

ONE

It was the perfect day to die.

Scott Maguire climbed into his glider. He looked long at the mountains, a collage of purple and gold that shimmered through the sultry air. They beckoned him. Come lie with me, die here. You won't find a better resting place. Behind the range rose the angular peak of Mona Gowan where he'd often walked, years ago when it was still safe to roam the countryside.

He attached his seat belt, fumbled with controls he knew well but today looked unfamiliar. Two men in overalls leaned on the nose sharing their impressions of the World Cup. When would they find the winch and attach it so he could escape? The tall fence, surmounted by barb wire coils, still enclosed him like a prison. Through it he made out the wasteland of blackened tree stumps and a couple of bombed-out houses. Smoke rising from a yellow plume to the north made the air hazy. The battle of the day or a wildfire? It wasn't a farmer burning his rubbish.

He took a sip of water from his flask, swilled it in his mouth and swallowed cautiously. His throat was raw. The swelling under his chin reminded him that he was infected. His clock was ticking toward its appointed end.

The plane jerked, telling him that the winch was attached. So it's up, up and away. The cable tightened on the sailplane, pulled it briskly along the runway and then free. Scott drew the stick toward his chest, watched the plane's nose tilt up. A flawless takeoff for his flight out of the world. If he held to his plan and

didn't wax nostalgic about the gift of life. Life – a gift? He laughed, loud enough to hear himself above the whistling air but could not dispel a growing numbness. If he was about to die of Plague why not go out with a bang rather than in bed? Or in jail? After all, his dream was over.

Unfortunately he wasn't dreaming when he woke up the previous morning to find the police at his door. Someone had tipped them off to his less-than-legal activities. At first he kept his cool, gave detailed answers to their questions, but when they kept at him like pit-bulls he grew angry. After an intense discussion he persuaded them that they could find him at any time. They took his passport and left.

Did he have to end his life? He did, unless he wanted to die in jail, disgraced and branded as a traitor with his name raked over by tabloids. Dad and Mum would be bereaved, but they would get over it. For years they hadn't even tried to stay in touch. Living in Sweden they might not hear about his death for another month. Joan would hate him for it. Though they'd broken up five years ago she still wrote him sentimental emails. He'd sent her a delayed text that he was ending his life and why.

At the edge of a forest the plane caught an air wave that sent him a hundred meters up. The yellowing ground retreated, waving him good-bye. Steadying the plane he made a second run at the forest, gained some lift then turned the glider's nose toward a prominent line of mountains. At that altitude he'd make at least twenty miles, to reach less populated parts of Aberdeenshire.

Through the smoky haze he made out more trees, stretches of healthy pines then acres of stumps that hadn't borne a leaf for years. They were soon replaced by homesteads, each consisting of a stone cottage, vegetable patch, a few farm animals and an electrified twelve-foot fence. Most had a lookout tower with an armed guard. Before global warming kicked in, sheep and cattle roamed a pastoral landscape. You could walk for miles and no one bothered you. Then the high oil prices and exotic diseases drove the farms out of business. People escaping from crime-ridden

cities or flooded-out homes filled the vacuum; built their private fortresses.

The smoke plume originated in a large homestead, now no more than a bombed-out shell surrounded by several craters. He made out several people standing nearby, no doubt weeping at the devastation. Electric fences and armed guards might deter wandering climate refugees but they only attracted city bounders by advertising that here was something worth raiding. When bounders came, they came with shoulder rocket-launchers. Each day a new raid figured in the news. The Scottish army, spread thin in the Highlands, often came too late to help individual homesteads.

And there it was – three covered lorries, a tank and a bulldozer all on their carriers creeping along a mountain road, except that they were heading toward Braemar, in the wrong direction. They hadn't come to help out the locals. This was a demolition crew bound for the Braemar refugee camp. President Christie was making good on his election promise to secure Scotland's borders and clean up illegal camps.

I'll be gone by that time. My work is finished. I gave a few people a decent life but in the end it didn't do a damn bit of good. My clients will soon be locked up in internment camps. I can't fight a tank with a tooth pick.

