



The Boring Stuff

Copyright © 2008
Marcus Alexander
Publishing
The moral right of the
author has been
asserted. Apart
from any fair
dealing for the
purposes of
research or private
study, or criticism
or review, as
permitted under
the Copyright,
Designs and
Patents Act 1988,
this publication
may only be
reproduced, stored
or transmitted in
any form or
by any means, with
the prior
permission in
writing of
the publishers, or in
the case of
reprographic
reproduction in
accordance with the
terms of licences
issued by the
Copyright
Licensing Agency.
Enquiries concernin
g reproduction
outside those terms
should be sent to
the publishers.

Marcus Alexander
Publishing
67 Lateward Road
Brentford TW8
0PL
Hard Copy
(Paperback) ISBN
978-0-9558912-0-5

All illustrations
Artwork: Lobak Oren
Inks: Little Zedd



Mr. Crow, the House and Unusual Visitors.

The house lay at the end of the small Kensington mews and it looked wrong. Not wrong in itself, although it was a peculiar looking house, but wrong for the neighbourhood. Big, cranky and ancient it squatted between its smaller neighbours and glared down the narrow street as though daring anyone to say anything about its battered appearance.

Yet beneath the grime and bird droppings were small scraps of evidence that pointed to grander times. Worn silver lining could be glimpsed on the window frames, bronze gilt hung in tattered shreds from the oak door and carvings of dragons could be glimpsed beneath the creeping ivy.

But for all its forgotten heritage the building was still a relic. It had been old when London was young and was in dire need of renovation.

Or demolition.

Charlie Keeper was well aware of how it looked. As she gazed out of her small bedroom window at the neighbouring buildings she knew that her house was a source of discomfort for the wealthy locals, knew that her neighbours complained

about its scruffy appearance. But she didn't care. The place felt like home, felt like a part of her and more importantly reminded her of her parents.

Trying to put thoughts of her grumpy neighbours aside she rubbed the sleep from her turquoise eyes and did her best to pat her messy, blond hair into something that resembled a ponytail. Stuffing her feet into a pair of scuffed sneakers she stomped her way into the bathroom to clean her teeth.

Ignoring her sharp cheekbones, which she hated, she slapped some toothpaste onto her brush, rammed the thing into her mouth and began to scrub furiously at her teeth.

Charlie wasn't happy.

In fact she wasn't happy most days. It wasn't that her neighbours were always rude to her, she could deal with that like she dealt with most adults (thirteen year olds knew how to put up with adult foolishness.)

It wasn't that she got bullied at school. It wasn't that she returned home with new bruises every day.

And it wasn't that life appeared to be stacked so unpleasantly against her.

After all there were good things in her life. She got to live with her Grandma and although the woman suffered from amnesia she was, in Charlie's mind, a wonderful woman with a beautiful heart. Charlie even had a good friend who lived down the street so she was guaranteed a place to hang out and chill when times got too bad.

And she was of course a Londoner. She loved the grimey city. Loved sneaking off to watch the b-boys and freerunners hanging at the Southbank, got a secret thrill out of deciphering the twisted graffiti and loudly coloured street murals that clung to dirty walls and concrete underpasses. She got a buzz sneaking into forgotten museums and ducking into silent galleries to stare at old masterpieces and quirky works of art.

When she thought she could get away with it she mingled with the other North London kids so she could sneak into the Talacre gym to join in the gymnastic and

tricking classes. And when she got caught and chased she would always scamper off to Camden Market to see what wonders were being bartered and bargained for at the stalls.

Life would have been bearable. Really it would have... apart from one thing.

And the one thing that made her life truly miserable, almost unbearable (and she could see him walking down the mews towards the house) was the horrible Mr. Crow.

Mr. Crow (according to her family's estate, will and testament) was her lawyer, her custodian and the house steward. In Charlie's opinion this gave the man too much power. He held all the purse strings, had control over her grandmother's health care and sent Charlie to the strictest of schools. And although Charlie couldn't prove it, she had a niggling feeling that Mr. Crow had been selling antiques and furnishings from the house for his own financial gain.

Charlie, without a doubt, hated him.

As Mr. Crow strode up the mews, with his long, skinny legs and customary black cape flapping behind him he looked remarkably like an irate heron. Charlie's neighbours hurriedly ducked out sight. Whilst they could ignore the house it was altogether another matter ignoring the lawyer.

Mr. Crow, homing in on the house like a venomous snake, prodded an unfortunate passer-by who was too slow in making way.

"Get out of my way you clumsy fool!" snapped the miserable lawyer, "Can't you see I'm on important business? Make way, make way!"

Leaving the flustered passer-by to rub at his backside Crow stalked up to the house and slammed his way through the front door. Pausing for his eyes to accustom to the darker light of the house, he took a deep breath, cracked his knuckles, stroked his long, angular nose and called out, "Charlie, my filly, my pretty filly. Come to

Crow and make him happy. There's work to be done and papers to be signed.

Come, come."

Charlie knew better than to keep him waiting. Hurrying to the lawyer's study she walked straight up to the large leather bound desk, took up the pen that rested on its surface and without needing to be asked signed the papers that he held aloft. The fiercer part of her soul wanted to scream out in protest or at the very least question him about the content of the papers she was signing. But the other part of her soul, perhaps the wiser part kept her mouth shut. She remembered the first time she had opened her mouth, remembered how his face had changed and how he had beaten her back and forth across the study until her skin was black and blue. Now she always signed. Quick and easy was better than battered and bruised.

Mr. Crow simply looked on with a look of ill-disguised greed.

As usual Charlie had a sinking feeling that she was signing away more of her inheritance, but what could she do?

She had told her grandmother, who was only too willing to help, but halfway through confronting Mr. Crow her amnesia would kick in, she'd lose track of the conversation and end up asking Crow for tea and biscuits. Charlie had tried to tell the teachers at her school, but because the lawyer paid them so handsomely they simply wouldn't hear a word of ill will said against the 'charming Mr. Crow'. All in all, Charlie thought she had been given a raw deal and without the possibility of help from an adult felt as though she was fighting a losing battle. She honestly had no idea what to do. And apart from sticking her tongue out at his back and the few occasions she had gathered up the nerve to put ink in his tea (Crow would walk home with blue lips and an odd feeling that people were laughing at him) she didn't feel as though this was a situation she could fix.

The lawyer's words pulled her back to the present.

“Thank you my pretty, that was easy wasn’t it? Never let it be said that work should be hard! And now my little filly I must ask you to leave me to peace as I have much to do. Oh yes! Crow’s work is never done!”

And so saying he ushered Charlie out the study door. As soon as the door was shut she promptly stuck out her tongue and stamped her foot. She hated him! He was so miserly and cheap! He took from the house but wouldn’t pay to fix things and he certainly didn’t pay for the heating in the winter - Charlie always froze. But, worst of all, he wouldn’t get the right medical treatment for her Gran.

Furious, with both Mr. Crow and herself for not standing up to him she turned her back on the study and headed into the depths of the house.

It was only there, in the deep recesses of the house that she ever felt safe.

She had known from a young age that her home was different from most buildings.

It didn’t obey the rules that all other houses were inclined to follow. She had a sneaky suspicion that the house cheated and although she couldn’t prove it Charlie was pretty sure that it was bigger on the inside than it was on the outside.

Much bigger.

Charlie, who had been running riot around the house all her life was still discovering new doors that led deeper into new, unexplored parts of the house.

And so she found herself striding through dusty corridors and along deserted hallways that echoed with the sound of her footfalls. Down stone staircases carved with strange and ornate mythical animals. Past marble archways and cavernous rooms full of ancient and eroded statues. Emblems and old signs of chivalry and heraldry stood proud on the walls and doors. Lions, unicorns, griffins and even stranger creatures were carved with such skill that they appeared to wriggle and writhe as she walked past. But Charlie, used to these every-day wonders ignored the lush surroundings and stomped deeper and deeper into the house. Every once in a

while, unable to constrain the urge, she would stamp her foot and shout “It’s not fair!” and just to punctuate the statement she would kick the wall.

