

Hanna York and his shipmates are on a routine maintenance mission above the planet Mars. When caught in the ion plume of a man made terra forming storm on the surface, they find themselves suddenly crash landing on a seemingly pristine and primitive world.

After a series of adventures, he finds an advanced civilization and learns that he has travelled millions of years into the future of a terra formed Mars.

The earth's ecosystem had failed and humankind has moved on to their new home where genetically engineered Priests are now the caretakers of the human race.

Originally designed as servants with a duty of care to the survival of humankind, they have taken control of the population who now live safely, under their protection, inside dormitories, connected to the 'Net cap.'

However, *Hanna's* arrival has upset a delicate balance that has been in place for thousands of years and set into motion a series of events that will change the future of humankind forever.

He and his companions must now face the realities

of

'The Paradigm of Time.'

The Sun Rose

Book 1 of

Paradigm of Time

Saga

Prequel to

The Ark of Corporeity

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The Sun Rose

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For my brother

Andrew Peter Kinna

U.N.S.A. Marion Crew

(United Nations Space Association)

Hanna York	Ship's Captain
Ray Stevens	First Mate
George Pittsworth	Engineer

Androssan's Nordic Caucasian Human (Netlanders)

Arno	Youngest brother
Icno	Eldest brother
Kernewek	Chairman of people's council
Koorngal	Keeper of the books
Moonta	Traveller/psychic
Pirie	Dark Valley Guard
Rickaby	Dark Valley Guard
Tooligie	Mother of
Tunot	Balladeer
Urno	Middle brother
Weeroone	The father
Yurla	Captain at Arms

Cedunan's 'The Chosen' (Pure Human)

Bute	Rebel youth
Cleve	Rebel leader
Cowell	Cleve's sister
Curwie	Rogue Cedunan
Elliston	Rebel youth
Grundrie	Rogue Cedunan
Pillana	Rogue Woman
Rudell	Rebel youth
Wanilla	Hybrid High Priest
Wirrulla	Rogue Cedunan
Wudinna	Rogue Cedunan leader

Kiana Aryan Caucasian Human (Netlanders)

 Yaiata Kiana Trade Master

Kimba Australopithecus Sediba (Evolved hybrid)

Perlumbie Homo Neanderthalensis (Netlanders)

 Hasian Captain of the Imperial guard

 Kyancutta Games weapons Master

 Moorila Sergeant

 Penong Politician

Taila Afro Capoid Human (Netlanders)

 Poochera Group Leader

 Turton Hunter

Wangary Avian Human (Hybrid Netlanders)

 Bookabee Guard

 Carappee Guardian of the Well's

 Coulea Female

 Moorowie Male

The Village Australoid Human (Netlanders)

 Barunga Hunter/Gatherer

 Curramulka Village Elder

 Kadina Village Girl

 Kielpa Hunter/Gatherer

 Koonaida Hunter/Gatherer

 Minlaton Youth

 Unow Hunter/Gatherer

 Warooka Hunter/Gatherer

 Yaninie Hunter/Gatherer



Chapter 1

A sun rose slowly above the low lying clouds on the eastern horizon. Golden beams of light were now radiating from the crimson pillows that had shrouded it from view as it had risen above the horizon earlier. Hanna could feel the warmth of water as the chill of the morning air touched his wet skin and wisps on mist began to dance across the mirrored surface of the ocean. Hanna revelled in what he could see was going to be another glorious day.

Suddenly a call went out and the group started to paddle in unison towards the oncoming bludge on the smooth flat surface. George was in position and turned as the swell stood vertically and Hanna watched as he disappeared over the edge. Cries of approval rang out as the next in line positioned himself for the following wave. Hanna would miss out as he was too far away from the action and he realised his host didn't seem very experience as he was now about to be caught inside the next breaking wave of the set.

Hanna emotionally disengaged himself from the man's frustrations as he savoured in the delight of the refreshing physical experience of the cool effervescent salt water. However, the man's fear and blind panic began to over whelm him.

'Open your eyes! Open your eyes!' Hanna cried in vain, trying to tell him but his host's anxiety, together with his own frustration, was all too much and he jumped back into his own reality. With his thoughts remaining within the scene he had just left, he removed his cap in disgust. Hanna sat in his cell and stared at the cap as it lay on the chair beside his bed.

He felt unclean, violated, and depressed. He had just spent another three hours with the dammed thing on and he had promised himself it would only take a ten minute location update check on his friend.

Before that, he had tried meditating and exercising to distract him. Yet the allure had gained it's momentum. Like a drug, it beckoning to him. But this was worse than any drug, this was real, not some chemically induced dream, real.

'Yet how can any of this be tangible? This place, this new world, this new dimension, it all seems so unbelievable. And how on earth did he get here? How can such a short span of time change so much of the reality of one's own familiar space?'

He didn't want to use the device; he fought with all his strength to resist the temptation. Non the less, the fact that he could keep tabs on his companions was it's most powerful attraction. It was always his self-justification when he lost his battle against using it.

As he stared at the cap, the walls of his tiny cell began to press in on him again, the reality of his confinement weighing heavily on his increasingly deteriorating mental state. He recognised the trigger mechanism's within his mind as the urge to escape and re-enter the Net gained momentum. He knew that the time he spent within his own reality was getting shorter and shorter and yet he continued to fight it.

It was then that his thoughts turned to Kadina. He sighed heavily as the temptation was overpowering, stronger than ever this time.

'To just relive some of their time together, just a little. How could it hurt?' His mind taunted him.

A tear formed in the corner of his eye. He placed his head in his hands. He knew that if he succumbed to that temptation then he would be lost to the ether forever and never return.

'Excuses! Always excuses! 'I'm not going to break. I know you're watching me. I know and I'm not going to allow you to win, no way!'

He stood defiantly, continuing his self-talk and began exercising. He started with his stretches. He could feel the muscles in his calf burn as he extended his right leg behind him. He leant forward; left knee bent as he stretched his head forward, then tilting it backwards, he arched his back, feeling the muscles in his lumbar as they pulled. He turned his head from left to right. He

stood to change side, and as he knelt, suddenly, without warning, the door to his cell swung open and he jumped in fright, toppling over to lie on the floor.

He looked up to see the expressionless faces of the two priests that had entered his cell. He remained still imitating their silent, solemn, dull gaze. However, he could not hold the straight faced look for long. He felt ridiculous, juvenile and with what started as a little smirk, he began to laugh. His laughter rang out. It echoed through the open doorway and down the empty corridors. He caught its sound as it reverberated back into the cell.

It sounded hollow ... and lonely ... and it sounded pathetic. He realised that it sounded more like a cry, a desperate call for help. He stopped and composed himself, as he lay back and once again reflected on the events that led to his arrival.

*

The mission had been routine as they left the comfort of the United Nations space facility stationed on Phobos, the closest of the Martian moons. After servicing the first of the satellites, they were moving on to the second when they began to experience the first indication that something was wrong.

‘Ray, what’s happening?’ asked Hanna, his voice tight but controlled.

‘Some sort of severe electrical static,’ said Ray, the ship’s pilot as he checked his instruments.

‘It’s all gone haywire!’

Suddenly, the ship shuddered and all lighting and instrumentation went out. They clamoured about for the battery-operated torches but even they did not work.

‘Now we’ve lost all power Hanna, and I can’t get any response from the back up. It’s all gone dead,’

‘I’m on it boy’s,’ quipped George, the ships engineer, as he blindly made his way to a panel in a corner of the cabin.

Suddenly a soft light wavered behind them as George flicked a gas lighter into action. Hanna was lost for words.

‘Report Ray,’ Hanna calmly requests of his pilot, ignoring his engineer’s blatant breach of protocol.

‘Last known position was eighteen hundred kilometres above the Martian surface Han, and approximately... directly, above the Olympus Mons,’ said Ray.

‘That storm was raging directly below us but we are too high above it to feel any effects from it, surly?’ commented Hanna as the ship began vibrating.

‘Who would know? They think their gods, those crackpot Terraformist’s. They’re only experimenting down there; they don’t know what they’re playing with,’ mumbled the ship’s engineer as he poked about inside the panel.

‘Power supply is still available,’ he added.

Suddenly, the ship jarred violently as George was thrown across the cabin.

‘You all right George?’ Hanna enquired.

‘I’m fine,’ he reassured as he picked himself up.

‘Those storms they’ve created down there are getting bigger and bigger. I know, for a fact, that they’re already twice the size of the projected probability ratings,’ he said as he continued to fiddle with the circuitry inside another open panel.

‘Well, the core is heating up so something’s working. Is that what you discuss with that pretty little Geo engineer: you’ve been seeing?’

Ray smiled, trying to defuse the tension.

‘Let’s stick to the problem at hand. We’re flying blind and judging from that vibration, our speed is increasing!’ said Hanna.

Just then, the lights flickered on and Hanna could see the satisfied smile on his engineer’s face.

‘Holly? Snap,’ yelled Ray as his instrument panel sparked back into life.
‘Thanks for nothing George, fasten your seat belts boys, we’re going down,’ he shouted.
The roar of the hull tearing a hole through the atmosphere threatened to deafen them all.
‘Where the hell are we?’ We’ve got atmospheric readings like earth here,’ George yelled.
‘It’s gonna be rough boys if I can’t get some control here,’ said Ray.
‘Hold steady pilot, I haven’t finished yet,’ stated the ships engineer.
‘All ready for a grade five crash landing,’ said Hanna in an authoritative tone.
‘I’m trying captain, I think I’ve nearly got it... under...control,’ affirmed George as he frantically worked at a control panel in the floor.
‘Captain, we’ve got no thrusters. Steering and some power yes, but for some reason... I can’t get the thrusters to respond sir,’ stated George.
‘I could glide her in if we had an atmosphere!’ said Ray.
‘Well I’ll be a... will you get a load of that,’ exclaimed Ray.
‘Seat please, Mr Engineer!’ ordered Hanna.
‘Aye, aye, sir! And I’m telling you there’s nothing wrong with that circuitry. What the hell! Is that an ocean I’m looking at?’ said George as he fastened his harness.
‘Pilot, confirm, grade four landing procedure,’ Hanna ordered.
‘Confirmed! Going for a grade four sir!’
‘Mr Pilot, try to head for the shore line, if we can skip her into that bay and put her on that beach?’
‘Yes sir.’
‘Jettison all fuel pods Mr Engineer.’
‘Check, mark on three Mr Pilot.’
‘Confirmed! Unus, Duo, Tresone.’
‘Thank you Momma, they’re gone, captain.’
The next few minutes seemed to be in slow motion as the last few minutes of the U.N.S.A. Marion played out and they sped toward the planet’s surface.

It was a fine ship. A shuttlecraft designed to reenter the earth’s atmosphere some four or five times without any major overhaul. It had done so on three occasions and had been in service four years now. It was Hanna first command and he loved every millimetre of her stream lined hull.

Ray had managed to regained control with only minutes left to avoid disaster. He flew the ship in an arc. With the skill of a glider pilot, he banked her gently to follow the coast with the sun behind them and although he had no power, he held her steady as she fell to ground.

Terror gripped them all as not a word was spoken. Hanna had sat helplessly as Ray levelled the craft to skip like a stone across the ocean surface. ‘Slap!’ They hit the water, bouncing, air born again, blinded by the spray of water that had pitched in front of them, Ray used his instruments and adjusted the steering gear. Slap!

They hit again, air born. Ray steadied the ship.

‘Two,’ he said as he did so.

Slap!

‘Three,’ he cried as George joining in.

Slap!

‘Four!’ they all chorused together.

‘Five!’ they cheered optimistically.

‘Six!’ Was lost with the roar of the fracturing hull. Hanna could feel the adrenalin surge as it rippled through his body, his heart pounding within his chest. Then a feeling of joy overwhelmed him, a strange mixture of terror, excitement, and optimism that shook him to his very core.

As he sat there, he slowly came to the realisation that it was over, they had survived. They were alive, yes, but somehow he felt more alive than he had ever felt in his life. His body tingled like an electrical current. Smell, hearing, taste, all on sensory overload as his heart continued to pump violently inside his chest.

The ship was in an almost unrecognisable state, trees and sand now part of the interior decor. They had come to rest on a sand dune above the beach. It seemed an impossible landing yet somehow Ray had managed to pull it off.

Hanna looked to George as he lifted his head to return Hanna's stare, a stunned look in his eyes, they both looked at Ray as he turned from the controls. Suddenly, like a football team that had kicked the winning goal after the final siren, they were cheering. Unbuckled their safety harnesses, they began slapping and hugging each other like the victorious team that they were in the realisation of what they had actually survived sank in.

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Three days passed as they acquainted themselves with their new surroundings. It was familiar, yes, but it wasn't Earth. Nor was it Mars, well not the Mars they were familiar with. The planet they had hurtled towards from space had vast oceans. Their Mars has no atmosphere or oceans.

Hanna also realised that that any chance of rescue must seriously be in doubt. All in an instant, fate had dealt them a telling blow. Their life had changed and a completely new perspective had now taken hold. However, one looked at it, they had been lucky. To have survived the systems failure, the unpowered atmospheric entry, and then to have crash landed on a habitable planet was something that they were all still trying to come to terms with.

Ray Stevens was his pilot, a good man, diligent and precise. Always thinking to cover the angles before making decisions, he was resolute when he made them. His attitude was more serious than Hanna's was. Never quick to jump to conclusions, Ray would always look at the negatives before the positives. The perfect contrast to Hanna's more gung hoe approach to life. Hanna managed to pull a few strings when he required a pilot for his ship and Ray's skills, as a pilot, were unparalleled. He had been dux of the academy in aviation during the last three years of their training.

Hanna had learnt early in his training that Ray Stevens was a man he could rely on and they soon become trusted friends. As they worked their way through the academy, he quickly learnt that he could trust Ray to back him in situations that may not have been becoming to a cadet of the United Nations Space Alliance. Ray had shown faith in his uncanny survival instincts and natural ability to play it cool whenever they ventured too close to the edge. They made a formable team, always managing to avoid trouble.

Hanna York was around thirty-four years old. Captain of his first ship at thirty, he had graduated from the academy at twenty-seven, the top of his class. Cheerful and positive by nature, his enthusiasm and energy were magnetic. His instincts, almost psychic, as luck always seemed to follow him wherever he went. He had the ability to put people at ease, even strangers and would always remain calm in stressful situations. Always quick to give praise and earn peoples trust, he was a natural born leader.

George Pittsworth was a little older than Hanna and Ray. At thirty-nine, he was the veteran of the team. As an engineer, he was resourceful, quick witted, experienced and skilful. He was pleased with his new crewmates, as he had some ongoing unsettled periods during his previous carrier. That was until he met Hanna and Ray.

They enjoyed his proud and judgmental nature that others were so quick to dismiss. They understood his honest yet sometimes contemptuous humour. Hanna was pleased to have George's experience on board and found him to be a great asset to the team.

They met him at a bar one night during one of their little pranks. A man was drunk and obnoxious at the gambling table and they decided to play one of their favourite tricks. While Ray distracted the man, Hanna approached from behind and unceremoniously dacked him. During the confusion that ensued, Hanna made his getaway and they rendezvoused at another drinking abode a little later. Luckily, for the victim, he was wearing underwear.

George, having witnessed all this, decided to play a prank of his own. He had followed Ray and then confronted them. He claimed to be the other man's friend and after teasing them both for a little while, he finally confessed his folly. And as luck would have it, Hanna had found his ship's engineer.

Hanna wanted to travel to the higher ground for the night. And as the sun began to warm the others from their sleep, Hanna started to plot the day ahead. George condition, having suffered the worst of the injuries, would dictate the pace of day ahead. They had set up camp outside the wrecked ship as the cabin reeked with the stench of burnt circuitry. The weather was favourable but they had been reluctant to stray too far, at least not for the first few days. Food was not a problem for now; they had at least six-month's supply of ship rations to get them through.

They were relieved to find an abundance of local food sources. They had already ventured small portions of the local fruit with no ill effects. Finding fresh drinking water was their priority now. Hanna felt confident they would soon find an ample supply once they started to move. The insect life seemed to be fairly non-invasive. In addition, they had spotted what looked like lizards on occasion. There seemed to be plenty of bird life about.

George was the first to wake. He sat up, yawned, and looked around.

'How you feeling today?' asked Hanna.

'So far, so good,' replied George.