He tried to steady his hands, but they kept shaking. I never thought I'd be afraid to die, but I will not die in jail. Better make an end of it in the heather and hope that at least one quality paper will run a sympathetic headline, like: *Fake Visa Lawyer Crashes in Highlands. Human Rights Groups Praise Lawyer.* Death is the ending, Scott. There's no afterlife. It's like going to sleep one last time.

The sailplane crossed into a small glen where it caught a weak slope lift allowing him to skim over the hill and down into the next glen. More homesteads, and he was headed for a high fence and its metal watchtower. He yanked the stick, lifted the glider's nose, only barely enough to clear the structures. *I can't crash among those bastards.* Several shots echoed from the hills. A guard in the

closest tower had decided to open fire. He crouched lower in his seat, banked the plane away. The shooting ceased.

‘Idiot,’ he screamed. ‘You think I’m a bounder coming to steal your bloody cabbages?’

Not enough lift. The skirmish left him drifting into heather and scrubby forest. Losing altitude. The ground rushed at him with finality. *Not here – I can’t die here.* He held the stick steady. If he stayed on course a lucky thermal near the distant tree line might still rescue him. As the gnarled trees rose to meet him he braced for impact. Then he felt a gentle tug from rising air. The ground rolled out of sight and was replaced by blue sky. The plane cleared the crest of the hill.

He was in a narrow valley with several homesteads and a meandering stream along whose banks stood a small settlement. He could tell it was a refugee camp from the motley collage of whitewashed cobb houses with thatched roofs, Italian-style villas and wooden sheds with tar-papered roofs. Smoke seeping from stove pipes formed a white pall over the valley. He made out several lines of flapping laundry strung across mud-caked streets and small children playing there. Farther up the hill several wind generators turned slowly. There were no watchtowers or security fences other than a wolf-fence that snaked up hill and down valley. Where was he? He knew all major refugee camps but couldn’t place this one. Intrigued, he banked to the right and circled over it. A stand of mature olive trees suggested they’d been planted twenty years earlier, which would make this one of the first camps. How had it survived government edicts that had closed so many others?

His eye was drawn to several faint lines that crisscrossed the glen, not respecting fences, houses and man-made boundaries, apparently painted on the ground, punctuated by standing stones and small stone circles. The web appeared to converge on a nearby hill. Close to its summit were several thatched domes like huge haystacks, and small patches of cultivated land.

‘Impossible,’ he muttered. ‘What the hell is that doing there?’

The hill had all the features of a lupan colony, an active one judging by the smoke seeping from the domes. Most colonies had been eliminated years ago, the lupans shot or taken to government reservations. Why had this one escaped sentence? He made out small dark figures walking between the dens. They appeared to walk and run like humans, but he was sure that they weren't.

He'd seen lupans close up in a primate research facility. As expected they wore no clothes. Their arms and legs, sticklike as if after a long fast, appeared abnormally long. Sores on the hands and feet only emphasized their miserable state. Most characteristic were their ochre leathery skin, golden eyes and long black hair. Born of human parents, they should elicit at least the sympathy you felt for handicapped children, except that they were a species apart. Their hungry golden eyes sized you up the way a leopard might before it pounced on you. Like most people, he felt that lupans were a mockery of the human race and of everything he valued; nothing but grief to families cursed to bear them. They had less ability to bond than a canary. He tried to talk to them, but they responded with clicks, whistles and a deep throated moaning like the baying of wolves. Lupans were able to retain at most ten common nouns. If they were destined to take over the world from humans, they represented no evolutionary advance.

In a field near the dens several lupans milled about as if they didn't know which way to go. Maybe they were lost and needed to be helped out. He'd give them something to remember. He turned the sailplane's nose around, pushed the stick forward and let the plane drop. As he closed in, the squirming things ran for their lives, hair flying in every direction. Their high-pitched yelps echoed faintly as they hit the ground. He forced a smile.

'Count yourselves lucky,' he shouted through the window. 'At least you'll live long after the rest of us are gone.'

It's over. We're the last generation, and we're headed for a final exit.

