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Glass House
by Max and Ariana Overton
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Suspense/Thriller

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It came out of the forest ... and it's growing bigger.

"What is that?" James, back to the peak, facing the thick jungle-like trees, leaned forward and put his plate down on the ground.

In the distance, a big blue-white light shone through the trees then slowly rose lazily into the sky, hovering over the forest.

"It's not a star, that's for sure. It came out of the forest ... and it's growing bigger." Nathan pointed at it, his hand shaking.

As the light rose higher, James stood up and the others, fixed in place, watched it lift then hover over the crown of the mountain. Every night sound abruptly stopped, the thick growth around the clearing falling eerily still and silent ... waiting. Unaware of their actions, they all stood ... and waited.

The object moved slowly toward them, hovering for seconds in between small advances. It seemed to be approaching cautiously, like a predator stalking its prey. At a distance of about a half-mile, it abruptly stopped and shot off to the left, heading toward the farthest Twin. It came to a halt directly above the peak. Like a shutter going up, a beam of blue light shot out from the bottom of the object. What it illuminated on top of the peak made the group gasp with a collective shock of recognition.

The Aboriginal man they'd seen standing on the hill in Sapphire, bathed in lightning and rain, now stood immersed in the light of the object hovering directly above him. He faced the campsite and not one person in the group doubted that he knew they were there.

The old Aborigine's eyes glowed brightly, piercing into every mind and into every heart. He slowly raised his spear arm and pointed to the spot where the light first appeared. He stood in that pose, arm and spear fixed inline and one foot planted on the opposite knee, an aura of light backlighting his form, for what felt like hours. When he finally turned his head to look at them once again he began to fade, a smile on his face the last image to disappear. With him, the light went out and the night, still silent and poised on the brink of a breath, surrounded them once again with darkness.

This is a work of fiction. While reference may be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the characters, incidents, and dialogs are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to all those people who generously gave of their time and expertise:

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+ Ratana and Nathan, two Aborigine students and close friends, studying in the Indigenous Peoples Studies Program at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia. They gave us insight into the beautiful 'family' attitude that most of these people hold close in their culture.

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+ To Max-my life, my heart and my strength. Without his intelligence, his knowledge, his talent, his patience and his insights into the mysteries of Australia this book would never have been born-Ariana

+ To my wife Ariana, who showed me how I could take vague thoughts and weave them into a tapestry of meaning. I am forever indebted to her for the intelligence, ability and creative skill she brought to this union and above all for the great love that made a whole man of me-Max

PROLOGUE

"What is the most cunning creature in the world? The one you never see or hear."

He raised his bloodied face from the fresh kill, the antelope forgotten as the voices filled his head. They called to him, a siren's song, stroking every cell and fiber of his brain. Picking up his spear, he rose onto his knees, listening. He anxiously fingered the black stone hanging around his neck, its angled facets catching the light in a rainbow of colors. Fear twitched thick, knotted muscles as he aimed his mind toward the message he knew he must listen to and obey. He could hear Umbra, his grown son, in the next valley, and the other men of his village. They all froze, joining their

thoughts to his, listening to the distant message.

Garagh, my father, do you hear? They call again, Umbra's thoughts connected with Garagh's mind, which was now filled with images alien to memory.

Yes, I hear, my son. It is stronger this time. We must answer, as we have been taught to do by the ancients. Call the others. We must go-now, Garagh answered.

No resistance was possible, or given, as he rose onto trembling, muscular legs. Slinging the kill around his thick neck, Garagh scanned the horizon for the other hunters of the tribe, his dark, penetrating eyes protected from the fierce sun by a thick brow. He could hear their thoughts and feel their reactions, and he knew they were aware of his inner workings as well.

Come my brothers. We go to the camp. We must ready our people for the journey. It is time ... at last.

Aiming his resolute face toward the south, he took his first step into a journey that would last thirty thousand years and change the fate of mankind.

CHAPTER ONE

Dr. James Hay felt a river of sweat run down the valley of his wide, sunburned back. The deepening color of his skin highlighted the small triangular scar on his right shoulder. He ran his fingertips absently over the faint ridge while carefully inspecting the rocks scattered over the table before him.

Straightening with a groan, he rubbed his hands over the knots aching in the small of his back and lifted his eyes to gaze at the brilliant blue of an Australian summer sky. As a cool breeze swirled around his body like a playful puppy, shivers of delight ran through him in spite of the intense humid heat. A small, secret smile curved his lips. His stomach muscles tensed when the damp, sensual smell of the rainforest, mixed with the perfume of orchids, wafted into his nostrils. His body betrayed him...

It smells like her, primal, sensual, earthy.

The forbidden thought sent a jolt through him, his body responding in spite of a lifelong regime of iron control. He pulled in a ragged mouthful of the heavily scented air.

It's been too long ... way too long.

The undulating sensuality of palm fronds swaying in the wind brought back a memory of watching her dance, her body moving with grace and elegance against the man who held her tightly against him. Passion swirled through his loins, building an unquenchable fire. A torrent of desire that flooded his mind and body. He closed his eyes and willed away the feelings, the mental images assaulting him from all directions. With a ragged breath, he turned toward the sound of soft footsteps approaching from behind. He turned. _Please be_....

The lone figure of Maggie Chin, an elegant Chinese girl of twenty-two and one of his postgraduate students, slowly made its way toward him. Like a cold shower, her approach served to snap him out of useless reverie and remind him fantasies, by their very nature, cannot fill an empty life. He yanked his shirt off the branch he'd hung it on to dry, slipped it on and took a deep, cleansing breath, dispelling the images he fought to bury since his trip to Washington.

Work is what I need. It's always been there for me and it always will be. Besides, Samantha Louis doesn't even know I'm alive and if she did, a woman like her wouldn't want me. He used his tried and true mantra to rebury the past and get on with the present.

He studied the site several volunteer students were working on with the diligence of ants. Their chatter and laughter echoed around the site, silencing the lorikeets, cockatoos and insects that normally dwelled there. The tangled, dripping vines of the rainforest almost obscured the view of the

central site where a small knot of trusted people gathered. Each one worked feverishly on a facet of a towering, coal-black obelisk standing in the center of a perfectly round bare spot fired into the middle of the rainforest. Its smooth, geometrically cut surface reflected the sunlight beating upon it with all the brilliance of a perfect diamond. James stood on the outskirts of the site, away from the group, his hands resting on the carvings etched deeply into large fragments of the hard rock they'd found laid out in a perfect circle around the obelisk. Observing the high-energy activity of this elite group of volunteers, his body quivered with fatigue and suppressed excitement.

Part of it had to do with the unique object they'd found, but another part was due to the telephone call he'd made from his seedy hotel room two nights ago.

She is on her way to Australia. She'll be here any moment. God, I wish she was coming here for me instead of the promise of a big story.

In spite of the knowledge that she couldn't be interested in anything other than another literary award, the thrill of seeing her again sent another tremor through his body. They'd met once, at a gathering of science delegates in Washington, D.C., where he gave a talk as guest speaker. He vividly remembered briefly talking to her about his work investigating Australian mysteries. The genuine interest she showed in the subject surprised him. He also remembered thinking how it would be easy to drown in the blue of her eyes and lose his very soul in her arms. The memory of Samantha's lithe body encased in a flowing black velvet dress, her flaming auburn hair cascading down the soft bare flesh on her back, remained etched in his mind.

Samantha Louis, as he found out later, worked as a world-class freelance journalist. After hearing she'd won several major awards, he stopped paying attention, stopped dreaming about her, stopped thinking he might have a chance, knowing she was out of his league.

A family friend out walking in the bush had discovered the obelisk. He sent a photo and a map to the University. James knew the find would be an international media circus unless he moved fast to contain it before it became public knowledge. That's when he decided to do a thorough background check on Samantha Louis. He liked what he saw and heard about her integrity and professionalism. Her honest and precise reporting motivated him to contact her when it became obvious he'd have to let the media in on his find. James needed her to report the truth, to keep out the rest of the sensation-seeking press with her clout and, more importantly to him, to protect the Aboriginal people he loved

He realized he stood there with a silly grin on his face and instantly pulled his thoughts back to the present situation. Maggie stood patiently waiting for him to notice her before speaking out. "Lost in another world huh?" She fingered her long, black braid and smiled up at him. The silken tropical print of her blouse whispered when the breeze caught it.

Her child-like voice, smooth porcelain features and tiny figure never ceased to stir up feelings of fatherly protectiveness inside him. But then, he felt that way about all his students. He grinned at her. "No, a new found world, Maggie. What's up?"

She held out a neatly typed report. "You asked for the analysis data I did of the black rock found on the coast, remember? To compare this one to?" Her calm, modulated tone, one used by very young people when dealing with older authority figures, made him chuckle.

"Right. Too much on my mind lately." His face split into a lopsided smile. When she turned to go he added, "By the way, I don't think I ever thanked you for dropping everything, including your PhD, to come and help us with this. I value your expertise with the analysis. Thanks, Maggie."

She held up her tiny hand with an indulgent sigh. "I've told you before, Doctor, no thanks needed. This is a chance for me too. Anything that has to do with people's beliefs and myths is just a part of the whole. Besides, I get tired of Oriental mythology. I wanted to see how other cultures

fared in that department. Anything else I can do before I go help Ratana with the etchings?" She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow at him.

"Well, thank you anyway. I'm sure your husband doesn't appreciate your absence." When she grinned, he ventured on. "Since you ask, would you indulge me and go see how Nathan and the others are doing down at the blockade?" He absent-mindedly swatted at another mosquito attracted to the sweat saturating his clothes.

While she quietly walked toward the dirt road leading into the clearing, he opened the report, briefly scanned it, then looked up to search for his research assistant. "Ratana, where the hell are those computer readouts I asked for?" he bellowed over to the young Aboriginal woman kneeling at the base of the obelisk and taking notes.

From where he stood, her thick brown hair obscured her face, but her body language spoke volumes about Aboriginal pride. Her wide shoulders tensed then relaxed before she replied, "Patience, Uncle. They'll be here when they're finished. Eddy's gonna bring 'em and you know how slow he is, so calm down." She immediately dismissed him, absent-mindedly brushed dried red clay from her dark brown legs and returned to her work.

Grunting in frustration, he scanned the other students gathering information, hoping to spot Eddy at his usual pastime of harassing the female students when they bent over. James snorted with disgust at the image of Eddy's small, piggy eyes devouring the sight of the young women's bodies while they worked. He pushed the image out of his mind as he strode to a battered and ancient army tent used as a base office. He paused at the closed tent flap and listened. Issuing a low snarl of anger, he stepped inside. Eddy sat at the computer terminal, downloading files onto a computer disc. The young man's frail-looking and bony body was bent towards the screen with intense concentration. The thick glasses he wore reflected the streams of file names moving down the screen. The slack-mouthed look of greed and evil malice shone from his pale face.

"What the hell are you doing?" James demanded when he looked over Eddy's hunched shoulders and saw the data from the find streaming down the screen.

The young man's skinny body jumped at the sharp whiplash in James's voice. "Just backing up the files, Doctor Hay. That's all." The pallor of his face and his small features blended in with the dull, yellowish tinge of his T-shirt. He stammered, squirmed and peered anxiously at the flap of the tent.

James leaned over Eddy's shoulder and stared closely at the list of files copying onto the disk. He felt his cheeks and neck suffusing with the red-hot flush of anger. He glared at Eddy's frightened face. "Okay, Eddy. Who's paying you for this? One of the newspaper guys or your uncle?"

"I can't talk. He'll kill me. I didn't mean it, Doctor Hay. Please don't hit me." Eddy cringed back in the chair, his hands outstretched. His words degenerated into childish whimpers, sputtering and stuttering. Eddy jumped out of the chair and bolted out of the tent. James ejected the computer disk out of the drive and tucked it into the pocket of his khaki shorts. As he left the tent, Ratana headed in, almost bumping into him.

"Hey, what's going on? Eddy just flew past me like his tail was on fire," she asked, concerned at the thunderous look on his face. "And you look like you just caught a blowfly in the teeth."

"He was copying our files. I'll bet he intended to sell the disk to one of those newspaper vultures trying to get in here. I caught him in the act and he ran." Running his fingers through the wet hair wildly capping his head, he fought back the bile rising in his throat at the thought of a student, even one as unsavory as Eddy, selling his data to those who regularly ostracized his work. "It was bound to happen sooner or later, I suppose. Peter would give anything to discredit me. I know he forced that kid on me so he could use him in some way. I just hoped Eddy would prove me wrong."

"Well, what's done is done. I'll make sure Nathan knows to keep him out from now on. At least you know he'll bleed the reporters dry before he gives

up what he's stolen, if anything." She laughed, deep and throaty.

"At least I managed to catch him before he made off with the disk anyway." He fingered the blue plastic disk while he mentally counted the stack of them on his desk.

"And, if they choose to print what he claims to remember, we'll hit them with a lawsuit based on faulty information. I'll be that skinny flat-chested lawyer from the TV comedy show and you can be Bobby what's-his-name from that other lawyer program." Ratana roared with laughter at the image of herself trying to walk in clunky heels and a micro-miniskirt.

He snorted, suppressing his own laughter. Forcing his face into a serious expression, he proclaimed, "They deserve it. Those people are like cockroaches, they just keep turning up no matter how hard you work to get rid of them."

Ratana subsided into a disjointed series of chuckles. "Yeah, and you've always been so nice to them too. Seriously, James, this find is drawing reporters from all over the world. This Louis lady you contacted better get here soon. We can't keep the rest of them out forever, you know. The only reason they're not swarming over this place is because it's a protected Aboriginal hunting ground, but that won't keep them out for long. What do you plan on doing when that happens, shoot them?" Her deep brown eyes studied the distress James knew his face revealed.

"If I thought for one minute it would help to let them in, I would. At first, excited about my finds, I called them, wanting to share my work with the world. I found out real quick how idealistic that turned out to be." He scowled and took a deep breath. "This is so much more than I've ever found before. Mick told me I'd have no choice this time. I have to cooperate if we're to save it from the bureaucrats. Problem is, I don't trust any of them. Maybe this American-lady journalist can find a way, I don't know. I do know one thing, though. If Ms. Louis doesn't show up soon, I don't know what to do short of turning Nathan's hotheaded native guards loose on them."

He groaned and sat down on a stool beside the tent flap. Rubbing his eyes, he continued, "This is one of the greatest alien finds ever and we have to beat off the press, the government and the nutcases just to study it. Worse yet, my own boss at the University refuses to let the board know I've found anything worthwhile. If I go back down to Townsville to get the funding I need from the board, the bastards here will seize the obelisk and we'll have nothing. It's a no-win situation, Ratana. I've waited years for something like this to happen and now it feels more like a disaster to me than a blessing." He rubbed his eyes again. "God, I'm tired."

"Excuse me, Doctor Hay? Do you remember me? You called and invited me to come to do the story for you..." Sam looked awkward as she stood in the doorway of the tent. She tugged at a sweat stained business suit and pulled a high heel out of the sticky clay, obviously feeling like a complete idiot. James could almost hear her ranting inside his head.

Damn those travel people! No one warned me about what was out here. Neither did that bloody photographer of mine. I'm gonna kill him when we get back to the hotel.

He had to admit she did a good job of being embarrassed while maintaining a professional pasted-on smile.

~*~

When the tall, wide-shouldered man she knew to be Doctor Hay rose and turned at the sound of her voice, Sam's mouth dried up. He looked just the way she remembered. The sheer raw masculinity of him seeped into her body like hot oil, massaging her libido. She felt her body come alive under his amused stare.

He's not handsome but, boy, there's something about him that hits a woman like a ton of bricks! Sam thought as she took in his looks at a glance, comparing the way he looked now to the shy stranger in a tuxedo she'd met before. _Tall, older, but still muscular; in top shape. Long legs, tanned, rugged ... wow ... eyes._ She felt her stomach knot up when those incredible

gray eyes swept over her.

~*~

"Ah, Ms. Louis, you finally arrived." James became aware of his voice-deep, sensual and vibrating with suppressed desire. Inwardly, he flinched and took a firm hold of his emotions. He took in her tall, athletic figure, superimposing his memory of her curves under a clinging dress onto the woman standing awkwardly in front of him now.

He also saw the young, tall, handsome man standing behind her with a video camera on his shoulder. "Who the hell are you and how did you get past the guards at the roadblock? I don't talk to reporters so please leave. Ms. Louis, you may come in." He turned back to Ratana, immediately dismissing the cameraman as one more irritating human intrusion to ignore.

"Doctor Hay, Marc is with me. If I'm doing the story, I need my cameraman." Sam's eyes flared with irritation at the preemptory tone James fell back on when under stress. Deliberately, she reached out to pat her cameraman's arm, clearly sending a message that she would refuse to cooperate without the young man.

Marc's mouth smirked at James with the appearance of good-natured one-upmanship, but his eyes flashed triumph and antagonism.

James studied the two and his heart hit his shoes when his fantasies of her disintegrated instantly. The hollow feeling inside his chest sharpened into anger, but he looked deep into her eyes, responding to their fire against his will. The sight of a running figure behind her yanked him back to the moment. "Just a moment, Ms. Louis."

Maggie trotted up, gasping for breath and holding her side. "Doctor Hay. Nathan says to get ready. There are some high-ranking military guys at the barrier. He says he can't keep them out."

He nodded at Maggie, whose look of anxiety and furtive glances at the computer reminded him about saving any of the data he may have overlooked. Ratana, already one step ahead of him and anticipating the military grabbing their information, sat at the computer. She was rapidly saving then deleting files at a furious pace.

"Ratana what would I do without you?" He lightly shook her shoulder then turned back to Maggie, her face a study in curiosity as she inspected Sam and her cameraman. "Maggie, get the guys to pack up what they have as soon as they can manage it. I don't want anybody confiscating our findings."

"Will you please tell me what's going on here?" Sam wiped beads of sweat off her forehead, then stood with her fists on her hips, an insulted tone tingeing the question.

James held up a hand to stay her question while he continued to give Ratana instructions. "We have to get pictures of all the markings on the stone made pronto. When you have the backup disks safely stashed, have whoever does the photos use the Polaroid and take them from different angles." James deliberately kept talking, hoping to get his emotions in check before he faced Sam again.

God ... she is beautiful, but this isn't the time or place.

The look on Ratana's face told James he wasn't fooling her, no matter how cold and professional he spoke to Sam. She responded to his orders with a smirk and a laugh in her voice. "Don't worry about Nathan. He'll hold them for as long as we need. However, that stone won't wait and if the mobs are going to hit soon then we have to get as much as we can before they do."

James sent a tiny smile to Ratana, her knowing look boring into his thoughts. He took a deep breath and turned to Maggie, who stood quietly, but alertly, by the tent flap. "Maggie, go take some Polaroids of the obelisk; all sides, all angles. Bring them back and give them to either myself or Ratana." Facing the young cameraman, the video cam still on his shoulder, James barked out, "You. Go with her and get some film of the artifact. When you're finished, I expect you to give the film to Maggie and clear off." When the man hesitated, looking at Sam for a nod, which she gave, James shouted, "Now!" Maggie turned and trotted away faster than she'd arrived, the cameraman hot on

her heels.

Sam rounded on James, her voice coiling in tightly held strands of self-control. "Doctor Hay, if I remember correctly you are the one who called me. We spoke about my coming to do a legitimate story on what's happening here. Remember? I'm assuming you wanted everything recorded. To do that, both my cameraman and myself need to have access to everything. I need facts, information, pictures ... you know, something to write about."

James realized that his lack of common manners was pressuring her to be sarcastic, and he could see her struggling to keep a leash on it, not wanting to start off on the wrong foot. The jumble of guilt and desire that flooded up within him threatened to give his feelings away. In response, his voice dropped to even colder tones.

"Okay, Ms. Louis, you may keep your companion, but keep him out of our way. I don't want to be tripping over him every time I turn around."

His stomach twisted when Sam forced a smile and nodded her head in agreement. "Agreed, Doctor Hay. Marc is a professional and will not interfere in any way."

"Good."

"Now, about the information you've already gotten. Any pictures too?"

"I'll fill you in later. In the meantime, when he returns you can take him and look around ... get a feel for things. Don't touch anything though and keep out of the way." He steeled his face with a stern look, in spite of feeling like he'd like to dive into the cool of her eyes and just keep on sinking.

"Doctor Hay, this is unprofessional. It's..." Sam stood ramrod straight, her long fingers clenched so tightly the knuckles went white.

"That's what you people do isn't it? So go do it and leave me to my work, please." Her presence distracted him far more than he could afford at the moment, and he knew it.

Sam stared at his face. James could see her debating whether or not to push the issue. He towered over her tall frame, intimidating her; obviously something she wasn't used to from anyone when she flinched but defiantly stood her ground. Without further comment, she made a sound of deep disgust and with a final sweep of contemptuous eyes over James and Ratana, she stormed through the heavy vines surrounding the tent.

After she left, James's shoulders slumped and he quietly eased down on a chair tucked next to the tent flap. "Why the hell did I treat her like that? Talk about being a cad." He snorted, disgusted with himself. "I'm never that rude to people, much less to beautiful women."

Ratana chuckled again. "You noticed, huh? It's about time, Uncle. We always wondered why you never married." She leaned back in her chair. "Besides, you're not fooling me a bit. You're rude to her because you know she's the one who could finally get you to hang it up and get a real life." She glanced at him under her lashes and smiled. "You're like an old, set in his ways, bachelor. You're fighting giving up your freedom."

He threw her a disgusted look and made a show out of ignoring her and her amateur psychology. When he tried to clear his mind, he found that he was too tired to worry about Sam, relationships or anything beyond his work. The obelisk took precedent. He steeled himself to brutally keep Sam out of his life and his heart, at least until he finished this work. Having decided that, he relaxed and awarded Ratana a smile. She frowned. "All joking aside, you look ragged, Uncle."

James closed his eyes in an effort to escape for the moment. Deep fatigue and worry made James feel much older than his forty-seven years. He leaned back heavily into the sagging canvas chair, groaned and closed his eyes, determined to grab this short respite from the chaos he knew was coming.