'I need to get some exercise though. Besides, I've got itchy feet to look around this joint. Let's see if there's a bar with some cute native girls running about.'

'Or man eating, two headed monsters,' said Ray as he turned over to join the conversation.

'I'd like to camp on top of that headland tonight and see if we can see any lights. I don't want to venture too far from the ship...you just never know,' said Hanna, pointing to the southeast.

'Sounds good to me.' said Ray.

'Maybe we should stock up for a few days travel just in case, hey Han?'

'Probably a good idea,' he agreed.

With improvised packs from the tool kits stocked with ship's rations, blankets, and walking sticks/come spears that they had manufactured from the native vegetation during the last few days, they were finally on their way. George was given the lighter load, under protest, his right leg still being sore. As they got moving, it seemed to limber up and they were all starting to feel pretty good. It was refreshing to be getting some exercise in some real fresh air. They had been away from Earth for some eight months now and they had a strict fitness schedule that they had meticulously followed. The three of them would always turn it into a competition, trying to outdo each other, doing twice the exercise required.

With easily two and a half hours of daylight to spare, they reached the summit and scanned the horizon. Considering the soon to be setting sun, they looked to the northwest where a series

of bays and rocky outcrops had been carved out of the cliffs by the ocean. Still further west, the cliff faces rose higher, as the land held its ground against the relentless seas. It disappeared into the horizon. Looking North, with their backs to the sea, there were rolling hills with scrub type bushland that got thicker as it receded from the coast. The tallest trees would only have been five metres high and it looked impenetrable. Looking further around to the east, they found what they were looking for, a creek behind a lagoon. In front of the lagoon was a strip of sand dune and a beach that stretched on for at least twenty kilometres. It promised fresh water and a bath.

The breakers, rolling in from the open ocean, made a formidable site, as the northerly wind tried in vain to hold them back. The particles of water that could not escape the wind were rewarded with rainbows of colour as the sunlight was reflected back to the weary travellers. Ray sat down to admire the spectacular site; soon they were all sprawled on the ground, not a word spoken, as they took in the view.

Sea birds swooped to fish what was plainly a bountiful sea. Circling and diving into a swirling, splashing school of bait fish that larger fish were no doubt herding and feasting upon from underneath. Further out to sea and a little more to the west was a similar scene of frantic activity.

‘There should be a rookery on the cliff faces somewhere around here,’ Ray said.

‘We could be on for some fresh meat!’

‘I don’t want to risk a fire tonight, just in case it’s seen,’ replied Hanna.

‘But I’m on for some fresh eggs for breakfast.’

Ray was up and heading to the edge of the cliff some thirty metres away.

‘Hold up Ray,’ called George as he stumbled to his feet. Hanna noticed, but did not comment at George’s obvious discomfort. Ray called back.

‘There’s a little valley down here guys. I reckon we can light a fire in there and that off shore wind will take any smoke out to sea. The wood around here is pretty dry so hopefully, it won’t smoke much.’

‘Ok, let’s check it out,’ replied Hanna.

Later that afternoon, as they watched the lumpy moon Phobos make its second pass for the day, they gorged themselves on cooked bird flesh. They managed to consume two large birds each and after more than eight months of ship rations, this was a welcome feast.

*

As the sky grew dark and more and more stars appeared, Hanna covered the embers of the fire with the pile of dirt they had prepared earlier. The night was going to be cool, as there was no cloud cover to trap the warmth of the day. They prepared their sleeping arrangements and layback to ponder the evening sky, the blue star less prominent than Venus in the east.

Hanna finally stirred impatiently and got up.

‘I’m going to have a look,’ he said as he turned to go.

‘Me too, wait up!’ said Ray as he jumped up. ‘Hold the fort Mr Engineer,’

‘Don’t wake me if I’m snoring boys,’ said George as he closed his eyes.

As Hanna and Ray reached the top of the rise, they both instinctively hit the ground. There, before their eyes, was a sight they were unprepared for and it shocked the both of them. In a clearing, at the head of the creek, was a blazing fire with some fifteen men dancing and jumping about. A drum was being hit but they could only here the faint rhythm as the wind carried the sound out towards the roaring ocean.

‘Well, well, well. What have we here,’ said Hanna.

‘Looks like we’ve found George a party,’ joked Ray as they studied the scene.

‘It doesn’t look like the girls have arrived.’

‘And they look a bit too excited to be crashing their party at this late hour... But I’d like to get a closer look. We should tell George what we’re up to.’ Just then, George joined them commenting.

‘Curiosity got the better of me.’

George took up vantage point a little further down the hill while Ray and Hanna slowly made their way toward the dancing men. With still no moon in the night sky, it was a dark and potentially dangerous excursion down the slope. They found a good spot to view the festivities, some fifty metres away and sat for about fifteen minutes, watching the activities in the camp.

‘They’re humanoid all right and in fact, fine examples of the species,’ whispered Hanna.

Ray looked at Hanna and raised his eyebrows as if to acknowledge the same thought. Some were feasting on shellfish and crustaceans, as others danced around a large fire. They chanted methodically to the beat of the rhythmic drum and a deeply resonant pulsating bass. These dark skinned natives were dressed in leather loincloths and those that were not dancing, wore fur ponchos. Most were decorated with bright paint and feathers.

Hanna found himself bopping his head to the rhythm of the music as one of the natives sang a verse alone. Then, there was a sudden roar of laughter as the others joined in with the chorus. Again, Ray and Hanna exchanged glances. They seemed to be having a good time. Two men sat on the ground playing, what looked like didgeridoo’s, while three others were slapping flat looking sticks that Hanna assumed were boomerangs. Their rhythmic beat flowed perfectly with the fast paced chattering song. Five men danced in unison and with leafy branches in their hands, they stomped their feet into the sand. Then, after the monolog, they flapped their arms like birds as they laughed and spun around.

Then, in time with the high pitch toot of the smaller Didgeridoo, each would drop one at a time, to their knee’s while bowing their heads low. Fluttering in unison they slowly stood shaking their heads with something in their mouths. Single file, they stamped their feet, turned to the left following the leader and one at a time dropped their catch into a basket. The chorus began and the routine repeated. They all got their chance to sing their individual solos, some obviously funnier than others and then they would sing as a group.

Hanna counted about twenty men in all. All fine specimens, with the eldest being about forty years old. Finally, he nudged Ray and indicated that it was time to go and they moved off in the direction that they had come. Back at their first vantage point, they talked about what they had seen.

‘Well, they sure look like a healthy bunch,’ said George.

‘That’s for sure; I wouldn’t like to have to tangle with any of them. They’re all about two metres tall and built like Roman gods.’ said Ray.

‘What are your thoughts Han?’ asked George.

‘To be honest with you fellas, I think we’ll sleep on this for tonight. I don’t think we should be rushing down there too fast. If these guys are here, then there could be others around. If we know anything about our primitive past... they could be hostile to strangers and I think strange is exactly how they’re going to think of us. Maybe we should just observe them for a few days and assess the situation,’ said Hanna.

‘Sounds like a pretty good plan Han, I think I’ve got to get some shut eye. I’m off to bed and we’ll pick up this little adventure in the morning. Good night boys,’ said George as headed for his sleeping bag.

‘I’m with you mate,’ said Ray.

‘They don’t look to be early risers, we could get in another good feed in the morning,’ said Hanna as he stood and looked back at the festivities still transpiring around the campfire below.

That night Hanna had a restless sleep. First, he lay there contemplating the life these people seemed to lead. They all seemed healthy and they looked to be happy. Nevertheless, ignorance is bliss and that was only a small glimpse of their lifestyle. Something about them felt right though, but he was feeling strangely anxious. There was some kind of déjà vu here, a familiarity that he

could not quite place. Then he remembered that he had that same feeling the night before their forced landing.

This place and time, questions, questions, it was all too much, his mind was in overload. Meditation was his only means to escape so he focused down on his breathing and took himself to his secret place in the purple light he called nothing.

Finally, he slept, a deep sleep, and dreamt of faraway places.

*

Chapter Two

*S*moke, the smell of roasting bird and the sound of a crackling fire, stirred Hanna back to consciousness.

‘A little more sleep, to drift in his lingering dreams wouldn’t do any harm,’ he thought.

Refusing to open his eyes as his senses slowly responded and his memory triggered as to where he actually was. As he lay there, his stomach began to react, the sweet aroma of bird fat clinging to his nostrils. His thoughts turned to the possibility of constipation with the sudden transition from ship food to fresh meat and uncomfortably, finally, he succumbed. He turned to lie on his side as he opened his eyes.

Ray was still in his sleeping bag and his eyes were bulging out of his head. Realising that Ray was trying to convey a warning, Hanna remained motionless. Looking past Ray, with his top eye closed, he could see George was still lying in his bag. None of them moved as Hanna slowly stirred to see who was doing the cooking behind him. There they were, about six of the natives, sitting around a newly built fire. They were all very intent on cooking and not paying any attention to the three sleeping cocoons on the ground behind them. Hanna noticed that they were sprinkling herbs and oil on the birds as they cooked.

They all seemed to be sniggering and trying not to look at each other without smiling, in fact... Hanna realised, they were trying not to laugh aloud and wake their sleeping captives.

Before he could devise some sort of plan, they finished cooking and turned toward the supposedly sleeping trio. They crouched down around them, two men to each sleeper, waving the aromatic meat in front of their noses. While one held the food, the other used a blade of grass to tickle the nostrils of their sleeping quarryies.

Hanna eyes opened and as he looked at his host, eye to eye, he was offered the cooked bird on a stick. He stared at the seemingly unfazed, stern looking young man that remained crouching in front of him. The young man’s expression changed to a smile, a cheeky smirk. He quickly recovered with a serious frown, but his associate could not hold it together and they fell about in a roar of laughter. Hanna caught the hot bird in his hands and immediately reacted to the heat. With that, the whole group lay about the ground, holding their bellies, in an absolute fit of hysteria.

Hanna, Ray, and George instantly sprang out of their sleeping sacks and stood back to back in an instinctive act of self-protection. However, as their native captors look at the confused faces of victims of their joke, they only laughed more. Both Ray and George looked to Hanna for a signal, but as Hanna surveyed the strange scene surrounding him, he felt that there was no real threat or danger. In fact, as the shock and wave of confused emotions swept over them, they could see the merit of their jest and began to smile.

The man, who had handed him his breakfast indicated that Hanna should eat and as he bit into the bird, he realised that it was it was extremely hot. He reacted quickly as he choked. The natives started to laugh again and the reality of the situation began to ease in his mind. He looked from Ray to George as they shook their heads, smiling, acknowledging amusement at the strange

prank that these natives had orchestrated. They too, began to laugh. Slowly, it escalated into a very loud crescendo as the unbelievable events of the last few days began its emotional release. From the depths of their subconscious minds came the fear and confusion of the recent events that had transformed their lives.

After a minute or so, Hanna and his crew sat up and wiped the tears from their faces. Hanna could feel his stomach muscles from the over exaggerated exertion of the laughing fit that had consumed him and felt a little foolish at his lack of self-control. The natives were still smiling and making jokes amongst themselves as they resumed making breakfast. Hanna offered some of his bird meat the man who had woke him, but he smiled and indicated that he was looking forward to the one he was cooking now. Hanna sat down with Ray and George to eat.

Hanna and the young man kept exchanging glances but he would break eye contact when Hanna tried to communicate. They were all friendly and warmth, yet they conveyed a childlike innocence.

‘Well they’re a happy bunch,’ said George.

‘Believe it or not,’ said Hanna. ‘I think there’re just a bit shy. I don’t think there’re scared of us, but they are a bit wary,’

More food was presented and Hanna made sure that they acknowledged his gratitude in his refusal in a deliberate attempt to communicate with them. Finally, he gained the trust of his host enough to make a move, sitting beside him as he spoke.

‘My name is Hanna York, Hanna York,’ he said as he pointed to himself.

Immediately his host looked to his friends and mimicked perfectly the words that Hanna had spoken. They all chorused in another bout of laughter. Hanna smiled at his hosts and looked towards George and Ray.

‘Do you understand English?’ asked Ray and one of his breakfast providers mimicked him!

The others repeated him.

‘Let’s start to pack our gear and get ready to move, and then we can gauge their reaction to that.’

Again, their host mimicked perfectly, word for word and again, his audience repeated. Now Hanna was impressed, as were Ray and George.

‘I like to rub my tummy and pat my head and poke out my tongue and roll my eyes,’ said George as he proceeded to do just that.

The natives stood and stared, there was an awkward silence, and Hanna glared at George in concern. The whole group looked at each other and tried to mimic George’s actions. Then, as they struggled to do so, they broke into another fit of hysterical laughter. This time lasted a little longer than the original bout. George was a hero as they were all having trouble trying to coordinate the actions. Instead of repeating George’s speech, they mumbled it in tune.

Hanna was now starting to feel a little frustrated with his attempts to communicate and Ray sat beside him, bemused.

‘Well they’re not stupid Han that’s for sure. Just... really immature?’

‘You get the feeling they don’t have a care in the world. It’s hard to believe that this is how they react to strangers, maybe we’re just not that strange, maybe they’ve seen men like us before,’ said Hanna.

‘Could be, but wouldn’t it be nice if they just didn’t have any fear of the unknown, they just accept what they see, without any preconceived prejudice or judgments,’ pondered Ray.

Hanna did not comment, he sat, and they watched together as George performed for his new found audience. After a little more time had passed, their host made his way over to where Hanna was sitting. He looked at Hanna and gently tapped his own chest.

‘Warooka, Warooka,’ he said. Hanna smiled, made the same gesture,

‘Hanna, Hanna,’ he replied.

Ray then took his queue and jumped in to introduce himself. Soon they were all patting each other on the back, exchanging hugs and names like a long lost family.

They spent the rest of the day gathering eggs and stockpiling them in baskets that the natives had brought. That night they joined the party at the mouth of the creek. First, they swam in the clear cool water, using the clean sand as soap and later they ate and danced around the fire. Hanna was amazed at how easy he and his crew had picked up the basics of the native language. Having been privy to the events of the day, the jokes and singing around the campfire did seem to speed the process up.

Hanna and his crew mates stood under a tall tree, Warooka and several of his cohorts clambered about in the heights, picking fruit. They would call to those below, as it was their job to catch the falling fruit. A call went up further into the bush as the natives descended quickly as possible. Hanna looked the George and Ray, alarmed by the reactions of their hosts.

Warooka ran past him as still more calls went up in the surrounding forest. He was smiling as he slapped him on the back, two fingers demonstrating tusks and snorting like a pig. They hurried on behind him leaving the gathered fruit where they lay. Although unseen, with all the noise, varying calls, and whistles, they finally congregated at the opening of a gully. There were small trinkets and carvings in the rocks that lined the entrance. This was a well-versed hunting practice. Spears, ropes, and carry poles were already stored here for the occasion.

They entered the ravine and soon came upon the family of wild hogs. Immediately, the boar turned and attacked. However, they were ready and he dropped to the ground as three spears pieced his chest. A cry rang out at the kill. Then it was the sows turn to attack. Warooka and his men climbed the rocks as they separated her from the main group, Hanna and his crew followed suit. Several men herded her and an accomplice out the ravine. Hanna suspected the remaining group of nine consisted of two generations. Their path now blocked with a previously prepared barrier. The men pointed as they discussed the sex of the group. They culled them, allowing three older females to escape. They kept, three young and one older female and the two young males. Warooka explained that they would take the breeding females back to the village but tonight. He smiled and pointed at the two young males.

They all stood around the dead boar as the three owners of the fatal spears sang a soulful tune over his body as a tribute of respect. After close examination of the fatal wounds, the two winners would be rewarded with a tusk each when they gut and bleed the beast in another location. Congratulations exchanged as the group helped lift the large carcass, his hoofs now tied and strung between two poles, onto the shoulders of four men as they joked and teased each other and carried the beast out. The captured young were strung together and to Hanna's surprise, willingly followed.

They had now spent three full days working with them, collecting provisions and learning new skills. Each night, they ate well as they sang and danced about the large campfire. Tonight would be the last night as they had all they could carry; in the morning, they would break camp.

Hanna and his crew discussed the pros and cons of going back to the ship. They decided it would be a good rendezvous point in case they were ever separated. As it was, the damaged ship was not secure and there was a lot of unsecured and possibly useable equipment on board.