He crossed over a forest that covered several hills all the way to the horizon. If he went down there, only a few lupans might

see him. A large thermal lifted his plane a few hundred feet. He circled the valley and returned to the lupan hill – one more run over the forest and then a straight shot to his resting place. Something moved him to delay, to take a last look at the glen. Hadn't he been there before? Its southern slope rose through several cultivated fields to a white, two-storied cottage. A small fence with hanging cloth flags surrounded the property. No watchtowers either. Whoever lived there counted on luck to keep bounders away, and flapping cloths to discourage wolves. In the adjoining meadow a lorry's cab painted with graffiti was half buried in the grass. Its empty windows stared into the sky like the sockets of a human skull.

He'd seen a picture of the graffiti cab before. In his office. This was Koppiemaul Cottage, with Koppiemaul Refugee Camp at the bottom of the glen. A few years back, the woman from the cottage barged into his office. A tall figure with long white hair, she demanded, in a mongrel accent somewhere between Glaswegian and Polish, that he obtain settlement visas for several undocumented women in her camp. More to get her out of his office, he promised to help. He managed to finagle two visas. Two women would be given a chance to integrate into society instead of living like hunted animals. What about the others? Koppiemaul camp wouldn't survive for long. The tank and dozer would be there after they finished with Braemar, shoot up the place, pack the terrified refugees into vans and drive them off to internment camps.

He drifted as low as he dared over the camp for a closer look at the residents. Dark-skinned children playing in the streets waved to him. He waved back. With his other hand he pulled the stick to gain altitude. The plane's nose barely responded. He tugged harder, banked slightly left. The hill with the lupan dens rushed at him. Damn, I'm going too fast now. His body braced for impact, but it did not come. Carried on a weak thermal, the plane missed the hilltop, skimmed the grassy field and headed for the trees. Like statues, the lupans watched him approach but this time

did not move out of the way. He leaned on the stick but it hardly moved. A hand stronger than his held it still. He could only sit helpless and watch the spindly trees rush at him with finality. All thoughts died inside him.

A tree grabbed the plane. His body jerked sideways; slammed against the seatbelts. A belt caught him under the chin and tightened on his throat. The sky was replaced by tree branches. Coming out of nowhere they smashed into the cockpit. One struck his face. He tasted its bitter sap. He was falling again, out of the trees. His head jerked back. Time stopped. He was floating in slow motion. Cool air brushed his face. So here I am, dying. Isn't that what I wanted? But if I'm dying, why am I so alive, like I've got all the time in the world?

Silence enveloped him, final as a grave. He was still tied into his chair, tilted at a slight angle. Wave after wave of pain coursed through him. He spluttered, wheezed but each breath cost him a painful stab.

Several bony faces with wrinkled skin and long hair looked down at him, muscular male figures, and bare breasted females. Their golden eyes looked him over as if figuring out how to cook him for dinner.

'Damn my bad luck,' he muttered, 'I've screwed up badly. Kill me. Just finish me off.'

A male figure with stringy hair thrust his wrinkled face up close. His breath stank of rotten meat. Like a dog he sniffed Scott all over, cracked a smile or what might be one. Lifting up his head he let out a loud howl. The others joined in with a chorus of clicks and whistles.

TWO

Linella's outdoor table had a pine surface with knife nicks and oil stains dating back to her grandmother. Hundreds of people had dined there: homeless Glaswegians, illegal immigrants and refugees. Every village child celebrated their birthday there. Though she had no idea who would show up, each evening she laid out a spread of homemade pasta, olives from her trees, sun dried tomatoes, apples and figs from the camp and dandelion wine. She arranged freshly cut flowers in a vase, poured herself a glass of wine from her cellar, and waited. Her boys usually drifted in, often with a stray kid from the village or a nearby homestead. Women from the camp regularly materialized out of the heather and stayed long into the night. She never put away leftovers because lupans usually cleaned them up. After sunset they emerged from the shadows, stood wordlessly at the table and ate in front of her. After scooping leftovers into cardboard boxes, they clicked loudly to express their appreciation.

She drained her glass, poured herself another and looked around to make sure everything was there. She smoothed the napkins. Her hands felt better when they were doing something to pass the time. Would the new refugees show up? She always felt better about unknown guests after sharing a meal with them. The smell of roasted vegetables carried on a warm breeze indicated that the newcomers had other plans.

