When you're a mother you realise that rushing into situations you don't yet understand to save children is natural.' She was looking at Ross as she was saying this. How pathetic he looked. 'What are you going to do with us?' she asked none of them in particular.

It was the one who resembled some sort of leader who answered her.

'Where is Gallow?'

'I don't know who you are talking about.'

'Do not play games with us,' it snarled ferociously, 'we have seen him with you!'

'He's left us,' Xandra snarled, 'deserted us! He calls himself a soldier too, that's a joke!'

'Why do you want him?' asked Janie.

'Silence! I do not answer to you!'

'You are afraid of him,' said Xandra. 'That's it. Screamer's more superior to you and you're scared of what he will do to you!'

'I am afraid of nothing!' cried the Sniper leader. 'We are still negotiating with his people. He is breaking the rules of the agreement by being here. I must know what he is doing here.'

‘Let me help my son,’ Janie pleaded desperately. But her words fell like snowflakes on a roaring fire.

‘There is no helping him. He is only here so that his brother will come.’

This was puzzling. ‘Why do you want Jack?’

The leader raised its head and slid backwards a little, as if what had been said got him agitated slightly.

‘You have spoken too much human spirit. When your other son comes, I will devour you first.’

And in his fiery gaze there was a deep promise of this.

Lucas had the most peculiar dream. Now that was something that hadn’t happened in a while. It began with him gazing at the sky. Only the sky was no longer any shade of purple, grey or black, but blue the way it was before his death. How odd this was. You stop dreaming once you die. Stout white Cumulous drifted from left to right like sailing ships on a clear pastel blue ocean. And there were sounds too he hadn’t heard for a very long time. Ornithology was never his thing, yet there was the distinctive trill of a song thrush. He tilted his head slightly and there it was, perched on a fence post. At least it looked like a song thrush.

Lucas’s head was against something uncomfortably hard, yet he still didn’t want to move. All was peaceful and this was a dream, and you had to make the most of them. Scientists dream, that is what makes

them want to push boundaries. When he placed his fingertips behind his neck he felt that he was resting against metal. Only when he was bothered to look around him and saw the lines of fading, rusting steel and the adjoining wooden sleepers, did he realise where he was. He was lying on a railway track.

‘Why here?’ he asked himself and sat up sharply. All of a sudden everything went grey and cold. The clouds, having been dowsed in black ink took on a more sinister pose, and the sparrow on the post lay still. Lucas was drawn to this first. As he approached it he realised that its sudden stillness was brought on by death’s icy breath. Slowly, and he didn’t know what made him, he reached out with his hand and touched its bitter feathers. No sooner as his tips connected with the bird than it immediately started to decay. Shrivelling first, as if the devil himself was sucking the air from it, and then when there was little in the way of fatty substance under its feathers, the skin split apart revealing blood and organs which the gaping tear spat out with a sickening gloop. Of course Lucas had seen animal entrails before but this was different. This made him feel ill.

Lucas looked to the ground, and when his eyes returned he was met by something that filled his mouth with vomit. The bird was now seething with maggots.

A sudden sound distracted him from this, the cracking of twigs and a long, heavy scraping along the ground. A tall, broad man spilled into the scene. He was dragging something through the bushes.

‘Lucas!’ Simo’s whiney tones shook him away

like an ice shower.

‘What?’ Lucas raised his head again, this time from inside a nice, safe bed of dry leaves.

‘I’m scared!’

Lucas stretched out his arms and yawned himself back into the real world. ‘What are you scared of Simo?’

‘I dunno!’

‘Then may I suggest that unless you can define what it is you are scared of, that there is little requirement to be scared at all?’

‘There was a sound!’

‘What kind of sound?’

‘I dunno!’

‘An animal sound, a people sound?’

‘I dunno!’

What always annoyed Lucas most was the idea of having to make an analysis with practically no information whatsoever. He placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Think,’ he demanded. ‘What was it about the sound that scared you so much?’

‘It came from...’ Simo paused and gulped. ‘Underneath us!’

Now he too was scared. His hand slipped from his little friend’s shoulder and onto the ground. He hadn’t noticed it before, but it was warm. ‘Simo!’ Lucas was whispering now. ‘Very slowly get up and walk away. When I tell you to run, run as fast as you can.’

‘Why?’

‘Simo, this isn’t the time. Just do it!’

He was still confused, then he always was when you gave him a short, direct instruction.

Even when he did obey, it was too quick. He had to grab his arm and drag him clear at a steadier pace. Soon they were both standing on a public path. Watching the place where they were.

‘Why did we have to go Lucas?’ The boy’s ignorance was stupefying.

‘Shush!’ Lucas pointed. ‘Do you see that?’

‘Yes!’ said Simo. ‘What about it?’

‘See the leaves where we were?’

Simo nodded.

‘There! Did you see that?’

‘No!’

‘The ground is moving, going up and down as if it’s alive.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ Lucas had to be honest. ‘Perhaps it’s this place doing the things it does, or...’

‘Or what?’

Lucas looked at Simo. ‘You don’t want to know.’

‘Yes I do!’ said Simo, ‘what?’

‘Just come on!’ Lucas grabbed the boy’s arm and the little chap was almost flying along the path. ‘Don’t look back!’ he advised him.

‘Why not?’

‘Because...’ Lucas was interrupted by a loud, raucous cry. Both the last thing and the first thing that he wanted to do was to turn around, and see what it was

they were running away from. Lucas chose the latter, but at no point was he going to stop and conduct any sort of close analysis. So he gave it a safe, quick glance. He was glad he saw it. It made him want to move his leg at a much faster pace. The mysterious thing was a flightless bird of huge proportions. It must have been more than eight feet tall, with a beak which could by the looks of it, tear open a car door just as a can opener rips into a tin can. But no matter how fast they could run he could feel it getting closer. In a matter of minutes its hot breath was upon them.

Then, the worst thing happened, Simo's foot struck a pot hole and he fell.

Lucas stopped too. The giant bird, which at a more prolonged glance now he knew was a Phorusrhacus, also stopped. Of course it was going to do that. It no longer needed to chase its prey.

'C'mon, get up Simo!'

'I can't,' replied Simo, 'my leg hurts!'

'Your leg can't hurt, we have to keep running!'

Lucas looked around him for some sort of weapon. As fortune would have it, he found a large rock, this was slightly L shaped and flat, liked some rudimentary axe. Hastily he began waving it from right to left in front of the bird's head. With one swift peck it was able to knock it from his hands.

'Damn it!' Lucas cursed. 'Get up Simo! You're going to be turned to light!'

At least he tried. Even though as soon as he started to move his body the bird's interest in him

heightened. It was sniffing him now, as if to decide if he was edible.

He was.

The creature lifted its heavy head and emitted another of its, terrifying, raucous squawks.

'I'm so sorry Simo!'

'Help me!' Simo was screaming.

With one swift movement it came down towards Simo. Lucas closed his eyes, wishing it all away.

When he opened them again the Phorusrhacus was still, as if time had frozen. And then it fell. Behind it was the most welcoming sight of all time. It was Jack. He was holding before him a blood-tipped sword. Besides him was the strangest looking man. But that didn't matter right now. Simo was fine.

There was something about Farl that made Finch think he was constantly with him. Everywhere he went he could feel his shadow, his icy breath, and every now and again when the wind caught his ear, there was his voice loud and clear like a shiny trumpet. Time was fleeting and he just knew that if he couldn't provide any proof that he was getting close to Gallow soon, then they would want his soul too. And he wasn't the only one haunting his thoughts, tormenting him. Xandra too pricked at his head. She was everywhere, and each time he thought he could hear her voice, her laughing, there was that pain, that Jack not far behind her. This was all

wrong. When you die together that is supposed to be special. It had been said that murdered souls share a special bond that can never be broken.

Finch awoke in the middle of the street with strange faces orbiting the air.

‘What’re you doin’ here boy?’

The accent was familiar, from old Wild West movies, as was the clothes the five men were wearing.

‘You can see me?’

‘You think there’s somethin’ wrong with my eyes, boy?’

‘Maybe we should lynch him, huh!’ Another man, slightly younger than the others added. There was a bit of Dutch or German about him. There was Irish in the first guy’s voice, more drawn out and exaggerated Rs.

‘You’ll have a job guys,’ said Finch, ‘I’m dead already.’

With this, the men looked at each other and then exploded with laughter.

‘It’s true. You can’t kill me. I’m a spirit.’

When the din finally subsided, the first cowboy said, ‘We know that fool. We’re dead too.’

‘So what are you going to do with me?’

‘Get up!’ he said, ‘I got someone who wants to meet you!’

He was pushed into the back of a covered wagon, where there were others. Some were definitely old gunfighters, others farmers and their children. It was easy to tell by the way the evidence of their deaths.

Apart from their attire, the blood-stained shirts, the black clothes, there were more obvious clues. One had a hole that went right through his face that let the daylight through. Across the way from him a mother in a burnt, yellow dress covered the eyes of a little boy. Finch wondered why, when the man with them, who just had to be his father was just sitting there with an axe in his face. Not that he cared all that much, but at some point in time this family had their home burnt to the ground by evil men. Possibly, somebody wanting the land it was built on. Then there was the Native American Indian. He didn't look much like the brave you see in films. Then films aren't always that accurate. He looked as much of a farmer as the father did. There was something in the eyes. But the soul in the rear of the wagon who fascinated him the most was someone like him, who just didn't belong in this scene at all. It was a man in his early twenties wearing what appeared to be an RAF uniform, blue-grey with wings on the shoulders and coloured bars over the pockets.

'So what's your story mate?' Finch asked him.

The airman's head had been tilted until now, like some of the others. On hearing a familiar accent it lifted. 'British?'

Finch nodded. 'How did you end up in the land of the cowboys, mate?'

'A very strange story, little fellow. I was in the middle of a dog fight, a battle, with the Bosh. Doing really well too. The old kite hadn't caught a single bullet. My squadron managed to see the last of them off

without so much as a scratch. We were flying back to base as pleased as punch when...'

'When what?'

'Most odd. The sky ahead of me tore open. On our side it was late in the evening, yet on the other side of the rip it was morning.

I tried pulling up on the joystick, but that was no use. It was like it wasn't attached to any part of the kite at all. It was the same with the pedals for the flaps. I stamped ruddy hard on them too.

'My feet nearly put a hole in the damn fuselage. So I tried to bail. No chance. The cockpit canopy was jammed. In the end all I could do was sit there and wait to see what fate had for me on the other side.'

Finch had to ask, even if he didn't really care. 'And what was on the other side?'

'A ruddy great mountain,' said the airman, and continued. 'It came towards me really fast. Only this time when I tried to blow the canopy it worked. The plane hit the mountain and exploded. I saw it as I was drifting to ground on my chute, thinking to myself on the way down, that was a bally close one.

'I landed in the middle of a corn field near this farm, where I ditched my chute and made for the nearest town to negotiate a route home...'

This was taking all day. 'So what you are saying is, you didn't die and then come here, you died here?'

This seemed to ruffle his feathers a little. 'Steady on young fellow, if you didn't want to know, then why even bother to ask?'

‘I was bored!’ Finch moaned, and then added. ‘Alright then, how did you die?’

The airman responded by unfastening his shirt and loosening his air force tie. The method of the man’s death became perfectly clear with the rope-like ligature marks on his neck. ‘Bumped into a bunch of rough sorts with an itch to scratch,’ he added. ‘Despite hefty protest on my part, they insisted I bore a striking resemblance to man of a similar age that’d been spotted rustling cattle. I mean, me and cows. I was brought up in Kent dear boy. But what ho! Mistaken identity old boy. It’s a killer!’

This was most peculiar and wrong. It was common knowledge that only spirits could transcend time. Never before, as far as he could recall had anyone died in a time they didn’t belong in.

The wagon started down a deep descent as if gravity itself had altered in this reality defying world. Then he realised as he was holding on to one of the ribs under the sheeting and the echoing sounds of the horses’ hooves on the ground changed, that it wasn’t that at all. They were now underground. They were forced to get out and make their way along the tracks of a narrow tunnel. They were in an old mine shaft. He couldn’t think of what possible reason that a bunch of dead people could have to capture another bunch of dead people. Then, before he could gather enough words in his head to make a sentence, there came a very haunting hissing, slithering sound which resounded through the tunnels. He knew that sound too well. And

before his imagination could form a picture there it was, the vicious, gaping mouth of a Sniper.

‘How many?’ its rattling hiss seemed to come from all directions.

‘Six!’ replied the cowboy leader.

‘Only six?’

‘This is the best we could do today. The doc says there’s a sickness coming. It’s gonna take a lot of town folk, he says.’

This news appeared to please their new captor. He looked a little less aggressive in some way.

Finch glanced at the entrance to the mine, assessing how quick he could possibly get to it before the Sniper was upon him. It was million miles away. In the back of the coach there had been two of the cowboys, and all the time their hands had been hovering over their holsters. It occurred to him then that spirit bullets might have done less damage to his body. Perhaps he could have run then. Now the danger was much worse and it was too late.