Midway through yet another shout of “It’s not fair!” and halfway through a wall-kicking a voice rudely interrupted her rampage.

“Child, wotcha think yer doing? Don’t go kicking de wall, it’s bad fer de house, bad fer business and also, me thinks, bad fer yer feet!”

Losing all composure and kicking grace, Charlie squawked and spun round. Being a reasonably polite girl she did her best not to comment on the man’s strange appearance (and he was strange looking).

“I, uh, I was letting off steam,” she replied with an embarrassed look, “I didn’t mean to cause any damage, honest.”

“And why, pray, were ya letting off steam?” the stranger enquired, “Are ya a steam engine, a new fangled locomotive, or merely a stressed an upset lass?”

“What’s a lass?”

“Ha! Yer a lass, me lass! And fer sure, ya be an upset lass. So tell me, wot’s got yer so angry that ya gotta go stomping around like an angry Hippotomi?”

Charlie, who would normally never be so open with a stranger, couldn’t help but feel the need to be honest with this odd man.

“Well, it’s...it’s Mr. Crow. He’s so horrible, he always makes me sign things I know I shouldn’t sign, he doesn’t help my grandma, he steals and if I don’t do what he tells me to do he beats me. It’s not fair!”

“Ah, de infamous Mr. Crow, so he’s making yer life hell eh? Well no surprise there lass, he’s a nasty piece of work. But tell me now, would ya be Charlie?”

“Uh, yes,” said Charlie, “How did you know?”

“Ha! We’s hearing lottsa things and we’s been hearing of yer fer a long time, Ah’m surprised Ah’ haven’t bumped inta yer before now. Nice pendant by de way, wot is it though, an egg or an acorn?”

“I’m not sure,” Charlie replied. Her fingers subconsciously rubbed the beautiful pendant that hung from her neck, “It was a gift from my parents.”

“Well look after it, a stomping Hippotomi like yerself could loose something precious if she wasn’t careful,” said the stranger with a grin and a twinkle in his eyes. Charlie, regaining her composure after the shock of being caught unawares began to reassert some of her natural curiosity.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why are you in my house, did my Gran let you in?” she asked.

“No, no lass, Ah’ let meself in,” seeing Charlie’s questioning look the stranger continued, “Ah’ see you got some more questions ta ask, aintcha? Well go ahead, ask away, me little stomping Hippotomi!”

And Charlie, unable to stop herself, just had to ask, “Why’s your skin that colour and why are you wearing those funny clothes? Don’t you get cold?”

Charlie had never seen a man like him before. His rich brown hair was tied back into a topknot that danced merrily above his head, he wore a green sleeveless shirt, olive shorts that reached to just below his knees and on his feet were a pair of wooden sandals. Wooden bracelets clattered when he moved and his large ears were pierced with sandalwood hoops. His big beak of a nose was pierced with a shell and a large plumed feather was stuck through his topknot. But strangest of all was his skin. It was dark green and polished with oil so that it glinted in the light. Charlie, who wasn’t tall by any means, was only a little smaller than the man and she couldn’t help noticing that he smelt of vanilla and strange spices. She was getting more and more curious.

“And what do you mean bad for business, what business? Do you come here often? How comes I’ve never seen you before?”

“Oh jeez, yer ask a lot of questions don’t yer? Ah’ think Ah’ should have kept mah mouth shut!”

“You just said I could ask away!” accused Charlie.

“Well so Ah’ did, okay, okay! Ah’ dresses like this, because Ah’ want ta and no Ah’ don’t get cold because where Ah’ come from it’s mighty warm. And mah skin is dis colour because Ah’ was born wid it!” the stranger paused for a moment, he could see Charlie wasn’t happy with his explanation, “Lass, do yer always cross yer arms and tap yer foot when someone tells yer de truth? Ha! Just kidding wid yer. Yer’ve never seen a Treman before?”

“A Treman? What’s a Treman?” asked Charlie.

“Ah’s a Treman. Sweetheart, Ah’ can see yer education is sorely lacking. Who’s yer teacher? Whoever he is, he ain’t doing a proper job. Tell me, little Hippotomi and don’t stomp yer feet at me, do ya know wot a Stoman is, or a Human? Eh?”

“Well of course I know what a Human is! I’m one, but I’ve never heard of a Treman or a Stopman.”

“Stoman,” corrected the stranger. “Bless me Glade! But ya knows nothing! Nothing! Okay sweetheart, do Ah’ understand dat yer’ve never been ta de Other Side, yer’ve never been ta Bellania?”

“Bellania?” muttered Charlie to herself. She mulled the word over a bit in her head, like a new sweet upon her tongue, one she didn’t know whether she did or did not like the taste of. “Bellania,” she said again, “Hmm, well I went to Paris once when I was younger, with my parents, but I don’t think I’ve ever been to Bellania, is that in Europe?”

“Oh jeez! Bless me Glade and Cripple mah Sapling!” shouted the agitated stranger, slapping his hand to forehead, “Sweetheart, ya and me gotta have a little chat, yer very, very far behind in yer upbringing. However, now’s not de time, Ah’s gotta run, ‘cos Ah’m late like. But not ta worry, now that Ah’ know ya Ah’ll be sure ta make time ta see ya.”

And so saying the stranger promptly walked off down the hallway.

“Wait!” cried Charlie, “You didn’t answer all my questions. What’s your business? What are Treman and- and- and Stoman, what are they?” stuttered Charlie. But the figure continued to walk briskly away, topknot and feather cheekily bouncing along in time with his feet.

“Ah’ll tell ya next time.”

“When’s that?” shouted Charlie at his dwindling back.

“Probably next time de house complains about ya kickin’ and a stomping!” laughed the stranger, “Look after dat pendant!”

The figure stopped by a small door, paused to wave at Charlie then dashed on through.

“Wait, please wait!” called Charlie, “I don’t even know your name!”

But it was too late. The door had shut and Charlie was sure the stranger couldn’t have heard. Raising her foot to deal out some serious stomping and stamping to the floorboards she was once again rudely interrupted by the little door opening.

Out popped the stranger’s head and with a twinkle in his eyes he sang out to Charlie, “Jensen de Willow is mah name!” then his head ducked out of sight and the door began to swing shut. Before it could close it banged back open and Jensen’s head re-emerged, “And no more stomping!”

The door crashed shut.

Charlie who was still standing on one foot, mid-stomp, nearly fell over in shock.

Rushing down the hallway she came to the door, yanked it open and dashed through. She came to a shocked standstill. She had never been in this room before.

It was huge.

The domed ceiling was hidden in shadows and the curved walls on the far side were a good stone’s throw away. On brackets evenly spaced across the walls were blazing torches that flickered and cast dancing shadows over the floor. Carved on the stone walls were huge emblems of snarling dragons that seemed to flail and thrash.

Massive, circular doors punctured the walls at regular intervals. Each door was adorned with thick carvings. Charlie stood there and gaped, mouth wide open. Turning around she discovered she was alone, she couldn't see Jensen anywhere. The cavernous room was empty.

Realising she probably looked pretty stupid with her tonsils showing Charlie snapped her mouth shut and went to investigate the nearest door. It was gigantic. Standing next to it she had to crane her neck right back to see the top. The door was constructed from a huge slab of stone. Wonderful carvings of roses, vines and thorns criss-crossed its surface in complex patterns. An oversized handle of black rock jutted outward, grasping this with both hands Charlie tugged, pulled and pushed with all her might. But to no avail, the door refused to budge.

Frowning she moved on to the next door. It had been made from timber and was so cunningly constructed that no joints could be seen. Carvings of trees and birds swept across its surface. Trying the handle of the door, Charlie was vexed to find that it too wouldn't open.

With her mouth set in a determined line she went from door to door, trying the handle of each and getting more and more frustrated as each successive door failed to open. Finally she found herself back at the smaller door.

"Fine then, don't open! See if I care!" grumped Charlie.

Taking a last look at the domed room with all of its bewitching carvings she snuck back through the little door and hurried to check on her grandmother.



Mr. Crow sat alone at his desk. He was cracking his knuckles and using his long, ink-stained fingers to pick his nose. On sudden impulse the lawyer stood up and walked

over to the enormous steel safe that loomed in one corner of the room. Opening it he stared at all the money stacked high inside.