She'd been cutting flowers for her weekly delivery, when the

rusty lorry appeared round the corner. It spluttered and gasped as it bumped along her access road, looking for a place to expire, its back crammed full of dark skinned people and furniture. She stood in the middle of the road, her feet planted like tree roots, and did not move until it rumbled to a stop, barely a yard away. There were at least four families, including three children under two. A tall bearded man with a lean face, clambered out, offered her a cigarette. He stuck one in his mouth when she refused.

‘I’m Roberto.’ He waved his cigarette at the lorry. ‘My family. We’re from Corsica.’

‘I see.’

‘You’ve got a nice place,’ he said looking around.

‘You’re on my property. Put out your fag.’

Roberto tossed the cigarette on the ground. ‘Have it your way.’

He related a familiar story, that the army had closed the camp where they’d been living for five years. They took to the road ahead of the tanks. Someone told them that the woman at Koppiemaul was friendly toward refugees. Could they stay with her a few nights?

Should they? The cab contained a well-loaded gun rack. Roberto had a duplicitous look about him. He might be desperate enough to take over the cottage and call it his own. The men in the back of the pickup looked capable of any crime. The women didn’t make eye contact. Like all refugees who landed on her doorstep they were scared, unable to kindle an ember of hope. The children’s grimy faces were smudged from crying. She needed to decide on the spot. She knew that she didn’t always make smart choices.

‘You can stay. Put your tents up by the graffiti cab,’ she said. ‘Your guns must be left with me. You’ll get them back when you leave.’

Roberto returned a caustic smile. ‘We’re worth more to you armed. I don’t see many guards protecting you. Are you going to call the police when the bounders come?’

‘That’s none of your business. The guns stay with me, or you can go somewhere else. Your choice.’

‘Fine. We’ll leave the guns. I only say that we could protect you if we kept them.’

‘I don’t need your protection. All guns go over by the door.’

Roberto talked to his people in Italian. After considerable grumbling they agreed to hand over their weapons and accept her hospitality. She rarely had trouble with her guests, but this time she felt some disquiet. After they drove off to set up camp, she phoned the village.

Arjan listened to her description of the Corsicans and let out a sarcastic laugh. ‘Why do you always take in complete strangers?’

‘Because I’m crazy. Arjan, I couldn’t help it. When people appear on my doorstep, they’re my responsibility. It’s the way I am. I can’t send them off into a war zone. Not if I can give those women a few peaceful nights.’

‘But these are dangerous times. You know absolutely nothing about them.’

‘I didn’t know anything about your family either when I took you in. Look at how well that turned out. Trust me, Arjan. I’m very intuitive about people. So far I’ve never had any trouble with my guests. I think that this lot will turn out okay.’

‘You’ll attract vigilantes is what you’ll do.’

‘Arjan, I need your help, not your commentary.’

‘Fine. We’re ready to help you if anything goes wrong, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

She needed to stay home, and so she sent Andrew off in her jeep to deliver flowers to the neighbours. Lately their support was wavering. They told her that *her refugees* would attract the army’s unwelcome attention. The only way to keep them on her side was to send regular flower deliveries, along with Andrew who could repair any software problem.

Later he called her about the sailplane. It circled soundlessly like a vulture covering the cottage, the village and the lupan colony. For several months there hadn’t been any military reconnaissance. She believed that the government had lost interest in Koppiemaul. Any plane that entered the glen awoke her concern for the

refugees. Pictures of the village and the lupan colony might already be all over the web. After the plane disappeared over the hill she sat alone in the garden to gather her thoughts.

Her life had changed thirty years earlier, the morning she climbed the fence to investigate a large marquee in her neighbour's field. The hand-sewn patches and the chimney sticking through the canvas roof all pointed to climate refugees. The tent was packed with several families. On the run from war and famine, they came to Scotland looking for a home. Many of the women had been gang raped. Most were pregnant. She offered them her field to build their houses.

Sandria's baby, Asra, was the first to be born. She had ochre, leathery skin, stringy black hair and a long, thin nose. Most peculiar were the large eyes, bright golden with a penetrating look. She ran a constant fever. Sandria applied cold compresses and wrapped her in wet blankets but nothing worked. Asra did not want to be held by her mother or anyone else for that matter. Autistic, Linella thought, noting that she responded adversely to touch. The second child was born to Lina; also golden-eyed. Then came Zia, Amber, Zariya and Ali. With each birth fear spread among expectant mothers that their children would have similar deformities. Local doctors were equally puzzled. They remarked that throughout the country similar children were being born, most often to climate refugees but occasionally to locals. Researchers muttered something about the effects of a virus or a solar flare, but no one really knew what was going on.