They accepted Warooka's invitation to return with them to their village. They would take one day at a time. So far, they had eaten well, worked hard, gathered food, and learnt some valuable survival skills. They were enjoying this new experience. They had been occupied enough to forget their situation and just appreciate the basics of life for a while. Hanna had even felt a scene of excitement, as each day had brought a new adventure.

That night, Hanna and his crew sang a few songs from home. Sometimes, when they sang in harmony, he felt a little lost and melancholy in this strange new world.

Of Warooka's men, Koonaida, a tall, dark haired man in his late teens, had teamed up with Ray. He was one of the two who assisted with Ray's breakfast that morning. Likewise, with George, Barunga, of similar stature, was now the star student of George's school of clowning.

They prepared baskets and nets to balance in the middle of two poles some ten metres long. They carried them with a pole resting on each shoulder to evenly distribute the load. There were twenty-three of them in total and fortunately, for George, as his leg had not quite fully recovered, he was the odd man out. However, it was only after his extreme protests. Other than that, the weight was distributed evenly throughout the group. Their bounty consisted mainly of eggs and live birds, bound and packed for the journey. There were also slings of different fruits and roots that were only available from this particular area. The pigs continued to follow the dead boar.

They began their trek to the village soon after sunrise and they followed a track that wound its way along the creek bank. It soon turned into the scrub and Hanna noted that they were heading west, back towards the ship. Their path was heading around the northern base of the hill that was their vantage point the night they had first spotted their new friends. Hanna judged that if they were to arrive at the village by nightfall and the track stayed on level ground, then it would be safe to assume that the ship was half way between the village and the creek camp.

‘Closer to the creek than the village, with any luck,’ he thought.

With about an hour and a half of daylight left, they were still heading west as the track began to rise. The journey had been uneventful and as they neared their destination, the chatter began to grow louder among the men. Hanna could hear the anticipation in their voices and picked up some of the conversation.

‘Over by the fallen log,’ whispered Barunga to the man on the end of his poles. Hanna and some of the others looked towards the log.

‘Minlaton, you’re always the first to be seen,’ said Koonaida. ‘How can you learn to hunt if you are seen by your prey?’

A child of around 12 years old ran to tackle the man’s legs and suddenly, with a great screeching roar, about twelve children came running from the surrounding bush. The men dropped their yokes, and began to chase and wrestle with the excited children. Hanna and his crew watched as they screamed with delight.

After the commotion died down, the men returned to their poles. They found it hard to lift their loads as the children held on, swinging. Eventually they managed to get free as the children danced around two yoke carriers that hauled one certain type of fruit. Hanna had no doubt that this was their treat as the children ogled the load, chattering amongst themselves. They eyed the newcomers, being careful not to make eye contact. Little Minlaton was again the one to be caught as Hanna managed to catch him with a smile just before he looked away.

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Shortly after, they came to the mouth of a cave where the people of the village had come to gather about. Hanna could see that there were more people watching from the cliff face above.

‘It made for a good defensive entrance’, thought Hanna.

The parade continued inside where they found themselves in a large cavern that was well lit by the sunlight that radiated down through the large hole in the ceiling. People were still gathering about when the column finally stopped and again, Hanna was surprised at the lack of attention that they seemed to draw. As they were adjusting to their new surroundings, Ray manoeuvred over toward Hanna and George.

The crowd had amassed to about three hundred people and an eerie silence had come over them. Warooka stepped forward as he lead his group in song. As best as Hanna could interpret it was a homecoming song, telling of the journey and the bountiful rewards that they have brought back to share. The crowd returned with verse that welcomed the journeymen home and how they had been missed.

Then Warooka sang a solo, telling how they came upon the strangers and the neat trick that they had played. He went on to tell how George had returned the prank and Barunga jumped forward to demonstrate. He danced around the crowd so they all could see and as he did, the merriment grew. Soon the cavern was roaring with laughter. Hanna, Ray, and George were also laughing. Not so much at the joke itself but the reaction of the people that had now gathered around them. Slowly the crowd calmed and although the children were still making jest, the elder members of the village sang a song of welcome to the new comers. A solo was performed by a man Hanna judged to be the eldest in the cavern. It was a report on the village news in their absence.

The cavern was large and along both sides ran a ledge that was perfect for people to sit and view any of the communal activities. There were stalactites and stalagmites betraying its age, they were showing the tell tale signs of contamination. It was a grand natural amphitheatre and Hanna thought of it as a ballroom. As the ceremony ended, some people dispersed, others took charge of the cargo, and the journeymen mingled with their friends and families. Warooka, Barunga, and Koonaida approached them with the elder soloist. He was introduced as Curramulka; it was obvious that he was well respected. They were then lead across the main Cavern to be taken to their living quarters.

They entered a smaller room that followed on deeper into the grand cavern. Hanna and his crew stopped dead in their tracks, this was no natural phenomenon, the walls beautifully carved and shaped in the surrounding rock. In the middle stood a fountain fed by water falling from the ceiling. The rock looked like Marble and the entrances to four tunnels had been carved in beautifully integrate patterns and pictures.

One set of carvings showed naked people bathing while another showed people eating and drinking. George was staring at the carvings around one doorway that depicted a mass orgy. Yet another showed people sleeping and relaxing. The ceiling shaped to depict the clouds and sky, the sun at one end and the moon's and stars at the other. Even the blue star was there. As they looked up, they could feel a cool fresh breeze spilling in from hole in the ceiling. The grandeur of the room held them in awe. Warooka said to Hanna as he waved an open hand at the doorways.

'This is the entrance chamber you just follow your nose. When you are settled, I will show you the short cuts. But if you look for the fountain markings you will always come back to this room.'

They entered the passage with the carvings of resting people above it and proceeded up a flight of wide stairs. It opened on to a long corridor that had doorways opening from it on both sides. There were no doors to the rooms. They follow Warooka into one of them as they turned a corner to walk around a rock wall partition that provided each room with privacy from the hallway. Inside was a large living area with several rooms and a balcony that overlooked the sea. There seemed to be no shortage of rooms in the cavern complex as they were each given their own separate living quarters.

'This is just unbelievable Han, somebody pinch me. I must be still in the bloody ship, unconscious in my seat. It's got to be a dream,' said Ray.

Hanna sat down and looked about the room. It was functional but not luxurious, he noticed the chairs were old and made from wood. The cloth on the bed had been woven from soft thread and was showing signs of age. There was an enclave that was home to a broom and other assorted knick knacks.

'Have you seen the view boys,' he said as he got up and headed toward the balcony.

They all stood silently staring at the clean blue ocean. Birds called as they hung in the breeze, the waves splashed and rumbled at the base of the one hundred metre cliff and clouds stood tall above a distant horizon. The three survivors stood together in this strange room, in this unfamiliar labyrinth of tunnels that they would soon call home and contemplated what the future might hold.

‘Well, I could get comfortable with this. Did you see how pretty some of those girls were?’ said George.

‘What is it with these people? Have you noticed a little lack of curiosity amongst them,’ said Ray.

‘They’re smart enough but there’s something missing alright,’ said George.

‘I’ve tried to bait Barunga a couple of times now but he’s just not interested in where we came from or who we are.’

Ray lay back on Hanna’s bed.

‘This all looks like a bloody good lifestyle so far. In fact, I think I may have died and gone to heaven.’

‘You got that right,’ said George.

‘Only time will tell... only time will tell,’ commented Hanna quietly, admiring the view.

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Chapter Three

One week later, they were feeling right at home. No one had refused them access to any part of the complex and they had explored every square metre of the place. They had learnt that the natives were very self-sufficient in their life style and that the complex was so old that no one knew who had actually built it.

Vague references to the Ancients were all they could get. The stories Hanna had heard were told in songs and were obscure and undetailed. Some were similar to the stories he had heard told by the indigenous people of the South Pacific Ocean. Stories of mother earth, forest spirits and nature’s bounty... that sort of thing.

They had no need to improve or expand the cavern complex as it served them well and had enough room for twice the current population. Ray had discovered an ingenious plumbing system that ran through the place. In addition, a waste recycling methane gas cooking system that he claimed to be proof of a more advanced civilisation in the past. Hanna had spent much of his time studying the hieroglyphics in the carvings to see what stories they could tell. However, he did not find much, these people lived the life described on the walls and as he studied them, he realised that life here could probably be sustained and remained the same as it was for hundreds, maybe thousands of years.

On the cycles of the moons, two groups of men would leave the village and forage for around six to seven days. This would coincide with the five full cycles of the moon Deimos. Another group of journeymen had come back to the village the day after they had arrived.

Every night these people would sing and dance. There was always some reason to celebrate and the festivities would not always be at the same place. More likely than not, there would be a number of different gatherings happening at once. These were mainly at night and ranged from quite little get togethers to full on party action.

They were uninhibited in their activities to the point of great embarrassment at times. Monogamy was also apparent among the tribe’s people as there were distinct family values displayed where the children were involved. They would sometimes drink a wine that had an intoxicating affect but it was something that you could not abuse. You reached a certain level of intoxication and if you continued to drink, you would actually begin to sober up. And, as George found out, if you consumed enough then it had a nullifying effect. The immunity would last for some days after.

Hanna had found a calendar in an astrologically aligned chamber at the top of the complex. There, the sun shone through an opening in the ceiling, pinpointing the date and time of day in

detail. Once again, the walls were carved with pictures of the life of a tribesman. Defining trees and their fruit, different fishing and hunting techniques... it was a complete how to do list.

The summer and winter solstice were clearly defined as the two main yearly events. The Martian year being twice as long as an Earth's and the planets having a similar tilt meant the each season was twice as long. The calendar was based on four points and each point was represented on the adjacent walls. Two of the walls were longer and semicircular.

The carvings were deep and integrally detailed with information such as maps indicating ripe fruit trees, animals giving birth, fish spawning and even the weather. Hanna found that his estimation of early summer had been correct and noted the creek camp and its attractions listed on the wall. The calendar showed electrical storms and evening showers to be the predicted weather for the coming month.

At one end of the chamber was a staircase that led to the roof level and Hanna spent many hours sitting here overlooking the expansive views. This was the pinnacle of the complex. From here, you could see for kilometres around. As Hanna admired the view, he realised that the complex would be almost impossible to see from the sky.

This high point was on the tip of the headland that the village labyrinth was built in. It sat in the centre of a spire of land that was around forty metres wide. Hanna could see that the complex had been designed to have the living areas overlook the ocean on both sides of the headland. It was a truly a beautifully designed piece of architecture.

On both sides of the headland were beaches that offered protection from the prevailing winds. One protected from the east and the other protected from the west. The sandy beaches at the base of the cliffs, inside each bay, were only accessible through the cavern system. Today with the wind from the east, there were children playing in the ocean on the western beach. Hanna watched as they caught the waves on surfboards made from carved pieces of wood.

This was an ideal life style but there were still many unanswered questions. Why were there no boats? Are there other tribes in the area? Why did the maps only show the surrounding areas? He had asked Warooka these questions and had received little response, nor any interest from anyone in his queries.

He could picture in his head the rough lay of the land as they had descended from space and remembered that there was another land mass further south over the ocean but how far away it was he did not know. As he lay back against the ground to stare at the clouds, he heard a noise behind him. He turned to see but no one there, then again, the sound of stifled laughter.

'Well there's no point in hiding if you want to know what I'm doing, so you should just come out and ask me,' he said, pleased that finally somebody was showing an interest.

From around the corner of the doorway stepped the native girl Kadina. She gave him an innocent smile and stood there gently swaying with her hands behind her back. Hanna took a deep breath and sighed aloud, speaking in his own language so she could not understand him.

'Holly snap girlie, you'd better be careful looking at me like that with those eyes, who knows what could happen to a nice girl like you,' he said.

Kadina smiled as if she understood his words as she walked from the doorway to look at the view. She turned her head at the right time to catch his stare and then looked away as she smiled to herself confident in her victory. Hanna felt defeated and confused, he had played into the trap like an amateur and he was not about to play games with this little minx.

He politely smiled and started the conversation.

'It's such a beautiful day and I'm sure you would like some time to yourself, so I'll see you later,' he turned to go.

'Do you like the old stories Hanna York?' she said.

Hanna stopped, they were the right words, she had him and he could see no escape, he turned to look at her. This time she held his stare and there was no smile on her beautiful face. Her hair flowed down her shoulders and over her ample breast. Hanna felt himself blush, as he stood

there, speechless in her beauty; he had to break the dead lock between them. He looked away and spoke as he watched a flock of sea birds circle and land on the water.

‘I’m new to your land Kadina and I want to learn more about your people and their history,’ he said.

‘I have questions about your ancestors, and the lands beyond the sea,’

He waved toward the horizon. There was a short silence.

‘Lands beyond the sea,’ she repeated as she tried to digest the statement as she looked out over the water with him.

‘Why, Hanna York? What’s wrong with things as they are?’

‘Well, nothing, but I don’t like (he struggled for the translation of the word ‘mysteries’) unanswered questions,’ he said.

‘Why ask them then?’

Hanna did not answer and for a short while, he just looked at the view.

‘Where I come from we always ask why.’

‘When, where and what are the most common questions of my people and that’s how we learn to progress and develop our society, and ourselves.’

‘And what is it that’s so wrong with your society, and its people, Hanna York?’ asked Kadina as she placed her hand on his shoulder in a show of concern.

‘Nothing,’ quipped Hanna defensively as he pulled away. He realised his overreaction to her touch. She had stepped back and looked confused. He stared at her and thought hard on what she had just said.

‘Well, maybe you’ve got a point’ and he smiled at her reassuringly.

She smiled back.

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*H*anna spent a lot of time with Kadina after that day. He enjoyed the bouncing thoughts of her unpolluted mind and often found her reactions to his questions interesting and amusing. She however, would sometimes get a little fed up with his continued inquisition.

She was a wealth of stories and old myth, and Hanna listened intently to them all. Yet he was still unable to draw anything other than a moral value from them. Sometimes there was a reference to the forest spirits but they were vague and unspecific.

Hanna could find no reference to any other tribe or foreign lands and after another week of long walks and conversation he realised she was concerned that she could not hold his interest any longer. She encouraged him try fishing and promised to teach him to surf. He did not let on that he had some experience there and he thoroughly enjoyed his time with her.

One day, he and Kadina were walking around the lower cliffs northwest of the headland of the village. They had collected a large bunch of roses along the way.

‘All the colours of ‘a rising sun,’ she had said.

He followed her lead as she walked along the edge of the rocks some three metres above the water. The cliff face here had been undermined and large portions of sandstone had broken out and fallen into the ocean. They passed through an opening of what looked like a small cave. It opened up onto an enclosed bay with a small entrance to the ocean. They climbed up and down the rocks and finally stopped on top of a large square boulder.

The waves rolled into the bay through a narrow gap in the headland and Hanna stood beside Kadina to watch as a large swell swept towards them. She stepped up to the edge of the platform they stood on and threw the bunch of flowers into the ocean. As the wave approached, it hit the base of the rock that they stood upon and a spout of water sprayed into the air behind them

carrying some of the flowers. Hanna felt the rock vibrate and rumble. Kadina slipped her arm around Hanna's waist and looked up into his face, laughing at the surprise on his face.

'This is Rumble rock,' she said and ran off jumping from boulder to boulder till she was on the sand. Hanna stood and waited for the next wave to hit and again, more flowers were carried into the air as the boulder rocked and rumbled. He looked to see where Kadina had gone and saw her down on the beach some distance off. The ocean current had swept the remaining flowers around to where she now stood. Hanna ran to join her and when he arrived, he found her swimming naked amongst them, laughing. He ran into the water to be with her.

They splashed and swam and he chased her out of the water, up onto the sand. Finally, he caught her by the foot and they landed. He placed his hand on her shoulder and turned her around, all the while, they laughed aloud. He held her still and looked into her eyes. They both stopped laughing and stared at each other intently. Those beautiful pools of mystery and warmth, he dove in, releasing his inhibitions and abandoning his will power. He kissed her. There, on the sand by the water, naked in the sun, they made love.

The following few months were the happiest of Hanna's life.

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*H*igh above the cliffs, a large eagle hung in the breeze. It stayed motionless, listening to the sound of the air as it swilled around its vast expanse of wings. It surveyed the calm waters of the bay directly below. Two creatures sprang from the rocks and frolicked in the blue waters. Bright coloured dots moved about in the water around them. It watched as the large creatures left the water, embraced on the beach and began mating on the sand.