“Lovely, lovely,” he crooned. His dark eyes blinked slowly as he ran his knobbly fingers lovingly up and down each bundled tower of notes.

From his shirt he pulled out a thick key and locked the safe. Returning to his paperwork and nose-picking, Mr. Crow prepared to spend the rest of the afternoon relaxing. His concentration was broken a while later when the safe gave a little tremor. Looking up, Crow stared at the safe with a look of puzzled concern.

His safe certainly shouldn’t tremor.

Giving it a sharp look, the lawyer returned his attention to a particularly fat bogie skewered on his nail.

Oddly the safe shook and quivered for a second time.

Knitting his brow in puzzlement Mr. Crow stood up to investigate. Reaching for the door he yelped then fell over on his backside in alarm as the safe began to clamour and boom.

It behaved as though caught in an earthquake.

As the noise coming from the safe grew to a crescendo the study lights began to flicker and dim. Suddenly it fell silent. Mr. Crow’s eyes bulged in disbelief, he’d never seen anything like it. Rushing to check his money Mr. Crow hurried to the safe.

“Open the door,” commanded a voice that issued forth like rumbling thunder, “Open the door you bumbling, squashy Human. Open the door or face my wrath.” Mr. Crow once again fell to the floor in shock and all the blood drained from his face.

“Who’s that, who’s there?” squeaked the lawyer, “Who’s hiding in my safe? My money what have you done to my money?”

“You chattering, chattering fool, open this portal or I shall suck your marrow from your spindly bones and squish your brain!” threatened the dark, growling voice.

The lawyer's hands shook as he pulled the key from his shirt, slowly he inserted it into the safe's lock. With a violently trembling arm Mr. Crow drew back the door. The money had disappeared. In its stead a dark shadowy figure emerged...and kept on emerging and emerging.

Mr. Crow had never seen anything or anyone as large as this man. The figure almost filled the room, it towered over the desk and made the lanky lawyer look tiny in comparison. All of a sudden the lawyer felt fear, real disembowelling fear. Fear that snatched at his bladder, fear that sent cold waves screaming up his spine and locked all his muscles into a spasm. This...thing that now stood in Crow's study could not be human.

"You will do as I warrant you little wretch," spoke the hulking figure, "Fail to please me and I shall tear your skin into lengths, rip your hair into twine and use your fingernails as buttons. I will make you into a garment to be worn. Do I have your attention, you little squashy maggot?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" stammered Mr. Crow, "All my attention, all of it, you've got it, yes, yes."

"Stop your babbling."

Mr. Crow's jaw clamped shut. He stared at the menacing figure. It was almost as wide as it was tall, wrapped head to toe in black bandages, its head covered by a heavy cowl. Mr. Crow quailed as he stared into the dark depths of the hood's shadow.

"There is something that I desire and you, little maggot, shall be of use in my hunt for it."

The figure continued to talk, Mr. Crow dwarfed by the hulking figure grovelled and nodded his head in quick agreement as the newcomer laid out his demands. At one point Crow interrupted, "But how will I recognise this if I've never seen one before?"

"I will send one of my Shades with a sketch of its likeness, you may bide your time till then, but bear this in mind, little worm, I will suffer no failure on your part. Fail to please me and your marrow will be forfeit."

Mr. Crow gulped.

"Understood?"

"Y-Yes!"

"Yes, what?" growled the figure.

"Yes, er, Lord?"

"Good," the figure nodded its head. Turning the giant strode towards the safe, placing one oversized and huge foot inside it paused, "Something to remember me by little worm."



The figure upended a huge fist, rubies the size of magpie eggs tinkled as they fell and scattered across the wooden floor.

“A word of caution, greedy human. My generosity is great, both in reward and in pain.”

Turning once more, the figure climbed back into the safe. One of its bulging arms reached back and pulled the safe door shut with a quiet click.

Mr. Crow shuddered and wiped cold sweat from his brow. He took an unsteady step forward then hastily sat down in a heap before his shaking legs gave out. The lawyer sat there, on the floor surrounded by glinting rubies and let out a long, long sigh.





Two different types of Dog and an angry Giant

“Good morning Charlie, my little angel. Now then, who’s got a kiss for her Gran?” Charlie rubbed the last traces of sleep from her face and stumbled into the kitchen. Her eyes were red and puffy and as usual, her hair was a mess. Yawning, she staggered across the kitchen and gave her Grandmother a hug and a big kiss.

“Ooh, what a sweetie you are! And what have you got planned for today, Poppet?” Charlie’s Gran sat Charlie on a stool and pulling out a big wooden comb began to pull the knots out of Charlie’s bedraggled hair.

“I thought I’d go over to Tina’s for the day. Her mum said she could get a dog so we’re going to Bones ‘n Kennels to check out what they’ve got.”

“That’s nice Poppet, be sure to be home before dark, okay sweetness?”

“Yup, sure Gran,” said Charlie, “Gran, have you finished with my hair, or were you planning on pulling all of it out by its roots?”

“Oh Charlie!” laughed her Gran, “Don’t be such a baby, I’m just making you presentable. It’s important you know.”

“Hhmpf.”

Charlie's Gran's laughter tinkled across the kitchen, "There you go my pet, now then, off you run."

Charlie, with her hair combed into two crazy-looking pigtails, gave her Gran another hug. Sliding off the stool she grabbed one of her grandmother's freshly baked croissants and scampered for the door.

Turning to say goodbye she saw a familiar slackness shudder across her Gran's face. "Charlie! Good Morning my sweet. And where are you off to this beautiful morning?"

Charlie struggled not to let her despair show. Running back to her Gran she gave her another big hug.

"Nowhere special Gran, nowhere special."

Running out the kitchen, she almost bumped into Mr. Crow who casually slapped her in passing.

"Clumsy girl, watch where you step," he snarled, "You need to look lively my filly! Now get out of my way."

Charlie rebounded from the wall and hurried out of the way. Stepping out of the house, she let loose a sigh of relief as the front door shut quietly behind her.

She began to feel better as she headed further away. By the time she had reached Tina's a smile was peeking out of her face. Picking a puppy, even if it wasn't for herself, wasn't something she got to do every day.

Tina answered the door to Charlie's knock.

"So are you ready then?" asked Tina.

"Of course! Anything that gets me out of the house and Crow's way sounds good."

"Is that skinny, old idiot still being a pain?" asked Tina with a grimace, "My neighbour had a run in with him yesterday, Crow clobbered the poor man around the head with his umbrella when he didn't move out of the way fast enough."

“Yeah, that sounds like the miserable fool,” sighed Charlie, “I wish I was big enough to tie his skinny legs together.”

“Ha! That’s at least a couple more years away, unless you’re planning on having a huge growth spurt,” laughed Tina, “Come on now, I’ve got to go tell me Ma’ we’re ready.”

Charlie always enjoyed being around Tina, she had a knack of making her forget about her home and all the problems it contained. Following Tina, she walked into her mother’s kitchen.

“Hiya Mrs. Bagley, how are you today?”

“Charlie, how wonderful to see you. I’m well thank you, help yourself to a cookie whilst I get ready.”

Together they got into Mrs. Bagley’s car and headed off to Bones ‘n Kennels. Sitting in the back with Tina, Charlie thought back to the odd meeting with Jensen the day before.

“Mrs. Bagley, have you ever heard of a place called Bellania?”

“Bellania? No, I don’t think I have, Transylvania sure, but never Bellania. Why, is it in Russia somewhere?” asked Mrs. Bagley.

“I’m not sure myself, Mrs Bagley. I heard it mentioned recently, on the telly and I just wondered where it was.”

“On the telly? Maybe it was a movie or something, doesn’t sound like a real place. Have you been watching those late night movies again?” said Tina.

“Uh, yeah, that’s right.”

“Well what do expect? Must be an imaginary place then,” grinned Tina, giving her friend a knowing look, “Bit like you still believing in dragons, isn’t it?”

“But dragons are real!”

“Sure they are,” chuckled Tina. Reaching over she gave Charlie a playful punch on the shoulder.