They still didn't know. They called the children *homo lupus* because they preferred wolf milk, and enjoyed the company of wolves.

Josh appeared from the house, poured himself some wine and sat down.

'We have some new neighbours,' Linella said.

Josh rolled his blue eyes. 'I saw them. Are they okay?'

‘I suppose so. They’re human.’

‘They look like bandits. Mum, sometimes I really wonder about you.’

‘I couldn’t turn them away. They’ve been evicted from their camp. They’re only here for a few days. Arjan and Elijah are on call if there’s any trouble. I think you can relax.’

Josh heaped pasta high on his plate. He gulped down more wine, grimaced slightly. He’d never developed a taste for dandelion wine, but drank it anyway.

‘What’s on your mind?’ Linella said.

‘Last night’s riot in Aberdeen.’

‘Which one? Weren’t there a dozen?’

‘You didn’t see the pictures?’

‘You know I don’t watch the news.’

‘A bunch of yobs smashed up a block of shops on Union Street. They’re pissed off about the refugees and want something done about them.’

‘I wish they’d leave us alone. We’re not harming anyone.’

‘Mum, sometimes you don’t get it. Here you are taking in more refugees, while the army is out there closing the camps. It’s not a smart thing to do. Before long the tanks will be out here looking around, and yes, they’ll find that we have a good looking camp at the bottom of the hill.’

She slammed down her glass, so hard that wine splattered on the table. ‘Let them try. There’s only one access road, and that’s my road.’

‘I don’t think we can stop them.’

‘We’ll see. You’re always seeing things so dark. Is the army coming up the road or did I perhaps miss them? The government is completely broke. No one has the money to round up thousands of refugees – or the wolf-children, not to mention feed them and house them. My women are not doing anyone any harm.’

‘Mum’s going to pack a machine gun and stand them down. I’ll teach you to use one.’ Andrew had just appeared. His latest

getup of camouflage pants and the shaved head still unnerved her. She told herself that his military look was a passing phase, but what if it wasn't?

She let out an angry snort. 'Just wait. You haven't seen me when someone goes after my women.'

Andrew scratched his stubble. 'I know an Italian who has access to rocket launchers. We could recruit some guys from the village. By the time the army shows up, we'll have a top-notch army ready.'

'I don't want any of your fucking weapons. There are enough of them down in the village. I don't know anyone who for all their machine guns feels any safer.'

'How will you stop the government if you don't have guns? They'll just mow you down and take what they want. That's the way it's always been. We're all ducks waiting to be picked off.'

'You want to fight a war with the government?'

Andrew pulled up a chair. 'At least we should have a watchtower.'

'You want to stand up there, wear a uniform and play soldier.'

'I want to know ahead of time if the army's coming. Before they drive up and knock at our door. What do you have against towers anyway?'

'I don't want towers, and I don't want guns. Understand?'

She hoped it would end the discussion. Talking about weapons always evoked the memory of her sister Jane, gunned down in front of her in Glasgow. No weapon could have protected her.

Andrew loaded up a dinner plate and sat down. Josh ate his pasta in silence. He maintained a dreamy look, not wanting to engage with her. She realized that in snapping at him she'd made him withdraw. 'Okay Josh,' she said. 'What's on your mind?'

Josh pushed his curly, red hair away from his face. 'I don't think you want to listen to me.'

'I'm listening. Talk to me.'

'Look, I'm not making things up. You always say that I have

dark thoughts. Like for the hell of it. You never think I know anything worthwhile.'

'I'm sorry if I hurt you. I get very protective when it comes to the women and the wolf-children. I'll try to listen.'

'The butcher – you know, Colin. He said that convoys were heading this way. The worst bit is that he was so glad about it. Everyone wants the army to come in and clear out the wolfies. They know who I am and where I live. They call me a lupie. I'm sick of it.'