Then it saw a silver flash just under the surface of a turquoise swell that had just entered the bay. It arched its wings then tucked them in closer to its body as it entered into its decent. It arched again as it positioned itself to approach its victim from behind, careful not to be seen. Gliding closely above the water and using the air lifted by the moving swell, it approached its quarry.

Talons stretched out as its wings began pushing air forward, it stalled and once feeling its prey in its clasp, began working its wings to rise above the water. Turning into the breeze to utilise its energy, the massive bird worked hard as it flapped its wings and rose back into the sky. It screeched in victory, as its victim wriggled defiantly in its clasp. The bird then headed back to its cliff top nest to feed its young offspring.

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*T*he summer solace was upon them and it started with a week of busy preparation. After the journeymen had returned with more bounty, they began preparing their dance outfits. Everybody took great pride in them and Kadina said that if the weather was good then the celebrations could last up to two weeks.

Hanna had made a cape and intended to be a vampire although as none of natives would understand, he did not intend to pollute their minds with the details. Nevertheless, he would have fun chasing people around anyhow.

As the event drew nearer, the excitement in the community rose. The atmosphere became electric and infectious as stories were told of past events. This was a time for different songs and rhythms. Tunes that was restricted for use only in the celebratory period of the summer solace. Hanna had discovered that the songs he had participated in while foraging for the village payed tribute to the forest and animals that they were harvesting. All the songs and dances had some special meaning or significance.

Hanna also noticed that now, even the men were on the ocean with their wooden surfboards. Kadina explained that this was an important part of the celebrations as the coming months brought a new prevailing wind and swell.

‘A time for boys to be men and the experienced to demonstrate their worth.’ She explained.

Finally, the time had arrived and at noon, when the sun breached the orifice in the ceiling of the ceremonial chamber at the top of the complex. Large drums and baritone didgeridoos sounded the start of the celebrations. People followed in a procession to the cliff face that overlooked the eastern bay. After a brief ceremony, four men walked to the top of the headland and jumped into the ocean with their surfboards.

The sea seemed calm, yet on the horizon, distinctive undulating curves rose and fell against skyline. A large swell crashed around the headland and began to wall up along the point. The men started to paddle and one man, who was in just the right position, took off down the face of the wave.

As he dropped to the bottom, the crowd roared and three large drums thumped across the bay. The water loomed twice his height as he stood to his feet. If he fell, he would be dashed on the rocks. He turned his watercraft into the face of the wave and as the board rose up the wall of water, he turned it again to drop back down its face once more. He repeated the manoeuvre several times before pulling off the back of the wave and paddled out to where he started. Others were now riding down the line on the waves that followed.

‘Kowabunga,’ yelled George towards Hanna.

‘I’ll be giving that a go. I haven’t ridden a surfboard since I went to the Southern Cross Uni,’

There was a wait before another set rolled in as George bragged of some more youthful adventures.

Another rider took off and dropped down the face. This time, as he turned back up the face, he stalled his surfboard by placing weight on his back foot. The wave crashed down over him as he was swallowed up and just as suddenly as he disappeared, he emerged again, to the rapturous roar and cheers of the crowd. He aggressively pumped his board up and down, maximising his speed on the remaining wave before flicking out as it crashed on the shore. He flew high into the air, having time to acknowledge the cheers emanating from the crowd, before falling back down into the water.

‘This is going to be a great solace festive,’ said Warooka to Hanna and George.

‘Later it will be my turn and you can watch as I will dance with the fish,’ he laughed.

A school of dolphins swam around the headland, heading toward the surfers, as another wave formed; three of the school shot off at speed and jumped from the face of the wave as two men dropped in together. All five rode the wave and twice, the dolphins simultaneously leaped from the water. The sight awed Hanna and his crew. The spectators yelled their approval and the dolphins, on completion of their ride, stood high in the water, working their tails hard as they slowly moved backwards, acknowledging the attention. This spectacle lasted all morning and the dolphins stayed for the show.

Later that day, the dolphins, and some fifteen board riders herded a large school of fish into the bay and onto the beach. Hanna had missed it but Ray told how the dolphins disappeared for a short time then, on an unknown signal, the board riders helped the Dolphin’s as a large school of fish rounded the headland.

‘There were Hundreds of fish, they chased them straight into a gutter and herded them into the shallows. Then we took over and literally chased them up onto the sand. Then we threw half the catch back to the dolphins and everybody gorged themselves. It was truly a remarkable sight. Man and wild beast, working together for a common goal,’ said Ray.

The celebrations continued until late as the sky filled with large storm clouds. Distant thunder boomed. Hanna lay with Kadina in his arms; he could smell the rain as it started to fall. Lightning flicked on the walls of his quarters and he realised that he was smiling. Then it came to him, he was happy, for the first time in his life; he knew what real happiness was.

*

Chapter Four

*T*he solace festival lasted two weeks. They surfed, fished, and swam with the village people. The dolphins were back every day. Hanna could see them watching, and as people danced on the beach, they would rise out of the water on their tails and skip across the ocean surface backwards. George got his chance at surfing on one of the calmer days and made his fellow crew members proud.

Hanna and Ray swam with the dolphins on a number of occasions and helped with the fish harvest as the need arose. They surprised George as they too had some experience surfing. However, the weather finally changed. The wind and swell finally dropped away from the west and the fish migrations move back off the coast as the summer solace finished for another year.

Hanna and his crew had become a tight little harmonic trio now and were quite good performers. Each night they were required to perform and Ray had become an excellent music coordinator. He would spend much of his time choreographing and planning the next show so as not to become too repetitious.

George just enjoyed himself, everything was a joke to him, and that is just the way he liked it. Sometimes Ray, taking things a little more seriously, got a little flustered at his improvisations but it was all in fun. There was nothing to be serious about and why not, thought Hanna, life was good. For the next six months, they lived a simple village life with no worries or cares and little responsibilities.

There was always something to do, go with the journeymen if they felt the need for adventure or help in the kitchen. Fishing was Hanna's favourite past time. If he caught, only two fish then he had provided for himself, any more was a contribution to the community. He would average six. Sometimes, when he caught a big one, the blood would run in his veins. The thrill of the hunt would grip him and he would celebrate long into the evening, telling stories of how skilfully he had landed his prize. George would always call out.

'Tell us about the one that got away.'

Ray would follow with.

'How big did you say that was?'

On cue, villagers would, slowly, open their arms and then extend further to opened hands and everybody would laugh. (This was the village signal for a hug.)

George was king of the kids. Due to his clowning abilities, but he found that the children would give him no peace. Therefore, he would organise activities and projects to occupy them, his greatest achievement being the re invention of the wheel. A thin stick tied together at the ends to make a hoop. The children would run after them all day with another stick to guide it. George was the village celebrity.

Life was good.

*

*I*n the eight weeks after the summer solace, Kadina announced her pregnancy. Hanna was delighted and it came as no surprise. More celebrations took place as Hanna took pride in his accomplishment.

One fine winter day, they had travelled to the third bay south east of the village where Hanna had had a successful days fishing the day before. He found the fish guts he had buried from that catch to use as berley and as the tide was about one hour from full, he climbed out onto a ledge in the cliff above the turquoise water. He threw the berley into a gap in the rocks that the tide and waves would slowly retrieve. This would wash into a deep water gutter and attract the fish that would begin to feed at the top of the tide.

Kadina had climbed down another gap in the rocks further to the west and on to a little patch of sand. As the waves gently rolled in to cover the remaining sand, she splashed playfully about as Hanna stared after her. Admiring her soon to be swollen belly, he felt truly blessed to just be witness to such beauty.

She ran back to the rock face, removed her sarong, and placed it on a ledge above the water. She looked towards Hanna, yelled something that was lost in the distance, turned, and ran into the water. Kadina swam about twenty metres out and turned to swim along the coastline toward him. Hanna recalled the conversation where he had told her that swimming was good exercise for a pregnant woman. How they had laughed and made love when she told him she was going to give him the strongest son than the village had ever seen.

Hanna stood on the ledge overlooking the scene when he noticed a large dark shape in the water just east of where he stood. It was about fifteen metres from the shoreline, in the deep-water channel where Hanna had fed his berley trail. He immediately realised what was about to happen. His heart leapt into his throat as he tried to scream a warning and as he controlled his panic, he ran back and forth, looking for rocks to throw, trying to attract Kadina's attention.

Nevertheless, it was to no avail, the object was now heading directly towards her. In his terror, he ran over the side of the cliff into the water. He dropped about three metres into knee deep water and landed with a thump. Although jarred from at landing, he did not slow down in his frantic attempt to beat the creature to his woman. He swam as he had never swum in his life and as he approached, he raised his head above to water to check his direction. He could see water slashing where Kadina had been.

He took three more strokes before he realised what he had seen and he stopped to look again. Now, there was no movement on the surface. He kicked his feet hard to raise himself out of the water. Still there was nothing.

Then he dove down into the cool, clear water, searching. But still, nothing! He continued to dive around towards the spot he had last seen her, but it to no avail. There must be something, he thought as he looked. In addition, as his brain registered that he was really looking for blood in the water; he blocked out the thought and renewed his search with a panicked vigour.

There was no way that he would accept the fact that he may never see her again. He swam and searched for hours, refusing to give up hope. Finally, he crawled from the water exhausted and climbed up onto the ledge again. There, he looked about the bay, hoping, wishing, but there was only the clear blue water.

Birds hung in the afternoon breeze. Waves lapped at the water's edge. There was nothing to show that anything had changed other than the receding height of the afternoon tide. Everything was as it should be except, there, hanging from a small branch, was a red sarong waiting for its owner, the only proof to make Hanna's mind snap back into reality and believe what had actually happened. It sat there and so did he. Tears formed in his bloodshot eyes, blurring his sight, stinging.

*

*H*anna became a recluse and for all the effort his crew members made, they had trouble trying to break through to his private world of self-pity. He refused to interact with the villagers as they made him angry at their passive acceptance of Kadina's death. It did not seem to bother

them. In fact, they celebrated it as another festival, the ceremony of the forest spirits. They believed that her time had come and it was a great honour to be called upon at such an early age. They could not understand why Hanna was not happy for her.

He and his crew held a private ceremony in the bay where she had disappeared. That had been two long weeks ago. Now, he sat overlooking the ocean, the sun low on the horizon behind him.

‘How could it be,’ he asked himself.

‘How could this world, this life, this existence, be so cruel? Once so happy yet now..., so sad! Sad to the point of despair, lacking any will to continue.’

Overwhelmed with desperation, he stirred, restless, anxious, and angry. He hated it, he was helpless, empty, and he had never felt like this before. What could he do?

‘What? What?’ he yelled as he placed his hands over his face and bowed his head. He felt his hair in his hands. Again, he remembered her face, her hair; he could feel it, her hair. He pulled; he pulled hard and felt the pain. The pain! Tears emerged from the corner of his eyes and gently, so gently; they rolled down his cheeks. Warm, soft, tears creasing his face, comforting him in his hour of grief.

‘I won’t sob,’ he told himself. ‘Not again.’

Nevertheless, his breath became short, his chest constricted. The tears increased and again he moaned, but quietly this time. If he was to do this again, he was going to flow with it, take it to its limit, and rid it from his system forever so as to never allow it to happen again. He let his emotions run their course.

He sat on the edge of a cliff some eighty metres high mesmerised by the huge swells pounding the cliffs below. As he slowly gazed across the ocean surface, he noticed a number of large black objects in the heaving seas. Although they gave the impression of being small, he realised that they were dwarfed by the height of the massive cliffs.

‘They must be huge,’ he said to himself

‘Whales?’ He said, just as a number of the creatures broke the surface. Huge plums of watery spray emerged from their backs.

‘They are whales,’ he exclaimed aloud.

‘How could this be? All these similarities, it doesn’t make any sense. It’s just like Earth in so many ways. It’s just got to be home. But how was it possible? How did they get here?’

He stared after the pod of whales as they rose and fell on the large ocean swell. His mind cleared as he drank in the sweet purity of the air. He sat for about ten minutes without another thought as his mind blended with the majesty of the scene in front of him. He looked to the horizon, the sky was pure and clear. Then, as he focused, he saw it, land.

Distant, but he could just make it out, shadows highlighting the escarpment. He looked from left to right as he squint his eyes. Yes, there it was. No doubt about it, at about eleven o’clock south there was a rise on the horizon.

‘It could be a cloud’ he said aloud. But his heart was thumping and in his gut, he already knew.

He was out of here!

‘Explore’ His mind snapped. He jumped up excitedly, raising his hand to his brow, shading his eyes, searching.

‘Yes,’ he yelled. ‘That’s what I’ll do. We’ll build a boat and get away from here, away from these memories and reminders. A new adventure! I’ll explore this planet by boat. A new ship! Yes!’ he said.

‘Only this time an ocean going ship. Of wood and whatever else it takes to build, a project!’ He thought. He slapped his hand hard down onto his thigh. Then wheeled around excitedly and headed straight for the village. His pace picked up as he made a list in his mind. This was his new challenge, his new goal. Problems to solve, a ship to build, and a new land to explore.

‘Yes!’ he shouted as he skipped high, punching his fist into the air, and again slapping his thigh as he broke into a run.

*

*R*ay and George were a little taken back by the sudden change in Hanna’s attitude. He tried to organise the village people to start the project and found that they had no interest in it all. He held a meeting with his crew, Warooka, Koonaida, Barunga and the elder Curramulka to discuss his plan. He explained his ideas and waited for a response. There was none offered. Hanna had to prompt them.

‘What do you think of this plan Warooka?’ He said

Warooka looked up at Hanna.

‘I do not see why you would want to leave here. There is no need to go.’

‘But we can explore and discover new lands. Maybe meet new people, Imagine a new culture that’s different from your own.’ Hanna enthused.

Barunga stirred in his seat. Hanna looked to him for comment. He stiffened uncomfortably and said.

‘No man has ever travelled the ocean, there is no need.’

‘I’m sorry Hanna York, but it still doesn’t explain why, when all our needs are met here,’ said Koonaida.

Agreement was acknowledged around the villagers present. Hanna looked at Curramulka. The old man slowly looked around the group.

‘You are new here Hanna York and your ways seem strange and different to us. Every man is free to do as he may wish, but he must not interfere with another man’s will. We all work together to achieve this goal. Together, the tribe is strong. Together the tribe will survive. Together we live as friends,’

The villagers then, on cue, broke into song. Frustrated, Hanna stood up and paced. He composed himself and went to fetch some drinking water in the corner of the room. Returning, he sat down, then looked across at Ray and George. They both gave him a reassuring smile. Hanna’s frown remained in place. After the song was finished, there was short silence and Curramulka looked at him and spoke again.

‘We will help you in your quest Hanna York,’

*

*O*ver the following months, work slowly began on the project. The first job was to make tools to split logs and cut wood. Hanna had found a store of the crystal like rocks and using a hammer stone, they chipped flakes off the edge of the quartz to create crude but effective cutting tools.

They found a stand of trees that the surfboards were made from, the buoyant timber had a straight grain, and the trunks were long. He experimented and found that by using a series of wedges they could split a log into planking timbers approximately nine metres long by around forty millimetres thick. This was ample and a continuous length of planking would mean no joins in its length, giving the vessel extra strength.

This now determined he could finish the design of his boat. It was to be to be approximately seven to eight metres long, with a beam of two point one and a draft of point seven. They built a kiln to dry and season the timbers and then they manufactured a slipway. A heavier timber was chosen for the keel and after it had been carved from a large log, the men hauled it back to the

slipway. They then shaped the ribbed frames, some from crooked tree limbs he had handpicked in order to give the ribs of his craft that extra strength from the trees natural grain.

The work was slow but gradually the boat progressed and Hanna was occupied enough to block out his recent past. The planking was over lapped as they were attached to the frame and then fixed into place with timber pegs. A wood tar (hemp fibre soaked in pine tar) was then applied to the hull as a caulking material.

This, Hanna knew, would be something that had to be tested later in the sea trials. A rudder was fitted and as a precaution, he had a second one made to take on the journey. Two of everything was his motto, as he may not have the resources to manufacture these things again. The mast was erected amid great ceremony and the sail was made of a patchwork of pigskin. Again, a smaller sail was made as a spare and it was to double as a roof, to cover the travellers from the sun and the rain.