“Charlie, you really shouldn’t watch television late at night. It’s bad for you,” said Mrs. Bagley, “Promise me you won’t watch television after dark okay? It’ll give you nightmares.”

“But-”

“Promise me Charlie!”

“Okay, okay! I promise,” quickly agreed Charlie as she was keen to change the conversation, “So Tina...what sort of dog did you say you wanted?”



Mr. Crow was quietly sitting in his office. He couldn’t stop fidgeting, every once in a while he would turn round and stare with nervous eyes at the safe. Going up to it, he would produce the key and reach out to unlock the door but each time his hand would start shaking so violently that he would have to return to his desk, sit down and wait for his nerves to calm down. Crow was fiercely annoyed. Fear of the huge, bulking Giant had finally conquered his love for money and now he dared not open the safe, not even to play with his gold.

Sitting there with his head held in his hands the lawyer didn’t see the Shade as it slid under the door. However, the sudden drop in the study’s temperature caused Mr. Crow to look up.

Yelping in terror Crow tipped backwards in his chair and fell in an untidy heap. Hunched on top of his desk a shapeless, inky-black monstrosity pulsed and writhed. Extending what could have been either an arm, or a paw, it offered a parchment, rolled and bound in black ribbon.

“Ttttake it,” the Shade’s voice whispered like a chill winter wind, “Take it, misssserable Human.”

“Hhmpf, I assume you’re the ‘Shade’ my new and menacing benefactor was referring to.”

Reaching out Crow tried to snatch the parchment but the Shade wouldn’t let go. Gathering what little courage he had, Mr. Crow began to tug and pull, suddenly the Shade released its grip. The lawyer flew backwards. As Crow pried himself up off the floor he was disgusted to realise that this was almost becoming a habit. Over the past couple of days his skinny bottom had definitely received too much contact with the wooden floorboards.

Unravelling the ribbon and breaking the seal Mr. Crow stared in disbelief at the sketch drawn upon the parchment.

“Aaah! Its been under my nose all this time, I don’t believe it! I’ll skin that little filly alive! Quick you, go tell your Master it’s here! I know where it is!”

The Shade didn’t budge.

“Well hurry you piece of bile, do what you’re told! Go on shoo, go tell your Master!”

The Shade jumped off the desk, landing on top of Mr. Crow it thrust its shadowy head into Crow’s face. Cold, fish-like breath washed over the lawyer.

“Your Massster too, Human, yourssss too. Don’t forgetttt.”

With a snarl the Shade shook itself. Turning, it slid from the room.



Tina had the biggest smile plastered over her face. Together, she and Charlie were leaving Bones ‘n Kennels. Tina carried a large box that was shaking madly from side to side. Frenzied barking and inquisitive yaps erupted as the box’s new occupant explored the inside of his temporary home. Mrs. Bagley had gone on ahead to collect the car.

“Oh, isn’t he cute! He’s adorable!” gushed Tina.

Charlie, who also loved dogs, especially puppies, didn’t quite suffer from the same condition as Tina. She found her brain didn’t turn to mush or her speech revert to that of a three year old’s. Nevertheless, and as much as Charlie realised how stereotyped the moment was, she still had to admit that the puppy was incredibly cute.

“What are you going to call him?” said Charlie.

“Oh, I’m not sure, maybe Apple Crumble?”

“Apple Crumble?” said a new voice, “That’s gotta be the dumbest name I’ve ever heard of. But then again, what would one expect from the likes of you two skanks!” Turning, Charlie and Tina groaned. It was Bethany and Loretta. Two of the most spiteful six formers from school. Bethany held a sleek greyhound on a leash, its collar was studded with semi-precious stones.

“Of course, Bethany, I’m surprised to see them here,” smirked Loretta, “I always thought Bones ‘n Kennels catered for a better class of people. I wonder what on earth they could afford to buy, what do you think Bethany, a half-breed or a mutt?”

“Oh, surely it must be a mutt. Charlie, you’ve got poor taste in friends, you must know a lot about mutts,” sneered Bethany in a voice that dripped with acidic sarcasm.

Charlie glared back at the two simpering girls. Both Bethany and Loretta were dressed head to toe in the latest Prada and Miss Dior. The air around the two older girls shimmered in an overpowering cloud of perfume.

Charlie grimaced and had to resist the urge to curse her luck.

All she had wanted was one nice day without pain, or hardship, or misery. Just one. She should have known better.

Black waves of misery clouded her vision.

“What do you two want?” she asked.

“What do you think?” chuckled Loretta, “Think we’re going to let you get away with dissin’ us yesterday? Schoolyard tax. We want it and we want it now.”

“Yeah,” simpered Bethany, “Five quid.”

“A fiver?” exclaimed Charlie in disbelief. She was lucky if she saw five pounds in a month.

“Yeah, we know it’s not much but it all adds up. Your contribution will go towards buying next month’s hair extensions.”

“What?” exclaimed Charlie in disbelief, “You know I don’t have any money.

Everyone knows how tight fisted Mr. Crow is. How’d you expect me to have anything?”

“Everyone has to give us a fiver,” hissed Loretta, “And if you can’t cough up then Tina can pay twice.”

Charlie felt her good mood and great expectations for the day go up in smoke. She knew where this was going. Knew what was going to happen and was sorry that Tina was going to get caught up in it all. The strong sense of despair intensified, solidified and blossomed into anger.

“No,” she said.

“What do you mean ‘no?’” snapped Bethany.

“You heard me,” said Charlie moving protectively in front of Tina, “You guys must have been watching too many reality shows to come up with such a stupid idea. I’m not paying and neither is Tina.”

“Listen you litte skank-”

“Look,” said Charlie, interrupting Bethany’s flow, “I know what’s going to happen. Let’s just get on with it. If we have to wait all day for you two chumps to come up with a suitable insult for a fight we’re going to be here all day. So if you want a fight, stop blabbing and let’s get on with it or bugger off and leave us alone.”

There was a moment of startled silence. The six formers stared at Charlie in shock. Even Tina was mesmerised (although a smile of shocked wonder did momentarily appear on her face.)

No one had stood up to the older girls.

No one, until now.

“Why you little, scraggy-haired...” began Loretta, white faced and furious that Charlie should stand up to her, “I’ll teach you a lesson you’ll never forget!”

The two older girls stalked forward.

“By the time we’re finished with you,” snarled Bethany, “You’ll have a face messy enough to suit your hair!”

Charlie sighed to herself. Maybe today had not been a good time to finally lose her temper. Because of her pride and sharp tongue it seemed as though she’d be getting the first beating of the day earlier than expected.

But enough was enough.

Moving forward Charlie waited for the first fist to fall.

Fortunately Mrs. Bagley returned with the car. Hitting the horn and apparently quite unaware of the confrontation Tina’s mother waved the two girls over and indicated that they should clamber on in.

“Ooh, I hate those two,” snapped Tina, “Just because they were born with a silver spoon in their mouths they think they can treat us like that!”

“Now, now girls,” said Mrs. Bagley with a somewhat distracted air and her eyes fixed firmly on the road, “‘Sticks and stones’, always remember the saying ‘sticks and stones may break my bones but words shall never hurt me’.”

Leaning close to Tina, Charlie whispered, “Yeah, well if that’s the case...if words won’t hurt them then I’d sure like to give those two chumps a going over with the old sticks and stones treatment!”

Tina’s laugh filled the car as they headed back to the Mews.



Charlie had had a really enjoyable day. Hanging out with Tina, playing with the puppy and relaxing with Mrs. Bagley’s homemade cookies and hot chocolate had helped ease her worries and concerns. She finally felt strong enough to return home. Stepping through the front door Charlie groaned. Mr. Crow was there, waiting for her.

“Well, well my filly. Had a good day did you? Been out cavorting and playing with your friends whilst poor Crow has been working his fingers to the bone?”

Charlie’s stress levels suddenly soared. She would never be free of him, problems never disappeared, they only hid for a while. Losing all sense of caution Charlie stepped forward to speak her mind.