The Sniper did a sweeping inspection of its prey, sniffing each body in turn, salivating. When it did this to the little boy his mother tried to hug him. She was pushed away. The boy cried.

His mother said, ‘We’re dead now Seth, there ain’t nothing much else that can happen to you.’

Finch could understand how Seth felt. This was death, but it never felt like it. Blood still rushed through your veins pumped by a spirit heart. You hurt when you were hit by something and you were still vulnerable.

And all of the emotions you experienced in your life were still there. The only difference was, that all of this was echoes. No, it didn't feel like you were dead at all.

Obviously neither the boy nor the mother had been dead for long enough to know why it was important for you to avoid sharp things.

They were taken further down deeper into the mine where the tracks came to a halt. Here the light made the gold veins in the walls glisten.

Two guards were posted to the prisoners. Both of them on the instructions of their boss pulled out their revolvers and stood one each side. As soon as their boss walked off their postures became more relaxed.

'Momma!' the boy asked her, 'If we're dead is this Hell?'

'Yes child,' his mother replied. 'We've done somethin' real bad and we're in Hell.'

'This isn't Hell!' Finch was compelled to correct her. 'This is the Mortex, the Deadworld.'

'Feels like Hell to me!' the boy's father butted in. He was right, it did feel like that sometimes. But he was so wrong to call it that.

'Nobody's done anything wrong. You're here because that is what comes next after death.'

'You're saying there is no Heaven?' This was the airman.

'They say there is; only they call it Hevane here. I don't believe it. They reckon that if you climb some mountain you can get to it. Some people will believe anything to stop themselves from being miserable.'

The mother's face turned into thunder. Her eyes filled with rage at the sounding of these words, her lips quivered as if there was something that wanted to come out that she was trying to hold back. 'Young man!' said uttered with an affected politeness. 'Young man! I can see that you have not had the divine pleasure to be touched by our lord. I will therefore forgive you and your ignorance, but please be so kind as to keep your opinions to yourself.'

Finch refused to apologise. Clearly the mother, her husband, her son hadn't been first dead for very long, and haven't yet experienced the cold, empty feeling of utter dread which sets in.

About an hour later the head cowboy returned and instructed the other two to get the prisoners together to move.

'Where are you taking us?' the airman seemed to be asking no one in particular.

The reply he received came as emotionless and angry as it could sound. 'To a party, amigo! Eatin' time!'

The constant mid-tone purple light was hard to cope with. There was no way now to tell which was day and which was night any more. Not with the world decaying around them it mattered all that much. Even as they were bound to that dreaded carcass Xandra was thinking to see one of those repulsive veins in the sky, or to see nothing at all would have been simply wonderful.

Ironically, as if to make mockery of the relationship between them, Janie was tied next to her son. How pathetic they looked together, like two dead game birds hanging next to each other in a butcher's window.

She'd tried to teleport but it was useless. There was something about the Sniper bindings that was preventing this from happening. It was almost as if the dazzling light they emitted was somehow able to tap into her brain. The only other option was to get the stone out of her pocket and find one of her special dimension places, as if she could do that with her hands bound to a dinosaur rib. One thing that was worth a try was telepathy. Like Screamer Snipers lacked the ability to read minds.

She thought hard, *Janie!*

Xandra? Bloody hell girl.

I've been thinking, maybe if we all concentrated our powers we could affect our bindings in some way.

How would that work?

The bonds around our wrists is something to do with an energy force, like the Snipers. If we think hard enough perhaps we can unravel it in some way.

Worth a try!

Ross can you hear my voice? This is Xandra.

I am here. I want to go home now.

We will take you somewhere better Ross, to a much nicer place than here. I want you to try and do something for me,

Very well then.

Think about the light that is wrapped around you.

Think of it as a snake.

Yes it does look like a snake.

When I give the word I want you to do what I say.

I will.

Janie do you think Ross is up to it?

Xandra I'm looking at him now. There is nothing of him left to do anything with.

I know it's hard Janie, but we will need as many of us as possible.

Xandra wasn't sure if the little ones had the strength to do this, never mind the power. She had to try. This was the type of person she was. Fine, Lucas was the boss of them all. But she was always the one everyone looked to for answers when things got tough. Lucas was the kind of kid who kept his hands clean. Not someone who you would have expected to handle situations like this. So what was the plan? If they could get away from all the distortion and energy it might be possible to teleport to a safe distance.

'Come on then Snipers!' Janie suddenly bellowed out of the blue. 'If you're going to eat our souls just get it over with will you!'

Janie what the hell are you doing?

Sounding helpless. I figured that it would put them off the scent about us trying to escape.

Well, don't!

'We will feast when the time is right.' Came an authoritative growl. 'When the rest of your numbers arrive.'

'A single Sniper wouldn't even consider one

soul as a mouthful,' Xandra thought she might as well add. 'Four of us and five of them wouldn't be worth the effort on their part.'

'Silence!'

Shut up now Janie. Empty your minds all of you! Think of black, as black as it was after the veins used to appear in the sky. Now imagine a long, white, snake. The snake is coiled tightly around the branch of a tree. Have you all got that? Janie?

Yes!

Ross?

Yes miss!

Ross? Can you hear my voice Ross?

Yes... Xandra!

Try to hold on Ross. We'll all be out of here soon. Everybody, the snake so strong, and is holding on so tightly, that the branch is unable to sway in the breeze. Everyone, like the snake is holding on to the branch, hold on to that image.

So how are we supposed to see a snake and a tree in the dark?

Janie was getting to be annoying, Xandra could sense it.

Use your imagination Janie. You can see the snake because it radiates white light and you can see the tree because it is lit up by the snake. Now slowly imagine...

A distant sound broke her thoughts, a pebble thrown into a stagnant pool, rumbling like a thunderous sky, only closer than that.

'What the...?'

Ignore that everyone. This is a good time. The Snipers are looking about them in confusion. Now the snake begins to

unwind. Beginning at the tail it begins to move away from the branch, as if it had become suddenly uncomfortable, or if the branch had become hot and was burning the snake.

Above Xandra's head something was crackling now. She snatched an upwards glance and saw that the surface of the bindings was now not as smooth. Hundreds of white spots were being spat into the air. It was working.

Now only the snake's upper body is hanging onto the branch. The weight of it is pulling it to the ground... She continued.

Now more than ever, she could feel the link, and she began to feel good about it. Things had never worked this well before. Even her teleportation went a little skew whiff at times. Somehow this activity took away some of the discomfort of her confinement. She felt stronger, quite powerful in fact. As if she could just fly away from her bindings as Gallow could and no one could ever catch her.

Then, as if to destroy all of this, in a fraction of a thought, a hundred, no hundreds of peculiar-looking beasts, thundered into the picture like some saboteur of hope, a destroyer of dreams. As soon as the Snipers saw them they lashed out at them. Xandra had no idea at all what these things were, she didn't care. They had shiny grey skin, long necks with tiny heads on the end of them and long tails. As far as she was concerned they were a flock of plucked ostriches. More to the point, a bloody nuisance. Even though this was going on she still tried to get the link back. But Janie had broken

away, she was shouting as if her favourite film star had just arrived. What was worse was that the binds were tight again.

As if to add insult to injury there was an old familiar face. On the back of one of these intrusive creatures, wings outstretched in battle anger, there was Gallow.

What on Earth was he playing at, a diversion? What was this supposed to achieve, were the Snipers going to run off. All that really happened was now, as if with worlds colliding and substance not mattering anymore, they were going for them like prey. Jumping on these creatures they quickly coiled themselves around them like enormous white glowing pythons and sucked the souls away from them.

Gallow approached the prisoners like some triumphant knight on his gallant steed.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Xandra yelled at him.

‘Giving you a chance to escape!’

‘And how are we supposed to do that? The bindings around our hands are controlled by them. Our only chance of getting out of here was to combine our powers.’

‘Then use your powers now and let’s get out of here!’

‘We can’t do that. We need silence and calm. You’ve ruined everything. Now the Snipers will know that the world is going wrong. They’ll know they won’t need us for bait now and will eat us anyway.’

‘So how can I help now?’

Xandra knew there wasn't any point in thinking about it. ‘Just go!’ she just said. But it was too late. She saw the largest of the Snipers appear behind him, and before she could speak it had devoured both Gallow and the beast.

The chamber where they were now was much bigger than anything Finch had ever seen below ground. Quite clearly it wasn't part of the mine. If anything, it was more of an arena than an excavation site, circular like the ones inside the mountains.

However one thing he didn't expect was there was only one Sniper, and that was the one which met them in the shaft. This was odd, although Snipers resembled snakes they fed like piranha, in some communal frenzy. This was why many of their rooms were shaped like this, arena-shaped. It occurred to Finch at one point that somehow it might have been cut off from its own kind.

The chamber was fairly well lit for a place deep beneath the ground. The veins in the walls glowed red making everything appear bloody. Each of the captives was submitted to an inspection, as if it was going through a menu and trying to decide what to have first. Only when it got to him did it speak.

‘You do not seem as scared of me as the others,’ it snarled, ‘why?’

‘What's the point of being scared? If you're going to send us to our second deaths, then get on with

it!

‘No, there is something else, and I cannot determine what.’

‘Do not taunt Satan’s beast!’ the woman pleaded, ‘ask for mercy for your tainted soul.’

‘I’m not scared of no Sniper!’

The creature recoiled; something on its face appeared puzzled somewhat. ‘What did you call me?’ it asked at last.

‘Sniper! Underworld creature, snake spirit, soul-eater! You know what you are!’

Finch wondered if there was perhaps an opportunity here.

‘Don’t you know what you are?’

‘I am above all things!’ was all it had in defense.

‘Above all the others of your kind?’

‘Ha, fool!’ it scoffed. ‘There are no others of my kind. I am unique, powerful, the prime feeder.’

‘Ah’ said Finch. ‘Top of the food chain. Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you but you are not.’

‘Liar!’ the Sniper lunged forward and pinned Finch to the wall with its chest. Its mouth widened revealing the gaping chasm of pink flesh and long, white fangs. It was so large it could quite possibly engulf his whole body in its mouth. But this isn’t how Snipers eat you. Snipers rip the spiritual flesh from the top of your head, like pulling the ring from a can of cola, and then they suck out your insides while your outside burns away with the escaping light. Now was the time to act if any. Snipers were known to anger easily, and if you ever

did, the first word of insult was guaranteed to be the last of you.

‘Wait!’ cried Finch, and not a moment too soon. Its teeth were against his forehead poised for the kill.

The serpentine creature pulled away. ‘What have you got to say?’

‘There is something you ought to know,’ said Finch. ‘The Screamers have sent someone to kill you, a boy like me.’

‘Why would anybody want me dead?’

‘Because you are the last of your kind. Long ago, there were many others like you, but the Screamers slaughtered them all. They have sent someone to this place. He is called Jack. They have said that he can live if he destroys you. Let me go and I’ll find him for you. I’ll bring him to you.’

‘Huh!’ The Screamer scoffed. ‘If I let you go, it will be the last I see of you.’

‘But he has great power, enough to destroy you with a single thought. So much power that if you devour him, you will not have to feed for weeks.’

‘Then how can you kill him?’

This one is quite intelligent, Finch thought. It had an answer for everything. ‘He wants to kill me too. He hates me. I took his female and it has made him very angry. I could find him and lure him here. Then you can kill him for the both of us.’

‘Evil boy!’ yelled the mother.

‘Selfish young man!’ her husband added. ‘And what about the rest of us?’

‘I wish I could help you,’ Finch sighed, ‘but even in death, it’s survival of the fittest.’

By the look on the creature’s face, and the way it glanced around at the other humans, Finch could tell that he had found the magic words that would ensure his freedom. Once back on the surface he could find another dimension hole and get away from there as fast as he could, or try to teleport to a place this crazy, delusional serpent couldn’t strike.

Explaining the existence of the Fleshspectre wasn’t easy. This was a being who could travel between two different worlds, yet he chose to be in the one which was apparently dying. Jack could tell Lucas was a little suspicious of him. Then he was the kind of person who required analysis for everything. He’d given him a look that seemed to say everything he thought, and then went off with Simo to look for mushrooms. The world was becoming a weary place; they needed to eat something, if only to keep their spirits up. Even the water seems dead now, Jack thought, as the inky currents followed the curve with little determination.

‘Why are you here?’ he asked, the words just jumped out, little mattered anymore.

‘To find the other three!’ was the somewhat prompt response. ‘Then all will be right!’

‘Three what?’

The Fleshspectre picked up a stone. For a

fraction of a minute Jack thought he was going to throw it at him. He didn't, he threw it into the river. But instead of causing a splash, it rode the ripples as if it had been made of a light wood, before leaping out and landing on the bank on the opposite side. 'There!' he said.

'That is weird!'

'It isn't supposed to be happening. It has always been my task to walk between worlds and monitor the status quo, and things have been fine, until now that is. Then this happened. No warning, not like the veins which have always told us when the light in the sky was going to be switched off.'

Jack thought for a moment. 'There must have been something. I don't know much, but there are always warning signs in nature.'

The Fleshspectre shrugged. 'Like what?'

'I don't know,' said Jack, and a light went on inside his head. 'What about...?'

'What?'