As the project neared completion, Hanna could feel the pride of his achievement. This was a beautiful boat, stronger than he had originally envisaged and bigger. It would hold nine men comfortably, and had provision for eight to row. Hanna hadn't spoken of a crew to any one as he thought that as the project developed, the interest would also increase and it did.

*

The day finally arrived for the launch. Hanna had his crew and they had all been instructed as to how to row the craft once it was in the water. Hanna would be the helmsman; there was George, Ray, Warooka, Barunga, and Koonaida. Some of the younger men of the tribe, Kielpa, Unow and Yaninie had proved to be a great source of strength during construction and seemed enthusiastic enough to join the crew. Hanna allowed young Minlton to come along as the mascot. He had watched the construction process from the very start. Looking over Hanna's shoulder during the design stages, in fact, every day he would be standing by Hanna's side, yet he never got in the way. He watched and sometimes he tried to help and Hanna had grown very fond of the lad. For some reason, Minlton had never spoken a word in his life. Hanna enjoyed his silence of his company.

The moment had arrived and the village was out in force. Much to Hanna's delight, the day had even begun with the banging of the drums. The procession meandered its way down to the beach and the people gathered around the boat and along the shoreline. They sang some songs and finally Hanna gave the signal. As arranged, Curramulka's wife threw a container of wine over the bow.

'I name this boat the Marion Kadina,' she yelled. The crowd cheered, the blocks released, and a team of men pushed and pulled the craft down towards the water. Gravity took over and the men scurried out of the way, some stumbling and laughing as they fell over in the sand. Hanna's heart leapt and his blood raced as the craft rocked violently, throwing him from side to side. He looked to see Minlton as he stood on the ships stern, holding onto the tail of the keel, facing the oncoming water, eyes wide open, solid as a rock.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, it was over. There was a large splash and a wave of water heralded the entry of the Marion Kadina into its new home. A short silence was broken with the rapturous applause and the roar of the crowd. People ran into the water and swam about the craft as Hanna instructed his crew to prepare oars and rudder. Finally, they were powering past the headland and along the coast.

He yelled his signal to the port side crew to remove their oars, then he pulled hard on the rudder and the boat turned. His crew cheered and they continued on. They kept it up for about an hour and although Hanna was desperate to test the sail, the boat was leaking and as he had expected, there would be some fine tuning to do. They had accomplished their goal and he was well pleased. The craft was all and more than he had expected.

‘This is a story that would live in village history. A song will be composed to commemorate this momentous event. ‘Who would think that this thing would float, Hanna York, I truly thought it was folly.’ Curramulka confessed.

Over the next month the sea trials continued. Soon, Hanna was ready to leave. Now was the time to gather his team. He had the three young men, Kielpa, Unow and Yaninie, as his constant companions. He was sure that they would go. He called a meeting to discuss the matter.

To his surprise, George expressed a lack of enthusiasm for the venture and asked if he could stay. He was happy here and liked the village life.

‘Life good here,’ he explained. ‘And besides, you’re coming back?’

Ray was a little more enthusiastic as he was keen to put some distance between himself and his relationship with one of the village girls. Warooka and Koonaida had also agreed to go, but only on the condition that they would return in one month. Seven was a good number, he told them and the final preparations began.

*

Chapter Five

Three dolphins broke the surface at the same time. They leapt free of the water and then re-entered without a splash. Their smooth skins reflected the sun as they effortlessly matched the speed of the boat. Hanna could see their faces as they swam on their sides and made eye contact. Unquestioningly, they followed the travellers out into the open ocean.

He could hear the water slap against the bow of his boat as it sliced through the waves. The wind bellowed the sails giving only a hint of its presence as it ushered them along. Several sea birds hung in the breeze above them, investigating. Satisfied, they would turn and shoot off with the breeze.

The crew all sat and stared back at the mainland from whence they had come. The morning’s preparations had gone well and they had left the village about an hour after sunrise on the offshore breeze. The cliffs of the village coastline slipped away to the northwest, as they sailed south-southeast into open sea.

Nobody spoke, as the realisation that they were actually leaving became a reality. Hanna put his hand on Unow’s shoulder and gently squeezed reassuringly as he could see the wrinkles of concern on his brow. They exchanged smiles and Hanna again looked forward toward their destination. Encouragingly he spoke to his men.

‘Well boys, we’re on our way. Let’s have a song,’ said Hanna.

‘What do you do with a drunken sailor?’

Ray started and they all broke into the song that had become their theme. Soon, they were improvising the verses and then all join in for the chorus. The dolphins leapt high to investigate the ruckus and the men roared encouragement as they shot out of the water.

About six hours later, they saw the peak of land that Hanna had named Mt Inspiration. It slowly rose from the horizon and its steep spire soon dominated the skyline, the rocky pinnacle rose up through the clouds. It came as a great relief to the crew to once again see land.

As they drew nearer they could see two islands that mimicked the mountains shape but on a smaller scale. The smallest was the closest, as the land seemed to stretch out to touch them. They could see that the main land that stretched off to the southwest was lined with cliffs and bays, much the same as the village coastline. The southeast coast disappeared around the other side of the mountain.

Hanna decided they would stay with the north easterly breeze and follow the south eastern coastline to look for a bay that would give them safe harbour. He estimated they had two hours

of daylight left. Finally, at dusk, they found a protected bay and that night they slept on a beach and ate from their provisions.

They spent the next day investigating their new surroundings. Hanna and Ray soon discovered that an impenetrable wall of cliffs surrounded the small forest that lay behind the beach. Waterfalls tumbled majestically from the plateau above. Large caves lay hidden behind the largest as it spilled into a fresh water lagoon. Coconuts, mangos and bananas grew abundantly throughout the forest. The day proved to be therapeutic for the crew as they swam with the dolphins and played in the serene setting. The next morning they sailed on the high tide.

They headed south along the rugged coastline and as the day progressed, so did the wind. By early afternoon storm clouds began building around the mountains. Hanna considered trying to make it back to the safe harbour of the night before but suddenly the wind shifted and they were being thrown about in a three-metre swell, the wind driving them out to sea.

Hanna decided to drop sail and they spent the night fighting the elements. The wind eased and the rain poured down. It was the longest night Hanna had ever experienced. As daylight grew, so did the wind, the tiny craft heaved to and throw in the massive swell. He ordered his crew to break out the wooden body boards they had stored as a safety precaution and they tied the safety line to their hands. As Hanna checked his charges, he could see the fear in their eyes.

Finally, the inevitable happened and a large swell loomed off their starboard bow. It stood high above the boat and with the wind howling, it came crashing down on them, filling the boat with water as it continued on its march. The next wave sucked the Marion Kadina deep into a hollow pit, she twisted sharply with the sudden drop and with the weight of the water that it now carried, she submerged, dragging her occupants with her as the next wave came crashing down upon them.

Hanna was awash, lost from the boat; he struggled in the water, straining to see. Controlling his panic, he stopped his efforts in order to conserve his energy. If he were to survive this, he would need all the energy he could muster.

The sky grew darker and the rain began to bucket down cutting short his visibility even more. Although he had planned for every contingency, this was definitely the worst case scenario. His only thoughts now were of survival. With every wave, every wall of foam that washed over him, his energy was sucked away. He hung on tightly to his wooden body board.

‘He must survive,’ He thought as he watched the swirling water. He would take a breath, then get thrown about under the white water, released and then gasp for another, over and over again. Slowly, he lost track of time, his mind went blank, his body numb, his guilt, overwhelming.

*

*A*s the storm slowly dissipated, the ocean settled down and Hanna floated on the now calmer surface. He found time to reflect. He remembered why he was here, that he had a crew. That there were others out here, somewhere that depended on him. That he alone and his selfish needs was responsible for this.

‘Had they survived? Will he survive?’

The seeds of doubt began to sow in his mind. It was his fault they were there. His fault this had happened. Anger surged in him. He got a grip on himself.

‘This wasn’t going to beat him, if he’s still alive, then the other’s would be to.’ He thought.

‘They were all experienced water men’.

Only barely conscious, he felt the heat of the sun on his face. He watched the sky as the clouds slowly moved about and roughly ascertained its position. Remembering that the swell was pushing in from the south, he chose a direction and began to kick his wooden body board towards his chosen goal, life and land.

The hours passed slowly as he drifted in and out of consciousness, reality and dreams, it was hard to tell, nothing seemed real. His thoughts drifted back to a day at the beach with his beautiful Kadina. A time when his heart sang and mind soared high, when he was consumed with love's longing. Desire ached in his heart and an all-powerful lust to consume, be part of, to somehow integrate with his beloved 'pretty girl' began to overwhelm him. He could see the lights of a village calling on the horizon.

'Over here,' they said.

'Follow us,' they beckoned.

'Captain!' Yelled George

'We've got no thrusters.'

'Going for a grade four sir,' said Ray.

He lay on the piece of wood that kept him afloat and mindlessly kicked his feet.

He woke as a wave washed about his legs, cool water massaging his aching muscles. His conscience flickered into reality and he slowly sat up on the sand. The body board that had saved his life was on the water's edge beside him. There was nothing else to be seen other than the deserted beach, a headland to the north and a long stretch of beach to the south. Hanna lay back against the sand and looked to the sky. He lay there until another wave washed over him and as the memory of his swim sent shivers up his spine, he scurried backward away from the water.

Sleep was his only concern and he looked for shade. He tried to stand and was shocked at his inability to do so. He tried again and slowly stumbled his way over to a nearby tree. The next time he woke his throat was dry. He knew that he must find water. He staggered into the nearby foliage and looked amongst the leaves for any naturally occurring water traps. Sure enough, the skills he had learnt in the military academy proved to be of benefit and he found enough to survive. Once he had composed himself, he walked back to the beach and looked out to sea.

'Where are you fella's?' he called aloud.

'I know you're out there, somewhere, but where?'

He scanned the horizon with his hand shading his eyes. He climbed up the sand dune behind him and again looked about. He could see a watercourse entering the sea about two kilometres to the south and suspected that there could be a body of water inland that connected to it. His instincts told him to travel north to the headland. There, the rocks would be home to shellfish and fresh water would course through the cliff face somewhere.

He gathered his body board and trudged along the beach towards the headland. As he went, he penetrated the sand by the water's edge and was rewarded with cockleshells. His father had taught him how to find them on fishing trips as a child; they would use them as bait. Using one to smash the other he sucked the flesh from its shattered shell.

When he finally arrived, it was late afternoon. He found a water source trickling down a mossy crevice and then made his way up to the summit. Seeing nothing, he decided to gather some wood for a fire. He thought of the irony of making a fire for all to see when the last time he was on an unknown headland he was more concerned in not being seen. Just before the evening darkness fell, he scouted the cliffs for nests and managed to stone a couple of sea birds for a meal. He was ravenous and ate them before they had cooked properly.

That night he sat by his fire and stared out to sea hoping his companions might see the flame. As his thoughts cleared, he remembered his vision of seeing lights on the coastline. Although sleep was nearly upon him, he made for higher ground. Sure enough, there, to the north and a little inland, was the glow of lights. There was definitely a town with enough light to promise some form of help tomorrow. He dismissed any negative thoughts from his mind as he made his way back to the camp; he fed the fire and had a fitful night's sleep.

The town was on the other side of a fairly large bay. He estimated that it could be a good couple of day's walk to get to it. There had been no activity on the beach that morning and he

was torn between making his way to the village or to continue his vigil on the headland for his crew. By mid-morning, he decided to go for help.

*

A couple of hours after noon he came across a cabin. There were fences were four horses stood in a corral; pigs could be heard from a group of sheds. A rooster crowed in the chicken run. As Hanna got closer to the complex, he could hear the clatter of metal and voices yelling. He took a wide course around the buildings to see what the commotion was all about.

There, to his amazement, were two young men locked in ferocious combat. Both were around the same height and build. They swung thick metal swords, each around one metre long and both held shields, some six hundred millimetres wide by one metre long. One would swing his blade and the other would take the blow on the shield, trying to push his opponent off balance, thus giving him enough time to swing his sword. Then one of the men stumbled; the other made his move for domination, pushing him to the ground. His opponent stood over him and pinned him down with his foot on the shield.

Hanna began to run and yelled as the man raised his sword to seal his victory. Both men stopped and watched as Hanna surged forward. By the time he arrived, the victor had stepped off his opponent and extended him his arm to help him of the ground. Although Hanna was unarmed, their mood was obvious, they were on their guard and his uninvited intervention was not welcome.

Hanna followed his instincts, bowing his head slightly; he introduced himself and extended his hand in friendship. The two young men regarded Hanna suspiciously and called out towards the house. A female voice answered, the door opened and a woman of about forty years old stepped out towards them. She was an attractive and strong looking woman. She wore a long dress that flowed elegantly over her body and helped extrapolate her figure. Her long golden hair, tied in a plait, hung down her back. Words were exchanged as then they looked back at Hanna.

Taking his cue, Hanna repeated his original introduction only this time he bowed his head a little more showing the woman proper respect. She then locked eyes with him as she studied Hanna's reaction to her deep probing eye contact, then smiling, she indicted the water drum and walked toward it. As she handed him a cup of water, he once again repeated his name as he tapped his chest. She repeated his name as communication slowly developed between them.

Hanna tried to learn as much as he could of their language. Again, he was surprised at how easily he managed to pick it up. At home, on Earth, he could speak several different languages fluently and luckily, he could see a common thread with theirs. He managed to explain his situation although he found it hard to convince them that he had come from over the sea. Again, the concept of a boat was unknown to these people.

Her name was Tooligie and she had three sons, Arno, Urno and Icno. Her husband was killed four years ago. He died bravely, in battle, defending the town of Ardrossan against the barbarian hoards of the east, the Perlumblie. Theirs was an orderly structure to their society and a long recorded history. Hanna was to discover that they were an honourable people with long standing traditions and a strong cultural heritage. They considered themselves warriors. A culture developed from the need, to defend and protect themselves, a total contrast to Warooka's village in the north. Here, the golden rule of life was in full force, the survival of the fittest.

Tooligie instructed her two sons to ride out and gather some help to search the coastline, but not before an argument with their mother on the merits of leaving her with a mad man. Hanna felt that he agreed with them although he felt honoured that she was so quick to trust him.

Hanna realised that he may have found what he was looking for; there could be clues here to the mystery as to where he was.

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As night began to reclaim the sky, Arno and Urno returned with the news that six men would be arriving in the morning to begin a search of the coastline. Hanna wanted desperately to join them but they insisted that he and Tooligie were to travel to the township for a meeting with the people's council. Tooligie was adamant that the council was his main priority.

'To offend them could prove disastrous,' she said.

Here, the village survived because the people obeyed the rules. That way there was no doubt, as to how the people would behave when in a crisis as they were constantly on high alert. He remembered Curramulka's words.

'Together the tribe is strong. Together the tribe will survive.'

During the evening, Hanna learned more about the Perlumblic. Tooligie described them as fierce, animals like creatures that ate human flesh. They used crude weapons and were apparently not very intelligent. Their ability to communicate was limited and although they had been known to fight in large numbers, they were more inclined to hunt in packs. They didn't ride horses, as they preferred to eat them and their weapons were crude yet effective. Although the villages had tried to exterminate this curse, they always seemed to return. They came from the mountains to the east and they could only enter the fertile valleys of Androssan through the Dark Valley.

'This was a deep gorge through which the 'Waters of the Dead' flowed. It was a defensible position and the entrance was guarded both day and night,'

Early the next morning, they were awoken by the arrival of Icno, Tooligie's eldest. He made a show, huffing and puffing at his brothers. Hanna suspected that being the eldest; he was feeling guilty for not having been there to protect his family on the arrival of a stranger. Hanna took no offence to this territorial display. After Icno had calmed down, Hanna discovered that he had been away courting a farmer's daughter on the other side of town. Tooligie gently reprimanded her son for breaking traditional rule and travelling so far alone. Hanna recognised this as a basic rule of warfare, as in a game of chess; 'you never leave a man unguarded.'

'Boy's will be boy's' he thought.

Others soon arrived and after closely examining this stranger, much to Hanna's relief, they finally rode off to the coast in search of more.

Hanna and Tooligie travelled along a track that followed the creek through the grasslands of the valley. Their horses seemed eager for the exercise. As they reached a rise in the road, he could see across the fertile valley to the Carpa River. Tooligie explained that the 'Waters of the Dead' was a tributary of that very river.