“Ha! You’ve never done a real day’s work in your life, you lazy sack of bones. You’re a cheat and a skinny one at that! You’re just a bully, you pick on me ‘cos I’m small and you can get away with things ‘cos my Gran can’t help. Well you’d better watch out because when I’m older I’ll make you pay!”

Crow’s eyes bulged, his fingers twitched, his face went red then purple. Charlie shrank back, she knew she’d get a beating but she didn’t care, some things had to be said. Suddenly Mr. Crow laughed. His mouth twisted into a sneer, cracking his knuckles he leaned forward and said, “When you get bigger? If you get bigger my filly. IF!”

Striding forward on his long skinny legs Mr. Crow grabbed Charlie by the hair and dragged her down the hall.

“But you’re in luck my pretty little filly, it’s not me you have to worry about, someone else has expressed an interest in you. Oh yes, my pretty, your precious little neck has more value than you think and it’s time for you to meet the new Master of the house!”

Crow kicked open the study door and hauling Charlie, kicking and screaming into the study threw her to the floor by the safe. Stepping back Crow called out, “My Lord, she’s here! Look she has the key, it’s here, it’s here!”

Charlie looked up at Crow in bewilderment, had the skinny lawyer lost his mind? Who was he talking to? She knew Crow talked to money, much like one talked to a pet, but surely calling it ‘Master’ was a step too far?

BOOM!

Charlie stared as the safe door shook like a leaf in a gale.

BOOM!

The door began to buckle and bend.

KRA-KKOOOM!

The safe door flew across the room and fell with a loud clang to the floor. Charlie sat up in bewilderment, what had just happened? All of a sudden, Charlie felt sick, butterflies tore around the inside of her stomach, she couldn’t believe it. A huge foot was sticking out the safe. Charlie began to whimper as the foot stepped out and a leg the size of a tree trunk followed.

Standing up and filling the study with his bulk Crow’s new Master radiated such a sense of menace that Charlie began to shake uncontrollably.

“This is the one? She holds the key?” said the hulking giant in his voice of granite.

Stooping he easily lifted Charlie up with one mammoth hand. Turning her head from side to side he scrutinised his find, “Yessss, I can see the family resemblance,”

tilting Charlie's head backward, he examined her necklace, "Yesssssss, yes! You have done well worm, she does indeed carry the key!" casually throwing Charlie aside the giant turned to Crow, "Remove the pendant and bind her, I will take them both."

Mr. Crow scurried over to Charlie. Quickly and brutally, he slapped her, kneeling down he removed the Pendant with his spider-like fingers. Untying his braces from his trousers, he lent down to bind Charlie with them. Charlie, recovering her senses grabbed the lawyer's hand and bit him with all her might.

Crow screamed, grabbing his bleeding hand he leapt back. Charlie snatched up her pendant and made for the door but before she could reach safety python-like fingers grabbed her leg and hauled her into the air.

"Going somewhere little maggot?" chuckled the giant.

Charlie screamed in terror and instinctively lashed out with her hands. The pendant whipped round and bit into the giant's arm. Immediately thick, bubbling smoke erupted where the necklace made contact. The giant roared and Charlie found herself airborne as she was flung across the room. She slammed into the wall, rebounded off and fell into a small heap. Charlie struggled upright. Pulling herself back onto her feet she turned around to see the giant bellowing in pain and Mr. Crow still holding his mangled hand. Sensing an opportunity Charlie bolted for the door.

"Fool! Grab her!" roared the giant. Crow made a lunge for her but tripped over his braces, "Idiot! Shades come to me. Come, your Master commands it!"

Opening the study door, Charlie glanced back. Mr. Crow was on his arms and knees on the floor, the Giant stood arms outstretched and silhouetted in the centre of the room. But what made Charlie go cold were the thick shadows tumbling and oozing out of the safe. Mewling and snuffling they crowded around the Giant's feet.

Turning she fled.

Racing through the house Charlie sped away, a chill and unnatural howling and barking followed her. Bolting through doorways, scrambling up and down stairs she ran from the pursuing Shades.

Pausing for breath at the top of a flight of stairs, Charlie tried to take stock of the situation.

“Oh, my God! Gran!” she said.

Turning to head back and warn her Grandmother she was confronted by a Shade rippling up the stairs. Charlie yelped, quickly changing her direction she bounded through the nearest door. Sprinting, she flew down the corridor. Snatching a look over her shoulder she glimpsed more Shades tumbling after her. Putting her head down she pumped her legs even faster. Tearing a door almost off its hinges Charlie jumped through. Locking the door she turned to find herself in the corridor in which she had so recently met Jensen. Lungs heaving and with a stitch beginning to burn in her side, she trotted down the corridor.

BRAA-BOOM!

The door at the far end of the corridor burst apart covering Charlie in splinters. As the dust began to clear she saw the black-robed giant brushing past the shattered doorframe. Squeezing into the corridor his huge bulk completely blocked her exit. Looking back, she saw a Shade oozing under the locked door behind her.

“Yesss, little bird, what are you going to do now? There’s nowhere to fly. Give me the pendant, squishy girl and I might not feed your fleshy carcass to my Shades.”

The Shade behind her hissed in anticipation. Charlie, spying the small door Jensen had used scrambled through, slamming it shut she found herself once more in the huge vaulted chamber. It might have been her fevered imagination but the dragons carved on the walls seemed to move and writhe even more than earlier. There was no sign of Jensen.

Hurrying over to the nearest door, she tried the handle, but as before it was firmly locked. Remembering her previous lack of success with opening the doors Charlie began to panic. Keeping an eye on the small door for any sign of the Shades she hurried over to the next, it too, was locked.

A deep, rumbling chuckle filled the room. Slowly, knowing what to expect, Charlie turned towards the sound. The giant stood there with his arms crossed, Shades boiled and scrambled around his feet.

“Oh no, oh no! Not good!” Charlie scrambled to the next door, it was the one made from wood. Hands twisting at the handle Charlie began to scream and shout as she pounded on the door, “Help, help me! Jensen, where are you? Help me, someone, anyone! Please!” Turning she saw the Giant stalking towards her, the Shades had spread out across the room foiling any possibility of escape.

Fingers bleeding she scabbled at the handle and pounded at the door, “Let me in, let me in. Jensen, please let me in. Please open!”

A shrill wind suddenly filled the chamber, snapping at Charlie’s ponytails it howled across the room. Tugging on the giant’s robes, it blew at the bracketed torches, causing the flames to flare. On the walls, the dragons snarled and lashed their tails. The giant bellowed, the Shades screamed. Charlie fell over onto her backside and stared in disbelief as the door began to move.

Groaning, the door swung open.

Charlie gasped, she could see nothing through the doorway, just a throbbing deep blackness. The giant’s angry bellow of rage brought Charlie to her senses, gathering her courage she took a deep breath and jumped through.

Into the darkness.





A High Dive, Deepforest and some New Companions

Jumping blind, Charlie hit the floor hard and fell in a heap. Rolling onto her knees, she stared back in dismay at the approaching Shades. They came bounding and leaping towards her, screaming and spitting venomously, their rage and terrible anger causing Charlie to flinch in horror. The giant too was nearing the door, his black, bandaged hands reaching out. She could hear him repeating a fevered chant as his legs bludgeoned their way across the floor.

“Squeeze her, crush her! Suck her marrow! Squeeze her, crush her! Suck her marrow!”

Charlie recoiled in fear. Springing for the door she tried to force it shut. Her fingers, scrabbled at the handle, pushing all her weight against it she hastened to close it. But the door wouldn't move. Steadfast and stubborn it stayed ajar.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no! Shut, shut, shut, SHUT!” cried Charlie. She stamped her foot in frustration, “Shut, shut! Oh, please, please shut!”

Incredibly, the door began to move. The giant seeing his prey about to escape put on a burst of sudden speed. Jumping towards Charlie, he lashed out with clawed fingers, but the door was faster. With a thunderous bang, it slammed shut, cutting off the cries of her terrible pursuers and leaving her alone in the dark. Standing there, in the darkness, she could hear them, pounding on the door. Reaching out, she placed her trembling hands on the wooden surface. She could feel faint tremors from their frenzied efforts, nothing more. The door stood firm. It didn't budge, not even an inch.