'Those things Xandra can find... the dimension pockets!'

'Dimension pockets?' the Fleshspectre shrugged, 'what are those?'

'So they are quite new?'

There was no answer. Strange, Jack thought as he now viewed what was obvious to be a man in deep thought; these didn't come with the territory. The children's main base, which even resembled some sort of house, looked like it had been there forever.

The Fleshspectre was like a stone monolith, tall and still, gazing into a space, or perhaps looking at something that no one else could see. There was a moment when Jack thought the man had died. In the end he returned to the world, as if someone had just given him a jab with a cattle prod.

‘Of course there are bubbles’ he ranted. ‘They must be a safety measure. The Deadworld must have put them there as soon as things started to go wrong.’

‘You mean like an airbag in a car?’

The man nodded. ‘You mean that, in a car when you crash, and the cushion comes out of the dashboard to stop you from getting hurt?’

‘Exactly!’ said Jack.

‘Yes!’ replied the Fleshspectre. ‘But all this means is that we must find the others, fast.’

‘So I must find the four to save it. Four brought to this place by one man, and one of them is you Jack.’

Jack didn’t understand. ‘A man brought me here?’

‘The manner of your death. It is the same for you as it is for the other three.’

This being, this person, this thing was saying a lot and very little at the same time. Not only that, the rhythm of his speech was much slower than anyone else’s, as if not only did he exist in no particular place but also no particular time. He was quite shifty too, as soon as the others returned he walked off and most mysteriously, he started talking to himself.

‘The mushrooms don’t seem to be at the quality

of the usual ones,' Lucas was saying as they approached. 'I'm wondering whether to put that down to the peculiar weather conditions.'

'I think it's getting warmer,' Simo added, 'I'm sweating now.'

Jack found their seemingly carefree attitude hard to digest. How can the two of them be so casual about what was happening? He gave Lucas a hard glare that he didn't see and glanced upwards. So what? Couldn't he see that?

'What's with him?' Finch pointed to where the Fleshspectre was crouched by thick gorse bush muttering to himself as if it were perfectly natural.

'Lord knows!' said Jack. 'I had an aunt who used to do that. She said it was a sign of intelligence.'

'Do you think we can trust him?'

But they had asked the same question about Gallow not so long ago, and where was he now? The brave, battle-scarred soldier who was going to keep all the children safe.'

Perhaps Lucas was getting used to things in the Deadworld being odd. Who had ever heard of a sky having veins, or being the colour of dirty violets? Suddenly there were a hundred dots of orange piercing the firmament. Jack hadn't been there all that long in comparison to other beings, but this was a first for him. 'Do we need to be concerned about that?' he asked Lucas.

'It's not something I've seen before. Perhaps a meteor shower. We should find somewhere safe to go,'

then, as if he really needed to, Lucas hastily added, ‘if there is such a thing.’

Janie took the hand of her little boy and as if he would fall to pieces at any minute, very carefully gave him a gentle hug. How cold, he felt as a spirit and made up of hardly anything at all. She could still remember the last time she had done that. It was when he fell off his brother’s skateboard. He was trying to copy Jack. It was in the middle of a busy car park at the supermarket, he nearly died then, now he actually was.

‘You’re such a hypocrite!’ Xandra remarked.

‘Explain!’ Janie frowned.

‘You sat in that cave all these years and you must’ve known he’d passed over then.’

‘I thought of him every single day.’

‘Yet you didn’t bother to look for him. You knew damn well there were horrible things out there and you left your sons at their mercy.’

‘I knew he was with Jack. Jack is strong, I knew he’d be in good hands until it was time for us to meet again.’

‘Ha!’ cried Xandra. ‘You so-called adults are all the same. You calm our tears when we cry and tell us lies, like everything will be alright, don’t worry, we’ll keep you safe from harm – liars!’

As each day passed it was becoming more and

more obvious that the two of them were never going to see eye to eye. Xandra had trust issues when it came to adults. You could see in her eyes that at some point in her life she had been seriously let down.

‘Look Xandra,’ she said anyway, ‘I know what happened to you was bad, it was terrible, but we aren’t all the same you know.’

But Xandra wasn’t even listening. She was looking around her quite frantically. ‘Where’s George?’

‘He said he was going to pick some flowers,’ said Janie. ‘He wants to take them back to his mum. Poor thing doesn’t know. Don’t worry, he’s only down the bank.’

‘Idiot!’ yelled Xandra. ‘You were supposed to keep an eye on him, but no. You have your own little mite back and now you don’t give a damn.’

‘That’s not fair!’ said Janie. ‘He promised he wouldn’t go far.’

Still clutching Ross’s hand, Janie followed her willing adversary to the edge of the bank. From there you could see the river through the trees. How peaceful it was underneath this disturbing sky. ‘Can you see him?’ she asked Xandra.

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘he’s by the water.’

Janie could see him now. He was crouched at the water’s edge poking at something with a long stick. Then her gaze swept to her sharp right, where for a brief moment there was a flicker of something bright white. ‘Did you see that?’

‘No, what was it?’

‘I don’t know, perhaps just a reflection.’

‘Reflection?’ Xandra pulled a strange face, ‘this is a death zone in the prehistoric era, what is there out here that’s reflective?’

‘Another dinosaur?’ A shiver rippled right through Janie. Xandra looked her straight on in the face. She’d had the same thought.

‘Wait here with Ross!’

‘No!’ said Janie. She gave her Ross’s hand together with a half-cocked smile. ‘You wait here with him. I’m responsible for him going off. I’ll get him back.’

‘Alright!’ said Xandra, ‘but be quick!’

So, without another thought about what she was getting herself into, Janie ran down the hill towards George. She was going to call out to him, then thought about it. If she did that, it could’ve alerted the whatever it was, to their whereabouts and it would be on them sooner.

Janie was running her legs off, yet no matter how many times she dared to look, he was still a billion miles away. At least there was no sign of the thing, surely it had changed direction. She chanced a loud whisper and a wave. ‘George!’ No reaction. A little louder. ‘George!’ But he wouldn’t have seen her. This time she missed her footing and fell onto her face. ‘Damn it!’ she ranted.

Rapidly, she got to her feet to continue her descent, but froze. George was still preoccupied poking at the river. He couldn’t see the complete horror that

was just but a couple of feet away from him. This time she screamed. 'George, look out!'

Dangerously close to the boy, slithering, sneering and drooling like a ravenous dog was one of those horrible Sniper things.

Soon, Janie was with George, who saw Janie first and then the danger he was now in.

Janie put herself between it and George. It felt like the most natural thing to do.

'Leave him be, you monster!' she yelled waving her arms about.

'Hun-gry!' it hissed back.

'You're not having him. Just go and find someone else to scoff, snake demon!'

'Need food! Need energy! Need boy spirit to continue!'

'Alright!' Janie yelled loud enough to make a mountain crumble, 'if you want a soul take mine, and I hope you bloody choke on it.'

The Sniper appeared to have accepted her offer. It raised its head and pulled back in the way that cobras do when they are about to strike. It opened its mouth to reveal a jaw lined with not just one hooked fang, but many, far too many to count.

This was it. 'Run to Xandra, George!' she ranted. 'Quickly!' How huge was the temptation to run after him. It was too late now. She wouldn't have made it two feet before it got her.

The Sniper's eyes turned blood red and it prepared for the strike. Its ghostly head hung in the air

like a gruesome, white spirit of doom and it emitted a noise she didn't realise they made. Then if it was the last thing their prey ever heard, it wouldn't be widely known. The sound was similar to a man being strangled, the last attempt of a dying man to cling onto the last strand of existence.

She thought it was without a doubt the most disturbing sound she'd ever heard.

'OK!' she cried. 'You've got it, I'm scared!'

The Sniper didn't reply to this with any sound. This time it was like hard chalk.

'Is that it?' Janie was still shaking. 'Is that it, or are you going to go for it?'

Then something happen she hadn't expected at all. Instead of lunging at her, which surely it should have done that by now, its chest started to throb. She didn't know whether this was a good thing or a bad thing.

'Are you having a heart attack?' she asked it. 'Surely that wouldn't be possible.'

But it wasn't that. There was something inside it trying to get out. Four clawed fingers penetrated its skin, and then another four joined them to the side.

Janie began to make her way backward up the bank, not taking her eyes off it for a single second. Suddenly the Sniper's chest was ripped open and something emerged, something large covered in pale gossamer. Behind it, the Sniper exploded into powdered light and became nothing.

'Gallow!' Janie bawled enthusiastically.

Gallow fell to his knees, coughing and

spluttering. She could see that he wasn't ready for words yet

ACT 4 – To Hevane

Finch raised his head from the stony ground. Massaging his aching neck to ease the soreness that came in his sleep, he viewed his new surroundings. The clouds were now on fire, which in a way filled him with exhilaration. If he was scared, then he wasn't feeling it yet.

Down on the plain there was utter Bedlam, creatures chasing and attacking other creatures which didn't belong in their space or time. Dinosaurs attacking horses and giraffes, and there was something a lot different about the fleeing masses now. Burning holes appeared in the air, and men, women and children came through them screaming so loud that he could just about hear it over the noise.

These were living people entering the world of the dead by the most unconventional means. As the substance which separated the two, was becoming rapidly undone, the panic was now sending them through. Only when they entered the Deadworld, their bodies turned to living corpses - zombies.

'Getting a thrill Finch?' He spun around quickly, and got into a defensive stance, crouched down and his

hands in front of him ready to punch out.

‘Who the hell are you?’

The man was tall and quite old. Despite what was going on, like Finch, he didn’t seem afraid at all.

‘Put your fists away boy,’ the stranger replied, ‘they will not do you any favours!’

‘Are you responsible for all of this?’ said Finch, more irritated than angry about it, ‘is this you?’

‘What’s the matter with you? I saw the expression on your face. You love the idea of things dying. You are a very angry boy master Finch.’

‘Am I going to end?’ Finch said, the realisation was starting to set in. Perhaps it was this man’s presence.

The stranger viewed the tumult on the plain and breathed it all in with one sweep of his head. ‘All things end boy. It is the way of things.’

‘I repeat, who are you?’

‘Who indeed,’ the stranger wheezed. ‘When was the last time you spoke to Farl?’

Finch had heard this name many times, yet this was the first time that the sound of it brought him to his feet. ‘What do you know of Farl?’

‘I know that you shouldn’t trust him.’

‘Because he’s a Screamer, is that what you’re saying?’

‘Because he wants you to fail. Then he didn’t think his actions would ever be responsible for all of this.’

‘Farl did this?’ Finch scoffed. This was hard to

believe.

‘He could have prevented it,’ said the stranger, ‘and that is almost the same thing.’

‘How? He hasn’t got this much power.’

‘The story goes that there was once a great and powerful man. He wasn’t the ruler of this world, but a caretaker of sorts. His was the task to keep this world and the world of the living from ever touching.

‘So he made four keys and cast them into the world of the living where they were caught in the minds of five children. These children must suffer the same fate at the hands of the same man, and they must pass into the Deadworld through violence, as violence is the most powerful thing that humans do. The only way to save the world was to get these children together and link their powers. You are one of those children Finch, you and your friends.’

‘Xandra?’

‘And Lucas, Jack and his brother.’

‘No!’ Finch was filled with anger now. ‘Jack must be gone. I will capture Gallow for Farl and then tear the hell out of Jack.’ While he was saying this, his eyes were drawn to sabre-toothed cat which was attacking a man in a postal uniform - the irony.

‘You must all be together, and soon, create the link and stop everything from falling apart.’

‘Even if I agreed to that,’ said Finch, ‘I don’t even know where they are.’

‘I know where Jack, Ross and Lucas are.’

These words perked him up a little. ‘Xandra

isn't with Jack?

'She is not!' replied the strange man, and these words was the most satisfactory sound he'd heard for ages.

'What do you want me to do?'

'Come back with me and together we will find Xandra.'

'Huh!' said Finch, 'And what makes you think I won't destroy Jack when I see him?'

The stranger placed a hand on Finch's shoulder and that steadied him in a way. 'Promise me you will leave him be until the task is done,' he said, and there was worry about him now.

Finch thought about it hard for a few seconds and then nodded with slight reluctance.

'Good!' said the stranger, and then, 'This way!' He pointed to a spot beyond the trees.

Finch moved towards the man hesitantly. 'Wait!' he stopped in his tracks. 'First tell me your name!'

'Oh,' replied the stranger, 'you are a most persistent one aren't you!'

'Tell me or I stay!'

'Very well,' said the strange man. 'Until this happened and one place was one thing and another was another, I travelled between the two. I am the messenger of two worlds and the caretaker of one. I am the Fleshspectre!'

And that was the end of the introductions.

Lucas knew that it was morning, even though time appeared to be no longer a factor and days weren't joined by darkness anymore. It was his inner clock. Back in the days when he was alive it could be relied upon to get him to places in good time to begin important things. Clocks were never always reliable, and late never got things done, late was a time waster, and even though in school they were cruel to him about it, he just let it brush over him like the sad breeze of ignorance which blew around that dreadful school.