Her fingers flying over the keyboard, Ratana spoke as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. "You know, it's eerie. The markings on that thing are so similar to the Aboriginal drawings at Split Rock it's uncanny. The

black rock it's made from looks the same as the stone in the Black Mountain out by Cooktown. The only difference is, this baby is much harder. Robbie had to analyze it standing up. Nothing would cut it, not even his diamond-tip drill. He's kind of thrown by that, I think..."

Ratana's voice brought his eyes back open. "James, all my life you've protected me, taught me and cared when others didn't bother. Why haven't you ever made a life for yourself? You've never told me why."

He propped his chin on a hand and hesitated before answering. "When my parents died and I went to live with Mick, all I could think about was becoming a doctor. Then, when Mick taught me about our people, I knew I had to do something about the problems I saw all around me, something to help. When every avenue was blocked to me because my mother was Aborigine, I realized the only way I could do anything positive was to find proof of our right to be here, our right to claim the land."

He paused, staring unseeingly at the computer screen. "I never made time for a personal life before. No woman caught my eye, even though my cousins paraded every girl over twelve and under fifty my way." He smiled a tired smile and poked her in the side. "Now, it's in the hands of the gods. I have other more important things to see to." His gaze returned to the open tent flap.

The exasperation in Ratana's tone yanked James's attention back to the conversation. "It's clear you're attracted to her and she to you. Get a life, Uncle. Give her a go."

"Listen to you. Just a kid and giving me advice about my love life. What about you and Nathan? You two are closer than soul mates but you never told me about that either. Now's your chance, luv." He hoped to get her off the subject of Samantha Louis.

She lowered her eyes and came as close as she could to blushing, but she didn't answer the question.

His weak smile almost reached his eyes. "That's what I thought. Well, this isn't the time to be sitting around talking about my personal life. We have to get this thing out of here and somewhere safe. How the hell can we do it? Maybe she can help if I let up and be nice." He shrugged at his lame joke then ran his hands through his damp hair again. "I have to get back out there. Our fearless government has arrived and I'm not so sure they won't arrest us." He started to stand up. Ratana pushed him back down into the chair.

Squatting down beside him, Ratana reached up to grasp his hand. "You okay, James? You look more stressed than you should over this thing. You're letting them get to you before the fight has even started. That's not like you. At the settlement, you used to teach us kids to always look for opportunities, to be more, reach out more than we were born to be or have. Here's our chance and you fizz out on us. Or did this Sheila get to you? Have you finally met a woman who can get through that thick hide of yours?" Her deep brown eyes peered into his, assessing how well her jibes were working.

He shot a disgusted sideways look told her, telling her that the old trick didn't work anymore. "Can it, Ratana. I'm not passing on the opportunity and I'm not stressed over those damned reporters either, Ms. Louis included. I'm just tired and I am worried Eddy may have taken something the government people will use against us. I want this thing secured before all the vultures, academic as well as military and government, get to it and ruin our chances of deciphering it."

"That can only mean your old nemesis is on her way then; our illustrious Queensland MP herself. Don't worry, we'll be set up by the time she gets here. She won't be laughing at our work this time. By the way, I got the rubbings of all the symbols for you. I hid them and the fragments in your car boot before anyone tried to lock us down and take away all we collected. We have plenty of time to just talk. So, tell me ... what's eating away at you? I'd like to help you for a change instead of the other way around." An impish smile twitched her lips.

In spite of her smile, James felt irritation at this unaccustomed

bombardment into his private feelings. He suppressed the feeling and deliberately smiled back at her.

"Thanks, little sister, but I'm fine; really I am. I'm just out of fuel, I think. I didn't sleep last night. I kept waking up and crawling out to stare at that stone. There's something about it that seems familiar to me ... Hell, I'm just getting too old for this anymore ... and I know it's just a matter of time before the military comes in here and grabs it all."

"That's what you keep saying but maybe this time the Uni will back you up. Maybe..." The impish look left her face and was replaced with a deep frown when James didn't respond.

He reached down to scratch a mosquito bite on his thigh then sat back and looked hard at Ratana. "Look, I know Peter Howard is on his own when it comes to shooting down my work. Thank God the University board is willing to give me time to prove my claims. It really pisses Peter off too. When this proves out, he'll be out ... finally. At least we'll have something to work on when it happens, thanks to you." He patted her hand then stood up, stretching his back. "Which reminds me. I have to call the bastard, much as I hate to talk to him. He'll have to get somebody to cover my classes next week."

Ratana pointed to the cell phone sitting beside the computer. "You might as well get it over with." She smirked as he rose to place the call.

James heard the phone connect and waited with tense muscles for the confrontation he knew was sure to come. When Peter spoke, James let out his breath. "Hello Peter. It's James Hay here. I'm calling from the site." He knew he was speaking in stiff, clipped sentences but couldn't stop himself. "Look, Peter, I'm on to something big here and I need you to find a replacement lecturer for my classes for the next few weeks."

Peter's deep, lazy reply came through the line sounding like a tinny recording. "No way, Hay. You get your ass back here and fulfill your contract. That bullshit you chase can wait until you have a holiday."

James could hear the glee in his voice and gritted his teeth. "Dammit, Peter, you know I can go to the board and bypass your authority. They gave me leave to pursue this and you know it. You may be the Chancellor but they hold the moneybag. Are you really going to force me to call them again? Besides, in spite of your determination to inject pettiness into our working relationship, I still believe in calling you as a professional courtesy."

"Well, don't bother, I don't want or need a professional courtesy from you. One of these days I'm going to show you up for the crook and fraud you are, you know. Besides, you know that I can delay anything you want to do for so long that you might as well not do it to begin with." This time, Peter did laugh. "So don't give me any of your shit, Hay. I'm not in the mood for it."

James felt anger, bitter and black, rising within and struggled to contain it. "Only a scientific idiot like you would be this blind to fact, Peter. And get this through that thick skull of yours, you may be able to make things hard on me but you can't stop me. And while we're on the subject, I caught your nephew, Eddy, trying to steal my data. I know you put him up to it. What I can't figure out is why you want it when you think it's worthless." James allowed a sneer of contempt to saturate his words.

The pause on the end of the line delighted James. He could imagine Peter frantically trying to figure out some way to deny his nephew's behavior. When Peter spoke, his voice was strained. "What my nephew does has nothing to do with me. I'm not interested in your fantasies or your make-believe data. You may have the board fooled into thinking your little trips have value, but I know you're only fleecing them out of the cost of a free trip for yourself and your primitive black friends."

Before James could reply to his racist remark, Peter snapped, "Get back down here and arrange for your classes yourself. And don't call me for anything again, Hay." He slammed the phone down so hard it came through the line with a crack.

James laughed out loud, knowing he'd bettered Peter Howard for a change. It felt good. He smiled down at Ratana, who was acting like she hadn't

heard the entire conversation.

She was watching the activity in the clearing while casually braiding her hair. In a calm voice she asked, "What do you want to do about the site?" She snapped a band on the end of her hair and looked up at him. "And how soon do you want to leave?"

Distracted by the hum of people moving about, he muttered, "We have to protect it somehow." His gaze shifted to the clearing. "How long do you think Mick and Nathan can keep the reporters and military out? Aboriginal rights only stretch so far. I don't think Mick's elder status will keep them out for long and Nathan's young guards are way too overzealous for comfort. The whole thing is waiting to go nuclear if we're not careful here. Do you think we can hold them off for another day or two?" His eyes searched hers, knowing the answer before she spoke.

Shaking her head she replied, "Not for that long. Nathan told me earlier that the military guys are only waiting because some government bigwig told them to hold back until she can get here from Cairns. When she does, they'll be all over us like flies on a dead roo. I don't think anything is going to stop them after that."

"It's got to be Henson. She's been waiting to use my research to invade the Aboriginal lands for a long time now and I think that asshole, my boss, is working with her. This is just what she's been waiting for. I should walk away from this and let your grandfather handle it. Maybe then she'd back down."

"James, I don't even want to hear you talk like that to me. You've never quit on anything when it was important. This is important. When Nathan and I needed someone at the settlement, you were there. Grandpa didn't raise you for nothing, you know. You're special ... special to all of us who call you family, and this is something you've worked hard for. You of all people know you can't back down from the bloody vultures that want to steal the rest of our land. Now, old timer, get off your bum and let's go see what we can find out about this alien stone we've been given."

Almost completely lost in thought, James almost missed the twinkle that leapt into Ratana's eyes as she obviously decided to drop the other bomb on him, no doubt hoping to get him fired up again. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. Mick told me to tell you the elders of the clan will be here soon. They want to speak to you about this thing. He says it's a message they've waited for and they seem to believe you've been chosen to understand it for our people. Anyway, he'll talk to you when he gets here."

James decided to ignore her feeble attempts to get him riled. His lips twitched into a tiny smile then settled into a serious compressed line. He took a deep breath and ran long fingers through his already tousled and sweaty hair. "Thank God. I can use Mick's help right about now. What about the mob Nathan's boys are holding back?"

"As for how long the guys can keep the mob off us, I have no idea, but I can tell you one thing. If anybody can manage it, Nathan can. Come on; let's go get scientific. That always cheers you up. Take your stuffy teacher tie off, put your 'Indiana Jones' hat on and get your adventurer spirit in gear, mate. It's time for a new adventure." She nudged him in the ribs, tossed his old, battered Digger hat at him and then moved off toward the clearing.

When her tall, broad back was no longer visible through the undergrowth, James went back into the tent. Pulling the last computer disk out of the drive and putting it into his short's pocket beside the first, he muttered, "Damn it, she's right! I can't lay down now and let the government take it away." Staring at the computer, he continued, "I hope Eddy didn't manage to get anything else out to those sharks. This is my chance to show that fat bastard at the University I've been right about Dreamtime and the mysteries happening here all along. When Ms. Louis is finished, Peter Howard will shit himself, and I hope he slips in it and falls on his fat ass when he does."

Cheered up by the mental image of the Vice Chancellor at the University sprawled in the middle of his own waste, James shut off the computer and

headed back to the site. When he approached the clearing, the absolute quiet, in contrast to its former hum of activity, set off mental alarms. He could see the group of students and village volunteers standing and facing the stone in the middle of the circle. A group of soldiers stood frozen in place on the road leading into the site. They shifted nervously, obviously uncertain what to do in this situation. Their officer stood glaring at the elders with the look of someone who wished he could be somewhere else. The news people handled their cameras and tape recorders, taking their cue from the military but not liking it. Nathan and his friends stood beside the road, angry at their failure to stop the mob from gaining entrance. All of them remained motionless and silent. And all of them faced the stone.

Standing off to the side and partially under the vine screen, he saw Samantha Louis and her young sidekick filming the drama unfolding in the clearing. The look on her face reflected the mood of the crowd standing inside the clearing—a mixture of fear, awe and indecision. The deadly quiet bound all of them to each other, to the stone and to the people themselves. When James stepped out of the tangle of thick bush, he understood the reason for their silence.

CHAPTER TWO

Seven elders of the local Aboriginal settlement encircled the stone, hands held and heads bowed. Each gray-bearded man sported intricate face paintings covering his broad features. A pure white headband with Aboriginal dot pictures of animals racing across them encircled their foreheads.

Three younger men, clad in native loincloth and unpainted headbands, squatted behind the circle, ready with traditional clapping sticks and didgeridoos, the Aboriginal equivalent of a horn. When James halted in front of the undergrowth, they began to play, a slow, mournful tune he seldom heard played outside secret elder meetings.

The old men began a slow shuffling dance around the obelisk, chanting in their native tongue, each sharing his piece of the Dreamtime song with the world, merging it into the story of creation. James understood the ritual enough to know that what they were doing was very seldom performed and usually of great importance to the clan. It related to how the sun was created from the primordial mud on the first day and the moon and stars rose from the same source that night. Then how the sun warmed the aged and decrepit sleeping ancestors in their waterholes. They emerged from the mud and sang the world into existence from the clods of earth around them. It told of the Lizard man, the Rainbow-snake man, the Kangaroo man, the Wombat man and all the rest of the totemic species on the 'song-line' that each Old One traveled in his lifetime ... the beginning of the world and its dreams.

The elders' voices rose to passionate heights as they sang of their burden and their joy. How they were chosen as kirda (boss) and kutungurlu (guardian-policeman) for the land; how they must maintain and protect those secret places that the ancients claim as their resting-places.

They told of their song-line to those following in the generations. The song soared when it told of the universal music of the path of their Ancestors and the Dancing in the spirit. It explained their Dreaming. The Dreaming that is their sect, their ancestry, their totems, their intricate kinship and their relationships with the earth and with those unseen things that rule their pathways. The song told of things past and things to come; magical, mystical things.

James struggled to throw off the magic of the song being woven around the obelisk and the elders who held it in their minds. He slowly emerged back from the place the music transported him to; a place of peace, harmony and joy. He shook his head, dispelling the disquieting, gauzy feeling of unreality threatening to engulf his mind permanently. He made himself focus on the here and now, knowing he must be alert and aware to what was happening around the stone.

When his eyes scanned the faces of the watchers, they fell on the large

group of outsiders observing from the dirt track. Obviously on their way into the clearing when the music started, they too had halted and now stared, fascinated, at the ritual unveiling in front of them. He frowned in irritation when he spotted the cameras and uniforms of news people and military personnel. "At least they have enough respect to keep their distance until it's done," he muttered under his breath.

His gaze settled on Sam's swaying form amongst the vines. He found he could not tear his gaze away from her. The light shining around her seemed to showcase her tall, long-legged body. He felt caught up with her, both of them lost in a sensual dance of intertwining souls. Her eyes dazzled him with the turquoise blue facets radiating from them, creating a prism of light around her face that gave him a sense of Mother Earth and the sea that nurtured her. His body and mind wanted to reach out to her, merge with her-consume her and never leave the comfort of her arms. He knew she was lost in the weave of the magic and he wanted to join her.

When the volume and intensity of the chant rose, James was drawn away from Sam and back into the circle of men dancing and singing. He felt the music's vibrations reach inside him, compelling him to sway with its beat and return to that plane of existence that knew all, told all and held all. Remembered words from his childhood translated snatches of the song. The images of ancient beliefs and prophecies returned to him as he watched the head elder, Mick, his grandfather, lead the circle around the stone. He saw this man, his gentle hands wrapped around James's small boy's head. Mick's expressive brown eyes, so dark they were almost black, burrowed deep into James's gray ones, relaying comfort and security. His low, soothing voice, vibrant with passion and awe, spoke of the days of Dreamtime, the promise of the Old Ones and what it would bring to his people when they returned to enlighten the world once again.

James stood transfixed by the sight of the ritual, anchored to long ago memories. The chant and dance reached fever pitch. He strained with its intensity then it abruptly ended on a deafening single word, accompanied by the clashing notes of the instruments. When the last note ended the stone shattered into dust, scattering brilliant iridescent motes high into the air. All motion and sound stopped as they lazily settled to the ground, the moment frozen in time. The stunning vacuum of sound and space that remained transfixed all who were touched by it. The magic spell binding the onlookers evaporated when the stone disappeared.

The resulting uproar of motion and noise that ensued temporarily deafened him, but also served to restore his stunned wits. The clearing came alive with human activity as soldiers rushed to cordon off and inspect the spot where the stone once stood. Reporters and cameramen swarmed around the site, frantically filming and speaking in high-pitched voices into tape recorders.

Ratana, transfixed like the others, abruptly came to herself when a chunk of the black rock fell at her feet. She stooped to pluck it from the clay and quickly slipped it into her pocket. She scanned the chaos around her and gasped when she saw her granduncle, Mick, barely withstanding all the bodies rushing around his frail form. She hurried toward him, catching up with James when he lunged to grab Mick, preventing him from collapsing under the feet of the crowd.

James, stunned with disbelief, asked the old man, "Mick, are you okay? My God! What just happened?"

Mick's frail body slumped against James's strong arm. He blinked up at James. "My son, it is the message we have waited for. It tells of things you must know; things you must find. Help me over to your tent where I can sit and rest." He indicated the table and chairs sitting beside James's tent, partially hidden in the deep shadow of the rainforest.

Waving away Ratana's offer of another arm, he waved his fingers at her and peevishly demanded, "Go now, daughter of my brother. I will call when it is time for you." Without hesitation, she nodded in respect then turned back

to stand under a tree, observing the chaos within the circle. She cringed when soldiers brutally pushed back students and tribal volunteers and encircled the site. A crowd of news people frantically snapped photos. When an officer bellowed at them, a knot of soldiers quickly moved to block their view.

James helped Mick over to the stool and gently eased him down. "What about the others, grandfather? Will they be all right?" he asked, anxiously watching the remaining elders as they sat, unmoving, in the clearing, steadfastly ignoring the shouts of the soldiers and the flashing of the cameras.

"They will soon recover from the visions and they will hold their position until it is finished. Before the others come for us, I must speak to you of the black stone." He grabbed James's arm and pulled him down onto a chair until James faced the old man, eye to eye, his grip surprisingly strong. He held out a leathery fist and grabbed James's hand until the two met. His fist opened and something hard pressed into James' palm. He opened his hand slowly and gasped. The part of the obelisk containing the engraved image of a horse now lay there. He slowly closed his fist and squatted next to Mick, searching the old man's face. Mick solemnly gazed back and continued. "I knew who it was meant for when it came to me. So do you, my grandson. The messages on the stone speak of a quest; a quest you must make for our people. You cannot refuse, my son." His solemn face peered deeply into James's eyes as he spoke.

"Me? A quest? What quest and why me? Speak plainly, Mick." A flood of excitement gripped his chest. His breathing quickened.

"The stone speaks in the language of the rock pictures. Your Dreaming totem sits upon them. You must go where it leads you. You must follow its song-line to the secret place the stone will lead you to."

"My totem? You mean my horse tattoo? But you told me there is no such sign for the Aborigine people. It was tattooed on me at birth and unknown to any of the elders. I'm not..." James started to protest.

"Yes, you are. The people are of the heart. Your mother, a much-missed daughter, was of the heart. You are of the heart. Your totem has been chosen. It sits atop the totems of the old language and of our people. It speaks of ancient ones that have no speech. They wait for your coming. You must go." Mick's stern look and tighter grip silenced James's words. The old man held out his crabbed hand to James. James accepted it with awe. The old man nodded approval. "You have gone to do the will of the people before, my grandson, as your mother before you. This time, you do the will of the world. There is no other path."

His eyes met Mick's in understanding. "Where did it say I have to go for this quest? Did it tell what I'm to do and when?" James sat straight, his face somber.

"It speaks of going to the southern regions and finding the place of meeting. That is all I can tell you. The spirit of the horse will lead where you must go. I do not know this spirit, but I do know it carries the rainbow with it, as you do. Both are of the earth and the earth will lead you. You must have faith, the faith of your childhood. It is important you do this thing and do it now. There is no time left." The old man's hand fell to his side in fatigue. "Now take me back to the circle." He rose and James took his arm, supporting him as they walked.

A knot of military men stood like wooden soldiers around the elders, hands poised above sidearms. James and Mick made their way toward the elders, pointedly ignoring the armed guards. A young, smooth-faced officer, looking like he'd put on his brand new uniform for the first time, stepped up to them when they reached the circle. "Doctor Hay. I have been authorized by the Australian government to secure this site and impound any and all information and data you possess about it." His clipped military declaration accompanied a glare, designed to give the impression of mature authority.

The officer handed James an official looking document. When James spotted Hensen's name on it, he stuck into his pocket without reading any

further. Scanning the area for Ratana, Nathan or Maggie, he was relieved to see the circle empty of all but the soldiers. "Captain, it would seem there's nothing here for you to secure or impound anymore, but you're welcome to what you can find." He answered in a mocking tone, waving his hand around the empty circle.

"Maybe I can help, Captain." Sam strode up to the young officer and handed him a folded paper. He opened it and as he read what it contained, his face became grim and stoical. He folded it back up slowly then, after a small hesitation, handed it back to Sam with a surly nod. Without another word, the officer motioned to his men and strode off toward the tent with two soldiers in tow.

"I don't know what you have there, Ms. Louis, but it must be something pretty potent to get the military to back off." James's words and smile of pleasure broke the silence that ensued after the soldier's hasty retreat.

His smile seemed to take Sam completely off guard. Her voice shook when she answered. "It's a document from some government official ordering any military personnel to give full cooperation to us while we're here. My boss is a personal friend and he managed to get us this document just in case anyone tried to keep us out of places we needed to get into." Her cheeks glowed a pleasant pink under his scrutiny. "I know, it's a typical American steamroller move, but it did get them off your back," she added defensively.

"Thank you," James said sincerely. He turned back to Mick when he became aware the old man was plucking persistently at his arm.

"What, Mick? What is it?" James felt the whole day was slipping into the realm of the fantastic and almost expected to see a flying saucer overhead waiting to beam them all aboard.

"The stone would never have spoken to them anyway. This woman has heard its call too, my grandson. She is of the Old Ones, as you are. You must take her with you." Mick stood up straight and pointed to Sam's startled face.

She whispered, "How did you know?"

Before James could react to Mick's pronouncement or Sam's response, Ratana trotted up to Mick and whispered in his ear. "Grandfather, the place is overrun with soldiers threatening our people. What are we to do, fight or go? The elders must take the lead now."

"Yes, it is time to go, but you must stay with James. He will need you in the days to come, my child. Trust in your memories and lean on the truths you have learned." Mick squeezed her hand then walked slowly toward the silent elders, who were standing and waiting for him. James watched them with a lump in his throat. His pride and love for the Aborigine people were only overshadowed by his fear for them.

When they'd disappeared into the rainforest, James turned to Ratana with a searching look. "What did he mean by all that?"

Ratana held herself still as a rock and watched the elders move down the track leading out into the depths of the rainforest and the settlement where she'd grown up. James studied her profile as he waited for an answer. Her features were broad, strong and pronounced. She stood tall for a woman and her face reflected the deep brown of a pure Aborigine. What softened the almost masculine look she nurtured were her large, luminous brown eyes. James still felt protective of her, as he did when she was a toddler trailing after him throughout the settlement.