Lupie lover! Lupie lover! The shouts still rang in her ears, children's taunts that used to follow her down the street. Shopkeepers she once regarded as friends, turned against her after they found out that she hosted refugees and protected lupans. She swallowed a mouthful. The cold pasta slid down her throat; tasted like sawdust.

Some of the local attitudes were understandable. Lupans survived by poaching livestock, had no concept of property and viewed the entire world as belonging to them. High fences didn't keep them out. Their nocturnal raids weren't restricted to cows and sheep, but included harvested grain, tools and anything not locked up. 'Worse than tinkers,' was the general comment about town. More than lupans' behaviour, their physical appearance unnerved people: their witch-like golden eyes, their silence, and that though they might look like anorexic humans with long hair, they broke a basic taboo by walking naked. People were more afraid of what they might do than what they did. They didn't belong in the Scottish countryside living side by side with people. The zoo was where they belonged. People who shot lupans, mistaking them for deer, were rarely prosecuted.

But they are our children – children of our women. Why can't people see that? She knew why. Lupans tended to be born to refugees from Africa and the Middle East, and not to Scottish women. Even the lupans' mothers were estranged. Their children never bonded with them; only with each other. Or with wolves. If a child wandered off to join others like it, the mother might initially grieve, but usually felt released from a heavy burden. Very few maintained contact with their children.

‘People are scared,’ Josh said.

‘There’s a lot to be afraid of,’ Andrew drawled. ‘The Plague, bounders and incompetent cops. The sea’s still rising. Everyone’s moving to Scotland. People blame refugees for taking their jobs, gun-running and even the Plague.’

‘Okay, I’ve had enough of dark news,’ Linella said. ‘I know it’s all bad out there, but I can’t change global warming. I can only change things here, in my glen.’ She held up her hand to silence the protesting looks. ‘I know you think that I want to shut out the world. I don’t have time for problems I can’t do anything about. I can only take care of the women.’

Josh nodded at the hill with the lupan dens on the far side of the valley. The standing stone on its summit was silhouetted against the evening sky.

‘Who’ll protect the wolfies?’ Josh said.

Linella shook her head. ‘I hope we’ll never face that one.’

She drained her wine, pushed away her plate, still half-loaded with pasta. ‘You guys finish this. I have things to do.’

She retreated into the kitchen. From the living room came the sounds of small explosions and mortar fire. George was lying on the couch with a computer helmet on his head. His glazed eyes followed a war game. With a flick of his eyebrow he gunned down rows of aliens. She yanked off his helmet to reveal his magenta mohawk. ‘Go get some dinner.’

George looked up in surprise. ‘Why does no one ever call me?’

‘How can you hear me above that rubbish?’

She stacked dishes, still unwashed since yesterday. Usually domestic work calmed her agitation, but this time it set her teeth on edge. Josh’s news reminded her of a recent nightmare. She was walking among piles of dead bodies in the middle of a burning village. She was supposed to meet a wolf-child but she couldn’t remember its name.

She slammed a dinner plate into the drainer. ‘But they are my children. I won’t let anything happen to them.’

If an army raid was imminent, Brigadier Johnson would

know. He had helped her before but she hadn't spoken to him for almost a year. Since their last fight he no longer came around. He told her that he'd been transferred but she suspected a lie, and that he wanted to keep his distance. He liked her well enough; enjoyed having sex with her, but just wasn't interested in pursuing an intimate relationship.

They met four years earlier, soon after Stan left her. The army was conducting helicopter raids on the hill. Soldiers bundled any lupan they came across into a copter. Soon the lupans learned how to disappear into the forest upon sighting the helicopters. Officially, lupans were being taken to government centres for their own health and protection, so they'd be cared for by *experts*. Actually the locals, tired of lupans raiding their farms and vegetable plots, wanted lupans out of the way. Captivity for lupans usually meant a quick death. Though they were immune to the Plague they died from the common cold or flu. Few survived for more than two years in captivity.

Linella stormed every government agency looking for help and finally located Johnson. The first official who actually listened to her, he asked her questions and offered to help. When he came out to Koppiemaul she served up her best meal and offered him vintage champagne. His official demeanour quickly faded. He found her beautiful. Said he admired her fiery spirit. The next morning when they woke up together in her bed, he told her that the wolf-children would be left alone. The raids stopped. For several years it appeared that the government forgot about the colony.