So where was Puke-as Lucas now eh? Dead, but that didn't mean that he wasn't still smart. In the absence of one of Xandra's safety bubbles, he, Simo and Jack slept in a cave, where the cacophony was somehow muted. When he lifted his head from the patch of moss that acted as such a convenient substitute for a pillow and contemplated digging into the mushrooms they'd brought back, he noticed Jack staring at a piece of paper.

'Good lord!' he exclaimed over his shoulder, and apologised most profusely when the lad jumped out of his spiritual skin, 'a piece of paper with words on it, printed words.'

'So what?' said Jack.

'It's just interesting that's all. Where did you find it?'

'In the living world. Me and that spectre guy were in the street and I found it. This is about me. I

know somebody somewhere wanted me to see it.'

'Secret, unexplainable forces?' said Lucas, 'What is it about?'

'Things!'

'Things? Like what exactly?'

'Words!'

'What words?' This was becoming a game of sorts. 'I see it's an editorial, what's the story about?'

'You're really annoying Lucas,' said Jack, 'has anybody ever told you that?'

'At a count, two-hundred and eleven times, including just then!' He could tell that his attempt at a joke was ineffective. His words turned into a mere metaphor, hit Jack's cheek and slid onto the ground where it was lost with all the other unimportant matter. He decided to try something else. 'You know, there are a lot of people out there who can't read, don't you?'

But that didn't work either. Jack merely screwed up the newspaper article and threw it on the ground. 'I can read,' he growled, 'get off my back!' Jack went quiet for quite a while after that. This was the caveman that was deep inside every man.

Lucas tried again. He picked up the screwed up paper and cast his eyes over it. 'Good lord!' he said when he ran out of words. 'Do you know what this is about?'

'I'm not stupid,' replied Jack. 'It's about what happened to me and Ross and the train accident.'

'No, it's more than that Jack,' Lucas couldn't contain himself, 'it talks about what happened with the

train, but that's only part of it. It says that the accident was used as a cover up for a murder, the murder of two children Jack, you and Ross.'

Very slowly Jack turned around and their eyes locked together. 'What?'

'It all makes sense now Jack. When me and Simo started on our journey we saw policemen on the rail. They were forensic people, looking for clues. I'm sorry Jack, but you were murdered.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Jack. 'I remember sitting in the carriage with Ross. He was moaning because he was bored.'

'I don't know what that could have been,' said Lucas, 'perhaps,' he analyzed the thought further, 'perhaps it was someone else's thoughts. A lot of people died. When that happens things get fragmented, thrown into the air and mixed up.'

Jack shook his head. He wasn't going to be an easy subject to convince.

Lucas continued. 'Think about it. What if you were killed just before the accident happened, just a few feet away?'

'What a stroke of luck for the killer that would be.' Jack replied mockingly, 'what are the chances?'

What Lucas actually wanted to say to that was, if you give me enough time I could tell you. But that wouldn't have been sat well with his friend. What he ended up saying was, 'The possibilities of such things being possible Jack, are much more better than you would think.' He also wanted to say, hey, so you two are

murder victims too, welcome to the club.

Before he'd been vested with the opportunity of saying any such thing, in a flash of yellow light, the Fleshspectre arrived with a very angry, familiar, unwelcome face.

'What's *he* doing here?!' Jack lunged at Finch, but Lucas grabbed his shoulder before he could move too close. 'And why did you go for him?'

'I don't like being near you either,' snarled Finch, 'but the old guy seems to think it's a good idea.'

'Well, I don't!' said Jack, matching the boy's anger. 'I could tear you apart, for what he did to Ross.'

'He needed a wake-up call Jack. You have to be tough if you're going to get on in this place, not a wuss.'

Jack could only erupt to that. He could feel himself swell with anger. He was almost shaking. 'He's just seven years old, you ignorant bastard!'

'It doesn't matter!' Finch yelled, 'we're all the same here! You think Screammers, Snipers, Draklis are bad? There's worst waiting around the corner, much worse! God knows what there is in the mountains.'

'Huh!' Jack pushed Lucas's ever so sensible hand away from him and shrugged and swaggered past the annoying little fool. 'So how would you know that?' he whispered in his ear en route.

'Because,' said Finch, 'Xandra told me.'

‘And she would know, how...?’

Finch shook his head and laughed. ‘You mean she hasn’t told you? Call yourself a boyfriend?’

Boyfriend? Jack thought. That was a first. Sure, he thought she was attractive, but he’d never considered there’d be anything more than just friendship. It was good though, to have the nasty Finch dangling like this. ‘Alright,’ he said finally, ‘told me what?’

‘Where do you think she got those stupid stones? They come from here, where the power of from Mount Calmanis is stronger.’

‘She’s been here before?’

‘The Draklis weren’t there back then, so she was able to get across the valley unhurt. But she told me that she made it to the other side.’

Now Jack was confused. He was scratching his head and moving from side to side, like a lion in a small cage. ‘I don’t get it,’ he said, ‘why would she want to come to this place? It’s worse here.’

‘Because,’ Finch’s voice was more and more patronising by the second. Jack was dying to punch him, ‘because, she believed in Hevane once.’

‘So why doesn’t she now?’

‘She heard something while she was here; sounds, loud, terrifying sounds that changed everything for her. They came from the mountain. She came back to the hide and never talked about it since. She insisted there couldn’t be anything good here.’

Jack returned to the cave and picked up his sword. He gripped the handle tight. From now on, he

swore, it would never again leave his side.

‘So what’s this about needing him?’ Jack confronted the Fleshspectre.

‘Have you figured out yet the manner of your death?’ The odd man asked him.

‘The manner of the death you could have told me about in the living world?’

‘You had to be the one to find that out,’ he said. ‘Realisation of death is the same as realisation of life. You have to work it out yourself.’

‘I think all this travelling between worlds has made you go mad,’ said Jack. He turned to Lucas. ‘He says such crazy things.’

‘That doesn’t matter for now,’ said Lucas, ‘Fleshspectre, what do you want with us?’

To Jack, it didn’t matter what he said. He just wanted to find Xandra and his brother and find somewhere safe. He figured their best bet was to climb the highest mountain, Calmanis, no matter what anybody said. Whatever else was there it would be as far away from all of this than anything else. He’d always felt that there was always something about mountains. They were strong and protective, like he’d always tried to be for Ross.

The Fleshspectre seemed to like an audience. He moved around as if he was on some sort of stage in front of an awaiting crowd. Instinctively, Lucas was already in a squatting position awaiting his words, and Simo would listen to anyone if there was the promise of some exciting tale. Jack didn’t want to listen. The man

was an enigma, and that wasn't good. There was a saying that went with all of the best people, what you see is what you get. A person like that could never disappoint you, because you would get the idea they would do that after you've first met them. As he took his place, about eight feet behind everyone else, he glanced again at the sword, and remembered that the rambling weirdo who was about to speak, had given him that.

'Lucas,' Fleshspectre began, 'you are the scientist, so you will know that the universe favours balance?'

Lucas nodded like an obedient, excitable puppy.

'It has been the way of things since the beginning of time. For instance, yin and yang, good and evil, hot and cold. In each case, one thing cannot be without the other. Symmetry is the most natural thing. Well, the same is true of here, except that two becomes four. That is why the caretaker cast out four keys into the world of the living and not two.'

The man went on about something to do with the powerful energy caused by violent death. All of this before the truth had a chance to sink in. Drifting in and out of the man's words, he tried to picture that happening, but he just couldn't. Perhaps it was all just one great con.

Just after he'd spoken to the boys, the Fleshspectre went off again. Even though the world resembled Hell, he wandered out into the screaming and the panic and the fear as if it was just a normal

spring morning.

‘Why does he keep doing that?’ he said to Lucas without even glancing at him. ‘Who is he talking to?’

‘Who says he’s going to talk to anyone?’ replied Lucas. ‘He could merely be going to assess the situation.’ Then he would say that, the swat.

‘I don’t like it,’ said Jack, ‘I’m going to follow him.’

There was no sign of him outside the cave. Then this was someone, a being, who could cut through the air, as if it were his own invisible doorway.

A few minutes later, he returned with a beaming smile.

‘I’ve found it!’ he exclaimed. ‘A link to the others. Follow me, and we shall save this world together.’

And in a flash there they all were just at the top of the hill, as if this weird stranger had been some secret guardian of lost doors.

‘Humans!’ said Janie.

‘What kind of humans?’ Xandra seemed dubious, untrusting as always.

Oh for a pair of binoculars, Janie thought.

‘How many?’ asked Gallow.

‘Five I think!’

‘You mean you aren’t sure, woman?’

‘They keep moving. They’re coming this way.’

Janie turned to Gallow. 'Here, I thought you hawks were supposed to have good eyesight.'

This at least spurred Gallow to look himself.

'It is them!' he announced.

Janie was so happy that both her boys were now alright, and they were a family unit again. Although she had mixed feelings about how she was going to deal with seeing her eldest again. Coming up the hill, he looked like a proper grown up. He walked just like his dad, long, confident strides and not an eye on anything that was happening. On nature walks the two of them wouldn't have noticed anything beautiful that they may have passed. Her heart soon became filled with fond memories.

They were being led by an odd-looking man, a skinny guru. He looked ill, as if he should be in bed, in some hospital. He was wearing Victorian garb, as if he'd just walked out of a Dickens Novel. However he was, he'd brought her, her son back safe and sound.

At the top of the hill, the stranger stopped and let the others pass, as if he was aware that he was really nothing to do with any of them.

And there he was, her son. But it wasn't her he came running to, it was Xandra. They had arms around each other, as if they had been apart for a decade or more.

But that should have been her hugging him, not the girl. When she saw the other boy, she broke him off and hugged him, although not as tightly.

She approached Jack regardless. 'Good to see

you again,' she said.

'Mum!

'A hug for the old girl?'

'No thanks!' He seemed agitated, maybe embarrassed. Some boys don't like other kids seeing them getting a kiss off their mum, even if the world is falling apart. She did get a sort of a smile from him.

'You know,' she said, 'about your father...'

But she was cut off.

'So what now?' asked Jack.

'We need to climb Calamanis!' exclaimed Janie. Gallow glanced at her. Screamers didn't have much in the way of facial expressions, but she just knew that it was something disapproving.

'Huh!' he snorted, and under his breath, he muttered, 'just like your children!'

'What?' Janie sniffed back tears of joy. 'We're going to find Hevane. We all are.'

'That was their original intention,' said Gallow. 'But these places are made up to stop us all from going mad. We Screamers have Valvard.'

'Valvard?' said Janie. 'Sounds a bit, Viking that.'

'It doesn't matter. It doesn't exist anyway.'

Janie moved closer to him. Somehow it irritated him, but that was part of the fun. 'What's that like then? We could be here for ages. You might as well tell us. It would help the time pass if nothing else.'

'I cannot see the point.' Gallow's head sunk. 'Who is to say there will be anything left out there when we leave this place? It could be nothing but space, a

void.'

Gallow wasn't the only one who didn't believe in Hevane. Xandra too, was sitting there frowning tightly. Janie could tell she was dying to say something.

'So you believe in a better place,' said Janie, 'What does this Valvard look like?'

'Huh?' replied Gallow. 'In legends they describe it as being like a golden sky that goes on forever. It is said that everyone you ever knew is there, and you can fly together with them, for an eternity, never get tired and hunt worthy prey.'

'So, you like flying then, you guys!' Janie quipped.'

Gallow, moved away. It seemed he didn't want to be a part of this discussion. It was a shame. She quite liked the sound of his voice. It was husky, weathered and manly like a warrior. Being in range of it, made her feel sort of safe. He was quickly replaced by a much smaller creature, her youngest child, whose beaming smile warmed her up inside.

Everything had calmed down, as if the monster had fallen asleep for a while. She was just about to grab hold of him and draw him close, when Gallow returned.

'Come on!' he said. 'We need to move now, before it starts up again.'

She grabbed Ross's little hand and they walked together behind the others. She could hear the Fleshspectre's voice exploding into the air like fireworks. He was in the front with Finch, Lucas and Simo. Jack was keeping a very discreet distance from

them. She was worried about him, since he'd been back. He'd not said more than two words to her. After she'd died, he must have felt betrayed. It was quite understandable; she left him with a lot of responsibility. His childhood had to go to one side, while he looked after his brother.

Flehspectre was rambling on and on about how wonderful Hevane would be, how it will all be over, how wrongs will be put right, how sins will be forgiven and there will be no other feeling but joy. Doubtful Jack was shaking his head again. That was him in life, always skeptical about any plans she or his father would make for the family. Jack always said that he trusted no one, he was safer that way. She too, was skeptical. She'd known the man for all of five minutes, and he was leading them all into the unknown like the Messiah. She asked herself why she was following them, why she didn't just lie down and wait for what was to come. It was her curiosity, the urge to seek the truth. To look at what it was at the top of the three mountains and then decide whether it was the appropriate choice.

Janie thought that their shared feelings about the strange man would be a good talking point. 'Hey!' she called ahead.

Jack stopped and turned. 'What?'

'Come here!'

'Why?'

'I want to ask you something.'