She was the daughter he knew he'd never have and he loved her with a strong protective pride. She'd graduated top in her class at the University and now worked as his field assistant—an arrangement that helped him in more ways than one. She looked after him like a daughter might, cooking and making sure his socks matched.

Her strong voice startled him out of his reverie. "He means you will need someone you can trust in the days to come. He didn't tell me why, but he did tell me it would mean the difference between our people staying or being lost. He told me this yesterday. Now, it's your turn to tell me what all this is about." She turned her gaze full on him, ignoring Sam standing beside him,

and held it unwaveringly, inspecting him in return.

"Ratana, I don't know any more about it than you do. That rock had markings on it that he thinks are important. From what I can tell, most of the markings resemble those at Split Rock, but some of the glyphs are ones we've never seen before in any ancient writing. How he knows what they mean is beyond me and he's not talking yet. But, he did tell me I have to go south and find the answer to what they mean myself. I'll go, but I don't know where or what in the south to look for, so I'm stuck." He held up his hands in surrender.

Sam stepped away from the two, seemingly embarrassed at being in the middle of their conversation, but curious enough about the stone to continue listening. Ratana, as tall as Sam, stepped closer to James and lowered her voice while keeping her eyes firmly on Sam. "Not stuck, just in the dark. I know one thing ... I know we'll be sent the help we need, when we need it. Things just work that way. I've seen it for myself too many times to question it any longer. We'll be led where we're supposed to go and find what we're supposed to find. I think she's one of the things you're meant to find and take with you." She nodded at Sam, amused at the city woman's efforts to unstick her high heels from the red clay.

Giving Ratana another scathing look of disgust, James stalked over to confront Sam as she still struggled with her shoes. He grabbed her arm and halted her struggles. "Just slip your shoes off. You'll never get them out with your weight in them." His tone held a disgust he didn't really feel about being forced to drag a woman he didn't know along on a trip to nowhere. Privately, he wondered what it would be like to see those eyes first thing in the morning.

Tossing his hand off, Sam snapped, "Look, maybe you don't mind being covered with slimy red mud, but I do. I have no intention of walking in this stuff barefoot."

"Suit yourself, lady." He started to turn away, when a thought struck and he turned back to her. "When you've finally gotten yourself unstuck here, I think you and your photographer friend should leave. As you can see, there isn't going to be a story here for you. I apologize for wasting your time Ms. Louis, but you will be sufficiently compensated, I assure you. Now, we have a lot of work to do here and a lot of packing up. We don't need to have people underfoot while we're doing it." Again he started to turn away but Sam grabbed his arm, her fingers digging into the tight muscles under his sweaty shirt.

Her grip dug surprisingly strong into his forearm. James wanted to flinch, but suppressed the impulse when he saw the fire in her eyes.

"This is one woman you don't back down to or she'll eat you alive. Another ambitious woman", he speculated.

"Look, we came almost ten-thousand miles to cover this. I pulled out all the stops to get my boss to go for this whole story, so I'm not going to lie to you and say it doesn't matter; it does. This event is one of the biggest things of the century. I'd like to make sure it's written about accurately. I'm not going to force you, but did it ever occur to you that we might have some pull with the government? We also have a huge budget for research or whatever needs doing. I might be able to help you. What do you say, Doctor Hay? Give us a chance at least." Marc grinned and walked away, snapping pictures of what was left of the circle and the camp.

Samantha managed to ask for his help, without sounding like she was asking. That impressed James and he had to admit to himself, although he'd never admit it to anyone else, Ratana was right; he felt strongly attracted to this woman. It excited and terrified him at the same time. Admiring the blaze of red hair surrounding her face, he thought, "A very strong woman indeed."

He silently considered what she said and gave himself more time to really look at her, to gauge her sincerity.

"She's attractive, but tries to hide it. Wonder why? Great hair and eyes. Tall and leggy. Not beautiful, but probably could be if she'd put a little makeup on. Workaholic, no doubt." His thoughts kept pulling away from

the practical and back to her.

Ratana leaned over and whispered, "I told you we'd get what we need for this trip. She's what we need. She's what you need. Don't be a thick head, James. Let them come along. The worst that can happen is they get in the way and we get rid of them later."

"What makes you so sure they're what Mick was referring to?" James hissed into Ratana's ear.

She placed her large, strong hand on his forearm, squeezed for emphasis and replied, "I'm not sure, but I do know Mick knew we'd be needing help and this just feels like the right thing to do for some reason."

He looked into her eyes and noted the sincerity there, then he looked at Sam's face as she listened to as much of their exchange as she could. He didn't completely trust her motives or ethics, but he did trust Mick and Ratana's.

"Okay, what do you want?" James shrugged, folding his arms and waiting for her to tell him what the cost of cooperation would be.

Let her make the first move.

"You won't regret this. First, if there's nothing here you've hidden from the Fed's we could see..." she raised her eyebrows waiting to see how he reacted. He continued to stare, stone-faced at her. "Okay, since there's nothing here of much interest anymore, can we go somewhere comfortable and talk? I have a list of questions..."

"Like where? Back to town or to my place?" He raised his eyebrows in return.

Her normally full lips compressed into a thin line, Sam dryly replied, "We have rooms in Crocodile; at the local hotel. If it's not too much trouble, I'd like to go change into something more suitable. Would buying you and your friends dinner be pushing too much?"

He cocked an inquiring eyebrow at Ratana. She stood unmoving, silent and stone-faced as she stared into his eyes. Shrugging, he turned back to Samantha and replied, "Dinner would be nice. We have supplies to pack up here before we can go anywhere though. Mind if we meet you there later?"

"I don't mind. We'll be at the Crocodile Hotel in the thriving town of Crocodile itself. It's the only restaurant in town; actually a pub. Sorry ... I suppose you already know that." She blushed. "We'll be there in two hours. Is that enough time?" Sam asked, genuinely pleased that he'd agreed to talk to her.

"We'll be there." James replied and abruptly walked away, making his way toward his tent and shouting for Maggie to get the crew to pack up the equipment.

~*~

"Well. He doesn't believe in 'thank you' or long good-byes, does he?" Marc's sarcastic tone matched the look on his face when he sauntered back.

"He only says 'so long' to those he respects and he never says 'thank you' for something not given with a generous heart." Ratana flatly stated. Her luminous brown eyes shot fire at Marc. Then she whirled on her heel and left him and Sam standing there, unsure what her remark meant to the success of their story.

"I was always told the Australian people are a friendly lot. Now, I'm not so sure ... or is it just me?" Marc asked as he watched Ratana pause to speak to Maggie then disappear into the tent Doctor Hay entered earlier.

Sighing deeply, Sam shrugged her shoulders. "I think it's a combination of scientific arrogance and antisocial attitude. Too bad ... I could go for the guy. Well, just as long as we get our story. You ready? By the way, remind me to castrate you later for letting me make a fool of myself and come out here in a suit. Some friend and colleague you are!" She shoved his shoulder, almost unbalancing him.

Snickering, he replied, "Hey! You can't blame me for the way you dress. You're the one who told me to know what I'm doing here. What about you, didn't you read up on what the weather is like here? Besides, your suit has pants.

It's the heels that don't quite make it, I think." He leered at her as he spoke.

She glared at him sideways then started back to the car. When they reached the rental car, she reached inside and grabbed a pair of tennis shoes. Sitting down on the car seat, she slipped off the heels, now caked with red clay, and pulled up her pant legs to remove the knee high hose she wore with them.

Marc heard her muffled scream and, slamming the trunk on his camera equipment, ran over to her side of the car. "What the..."

Sam had both pant legs rolled up and was plucking things off her legs with disgust. "You ... you ... shit!" she sputtered as she pulled long, worm-like leeches off her legs.

Marc's face turned white at the sight. "Leeches? There are leeches out here? But we didn't go into any water."

"If you had read your book on this country as you claim then you'd know they crawl on the ground and latch onto you as you walk by. I found that out in Malaysia. Damn! I hate these things! You'd better check your legs too, Marc. They get up your pant legs."

His face got even whiter. Without any shyness at all, he unzipped and dropped his jeans. His legs were covered with them. Sam laughed when he sat down hard on the red clay and frantically began pulling them off.

"I wouldn't sit there, if I was you. You may be acquiring more in places you won't want them."

She laughed out loud when he jumped up faster than he sat down. "This is quite a country, isn't it?" Her eyes lingered on the flap of James's tent. Smoldering passion burned deep within her eyes and a violent blush colored her cheeks.

Yes, quite a country all right.

CHAPTER THREE

The Crocodile Hotel and Pub was located exactly in the center of town, if you could call it a town. A handful of weathered buildings baked in the north Queensland sun, each tin-ribbed roof reflected sunrays onto what was left of the eucalyptus trees scattered around them. Wallabies, normally shy and in hiding during the day, now blatantly lay under the sparse shade the trees or buildings provided.

Not a soul could be seen on the short, dusty street this time of the day; not even the ever-present Blue Heeler dogs every drover owned in the Outback. The hotel seemed to be the only building the owners felt compelled to paint once in awhile. Sam admired the classic Queensland architecture, but had real trouble with the color combination of dark green, yellow and orange.

"Looks like Halloween is here to stay," Marc observed when they'd checked in. Next he commented on the locals they could see through the dirty windows of the first-floor pub. "I think beer drinking is the national career choice here; that, or chasing sheep."

As they parked in front of the hotel, Sam elbowed him. "Shut up, Marc. It's bad enough these Australians think we're arrogant and spoiled without someone like you adding childish and rude to the list. This story is going to be written even if I have to knock you out, take your camera and do the photos myself."

"Okay, okay. I was just kidding anyway." He got out of the air-conditioned car and immediately stopped as a wall of heat hit him. "Damn, this place is hot!" Sweat broke out on his body, soaking his shirt, before he made it to the trunk and removed the camera equipment.

Sam stepped out, covered her eyes with her hand and looked up and down the street. "Maybe you should get some shots of the town, Marc. Background stuff." Without waiting for an answer, she turned and made her way to the long covered verandah surrounding the hotel.

"It's too hot, Sam. I'll come and get some shots later when the sun

won't grill me in the process."

She stopped just short of the faded green swinging doors that led to the hotel's lobby and turned around. "Look, I've had just about enough of your childishness. Mel may be your uncle and he's my employer for the moment, but that doesn't make you boss. Is that understood, Marc? This is a job. You know what a job is? Where you do the work then you get paid? Take the damned pictures!" She spun around and stormed through the doors.

Marc stood next to the rental car, his big hands white with anger, his dark face suffused with hot blood. His mouth opened, ready to protest. The words stuck in his throat as he watched her move toward the hotel door. The pale green camisole she wore clung to her breasts; sweat molded it to her. The angry words he meant to utter didn't get out until long after she disappeared into the cool darkness of the hotel; and then they came out as more of a whimper.

~*~

James and Ratana drove into town three hours later. The sun was almost down and the streets now had people moving toward the pub for the evening's festivities.

"How did Nate do today? Did he have any trouble with the military?" James asked, leaning forward to peer out of the dusty windshield at the people walking by.

"He had a bit of flak with a couple of the soldiers, but his mates kept it down for a change. He said he'd meet us here later tonight and tell us all that went on from his side of the camp today. Besides, you know Nate; he'll want a complete report from you about how it went with the officers. He loves to hear how we beat them at their own games sometimes." Ratana chuckled and leaned forward with him, watching the sparse parade of townspeople at dusk.

James laughed out loud at her remark. "Yes, he is a bit militant himself, but the man knows what he's about when it comes to the bush. He's a good mate and a good bushman. Have you two decided when you're going to marry or has your mum chosen him for you yet?" he asked, peering at her sideways, waiting for a reaction. It didn't come.

"She whacked him with the mulga wood last night, in fact. His back has a nice dark bruise on it. He's a good bloke. I'm satisfied," she commented without any outward show of deep emotion.

James parked the Rover in front of the pub and reached over to grab her hand. "I wish you both well. Both of you are my family, my clan and my friends." Embarrassed at the 'White Fella' show of emotions he seldom indulged in, James squeezed her hand, smiled and opened the door.

As they climbed out of the dusty Range Rover, a lanky, almost skeletal man in a big drover's hat stopped on the wooden walkway and raised a hand toward them. His bearded face remained solemn and unsmiling, but his attitude was one of welcome. "G'day, Doc! You and the lil' lady goin' to shout the suds tonight?"

James smiled at the man, noting he probably hadn't taken a bath since the last time they'd met a month ago. The old man's leathery face beamed under an oversized bush hat when James said, "G'day, mate. Sure thing. First round is on me." He turned to Ratana and covered his mouth. "Old Pete's finally lost those last teeth, I think. He won't smile anymore. Well, he will when he gets a few beers into him."

Pete continued to rant on, in spite of being talked around. "'Cos I have a real strange tale for yer, Doc. Somethin' I know yer'll want to hear. Yer been tryin' to find out about the things in the rainforest and I found somethin'; some black stone with scribblin's. I know yer'll want..."

James gripped the old man's skinny arms and pushed his face into Pete's, hoping to get his attention. "Pete, Pete ... what was that you said? You found something? Start from the beginning and tell me about it."

~*~

Sam sat by one of the dusty windows of the pub. She sipped tepid beer and watched the rough men around the bar with a leery eye. Several men had already

tried to pick her up and more than a few offered to arm-wrestle Marc for her. They good-naturedly accepted the 'no thank you' they got from Sam, but tried to taunt Marc into joining the Aussie outback version of the Olympics at the antique wooden bar. Marc rose to the challenge and now sat teetering on an old stool. He reeled, drunk on local beer and loudly singing ballads of the bush. However, he still reached out every so often to grab at the barmaid as she moved back and forth behind him.

Sam ignored him and studiously watched James and Ratana casually talking with the old drover. Her anger rose as the minutes ticked by. Her sandaled foot tapped out the irritation building inside her. She watched James lounge against the dusty Range Rover and smile as the old man animatedly waved his arms around, his toothless mouth rambling on.

"That rude, arrogant, ill-mannered..." Sam pushed her warm beer away and stood up, ready to storm outside and give him a piece of her mind.

"Hey there, lady with the long, purty legs. Would yer be wanting to have a drink with a lonely, parched man?" A huge hand, dark and covered with thick black hair, gripped her arm.

She stopped in her tracks, slowly turned around and looked up into the smashed face of a local thug; at least he looked like a thug. The grin pasted on his face showcased his missing and blackened teeth. The stubble on his face looked weeks old without having decided to become a beard. His sweat and food-stained shorts and shirt reeked. The ball of nausea that hit Sam's stomach while looking at, and smelling, him almost sidetracked her from her course ... but not for long. She hit him square in the nose with all her might, paused only long enough to see him grab his face and sit down hard on the dirty wooden floor, then she stalked to the swinging doors leading out to the street, her anger hotter than ever.

James came through the doors, almost knocking her down in the process. She ran into his chest with enough force that his automatic response was to grasp her tightly to him and step back through the doors. "Hey! What...?" When he saw her face, he stopped and stared at her, his face scowling with concern. "What happened, Miss Louis?"

Before she could tell him, the thug came charging out of the pub, his face a study in rage while his nose dripped blood down his bare chest. He ran into Sam's back and all three of them, looking like a six-armed beast, fell, tumbling off the verandah and into the dusty street. Within minutes the patrons of the pub poured out of the doors and crowded around the tumbling trio, cheering them on and hoping for a brawl.

Sam squealed, smashed between two big men. James grunted on the bottom of the pile, unable to catch his breath when the thug sprawled, roaring like a wounded wombat, on top of both of them.

Sam regained her breath first. "Get off me, you damned hairy ape!" She got her legs under her and pushed the thug off, rolling off of James at the same time. She sprang up and stood, bent at the waist and ready to hit, glaring at the thug as he groped around on the ground, looking for a handhold up. He squinted, his eyes clogged with dirt and blood, making it next to impossible for him to see where he was going. He grabbed the hairy legs of two drunken men who laughingly pulled him to his feet. They twirled him around to face Sam and James, hoping to prolong the entertainment.

James, gasping for breath and holding his left arm tightly against his side, was the last to stagger to his feet. He shakily held up his right hand and croaked, "That's enough, Paulie." Gathering air into his lungs, he thundered, "Damn it, Paulie, stop this right now!"

The big man stopped, spit blood onto the ground, smiled crookedly then passed out. James walked over, squatted next to the limp body and felt his pulse. Shaking his head, he pronounced, "He'll live. Tom, Keith, get Paulie back into the pub and find a dark spot to stuff him into. He'll sleep it off." He motioned for the two who had helped Paulie to move him. They staggered over and hefted the unconscious man up, laughing as they made their way back into the pub.

With shaky legs under him, he felt strong hands on his arms, steadying him. Ratana on one side and Sam on the other. "Your arm looks broken and your lip is bleeding. Are you in pain?" Sam asked, her forehead creased with concern as she used a handkerchief to mop at the stream of blood dripping from his chin.

He took the bloody cloth from her hand and held it against his lower lip. "Thanks, Miss Louis, but it's not broken." He rotated his arm, flinching with the pain. "I'm all right. Are you? Paulie landed on you pretty hard. I know; I was on the bottom of that menage a trois." His lopsided smile lit up his face as he took in the dirt on her face and the scrapes on her knees.

Her face suddenly looked like sundown as deep pinks, reds and roses infused her skin. Her eyes flashed emerald. "The whole thing is your fault, you know. I came out to remind you that you agreed to meet me over an hour ago. I've been waiting in that pub and fending off baboons in shorts for almost an hour and a half. I got tired of waiting for you to remember your manners. That particular ape followed me. So if you don't mind, I'd like to get this meeting on the road ... unless you have any other people you'd like to chat with first?" She dusted off her shorts, spun around and stalked back into the pub, leaving him gaping at her retreating back and shapely backside.

"She's not much on 'thank you' or 'sorry', is she?" Ratana laughed at the comical look on his face and slapped him on the back. "Where's she going? I thought you two had a meeting planned? Better hurry and catch up with her, mate."

Ratana moved away and headed for the truck as he turned to shoot an appropriately acid retort back at her. She made it to the truck before he could think of anything suitably nasty.

Grunting in disgust with the absurdity of women, he moved toward the pub, determined to show these women how a man kept his self control. He stalked through the swinging doors and met a fist in the middle of his nose; then his entire body met the hardwood floor, where he proceeded to take a much-needed nap.

He woke up in a dark room, lying in the middle of a soft bed, with a cool cloth across his forehead. It didn't take away the intense pain in the middle of his face, though. Wincing, he sat up and held the cloth on his nose instead.

"Ah, you're back in the world of the living, I see." Sam came out of the kitchenette clutching another cloth, this one filled with ice. She held it out to him then walked over to the single armchair in the room and sat down. She picked up a frosted glass of lemonade and gulped the contents half down. "Now, do you want to tell me why you decided to pick a fight with that ape again? Wasn't that embarrassing tussle in the street enough to satisfy your manly urges for violence?"

His muffled reply had an angry, accusatory tone to it. He settled himself against the wooden headboard and glared at her, obviously expecting an answer.

"I can't understand a thing you're mumbling, Doctor Hay. Would you kindly take the icepack off your face and answer me, or would you rather wait until next week when your nose gets back to normal? By the way, it's not broken. Thought you'd want to know that." She lifted her glass to him, but the smirk on her face told him she probably was disappointed at the news.

"I said I didn't pick another fight, I ran into one. He hit me as I came through the doors. Besides, I only got into the first one because you came plowing into me. Or did you conveniently forget that part?" He felt like a little kid returning a taunt for a taunt, but he was unable to stop himself.

Her bare foot stopped tapping on the wooden floor and she set her drink back down. Taking a deep breath, she looked at him and said, "Look, we both want the same things, I think. I want to tell the real story about what's happening here and you want to protect it from those who would hide it or exploit it. Right? By telling the world about this, we can both protect it. We're on the same track, I'd say. Why don't we start over? We got off to a

very bad start, but it doesn't have to stay that way. Okay?" She stood up, smoothed her dirty shorts, walked to the bed and held out her hand to him, a quirky smile playing on her face.

His hand slowly came down from his nose, the ice inside melting over his chest and onto the coverlet. He hesitated. Then he held out his hand and shook hers firmly. "Okay. I apologize for my rudeness. I'm not ordinarily so ill mannered. I've been burned by journalists before and this thing has gotten out of hand. You're right, of course. Telling the truth will protect whatever is happening here. I guess I could have a worse lot in life than traveling with a beautiful woman." He knew the smile transformed his face from a serious one into a ruggedly handsome one, so he flashed his brightest and best smile at her. Seeing her frown of disapproval, his demeanor switched to one of seriousness. "All right, you and your friend can come along. But, it will be on my terms. No story or pictures unless I okay the final product. Agreed?"

Sam sat down on the bed, still holding onto his hand. "Tell me what you know, Doctor Hay. Tell me everything that's happened up until today when the stone disappeared."

His smile returned. "Call me James if you don't mind, Samantha. If we're to be partners, we might as well be on a first name basis."

"All right, James, call me Sam. We can introduce the others as they show up. Now, let's get this thing on the road shall we?" Her smile matched his as they looked into each other's eyes, unaware of their hands still locked together.

CHAPTER FOUR

The drive down the coast into Townsville from Cairns drained all James's energy. A long drive, relieved only by the occasional small town, it boasted hot, muggy and boring scenery for five solid hours. The air conditioning in his old red van had long ago given up the ghost and the interior was stifling, even with all the windows down. James drove while Ratana and Nathan sat in the back with the site's clay-crusted equipment. They all gulped down large quantities of lukewarm water from their portable bottles. None felt much like talking after the first hour when they caught up with each other's versions of current events.

When all became silent, James glanced in the rearview mirror to see Nate and Ratana dozing now that the early evening sky was cooling off and cooler air was flowing into the open windows. James glanced periodically at the side mirror and checked to make sure Sam and Marc still followed in their rental car, a newer model station wagon. "Probably has good air conditioning too." James mumbled as he checked their position again and wiped away the sweat dripping down his neck.