She picked up her phone. It was an antique with a handset as heavy as steel and an old fashioned dial that whirred and clicked. Miraculously it still worked. A robotic voice instructed her to leave a message. 'Hello Brian, this is Linella. I haven't talked to you for a while. Been thinking about you. Hope you're in the neighbourhood. Need to talk to you. Call me when you can. Bye.'

She sipped her wine looking through the kitchen window out at the table. Her sons sat relaxed, their chairs tilted back. Laughing. The sun had set over the western range and shadows

grew in the garden. Andrew rolled a cigarette. He passed the tobacco and paper to Josh. George complained that the others had eaten all the pasta. So that was the worst complaint he could muster? Lately they'd stopped moaning about wanting some city life or moving to England to live with Stan.

She was about to turn from the window when a dark figure appeared in the garden – a tall woman in a black robe, out of breath as if she'd been running all the way up the hill.

Andrew told her, 'She's in the house.'

Sandria stepped into the kitchen. She had an oval face with a dark complexion, large dark eyes, a brow covered with lines wrought by suffering. 'I thank God that I've found you. You must come.'

'What's happened, Sandria?'

'A plane has crashed on the hill. The pilot's wounded. The wolf-children have taken him.'

'Is he critical?'

'He's dying. Can you come and help?'

'Have you told Eisa?'

'Yes, but they won't let him see the pilot. Rami stopped Eisa outside the den, and threatened him. Please come. I think they'll let you in.'

'I can wrap his leg in a bandage, but we really need Eisa.'

'You must try to persuade them to let Eisa through.'

'I'm on my way.' Linella grabbed a head-light.

'We're going up to the colony,' she shouted to the boys, still sitting about the table.

'Oh no,' George said. 'She's still trying to adopt a wolfie.'

'More to the point keep an eye on our new guests. Call Arjan if there's any trouble.'

'So you really aren't sure of them?' Josh said.

'Just mind yourselves. I'll be back soon.'

THREE

The sun is already half hidden behind a distant hill when Blue Sky climbs the earthwork to the standing stone on its summit. He is one of the eldest and most respected in the colony, well-known for his ability to keep up with the wolves during their hunt. His large brow is more wrinkled than most males and exudes a calm that could quench any gale. His black hair, always combed, hangs halfway down his shoulders. 'Blue Sky' is only of his many names for he is also called Tallest, Cloud Brow or Old Ash. Only the Elder People refer to him by his birth name, 'Rami', a name that conveys nothing to him anymore.

He leans into the standing stone, listens to the Earth's heartbeat. When he was younger it used to be too faint to make out but on this day the beat is so loud that anyone should be able to hear it. Even the mothers in the village might hear a low hum, a continuous vibration reminiscent of a swarm of bees on a summer day. If they paused long enough in their daily bustle to listen.

His eyes are drawn to the forest, to the gash in the trees where the giant bird crashed. Its remains are there: the wing of twisted metal and paper half-buried in the grass, the white tail hanging in the branches. It was no normal bird but a toy of metal and wood. Its arrival awoke in him an excitement he hadn't felt for a long time, that something had changed in the order of things. The sky had opened and brought the People a gift.

Who is he? If he's a messenger from Sky, he's a very unusual

one. Should be named Lone Man because of his solitary eyes. When his bird circled the hill, it fluttered in pain, looking for a place to die. Twice it swooped down like a falcon. Saplings playing outside, seeing a predator about to devour them ran for shelter. The third time the bird approached the hill, so low that it lacked all power to rise. The Earth pulled the bird down so that it impaled itself on a tree. Such an event hadn't happened before. Was the Earth stronger than it used to be, capable of capturing mechanical birds? Or had the plane landed where it needed to, to bring the man to the People?

What if he is the one, long-expected, who will heal the wounding of the People's birth?

Returning to the den he finds Lone Man on the heather bed. His frail body appears elusive as a shadow. He struggles to breathe, cries out in pain, tries to move a leg but the effort reduces him to tears. His voice consists of single guttural words, each sounding like a bird's cry. Blue Sky senses the man's frustration. That he wants to die. His eyes dart from object to object, like a captured animal about to be slaughtered. When he finally deigns to look at Blue Sky, he grimaces as if tasting something disagreeable and quickly turns his head away. His faint breathing draws a pittance of life from the air. Pale as a corpse he heaves, coughs and produces bloody phlegm.