Tooligie continued to explain that the mountains acted as a natural barrier and protected her people from their enemies. There was no way to cross the river as it wove its way between the thick rainforest and the sheer cliffs of the mountains. The only way over was by Heaven's Gate, a spectacular natural arch.

To the north was a great peak that dominated the skyline above the township, Mt Androssan. Between that and the escarpments of the west flowed the Baroona River. West were the Walls of Restraint, a jagged, impassable escarpment that ran from far in the north and south to the dark valley.

'Come Hanna, we mustn't stop long if we are to conclude our business and return before night,' she said.

Hanna turned his young steed towards her and broke into a canter to catch up. As he continued past, he could feel the enthusiasm of his horse as they sped along the trail. Slowly, as he gained more confidence in his riding ability, the thrill and freedom of riding took over. The wind whistled in his ears and he could feel the cool air upon his face. He gripped the might steed's stomach tightly between his calves and relaxed as he controlled the rhythm of his bouncing to

coincide with the movement of the horse. As the horse recognised the rider's newfound confidence, it suddenly stepped up gear, throwing Hanna about in the saddle. Tooligie, realising Hanna was now out of control, shouted the horse's name.

'Woe, Tangle foot. Woe!' she called.

Hanna over reacted, pulling hard on the reins. The horse skidded to a stop, dropping its head as its hooves slid in the dirt. Hanna was thrown over the horse's head, somersaulting as he grabbed the steed's neck and unceremoniously, landed on his backside. Tooligie pulled up beside him, skilfully dismounting before her horse had come to a stop. She rushed to his side. Hanna gasped for breath as he tried to sit up.

'Are you alright?' asked Tooligie.

'I'm fine, I think,' he said.

'Are you injured?'

'Only my pride,' he said, rubbing his backside.

They both started to laugh. Hanna lay back on the ground holding his chest, trying to catch his breath. The horse came over and nudged him, licking his face. Hanna realised that the beast was also concerned about his wellbeing.

'Old Tangle foot, hey?' said Hanna and they laughed some more.

'It is plain to see that you are not an experienced horseman. If the steed thinks he is in charge he will only lead you in circles, back to where you came,' advised Tooligie.

'And I thought I had it all under control.'

'I fear that as you are a stranger to these valleys, you may be in considerable danger. You may not be wise in the way of the sword.'

Hanna stood and slowly remounted his horse. He uncomfortably settled back into the saddle. Tangle foot turned his head and eyed his rider. Hanna gave the horse an affectionate pat on the side of its neck and reassured the beast that everything was all right.

'It's not your fault tangles,' he said encouragingly.

'You were just doing what you were told.'

The horse neighed and shook its head as Hanna's legs instinctively wrapped tightly around the horse's midriff.

'If I am to remain in these lands, I will make it a priority to learn the customs of your people. Although it is the way of my people to avoid violence, I am well versed in the arts of self-defence,' he said.

'I can see that you are an honourable man Hanna. Nevertheless, the experience of mortal combat is very real and not learnt from customs or from the books of the Ancients. To take the life of one who is intending to take yours is an instinct that one is born with and must be nurtured until manhood makes its reality felt. I fear for the man who has not had an upbringing to foster this, as those who fear the unknown may construe his principals as a weakness.'

She held his gaze. Hanna nodded to acknowledge that her message was heard, loud, and clear. He felt a little humiliated by her condescension and reminded himself that this was the mother of three young men.

Again, they started towards the village. This time they rode side by side and Tooligie, sensing Hanna's injured pride, lead the horses into a canter once more. It didn't take long for the exhilaration of riding to grip Hanna again. He could feel the power of the mighty beast as it skipped beneath him and slowly, he regained his confidence.

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Chapter Six

The village was about two and half-hours away from Tooligie's farm and they passed five other farms that dotted the road along the way. It had been built on the top of a knoll and was encompassed by a protective rock wall about three metres high. Behind it stood black slate shingled roofs with dormer windows that sloped at an angle of around sixty degrees.

In the centre of town rose a tall dominating tower that stood some six stories high and from the top, Hanna guessed, you could see quite some distance of the surrounding area. He considered it to be a very pretty little town. Outside the city walls people gathered about doing business. Merchant's tended stalls and farmer's milled about with livestock. Men sat at tables under the trees and pavilions as they played board games while women congregated in groups, gossiping. Children kicked balls while others jostled in sparring sessions. As they approached, people stopped what they were doing and walked to intercept their path as they greeted them.

'Who's the friend, Tooligie?' One called out.

'Is that the stranger?'

'Where is he from?'

'What's your name stranger?'

'His name is Hanna York and he visits from the lands of the north, past the open seas,' she replied.

The crowd erupted with a huge gasp. Loud discussions began amongst them, they had never heard of such a thing. More voices called out for explanations while others protested their disbelief. Hanna composed himself as he began to feel uncomfortable in amongst the chattering crowd. Tooligie ignored them until she reached the gates where she stopped her horse and turned to look.

'That's what I said,' she called. She repeated her original statement and added.

'The people's council is waiting on our arrival.' They turned and entered the city.

Inside, the streets were clean, the buildings were tidy, the roads were paved and everything was well maintained. Children that were playing suddenly stopped and ran to see. People continued to follow from outside the city walls. As they made their way to the main tower, Hanna allowed Tooligie to take the lead. She gave him an encouraging glance, as she remained focused on their path.

Her head held high, she comfortably exhibited the pride and dignity of an ambassador of the town of Androssan. Hanna was struck at how beautiful she looked and could see that there was more than curiosity in the eyes of the men that watched.

Finally, they reached the base of a grand stairway. It led to a platform in front of the main entrance of the tower that overlooked a central courtyard. Someone took charge of their horses. As they strode up a staircase, people began filing into the area; Tooligie entered the building without looking back. Inside was a large hall, it was filled with bench seats that faced a stage. Men began sitting at the table in its centre. As they approached, others filed into the room after them and sat in the stalls.

The man seated at the centre of the table indicated for them to sit and ushered an attendant to offer Tooligie and her associate a mug of water. He drank heavily from one himself and Hanna wondered if water was what the man was really thirsting for. When the hall had filled to capacity, the man at the centre of the table tapped a hollow twisting metal cylinder that hung from a frame.

'Ting! Ting! Ting! Ting!'

'Call to order, call to order!' he shouted. The crowd hushed, and then the man addressed them.

'This special meeting of the people's council is now in session. Tooligie Yeelanna will now address the people.' He said authoritatively.

Tooligie stood gracefully and spoke confidently.

‘Yesterday at mid sun, this man, Hanna York, a traveller from the north arrived at the farm Yeelanna. He tells a tale of high adventure in a craft of wood that floats on the ocean surface.’

The crowd murmured amongst themselves.

‘Ting! Ting! Ting! Ting!’

All was silent again and Tooligie continued.

‘This craft was swamped by the surging seas during the storm of two suns past. There he last saw his six companions and afloat a piece of driftwood, he swam to the shore alone. Now my son Icno leads a group of nine ardent young men in a search of the coastline in the hope of finding more survivors.’

The crowd was still hushed but exchanging expressions as they absorbed Tooligie’s revelation. The man at the centre of the table looked at Hanna intently and said.

‘In your experience as a traveller of the ocean’s surface, what are the chances of your companions surviving?’

Hanna was relieved that the man’s was showing concern for his crew and not casting doubt on Tooligie’s story, as the crowd seemed to be doing. As Hanna stood, he gave the chairperson a polite grin and bowed his head respectfully. He spoke as a captain of a ship, without emotional attachment to the basic facts and figures, as his training had taught him. He was surprised by what he said.

‘Considering the resent experience and training of my crew, I would give them a very good chance of survival. But if the searchers don’t find them by three days’ time, then I must give them up as lost,’ he said

‘I think the people’s council of the town of Androssan would agree to help in this search for the lost men of the northlands.’

He looked about the as they were shaking their head in agreement.

‘Are their more of these craft carrying your people on their way to visit our land?’ The chairperson asked.

Hanna sensed there was more to this question as the crowd murmured their approval.

‘We only have one vessel sir and this was her first voyage. We come to explore new lands and to meet new people in the wish to study the ancient texts, exchange new ideas, and share our cultural heritage. We come in peace and respect.’

Hanna bowed his head humbly. Again, a murmur rippled through the crowd.

‘We welcome you to our home Hanna York and as we wish to pursue a friendly and peaceful coexistence with the inhabitants of the north lands, we will work with you in this honourable pursuit. But first we will assist you in the search for your companions.’

The committee gathered at the table, momentarily spoke amongst themselves. Then the chairperson addressed Hanna.

‘As there are already nine men in the south covering that coastline, we will dispatch two parties of five to the northern coastline. They should take ropes to descend the cliffs if need be. If we leave within the hour, we will have some sunlight left. Are we agreed?’ ‘Agreed!’ The other men seated responded.

‘This meeting will now adjourn to the councils chamber.’

The crowd began to talk amongst themselves as they slowly started to disperse.

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*T*ooligie and Hanna stood and followed the chairperson through the door at the side of the stage. A short distance down a hall the he stalled his pace to stand next to Hanna as they turned to climb some stairs.

‘This is something we have never considered, this... ocean travel. It isn’t mentioned in the books of the Ancients.’

He addressed an old man dressed in a long robe that followed behind.

‘Am I mistaken, Keeper of the Books?’

‘I recall a small mention in the second book of Sheringa. It recommends against it for obvious reasons.’

His words were slow and calculated.

‘Yes, yes, quite so,’ he responded.

They entered a room with a large table that seated about ten people. The council took their places.

‘Welcome again Hanna York,’ he began.

‘Here, here.’ The others chorused.

‘My name is Kernewek. I am the elected spokesperson of the people’s council. And this is Kooringal, ‘Keeper of the Books’. The ‘Captain at Arm’s’ you will meet later, his named Yurla. He will be leading the search parties to the north.’

The introductions went on around the table. There were six members of council present and two were women. Hanna told them that he was from a village in the north as he thought it prudent not to tell them where he really came from. They were amazed to hear that there were no Perlumblic or any other threat, for that matter, to the people of the north. He also refrained from explaining how primitive and innocent the lifestyle of northerners was.

‘Are there other towns and people other than the Androssan’s?’ He asked.

Kernewek turned to Kooringal and said.

‘There are stories in the books of the Ancients that I am unfamiliar about. The ‘Keeper of the Books’ would be of more help in this curiosity.’

‘I am more than happy to spend some time with a man who is interested in the study of the ‘Ancients’. The answer to your question is complicated as there is no way east or south of our homeland that does not cross the path of the barbarian hoards of the Perlumblic. There are stories in the texts of strange peoples to the east but where or if they exist, is a question I cannot answer. We have never met a stranger from another land,’ said the Keeper of the Books.

Together, they ate a late lunch and after, they met with the councillor’s wives, husbands and more of the town’s people. The political pleasantries over, it was time to leave to beat the sun. Before they journeyed back to the farm, Hanna arranged to return and begin his studies of the books of the ‘Ancients’. As they approached the farmhouse, a rider came to greet them. It was Icn0; he rode with confidence and skill as he galloped towards them. Reining his horse in, he wheeled around to pull up alongside them.

‘We have found only one more northerner, mother.’

He regarded Hanna.

‘His name is Warooka, he is resting, but I believe he will recover.’

Relieved that there was some news, Hanna urged old Tangles into a gentle gallop towards the cottage. The other’s followed in pursuit.

‘Thank you Icn0 and you too Tooligie,’

He said as they caught up.

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*W*arooka was asleep when Hanna arrived at the cottage. Although he could think of a hundred reasons to wake him, there was no justification to do so. He would need his rest. As night cast its veil over the cloudless sky, Icn0 explained the day’s events. He had left four members of the search party to camp out overnight and tend a beacon fire at the headland.

Later that evening around an outdoor fire pit, Hanna told stories of Warooka’s village in the north. He stared into the flames and heard the joy in his own voice as he told stories of the

summer solace festivities. He could see the interest in the eyes of the young men that had gathered around. They would look at each other and stir restlessly as the flame of curiosity ignited in their souls.

Tooligie, also sensing the excitement amongst the young men, broke up the gathering, demanding they would all need sleep if they were to continue with the search in the morning. Hanna said his good nights and joined them as they waited their turn to climb the ladder into the barn loft. As he lay on his bed of straw, he pulled the warm blanket around his neck and reflected on the positives that the day had brought. He slept well that night, confident that tomorrow would bring more good news.

Before sunrise, roosters crowing, Hanna headed to the house to find Warooka awake and being fussed over by Tooligie. He struggled to stand as he warmly greeted Hanna in a bear like hug. Tears of joy welled up in his eyes and unashamedly ran down his face. Hanna was surprised at how hard he found it not to be caught up in the emotion of their reunion.

Warooka told of how he and Kielpa had shared a body board together after being swept into the turbulent sea and how they were separated when a large wave crashed down upon them, washing Kielpa away. He hadn't seen him since. Warooka had drifted for hours, looking and calling, and then, as night fell, he saw the flames of fire on a headland and kicked towards the shore. Hanna knew that without anything to help Kielpa float, he really didn't stand much chance of survival. Again, Warooka's tears flowed and as Hanna embraced him reassuringly, he too felt the warm moisture form in the corner of his own eyes.

Hanna left with the search party as the sun rose above the horizon. It's burnt, orange glow penetrated the clouds, and spread across the valley as gentle clumps of mist escaped from the trees that covered the hills to the south, a chill filled the air. Hanna spent much of the day fine tuning his language and horse riding skills.

Warooka stayed behind with Tooligie to regain his strength. She watched as this man from the north magically interacted with all the domesticated animals. He took to the horses with great enthusiasm. They would follow him around where ever he went. By mid-morning, he was learning to ride. By day's end, he rode as if he had been riding his whole life.

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*T*hat evening, the searchers returned with their prize. They called triumphantly, sitting tall in their saddles as they entered the far paddock.

'We've found two more!'

As they rode nearer, Warooka yelled with joy, recognising Kielpa and Yaninie as they waved enthusiastically from the back of two riders. When they arrived, they told an amazing story of how they had survived.

After Kielpa was washed away from Warooka, he struggled to stay afloat. Just as he was about to give up, a lone dolphin had surfaced beside him. He held onto its dorsal fin as they swam to join the rest of the pod.

'I couldn't believe it when Yaninie appeared on the back of another dolphin beside me.' Kielpa laughed.

'The dolphins took it in turns in carrying us to shore,' agreed Yaninie.

Both men had spent the next day foraging and slept the night on the beach. They had been walking south when the search party rode up behind them.

'Scared us to death, seeing men riding beasts!'

There had been no sign of the others. Hanna took solace in the fact that there was now real hope. If the dolphins managed to save these two and no wreckage had washed up on the beach, then the others would have survived with the boat. There was the fresh sense of relief in the air.

The joy Warooka and his village brothers generated at being reunited created such energy that it swept through the whole group as they all celebrated the ambience of the evening.

Hanna helped Tooligie prepare food for the large group that had now gathered and were now staying at her residence. The young men stood around an impaled beast they were rotating above a large bed of hot coals.

Kielpa and Yaninie had dug a pit and were showing their new friends a different way of cooking by wrapping the meat in large leaves, burying them and then placing hot coals over them. They had caught four wild mammals that lived in the forests of the foothills that bordered the farm. Kielpa had spotted them grazing on the edge of a paddock early that morning. There was no stopping them after that. They were happy for what they called 'Gifts from the forest sprits'. Tooligie had produced a keg of ale, stories were told, songs were sung, and finally, late that night, they all settled down to sleep.

The next day, the search party left late, Warooka stayed behind to help with the long list of duties to perform on the farm. It had become apparent to Tooligie that he had no experience of domesticated farm life. She had questioned Hanna the night before, as it was easy to see that Hanna was different from the others.

'I am a traveller from a different country and I have been living with these men of the north for quite a while now. There is also another man from my country on the boat that we came here in and a third who chose to stay behind. The three of us were ship wrecked and lost in their lands,' he explained.

'And now your ship wrecked here?' exclaimed Tooligie.

Hanna smiled shaking his head, seeing the irony.

'Because the story was complicated, I didn't explain all the facts. It was never my intention to deceive or trick anyone,' he looked Tooligie in the firmly in the eye.