~*~

Sam drove as Marc, clutching his camera like a teddy bear, dozed in the back seat. The air conditioning in the Commodore station wagon kept the interior cool and comfortable. She watched the battered van as it ate up the miles in front of her. She was glad to follow James. Driving on the left side of a two-lane road without any major towns along the way didn't make for confidence, even for an independent American woman. What she did feel was an overwhelming sense of expectancy.

The two-vehicle caravan pulled into the parking lot at James Cook University and stopped in the fading shade of two huge frangipani trees, both laden with fragrant white flowers. Their scent enveloped Sam when she stepped from the coolness of the car into the fading heat of the day. She stumbled dizzily as she tried to correct the lightheaded, almost surrealistic look of James standing under the canopy of the trees. Sam gaped, moving her head from side to side in disbelief as he seemed to float suspended in air and time toward her. His body appeared to undulate toward and around hers; she liked it. The world surged, then shifted into slow motion. Everything became liquid; a waking dream.

She stood frozen to the spot, as her eyes tried to adjust to what

appeared to be an ancient person of undetermined sex floating up beside James. The vision's long hair entwined itself around him, pulling him closer to the apparition. It whispered in his ear. It stroked his head. It smiled and kissed his cheeks. It looked up at Sam with sun-red eyes and beckoned her to approach. Frozen in place, Sam stood rooted to the spot. It disappeared just as suddenly as it appeared and the world snapped back to reality with the force of an overstretched rubber band. She stumbled and would have fallen if the car hadn't been there to lean against. As her world righted itself, she gasped with the feeling of being reborn.

"Are you all right, Sam?" Marc stood beside her, holding onto her arm as she sagged against the hot car. Her eyes tried to focus on James when he frowned at her, shrugged, then turned to casually chat with his two young assistants. He flashed one last glance at her then moved toward the low building. Unable to speak, she nodded and reached back in through the car window for the cold water bottle nestled next to her seat. She gulped down a mouthful and steadied herself before standing upright again. "I'm fine. Must be this heat. Let's go get this story." She gave Marc a shaky smile and followed James and his group as they made their way toward a squat yellow building.

Her legs were like rubbery extensions of her body as she made her way into a chaotic jumble of lab equipment, computer terminals, and shelves crammed full of dusty books and jarred specimens that looked like tiny mummies. "Cute. What do you do for entertainment? Hunt down the deadly butterfly and mount their little heads on the wall?"

James walked over to sagging floor-to-ceiling shelves packed with hundreds of flat wooden boxes and slid one from the stack. He smiled down at the plain box with fatherly pride and opened it to reveal a layout of butterflies neatly pinned to a white background. He adjusted the nametag arranged below one specimen then shifted the box to better catch the meager light in the room. "Beautiful, aren't they?" he murmured.

Sam leaned over the box and wrinkled up her nose. "They're gorgeous but the smell is horrible. Did you catch all these yourself?" she asked, genuinely impressed with the collection.

He dragged his gaze from the multi-colored display and searched her face for a trace of sarcasm. When he saw that her question was sincere, he flashed a large, white-toothed grin at her. "Yes. I love butterflies. Some people think it's a girlie hobby, but I've loved them since childhood when I saw my first beauty in Jamaica."

"You grew up in Jamaica? How did you end up here?" she asked, her journalist's curiosity rising in earnest.

"It's a long story. One I don't care to have spread across a newspaper." He shut the box and replaced it on the shelf. Turning back to her, the grin completely gone from his face, he announced, "Now, I have to get on the phone and coordinate some supplies for this trek down south. Ratana, would you or Nathan please make some coffee for our distinguished guests? I'll be back soon." He disappeared through a connecting door into his private office.

Sam frowned at the closed door. "Touchy! Can't even ask harmless questions without him getting his panties in a bunch."

"It wasn't a harmless question, Ms. Louis." Ratana commented from across the lab table. She held up her hand, palm forward. "And before you start grilling me with questions, it's his business and I won't answer you either." The smile that accompanied the statement took the sting out of the words.

Sam smiled back, shrugged her shoulders and turned back to the shelf, retrieving the box. She sat it down on the countertop, opened it and studied the insects with interest. "Strange man. Hard on the outside and sensitive on the inside." She glanced up to see Ratana watching her with a knowing look on her face. Sam turned to inspect the room. "Cramped place for a scientist to work inside. He must not be too popular with the higher-ups here."

Marc nodded in agreement as he walked around the lab, curiously

touching and examining all the stainless steel equipment. In awe, he muttered to no one in particular, "This place looks like something out of a mad scientist movie." He raised the small camera slung around his neck, focused it and scanned the room.

Nathan, looking calm and cool in shorts and sandals, started to sit down. Ratana stopped him with a look. "Nat, go unload the equipment from the van and collect the stuff we'll need for down south. You know he'll want to leave right away."

He made a disgusted sound through his nose. "The guy thinks we're all running on limitless energy like he is." When he smiled, his big white teeth lit up his face. "Oh well, he's worth it, I suppose." He shrugged, smiled again at Sam, then looked at Ratana and lifted a finger to his forehead, saluting her with charming Aussie cockiness. He used the same finger to point at Marc with a different attitude. "Hey, mate, give me a hand. We need some equipment from the office next door."

Marc looked at Sam questioningly, a frown on his face. She grimaced at him. "Oh, go help, Marc. Make yourself useful. There's nothing to film here." She shoved at his arm, throwing him off balance and into Nathan.

Nathan laughed and shoved Marc from the other direction. Marc pushed back, laughing like a boy. When Sam and Ratana glared at them, they grinned at each other and headed for the door. Like two schoolboys in a battle of one-upmanship, the two men left after a small scuffle to see who could get out the door last. When they left so did all activity and sound.

Aware of the unsettling stare Ratana now placed on her and the lack of conversation, Sam inspected the hundreds of stacked wooden boxes. "This guy is into everything, isn't he?"

Ratana sat down on the stool next to a high counter. Her brown legs twined around the metal legs and she perched her elbows on the counter as she watched Sam inspect the room.

"Not everything; just everything he thinks he can prove."

Sam turned around to face her. "Prove? You mean he's a ghost hunter?" Her deep throaty laugh echoed throughout the room.

Ratana chuckled with her. "Not exactly. James hunts answers to mysteries. He's a scientist who unwillingly believes in the unbelievable and he's determined to justify it to the rest of the world by finding hard evidence. That's not so strange, is it?"

Sam turned back to inspect the jars and containers lining the shelves. "No, I suppose not. What's hard to believe is that a man with his education and intelligence believes it without proof to begin with. What's even more surprising is that a big university like this one would pay his way to chase these wild stories down. I thought all academics were stodgy and narrow-minded."

"I think you'll find things are much different here than in your country, Ms. Louis. You also need to remember who and what he is to understand it. As for the university, they fund his studies because he's been doing this for many years now and he's actually disproved some of it for them. Only, Peter Howard, the head of this department, is so jealous of James that he does what he can to sabotage James's investigations. It's a dual-edged sword he walks and he knows it."

"Ah ... they give him enough rope to hang himself then. That makes more sense to me." Sam strolled over to inspect a shelf crammed with hardbound and very dusty books. "What did you mean, I'd have to remember who and what he is to understand him?" She peered at Ratana out of the corner of her eye.

"You'll find out. Just keep in mind that rigid opinions about what we don't know usually leads us down false paths." She paused and relaxed her tensed back. "You like him, don't you?" Her brown eyes deepened as they studied the woman's body language; it screamed surprise.

Sam plopped onto a stool facing Ratana's. She plucked a Kleenex from her shoulder bag and mopped the sweat from her face. "The air conditioning feels great. I thought I'd melt when we got out of the car."

"You're avoiding my question, Ms. Louis. Didn't anybody ever tell you it's rude to do that, especially when it's something so obvious?" Ratana raised her black eyebrows, widening her eyes even more.

Sam dropped her hands and deliberately looked squarely into the other woman's eyes. "You are direct, aren't you? Okay. I can be blunt, too. Is he yours?" She set her mouth and waited for a confrontation. What came next surprised her.

Ratana laughed, long and hard. "That is rich, truly rich. Is he mine?" She continued to snigger until Sam's look of perplexed anger stopped her. "I'm sorry. It's just a very funny question. He raised me. When James came to our settlement, he was a scared teenaged boy, orphaned and alone. He came to live with our grandfather, Mick, the elder you met at the site." Ratana settled her arms onto the countertop and continued. "I used to follow him around like a puppy. I couldn't get over his beautiful pale skin and I had a crush on him. He became my mentor, my friend, and I respect him as family. That's why I call him Uncle. No, he is not mine, he belongs to no one but himself."

Ratana's white-toothed smile set Sam at ease. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be insulting. I'll be just as forthright as you are; yes, I like him." Sam blushed. "I never heard you call him Uncle." She smiled back at the young woman still smiling at her. Her face softened. "I hope we can become friends, Ratana."

"Oh, we will. I'm sure of it."

Ratana stated this so matter-of-factly Sam frowned at it. "What do you mean by that? How can you be so sure?"

"Because I have the sight and I know it will be. I also know there is death in the wind to the south." Ratana freed her legs from the stool and stood up, stretching.

"You know..." Sam, startled and deeply curious now, halted in mid sentence when James reappeared out of his office. He stalked into the room and halted next to the stack of cases on the wall.

"That son of a bitch. That bloody bastard. That..." He slammed his fist on the counter next to Sam, his face contorted with anger and disbelief. Sam jumped but remained silent; as did Ratana, who waited for him to finish the tirade she knew was coming.

He brushed dust off the stool next to Sam and plopped down. Taking a deep breath, he flashed an embarrassed smile at her. "Sorry. I don't usually get so bad tempered but Peter Howard, the head of my department, has a problem with my personality and my work. He loves to block me at every turn."

Sam raised her eyebrow. "Your boss disapproves of your work? Why?"

"The man has a personal dislike for me that I've never been able to figure out. He goes out of his way to make my life miserable, in spite of the fact I obtained university approval to study these things for the Indigenous Peoples Department. He doesn't believe in what I do, for one thing. He thinks it's all fairy tales and spook stories. Fact is, so does most of the scientific community. It doesn't matter." He ran his fingers through the wild mop of hair on his head. "I had to bypass him just to get a damned four-wheel drive for the trip, but I got it. Are you ready to leave or do you need to stop somewhere first?"

The impatient look on his face stopped her from asking to get a room, shower and food. "As long as we grab something to eat on the way, I'm ready to go now."

"Good." He turned to Ratana. "Would you go check and see if Nathan has the equipment ready? Stan is bringing the Rover around front soon and I want to be ready."

Ratana nodded and unceremoniously left. The silence returned, even deeper than before. James sat awkwardly, playing with a specimen jar on the counter while Sam returned to peer into the open butterfly box. Shoving the specimen aside, James abruptly stood up and shut it with a loud thud. "Time to go." He moved toward the door.

"Hey! What about your classes? Don't you have to stay until they're

finished?" Sam asked with perverse humor.

He spun around and glared at her. "Don't worry about my schedule, Ms. Louis. I take care of my own business." He stalked toward the door.

Sam watched as his tall frame moved fluidly out the door. He reached the veranda then turned and waited expectantly for her to follow. Slowly, she stood and walked out the door and, without a glance, strode past him. Instantly, sweat soaked her plain cotton blouse when she stepped off the covered porch into the blazing sunlight. The Rover sat packed and ready at the curb. Marc snapped pictures of a flock of black cockatoos brawling over eucalyptus blossoms in the trees nearby. He seemed to enjoy their raucous screaming, joining in the noise with his own warped imitations of their voices. Ratana and Nathan stood under a shade tree talking to a wizened old man dressed in wrinkled khaki shorts and worktop. It was clear they preferred to ignore Marc's antics. As Sam approached with James right behind her, their conversation stopped.

James stuck out his hand to the old man. "Thanks, Stan. I appreciate your help. By the way, would you take this and put it in your safe at Indigenous Studies? You're the only one I trust in this place to watch out for it for me." James held out the computer disk, a chunk of black rock and a packet of pictures.

Stan smiled, showing off his lack of teeth. "Sure thing, mate. No worries. You just ask for them back when ya want 'em." He cackled. "That old arse boss of yours won't get 'em from old Stan." He cackled again and shambled off toward the main buildings of the University.

James turned and walked to the knot of people now waiting around the vehicle. "Everything ready to go, Nathan?" James asked, inspecting the Rover.

"Yep, Uncle. It's all there and packed down tight, just like you said." The teasing tone in his voice brought a tiny smile to James's mouth.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. You know how I get when I get in the middle of these things." James opened the driver's side door and sat behind the wheel. He turned it on and set the air conditioning up to high.

Marc, Ratana and Nathan climbed into the back, leaving Sam to sit in the passenger seat. "By the way, do you have any idea where we're going? I haven't heard anybody say anything about maps or directions yet."

"We're going to the only place I know that has anything like this strange black rock down south. We're going to the Glass House Mountains. It's a place where so many strange, unexplained things happen even the hardcore cynics are afraid to go there. It's also a place where a great many people disappear each year. They're never found or heard from again. That's where we're going." He put the Rover into gear and drove out of the parking lot.

CHAPTER FIVE

"When the hell are we going to get out of this damned car? And where the hell are we?" Sam alternated between glaring at James's set jaw and staring at the blackest, wettest night she'd ever seen. The headlights, with their ineffectual illumination, did little to reassure her. The rutted red clay road they bounced and slid over, its path barely discernible through the heavy rain, was a nightmare. Indistinct outlines of crooked, towering trees flashed by the window. Every time a lightning flash lit the road and the twisted shape of one of the trees rushed past her window, she flinched, expecting it to be some prehistoric monster ready to pounce on the car and devour them whole.

James continued to stare at the road, his eyes slitted in concentration. "To answer both your questions, we're coming into a little town called Sapphire. After we pass through it won't be long before we hit a big town called Emerald. We'll stop then, not before."

His clipped, calm answer only deepened her already bad mood. "This road is the darkest, loneliest, worst excuse for a road I've ever had the misfortune to travel over, if you can call it a road. Why did we have to go this way, or is it okay to question your judgment? Isn't the coast road

everyone else uses good enough for us?" She moved restlessly in her seat, adjusting her seat once again and grimacing as she gingerly rubbed the knots forming in her lower back.

Moving carefully to avoid waking Ratana and Marc, one snoring softly on each side of him, Nathan stuck his head between the front seats and politely touched Sam's shoulder. "Ms. Louis, we had to come this way. Remember the radio announcement about a sudden cyclone hitting Bowen? That's south of Townsville on the coast road. We couldn't go that way." He tapped Sam's shoulder harder, emphasizing his words. "It is a sign leading us this way. It is important we do this according to what comes to guide us. To do otherwise would be unacceptable and dangerous."

Sam turned to look at Nathan's profile in the darkened car, the green dashboard lights making his features look like something out of a Stephen King novel. "Are you serious? Are you trying to tell me the gods told us to come this way by sending a freak cyclone to hit the way south? Come on!"

"It be true."

His simple, flat statement pulled Sam upright in her seat. She turned to search his face. "Okay. I'll accept that ... for now. I have one more question you might be able to answer. Would you tell me what the gods want of us and why? Do you know?"

"I know but I cannot tell. It would mean death to tell those not of the People." He abruptly pulled back into the darkness of the rear seat and fell silent.

Her mouth hanging open, Sam turned to James. "Can you tell me what this is all about?"

He ignored her. "This is Sapphire we're coming into now."

Sam glared at him then leaned forward to get a better view of the town through the streaming windshield. The intermittent lightning flashes revealed a small, rough looking town of few buildings, most rundown with tin roofs. "Why do they call it Sapphire? Are the gems found here?"

Before James could respond, a brilliant white light flashed through the windshield. James slammed on the brakes, sending the Rover sliding over the slick clay of the road. It shuddered, turned sideways and moved steadily toward a concrete block building sitting next to the road. Sam's eyes widened and her mouth opened in a silent scream as the Rover aimed toward the solid wall of concrete. The world slammed into slow motion, the scene surreal and filled with colors normally unseen by the human eye. Cracks of thunder became physical entities. They roared through the car and shattered the night with piercing arrows of light, penetrating Sam's closed eyelids like shafts of white-hot lava. The humid, cloying smell of plant and earth permeated the car, giving its small space the funeral reek of death. Sam gagged, clutching her ears with shaking hands.

Another bright flash of lightning caused Sam's eyes to snap open to see the lone figure of a tall black man dressed only in a loincloth, a spear in hand, his face covered with the traditional painting of a highly respected Aboriginal Elder. He stood, statue-like, upon the hill just behind the building they now moved toward. With exaggerated and maddening slowness, he raised the spear and pointed it at the Rover. A heartbeat later he threw back his head and raised both arms into the night. Fingers of lightning flickered around him, appearing as a multi-colored snake, slithering to protectively surround his body. Almost as quickly as the snake appeared, it vanished. His lips mouthed words into the feral wind battering his body. A brilliant blue-white light surrounding him threw his face into relief, his broad features taking on the etched look of the red clay he stood upon. With a bone-crushing snap, the Rover stopped moving, the passenger side door halted by a wall of air just inches from the concrete. The storm died as suddenly as it started and the figure on the hill disappeared with it. An eerie silence enshrouded the Rover, its passengers still locked into a numbing state of shock. The world subtly slipped back into place when a whimper from the backseat filled the Rover with sound again.

"_Who_ was that?" Ratana's voice quivered with fear. She gulped air, on the verge of panic. "Crikey, what was that around him? The Rainbow Serpent?" Her voice lowered to a stunned whisper.

"You saw him, too?" James whispered hoarsely then cleared his throat. "You saw the Aboriginal man on the hill, too?"

Sam reached out and grabbed James's hand, her own hands shaking and slick with sweat. Her facial muscles worked to attain a look of normality. She licked her lips. "I saw him. He saved us. He stopped the car." The awe and fear in her voice, reverberating through the Rover like a living thing, heightened the feeling of unreality.

Marc's only remark did nothing to break the tension in the car as he mumbled under his breath, "Holy shit!"

Ignoring his weak attempt at humor, Nathan spoke from the darkness. "We all saw him. The Great One leads us and finally binds the Clans across the land. We are being guided and protected. Now do you see, Ms. Louis? Now do you believe?" His voice held no animosity, only wonder and absolute faith in what was happening.

"I believe. Now, I believe." Sam shuddered and crossed her arms over each other, rubbing the goosebumps suddenly covering them.

CHAPTER SIX

The pounding on the door translated itself into a giant hand trying to tear down the small, dark room where James hunkered in fear, his heart thudding in his chest in rhythm with the beat. His mind scrambled, trying to find a way to elude the threat of death he knew waited outside the door. The voice inside his head screamed at him, "There's nowhere to hide. Nobody is coming to save you. You have to save yourself." _

He rolled his body even more tightly into a ball, hoping he would be overlooked when it finally broke through. _

Nathan's voice cut his dream into shreds, its tatters dissipating in the morning light streaming through the motel room's inadequate drapes. "Wake up, mate! James, wake up!"

James rolled onto his back and slitted his eyes against the light, waiting for them to adjust to the room's alien look. He rubbed them and sat up. "Okay, Nathan, I'm up. I'll be right with you." He groaned, glanced at the clock, groaned again and swung his legs to the edge of the bed. The carpet felt nubby and coarse against his feet. He pulled himself off the bed and stumbled to the door, struggling to pull on his shorts at the same time. The door cracked open and he peered out, bleary-eyed, at Nathan standing there looking rested and freshly showered. "What time is it? The damned clock in here doesn't work." He yawned, opened the door wider and waved Nathan inside.

"It's nine o'clock. You told me to wake you. The others are waiting in the restaurant across the street. We all decided to let you sleep as long as we could. We figured you could use it, being an old fella and all." Nathan's face struggled to remain straight. "It's getting late, though, so pull your finger out and get dressed." Nathan pulled a clean shirt out of James's duffel bag and threw it at him.

James grimaced and caught it in midair, grumbling, "Only six hours sleep ... hey! I told you to wake me at seven." James yawned again. "Oh well, you're probably right. You can wait if you want but I'm grabbing a shower first. He ran his fingers through his tangled hair and headed for the bathroom.

"I'll go wait with the Sheilas, I think. Besides, the Emerald Cafe sets a big table and I need time to eat my fill before you get there and clean it out." Nathan chuckled and turned to leave. He paused with his hand on the knob and turned back. "James, the black fella last night ... he really was there? I didn't just see things?"

James halted inside the bathroom doorway. "He was really there, Nate. I saw him too. So did the others. I think you, of all of us, have it right; we are being guided and protected, so stop worrying about whether or not you've

gone round the bend. You haven't." He knew his lopsided smile appeared even more crooked when combined with lack of sleep. He hoped it would convince Nathan to get a firm grip on their circumstances. James needed all the sanity he could get right now.

To James's relief, Nathan grinned back. "You're right. I've been raised and taught all my life about the Old Ones. Mick raised me to be an elder when the time came. All that still didn't prepare me for the real thing, I guess. I know this is real but something inside me still wants to believe it's some kind of bad movie. You know what I mean?"

James clapped a hand on Nathan's shoulder. "I know exactly what you mean, mate, but we all have to face things the way they really are, not what we're comfortable with. That's why we're here, to find the truth."

Nathan snorted and turned to go, saying over his shoulder, "Whatever you say, Oh Great White Guru. Now, will you get cleaned up and meet us across the street? I'm hungry." When James threw a dirty pair of socks at him, Nathan ducked outside the door, using it to block the assault. His face took on a semi-serious look as he growled, "See ya when you get there. I'm not saving any brekkie for you so hurry up." He slammed the door shut when a pair of underpants came sailing across the room.

James grabbed clean clothes and turned toward the small bathroom. His reflection capturing his attention, he hesitated before the mirror over the dresser. The worry lines on his forehead, his eyes dull with concern and the obvious fatigue of the trip, startled him as he studied his face. "I only hope we're ready for what truths we find." He walked over to the shower and turned the cold tap on full. He yawned again and stepped in.