It took a while, the boy needed to show his stubborn streak, but he came to her side, where he gave

Ross's cheek a gentle knock with his knuckle. There was a smile there for a second. It soon vanished when his eyes met hers. 'What?'

'I was thinking,' she said, 'do you think this is the right thing?'

'What does it matter what I think?'

Ah, answering a question with a question, she thought, how often have I told him that was rude. She ignored it. 'It's just that I was wondering if we should be heading back to the living world, now that there are tears.'

'Stupid!' Jack exclaimed, 'It's all going to hell there as well.'

'True!' she said. 'But at least we could meet our second death somewhere more familiar.'

Janie could tell that Jack wasn't even beginning to think about entertaining that idea. 'I mean, we don't even know this chap from Adam.'

'I don't know,' said Jack. He stopped and waited for her to catch up. 'That was nice. There's something familiar about him. You know when you look at someone you haven't seen for a while and there's a horrible flash? Yes, you don't know him, but you know there's something there, hidden.'

'You just don't like happy people,' Janie scoffed. 'You've always been like that. You think that happiness is just a device to hide something bad. You know, I've never seen you laugh.'

'Ha!' said Jack. 'Probably because I haven't found anything that was funny yet.'

At that exact moment, Xandra, who up until now, has been giving them space to talk, turned and winked at Jack. Jack returned one.

‘You’re not telling me you haven’t met at least one person to make you happy since I died.’

Nothing.

‘So tell me about your sword, who gave you that?’

‘He did!’ Jack groaned. ‘Him!’

‘So he’s not all bad then,’ said Janie.

‘What?’

‘He didn’t harm you with it. He just gave it to you.’

‘He did, so that I could defend myself.’

‘Hmm,’ said Janie. ‘That makes me even more suspicious.’

‘Why?’

‘If you’re the one with the sword, then you will be the one who will be expected to fight when the time comes.’

Jack said nothing for a while. It was blatantly obvious that she had left something in his mind that was going to grow into an action.

‘I’ve definitely seen him before,’ he said, and went off to speak to Xandra without a please or a thank you.

The rumbling thunder was the most surreal

thing that Jack had ever heard. It was also the cue for the Fleshspectre, with the agreement of Gallow, that they should stop and rest. There were plenty of hollows in the mountain. This was Torponus, the smallest of the three, and according to Gallow's map, it was joined to Calmanis by a narrow pass. Deciding that there would never be a place large enough to occupy both him and Finch, Jack opted for a smaller one adjacent to the others.

There, he made a bed out of dried leaves and lay on his back for a while. He'd been like that for five minutes when a familiar face arrived in between his and the sky.

'Xandra!

'I can't be long,' she replied, 'I'm sitting with Finch. I thought it would be a good idea to keep an eye on him. It's keeping him quiet if nothing else.'

'I think he's up to something too,' said Jack.

'Other than who?'

'Our new leader!'

'You don't trust him either then?'

'You mean you..?'

'He reminds me of someone. I get bad feelings when I look at him.'

'I know exactly what you mean.' Jack was relieved to hear this. Having an ally at a time like this, was a much needed thing.

She placed a hand on his shoulder too, as if to underline this. 'I'm not sure I want this,' she said.

'Really?' said Jack, 'do you think going back,

might be better. That could mean the end of us.'

'So could whatever is up there.'

'Wait, I don't like it either, but there must be a way of finding out. Maybe we should just ask him straight.'

'Huh?' Xandra pulled a funny face. 'You honestly expect him to give us a straight answer. All we get are riddles from him.'

'What about these stones of yours?'

'What about them?'

'Surely one of them can help us?'

Now Xandra's face was screwed up a little, as if she was thinking really hard. He noticed she did that a lot. When she finished she put a finger into the air. 'Wait a minute!' she exclaimed. 'They say that these mountains have some special energy, it comes from the top, the apex.'

Jack was interested. 'Go on!'

'I wasn't able to pick anything up about him before, perhaps I can now.'

'Your tele...' Jack had to think about it, 'telepathy?'

'I could try reading his mind.'

Jack wasn't sure now. 'I don't know Xandra, what if he can feel you there?'

'It might be worth the risk,' said Xandra. 'We need to know if he can be trusted. My mum always used to say, if it looks too good to be true, then it probably is.'

'Mine just says if it looks like a good thing, go

for it, and sod the rest.'

This made her laugh, he joined in, his mother was right. 'Hang on!' Xandra shuffled away and returned satisfied. 'Yes, I was right!'

'About what?'

'The Fleshspectre's sitting quite close.' Xandra placed both of her hands on the rock and closed her eyes. In a few seconds, there was a yellow light around them.

'Anything?' said Jack.

Xandra shook her head. 'I'm getting random thoughts from some of the others, but there is nothing from him at all.'

'Damn!' exclaimed Jack. 'This was annoying. Let's just have it out with him. We could get Gallow to interrogate him.'

'In front of Simo, George and your Ross? I don't think that would be a good idea, do you?'

Jack shook his head. 'Keep trying.'

'Wait,' said Xandra, 'got something. Not much, but a glimmer.' She pulled her hands away. She looked exhausted.

'What did you see?'

'Not see,' Xandra panted, 'heard. Someone was calling out.'

'Well, don't keep it to yourself, what?'

'A woman was saying, *come back*. It's coming from the living world.'

Having recommended that the others get a couple of hours sleep, Gallow insisted that he stayed on guard. This irritated Finch a little, administering the liquid to him while he was wide awake, was going to be extremely difficult.

Finch wasn't interested in all this spiritual garbage about a nicer afterlife. He had his mission to get on with. Now though, it wasn't going to be that easy, as he was not only out of range of his leaders, but getting a communication going while there were so many to witness the event, was going to make things practically impossible. He checked again to see that the vial was still intact, and miracle of miracles, it was. How tempting it would be to give it to Jack, pour the putrid stuff over his eyes while they were closed. A half an hour in, he saw Gallow rise to his feet and move away.

'Go to sleep, like everyone else,' he said to Finch. 'We move again in ninety minutes.'

'I can't,' he replied. 'It's difficult, with all of this that's gone on.'

Gallow's eyes narrowed. 'What, you Finch? Surely not.'

'It's true. It's all this religious stuff. I think the reality is beginning to set in.'

'If there is anything you want to confess Finch, you need to speak with the Fleshspectre, not me.'

'I was just wondering, if he's said anything else about it.'

'A little and nothing,' said Gallow.

‘Can you tell me, please?’

Gallow paused. ‘Not here, or we will wake them.’

This pleased Finch, he was going to get him alone at last, and capture his spirit.

He followed the Screamer beyond the recess and through the strange, ankle-length plants to another clearing. From there, he could see just how far they’d climbed, as well as all the people and animals, dead and alive. The humans had sorted themselves into their little groups, probably to find a way back to where they belonged. Sporadic bursts of white light meant that not everyone was safe from spirit beasts.

Gallow placed one foot on a small rock, and the other behind him, to steady his body, then he stretched his wings, the span of which could stretch along the side of a house.

‘So, what are you going to do then?’ said Finch, he was behind Gallow and was slipping the pouch with the vial gently from his pocket.

‘When this is all over, and you are safely in Hevane, I will return to the valley.’

Finch carefully, slowly removed the vial from the pouch. ‘But it’s horrible down there. Can you see them turning to light?’

Gallow’s bird head turned to him slowly and then back to the valley. Quickly, he put the vial behind his back. ‘Do you think I am blind child?’

‘No!’ said Finch. ‘It just seemed like a stupid thing to do, put yourself amongst that lot.’

‘Then you don’t understand Screamers,’ growled Gallow. ‘We do not meet second death with gentle steps and greetings from celestial beings. We die as we live, in violence.’

‘But your people disowned you, didn’t they?’

Finch half expected that to make the man angry. The words came out of his mouth before he’d had a chance to think about it. However, he wasn’t.

‘That doesn’t make me any different from the others,’ he said after a reflective pause. ‘I am still a Screamer, and now that this world is nearly over, I have my duty to go to Valvard in the right way.’

You may not have the choice pretty soon, Finch was thinking as he stroked the glass. Concealing it with both hands, he brought in around his body and inside his shirt. ‘So, you were going to tell me more about what the Messiah bloke had told you.’

‘Fantasy and nonsense,’ said Gallow.

‘I would still like to know, if it’s all the same to you.’

Above them the sky cracked and spat yellow sparks over the people in the valley. For a moment it dispersed the crowds.

‘It is more a human place by his description, filled with nice things, everything you ever dreamed of, but could never acquire in life.’

‘There is no other feeling but love, sickening love. No hatred to fire your soul, and no hunting. Everything is provided by a wish, apparently.’

‘Not for you then Screamer,’ Finch carefully

removed the cork from the vial under his shirt. There was another container he needed, an ornate, metallic, silver box with strange shapes and faces on it. He wasn't able to open this to see what was inside, then he was told by Farl that this would do what it needed to do when the time was right.

He removed the vial from his back and got ready to act. Just throw it him, the instruction had been. Then hold out the other container and wait, he assumed.

Finch was just about to do all of this, when he was struck by a hideous thought. What if the council was gone? What if, that was the reason they hadn't communicated with him? What if all of this was for nothing and there was no one to deal with Jack now? This inaction cost him dearly. For, before he'd had the chance to strike, Gallow turned around.

'What are you doing child? What is that?'

Finch threw the contents of the vial at him him, but missed his head completely. The liquid sprayed the air, where after turning into a small cloud, burst into nothing. He gave Gallow a push, but it wasn't enough to send him over the edge. He turned to run. Gallow grabbed his shoulders and they took flight. Gallow's talons in his shoulder really hurt. Already, he could feel the light leave his body. He tried desperately to teleport, it was hopeless. He was far too anxious, and in pain, to be able to concentrate on such things.

'Take me down!' he yelled. 'I'm sorry!'

'Why, child?'

‘Your people made me do it!’ ‘Why would you do such a thing? Take me down!’

‘Why?’

‘They said if I brought you back to them, they will destroy Jack for me.’

‘And what has Jack done to you?’

‘Stolen something very valuable from me.’

‘You are lying child. You are not to be trusted!’

‘I’m not!’

‘The council does not use children to do their deeds.’

‘This Screamer does, the one who gave me the task... Far!’

Finch could feel Gallow’s grip loosen slightly. He was a little relieved, and was just about to thank him, then the darkness returned, that horrible, inconsiderate darkness that came at such awkward times.

‘I will have to attempt a landing,’ said Gallow. ‘I will try to get as close to the mountain as I can. You must swear an oath, that you will not attempt an escape.’

‘I promise!’ Finch squealed. Then he felt the talons digging in again. This time it was enough to pierce him. Streams of white light came from his shoulders. ‘What are you doing? I promised I wouldn’t run.’

‘Damn!’ exclaimed Xandra. ‘It’s bloody back.’

This is the first time he'd heard her swear. Somehow, it didn't seem so bad coming from her mouth.

'You'll have to stay here, until it's light again,' said Jack. 'Xandra, did you see anything?'

'When?' She was very close, he could feel her warm breath on his cheek.

'Just now. Something shot up into the sky. It happened very quickly, like a sneeze.'

'Dunno,' said Xandra. 'Perhaps it was Gallow doing some reconnaissance. He's very keen on that. I'll ask Lucas, Lucas,' she bellowed. 'Was that Gallow?'

'Perhaps,' he replied, and there was a pause. 'I've just woken up. The others are stirring. The Fleshspectre isn't responding to my voice. I think he has gone too. He keeps doing that, it's most annoying.'

'He could be on the ledge.'

'You will excuse me for not going to check, considering the circumstances.' Then his voice sounded more excited. 'Look, there's something coming towards us!'

'Don't kill me!' Finch pleaded.

'Do not fear,' Gallow's soft tone wasn't as reassuring as he'd hoped. 'It is just enough to light the way. Once we are down, I will repair you.'

Surely enough, Finch's body light gave them some visibility, albeit limited. They made it back to the ledge with a slow and careful glide. By the time they

landed, he felt quite weak. Gallow was as good as his word. While Finch was resting his head against the rock, he picked some of the plants which grew in the cracks and picked them together with his hands. After saying some barely recognisable words, he spread the mixture over the holes in his shoulders. Soon, he felt stronger, not much, but Gallow assured him that the light inside him will grow again, and he would be back to normal.

‘This feud with Jack,’ he added. ‘I do not agree with it, but if there is air to clear, something to put right, then you should do it in the proper way. You should fight it out.’

Well, I don’t think I’ll get any objection from him, Finch thought. He didn’t say any more about it for a while. He heard Lucas calling out to them. Then the light returned, and for the first time in his afterlife, it made him jump out of his skin.

Of course, Jack’s stone glare that he saw first. ‘Hello again!’ he said, and it was intended to sound like sarcasm. It didn’t. Then the events of the last few minutes had shaken him.

‘We should move on,’ said Gallow. ‘Where is the Fleshspectre?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ said Jack. ‘I’m very suspicious of that man.’

‘I tried to read his thoughts before he disappeared,’ Xandra dived in.

‘Tried to?’ said Gallow, ‘I thought Calmanis was supposed to enhance your abilities.’