'Yes Hanna, I can see that you meant no harm, but I must confess that the difference is plain to see now that the others have arrived.' she urged.

She stared at him intently as he realised that she was reassessing her opinion of him now. It wouldn't seem too bright to continually be making it a habit to be ship wrecked. At least, he wasn't lying now. That night the search party returned empty handed.

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*T*he tides were now starting to be low during the sunlight hours allowing them comfortable access to the long beaches. Hanna decided to start preparations to broaden the search. He would take provisions and travel south for a few days. His investigation into these books of the Ancient's would just have to wait.

After further discussions with Tooligie and Icno, they decided that the northerners, Warooka, Kielpa and Yaninie would remain at the farm with her sons, Arno and Urno to help with the chores and learn how a farm works. Hanna and Icno would lead a search party and travel the coastline on an eight day journey south. They spent the next day preparing while the other riders continued their daily search.

Tooligie suggested that while he was gone the northerners should also be instructed in the way of the sword. Hanna agreed. He already suspected the boys had been planning a sparring session with their new friends. Warooka wanted desperately to join the search but Hanna convinced him that he would be better off staying and learning some of these new skills.

During the day, word came from Androssan that nothing had been found north of the village. Hanna wasn't surprised but the others were disappointed.

'If the boat survived, then the sails would be the only effective means of powering the craft. Three oarsmen would be ineffective against the wind and current. If they came to shore, it would be in the south. It's possible they're a couple of hundred kilometres away by now.'

The next morning Hanna left the valley and journeyed southwest to the coast. For four days, they travelled the beach in search of debris or some sign of the boat and crew. Headland followed beach and beach followed headland and with each headland was the threat of a continuous rock face as was the coastline to the north. Yet, as they rode over each rocky outcrop, they were rewarded with another long golden ribbon of sand, waves peeled mechanically around each point as the ground swell continued unabated.

They did come across some familiar items on the second day of the search. They found two body boards and some other small items from the boat. They had searched the high water mark for hours with each find, backtracking and looking for tell tale footprints, but found nothing. Hanna suspected they belonged to Kielpa and Yaninie.

That night they found a swift flowing creek that flowed into the ocean. Hanna bathed and relaxed in the cool refreshing water. He ate and retired to a restless night's sleep. He had nightmares of being thrown about in the surf. He rolled along the beach, unable to move, as wave after wave tore at his body. Paralysed, he was suddenly trapped under the surface, watching the sunlight filter down into the now still, calm waters that engulfed him. He floated in silence, as the peaceful serenity that surrounded him took over and as he relaxed, about to take that much-needed breath, he woke gasping for air.

He sat up, composed himself and announced to the others that they would spend one more day searching. They would travel half a day out and return to camp here again that night. That way they had no need to pack up the camp.

The next day, they rode along the beach until the sun hung directly above them. He split the group by sending two of the party back to base camp to prepare dinner. He and Icnio continued on as they rode to the top of a highest sand dune to see as far south as they possibly could before they abandoned their search. Still the day brought nothing.

Hanna had to come to terms with the fact that he had lost contact with his good friend Ray. Thoughts crowded his mind. He may never see Ray or George again, or Koonaida and Unow for that matter. However, in his heart he knew, Ray and the crew were all right.

Determined not to let any self-doubt or negativity interfere with his purpose, he resolved to return to the village and simply wait for Ray to turn up. If Ray had survived then he would make his way back up the coast as the wind turned to search for his lost companions. This was the best course of action, wait and see what time will bring.

They arrived back at the camp after dark. Hanna watched as the smoke of their fire drifted gently out across the ocean. As the sun had disappeared behind the hills, the water looked like liquid silver. The reflecting waves lifted into the air and then peeling left and right as they turned into pure white snow. It's pulsating, crashing rhythms descending into a crisp sparkling effervescence.

The fading light transformed the sky from pink to purple to gunmetal grey. One by one, the stars appeared in the sky and as they reached camp, the night had chased the last of the sunlight away.

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Chapter Seven

*W*hen they arrived back at the farm Yeelanna Toolgie and the others were out to greet them. Hanna explained his theory. Ray and the others must have drifted further down the coast and they would return with a change in the wind direction. With a good southerly wind behind them, there was no way they could miss the town of Androssan, not when approaching from the south.

Warooka bragged how he was now a master of the sword and how he had championed the others in their fencing sessions. The others confirmed it and displayed their bruises as proof for all to see. Icno seemed pleased at the prospect of a new challenger.

Later that night, Hanna displayed his combat skills. He was an accomplished fencer at the military academy, epee and sabre. Tooligie and Icno were suitably impressed as was Hanna himself, besting both Icno and Warooka.

Hanna was worried that, as the three Northerners had never had contact with any outsiders before, they weren't ready for the exposure of a large town just yet. Tooligie agreed and suggested that they all remain at the farm until Ray and the others returned. There was plenty to do as Icno made mention his intention to marry soon and any help to build a new cottage would be appreciated. In addition, there was still work in the fields as it was now late spring, planting time.

They split into teams, builders and field workers. Hanna then explained that the only construction experience the northerners had was building the boat. The next day the work started and Hanna soon found solace in the physical activity. Nevertheless, after a few days labour, his thoughts were distracted. Rays fate weighed heavily on his mind and his curiosity was steadily eating at him.

'What lay to the south? Who are there these fearsome Perlumblic? Could Ray be in danger?'

Finally, he asked Tooligie what she knew of the books of the Ancients. Would it hold any of the clues he was looking for? She told Hanna that she really didn't know much about them and that the best man to ask was Kooringal, Keeper of the Books. She suggested they could go to town for a few days and leave the young men to their work. They could stay with her family as she had some catching up to do and she could show him around. There were supplies needed for the new cottage construction anyway. That night they discussed their plans with the others and they left early the next morning.

They arrived in town around midday and like last time, there was another public commotion as Hanna and Tooligie arrived. Word had gotten around that there were three more strangers staying at the farm and people wanted to know why they had not come to town with them. They made their way through the crowd and arrived at Tooligie's family home.

Hanna was taken to an archives room in the central tower where he met with the Kooringal, 'the Keeper of the Books.' From there, a balcony looked directly out over Androssan bay, a road lead from the town gates down towards the water's edge where he could see an old rock paved jetty protruding some hundred meters into the water. He recognised it as an old dock. He realised immediately, that it was once a port town that must have accommodated some pretty big ships in its day. He wondered how the villagers had never heard of boats. Hanna could picture, in his mind eye, a clipper ship sitting in the bay.

Just then, an old man quietly entered the room. Seeing the faraway look in Hanna's face, he placed his hand on his shoulder.

'They say that your friends must have survived, as there is no evidence that they have not. This is good news and you must not dwell on the negative,'

Hanna smiled at him reassuringly.

'The positive forces that protect you can be disturbed by the winds of doubt, the forces of chaos that surround us are delicate and like a leaf on a tree, you can be dislodged by the breeze.' he said.

Hanna was surprised by the prudence of the words he had just heard. He turned to look at the old man and saw warmth and wisdom in his eyes.

'Are these the teachings of the old books, Kooringal? I wish to learn. I hope to seek the answers to my questions' said Hanna.

‘Sometimes the question is the answer, for what we seek, when found, only leads to another question,’ he said.

‘Like the mountain water that wants to flow back to the sea. It finds that it must first flow around a rock in its path only to find that there is always another rock to flow around in its long journey.’

Hanna looked thoughtfully at the view out the window.

‘This felt right,’ he thought.

‘He was comfortable here and that sudden feeling of *deja vu* washed over him again. He felt, deep within, that for whatever the reason, somehow he was supposed to be here. This was his journey and he was on the right path.

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*H*is stay in town lasted one week before he felt the tentacles of responsibility tighten enough to distract him from his study. Tooligie had returned earlier with some of her family to help build Icno’s new house. She had joked they were probably more interested in the strangers that to help with the construction. She was happy for Hanna to stay and he had taken room in the tower to continue his work.

During the week, a transformation had come over him. He spent hours perusing the books in the library before he finally settled down to read them one by one. There were only about one hundred and fifty books and they were varied in their appeal. Some were a dialog on the history of the people and township of Androssan. Others were on philosophy and advanced mathematics. Most were of unknown origin.

Hanna discovered a small group of scholars that called themselves ‘The Guild of Cordiality’, a group of people who studied the books of the archive’s and practiced meditation. In particular, their main focus was the five ‘Books of Sheringa.’ The first and fifth book was missing. They contained stories of the adventures of a man called Sheringa who had travelled and explored the land.

At the end of each story was an analysis of the outcome of the decisions that were made during the events that had transpired in the story. A moral evaluation and a hindsight comment made by the man himself. Most of the stories were farfetched with tales of strange beings and events, most unexplained sounding fanciful and unlikely.

Hanna found Koorungal to be a wise old man and had grown to like and respect him. They would meditate together and soon Hanna felt like an apprentice to the master, yet he knew he was still on probation. Koorungal showed Hanna the book that contained the passages that referred to ocean travel. There was no doubt in Hanna’s mind that this story was based on fact.

After Hanna had read it, he took Koorungal on a walk down to the ancient dock and explained the workings of such a place. He described a clipper ship in detail and how the men would carry cargo aboard, to store in the hull and then sail to another port to trade. He found foundations where cranes would have been anchored and explained how they would have worked. He told how the ship’s crew would have used the stars to navigate their way to their destination.

Koorungal looked at him with questioning eyes, wondering who this stranger was with such knowledge of the stories in the ancient books. Hanna walked over to the water’s edge and indicted that they should sit. They hung their feet over the edge as the high tide lapped against the ancient stonewalls. Children were fishing at the other end of the pier and as they sat, a roar of excitement erupted they caught a fish.

Hanna watched and remembered his time at the village and related to the thrill. He smiled at the enthusiasm that rippled through the group as they pulled the large fish from the water.

‘I will tell you a story that you will find interesting. I feel it is a story that would be hard for some to understand and it would be best kept our secret unless otherwise discussed,’ said Hanna as he looked to Koorungal for reassurance.

‘Discretion is always wise among the ignorant,’ Koorungal said.

‘It’s about the place that I come from. You see, I am not of this world or if I am, it is from another time. My two companions and I were on board a ship. However, when we crashed in the northland, it was on board a ship of the sky, not a ship that sailed the sea. In fact, it was a ship that travelled between the planets of the solar system,’ he said.

Koorungal remained silent.

‘My people were in the process of changing the closest planet to our own into a habitable world. We were part of that team when, somehow, we were caught in an unknown phenomenon and found ourselves in this strange land.’

He waved an open hand towards the dock, township and distant hills.

‘Our home world was under great pressure to support a population that had grown too large. We had to do something to continue to exist and feed such a population. Fertile land and clean drinking water were, over a long period of time, abused and exploited.’

‘My people had to learn from their mistakes and nearly left it until it was too late to resolve these problems. Instead of working together, they fought greedily amongst themselves only making matters worse. Fortunately, the lessons of the past survived as an education for the people of the future and together they formulated the plan. It will take them some hundreds years to achieve, but if they do not succeed then billions of people would suffer and the world, as I know it, will not survive.’

He stopped a moment to let the gravity of what he had just said settle. He looked over towards the children as he heard the plop of the newly baited hook hit the water. Koorungal didn’t say anything, so Hanna continued.

‘How or why I am here I cannot answer; yet somehow I feel that this is what is supposed to happen. I don’t understand why, but something in me is changing and I know it sounds egotistical, but I believe I am here for a higher purpose.’

He paused again to let Koorungal absorb what he was saying. He turned to look Koorungal in the eye.

‘Your story is as wondrous as the stories of the achieves Hanna and I will assist you in your quest for knowledge,’ he said.

‘When a storm lashes the coastline, many stones are turned over by the surging waves. It is only then that we will be lucky enough to see what lies under them.’

They sat in silence for a short time only to be distracted as the children celebrated another catch.

‘I must go and see that all is well with my friends at Tooligie’s farm and then I will return to continue my studies,’ he said.

Koorungal agreed and they sat for an hour as Hanna told him stories of earth. Of large ships that carried more people than the population of Androssan on holidays too far off location. Of ships that travelled under the water and others that flew through the sky. Of buildings that stretched up through the clouds and machines that speed along the ground. Koorungal was fascinated and at times thought, he could relate to some of what he heard in the stories that he had read. Hanna recognised a spark of enthusiasm in Koorungal’s tone as they walked back to the tower.

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To his surprise, Yurla the captain at arms joined him on his journey back to the farm. Koorungal was obliged to inform him of Hanna’s movements, as no one was to travel alone.

Notification of one's intended time of return was a standard requirement upon leaving the town. Hanna was glad of the company and Yurla was curious to meet the other men of the northlands.

They arrived just before dark and in time to witness a mass sparring session that was taking place outside the cottage. There were six large warriors jostling each other and as one went down, he was eliminated from the fight. As they approached, two were eliminated and then two more. They could see the faces of the two combatants as they got closer; it was a match between Warooka and Icnó.

Even though the others acknowledged Hanna and Yurla's arrival, the two battlers didn't break their concentration for a second. Hanna was fascinated by the duel but as it wore on, he began to look around to see how the work was progressing. His distraction drew Warooka's attention for only a split second but that was enough for Icnó to make his move and Warooka was sat unceremoniously on his tail.

The crowd roared with laughter and Hanna could see that Warooka's pride had been hurt. Icnó was pleased to take the victory especially in front of the captain at arms. Hanna found out later that it was the first time that anyone had bested Warooka. He had a natural ability that he claimed came from hunting. He had no problems telling the others his secret.

'Always anticipate what you would do if you were in their position,' he told them.

'If you were a wild boar, what would you do if a hunter were stalking you? You must survey the scene, pick their route and watch their eyes.'

There was a patrol on the coast that was replaced every second day. They lit a beacon at night and searched the beaches by day, but there was still no sign of Ray. That evening, they ate the wild boar that Warooka had caught on the way back from the coast that very day. Warooka had convinced Icnó to accompany him in a hunt after he spotted some tracks as they were returning from the coast. Hunting was not much of a tradition in these lands as it was considered dangerous and there were domesticated animals to be had. Work was progressing well at the farm and judging from the lack of attention he was receiving, he was not being missed. This came some relief, as it was one less distraction his studies. Later that evening Hanna, Tooligie and Yurla broke from the group to talk amongst themselves. Hanna could see that there was an interesting rapport happening between the two.

That night, he dreamt of Ray. He woke with a picture of him in his mind, standing on the bow of the boat, hand shading his eyes, searching the horizon. He could see his mouth move as he was calling but he could not hear the words. Little Minlaton was standing beside Ray, staring straight at him. When Hanna woke, he decided instantly that another trip to the coast wouldn't hurt and that day he and Warooka made the journey to the beach. They roamed the headland looking for eggs and catching seabirds, but they found nothing of their friends.

Hanna enjoyed the days outing with his good friend. Warooka had missed him and although he was doing fine, admitted to feeling a little homesick. He was glad to see Hanna again but wasn't worried about him going back to the village to continue with his inquiries. Satisfied that they could carry no more, they travelled back to the farm where the others awaited their arrival. That night they feasted on the sea birds, another new taste treat for Tooligie and her family.

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The next day Hanna returned to the village with Yurla. Hanna felt that they were beginning to bond, as Yurla seemed more relaxed and open. Hanna suspected that his northern friends had passed his test of approval. He also suspected that he had been removed from the suspect list of possible suitors for Tooligie's attention.

After they arrived at the village, Yurla managed to talk Hanna into visiting the local tavern. It was a rustic establishment with a large open fireplace in the middle. As they entered, Hanna could smell the meat cooking above the fire as two men attended it, the smell of ale hanging in the air.

A bar lined one side and behind it, on the wall, were rows of glasses and mugs. Above that, hung old tools and an honour board, names were carved in it. On another wall was a large painting of a bloody battle and Hanna saw the artist's impression of the Perlumblie. Ugly and foreboding creatures locked in fierce fighting. They had short, stocky bodies with thick limbs and on their face was an enormously wide disproportionate nose. Their skulls had pronounced eyebrows and jaw line.

'The battle of Androssan, fought some two centuries ago,' said Yooralla as he handed Hanna ale.

'How long has it been since they were last seen,' asked Hanna?

'The last time they were in these parts was over four years ago, when Tooligie's husband and two others died,' he answered.