~*~

The Emerald Cafe served good, hot food and lots of it, just as Nathan reported. Both he and Marc were wolfing down huge amounts of food and ignoring the women, who spoke quietly together as they ate. James strolled in sporting fresh khaki shorts and a short-sleeved cotton shirt. His hair glistened with water from his shower but his eyes still showed signs of fatigue.

"Morning, everyone." He reached for the pot of tea and poured himself a mug. He took a big gulp and sighed, relaxing back against the faded red plastic seat of the booth. "Ah, I needed that."

Sam quietly sipped her coffee and the two men smiled and resumed eating. Ratana picked at her food. "Morning, Uncle. Did you sleep well?"

"I hope you don't think I'm prying too much but why do you and Nathan call him Uncle when he's not your real uncle?" Sam put her cup down and peered at Ratana with curiosity.

"In the People's clan, an older person, much respected, whether related by blood or not, is called Uncle or Auntie. It's a title of affection." Ratana pushed her plate away and picked up her teacup to take a sip.

James smiled. "That's a bit simplified but accurate. Mick raised me when my parents died in a plane crash. He's my grandfather and Ratana and Nathan are cousins, although he raised them too. He is grandfather to us all." He leaned forward and placed both elbows on the tabletop. He looked into Sam's eyes. "Now, down to business. I called an old friend of mine. His name is Spencer and he's one of the leading experts in the field of paranormal activity in Australia. He knows a lot more than I do so we'll need his help. He'll meet us at Rockhampton tomorrow, where we'll form some kind of plan for the rest of this trip. I know it's a bit late, but I'm not sure where to go. All Mick could tell me was to go south and that means the Glass House Mountains to me. I'll feel better talking to Spence about it though. Any ideas, suggestions or questions?" He glanced at all of them in turn, waiting for feedback.

"It's clear all of you want to ignore what happened last night, but I would like to know what the hell happened." Marc locked his gaze on James, his fingers drumming the hard surface of the table.

James cleared his throat. "I'm not ignoring it. I just don't know how to explain it beyond what we all saw."

"Neither do I. It looked to me like the old man stopped our car from hitting that concrete building. As for the rest ... your guess is as good as mine." Sam shifted in her seat and poured more coffee into her cup, slopping some of it onto the tabletop.

Ratana leaned closer and locked her eyes with Marc's. "You don't need to understand it right now. All we need to do is follow the way we've been given and find what we're being led to find." She settled back and softened her words with a small smile.

"I guess you're right. I don't think any of us can really say for sure what happened last night. I just can't accept that it was some kind of supernatural rescue though. But it sure was weird." Marc shrugged and went back to shoveling his breakfast into his mouth.

"Well, we know one thing. We know we're here now and we're headed to the Glass House Mountains. We'll get our answers there." James sounded unsure but nodded his head to emphasize the last sentence.

"Why the Glass House Mountains?" Sam leaned forward, cup in hand, and looked intently into his eyes, a soft smile on her lips.

He turned to her and met her gaze head on. "Because they're eroded volcanic plugs and there are a few small deposits of a similar black stone like the obelisk we found at Crocodile. It's all I have to go on and ... it just feels right." He shrugged and smiled.

"It is right. They hold the secrets promised by the Old Ones from Dreamtime." Nathan stated flatly. He pushed his empty plate away and poured some coffee.

"Well, whatever we find there, I'm going to get some film on it." Marc wiped his mouth with a napkin then grinned and patted the big camera bag sitting beside him in the booth.

James nodded at them. "Right. Let's get going then. We have another long day ahead of us before we reach Rockhampton." He started to rise then hesitated when the others remained seated. "What is it? We have to get going. Come on."

"We decided we'd all take turns driving this time. You're a good driver but you were tired last night." Nathan pointed his finger at James to emphasize his words.

"And ... you need to eat something first. We'll wait." Ratana pushed a plate full of toast toward him. "Order something." Both her tone and face reflected stubborn determination.

He sighed and sat down. "Okay, okay. But ... we leave just as soon as I eat. All right?" He picked up a piece of toast and started eating, the others taking their time over what they still had in front of them.

~*~

The city of Rockhampton glowed against a moonless night sky. Nathan maneuvered the Rover into a parking place in front of a roadside steak house, its neon sign flashing the words 'Tropic of Capricorn' onto the dark parking lot. Groaning, he stretched his back and announced, "We're here. All out for tucker time." He smiled and stepped out into the parking lot. The others soon followed.

"I could eat a whole kangaroo, I could." Ratana chuckled. "I'm sure glad we'll be in the mountains tomorrow. All this riding in the car is making me feel like a pretzel." She stretched long and lazy. Marc eyed her gyrations with obvious interest and wolf whistled. Ratana ignored him and bent to stretch some more.

Sam also stretched but less openly, aware of Marc's leering eyes. "I'm hungry too. Let's go eat."

"Wait. There's Spence now. I told him to meet us here. Looks like he had no trouble finding the place." James walked briskly toward a green Rover similar to the white one they used. His grin of welcome when he spotted Spence asleep behind the wheel slipped into a full laugh. "Hey, Spence! Nap time is over, old mate." He reached through the open window and shook Spence's shoulder.

Spence's long, gray hair covered his face and blew out in time with the loud snores emanating from a slack mouth. His thin arms jerked in time to James's pokes into his thin, yellowing undershirt. Snorting, Spence came awake with a jolt and suddenly sat upright in his seat. Rubbing his eyes, he glared at James through slitted eyes ringed with red. "Leave off, ya bugger! I'm awake." His thin hands pushed James's fingers from his shoulder. "Oh, it's you. What took you so long? You're late, as usual." He smacked his lips and pulled a wadded handkerchief out of his pants pocket to blow his nose.

"We're not late. I told you we'd be here around seven and it's just before that now. Are you hungry?" James laughed at the old man's obvious discomfort at being caught sleeping in his car.

Spence groaned and stepped out of his car, empty cans of beer falling onto the pavement when he stood up. James stooped and picked them up, tossing them back into the car. Spence belched then smiled up at James, showing off a new pair of dentures. "Yep, I'm always hungry. We gonna eat here?" He pointed to the neon sign, erratically sputtering and losing lights.

"Yes. Now come on. We've all had a long ride and I'm starving. I want to introduce you to this bizarre group of shadow hunters I've assembled here." James laughed again when Spence's face registered shock and dismay. "What? You think you're the only one who can do strange things and get away with it?"

Spence sputtered then smiled another toothy smile. "Okay, but you didn't tell me there was going to be others coming along. I thought we was going to tramp the bush by ourselves again." He stamped his dirty, worn hiking boots in a parody to match his words, like a child having a temper tantrum.

"Nathan and Ratana are with me. I seem to remember that the last time we four went out in the bush, they had to bail you out when you got lost." James chuckled.

"Leave it to you to remember unimportant things like that. Hope you brought lots of beer this time," Spence muttered.

Lightly pushing the small man ahead of him, James leaned over and replied, "Not this time, Spence. No more 'good old boys' parties in the bush. This is serious. I told you what we found on the Kuranda Tableland. It's not a joke."

Spence stiffened then turned slowly, meeting James's eyes. "I know it isn't a joke and I know it's serious. I found one just like it years ago in New Zealand. I've been waiting for over forty years to find another." He spat on the tarmac, grimaced then spun on his heel and walked toward the restaurant, leaving James standing there, stunned. The others had already gone in so James trotted to catch up.

He found all of them, except Nathan, laughing around a table in the bar, including Spencer, who was shining as the center of attention between the two women. Spencer raised a huge mug of dark beer and announced, "This is gonna be a bash in the bush with a mob of randy roos!" He then gulped down half of it and came up with foam permeating the ragged hair around his grinning mouth. "They ordered for us so I didn't have to wait for the brew, James. I think I like this bunch." He hugged the two women against him and laughingly released them again when they struggled to escape. "All right, me ladies, I know I beg a bathing. Would either of you wish to volunteer to help?" He roared with laughter at the dirty looks they both shot him.

James looked around the room. "Where's Nathan?"

"Oh, he had a call to make. He'll be right back, James. Sit down, sit down. Have a drink," Spence bellowed.

"This is our expert in paranormal activities?" Sam's eyebrows arched high when James settled down into the chair next to her.

"You bet, I am! I've been tramping New Zealand, New Guinea and Australia for over forty years now. Always on the scent of the elusive UFO, Yowie, giant monitor lizard or Bunyip." Spence chuckled and downed the rest of his beer.

Marc set his camera down on the tabletop and leaned forward. "Yowie? Bunyip? What are those? Giant monitor lizards?" Marc's eyes grew round with

interest.

"Those, my dear boy, are some of the many Australian mysteries you Yanks don't notice or care about enough to send National Geographic to investigate." He harrumphed and lifted one thin arm toward a barmaid for another round of beer.

James picked up his glass and took a sip. "Don't let him fool you. He is one of the world's leading authorities about these things, here and abroad. Even Paul Cropper respects Spence's knowledge."

"Hey! I've heard of that guy. Didn't he write a bunch of books about UFOs and other stuff?" Marc searched James's face with intense interest.

"Yes, he's also an expert in the field. He wrote Out of the Shadows with Tony Healy. It's a great reference book if you're interested in learning more about our Aussie secrets. And ... I'd like to brag a bit for him, because he won't, and tell you that James has partnered with Paul on many occasions in the past. He, too, is considered a world's expert in this field. There, now I've done your promotional work for you, you can take it from there, I think." Ratana snickered, wiped her mouth with a napkin and pulled a bowl full of shelled peanuts toward her.

"Yep, he's a good guy, old Paul is. Where's me beer?" Spence peered into the dim light around the bar, searching for the barmaid.

"You hide your light under a basket well, Doctor Hay." Sam giggled at the fierce blush on his cheeks, then paused a beat to become serious. "So, you think the obelisk you found up north has something to do with these mysterious beings?" Sam looked puzzled. "I thought we were just going to find some more of the black stone it was made of and do a story on the Aboriginal people connected with it."

"We are, but it's right in the middle of a paranormal hot spot in Australia. You have to wonder whether they're connected or not." Ratana munched on a peanut while watching Spence out of the side of her eye. "James has been researching the link between them for years. So has Spence."

Sam turned to look at James, who quietly sat sipping his beer and shelling peanuts. "That is what this is all about? We're chasing aliens?"

Nathan sat back, arms crossed over his stomach and nodded. "It be true, Ms. Louis. The Old Ones promised the People there would be a time when they would be called and the world would be set right again. It is now time." His eyes bored holes into her, daring her to say differently.

Spence slammed his hand on the table. "Well, it don't do no good jawin' about it now. We won't know until we get there. Where the hell is my beer?" He grinned at the barmaid approaching with a full tray. When she set a mug in front of him and he'd taken another big gulp, he looked across at James. "When do we leave for this alien hotspot and get to hunting?"

"Tomorrow morning, early. I want to be out of here by eight in the morning. Did you get rooms yet?"

"Yep. Booked 'em just like you asked. Over to the Capricorn Motel up the street. Course, I wouldn't mind a bit of room swappin' if the ladies aren't happy with their accommodations." He leered at Sam and Ratana.

"That reminds me, why is everything called the Capricorn something or other here? Does it have a special meaning?" Sam ignored Spence's leer and focused on the others.

Ratana, Nathan and James busted out in mild laughter. "What's so funny? It's a legitimate question." Sam scowled at them.

"Sorry Sam, it's just that you're sitting on the Tropic of Capricorn. Everybody here knows that and takes it for granted." Ratana laughed again.

"We are? Right on the line?" Sam looked at Ratana with wonder.

James pointed to a yellow line painted on the floor. It ran the length of the room and bisected the table they now sat around. "Right on the line. You're sitting in the tropics and Marc is sitting in the Temperate Zone of Australia."

Marc and Sam peered down at the line. "Wow." Marc traced it with his boot. "We are on the line. Cool." He smiled and picked up his camera to film

it.

"Hey! Cutie! More beer here." Spence bellowed at the young girl waiting tables. He turned to the group, his lined face serious, "Save your laughs for the Glass House. You'll need them there." Then a smile broke out, smothering the flash of fear showing in his face. "When do we eat?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

"When are you going to tell me about the other artifact you found in New Zealand?" James sat quietly in the passenger seat watching Spence maneuver his Rover down the highway at an uncomfortably fast rate. He glanced in the side mirror, checking to make sure the white Rover wasn't falling behind.

"Nice day, ain't it? Good day for a drive." Spence's knuckles, white on the steering wheel, tightened even more. He glanced out the window repeatedly, avoiding James's look of expectation.

The Bruce Highway paralleled the Pacific Ocean so the trip down south brought sea breezes and the smell of salt in the air. James took a deep breath and sighed. "I love the ocean. I think when I retire I'll build a small cottage next to it and just fish all day." He hesitated then swiveled in his seat to face Spencer squarely. "Spence, I have no idea why you're reluctant to tell me, but I think you should. This situation is too unsure as it is. We've been friends for a very long time. You can tell me, I won't say a word to the others if you don't want me to."

Spence's hands relaxed on the wheel. He took a deep breath. "You're right. This isn't the time to play clam." He took another deep breath but kept his face pointed toward the road ahead. "You know I was raised in the North Island in New Zealand. You also know I'm half Maori. Like you, I've had to keep my bloodlines to myself or the academics would try to use it against me. What I didn't tell you is that I'm the son of a chief. I grew up in a tiny village on the East Coast. One evening, when my father and I were fishing out in the bay, a bright white light lit up the sky. It blinded us then it knocked us out. When I awoke my father was gone ... disappeared right out of the boat. I managed to get back to the shore. When I hit the sand, screaming for help, the elders led me to a black stone with markings just like the one you say you found near Kuranda."

Spence turned his head to look directly into James's face. "It had my father's totem mark freshly etched at the top. The elders told me he had been taken by the Old Ones and that I now had the duty to follow, to find out what they wanted from us." He took a ragged breath and turned back to stare at the highway. "They castrated me and gave me a special moko." He pointed to his chin, covered by a thick gray beard. At James's puzzled look, he sighed. "My chin tattoo. Didn't you ever wonder how I got it? They wanted me prepared and dedicated to the quest. I've been searching for those answers ever since."

"Why would I wonder about your tattoo? I've always known you're Maori, Spence. I guess it didn't sink in that you wouldn't have that unless you're high up in Maori society. Royalty, huh? You sure don't look it." He poked at Spence's yellowed shirt and faded shorts.

"Hey! Bugger off, ya great sod. These be my best duds, don't ya know?" Spence laughed.

"It does make one wonder ... about the two stones being alike, I mean. You should know that the stone we found had my totem at the top. Mick told me I'm now being led to find the answers too. I guess we're both strapped with this, aren't we?" James felt the tension in his face ease as he smiled at the old man.

"My gut tells me the answers are here ... right here ... at last." Spence nodded at the Glass House Mountains looming alongside the highway. Their imposing peaks, black against the blue of the sky, pointed like sentinels toward the heavens.

James watched the first peak speed by the window. "The ancient Aborigines called them the father, the mother and their various children. They all have meaning, don't they? So many millions of years of volcanic

activity to make these ... so much mystery inside them."

"Do you know which one we have to go to? I haven't got a clue." Spence peered through the windshield, inspecting the range of mountains flying by.

"No, I don't. I planned on stopping here, at Beerburrum, and having lunch and a brainstorm session. No sense chasing our tails. Maybe Ratana or Nathan will come up with something based on the Dreamtime stories. I don't know, but at least we'll get lunch."

"Tucker at Beerburrum! I always did like the name of this place." Spence grinned and pointed to the Glasshouse Cafe, sitting next to the highway leading into town. "Here okay?"

They pulled into the small parking lot and waited for the other Rover to park. They strolled onto the wide verandah shading the front door of the cafe and waited for the others to catch up.

"I'm sure glad you guys finally decided to stop somewhere. My bladder hates me right about now." Marc squirmed then trotted inside, still clutching his camera.

Sam tried to press out the wrinkles in her white shorts with sweaty palms, then gave it up as hopeless. "Damn, it's hot. I'm glad we stopped, too. I'm in serious need of a cold drink."

Ratana and Nathan locked up the car, then walked into the shade of the verandah. Nathan rolled his head, trying to unkink his neck from the long drive. "Bloody heat makes you feel like a limp goanna ... if you be a Yank, that is." He winked at Sam and grinned at James. "You and the good Doctor Spence know where we're headed yet?"

"Not yet. In fact, I'm hoping you and Ratana can help us with that problem. Let's go get some lunch and a cold drink for the lady." He swept his arm toward the door and smiled at Sam.

The cafe turned out to be more along the lines of a lunch counter take-away, and very crowded, so they decided to buy their food and take it to the park in the middle of town to eat. When they'd settled down under the shade of a big mango tree, Ratana pulled a piece of black rock out of the pocket of her shorts, closed her eyes and began to rhythmically hum, feet and hands swaying with the tune.

"What's she doing?" Marc chewed on a huge sandwich and watched her with interest.

"She's tuning in to her magic place. She's trying to find a guide as to where we should go. Ratana's inner voice has saved me more than once." Nathan's matter-of-fact reply removed any doubt about his seriousness. He closed his eyes and joined her.

James and Spence remained silent but stopped all motion, intently concentrating on Nathan and Ratana's movements. Sam sat still, waiting. Marc continued to munch on his sandwich but he squinted his eyes at the group and reached for his camera. Sam reached over and halted his hand when he grasped it. She frowned at him. He shrugged, tried to smile then fell quiet along with the rest.

When Ratana's eyes opened, unfocused and staring, Sam, sitting next to her, gasped at her next words. "Alangarr ... anangumin mayingku ngiva. Anangumin ambeny alh anyjir. Ambin abum ichan Beerwah. Yibii. Yarmani idhar odh alal Tunbubudla." All tension left Ratana's body. She lowered her head, eased down onto the shady grass, rolled into a ball and fell asleep.

"Uncle. Searching for the law of the people. Looking for the vagina of the seven sisters. Tasting the breast of the mother. The woman leads, the father protects. The Rainbow Serpent dreams inside the testicles of the twins." Nathan chanted, translating.

Sam touched Ratana's arm, jerked it back and looked at James, a helpless, puzzled expression on her face. "She's as cold as ice. Is she okay? Shouldn't we do something?"

James reached out and took her hand. "She's fine. It just drains her. She'll sleep for about an hour then she'll be okay. I've seen this before."

"She speaks the old language." Spence murmured. "It's the Uw Olkola

dialect. It used to be spoken by the Aboriginals from Tamworth up to Northern Queensland. I haven't heard it for almost thirty years." His eyes never left Ratana's sleeping form.

Marc elbowed Nathan, who sat clear-eyed and wide-awake next to him.

"Hey, Nate. You know that lingo too?"

James squeezed Sam's hand, then, lunch forgotten, he grabbed the folded map he had placed in front of him when he sat down. He unfolded it and ran his finger over the range of mountains they now sat near. "The mother ... the twins. Those are here all right. But what does the rest of it mean?" He ran his hand through his hair and looked hard at the map, trying to divine the answer.

"The Twins ... we must go to the twins. The seven sisters and the mother nurture them. Our answers lie there." Ratana's groggy voice startled them.

Spence grinned at her. "The Twins it is." He turned and looked to the west, the grin slipping into a frown. "The Twins it is."

CHAPTER EIGHT

James turned onto the Woodford Road heading west toward the center of the mountain range. Spence, Nathan and Ratana, in their green Rover, stayed close behind. Within minutes of leaving the town, they felt the valley inside the mountain range close in and capture them. Even though it was still late afternoon, no cars or people sped along the road. The sun setting in the west gave the peaks a fiery glow, red and orange bursts of light flaming around the tips, like matches lit to show them the way. By the time they turned down a red clay service road leading toward the dual-topped mountain named 'The Twins', it was almost dark, the sky now a deep velvety blue. When heavy jungle-like vegetation blocked out the last of the sun, they pulled into a clearing at the base of the first Twin peak and stopped to camp for the night. The men pulled the supplies out of the Rovers.

"Why the hell you got to bring all this fancy junk?" Spence grumbled to Marc as he struggled to pull a heavy camera case out of his Rover.

"Hey, fella, that's my living you're manhandling there. Be careful!" Marc rushed over and grabbed the case out of Spence's grip. "This is a very delicate camera and that's my laptop computer over there." When he saw Spence's look of disgust, he reached toward the rest of his equipment. "I'll get them."

"What the hell you need all those new-fangled gadgets for anyway?"

Spence reached back into the back of the Rover and pulled out a box of food.

"Pictures. My job is to record all this for later. I have a digital camera that takes pictures right onto a computer disk so we can see them on the laptop. Do you want to see it?" Marc put the large camera case down at his feet and plucked a smaller case out of his backpack.

"Nah, I'd rather see some girlie magazines if you have some," Spence chuckled.

Ratana glanced at Sam, grinned and grabbed two flashlights. "It's getting macho around here. I think it's time to go find some wood for the fire." She turned toward the thick copse of trees three quarters around the campsite and headed toward them, with Sam close behind, both shaking their heads in amusement.

Sam stooped to pick up a gnarled, gray branch from the forest floor. She placed it in her arms, along with a few other branches then she stopped and looked up. "Ratana, would you tell me about the Aboriginal legends we're dealing with here? This whole thing seems so unreal, so Hollywood..." She blushed, realizing she sounded childish and insulting. "But if it's too personal, I'll understand." Her voice faded into an embarrassed cough.

"Why talk about it when you will soon see it for yourself?" Ratana continued to pick up dry branches, making her way back toward the clearing. At the edge of the undergrowth she stopped and turned to face Sam. "The legends say the Old Ones, the ones who watch over us and have promised to return the

land to what it should be, will contact us, lead us and finally save us. It is now coming to pass. It's that simple." She smiled and turned back to the clearing. "Looks like the blokes are having a bit of trouble with the tents." Ratana moved into the clearing, shouting at Marc, who struggled to erect a tent. "Hey! Yank! It helps to use the poles."

Sam returned with an armful of wood. She threw it down next to Spence, who sat in the dirt, his knobby knees covered with red clay and his dirty hands working diligently on the stack, trying to start a fire. He looked up at her and smiled. "Good on ya, Ms. Louis. Or can I call ya Sam?"