‘Apparently it does the opposite,’ said Jack. ‘We

can't teleport either, or haven't you noticed?'

'And you,' said Xandra, 'how long were you in the air before you felt that you had to come down?'

'A few minutes, and I had to act on my tiredness,' said Gallow. This sounded more like a confession than anything else. 'Go on, you were saying about your mind link.'

'It wasn't as clear as it usually is, and I couldn't hold my concentration for long. But there was something there for a few seconds. I felt him sleeping, yet he was wide awake, and there were echoes of sounds and people talking. And someone was calling out.'

'Before we all met up again,' said Lucas, 'he kept vanishing too. He said he had other business to attend to. I didn't think it might be anything devious.'

'Well I do,' said Xandra. 'If he isn't up to anything, then why doesn't he tell us about it?'

'Yeah!' said Jack, 'and I'll tell you something else in case you haven't realised it, things only started to decay around here when he turned up, and I'm beginning to think that it's more than mere coincidence.'

'So what do you want to do,' said Lucas, 'go back and perish? Alright, so he is secretive about himself, but what if he is right, and our only chance of finding peace?'

'You are sounding less and less like a scientist every day Lucas,' said Xandra.

'I don't agree,' replied Lucas. 'It is scientific curiosity which is making me want to go up and look.'

Finch thought Lucas was an idiot. Surely, being in this place was proof enough that science didn't have all of the answers. Still, the boy wanted to study everything that happened to be around them. Like the plants on his shoulders, he asked Gallow what medicinal qualities they had. Gallow didn't understand that side of things. He said he'd learned to do that in battle and that was that. He had the cheek to ask Finch for a sample to study at the next opportune moment. He told the lanky swat where to go.

While they were standing around discussing their next move, Finch couldn't take his eyes off Jack. He was weighing him up, wondering if he had enough anger and strength left to finish him. Jack's main weakness was his caring nature. Finch hadn't cared about anything for quite a while, not since Jack stole Xandra from him.

At least Jack didn't have that annoying insect clinging to him now their mother was there. Instead, he was glued to her.

His bitter gaze was broken, when Lucas suggested they voted on the matter, either to go down, or continue upwards without the Fleshspectre.

'Well?' Everybody was now looking at him.

'Well, what?'

'Up or down Finch?' said Xandra. 'Me, Jack and Simo say down, Janie, Ross, George and Lucas say up.'

'Go down? Are you mad?'

'Up it is then,' said Jack.

Janie gave Ross a celebratory hug. 'We're going

to real Heaven,' she said, 'proper Heaven-Heaven.'

Before they moved, Gallow observed the map again. He spread it out over the ground placing a rock on each corner, to stop the wind, which was now starting to build up, from blowing it away.

Finch noticed that something peculiar was happening to the mountain, it was glowing. Where the cracks were, were pulsating yellow streams. He felt compelled to touch this, and as he did so, experienced shallow vibrations, like turning on an electric toothbrush, and for a moment, there was a voice, a whisper.

I'm waiting!

Finch pulled his hand away fast.

'What's up Finchy,' the voice was Xandra's, she was right behind him. 'Is the mountain too hot?'

'It's nothing!' he replied monotonously, 'nothing!'

Xandra wasn't convinced. 'Nothing? It didn't look like nothing to me.'

Yes, this was Xandra, the one he knew. He could never hide anything from her. It was as if she could see right into his mind. 'If I tell you,' he said, 'you'll think I'm going mad, but I'm not.'

A very welcome hand landed on his shoulder. 'Surely not!' she said with one of her smiles.

'I heard...' he paused to think about what he was actually saying, 'a voice!'

'Ah,' said Xandra, 'That could have been one of us. Sometimes things can get a little confused and you

pick up someone's thoughts.'

'It didn't come from any of us,' he said.

'Then from where?'

'From...' no this was ridiculous.

'Spit it out,' said Xandra. 'If you don't, I'll find a spider to put down your shirt. I'm quite in the mood for doing that.'

'It's stupid!'

Xandra gazed at the ground. 'Oh look, there's one!' Finch couldn't see it.

'OK!' he said, 'it came from the mountain.' He tried to study the expression on his friend's face. He was fairly good at reading her. The announcement returned no look of amusement at all. In fact, he recognised it at once. It was the one where they both knew something nobody else did.

'You too?' she said.

'Wait, you mean you've heard it too?'

Xandra nodded. 'I touched the mountain earlier, to try and read the Fleshspectre's mind. We needed to know if we could trust him.'

'We?' something inside him dropped a few feet.

'Me and Jack.'

'And have you and... Jack told anyone else yet?'

'It could be risky at the moment,' her voice dropped volume to a whisper. 'This, whoever he is, seems to have an influence on some of the others. I think if we say the wrong thing, they might tell him and things might turn bad.'

'If they could get any worse.' Finch looked

down towards the valley. Things were settled for the moment. Most of the living had gone, either they'd found a way back to where they belonged, or just moved on while things were quiet, but this was such an unstable landscape. Any minute the calm could be smashed by a meteor shower or a hurricane. The ground could start blistering again and the sky could tear itself up into shreds.

Xandra was beside him, sharing the view. Somehow, this made things feel better 'Perhaps it's all over,' she said in that ensuring way of hers. He was just about to tell her what it was he'd heard, get it off his chest, when Gallow bellowed his command to move on. But this didn't last long. There was a tremor in the valley which made everyone stop in their tracks. An enormous fissure opened the ground swallowing several creatures. Echoing this sudden worrying phenomenon, the sky crackled and spat fire onto the ground. With this was emitted from above a rumbling belch. By sheer coincidence the Fleshspectre was back. He seemed pleased with himself, as if he'd had good news and was keeping it to himself.

'Well,' he boomed, 'are we going to Hevane or not?'

Jack found himself lagging behind. His thoughts had been weighing him down that much that his legs slowed to a slovenly crawl. The path ahead of them had

widened, but at the same time it had steepened. He didn't mind being behind everyone else, this was not a race where the first one to reach the top got a cash prize, a holiday for two or a silver cup.

The return of the decay, had annoyingly given some of the others a reason to carry on. For a fraction of a second, they'd started making noises about perhaps returning to what they knew. Nobody could know what was at the top. If any of them did, and it was so wonderful, then surely they'd be there. Each time he thought about it, he subconsciously clutched the handle of his sword, as if that was going to make any difference.

Ahead of him, was his mother, who every now and again would turn around and throw an awkward smile. He returned a faintly sourer one. Next to her, and trying to keep up, was Ross, who appeared to have forgotten who'd been looking after him the past four years. Xandra was behaving exactly the same. She and Finch were also walking side by side, laughing together, having a good old catch-up. Jack wasn't the jealous type, it didn't mean he shouldn't feel betrayed – by either.

The further they moved up Calmanis, the heavier it was on their legs. This was another infliction which travelled with them from the living world, tiredness. He thought that being a spirit was a massive disappointment. You were supposed to be able to fly, transcend solid walls, and frighten the living. More importantly, be happy for the rest of eternity.

Every so often, there was a quake, and they had

to dip their bodies into a hollow, to avoid the sharp, falling rocks. During one of these unsettling periods, there was one of those deafening roars from some spirit creature. This was nothing they'd come across yet, he could tell. This was something that sent shivers all through him. It even made his feet itch and curl. Whatever it was sounded distressed, which for a beast in this realm was a terrible thing for those around it. Things that sense they are in danger, are a danger to those who come near.

Not surprisingly, the closer they got to the top, the brighter it got. The eternal light of Hevane was powerful. Although too far away to light up the valley, it was intense. How ironic, Jack thought. We've been dead now for so long, and only now we are finally walking towards the light.

Gallow, who'd been walking with the Fleshspectre, took to the air, but instead of flying off, looped in the air over the heads of the others and landed by Jack's side.

'To what do I owe the pleasure?' he asked the bird man.

'Did you hear the spirit beast?' Like most other times, Gallow didn't look him in the eye when he spoke.

'Who didn't?'

'You are the only person with a spirit weapon,' said Gallow. 'Be prepared to use it at a moment's noticed.'

Jack was surprised he needed to be reminded of that. He answered in the affirmative anyway.

‘The Fleshspectre has asked to have the sword.’

‘What?’ Jack grabbed the grip just under the pommel. ‘No way!’

‘I don’t blame you,’ said Gallow. ‘I would have reacted the same. I am also unsure to the matter of his trustworthiness’

‘Can I ask you something?’

Gallow grunted. ‘You may!’

‘Why are you so, friendly with him, if you don’t like him?’

‘That is a good question child.’ Gallow didn’t say anything for a while. Jack wondered of this might have been some kind of Screamer joke.

‘Well?’

Gallow inhaled deeply and then exhaled. His chest inflated and he appeared more military. ‘We have an old saying Jack, just because you despise a man, it doesn’t mean he isn’t right.’

Jack thought this was such a rubbish thing to say. Good people don’t hide anything. Everybody knew that. Yet it didn’t seem to bother anyone else. It was as if there was some great, wonderful surprise waiting for them, which would be even better, and they didn’t want to know until they got there. Like when your parents say, put some nice clothes on and get in the car. We are going somewhere fantastic. We’re not going to tell you but you’re going to love it.

Soon, they arrived at a small plateau, which pleased his mother no end. The first thing she did as soon as her feet landed on it, was lie down and emit a

loud sigh. Ross did the same thing, next to her.

‘Now that we are here,’ Gallow said to him, ‘our friend wants to speak with you.’

‘What would he want me for?’ Jack was confused.

‘You will see!’

Surely enough, the Fleshspectre called to him. Jack was reluctant at first, then when he saw the way that Finch was now gazing at him something inside clicked.

‘What?’ he snapped angrily.

‘Gallow has told me that you and Finch have a grievance.’

‘You might say that.’ Jack was looking at Finch as he was saying this.

‘You cannot enter Hevane in anger,’ said the Fleshspectre. ‘All if your negativity must be purged beforehand. The angels will not have that infection in the second afterlife.’

‘So what do you suggest? We kiss and make up?’

‘Perhaps not that far,’ the Fleshspectre laughed. ‘I am afraid though, that Gallow will have you fighting it out to the death. That is their way. You must settle this in the most respectable and peaceful way, and accept each other’s forgiveness.’

‘What?’ Jack laughed this time. ‘That’s why you want the sword from me isn’t it? So that I don’t cut him with it.’

‘Watch it!’ ranted Finch, dirty and rat-like. ‘If it wasn’t for me, you’d have been food for the Screamers.’

Come on then, let's have it out, once and for all.'

His mother became suddenly distraught. She got to her feet rapidly. 'No!' she cried out. 'Don't make him fight, Gallow!'

'It is the only way,' said Gallow, and look. We have the ideal place in which for them to do it.'

'But isn't it dangerous?' said Janie, 'What if they got cut? What if their spirits burned out before Hevane?'

'We will insist that no sharp objects are used. There are pants here. If there is somehow and accident, I can patch them up. Dying will not be necessary. A back to the ground will suffice. They can shake hands and we can move on.'

Jack didn't know what it was, perhaps it was the idea of going against his mother wishes, but it felt right. He looked her right in the face. 'Right!' he said. 'Let's get started.'

As expected, Finch's face was alight with the idea. This was his opportunity to get the better of someone he hated.

Flehspectre asked for the sword again, even though it sounded more like a demand this time. Jack refused, and handed it to Gallow instead. 'I want that back when we are through.' He said.

The Flehspectre placed both boys side by side directly in front of him. There, to the noise of his mothers erratic panting and sobbing, they were made to swear to fight fairly, to reveal any sharp objects on their person now, or damn their souls forever and to shake

hands. This they managed to do while expressing the same aggression which would carry them to the end of the fight.

The rules were quite simple. They were to use their fists but not their feet, their knees if need be but no teeth, no head-butting and no nails. The first one on the ground for more than five seconds would be the winner, and they would be expected to shake hands again and express no anger or malice to the other.

Because she was obviously a good person, Xandra took Janie, George and Ross for a walk to somewhere out of sight, until it was all over. The sky rumbled overhead, as if to express some sort of opinion on what was about to happen.

Both boys were positioned so that they were facing each other with about four feet in between them.

‘Before we begin,’ wailed Fleshspectre, ‘voice your anger!’

‘Finch did something horrible to my brother!’ Jack began. ‘He has to pay for that!’

Now you, Finch!’

There was a crackle of lightning.

‘Jack stole Xandra from me,’ cried Finch, ‘and *he* must pay for that!’

‘That’s stupid!’ said Jack. ‘I haven’t taken Xandra from you, we’re friends, that’s all you idiot!’

‘I don’t believe you!’

‘Good!’ Fleshspectre bellowed, ‘now that the reasons have been announced, we can begin!’ Then he held out his hand in the direction of Gallow, who did

something quite unexpected. He plucked a feather from his own wing, which must have hurt, although it didn't show. He handed it to the Fleshspectre. 'When this hits the ground,' he continued, 'begin the fight!'

He held the feather in his outstretched arm at a forty-five degree angle and released it by splaying his hand. All eyes followed it, as it zig-zagged its way slowly earthwards.

When it did, it was Finch who moved first. Not that it had the chance of touching anything before the weasel acted. He charged at him, grabbing his waist and throwing him backwards.