Charlie released a shuddering breath.

Standing up she turned around in an effort to collect her bearings. As her eyes became adapted to the darkness, she began to make out faint details. She was in what she assumed to be a large tunnel and spaced at regular intervals along the walls were what Charlie believed to be statues, but in the gloom she couldn't be sure.

Following the dim lines of the walls she began to edge her way along. As she progressed onward she soon became aware of the sound of rushing water.

Turning a corner, Charlie's path joined a much larger tunnel that was lit with smoky torches which spat and popped in the moist air. A flowing river cascaded down a causeway and graceful bridges spanned the water at regular intervals. In the distance, Charlie could see a circle of daylight.

Hurrying along the side of the subterranean river Charlie headed towards the light. A terrible and sudden thought brought her to a halt. The house was enormous and she had of course seen many unusual sights and wonders within its walls, but never before an entire river. Charlie had a sneaking suspicion she wasn't in the house anymore. The thought almost made her stop, turn around and head back. However the idea of returning through the door and confronting the Giant wasn't exactly appealing. Besides, she had a curious nature, a fondness for investigating new places. She had never tired of discovering new territory inside the house, why should this be

any different? Setting her mouth in a determined pout, Charlie stomped off down the path to see what lay in store for her.

The tunnel opened out onto a cliff-face. Standing on the edge of the path Charlie gaped in delight as she took in the view. Spread far below her lay an immense forest. Huge trees thrust their foliage aloft to form an extraordinary ocean of green that stretched as far as her eyes could see. Many of the trees were in bloom, scents filled the air tickling at her nose: lavender, vanilla, aniseed and other smells, unlike any she had experienced before. Gazing in wonder Charlie saw huge pink birds that vaguely reminded her of flamingos gliding on spread wings above the forest canopy.

The river, emerging from the tunnel burst out into the crisp sunlight and fell below to form a vast, roaring waterfall before continuing on its winding, snaking way into the distance. Below her, near the base of the waterfall was a large clearing. She could see a small group of figures sitting around a blazing bonfire, with more people fishing nearby on the riverbank. However distance and spray from the waterfall made it hard for Charlie to make out any details.

A menacing growl coming from behind made her jump. She moaned in dismay, wouldn't he ever give up? Spinning, Charlie grabbed her pendant and raising her arm she prepared to put up a fight. To her shock she found, not the giant as she had supposed, but the largest dog she had ever seen. Hunching forward the streamlined animal was nearly the size of a pony. Powerful muscles bunched and rippled beneath its gleaming black coat, a strip of white fur ran down its back. Peeling back its lips to reveal enormous teeth it growled. Clearly it wasn't happy. Charlie groaned.

"Can my day get any worse?" she said. Bending down she picked up a nearby stick, hefting it she threw the stick down the path, "Er...fetch?"

The dog wasn't amused. Snarling it slowly padded towards Charlie who just as slowly backed away.

“I guess you’re not the sort of dog that Bones n’ Kennels aim to market for young, urban, fun-loving girls are you? Er...no? I didn’t think so, so why am I getting the really, really, really bad impression that you’re maybe the sort of dog that likes to EAT young, urban, fun-loving girls?”

Looking over her shoulder, Charlie realised with sudden alarm that the dog had backed her into a corner. On one side was a sheer drop down the cliff-face, on the other the river.

Charlie hastily stared around looking for any possible way out of her predicament. Lying on the floor a couple of metres away was a tree limb, worn smooth from its passage through the water. Charlie started to inch her way towards it, if she could just get her hands on it she could use it to keep the dog at bay, maybe even scare it off.

The dog with canny foresight moved between Charlie and her goal.

“Oh for crying out-”

The dog suddenly leapt at her. Teeth snapping, it shot through the air. Charlie fell backwards in an attempt to get out of its way, shock raced through her system as she abruptly found herself submerged in icy, cold water. The realisation that she was in the water and nearing a plummeting waterfall sent adrenaline pumping through her body. Kicking out in a frenzied front-crawl she hastened to reach the riverbank, but too late, the rushing water dragged her under. Spinning and tumbling, Charlie lost all sense of direction. She couldn’t tell up from down, or left from right.

Exploding from the water, Charlie found herself in a state of free fall. Spinning as she fell, Charlie had a ghastly, nauseous view of the mountainside rotating in and out of sight. One second the sky would be in focus, next the forest and then the waterfall. The rapid spinning, combined with the sensation of falling completely disorientated her.

The fall seemed to go on forever. Charlie, dizzy beyond belief, looked up and saw the foaming surface of the river rushing up to meet her.

“Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The water slammed into Charlie, cutting off her scream. Battling against the rushing water she struggled back up to the surface. Gasping, she managed to drag in a lungful of air before the pounding waters pushed her back under. Struggling harder, Charlie swam with all her might against the powerful undercurrents but with no success. The waters dragged her down and spun her along the stony riverbed. Large stones and waterlogged tree limbs scrapped at her clothing and to her horror, cramp began to spasm up and down her legs. Charlie could feel herself beginning to tire. The very thought of drowning in the murky waters drove her to fury. Flailing about she laboured to free herself. A sudden collision caused white flashes and an explosion of pain along the side of her head, dimly she could see a large jagged rock that trailed a line of blood, slowly disappearing into the murky water. Charlie’s vision began to blur and dim.



The Giant stood there, staring with a focused rage at the carved wooden door. His anger and fury was so intense that it could be seen pulsing around him like a dark halo. For a long, long time he stood there, his only movement was the slow opening and shutting of clenched fists. The Shades cowered in silence around him, forming a thick black, rustling and whispering carpet of shadow.

With a shudder, the Giant awoke from his bitter trance. Turning from the wooden door, he strode across the chamber towards the stone door. Thrusting his hands out he firmly grasped the criss-crossed carvings on the door’s surface. Opening his mouth, he began to chant. His voice was a deep, rumbling, baritone, a cross between

whale-song and distant thunder. His powerful voice filled the chamber, rippling back and forth it built to a crescendo. The stone door began to glow a deep red and as the chant built in power the colour brightened from red, to orange and finally a painful, luminous white. Another melody began to fill the chamber, a gentle wave of undulating sound that echoed across the room, weaving in and out of the Giant's voice. The new melody lifted the song to new heights. The eerie duet continued for a few heartbeats more then suddenly stopped leaving the room in a thick silence. The Giant released his grip and stepped back.

“Open,” he said.

Smoothly and silently the huge door swung open, the Giant strode forward with his shadowy servants following at his heels. Stopping halfway through the gate, he turned to one of the Shades.

“Fetch me a garment that belongs to that squishy little girl, ensure it is rich with her disgusting and vile scent. Bring it to me in the Western Mountains.”

Bane watched the Shade slink away, slipping under the small door on the far side of the chamber it disappeared back into the house. The Giant grunted his approval before striding through the gate with the remaining Shades.

The door swung shut leaving the chamber empty and silent.



Groaning, Charlie came to. Sitting up she stared around her, she was resting on the bank besides the rushing waters of the river. She didn't remember getting here, in fact the last thing she remembered was knocking her head on the submerged rock.

“Hello lass, nice swim?” said a voice.

“Uh, hi,” said Charlie, “Would you be a Treman?”

“Ha! Of course Ah’m a Treman, wot else would Ah’ be? Such a shame, Ah’ can see ya mind has been turned ta mush after swallowing all dat water...of course Ah’m a Treman! Look! Big nose, big earlobes and let’s not forget, green skin! D’ya meet many Humans that look like dis? ”

“Uh, sure, whatever. Well thanks anyways for saving me, I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t thank me, blossom, thank Sic Boy. T’was him dat pulled ya out de water.”

“Is that him?” asked Charlie.

A very fat Treman was walking down the bank whistling a jaunty tune as he came. Charlie had trouble imagining him pulling her out the river he was so fat! As the newcomer walked his phenomenal green stomach wobbled and rolled. Too large to be contained by his leather shirt it bulged over his belt. Charlie couldn’t help noticing that his belly button was pierced.