She smiled down at him, rubbed her hands over her clay-stained shorts and squatted down next to him. "Sure. Call me Sam." She hesitated a heartbeat then continued, "Spence, what's going to happen now? Do you know?"

"Nope. All I know is that we're supposed to be here and what comes, comes." He struck match after match trying to get the kindling to ignite. Strings of Aussie swear words followed each match's failure to get the job done. "Damn things got wet with my beer." He swore again and pulled a lighter out of his shorts pocket.

Sam gazed up at the darkening slope of the mountain and took a deep breath. "I guess you're right. What comes, comes. I just hope we're ready for it." She glanced down at the woodpile, reached in and rearranged the way they stacked up, pulled out her lighter and lit the smaller slivers at the bottom of the pile. It ignited and soon took off. "You have to have airflow for it to work." She smiled at Spence's snort of disgust, stood up and walked over to the heap of tent she and Ratana would be sharing. Ratana was laying it out flat and gathering the poles to set it up with. Sam stooped down and picked up one end and a pole. "Let's show these fellas we can pull our own weight."

Ratana picked up the other end and smiled back at her. "We already have." She nodded at Spence, who now grumbled to himself as he pulled iron pots and pans out of a box. Her laugh echoed up the wall of the mountain, temporarily silencing the awakening wildlife stirring in the bush.

The kerosene lanterns hanging from the entrance of each of the three tents made a nicely lit circle around the campfire. They all sat on foldout stools, balancing tin plates and cups on their laps while they ate. Marc put his plate down on the ground and clasped his cup of tea. He looked up into the sky. "It's so dark out here. There must be a zillion stars up there." The tone of wonder in his voice brought a smile to the others, now looking upward to marvel at the heavens above them.

"With no city lights out here to ruin your vision, you can see them all. It's beautiful, isn't it?" Ratana took a sip of her tea and continued to stare into the night sky.

Spence let out a wild whoop. Sam dropped her plate and Marc grabbed the big movie camera he always had ready at hand. Nathan jumped up, nervously peering around into the dark foliage, searching for the source of alarm.

Spence laughed, long and loud, slapping his thin thighs with both hands. "Sit down, boy, there's no danger. It just came to me. You know ... what Ratana said, 'The seven sisters'...oh, come on, James. Remember what she said? 'Look for the vagina of the seven sisters.' There's your answer! Straight ahead, just beyond the second Twin. Look!"

James stared at the spot Spence pointed to. "I'll be. There they are. The seven sisters, the Pleiades. Seven stars in a cluster and they point to the Twin." James's voice quivered. "The second Twin, they point to it like a finger in the sky."

"Is that where we're supposed to go?" Nathan sat back down, his hands and feet still moving nervously.

"We must search for the vagina, the opening. A source of life ... a river." Ratana spoke clearly into the ensuing silence.

"There are no rivers here." James pulled out an area map and leaned toward the fire in order to capture enough light to see by. "This place has been mapped, tramped over and hiked on for years now. It's even been photographed from the air and by satellites so even the tops of the peaks are

well known. There's nothing like that anywhere around here. Even this growth was planted by men." He swept his arm around the circle, indicating the thick forest of growth surrounding their campsite.

"You also mentioned something about sucking from the breast of a mother. What does that mean?" Sam, eyes wide at this new revelation, stared into Ratana's glowing eyes. Flames from the fire gave them the look of an inner fire.

Ratana's voice dropped to a bare whisper, deep and monotone. "Life, a river of life."

"You people are giving me the creeps. Do you really believe all this mumbo jumbo stuff?" Marc laughed nervously and laid his camera back under his chair. He then picked up the hot pot of tea resting on the fire-grate to refill his cup.

"You Yanks think with all your money and your fancy technology that you know everything. The old ways still have meaning, Marc. This isn't mumbo jumbo, it's reality, a reality we're just now realizing exists side-by-side with what we laughingly call civilization." James took the pot from Marc's hand and refilled his own cup. His reflected no humor when he looked into the younger man's face.

"Tomorrow, I think we need to hike around to the other Twin and take a look see at what's there. If we are being led by the spirits then we have to trust they'll take us where we're supposed to go." Spence, all laughter gone from his voice, tossed out the rest of his tea and threw the cup into an empty box sitting next to his chair.

"What is that?" James, back to the peak and facing the thick jungle-like trees, leaned forward and put his plate down on the ground. In the distance, a big blue-white light shone through the trees and then slowly rose lazily into the sky, hovering over the forest.

"It's not a star, that's for sure. It came out of the forest ... and it's growing bigger." Nathan pointed to it, his hand shaking.

As the light rose higher, James stood up and the others, fixed in place, watched it lift then hover over the crown of the mountain. Every night sound abruptly stopped, the thick growth around the clearing falling eerily still and silent ... waiting. Unaware of their actions, they all stood ... and waited too.

The object moved slowly toward them, hovering for seconds in between small advances. It seemed to be approaching cautiously, like a predator stalking its prey. At a distance of about a half-mile, it abruptly stopped and shot off to the left, heading toward the farthest Twin. It came to a halt directly above the peak. Like a shutter going up, a beam of blue light shot out from the bottom of the object. What it illuminated on top of the peak made the group gasp with a collective shock of recognition.

The Aboriginal man they'd seen standing on the hill in Sapphire, bathed in lightning and rain, now stood immersed in the light of the object hovering directly above him. He faced the campsite and not one person in the group doubted that he knew they were there.

The old Aborigine's eyes glowed brightly, piercing into every mind and into every heart. He slowly raised his spear arm and pointed to the spot where the light first appeared. He stood in that pose, arm and spear fixed inline and one foot planted on the opposite knee, an aura of light backlighting his form, for what felt like hours. When he finally turned his head to look at them once again, he began to fade, a smile on his face the last image to disappear. With him, the light went out and the night, still silent and poised on the brink of a breath, surrounded them once again with darkness.

Sam moved close to James, her body quivering. He reached his arm around her waist and pulled her closer, his own body quivering with excitement. "Agngar leads us."

"Aga ... who?" Sam whispered, pressing even closer against his side, her body now quivering in response to his nearness.

"A ghost, a spirit. We have our answer. We head south tomorrow." His

voice took on depth and strength. "We go to the spot he points us to. Our answers lie there."

"How can you be so sure? For all we know, that UFO is playing with our minds. If it's a UFO at all." Marc glared at James, fear clear in his voice. He tucked his camera back into the bag he'd hastily dropped in the excitement of the sighting.

"We know and you do too. It was our guide, the one who saved us from the car accident. He leads us to where we need to go." Ratana, brightness in her eyes he avoided looking at, reached out and patted Marc's arm

Marc pulled his arm away. "I think all of you have been watching too much Star Trek. This Aboriginal, Maori, Indian stuff is all a bunch of old myths and kiddie stories. And you're all buying into it because you want to feel a part of your blood brothers or something. Am I the only one here who hasn't lost his mind?" He looked around the circle of faces now staring at him with disbelief.

"You've seen everything we've seen, Marc. How can you still disbelieve?" Nathan's face registered shock.

"Look, all of you have this thing ... this cultural thing going on with you. I don't. I'm a cameraman, a news guy, and I'm just not buying all this as something supernatural. I can't." Marc shrugged, then his body sagged, all tension leaving, and he sat back down. He retrieved the tin cup he used for tea and refilled it from the pot, now cold.

Spence searched Sam's face. "You're part Native American, aren't you? That's what he's talking about. James is part Aborigine, Ratana and Nathan are full blood, and I'm half Maori. That leaves you. He's right, isn't he? We do have this common factor. I wondered about that." Spence also sat down, scratching the tattoo hidden under his beard.

Sam disengaged herself from James, avoiding his eyes. "Yes, I am. I'm half Osage, a plains tribe from Oklahoma. I didn't know until last year when I finally located my real mother. She gave me up when I was born. That's why my last name is Louis. I was raised in an orphanage in St. Louis, Missouri. It's all I ever knew until I finally found her ... rather, I found her grave."

James stepped close to her and reclaimed her waist. "It would seem the old cultures, the ones still harboring a deep respect for the land and the spirit that formed it, are the ones who now benefit. I'm glad." He leaned down and planted a kiss on her forehead. She placed her hand over his, clinching her waist, and smiled up at him.

"So, we're all agreed. Other than Marc. We will head south tomorrow morning and, as the saying goes, we shall see what we shall see." Spencer kicked up the coals on the dying fire and threw more wood on. He placed the billycan back on to reheat.

As the fire flared, sending spiraling sparks of orange into the night sky, a loud rustling in the brush, just outside the fire's light, captured their attention. Spence halted before throwing another branch on the fire, and the others also abruptly stopped in various poses, a frozen diorama of real life.

"Look to your right ... there, just behind that big tree with the twisted trunk. There's a pair of eyes shining through the leaves. Do you see them?" James whispered.

"I see them. And a couple more pairs too. What do you think they are? They're too high off the ground to be dingoes, and Roos wouldn't come this close to a campsite." Spencer kept his gaze glued on the thick leaves behind James's back. Imperceptibly, he jumped when several more pairs joined the original two. "There are more gathering."

"My God! What is that foul odor?" Marc gagged and covered his mouth with his hand.

"Don't move! Stay right where you are until we know for sure what these creatures are and what they want." James hissed toward Marc in as low a voice as he could muster and still be heard. He then very slowly moved Sam closer to the fire and pushed her down into a chair, standing behind her with his hands

protectively on her shoulders. "I've smelled that before. So have you Spence. Remember the trip we made into the Daintree last year?" His voice was barely audible as he continued to watch more sets of brilliantly lit eyes gather throughout the thick leaves.

"Yeah, I remember. Almost made me lose me tea then and it's just as bad now." Spence swiveled his head around the circle of light. "They're only in front of us and to each side. I think the mountain doesn't offer enough trees for them to hide behind. At least our backs are safe. I think."

"Yowies." Ratana flatly stated. Seeing the confusion on Sam's face she continued, "Bigfoot, Yeti, Sasquatch ... the hairy men of the mountains."

Marc quietly reached down under his chair and gently lifted the small hand-held digital camera up to his lap. Easing it up to his face, he snapped the button, setting off a series of clicks and whirrs that echoed around the deadly quiet of the clearing. Instantly, the eyes disappeared.

"Dammit, you bleeding Yank asshole! Ain't' you got no sense? They were here to help us." Nathan raged across the clearing and pushed Marc's shoulder, almost unseating him.

Marc jumped up, fists clenched. Before blows could fall or Spence and James could intercede, another loud crashing of the brush again froze them in place. Hearts pounding, they waited once more to see what the night would present to rock the world as they knew it. The thick leaves parted and a figure stumbled out into the clearing.

CHAPTER NINE

A young woman stood just inside the outer reaches of the firelight. Her shorts and T-shirt were filthy and torn, her hair knotted and tangled with leaves. Her small frame shook with fatigue. She presented an impression of something wild, newly born from the bush as she wrung her hands, giving her a look of a small child. Large green eyes took up most of her face as she fearfully glanced at each of the group then lowered them to stare at what was left of her hiking boots.

Stunned silence drew out. She raised her eyes and looked around the circle of faces staring at her and asked, "Is something ... wrong? I saw your fire ... and thought ... it would be all ... right to come ... in and ask ... for help." The fear-laden stutter she struggled with made her words come out in staccato bursts.

The sound of human speech broke the spell and galvanized the group to action. Sam and Ratana rushed to the woman while the men answered in chorus. "Yes, come in, come in. My God, you're not much more than a child. What in the world are you doing wandering around out there by yourself?" James's question overrode the voices of the rest and accompanied the women's action of bringing her to the fire.

The young woman sat down on a chair and gratefully accepted a hot cup of tea from Ratana. She sipped it and sighed. Looking up at James, she offered a tired smile. "I'm not a child, I'm almost eighteen and I wasn't alone. I was hiking with a friend when he disappeared. I've been trying to find my way back to our camp for two days now." She took another sip of tea then put the cup down onto the box sitting next to her. She gripped a tattered backpack with white knuckles. "I saw your fire and..."

Sam pulled her chair over and sat down next to the girl. She reached over and patted her on the shoulder. "It's okay, honey. Ignore the guys. You just scared them is all. What's your name?" She pushed the young woman's tangled hair away from her eyes and peered into them, noting their unusual shade of bright green.

"Cindy. My name is Cindy Walsh. My friend, Darren, talked me into a weeklong hike here. We got here three days ago. The first night, while I slept, he disappeared from our camp. When I woke up, I went looking for him but then I got lost too and couldn't find the camp again." She shuddered as tears made tracks through the splotches of red clay covering her face.

The men crowded around the fire while Sam and Ratana stayed near the

girl, protectively hovering over her. James leaned toward her across the dying fire, inspecting her condition. "Do you know which direction he went in? Can you remember?"

"I ... I think I might be able to show you which way he went, but we'd have to go back the way I came." She looked unsure of whether or not she could actually do it.

"Wait a minute. What about those damned eyes and the light? Didn't you see them before you came in here?" Marc's voice vibrated with tension. He, too, leaned into the fire, intently staring at the girl's frightened and streaked face.

"What eyes? What light? I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice cracked and more tears flowed. She covered her face with tiny, delicate hands and wept with deep, gulping sobs.

"Stop it, Marc! Damn you. Can't you see the poor girl is scared out of her wits?" Sam glared at him and moved closer, putting her arm around the girl's shaking shoulders.

"He's right, Sam. Leave off. We need to know what is going on here and she might be able to help." Spence came to stand beside the girl, edging Ratana out of the way. He squatted down next to the girl's chair and took her smooth hand in his aged one. "Wee one, can you tell us if you saw anything strange out there before you came inside the camp?"

Her eyes, rounded with anxiety, looked into his. "No ... No, I didn't see anything. All I saw was your fire through the trees and brush." She gripped his hand with a strength that resulted in a shocked look on Spence's face as his fingers turned white from lack of blood flow. Then she burst into tears again. "Did Darren come this way? Have you seen him? Please, I have to find him."

Ratana gently pushed Spence away from the girl. "We haven't seen him, Cindy, but we will try to find him for you. In the meantime, why don't you come with me and have a wash? I think you'll feel better if you do." She gently helped the girl up and led her away toward the women's tent.

"So much for finding out what those damned eyes were." Marc still held the digital camera in his hand. "At least I think I got some pictures of them. We can take a look-see on the laptop and maybe have more to go on than just red eyes in the bushes."

"We'll take a look tomorrow. I think we'd better all get some kip time for now. We have to get up with the sun and find that landing spot." James stared off toward the marker point where the UFO landed. "I think most, if not all, of our answers to a great many things will be there."

Spence clapped him on the back and stood staring into the bush with him. "You just might be right, mate. You just might be right." Spence walked over to his tent and disappeared without another word.

"I just hope nothing else happens tonight. I'm bushed. Shouldn't someone stand guard just in case those creatures return?" Marc asked, his eyes frantically searching the thick brush that seemed to crowd into the clearing with each inch the fire died down.

"I don't think we're in danger, Yank." Nathan threw the comment over his shoulder as he made his way toward the tent he shared with Marc.

"I damn well hope not," Marc whispered and turned to follow him, yawning as he did so.

James lingered behind, watching Sam walk to the car then lean into its open back hatch to search for extra bedding for the girl. He lounged around the fire, sipping hot coffee and hoping she'd come sit with him, because he was too reserved to ask. When she came up empty he went to help her. After searching both vehicles, to no avail, he shut the last door and turned to her. "She can use my sleeping bag. I don't think I'll be getting much sleep tonight anyway."

She tilted her head and looked up into his eyes. Moonlight bathed her features into a silky canvas of beauty that took his breath away. "Has anyone ever told you just how lovely you are?" When her lips parted into a pleased

smile, he slipped his arms around her waist and drew her closer.

"Has anyone told you just how masculine you are?" she whispered and pulled him closer to her tensed body.

"I've wanted to do this since..." His lips edged closer to hers. Her lips parted further, moist and ready.

"Are you standing guard tonight, mate? Cause if you are then you better get to it and let us old geezers get our shuteye." Spence's rasp of a voice jolted them apart like a lightning strike.

Sam patted her hair and stepped back, her eyes still glued to James. "Yes, right. It is time to get some sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow if we're going to find that landing site." She turned and smiled at Spence, who stood by his tent flap grinning like a schoolboy who'd just pulled off a great practical joke and gotten away with it. "Good night, Doctor Hay." She moved off and entered his tent without a backward glance. She soon emerged, sleeping bag in hand, and entered her own with a small wave at the two of them.

James walked toward Spence, a thunderous look clouding his face. "Nice one, Spence. Do you enjoy being a pain in the arse all the time or are you just naturally one?" He returned to his chair by the fire, his back to the old man's laughter. When all was once again quiet, James glanced back at the tents, noticing all the lanterns had been extinguished. He smiled to himself and began to quietly whistle as he stoked up the fire. Within hours, he slept deeply beside the embers, now cooling around the forgotten pot of tea.

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A chorus of grunts, yips and whispers surrounded the camp in the early morning hours. Sam came awake with a jolt and struggled to remember where she was and what had woken her. The inside of the tent smelled musty and cloying. Her eyes refused to see anything but pitch black as she blindly turned her head, hoping to find the source of her alarm. "Are you awake, Ratana? Cindy?" she whispered into the darkness. Every instinct she possessed sent out alarms and red flags flapped inside her mind, telling her something was very wrong. Her fear grew, waiting for something, anything, threatening to show itself. She needed something tangible to fight against. Her heart pounded against her ribs as adrenaline pumped through her body.

Sam eased out of her sleeping bag and reached over to her right, her hand meeting the silky smoothness of the nylon tent. On hands and knees, coiled for an attack, she slowly ran her hand along the side, moving toward the flap that enclosed them. When her fingers finally felt the zipper of the flap, she grimaced at the rasping noise it made. When she had it completely open, Sam flipped it aside, letting moonlight flood the inside of the tent. She braced herself for what might be lurking inside with them. All she saw was Ratana and the girl curled up inside their bags, chests moving rhythmically in deep sleep. Sam visibly relaxed and sighed with relief at the sight. "Damn midnight jitters," she mumbled to herself then quietly reached over to find her shorts. She pulled them on, leaving her thin T-shirt on instead of finding a shirt, and moved toward the exit again.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" Cindy stirred and sat up, blinking at the light flooding inside.

"No, no, it's okay, Cindy. I just had a bad dream is all. I'm going out to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back." Sam reassured her, adding an embarrassed chuckle.

"Can I come too? Now I have to go." The girl's small voice sounded scared again.

"Sure. Come on. We'll be better off going in pairs anyway." Sam scrambled out of the tent and waited for the girl to catch up. She stretched when she straightened up and looked around the darkened camp, hoping she hadn't awakened the men as well.

When she heard Cindy behind her, she turned and smiled. "At least I didn't wake the guys. Listen to those snores. I'm amazed they haven't scared away all the wildlife with that racket." She kept her voice to a bare whisper.

The girl only smiled in return and pointed to a clump of brush close to the face of the mountain. She raised her eyebrows with an unspoken question. Sam nodded and they headed toward the spot. Sam leaned over and whispered, "You go first and I'll stand guard, then you can stand guard for me."

The girl nodded and disappeared into the brush. Sam could make out the white of her tank top through the leaves and turned to face the camp in case one of the men appeared. She relaxed a bit, listening to the wild music of the bush. After a few minutes, she turned back around and peered into the bushes. Cindy's white shirt could no longer be seen. "Cindy? Where are you? I can't wait any longer. It's my turn." She walked to the spot she'd last seen her and stood looking in every direction for the missing girl. "Cindy?"

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The sky, still a velvety blue fading into daylight, began to lighten with pink and orange in the east. Nothing stirred in the camp except a pair of Rainbow Lorikeets screeching to one another in a high gum tree. James staggered out of the tent he shared with Spence and shuffled toward the cold embers of the fire. Even early morning was warm so close to the tropics so all he wore was a short sleeved shirt and khaki shorts. His socks kept falling down his calves into his hiking boots as he walked. He swore and stopped to pull them up. He picked up a stick lying next to the fire and poked at the ashes. He swore again.

I must be getting old. I ache all over and I feel like I haven't had a lick of sleep. Damn hard ground!

When Nathan appeared, bleary-eyed and rubbing his face, James looked up and grumbled. "Hey, good morning. You make the fire and I'll get the coffee pot ready." He handed the stick to Nathan and walked slowly to the Rover to rummage through the supplies they shut up in it overnight.

Nathan grunted and picked up wood from the stack made by the women the previous day. He went about making the fire while James poured water into the pot and found the coffee tin in a box of food. When the fire finally began to blaze, he sat down on the ground and slowly fed sticks into it like an ancient priest making a sacrifice to his pagan god.

Marc shuffled out of his tent, his shorts and Aerosmith shirt badly wrinkled, and blinked at the sun now rising full force onto the camp as it peeked over the mountaintop. When he spotted Nathan, he shambled over to hold his hands out over the fire. "Where's breakfast? And where's the women?" He scratched his butt and yawned while stretching like a drunken cat.

"I'm awake, you bloody twit." Ratana stepped out of her tent fully dressed and yawned herself. She half turned and watched Cindy emerge behind her, still buttoning a clean shirt. Ratana looked her up and down. "You look a sight better than you did last night, my girl." Then she smiled and continued, "You must hate zippers. Even your shorts have buttons and your hiking boots have Velcro."

Cindy smiled back her, her small face transforming into a young, untroubled face again. "I hate zippers. I always get something caught in those things so I refuse to use them." She laughed, a high tinkling, bubbly sort of sound.

When Cindy stood outside the tent and Sam didn't follow, Ratana peered through the flap. "Isn't Sam up yet? Hey, Sam. Come on before the blokes eat all the food." When she got no answer, she poked her head inside and repeated her words. With a sigh, Ratana re-entered the tent and reached down to nudge at the lump inside the sleeping bag. "Sam. Wake up, you lazy Sheila." A frown furrowed her face at the softness of the lump. She pulled back the top of the bag and saw a pile of dirty clothing there. She stepped back outside. "You fellas seen Sam? She's not in her bag."