Jack was able to regain his posture quickly, throwing him off, delivered Finch, two rapid punches to the stomach. Finch retracted with one to the cheek, before he had a chance to react grabbed his knees and pulled him off his feet. Finch was just about to dive on top of him, but Jack rolled his body out of the way, in time to see his opponent strike his chin on the ground. Finch made a growling sound. Jack threw his body on top of Finch and began pounding away. Finch seemed to become more and angrier with each punch, and showed no sign of weakening. He brought his feet up and used them to push Jack off. Jack flew back six, or seven feet and landed on his bottom. Both boys got to their feet and got into a sort of attack position, with head and shoulders down and hands out, fingers splayed like claws. It was then he noticed something wrong. White light was streaming from Finch's thigh.

'Wait!' he said. 'Your leg!'

Finch glanced down. His hand went over the wound and his breathing quickened. 'Damn it!'

'You must have something sharp in your pocket.'

Finch's hand went in his pocket and returned with a very sharp-looking stone. 'Now,' he said, 'how did that get there?'

'Stop the fight!' The Fleshspectre cried out.

'Desist!' Gallow followed.

'Finch, what the hell are you doing?' Jack bellowed.

'What do you think, idiot? You didn't really think I'd let you get to the second afterlife, did you?'

'Put it down Finch!' said Jack. 'Fight fairly or not at all.'

'Well, you don't make the decisions Jack, not now I've got this.'

'Discard the weapon, and fight honourably!' appealed Gallow. But Finch was listening to no one. He was completely fuelled by hatred. His eyes were burning red; his pale had suddenly grown pale.

'You are losing light boy!' the Fleshspectre was most insistent. 'You must allow Gallow to repair you. Stop the fight.'

Regardless of the fact that he might be no more at any minute, Finch seemed keen to fight on. He came quite close to Jack and lashed out with the glass right and left. Jack pulled in his stomach and jumped back. He was able to get in a kick to Finch's elbow and the stone fell to the ground. They both eyed it for a second

and dived on it simultaneously. But it was Finch, who was able to grab it first. Jack grabbed Finch's wrist and pushed it down with all his might. Finch was holding onto it so hard that tears were forming in his hand and light was now spilling from there too.

'Drop it!' yelled Jack. 'I swear there is nothing going on between me and Xandra.'

'Why should I believe you?' Finch grunted.

'Why don't you ask her? Look Finch, I know there is a bond between the two of you. You were very close, and even died together. But the same man, who murdered you, probably killed me and Ross too. We shouldn't be fighting each other; we should be working together, all of us.'

'Why should we? I don't owe you anything. And admit it; you want to see me die for frightening your brother. But I only did that because I was angry with you.'

'Please Finch!'

Finch's body loosened, as did Jack's grip. 'Talk to Xandra!' said Jack. Finch nodded slowly.

Finch let the stone fall onto the ground. Jack got to his feet and offered his hand, with which to pull up. But Finch gave him a snide grin. Grabbing the sharp stone again, he lashed out at Jack and narrowly missed his chest.

'Ha!' mocked Finch. 'You lowered your guard, that was stupid!'

'You tricked me!'

'Call that a lesson Jack,' Finch snarled. 'Never

trust anyone, especially if they say what you want them to hear.’

Right, thought Jack, if that’s the way he wants to play it. He picked up a couple of sharp-looking rocks and placed one in each hand ready to strike back. Then the whole proceedings were halted by a blood-curdling roar.

All eyes went to Gallow, and then followed his line of sight to the side of the mountain. Now glaring back was something quite hideous. About thirty feet in length, twelve legs, elongated body, was climbing towards them spitting and snarling. It had no head, its mouth, which contained numerous hook-like teeth situated along its segmented torso. Under its body and all over its legs were hundreds and hundreds of barbs. It resembled a gigantic centipede, except that it had four, long, arms like a mutated scorpion. From every possible angle, this was truly the most dangerous things to spirits in this world.

And this was the time that Janie, Ross and Xandra returned.

‘Don’t move!’ Jack yelled. ‘And don’t, whatever you do, look up!’ he added when they froze. He beckoned to Gallow. ‘My sword!’

Gallow looked at the Fleshspectre, and the Fleshspectre shook his head. ‘I should slay the beast!’

‘Gallow please! I’ve already killed a spirit beast. I can do this!’

‘You are, spirited and brave, but still a child,’ he replied. ‘This is the battle for your elders.’

‘You need to see to Finch,’ said Jack, although now, especially after seeing the boy’s true colours, he wondered why anyone would want to bother. Meanwhile the aforementioned had disappeared from sight. The cockroach had scuttled off to find a stone to crawl under, until it was all over. ‘Where is he?’

‘We will have to find him, Gallow,’ said Fleshspectre. ‘We will need the powers of four children to undo the damage to this world.’

‘Why can’t we do that here?’ Xandra suggested. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘We will need the energy from the gates to Hevane. When you pass them together, balance and order will be restored. You must cast aside your doubts, and trust me.’

‘If you don’t mind,’ said Jack, we have more pressing matters to attend to – the sword!’

Gallow’s dithering was extremely worrying. The beast, which was bigger by each passing second, was almost upon him. Gallow finally, threw the weapon in his direction and Jack pounced on it. With his back arched, and his head focused on the task, he gripped the handle for all he was worth and pointed it angrily at the creature.

‘I am not comfortable with this!’ the Fleshspectre was ranting. ‘Tell him to cease at once Gallow!’

‘Jack, I implore you, give the sword to me. Let me destroy it!’

‘Please Jack!’ yelled his mother.

‘I have to do this!’ cried Jack, and he was right. This thing, this abomination, like everything of its ilk that he’d come across, represented people, situations, pain, disappointment, all of the horrible, crappy things which infested his mind.

As soon as all of its feet were on the plateau, Gallow organised the others so they surrounded it. Jack didn’t get the strategy with this, surely that would give the thing more targets to go for. Then, when they all began howling and wailing it occurred to him, that they had been instructed to create a distraction. The creature, which now resembled some sort of hybrid of a lion and a millipede, reacted to this by thrashing its body from side to side, an action which encouraged the noise makers to create more space between them.

Jack meanwhile, stood his ground. Growling at it, as if he were another beast, he spun the sword around in his hand and struck the closest leg. The beast emitted a squawk-like hiss followed by a spray of some green liquid, which caused Jack to instantly close his eyes. The warm, sticky fluid caught his right cheek and his forehead. ‘That’s poisonous right?’

‘I would expect so!’ Gallow bawled over the din. ‘It will be trying to blind you, in order to gain an advantage. Aim for its eyes if you can. If it cannot see you, then the advantage will be yours.’

This was going to be difficult, considering its front limbs were in the way. It reminded Jack of a scorpion, the way its facial features were embedded in its chest. The distraction was useful though. That was

until it swung the back half of its body around as if to sweep the others away. Being anywhere near it was difficult. One slash of those menacing barbs could finish you for good. The tail end swept through the air and Jack ducked. He attempted a quick jab to the underside, but missed. So, as it was steadying itself, he hacked at another one of the legs. This time, he managed cut right through to the bone. The Creature writhed as it cried out in pain. While this was happening, Jack dipped underneath it, and emerged at its back, where he began to scale the mountain unnoticed by the beast. When he was high enough, he decided not to even think about what he was going to do next. He leapt onto its back, where he thrust the sword deep into one of its segments. The creature emitted a deathly scream, which was quite humanlike.

The front portion of its body went into the air so suddenly and angrily, that it almost knocked him off. But something was definitely happening, the sword was suppose to dispatch things like this, and to prove it, its skin was already turning chalky white and began flaking. Its body had become cold. Touching any part of it with his spare hand, was like putting it on a frosty wall. Still, it was reluctant to die.

Beneath them, Gallow and Fleshspectre were throwing rocks, which didn't appear to have any effect on the creature at all. Jack wasn't sure how long he could hold on. He removed the sword, and with it came a shaft of white light. He thought that he must make more of the light come out, so he lashed and he lashed

and every part of its spirit flesh. Meanwhile, Gallow took to the air. He hovered behind him, where he grabbed his shoulders and started to lift him away. At exactly the same time, the ground rumbled. There was a landslide which brought rocks down the mountain. Some went over their heads and struck the beast, others hit the ground, which prompted the others to move back several feet. He felt his body float into the air, for a moment he thought he'd died again. Then he saw the relief on his mother's face as she stood there with Ross at her side with one hand on his shoulder and the other on her mouth. He was quite happy, until there was a screaming over him and he fell to the ground. He fell on his stomach, but instinct told him to glance upward, where Gallow was now being held in the creature's claws. With one snap of a movement, the Screamer's body was split into two. Both halves exploded into light and shot up the mountain like something from a gun.

'No!' he wailed after it, 'Gallow!'

'There will be time for grief later,' said Fleshspectre. 'Now you must give me the sword.'

'No way!' Jack got to his feet and without another thought, ran towards the beast. He waved the sword about madly now hoping that he would hit something that would finish it off. But a claw came out of nowhere and knocked the sword out of his hands. Another grabbed him, just as it did Gallow, and hoisted him into the air to do the same. Beneath him now were his concerned friends and others he didn't think he knew properly, like Finch, who now knowing that the

thing had him and all of his problems were going to be now at an end, was standing remarkably close to the danger, brazenly. Jack would have loved to make his final words in this world something horrible and hateful to him, but the strength wasn't there.

Jack's spirit body was shaken right and left, as if the creature was toying with him, just as a cat might with a dying mouse. He saw his mother's tearful face and was sorry for all of the hateful things he'd thought about her, and sorry for letting down his little brother. He'd sworn that he would always be there for him. Now he'd failed. Who would watch out for him now? Who would protect him from the likes of Finch, or the Fleshspectre?

Then Finch smiled, not so much the devious one that he had become so accustomed to, but something warmer, like the one that had greeted them when he and Ross had first arrived.

A hand went into his pocket, and out came some sort of glass vial with glowing liquid inside it. 'Don't worry, Jack,' he said, 'leave this one to me!'

Finch unscrewed the top and dropped it by his feet. He then hurled the bottle at the beast. There was another explosion and he fell to the ground. When he looked up, there was Finch holding the vial, its lid securely fixed. There was something inside it writhing around.

'Where is it?' he asked him.

'In here!' replied Finch. 'Look, I'm sorry about what I've done. The Screamers promised me so much

for taking back Gallow. I was going to spend the rest of my death somewhere,' he paused. 'better than this place, anyway.'

'You were going to kill Gallow?'

'Take him back to his leaders. He was forbidden the power of flight, but he broke the law to help you, and they take that very seriously.'

'Now he's gone!'

'Not necessarily,' the Fleshspectre intervened. 'We are very close to the summit of Calmanis. It is quite possible that he has been pulled into the world of Hevane.'

'His spirit light did go up the mountain,' Finch observed, and he felt a little better for it.

The next face he saw was that of his mother's. She held out a hand and he took it without any regret. It made her face light up.

'Well done!' said the Fleshspectre, and held out his hand also. But when Jack grabbed it, the oddest thing happened. Suddenly, he was transported to another place and time. It was late in the evening in the living world. He was lying on the railway embankment again, in a lot of pain. Ross was next to him, quiet and still. Where they lay, the grass was saturated with blood. His neck and his chest hurt like hell.

'Ross!' he whispered loudly. 'Speak to me!'

Ross's hand trembled for a moment and his whole body and then it was cold and dormant. Jack wanted to keep calling, until he got some sort of reaction out of him. But someone was coming.

In just over a couple of hours, if they existed here, they arrived at the summit. By then, what he had felt when he touched the Fleshspectre had filled him even more with doubt.

There they were now, the great shaft of light right in front of them, like some ancient magical intense fountain of wonder, the entrance to something fabled to be peaceful and everlasting. His mother had been sold that idea long ago, and because she was, Ross was. Even Xandra was different having seen it, as if her eyes had been opened in a way that nothing else could manage.

Finch believed anything, obviously. Like he believed that there was actually anything going on between him and the lovely Xandra, as if he could be that lucky. Then there was little George, who should never have been there. What madness had Xandra's kindness got him into?

'Quick!' Fleshspectre yelled over the loud hiss of the beam. 'There is not a moment to lose!'

Everyone but him moved closer to it. 'Not you,' he said to Jack's mother. 'Nor you!' he said to George.

'What?' yelled his mother. 'Why can't we go?'

'I have only allowed you to come, so that you can say goodbye to your children.'

'You have got to be kidding me!' exclaimed Xandra.

‘This can only be Jack, Ross, Finch, and Xandra.’

‘Why?’ said Jack.

‘I cannot tell you!’

‘That’s why this is a bad idea,’ said Jack. ‘You haven’t been straight with us.’

‘About Hevane?’ said Fleshspectre. ‘I cannot tell you about that I have not seen. It is about faith. You have to believe and make the leap into the light.’

‘But it’s not just that.’ Jack tried Xandra. ‘You’ve felt something isn’t quite right, and you still want to do this?’

‘It just feels right,’ replied Xandra. ‘I can’t explain it, it just does.’