“Ha! Yer must be kidding, Kelko the Fat Oak swimming! De only thing he’s good fer is floating, mind ya if de situation ever arose Ah’m sure he’d make an excellent life buoy!”

“So who’s Sic Boy?” asked Charlie.

“Sic Boy? Ah’ just saw him off chasing squirrels, he’ll be back in a minute,” said Kelko, who having arrived sat down on the bank next to Charlie (she noticed it took a couple of seconds for his stomach to stop wobbling, even after he had sat down). Charlie raised her eyebrow, chasing squirrels? Right.

“Nice dive by de way,” said Kelko, “Ah’ especially enjoyed all de arm waving and screaming, very stylish, wouldn’t yer say Stotch?”

“Oh sure. Real stylish. Of course young lass, ya gotta be de only girl stupid enuff not ta take de stairs,” said Stotch.

“Stairs? What Stairs?” said Charlie.

“Those really, really, big stairs cut into de cliff face,” said Kelko, “Ya know, de ones dat are really hard ta miss.”

Charlie looked back at the cliff face. Kelko was right, there was indeed a huge staircase carved into the rock.

“Well it’s not as if I didn’t intend to use them, I never got the chance.”

“And why’s dat then lass?” asked Stotch.

“Because I got pushed into the water by a blooming big, black furred monster. That’s why!”

“Monster, around here? Hey Kelko ya haven’t seen any monsters around here have ya?”

“Nah, not since yer sister stopped coming around!” said Kelko.

“Shut it ya big green lump ‘o blubber!”

“Hey I’m serious! There really was a big monster up there, it jumped at me and...Oh my God! Here it is! Quick, run!” shouted Charlie.

Jumping up she made to run off. Stotch and Kelko stared around in puzzlement.

“Whatcha going on about lass?” asked Stotch.

“See Ah’ always said Humans were a few acorns short in de head,” said Kelko.

“What are you two blind? There, right there!” screamed Charlie.

The huge dog was calmly sitting at the top of the bank, opening its huge mouth it yawned and scratched its flanks.

“Ha! Lass don’t be stupid now, dat’s Sic Boy,” laughed Stotch.

“Sic Boy?” said Charlie, “No it’s not, that’s the monster that chased me into the river.”

“Sic Boy, chased ya into the river?” said Kelko, “He wouldn’t have done dat, certainly not on purpose. Although Ah’ve gotta admit, he does have a rather wicked sense of humour.”

“Wicked sense of humour? He tried to bite me in half!”

“Nah, maybe he just wanted ta play a bit. He’s a bit feisty sometimes. Anyways don’t forget he’s de one dat pulled ya outta de drink,” said Stotch.

“Hhmp. If that’s his idea of fun I’d hate to see what he’s like when he’s angry,” grumbled Charlie. She still wasn’t convinced that the huge dog wasn’t going to pounce down the bank and try to gobble her up.

“How’s ya head honey?” asked Stotch.

“Really sore, but I’ve had worse beatings from Mr. Crow.”

“Who’s Mr. Crow?” asked Kelko.

“A skinny, deceiving, miserable...um, never mind, he’s not important.”

“Well then, lass, if ya can walk, lets go see de others, get ya some grub and something dry fer ya ta wear,” said Stotch.

Bending down he scooped up his fishing gear, his catch (which consisted of some brightly coloured, plump-looking fish) and his fishing rod before clambering back up the riverbank with Kelko wobbling by his side. Charlie, making sure that the two Tremen were between her and the immense dog, slowly followed after.

Reaching the top of the bank, Charlie got her first clear view of the clearing. It was about half the size of a football pitch and was covered by thick grass that rippled gently in the cool afternoon breeze. A couple of the pink birds that she had seen earlier were walking about, plucking at seeds and insects on the ground. Every once in a while one would lift its head and trill out a whistling song. The trees lining the clearing were gigantic, bigger than any she had seen in London. The trunks were wider than buses and the trees themselves towered high enough to look like small skyscrapers.

In the centre of the clearing a group of maybe ten or twelve Tremen were sitting around a roaring bonfire. They all seemed to be in a very merry way, passing around a dripping leather gourd and eating freshly barbequed fish. A couple of the Tremen were pounding out complex rhythms on leather bound drums, some were singing along and several others were dancing and cavorting around. Charlie couldn’t help but suspect that they were drunk.

They all cheered when the three of them (and the huge dog) came in sight. Charlie did a double take when she saw a familiar face.

“Jensen!” cried Charlie.

“Charlie, whatcha doing here, come ta visit have ya?” asked Jensen with a bemused look. His eyes took in her wet and dishevelled clothing and the big bump on her head, “Ah’ see yer’ve been in de wars, everything alright sweetheart?”

Before Charlie could reply the other

Tremen began to badger Jensen.

“Who’s she den?”

“Who’s de lass, Jensen?”

“Yeah, who’s she?”

Jensen waved his hands for silence, “All right lads, dis is de little lady Ah’ was telling yer all about. Say ‘hello’ ta de stomping, stamping girl, me little Hippotomi, Charlie!”

A large chorus of ‘hellos’ and ‘hi’s’ greeted Charlie who couldn’t help but grin. The Tremen were very welcoming and their good cheer and big smiles were infectious.

Many of them tried to come up and ask her questions. Jensen however, was having none of it.

“Stand back! Stand back ya useless lot of weasels! Now den, ya can all see she’s a little wet, let’s give her some grub and a chance ta dry out before yer all start bothering her!”



Jensen led her over to an empty seat, sat her down and got one of his companions to fetch a towel and another to dish out some food for her. One of the more jovial Tremens tried to offer her a drink from the leather gourd but Jensen waved it away and instead she received a cool drink that tasted of fragrant vanilla, lime and raspberries. The smell of the freshly cooked fish set Charlie's stomach rumbling, it had been hours since she had eaten. Accepting a plate of the Tremens' dinner, she tucked into it straight away.

"Charlie, me lass, are ya alright? That's quite a big bump on yer noggin," asked Jensen, obviously concerned.

"My head's okay, I think it just looks worse than it is," seeing the worry in Jensen's eyes she added, "Really though I'm okay."

"Well, if ye be sure but if ya don't mind Ah'll have Lentol look at it later," said Jensen with a thoughtful look at her head, "So, tell me lass, wot brings ya ta mah Side? Are ya here fer a bit of sight seeing, come ta see de beautiful Bellania, Land of a Thousand Suns?"

"Urm, I didn't really have a say in the matter. I kind of got chased here," said Charlie.

"Chased," said Jensen, "Wot d'ya mean chased?"

"By a really, really big giant with poor anger management and a whole load of black, hissing shadows!" said Charlie.

"Big giant, black shadows?" muttered Jensen. His mouth formed a big 'O' and his face suddenly looked very grave, "This giant, obviously a big guy, did he keep his face covered?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And did yer by chance get any chance to see his skin, ya know on his hands, his ankles, any part of him?"

“No, now that you mention it I don’t remember seeing any, it was weird, he was covered in black bandages.”

“Bane!” hissed Jensen.

One of the Tremen sitting close by promptly fell off his chair upon hearing the name. Silence fell across the campsite and all the Tremen turned to stare at Charlie.

“Bane? Who’s Bane?” asked Charlie.

“Bane, is bad, bad news,” said Jensen. He spat into the fire to prove his distaste of the subject, “He’s an evil bugger with a thirst fer power and conquest. And he’s been a right pain in de neck, he’s been closing down a lot of de trade routes, forbidding travel through de Stoman lands and amassing a huge army. He’s a bringer of war.”

“Oh, he’s worse than dat!” cursed Stotch, “He’s an eater of flesh! Children from all three races have been sold ta him in slavery and then never seen again. It’s said he has a unquenchable hunger and appetite, wid a particular fondness fer bone and marrow.”

“Um, any idea why he’s chasing me?” asked Charlie in a quiet voice.

“Yes lass, Ah’ve got a couple of good ideas as ta why he’s following ya,” said Jensen, “But Ah’ve taken a vow of secrecy, Ah’m sworn ta de Jade Circle and certain matters take precedence. But never fear yer safe here an we’ll take ya ta Lavendis and there de Jade Circle will take ya under their wing and sort matters out.”