Nathan and Marc shook their heads and continued to set up the pans for breakfast after James set the coffeepot in front of them. James walked over to the women's tent and when he saw the worried look in Ratana's eyes, he too poked his head inside the tent. "Where could she be? She's too smart to go wandering off by herself." Hard lines of worry showed on his face when he

turned to look at Cindy and Ratana. "Did either of you see her leave the tent earlier?"

"I woke up in the middle of the night and went with her to use the bushes." She shyly pointed to the clump of brush they'd used the night before. "When I finished she was gone so I just went back to sleep, thinking she couldn't wait. That's the last time I saw her." Cindy blushed and lowered her eyes.

"Shit. Nathan, Marc, go wake up Spence. We have a lost woman on our hands. We have to go search. Now!" His voice thundered across the camp, causing both men to drop what they held and move to wake up Spence. He turned back to Cindy, her head hanging and her eyes glued to the ground at her feet. "When did this happen, Cindy? What time? How long ago?" His breath came fast and he took a deeper one and made himself calm down.

"I ... I...I don't know. It was dark and I was sleepy. I don't have a watch. I don't know." Her face screwed into a mask of anguish.

James, seeing female tears coming on, patted her arm. "Hey, kid, it's okay. We'll find her. Don't worry." His hand fell lamely back to his side when she risked a look at his face and she gamely straightened herself upright again.

When Spence flew out of his tent half-dressed, Nathan and Marc right behind him, James had grabbed his backpack and stood ready to leave. "Come on. She's probably out there and can't find her way back." His voice, still harsh and anxious, set the others in motion.

James turned to the two women. "You two stay here just in case she comes back. Don't leave the camp. Do you hear me?"

They both nodded, Ratana's features set into a hard, emotionless look and Cindy's into out-and-out fear. Then Ratana reached down inside the tent and pulled out a bag sitting there. She rummaged inside and came up with large hunting knife. She glanced at James's startled look. "Just in case."

He nodded. When the men trotted over to join him, he nodded at them too. "Right. Let's go find her."

They moved as a unit toward the clump of brush that Cindy had pointed to when she indicated where they'd gone during the night. When they disappeared into the bush, Ratana and Cindy moved over to the fire and mindlessly began to make a breakfast they knew nobody would eat. Ratana had just picked up the hot coffeepot out of the coals when a scream echoed out of the brush. She quickly set it down again and grabbed her knife. She pulled Cindy up to stand behind her and stood listening to a thrashing noise in the thick growth just outside the camp. What came flying out of the bushes set her to laughing so hard she had to sit down.

Sam, clad only in a thin T-back shirt, dirty shorts and barefoot, came thundering out of the bushes, her face beet red and words more suitable to a military man spewing out of her mouth. "Those damned men! Can't a lady take a pee without having some idiot male barging in and ogling her?" She stopped just inside the clearing and glared back the way she came. "You sons of bitches! You perverted peeping toms!"

The men, just as red in the face as Sam, came stumbling out of the bushes behind her. None of them ventured an apology or an explanation in the face of her anger. Ratana's laughter faded into anger too. She ran to Sam. Grabbing Sam's shoulder, she spun her around, her own anger full blown. "Where the hell have you been? We've been searching for you all over the place. Are you daft going out into the bush without someone with you?"

Sam, face diffused with an angry red glow, opened her mouth to speak, then stopped, mouth still open but speechless. She spun around, inspecting the clearing like she'd never seen it before. "What's going on here? How did it get light so quickly?" Confusion, then fear, swept across her face.

James stepped closer, a look of real concern in his eyes. "Sam, you've been gone for hours. Cindy tells us you went out in the middle of the night and, thinking you'd be right back, she went back to bed. When we woke this morning you still weren't back. That's why we went looking for you."

When Ratana grabbed her again, she threw off the hand holding her arm and moved back to face all of them. She put both fists onto her hips. "What the hell are you talking about? I've only been gone a couple of minutes!"

James stepped closer. "I can't explain it either, but according to Cindy you've been gone for several hours, Sam. We woke up and you weren't here so..." He spoke slowly, with measured tones, like one would speak to a small child. When she showed further fear at his words, he stepped up next to her and peered down into her face. "What possessed you to go out alone in the dark to begin with? Especially after what we'd seen earlier?" His tone, deliberately controlled, held a touch of fear in it.

Sam's hands fell to her sides. "You're kidding! I've only been gone ten minutes at the most. And I wasn't alone. Cindy and I went together. She went first and when I lost sight of her, I went to look. Then I couldn't wait any longer so I did my own business and you guys showed up. Is this some kind of a joke?" She looked searchingly at the grim faces of her companions then her own face registered their sincerity, followed shortly with shock. "My God! I don't remember anything but what I just told you. I tell you, I didn't fall asleep out there and I know it was only minutes that passed." Her shoulders slumped. "Maybe I'm losing it here."

Spence turned to Cindy, who still stood next to the campfire, her eyes on the ground. "Cindy, when did you two go out? How long ago was it?" His voice vibrated with urgency.

She looked up, twisted her hands together and shook her head. "I don't know. Like I said, I don't have a watch. When I stepped out of the brush, I couldn't see her so I went back to bed. But, I know it was a lot longer than ten minutes ago. The moon was up high ... right there." She pointed into the sky.

"What is going on here? All of this shit is something right out of a science fiction story." Marc walked to the fire and set his backpack down next to the chair he collapsed into.

The others soon followed. James held Sam by the arm and guided her to a chair, where he stood behind her, lightly kneading her shoulders like a nurse over an invalid. She flinched but allowed it, her face pinched in deep thought.

"Nope, not science fiction ... fact. The moon set about three hours ago." Spence scratched at his chin. "I think what we may be dealing with here is the notorious 'lost time' people have experienced when a UFO encounter happens." Spence's matter of fact statement acted like a bombshell. Everyone went completely silent as it sunk in what his words might mean.

Ratana and Nathan exchanged meaningful glances. Nathan cleared his throat. "We know of this and have for a long time now. The Yowies often come when the light in the sky is seen too." Ratana nodded at him. "We ... Ratana and I ... know there are spirits leading us. They must have chosen you for some reason, Ms. Louis." He looked embarrassed.

Sam looked up at him like he'd grown another head. "Look, I believe in what I see, hear, taste, feel and smell. Everything else is yet to be proven. I know I stepped into that bush when it was pitch dark and less than ten minutes later it was light and you guys were standing there staring at me. In my mind, that means I went just before sunrise. No mystery, no spirits and no surprises. End of story."

James leaned down, peering hard at the back of her neck. He pushed her hair aside and inspected a small puncture still oozing a trail of blood. "What is this, Sam?" He leaned over her shoulder to look at her face.

"What's what? What did you find?" She raised her fingers to the injury then lowered them to inspect the blood on her fingertips. "What the hell? I must have scratched myself out there." She continued to stare at her bloody fingers, hypnotized by the sight of her own blood.

Spence stepped up and inspected the puncture while James continued to hold her hair aside. "UFO sighting, lost time ... implants?" He raised both shaggy gray eyebrows at James.

A loud peal of laughter echoed around the clearing. Marc slapped his knees and continued to laugh, long and hard, until he ran out of breath. Choking and gasping he held his arms across his chest and struggled to regain his composure. "Oh my God! This isn't Star Trek, it's the X-Files! Maybe the Yowies who came last night are really little gray men and they just had to have a party so they got Sam to come and entertain them." He busted out with intense laughter again, almost falling out of his chair.

Sam started crying. James cupped her head with one of his hands and roared, "Shut up, you idiot wanker! Maybe you don't take any of this seriously, but we do." When the laughter continued after only a slight pause, he took several strides toward the laughing man, his fists clenched. "Pack up! You're out of here. I wish the hell I'd never agreed to you coming in the first place."

The menacing snarl and clenched fists finally shut Marc up. His eye went round with fear, darting around at the somber, angry faces of the group. "Jeesh, guys. It just struck me as funny. I'm sorry, Sam. I didn't intend any harm. Honest." He spread his hands in supplication toward her.

"Let it go, James. It would be more trouble to take him back than it's worth anyway." She sighed and stood up, still gently touching the wound to her neck. "I'll go wash this. It's okay. Really." Her limbs seemed unsteady when she stood and Ratana took her arm, helping her over to the large water container sitting next to the Rover.

Nathan stared up at the sky. "It all has meaning. It all leads somewhere." His words sounded like a chant.

Spence followed James, who still stood menacingly near Marc, and lightly touched his shoulder. "Come on, mate. He meant no harm. Let's go get some brekkie and coffee and all calm down. I don't know about you but me nerves feel like lute strings right now." His toothy smile elicited a puny replica from Marc.

James grunted, relaxed his fists and turned on his heel to stalk over to the fire. He grabbed the coffeepot with such fury it boiled over into the hot coals, hissing like an angry snake. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down. Spence joined him there and filled a cup for himself and, seeing Cindy cringing in her chair, one for her as well. He offered the metal cup to her with a grin. "Drink up, girl. It's hot and will fill your veins with energy."

She reached for the cup, almost touched it, and jumped back with a swiftness that surprised Spence. The cup jolted as he pulled his hand back, spilling hot coffee over his fingers. He yelped with pain and jumped up, sucking on them with fury. "Damn, that's hot! Did you get burned?"

She shook her head, jumped up and ran to the women's tent. James watched her go with interest. "What was all that about?" With a puzzled look he looked at Spence, who was still blowing on his hand. "She never touched the cup. She didn't get burned. Why did she do that?" Shrugging, he stood up with his own hot cup and flexed his shoulders. "Oh well. God, I feel tired already and we haven't even begun our trip yet."

"What trip?" A booming male voice, tinged with sarcasm, echoed from behind James.

James flinched and shut his eyes at the sound. "Oh God. Please don't let it be who I think it is." He took a deep breath and turned toward the cars. A small, thin man in khaki stood leaning against the white Rover. A battered bush hat almost hid the small, narrowed eyes studying the campsite. His thin lips quirked into a wry smile when he shifted his gaze and returned James's stare. "Hello, Doctor Hay. Fancy meeting you here." He stroked a thick sandy moustache while he talked.

Spence spat a big wad of phlegm into the dust at his feet. "Guilford King. What the hell are you doing here? Nobody invited you, as usual." The venom in Spence's voice clearly showed his disdain for the intruder.

"I don't need permission to go anywhere. I go where I want, when I want and I never let anyone stand in my way." He lifted a finger and a young man,

squinting through thick glasses, a big sport rifle slung over his back, an Army duffel in his hands, moved to stand beside him. He placed the bag at Guilford's feet and stood glaring myopically at Spence and James, a sarcastic smile playing on his feminine-featured face.

An old Aboriginal man, black as coal and dressed in nothing but a worn pair of shorts and a dirty red headband, stood behind the cars, watching them with an inscrutable expression on his broad, creased face. After studying the camp, he quietly walked closer, bent over and, heavily laden with a huge pack on his back, eased down under a tree at the edge of the clearing. His thin hands reached up to unbuckle the straps that held the pack in place, then he slipped the pack onto the ground behind him. No emotion moved over his ancient features as he continued to watch the group of men cautiously approaching each other. He crossed his legs, rested a wooden staff made from a tree branch across his knees and silently continued to observe without comment.

James and Spence moved closer to Guilford, who now conferred with the young man by his side. He turned toward the two men approaching and announced, "Oh, good. You're going to extend your greetings to us after all. How nice." Indicating the young man, he went on. "This is Ian Percy, my protege, and the old Abo being lazy over there is our tracker, Ernie. He prefers to be called 'Dingo'."

Hearing the sound of loud voices, the others emerged from their tents and stood watching the encounter. Nathan stepped over to the tree where Ernie sat, straight and silent. Nathan eased down beside him, quietly and respectfully waiting for an introduction. The old man continued to stare straight ahead. Marc grabbed his camera and clicked off a series of pictures of the scene, a grin on his face. The women stood in a knot in the center of the camp, silently watching.

Craning his neck to look at the three women, Guilford winked at James, a sly leer on his face. "Who are the birds? Maybe we could get together later and have a drop or two and maybe a party, heh?" He snickered. "At least introduce me to the tall redhead. I could use some interesting diversion."

"You son of a bitch. Take your sorry carcass out of here ... now!" James, fists white-knuckled and poised to rearrange the nasty sneer on Guilford's face, pressed forward. He could feel the blood rushing to his face, while his heartbeat pounded in his ears. His body shook with barely suppressed rage.

Spence restrained him. "Get out, Guilford, or I'll help him kick you out. It's bad enough you steal our work and lie about what you don't find on your own without insulting our friends. Now go." Spence held his temper in check but slid a long, fillet knife out of his pocket, making sure Guilford saw it. "I mean it."

James made his body relax, forcing himself to assume a nonchalant stance while still holding Guilford's stare. "Well, I won't say it's nice to see you, King. Now be on your way. We have a hiking trip we're trying to get ready for." He forced himself to smile. He felt like a snarling lion that had just caught a whiff of something dead and wanted with every shred of his being to attack and kill.

Guilford didn't return the smile. "So much for Australian manners. At least we British know how to behave in social situations." He sneered at the group and crooked his finger at the young man and tracker. "We'll be making camp nearby if you need any protecting. Don't get your hopes up of any invitation to tea, though."

Guilford and the young man moved off toward the bush, the old man standing and trailing behind. When they reached the trees, Guilford hesitated and turned to look at James over his shoulder. "We'll be seeing each other again, Hay. Bet on it." Then they disappeared into the thick growth.

Marc stepped up to James's back as he stood watching for signs of their return. He peered into the brush but leaned close to James's ear to whisper, "Who were those guys?"

"People I wish I didn't know." James spat the words out and stalked

toward his tent without another word. He grabbed a bucket of water and ducked inside.

Marc raised his eyebrows at Spence. "I guess they're not best friends, huh?"

Spence looked at him with a sour expression. "That man is one of our greatest enemies. He's here for a reason, believe me. You thought things were bad before; now he's here, they are worse ... far worse."

"I don't see how it can be any worse." Marc grumbled, stamping on a large spider crawling near his boot.

"You don't know him. Somehow he manages to find out where James and I go when we track these mysteries. He always shows up and manipulates things so he can take the credit when it's legitimate. Problem is, he also makes sure we take the blame for the hoaxes. He doesn't hesitate to trump up something to make himself look good either, especially when he's trying to sell his damned awful books. He thinks he's the world's authority. Fact is, he's a joke but his skin's too thick for it to sink in. I hate the bloke and so does James." He paused, scratching his beard. "How the hell did he know where we'd be when we didn't even know ourselves? The bastard gives me a bad taste in me mouth." He grimaced and spat again.

Nathan walked over to stand next to them. "He brings evil with him. The dark ones sent him to stop us. He will kill us if he can." His voice registered shock and disgust.

Marc halted in mid stride, his breakfast forgotten. He spun back toward them. "Oh, shit. What next?" He shook his head and turned back to stare at the fire.

CHAPTER TEN

Nathan and James finished packing the extra gear into the Rovers and locked the doors. The campsite, now cleared and empty, looked barren of comfort or human warmth. All that remained were the two dusty Land Rovers parked under a big tree next to the mountain's western slope. Scattered around the bare clearing, the group, each focused on finishing up their preparations for the trek into the bush, remained silent.

James and Nathan joined Spence, who stood at the outskirts of the brush examining a barely discernible trail leading off to the south. "This is the way, James. Something tells me we should follow these." He pointed to fresh tracks made by oversized, bare, humanoid feet still clearly visible in the red clay.

James nodded and turned to scowl at the women, who continued shoving things into already overstuffed packs. "Blow me! I'll bet we end up lugging those bags around for them before we get there." He sighed, deep and irritated. "Hey, you Sheilas! It's late. Let's get moving." James hollered at the stragglers as they scrambled to finish fastening their individual backpacks.

Nathan chuckled, deep and rich, then hurriedly rearranged his face back into a serious look when the women, already struggling under their packs, caught up with the men. He stepped up to Cindy and eased her pack off her quivering shoulders. "I think you ladies should leave a bit of this stuff back here, don't you?"

James, irritated by the further delay, stepped over to help Sam off with her pack. "Didn't anyone ever teach you how to travel light?" Seeing anger flare in her eyes, he held out his hand and softened his tone. "Sorry. I'm still angry about Guilford. I shouldn't be taking it out on you." He laid her pack down and expertly unbuckled it in a matter of seconds. "Now, ladies, you need to lighten these packs by at least half. We'll take what you leave behind and pack it into the locked cars. Okay?" His conciliatory tone eased the tension.

Sam nodded, leaned down and began pulling things out of the pack. "Come on, girls. They're right. We won't last an hour with all this weight." She handed her things to James while the other women did the same with Spence and

Nathan. Marc leaned against a tree snapping pictures and laughing at the spectacle.

When they finally had the lightened packs strapped on and ready to go, James looked them over like a General in the field of battle. "Keep your eyes and ears open. I have no idea how far the landing site is so we might have a long walk ahead of us." His eyes settled on Sam and Marc. "It gets hot out here so drink a lot of water. And stay together. Don't wander off." He ducked into the brush, following the trail. The others quickly fell in behind him.

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After fighting thick undergrowth, thorny vines that stung the skin like miniature scorpions, rivers of sweat and all manner of biting insects for several hours, Sam was ready to trade all her worldly goods for a motel room with a shower and a bottle of Calamine lotion. She stopped to gaze at a flock of brightly colored parakeets arcing gracefully over the treetops; a touch of the familiar that made her want to collapse and cry.

Ratana, walking behind her, noticed Sam's state and yelled ahead. "Hey, Uncle! How about a rest? We've been walking for hours now and we could use some shade and water." When Sam glanced back at her, gratitude shining in her eyes, Ratana smiled at her. "I can't take these damned insects any longer." They both smiled and sighed with relief when James finally stopped.

Spence, Nathan, Marc and the women sat under an ancient tree, its trunk so big around it would take five men linked hand-to-hand to encircle its girth. James insisted on walking ahead to see if he could spot any sign of the site.

Cindy, quiet and reserved, slowly sipped from her water bottle and eased her back against the massive tree for support. She sighed and almost immediately slipped into a doze. Spence stood guard near the trail, watching for James to return. The other women sipped from their bottles and talked softly among themselves.

Marc leaned over to whisper in Nathan's ear. "I can't figure her out. She almost never talks and she seems like she's afraid of her own shadow. Why the heck would a girl like that agree to go hiking in a place like this?"

Nathan spoke low in response. "Maybe her missing boyfriend bullied her into it." He shrugged. "It happens." He glanced down the trail. "I wonder if he'll show up, feeling guilty for leaving her alone out there? I doubt it, though. Some blokes are real bastards that way."

Marc opened his mouth to comment and shut it in a hurry when James came trotting down the trail. "What the hell is he running in this heat for? Is he crazy?"

Marc and Nathan stood up when Spence moved to intercept James on the path. Ratana nudged Cindy, who came awake instantly. The women stood and joined Nathan and Marc as they watched the two older men speak together in low tones. Spence threw his hands around, talking animatedly while James listened. Just when Sam was ready to take the lead and go find out what was going on, the two men walked down the trail to rejoin them.

James yanked off his sweaty bush hat and ran his hands through wet hair. He took a big drink from the water bottle Nathan held out to him before speaking. "Guilford and his men are paralleling us on the right. They're trying to go unobserved but it's him." He paused. "And I found a body down the trail a bit. I think he might be your friend, Cindy." He handed the bottle back to Nathan. "Are you up to coming and seeing if it is? I know it's hard but..." He watched the girl for a reaction.

She stepped away from the tree where she'd remained until he arrived. "I'll come," she stated, her voice calm and steady as she shouldered her pack and waited.

The others silently shouldered their packs as well and followed James back down the way he'd returned. A half-hour later, they halted next to a jumble of large boulders stacked up next to the trail, some of them as much as eight feet high. A swarm of bluebottle flies hovered over the green lichens growing like thick yard lawn on the top of the rounded stones. James held his

hand up to the group. "Spence, you and I will go with Cindy. The rest of you stay here. No sense in the rest of you seeing this too." He gently took Cindy by the elbow and led her toward the boulders. Spence followed, his eyes scanning the ground for tracks as he walked.

Marc swore and Sam jumped when a pitiful wail rose from behind the rocks. James, stoned-faced and somber, led Cindy back to the group. She clung to his shirt, her face pressed to it, sobbing like a small child. He gently extracted her from his chest and handed her over to Ratana and Sam with sadness in his eyes. "It's him." The women led her to a shady tree growing next to the trail and sat her down. The girl's sobbing became softer but she gripped Sam's hand and sat clinging to Ratana's blouse.

James turned back to rejoin Spence, who still searched the area around the body. "What do you see, Spence? Are those animal tracks or human?"

Spence straightened up and rubbed the toe of his boot into a deep track running near the foot of the corpse. "It's just like the tracks we found up north. No doubt about it." He pointed to the right of the tracks. "Take a look at this, James. There's a trail of blood splatters as big as twenty-cent pieces leading off toward the trail. My bet is he shot something and it lived long enough to tear him up this way."

James stooped and picked up what was left of a .303 rifle. Splinters of oak stock were all that remained of a once beautiful old gun. The steel barrel, now bent at a ninety-degree angle, gave it an almost comical look, like something out of a cartoon. "What the hell would be strong enough to shatter solid oak and bend a barrel like this?" He turned the gun over and over in his hands.

"You know what did that as well as I do, James." Spence took the shattered weapon from James's hands and carefully inspected what remained of the wooden stock. "There are blood stains on the wood too."

"If he killed it, it would be long gone after two days. We both know a dead Yowie has never been found so that's no surprise. Poor Cindy. I wish she didn't have to see this." James stooped over the dead man and waved his hand over the face to run off the flies. He's been torn apart. He's barely recognizable as a human being. It's a nasty way to die."

"Well, we can't bury him so we'll have to leave him until we can report this and have someone come out and fetch him."