'We tracked them right back into the dark valley, that's where we caught up with them. There were ten in their party and eight in ours; it was hardly a contest. They don't fight well, they're gutless creatures that lie in wait and attack when you least expect it.'

Hanna continued to look about the tavern. One wall was full of closed shutters that would open onto a courtyard. There were comfortable chairs with small tables beside them, as well as the usual bar stools and benches, Hanna concluded that it had a good feel. Some of the men at the bar would occasionally glance back at Hanna and Yurla. Affected by alcohol but trying to be discreet, their conversation was obviously about them.

Yurla regarded Hanna.

'Flavour of the month, hey Hanna, It's worse than flavour of the week,' he laughed.

'This study of yours, if you're looking for a history lesson, then I'd like to introduce you to our balladeer when he arrives. He tells the tales of the ages in songs that have been handed down for generations. 'Probably told better than those old nit balls... the Guild of Cordiality.'

He sipped his mug.

'I mean no disrespect Hanna, it's all very nice to preach peace and understanding, but when you find a spear in your back when you least expect it, then it's time for understanding all right!'

He placed his mug down heavily to make his point, splashing some ale in the process. As if on cue, the two men from the bar picked up their drinks, nodded to the barkeep and made their way over to where they sat. Introductions were made and they all settled down to some drinking and conversation.

As the evening wore on and the bar filled with patrons, the volume increased, as did the effects of the alcohol. Hanna was introduced to a lot of people that night and soon gave up on any chance of remembering all their names. Nevertheless, he did remember Tunot, the balladeer. He spent some time discussing stories of boats and probed for any other strange stories in his folk songs.

A while later, when Tunot was intoxicated enough; he sang and played his string instrument, similar to a guitar. His voice rang high and true, Hanna tried to listen to the words but the alcohol, conversation and festive mood of the evening drew him to distraction.

'Tunot wasn't going anywhere, he would have to wait,' he thought.

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Chapter Eight

The next day, after a slow start and although hung over, he managed to get back to his study. Kooringal had made him a large breakfast and made sure he kept the fluids up to him during the day. Hanna felt a little pampered, but he wasn't complaining. He stayed for the next two weeks, reading and discussing the stories with Kooringal.

Tooligie and Warooka had visited on two occasions to update the developments on the farm and pick up supplies. Icno had also dropped by on his way to see his lady friend.

As time passed, Hanna absorbed the writings and philosophies of Sheringa. He became more aware of the significance and impact that they were having on his life. Here the texts were reinforcing in his psyche what he already believed to be true, the power of the mind to conquer any problem and any given situation.

Positive thoughts, actions and deeds were the secret to achieve a full and happy life. A positive environment was essential to catalyst that power. One could examine but never dwell on weakness, as positive energies attract and multiply. Hanna could feel this process being reinforced within himself. Kooringal could see it too, allowing Hanna his freedom to grow.

'Nurturing the seedling as its roots sort their foundations,' he would say.

The more Hanna's searched for information, the more he found himself lost in the consumption of the philosophies of the texts. At times, he would have to remind himself as to what he was really looking for, and yet, he continually found himself engrossed in his meditations.

He found stories of peoples in the southwest and references to other strange creatures. It was hard to tell the difference between any fantasy in the stories and the realities. There were several references to the ruins of an ancient city at the end of what; Hanna interpreted as, the dark trail that was the homeland of the Perlumblie.

There had apparently been Five 'Books of Sheringa' or so the book's foretold. When Hanna questioned Kooringal as to why there were only three, he had explained how there were as many legends as to what had happened to the first and last volume's as there were stars in the sky. Some interpretations were that they were lost forever in the mysteries of time. While others say that, they were only meant for the chosen few.

'Whatever the reason, time was too important to spend worrying about such things.' He had said reassuringly.

The winds still hadn't changed and there was still no sign of Ray and the others. Finally, he decided it was time to return to the farm for a few days and have a break. He told Kooringal and was again, surprised by his words.

'The journey ahead may be fraught with many spills and chills. The lessons you have learnt here and the lessons you had learnt on your way here are like a cake baking in an oven. It is not until it has finished cooking and cooled down enough for you to eat, do you know if the mixture was right. You must trust your instincts Hanna, for the positive energies that surround you will not let you down. The good will always take over the bad. The right will always fix the wrong. When the energies are placed in their proper order, then all that's meant to be, will be, that is the natural order of chaos, a simple mathematical fact.' He smiled and placed his hands on Hanna's shoulders.

'Travel well, Hanna York, your path is long but you will succeed,' he said

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Yurla and two border guards joined Hanna on his journey back to the farm. Two packhorses also accompanied them, one with supplies for the farm and the other with supplies for the men who were to relieve the guards that were protecting the entrance to the dark valley. Hanna had met them on that first evening at the tavern, Pirie and Rickaby.

He had only visited the drinking establishment on three occasions during his stay in town and it was all due to Yurla's persistence. He always seemed to regret it the next day but as much as he enjoyed the taste of ale, he didn't miss the after effects, unlike of the brew that the northerners drank.

They rode out just after lunch; the strong westerly wind that had been howling through the night had finally eased. They travelled towards the natural arch that crossed the river on their path to the farm. It was a geological marvel as the river had carved its way through the middle of a hill. What must have been an underground river once was now a spectacular land formation and as they rode over it, Hanna looked back towards the two rivers that joined some two kilometres upstream from where they were. As he looked around, he could see the thick jungle that cascaded down the slopes of the surrounding hills. Slowly, they gave way to the grasslands of the valley.

In the distance, he could see several small waterfalls as they splashed their way over exposed cliffs. Birds rang out their songs, echoing through gullies as the wind rustled in the branches as it swept along the top of the trees. Yurla stopped and pointed out some of the landmarks.

'The river Carpa joins the mighty river Baroona,' he said.

'And the cliffs are the wall of restraint, there to the South is the Dark valley and there,' he was pointing, 'is the crossing where the Carpa runs shallow and wide. It allows our men to cross and take up their position to guard the entrance to the Dark Valley,' he said.

Hanna could see the definition in the shape of the land that seemed to be raised above the flood plain. He recognised then the possibility of it being an old road and wondered if there had been a bridge there once.

'It looks like the land was raised to build a road there. It really is beautiful,' he added.

After a short while, a small animal scurried its way across their path. Rickaby let out a hoot!

'There is an old road that leads into the Dark Valley and it's a bit of a mystery as to who built it,' said Pirie.

'Yeah! It's actually been carved out of the cliff face itself,' commented Rickaby.

'Whoever did it sure had a job and a half.

'What gets me is how smooth the road surface is. It's like someone carved it with a knife,' said Pirie.

'I'd like to see that,' commented Hanna, his curiosity now seriously aroused.

'I reckon that those bloody idiot Perlumbie don't even mean to end up at our end of that road, they just follow the track and bing! There here and let's face it, not many escape and return to tell the others,' said Rickaby.

'You got that right,' added Yurla. They all laughed.

They had reached a point in the road where a small creek crossed their path and the two relieving guards made their farewells and rode off downstream. Pirie yelled back.

'Come and pay us a visit on your way back Yurla, we could do with the company. It's definitely worth a look Hanna. It's an eerie place but it sure is something to see.'

They gave a wave as they disappeared around the bend. Hanna and Yurla rode on chatting and arrived at the farm about one hour later. As they approached, they noticed that there was no movement, there seemed to be nobody around. Yurla commented that there were no horses in the corral and he urged his horse on, Hanna followed.

As they drew closer, they could see that the work in the fields had been abandoned in mid stride. Tools had been dropped where they were being used and left lying on the ground. Something was definitely wrong here. An air of urgency took hold of them.

Yurla called Tooligie's name but there was no response. They rode to the main house, again Yurla called; they went inside and looked about. Hanna searched the kitchen and living areas, while Yurla checked the bedrooms. Then Hanna heard his mournful cry.

'Nooo... oooh!'

Hanna ran to see and there, on the bed lay two bodies, Tooligie and beside her Yaninie. Both lay with their hands folded on the chest with their eyes closed. Yurla stood above them with the corner of the sheet that had covered them in his hand. He pulled the sheet off them to examine their wounds.

Tooligie hadn't suffered as she had a single mortal wound to the heart, an arrow most probably. Poor Yaninie hadn't been as lucky as he had multiple wounds slashed and carved about his body. He had fought hard and died a most horrid death.

Hanna was overcome with grief for Yaninie, as he was the youngest of his group. Not much younger than Arno, Tooligie's son.

'What horrible evil had robbed this young man of his innocence and youth? Cheated this proud and dignified woman of her right to see her grandchildren?' He questioned.

Thoughts of the finality and hopelessness of death rose up inside of him, only too familiar with the passing of his beloved Kadina. Anger boiled within him as he looked at the beautiful, peaceful expression on Tooligie's face.

'Such a waste, such a horrible senseless waste.'

He felt his blood begin to throb in the veins of his brow. Yurla bent down to hold Tooligie and Hanna, sensing the grief that was overwhelming him, thought it better to leave him alone and walked out of the room, on to the veranda.

He paced up and down to try to clear his thoughts. Then he spat viciously over the rail on to the ground, as if to spit the fowl poison of hatred from his system. As his mind focused, he looked around the area to see if there was any tell tail signs of what had happened. As he did so, he tried to empty his mind of the anger that was fogging his thinking; he took long slow deep breaths. He used self-talk to calm himself down. Now, within some control, he walked around the house and there, out the back, he saw the body of what must be a Perlumblie, lying on the ground about fifty metres away.

Clear horse tracks lead off past towards the woodlands at the edge of the paddock. He looked towards the sun, his hand shading his eyes, and judged there to be at least five hours of daylight left. His mind raced and became razor sharp. He calculated that if the deaths occurred this morning then they would be at least four hours behind the others. He decided that there was no other choice, but to follow, he returned to the house.

'Yurla,' he called.

'I've found their tracks. Grab some blankets and I'll raid the kitchen, they would have left without any thought of provisions.'

It was obvious to Hanna, gauging from the mood and conversation, during their trip out to the farm Yeelanna that Yurla had intended to soon make his intentions clear to Tooligie and the boys. He had discussed how he was thinking about not standing as the master of arms in the next election.

As he entered, the house there had been no response from Yurla. Hanna was suddenly overcome with a mental picture of Kadina's smiling face. To his surprise, it was clearer that he had ever pictured before. Then it was gone and he held his head as he tried hard to retrieve it. His mind shifted back to the matter at hand.

'Yurla!'

Yet still there was no response. Word power, he would be abrupt and firm.

'Blankets! Now! We're going!' He yelled Hanna sternly.

Thankfully, there was the sound of shuffling feet coming from the bedrooms. Hanna continued in the kitchen, Yurla met him outside with the horses.

'I saw a couple of bows and arrows in the hall, you grab them and I'll check to see if there's anything we've forgotten,' said Hanna, re-entering the house.

He returned to the bedroom to make sure the bodies were securely covered and the door was shut. He questioned, in his mind, the ethics of leaving the bodies unattended especially if they were away for a few days. Again, he put the thoughts aside. They met again at the horses. Yurla

looked at Hanna, obviously still dazed, awaiting his next instruction. Hanna gave him a grim smile and a reassuring nod.

‘Right, let’s do it.’ Said Hanna as he mounted old tangle foot and wheeled the horse around the house, Yurla following.

Hanna pulled up beside the dead Perlumblie to examine the scene as Yurla rode on by. He called out for him to hold up as he tried to judge the events that had transpired here. It was obvious that this was the spot where Yaninie had died. It looked as if he had tried in vain to crawl back to the house after he had won his fight with the barbarian. Hanna looked closely at the body of the dead Perlumblie and noticed that the clothes he wore were tailored, a thick leather belt held up his pants. Hanna dismounted and rolled the body over to examine it further.

Hanging from the belt was an empty sheath, the leather had been intricately engraved; Hanna looked around for the missing weapon and saw what could be a dagger, half protruding from the brush about ten metres away. He retrieved it and returned to the body as he examined the ivory handle.

It had been carved into a beautifully fashioned sculpture of a naked human female with wings that spread over the knuckles to protect the user’s hand. She stood on a large yellow gemstone; the blade shone and well kept. Although not comfortable to hold, he looked at the larger, thicker hand of the dead Perlumblie and could see they it would be a better fit.

‘Sharp enough to shave with,’ thought Hanna.

He looked at the dead Perlumblie and saw that he was not much more than a youth. Although his pants were made of leather, the Perlumblie’s shirt was of a thick weave with pockets tailored into it.

Hanna examined the contents of the pockets and found in one a small leather bag that contained a jumble of polished gemstones, small bones and some aromatic herbs. In the other was a leather parchment. Hanna unfolded it and immediately recognised the Walls of Restraint and the Dark Valley marked clearly on a map.

The lands of Androssan were undetailed and plainly unexplored but the lands of the Perlumblie and beyond were well marked. There were a number of townships marked on the map that Hanna recognised from the books he had studied.

‘This was a prize,’ thought Hanna.

He collected all three items and the sheath, packed them in his saddlebag and rode on after Yurla who was waiting for him to catch up edge of the woodlands.

When he reached him, Yurla indicated towards the south western horizon where balls of smoke were drifting into the sky.

‘Pirie and Rickaby have either got trouble or judging by the time, I’d say they’ve found it. The Perlumblie can only get in and out through the Dark Valley. I’ve thought about the possibility of them using your boat concept on the river Baroona to travel to Androssan, but I think that it’s a bit farfetched. One way or another they’ve got to return up the Dark Valley.’

‘So we either head them off at the pass or follow the boys, what do you think?’ said Hanna, relieved to find Yurla was thinking again.

‘The town watch will see the smoke signal and send troops out to the valley entrance. The town will go on full alert and prepare its defences, the walls are impenetrable. Preselected groups, mainly relatives will head out to the surrounding farms like Tooligie’s and if all goes to plan; they’ll meet them half way. If not, they will arrive to find what they will and then signal if they find anything wrong. Where there is that thick black smoke... there is trouble. We add a tree extract to the fire to create it.’ He paused

‘Tooligie’s father is in for a big shock,’ said Yurla, looking back towards the house, the pain of helpless distress clear in his eyes. Hanna was quick to change the subject back to the present.

‘But there was no smoke this morning,’ he said.

‘They’ve made a half-hearted attempt to light a fire in the pit back at the house. I saw a stack of half burnt fresh branches there, but I’d say they were too impatient with that strong westerly wind this morning.’

‘Yes, of course, I’d forgotten,’ commented Hanna.

‘They’ve done the right thing in the circumstances and stuck together as a group. There’s strength in numbers. And that’s probably our best option, to catch up and join them.’ he added.

Hanna agreed and they rode off. They easily followed their tracks through the scrub and after about two hours, they came upon a creek crossing where the horses were tied up to some trees. The Perlumbie were smarter than Hanna had expected as they had headed up a steep, slippery hillside to stop the horses from following. This would slow their pursuer’s right down; Hanna knew that with Warooka hot on their trail there was no escape, it was only a matter of time. Yurla had dismounted and was about to start on up the hill when Hanna called him back. Indicating the other way, he wheeled his horse to climb the hill on the other side of the creek. As he gained height, he was able to get a perspective of the surrounding terrain.

He could see that if the Perlumbie were to head back towards the entrance of the Dark valley, then they would probably have to cross the creek again further downstream. He rode back down towards Yurla and explained his theory. They both then followed the stream down through the valley as it wound its way through the hills.

With their senses on full alert, Hanna could hear the birds singing in the trees about them. The occasional small animal scurried through the bush as they passed. Leaves rustled as the horses trod their way through the forest litter that lay about the ground. Several times, they had to cross the creek and once the horses had to swim through a large pool. Hanna was just about to doubt his judgement when he thought he could hear some noise coming from around the next bend, he looked to Yurla and he acknowledged that he had heard it too.

They dismounted, secured the horses and slowly crept from rock to rock around the bend. Finally, they saw exactly what they didn’t really want to see. There in an open space beside the creek, was a camp of around ten Perlumbie soldiers.

They were shorter than Hanna had pictured in his mind, yet stockier and more fierce to look at. Their skulls were larger than a human, the jaw line protruding with a big, wide, flat nose that almost over hung their mouth, brows protruding with bright red hair. Hanna was surprised as he almost found them comical to look at. He checked himself as to the seriousness of the situation. Then it struck him, they looked, for all intent and purpose, like Neanderthals.

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