“But if you know something, surely you can tell me? For Heaven’s sake I’ve had a giant tearing around my house, threatening to feed me to his dogs! Jensen, please tell me something, anything!” implored Charlie.

“Blossom, he would if he could but a vow ta de Jade Circle is unbreakable. If he were ta speak he would be outcast from Lavendis and he’d spend his life as a vagrant,” said Kelko. Coming over to join them he placed a calming hand on Charlie’s shoulder, “Charlie, we’ll take ya to Lavendis and there all yer questions will be answered.”

“But my Gran, is she safe? How can I leave and not know for sure if she’s okay?” asked Charlie.

“Me little Hippotomi, matters have been taken out of our hands. Bane is too dangerous ta face, ya can’t go back ta yer house. Even if ya had us by yer side it wouldn’t be enough ta ensure yer safety, not from Bane. But lass, Ah’m sure yer Gran would be fine, she has no part in Bane’s plans,” said Jensen, “De only way forward lies wid de Jade Circle.”

“What’s the Jade Circle and what have they got to do with me?” asked Charlie, “Hang on a sec, how come they know of me? I’ve never been here before and I only met you for the first time last week.”

“Charlie, Ah’ know yer parents and de Jade Circle know yer parents. Yer parents have worked hand in hand with de Circle like all yer family have done fer generations. Little lass, yer family are de Gatekeepers, they watch one of de few Paths between Bellania and Earth.”

“You know my parents? Where are they, why haven’t I seen them? They’ve been gone for seven years!” said Charlie.

“Charlie Ah’ took an oath not ta talk about de whereabouts of yer parents.”

“But they’re my parents, you’ve got to tell me. Why haven’t they got in touch with me? Why haven’t I heard from them? YOU’VE GOT TO TELL ME!”

“Charlie, Ah’ can’t tell ya, Ah’m sorry, Ah’ve taken a vow and Ah’ just can’t break it. Please fer now, just trust me like yer parents have always trusted me.”

Charlie wanted to kick something, hard. To actually find someone who knew of her parents and maybe their whereabouts, only then to be told she couldn’t ask questions was almost enough to have her spitting in rage. Being asked for the same trust that her parents had given, was the only thing holding Charlie back from screaming out a string of furious questions. She had a feeling that was why Jensen had asked for her trust as it was the only way to get her to shut up.

Charlie had a sudden urge to kick Jensen in the shin. Fortunately he turned away before she could act.

“Alright boys, dis trade trip has been cut short. Pack yer bags, we’re going back ta Lavendis. If we push it we can make five leagues by nightfall so get jumping! Lentol, come over here and take a look at de bump on Charlie’s noggin’! Oh and Stodel, come over here, Ah’ve got a task fer ya,” said Jensen. Hurrying across the campsite he harassed the Tremen and supervised their packing. Water was flung on the fire, food hastily wrapped and fresh water taken from the river. In a very short space of time the Tremen were ready. Bags slung across backs and over shoulders they began to trudge to the forest edge. The pink birds scattered, breaking into flight at their approach.

Stodel, a young enthusiastic-looking Tremen, held a hurried conversation with Jensen by the forest edge. Giving up his heavy back pack he accepted a lighter bag and several flasks of water in its place. Shouting out his goodbyes, Stodel jogged down the path, his topknot bouncing from side to side. With a final wave he disappeared into the forest greenery.

Charlie, walking side by side with Stotch and Kelko, peered behind her for a final view of the waterfall. The path leading back into the cliff face was her only way back to her house. Wracked with sudden indecision she turned to Stotch.

“What’s Lavendis?”

“It’s our city lass. De home of de Tremen ‘Lavendis ,de Flower of Deepforest’.”

“And that’s where I’ll find the Jade Circle? They’ll answer all that I need to know?”

“Yes lass.”

Turning her back on the cliff she boldly strode into the forest.



The giant, Bane, watched as the large circular stone door swung shut behind him. Flexing his shoulders he stormed off down the large corridor. The Shades, no longer needed by their master, slunk off to disappear through the low archways that lined either side of the stone-flagged pathway. Striding down the corridor he neared two mighty, red-panelled doors that barred the way. Clapping his hands smartly together the doors swung smoothly open. Cowled servants, dressed in magnificent blood red livery bowed in unison as Bane marched into the lushly carpeted hall. Several approached him bearing fruits, spiced cakes and liquors to refresh him after his journey. Bane dismissively waved them aside.

“Just bring me my robes of office,” growled Bane, “I have no time to dawdle.” Two of the footmen removed Bane’s travel cloak and replaced it with a magnificent black, hooded robe that was bedecked with gold scroll work and embroidery. A third footman approached and placed a heavy gold chain, inset with dark red stones that flickered and glowed with a soft light, around his neck.

Checking his image in a polished brass mirror Bane grunted his approval then marched from the hall, his mammoth stride carried him quickly along the hallways. Rich and opulent furnishings lined the way: great paintings depicting ancient battles, jade vases, marble statues, bejewelled weapons and more hung from the walls. Bane marched past with uncaring eyes. Opening a lattice portcullis he entered a large dank and dripping room. Mildew covered the sandstone walls and fires had been lit in braziers in an attempt to keep the oppressive cold at bay. A circular pit lay in the middle of the room. A rusting, heavy metal grate barred the pit’s mouth and in the ceiling above, a shaft, the same size and shape as the pit below, led to an overcast and turbulent sky far above. Silent, shadowy and helmeted guards stood about, shuffling around in obvious discomfort (although whether it was from the cold, Bane’s presence or something else, it was hard to tell).

“Guard, how have they been?” asked Bane.

“Restless your Lord. It has been some time since they have tasted fresh meat,” replied one of the heavily muscled guards.

“Well that is about to change,” said Bane. Walking over to the pit he looked down into the darkness below. Pulling out an item from his pocket he brought it near his face and sniffed at its scent. It was one of Charlie’s T-shirts. Bane addressed the pit’s occupants. “Bring me back that squirming, squishy little Human girl, bring her to me, kicking and screaming, writhing and wriggling. I must have that little maggot! I will have that little maggot! Bring her to me and I will feed you fresh, succulent meat, such fleshy and dripping and bloody delights will be your reward for this service. Little Treman children shall be your feast, yours to suck on and gnaw, yours to chew and gnash upon. Bring me the disgusting little maggot and I shall show you my delight and endless gratitude.”

Bane stepped up to the lip of the pit and dropped the T-shirt into the darkness below. A loud hissing and clicking noise boiled out from the hidden depths. The walls of the pit shook as they were struck and beat upon from within.

“Open it,” said Bane.

Two of the guards began to turn a huge winch. Chains hanging from the ceiling pulled taut as the grate slowly lifted upwards. It teetered near the top of its arc then fell with a thunderous clang to the floor. The guards edged back from the gaping hole and pressed themselves against the walls. The things in the pit, smelling their fear, began to roil and boil within the darkness of their confinement. Faster and faster they moved, repeatedly striking at the walls of the pit. The whole room began to shake. The noises grew and soon the hissing became so loud the guards were forced to press their hands to their ears in an effort to dim the blistering and grating noise.

“GO!” roared Bane, flinging his hands towards the shaft above, “Go and do not return until you have the girl! GO!”

Out of the pit erupted a tide of predatory flesh, taut muscles and serrated teeth flashed in the air. The sinuous predators were long in body, grey and worm-like. Slime-covered scales festered along the length of their bodies. Torn and lacklustre dragonfly wings hummed as they beat powerfully against the air. The creatures spun and coiled around the room, the power of their passage forcing the guards to the floor and the heavy grate to shake and rattle on its chains. Bane's robes swept up around him and flapped in the wind. The creatures snapped at the air, hissing and clicking, the sound of their scales brushing and rubbing against one another was deafening. Spinning once more around the room they brushed against Bane's outstretched hand, then they were gone, flinging themselves up through the shaft and out into the dark, twilight sky.

Bane stared up through the shaft at the dwindling silhouettes.

“Maggot, I do not think your luck will last much longer...”