‘Jack,’ said Fleshspectre, ‘surely you must feel the positive energy coming out of the beam?’

‘If you want to go, then you go! Let’s see what happens to you!’

‘It doesn’t work like that Jack. The five of you should take the leap together. Then, not only will you enter paradise, you will save this world for those who are left.’

‘But you haven’t told us why.’

‘You go!’ said mother. ‘It will be great, don’t worry. I just know.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’ll go back to my cave. I quite miss my cave actually, got new furniture on order.’

Jack wondered why it was that he was the only sane one among them all of a sudden. There was a gleam

on the faces of Finch, of Ross of Lucas of Simo, of Xandra, that just made it all appear like some surreal nightmare he just didn't want to be in. He was disappointed in Xandra. She was, up until now, the sensible one. Right now, she should be arguing by his side, not glaring like a zombie. He had to try. 'Xandra!' he cried.

'Why do you want her?' asked the Fleshspectre.

'Let us both touch you again first. If we don't feel anything bad, then I'll go in with the others.'

'No!' Fleshspectre pulled away.

'Why? What are you hiding?' He tried Xandra again. 'You said you saw things, that something wasn't quite right!'

'When?' She didn't move a muscle.

'Back there, on the way up, when we stopped. You said you saw things. Let's see if there is anything else.'

'Why? It's all so, beautiful! I want to go in!'

'What about you?' He asked Lucas. 'You are the scientist. Don't you want to ask questions about any of this?'

'You can't explain everything with science,' he replied. 'I never thought I would hear myself say that, but there it is.'

There was only one thing now he could do. He still had the sword. Even though the mysterious madman had tried several times more to get it off him on the rest of the journey up, he still had it. But even though it was a spiritual sword, it was somehow heavy.

He'd slid it inside the belt of his jeans, where it slapped against his legs rather irritably when he moved. He slid it out quickly and held it against the Fleshspectre's head.

'OK, tell them to back away!'

'Why?'

'I know it's that beam that's sucking the sense from them. Make them move away. We will go somewhere away from it and vote what would be the right thing to do.'

'There isn't time for that.' As he spoke the mountain shook scarily. 'Get into the beam, all of you!'

But Jack was the one holding the sword.

'You won't use that thing on me.'

'Don't count on that. My friends may be gone forever if they do what you want them to. They are not going in there until I am sure.'

Jack noticed now, that the Fleshspectre was changing. His expression, which had been so sickly, annoyingly positive on the journey, had gotten dark around the eyes, sunken and pale.

'What's happening to you?'

'Nothing!'

'It's like you are decaying.'

'Nonesense!'

Jack ran over to Xandra and pulled her to the Fleshspectre. So strong was the light, it took considerable force.

'What are you doing?' she said, 'Take me back!'

'Xandra, your powers are stronger than mine. You've been here longer. Touch the Fleshspectre and

tell me what you see.'

'Never!' The Fleshspectre moved away from them. 'This is not about me, this is about trust.'

'Let her touch you. It's the only way that we can be sure. Let us all touch you in turn, and let's see what we can see.'

Something was beginning to happen to Xandra. The further away from the beam she was being pulled by Jack, the clearer her head was. The top of the mountain was the curious shape of an enormous crown, perfectly circular and flat in the middle. Jack was by her, that sword, which he had been so reluctant to relinquish in his hand aloft. He was about to bring it down onto the Fleshspectre when she came to. 'What are you doing?'

'What I need to,' said Jack. 'It all makes perfect sense now. We don't have to enter Hevane to save this world, we just have to kill him.'

'Why?'

'Because, he is the link between this world and the world of the living. Him just being here is causing chaos. Can't you see? End him and you end all of this.'

'You don't know that Jack.' Xandra held out her hand in the hope that he might trust her with the sword. He did. 'Thank you!'

'You grab his arm. Make sure he doesn't move

an inch. I'll get the others away from the light.'

Xandra nodded. She placed the sword on the ground by her side; in a place where she could get to it quickly if need be. Then she grabbed the spirit man's wrist.

All of the world went immediately white, as if everything had been erased to start again.

And she saw absolutely everything. Furthermore, she knew exactly what to do.

'Jack!' she yelled. 'Help me with the Fleshspectre. Help me get him into the light. You were right about one thing; he's been lying to us.'

The world now, was worse than it had ever been. Great lashes had appeared in the dark purple sky and fiery rocks came through and hit the ground. Powerful winds came from nowhere, ever direction bringing with them a strange luminous mist. Even Mount Calmanis, with its indestructible nature was not immune. Enormous cracks were beginning to appear. It was surely going to crumble into dust. The tremors had gotten worse. No-one atop of Calmanis believed now that there was any possibility of anything below remaining. What this was doing to the living world was a very dark mystery.

A barrage of molten rock hit the summit. The children and the one adult instinctively threw their bodies against the perimeter rock wall. Somehow it was

a safe place to be. Meanwhile the weakened body of Fleshspectre was in a very vulnerable spot.

‘Is everyone OK? Anybody hurt?’ Jack cried out over the hubbub.

He saw thumbs in the air. All seemed fine as could be. Xandra was by his side, Finch the other.

‘Why do we need to get him in the beam?’ he asked Xandra.

‘There’s no time for me to explain properly now.’

‘If we leave him where it is, he will die soon, and all this will be over.’

‘No, it will never be over if he dies like that, trust me. Believe me, I would like to do far worse to him. This is how it needs to be.’

But it was like a war zone now. To get to him, never mind remain upright enough to hurl him into the light was a massive risk. Nevertheless, he trusted Xandra. If she said that was how it needed to be, then that was it. Jack started towards the man, a sudden explosion of rock hitting the ground knocked over. When he looked at the Fleshspectre again, there was light streaming from his leg.

‘Damn!’ he exclaimed, ‘we’re never going to get him there in time.’

‘Wait!’ yelled Finch. ‘I’ll help you!’

All of the ground around them was burning. It just wasn’t possible. The mountain was a furnace. Amid all of the fire and the smoke, he could hear voices crying out in anguish. He couldn’t see anyone. Were

they dying? Was it all over. He tried to crawl towards Fleshspectre, he just had to. Soon Finch was close.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘let’s do this thing!’

‘It’ll be the end of us,’ said Jack, ‘you know that?’

‘But if we can dispatch that rat-bag while it’s happening, we can save the others.’

Sacrifice was the last thing he was expecting from Finch. Then, he bottled that centipede beast, put it in a bottle like a genie master. Finch grabbed his arm and they continued forward. Soon, the man was just a few yards away. They wove their way through the pummeling rocks from space, knowing that the next one could finish them. When they landed, they sent earth and shale into the air, anything could have hit them. They had just reached the Fleshspectre when there was one explosion too many. The blast pushed Jack onto his back, too far back to finish the job now. Finch was on the ground faced down, light spewing from a tear in his back. Jack was dazed, the air fizzy, everything moving.

Then he saw something, a glimmer of hope, a huge, white angel. Where it came from he would never guess, but there it was in the air. It swooped down on Fleshspectre and lifted him into the air.

‘Thank you!’ he whimpered.

The angel, if that was what it was, rose several feet, twenty, thirty, it was hard to tell. Then with hardly any effort at all, it flung the Fleshspectre into the light. The moment the body hit it, tremendous ripples of light

burst from the beam with intensity that nothing could possibly survive its force. Jack closed his eyes and in his mind, said goodbye to absolutely everything and everybody he had ever known.

When he opened them again, he didn't know what to expect, nothing at all quite possibly. He had never experienced second life before, never really got used to the first one. But he wasn't anywhere elaborate at all, but back in the hideaway, back home.

'So this is Hevane?'

Voices around him laughed. A hand touched his forehead. It was his mother, smiling, alive. 'Are we?'

'Still in first death? Yes!' said Xandra.

Soon the others were around him, as if he was in some hospital bed. He was on the floor, on a mat.

'It's a shame about Hevane, that it doesn't exist.'

'Perhaps it does,' said Lucas of all people, 'just not on top of that mountain.'

Jack got up and went outside, he just had to convince himself that everything was back to normal. It seemed to be, the sky was purple again. There was a calm, reassuring breeze. No sign of anything angry at all. Yet there was something on his mind that was never going to be calm, until the question was finally answered.

'You didn't get a chance to say, who was that man-spirit Xandra?'

‘Believe me,’ she replied prickly, ‘you don’t want to know.’

‘I want to know,’ added Finch, who had suddenly joined them.

‘And me!’ said his mother. They were all out in the sunshine now. There was a feeling all around that the worse had happened. Nothing bad was going to happen for a while. Lucas it seemed either knew already, or wasn’t interested.

Ross, George and Milo had been instructed to stay inside for their own good. It seemed that nobody was sure how Xandra was going to explain this.

She began anyway.

She walked into a ray of sunlight first, which made her look like some sort of mystical prophet.

‘I had been wondering why it was that the Fleshspectre had been travelling between our world and the one of the living. Then it hit me when I connected with him. I could smell hospitals and saw a ward, an isolation ward. He was there, with tubes sticking out of him all over the place.’

‘He was dying?’ said Jack. ‘Is that how he could get here, he was drifting in and out of death?’

‘No flies on you Sherlock!’ said Xandra. ‘Flesh-spectre, living-dead. Only that wasn’t his real name, it was Richard Bayer.’

‘Richard Bayer?’ said Jack. He gave his mother a hard stare. ‘He was a friend of dad’s.’

‘Yes!’ she said awkwardly, appearing to try to figure it out.

‘And mine!’ said Xandra.

‘And mine!’ said Lucas and Finch at the same time.

‘Your dad belonged to some secret society,’ said Janie. ‘So was this Richard bloke, apparently. I never met him. Your dad never spoke about it. Never told me anything they did. Just went a couple of times a night and disappeared every now and again. Helping out - friends’

‘And covering up for them,’ said Xandra, before adding, ‘unfortunately.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You dad knew Richard had some mental health problem. Something had happened to him in the past that made him hate children. He couldn’t have known he was killing them.’

‘Wait!’ said Jack, ‘you lot?’

Xandra’s head went down slowly, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No!’ Jack snapped, ‘my dad was a git, but he would never have killed children.’

‘He killed all of us; Jack, me, Finch, even you and Ross.’

Jack was fuming. ‘No way! Me and Ross died in a train crash.’

‘But you know that isn’t true,’ said Xandra. ‘I’ve felt it when we were close. I saw you on the railway line next to Ross, and him.’

Jack wasn’t having this. ‘That was a dream.’

‘Have it your way,’ said Xandra. ‘But I’ve seen the truth. That man killed us all. He strangled us, he

slashed away at our bodies. I know why he wanted to get us into the light now, it was so that he could erase us from time. He did all sorts of terrible, sick things, and your father covered up for him.'

Jack laughed, he didn't know why, he just did. 'Ridiculous! Why the hell would he do that?'

'Find him and ask him!' said Janie. 'He's here too, somewhere.'

The only thing Jack wanted to do now was walk off and see where he ended up when he came out of this horrible dream. There was no one he wanted to talk to now.

There was a lull in all conversation for a while. As if words no longer had any use. There was only reflection and peace, which melted into the silence. The next time anyone spoke at all, it was Jack, who after a long walk, where he'd picked a cluster of fine mushrooms and put them in a sack, addressed the rest.

'I want to thank you all for being my friends,' he said. 'We've been through an awful lot and I think it's safe to say that we've come out the other side.'

'A few battle scars,' said Lucas, 'but we've come through, saved the afterlife as it were.'

'I'm going to find my father,' he said to his mother. 'I need to find out the truth, whether it was anything like Xandra said it is, no offence Xandra.'

'None taken,' said Xandra. 'But please don't go alone.'

'I must. It's one of those alone things.' He placed an arm on his mother's shoulder, she was

shaking. 'Please, don't let Ross out of your sight.'

His mother returned one of her smiles, 'Please stay,' she beckoned. 'Whatever your father did, it doesn't matter now, and lord knows, there could be all sorts out there still.'

'I'll come back,' said Jack, although he wasn't entirely sure he ever would. 'Anyway, I have my sword. Anything that gets in my way doesn't stand a chance. And if I see that angel again, I'll say thank you, for all of us.'

Then, before anyone could convince him otherwise, he walked out the door, his head fixed firmly on his mission. He didn't know which way to go, and then the most important journeys don't work like that. They go their own way.

Of the angel, he called it the angel, but something deep within him knew it was Gallow. He was a soldier to the last, in this world, the previous one or the next.

Philip Gilliver, is a Wrexham multi-genre author constructed in a laboratory by scientists with a suspicious laugh. He escaped to Wrexham in North Wales the moment his limbs functioned correctly. Here, in the wonderful Welsh wilderness (check out the alteration there!) he works at the enormously interesting task of trying to put words in exactly the right order for an expecting open-mouthed readership. So far, he has been successful at putting together a Young Adult thriller entitled 'Projector', an illustrated children's comedy containing a cheese-chomping, guitar-strumming 'Tyrannosaurus Rex, various twisted shorts and a supernatural comedy with the somewhat whimsical title 'A Tale of Two Brians.' Philip has an honours degree in Literature with Media.