Blue Sky allows his awareness to merge with the man. Among adults merging awareness is as natural as breathing. Blue Sky often tried to merge with Elder People but found their minds occupied with restless thinking, too lonely to be capable of merging. Lone Man may be different. Blue Sky closes all distances that separate him from the pilot, but just as his mind is about to merge with him, he encounters a patch of darkness. Instead of a warm presence there's nothing. As if the man isn't really there. Is his body an illusion, a reflection in a pool of water that disappears when you touch it? The man's pain-ridden body appears real but his feelings are too confused to understand.

Moreover his spirit clings tenuously to life and needs to be strengthened, led back from the netherworld where it has strayed.

The warm breath on his shoulder tells him that Beauty Woman is nearby. Tied to her back, Starlet has fallen asleep. Beauty Woman has a slight body that moves with the grace of a deer. Her clear eyes can penetrate any illusion; she was recently named Beauty Woman, because people feel beautiful in her presence. Blue Sky merges his awareness with her. Looking through her eyes he knows that she's in awe of the wounded man. She views him not as the victim of a cruel accident, but rather a child who is about to be born; a very special child sent to the People.

She kneels beside him. She strokes his head. With the power in her body she calms him the way she'd calm a flustered child. He twitches, withdraws fearfully; appears to be repulsed by her – normal behaviour for one whose spirit has wandered so far that his body is left to fend for itself.

- What is he? – Blue Sky asks.
- A messenger. That's what we'll call him
- What's his message?
- He'll tell us. If he lives.
- Where's he from?

She points to the sky.

- Yes, that's obvious. Is he one of the Insect People?

Long ago Insect People attacked the colony. Monstrous mechanical insects swooped down on the hill and disgorged Insect Men armed with lethal stings. They resembled Elder People except that they wore identical spotted clothes and their bodies emitted an unwholesome smell. They shouted angrily, burned dens and laid waste to the gardens. People soon recognized approaching danger and scattered into the forest before the insects landed. Those who stayed behind were taken away.

After the raids stopped, Blue Sky pondered why they had happened. If Earth and Sky are in a perfect relationship surely Sky

would not allow such dangerous insects to fly and to inflict grievous harm. Perhaps the Earth-Sky relationship needed to be strengthened. A vision came to the People of a web that must be laid out on the Earth, pathways marked by stone that would allow Earth to draw Sky into its embrace. So began the great labour of carving the stones and laying them out across the land. They were arranged in stone circles and aligned with rising and setting points of prominent stars. The Earth's voice, audible even inside the den, tells him that the great labour has been fruitful.

– He's not from the Insect People – Beauty Woman remarks.

– Could he be the one we've been waiting for?

– If he lives. Yes, he may be the first man to take the Dark Path. To be like us.

Starlet whimpers, struggles on Beauty Woman's back. She slings the baby to her front and offers her breast. The Messenger looks away as if disgusted. Surely he should regard feeding as normal. Unless he never was a child, knew nothing of food but grew to manhood like a shadow without bone or blood, growing during the day only to fade at sunset.

The child ceases whimpering; falls asleep at the breast. In the silence they hear steps approaching from far off. Blue Sky recognizes Dark Woman's faltering step and Cottage Woman's determined stride.

– They want to take him away.

– They must not. He belongs with us. We must help his spirit find its way back.

– Living among us will unsettle him.

– Not if Dark Woman takes care of him.

Blue Sky doesn't like the proposal. Dark Woman, still wounded by her child's birth, might inhibit his healing. She remains in the colony mainly because she still wants her child back or at least to see her. She does not understand that the child she remembers no longer exists. She remembers Young One, a squalling baby suckled by grey wolves and who is still the subject of stories beloved by saplings. She's no longer a child. Wolfborn

is wise among the People. As a wolf, she runs with the pack and answers to no one's summons.

– Better to keep him away from all his kind – Blue Sky says. –
He and Dark Woman could develop a troubled relationship.