Spence's matter-of-fact statement echoed James's thoughts as he looked with pity at the dead man. "We'll have to mark the spot. You got one of your old red handkerchiefs on you? That should do it. Go get a long branch to tie it to and I'll get his I.D. for the authorities." James felt around the man's jeans, hoping to find a wallet. When he felt no tattletale lump, he searched around for a pack. All that was left of it lay a few feet away and contained no identification. He stood up with a sigh, gathered what he could of the man's effects and walked back toward the trail.

Spence had secured the red cloth on a long sturdy branch and now waited with the rest of the group, who shot question after question at him about the dead man. He held his hands up in defense and pointed to James when he came into sight. "Ask him. I didn't check the guy out, James did." He threw up his hands and walked up the path to inspect the blood trail he'd noticed earlier.

Marc stepped up to James, his face a mask of fear, and asked, "How did he die, James? Was it an accident? You know, like he fell or ran out of water or something?"

James put a hand on Marc's shoulder. "He was mangled by some kind of animal." When Marc recoiled in revulsion, he continued. "Look, we're not children here and we don't have time to coddle anyone with a weak stomach or delicate sensibilities. If you expect me to lie to you so you won't have to face facts, then you have a rude awakening coming. Lying to you won't protect you but telling you the truth will."

Marc shut his eyes and struggled to collect his composure. "Okay, you're right. We can't protect ourselves if we don't face facts. Right. I got it. I'm okay." He stumbled over to the shade of the tree and sat down heavily.

His face dropped into his hands.

James walked over to the women and squatted next to Ratana. "How is she?" He laid the remains of the dead man's pack at Cindy's feet.

The girl lay quietly relaxed in Ratana's arms, but her eyes were alive and darting from face to face. "She'll be okay. I think she's tougher than she looks."

James squatted next to the ruined pack and pulled two plastic baggies out of a side pocket. One held a dozen hand-rolled cigarettes; the other was full of seeds. He held them out to the girl. "Cindy, what do you know about this? Was your friend here to plant Marijuana? Is that why he was armed?"

Cindy shuddered, closed her eyes tightly and buried her face in Ratana's shoulder.

Sam stood up and patted James on the shoulder. "Can I talk to you, James? Alone?" She nodded at Ratana then at the girl. "I'll be back soon in case you need any help." Her voice exuded sympathy for the girl but worry at the same time. She moved off onto the trail and away from the tree. "James, this may not be the time to bring this up but there's something wrong with all this, especially Cindy and that ... dead boy. It doesn't feel right." She threw up her hands in exasperation. "Hell, I don't know how any of this could feel normal. It's all weird." She took a deep breath. "Look, I don't know the right words here but under these circumstances, something feels out of whack to me. That's the best way I can explain it. I ... I wanted to warn you. I don't want you to get hurt and it feels very dangerous out here to me." Her shoulders slumped and she turned to face down the trail, away from him. "Shit! I'm making a muck of this." Taking a deep breath, she fought to hold back tears. "James, I'm scared."

He took her by the shoulders and turned her back around to face him. Her eyes pleaded with him to understand and not laugh. "I know, Sam. I know. So are the rest of us." He pulled her to his chest and stroked her hair.

Over her shoulder he saw Spence straighten suddenly and assume an attitude of listening intently to something coming from the bush. James tensed, gently pushed her away and kissed her on the forehead. "Why don't you go sit with Ratana? Don't worry, I'll watch out for myself ... and you." He smiled at her, lightly kissed her parted lips then hurriedly walked down the trail to join Spence.

"James, I heard something odd coming from that direction." He pointed off into a thick growth of bush. "It sounded like..."

A high-pitched shout echoed throughout the foliage. Flocks of birds suddenly took flight, their calls almost deafening as they flew out of the treetops. James, tall and wide-shouldered, and Spence, small and quick, didn't hesitate. In tandem, they took off in the direction of the shout, ignoring the thick growth trying to slow their progress.

With a suddenness that surprised them, they rushed out into a small clearing surrounded by large trees and thick brush, the entrance they'd arrived through looking like a tunnel of living green. Guilford and Ian stood just inside the circle with rifles pointing toward the trunk of a tree on the far side of the clearing. A five-foot tall hairy shape, partially hidden in the foliage beside the tree, stood very still, its eyes gleaming yellow at the rifles pointed at it.

"It's the proof I've searched for years to get. Finally, I'll make all you idiot academics stand up and acknowledge me as the best." Guilford sneered when he saw James and Spence standing, dumbfounded, in the clearing.

James eased closer, his eyes glued to the creature now snarling at the sudden arrival of two more humans. "Shut up, Guilford. This isn't the time." When he saw Ian edge closer to the brush, he whispered, "For God's sake, Ian, don't shoot. It won't harm you if you don't threaten it. Back up."

The young man ignored him, a malicious and self-satisfied smile on his thin face. He stepped closer to the creature, which responded with a weak cry of fear. Ian stepped even closer, the rifle steady on the dark shape.

When the women, led by Nathan and trailed by Marc, stepped out into the

clearing, James held up his hand to them, indicating they should stay where they were and keep quiet. Nathan halted and held himself motionless, his gaze glued to the brush with the others. One of the women gasped as the hidden creature stumbled and reached out a hand to steady itself against the tree, revealing a thickly coated arm.

Spence moved quietly up beside Guilford and whispered. "Whatever it is, it's dying, King. Let it be. You'll still have your prize but let it die in peace."

Guilford snorted in derision then stepped closer to Ian, leaving Spence standing behind him. Their two rifles never moved from the target. James took a step toward the two hunters, intent on convincing them to back off. As his foot hit the ground, the long, hairy arm stretched out of the brush toward the knot of people beyond Guilford and Ian. A loud whimper issued from the shape as its hand, palm upward, reached out in supplication. Slowly, the bulky creature began to move into the clearing, its hand still held out in peace.

The leaves parted, revealing a face with large, liquid eyes dulled with pain. Ian pulled the trigger. A hole the size of a golf ball appeared in the middle of the sagging creature's chest, blood blossoming like a crimson flower against its thick coat of hair. It finally fell, unmoving and fully revealed, out of the brush.

When the report of the shot died down, the silence in the clearing was deafening in its intensity. Then pandemonium broke out. Ian war whooped at the top of his lungs and ran toward the dead creature lying at the foot of the tree. Guilford lowered his rifle and stamped his foot in rage at the younger man's action, the women screamed and James moved back to the small group standing behind him as if to protect them against the madmen with the rifles.

Spence still stood inside the clearing, his shoulders slumped and his fists bunched into knots of rage. His face, a mask of hatred and loathing, worked and twitched. His chest heaved as he sucked in large gulps of air. Gradually, his body straightened and tensed. He slowly pulled the long fishing knife out of its sheath on his belt. Crouching into a defensive stance, he slowly moved toward Guilford's back. Standing so close he could smell the man's sweat, Spence poised the knife to plunge it into Guilford's kidneys.

Nathan roared, "No, Spence!" and pushed past James to run into the clearing.

James spun around to see his friend ready to commit murder. He leaped into the clearing right behind Nathan. Guilford, now aware of the threat at his back, turned around with his rifle raised. Nathan hit him at a dead run, grabbed the rifle out of his hands and slung it into the undergrowth. James grabbed Spence, pinning his arms down against his sides. The old man cursed and spat like a cat that had just been bagged. In spite of their size differences, James struggled to hold onto his friend.

The women rushed toward the knot of men. Marc remained at the mouth of the entrance, pressed against the thick bush that made up its impenetrable walls. As he stood at the edge of the clearing, Marc's head moved from side to side like an autistic child who refused to believe the evidence of his eyes. Sam reached James and stretched out a trembling hand toward his arm as he shook Spence and roared, "Get a grip on yourself, Spence. We need you to have a cool head right now. Spence!" When Sam's hand gripped his arm, James ignored her and continued to glare into Spence's unfocused eyes.

Clutching her boyfriend's shredded pack, Cindy stumbled toward the huddle of inert fur at the base of the tree. She moved like a sleepwalker, her eyes fixed and her face smooth with disbelief and horror. She froze next to the body, her arms rigid at her sides.

Cindy's somnambulant walk across the clearing alarmed Sam. She dropped her hand from James's arm and moved quickly across the clearing toward Cindy. When she reached the silent girl, Sam searched her face and patted her shoulder. She took a deep breath and squatted next to the limp body. Sam looked down into its peaceful face and reached out to lightly touch the silken coat with trembling fingers. When Cindy crouched beside her to put a

comforting hand on hers, tears suddenly began to stream down Sam's face as she murmured over and over again, "My God, it was just a baby. It was crying. My God..."

James used all his strength to hold Spence while he shouted into the old man's ear, trying to snap him out of it. Spence stopped struggling so suddenly James thought he might have had a seizure. Then he saw what the rest were beginning to see.

Ian had rushed from his hiding spot among the thick brush and was now standing triumphantly with one foot on the Yowie's body, his rifle held high in a parody of an old African white hunter. The women, crouched beside the body, stared past Ian into the thick trees. He didn't notice what was happening just behind him but the women rose slowly and began to back away from him, their eyes huge with fear.

The green of the foliage began to shimmer and take on form. Shapes of varying height and width began to solidify and move. They moved toward Ian with clenched massive hands. Before he could move to protect himself, two of the huge man-like creatures appeared behind Ian's back and had his struggling body locked inside massive arms before he could react to their presence. Several other figures began to appear inside the trees, each standing as if watching an execution, silent, somber and unmoving. The two larger ones each took hold of one of Ian's arms, growling and snarling their rage. Their brilliant yellow eyes flashed like liquid sunlight as they held his puny body between them. When the blood and death smell of their companion lying dead under Ian's feet reached their wide, flaring nostrils, they bellowed with a roar that shook the dusty leaves on the trees. They lifted Ian off the ground like a rag doll and his screams of terror began.

The silent watchers in the trees moved silently forward in anticipation. Ian screamed again and the duo, with roars of triumph, began to pull Ian's body tight between them. His limbs pulled easily from the sockets, like they were made of tissue paper, tearing and popping with the incredible pressure put upon them.

It happened so fast Ian had no time for the pain to register. By the time it did, the pair still holding his torso upright had a firm hold on his legs. The scream of agony that finally erupted from Ian's throat drowned their sounds of revenge as they pulled him apart.

With a movement that clearly spoke of utter contempt, the largest Yowie reached up and twisted Ian's head off like a soda bottle's lid, ending the man's scream as abruptly as shutting off an annoying audiotape with the press of a button. The dominant Yowie held the head high in the air and roared, showing long, yellowing fangs, while the other casually tossed the limp body aside. Holding Ian's head in front of his eyes, the larger Yowie stared into the face of the dead man, roared once again and, with an attitude of disdain and revulsion, threw it into their midst. Totally ignoring the other humans standing stunned before them, they lifted the body of their dead companion as tenderly as a mother with a child and disappeared as mysteriously as they'd appeared. Not a trace was left to verify they'd been there except the metallic stench of blood in the air and Ian's mangled head lying in the clearing at Guilford's feet.

Guilford's eyes gleamed with naked admiration, respect, maybe even love, as he stared at the huge beasts.

Marc's whimpers, Spence's labored breathing, and the sound of Ratana vomiting as she knelt in the dirt only broke the utterly complete, shocked silence that remained.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A feeble fire, made hastily inside a makeshift campsite, flickered and illuminated the varying shades of white and gray faces surrounding it. The loud hum of insect activity outside the circle of light attested to the lack of conversation inside the circle.

Finally, restless and unable to abide the depressing mood of the group

of people huddled together in silent shock any longer, Spence stood, produced a large bottle of cheap whiskey from his pack and poured some into a tin cup he used for coffee. He downed a large gulp before he decided to break the somber quiet and speak. "Bloody hell, people. Snap out of it. What did you expect? Disneyland rides out here?" When the only response he got was a circle of sunken-eyed stares from the women and being totally ignored by the men, he snorted in disgust. "So, okay, it was bloody, it was gory, it was a sight to make you puke your toenails but hey, the bloke had it coming."

Ratana flinched when he mentioned puking and Cindy began to softly cry again. Sam held her by the shoulders and stared into the fire. James stood up and held out his cup. Spence filled it. "I had no idea this trip would be so dangerous. If I had, I would've insisted the women stay behind." He took a drink and sat back down, staying well away from Guilford.

Sam's head came up with a snap, her eyes flashing with firelight. "Now, just a minute here. It seems to me the women aren't screwing this up; the men are. That idiot got himself killed because he and this arrogant ass," she nodded at Guilford, who sat smugly sipping his own stash of brew, "came in here to play big game hunters. They got what they asked for as far as I'm concerned. As for being in danger, I can't answer for Ratana or Cindy but I've been there before and I can handle myself. So, get the notion out of your head that you have to play He-man and protect me."

"That goes for me too, James. I'm okay. It just took me by surprise is all. I've never seen a man die like that. I have seen men die, though, so I'll get over it, have no fear about that." Ratana pulled herself up straight and looked squarely in his eyes.

"Speaking of playing Big Game Hunter ... Guilford, where's your tracker, Ernie? I didn't see him earlier either." Nathan's question served to silence the group once more.

Guilford, sitting relaxed with one leg crossed primly over the other and a cup held in his hand, like one would sit at a formal tea party, held his chin up and gave Nathan a scathing look before answering. "I do not keep track of the help. However, he did lead us to the Yowie. How he knew it was there is anybody's guess but he did lead us there. I saw him in the clearing. He dropped his pack and ran. I'm assuming he either ran back home in terror or was killed by the Yowies. Either way, it's no concern of mine anymore."

Spence snorted. "Damned bloody snob of an arsehole. The man probably had enough sense to get away from you while the getting was good."

Marc, sitting huddled in his chair, hadn't spoken a word since he'd followed Spence, Nathan and the women from the scene of Ian's death to find and make a camp for the night. Several yards beyond the scene of Ian's death, Spence had located a small cleared area under massive gum trees. A tiny, running creek ran through it, offering fresh water. Spence and Nathan had induced him and the women to get busy, hoping activity would blot out what they'd just seen.

Marc hadn't looked back at James and Guilford when they remained behind to bury what was left of the young man; he hadn't cared enough to look. By the time James and Guilford had stumbled into the camp, tired and dirty, to gratefully accept cups of hot coffee, the sun was going down and Marc was still sitting catatonic in his chair. Now, the camp enveloped in total blackness, he raised his eyes, still round with fear, to James. "I have to get out of here too. I won't stay here another day. I swear, if one of you won't take me back to the car, I'll go by myself, but I'll go either way." When not one person challenged him or expressed a desire to escape with him, he looked around the circle of people with absolute incredulity on his face. "I think you're all crazy. Nobody in their right mind would stay here now." His eyes settled on James once again. "I am going first thing tomorrow. Nobody better try to stop me either."

"I'll take you out, Marc." Nathan glanced at Marc's startled reaction then shifted his gaze to James, who looked just as surprised. "I'll take him out at first light and I'll be back by dark. I promise." When James relaxed

and nodded, Nathan nodded back and reached out his cup to Spence with a smile on his face.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish." Guilford saluted Marc with his cup then smiled and took a hearty drink.

"Screw you, limey. You got us into this in the first place. Those creatures hadn't threatened us before you came along." Marc threw the remains of his coffee into the fire and stood up, looking down on the Englishman who continued to smile up at him. "Why the hell are we allowing him to tag along with us anyway? The guy's a creep."

Spence laid a hand on Marc's arm. "Let it go, son. It's done now. Besides, you're forgetting Cindy's friend. He was killed before His Highness, there, came along." He tilted his head at Guilford. "I think Cindy's friend wounded the Yowie before we found it so it's not entirely his fault." Spence spat in the fire and gave Guilford a sour look. "We're not like him, we're civilized men who take him in for protection in spite of his obvious character faults." Spence donned a sarcastic grin. Guilford's smug smile slipped when he saw the hatred in Spence's eyes that gave a lie to the grin still plastered on his face.

"You never did tell us how he died or what you found there, James." Ratana looked up at him, expectantly.

"I guess it's time to rake over the facts as we know them now." James took a deep breath. "Okay. Spence and I know, from looking at the guy's remains, that a very strong being mangled him pretty badly. We have every indication it was the wounded Yowie." Seeing Cindy flinch, he hesitated. "Sorry, Cindy, but we can't afford to ignore things. We're very much in danger here and knowing what's what is our only hope of surviving." He turned his gaze back to the group. "Yes, we now know it's a Yowie. They're very real, in spite of media gluttons like Guilford whose proof of their existence gives all the research a bad name." He ignored Guilford's look of anger. "We found a shattered rifle with a bent barrel next to the hiker. Only a very strong creature could've done that. I think, for reasons unknown, he shot the Yowie and was attacked and killed right afterward as a consequence. Somehow, it survived long enough to get to the clearing where he found it." He nodded at Guilford, who silently sipped his drink and wisely refrained from making remarks.

Spence leaned over to James and whispered, "That reminds me. We have something to discuss between ourselves later." When James nodded, he sat back down and sipped his whiskey, alert to everyone's reaction.

"Then there's a chance it only acted in self defense. So did the others when Ian killed it. That means we may not be in danger if we don't bother them anymore." Sam's voice became softer and sadder as she spoke. "I think I felt more for the poor creature than I did Ian." Her voice trembled at the memory of the child-like whimper for help she heard just before the shot.

Guilford sputtered and laughed. "Oh come on! It was just a dumb animal. Ian was a human being. Have you no loyalty to your own species? What a lot of silly female twaddle. Stupid Yank cow." He shook his head in amusement at her sad tone.

Marc kicked the chair Guilford sat in and smiled maliciously when he sprawled in the dirt, his cup flying into the fire. "You son of a bitch. You watch how you talk to her, if you know what's good for you." His fists were clenched, waiting for Guilford to stand up.

James pushed Marc back into a chair and sat down between him and Guilford, who slowly stood, dusted himself off and rearranged his chair further away from the group. "Haven't we had enough violence for one day?" His disgust at Marc and Guilford etched his face with deeper lines when he looked at first one then the other. "We won't solve anything with more." He turned to Marc. "If you can't get a grip on your temper, Marc, then go to bed. None of us want any more problems tonight, if we can help it, and I won't tolerate it myself." The threat in his voice succeeded in convincing Marc. He stood and stalked to his tent without another word.

When Guilford grunted with satisfaction, James turned to him, the same threatening tone in his voice. "You can stay in this camp, Guilford, but only because I don't want my conscience to suffer because of your lack of brains. However, I'd suggest you pitch your tent away from ours."

"I think we could all use a good night's sleep..._if_ I can sleep after today." Sam emptied her cup. She nodded at Cindy, now asleep in her chair. "Better wake her up, Ratana, and get her to bed too. I'll be in soon. I need a wash first." She strode off to get a towel from her tent then headed toward the small creek.

Ratana nudged the girl awake and headed her toward their tent. When Cindy disappeared into the tent without protest, Ratana took a deep breath and hesitated before following. "Uncle, what about tomorrow? Are we still going to continue following the path or give it up?"

"We don't give up. We _won't_ give up," Spence said, answering the question for James. "We're too close now and I know the answers are here."

Nathan emptied his cup and set it down next to the fire. "Yes, they're here. We don't go back, Ratana. You know we can't."

She nodded and turned to enter the women's tent. Nathan watched her go then asked, "Do you want me to stand guard tonight, Uncle? I'm not tired anyway." His brown eyes sagged with fatigue.

"No, Nate. You have an early morning tomorrow getting Marc back to the Rover. Go get some sleep. I'll stay out here." James sat back down and refilled his coffee cup, dismissing the subject. Nathan went to his tent, grateful for the reprieve.

James turned to Guilford and Spence. "Spence, you come and spell me in four hours. King, you relieve Spence four hours after that. No questions and no arguments." He held up his hand at Guilford's open mouth, preventing the protest he knew was coming.

Guilford stood and kicked his chair over in disgust before stomping off.

"We have a problem, James. I didn't want the others to hear this because it would probably make things harder than they already are ... but ... I'm not sure about Cindy's story of how that guy died." Spence twisted his hands together, staring into the dying fire.

"What do you mean? His death looked straightforward enough to me." James leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees, completely alert and listening.

Spence's eyes didn't leave the fire. "That blood trail I found ... you know, the splatters the Yowie left after the guy shot it ... well ... Oh, hell!" He looked up into James's eyes, his own troubled. "James, that blood wasn't more than a few hours old. She told us he'd disappeared three days ago. There wasn't a water bottle or food in his pack either. It just doesn't add up. If the guy went trekking on his own he would've taken supplies and if he'd just shot that Yowie we would've heard it. Something is screwy here and I can't figure it out, maybe you can."

James sighed. "Spence, this whole trip is unreal. Nothing out of the ordinary would surprise me anymore. Let's just let it lie until we have more information. Okay?" He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands. "I'm too tired to think much more about it tonight."

"You're right. We're all worn out and overwhelmed. But..." Seeing James's fatigue, Spence shut his mouth.

James gave Spence a hard look, daring him to open his mouth again, but the old man simply stood for a few moments studying James, then he nodded and went to his tent without further comment. James lowered his face down into his hands and let out a deep breath. His shoulders slumped and his eyes closed with tired relief. When a pair of hands gently lit upon his shoulders and began kneading the hot, bunched muscles along his neck, he groaned with pleasure.

Sam moved her lips to within inches of his ear and whispered, "I was hoping we'd get some time alone tonight. I think we could both use a break

from the others right about now."

He raised his head and reached up to capture her right hand in his own. He gently pulled her around to face him. Smiling up at her with an unspoken intensity of emotion mirrored in his eyes, he gripped her waist with both hands and eased her down onto his lap.

In the firelight, her eyes shown softly luminous and her lips were full, moist and parted. A tremor ran through his body when he felt her settle onto his lap and sensuously wrap her arms around his neck, settling her head upon his shoulder. He held her close, burying his face into the sweet hollow of her collarbone. Her scent, the freshness of the rainforest combined with her unique womanly smell, overwhelmed him. His lips pressed against her damp skin, moving slowly, savoring her taste. His hand gently cupped one full breast, firm and unfettered, as his lips moved up along her neck. She shivered, her tongue slowly exploring the curve of his ear. Her warm breath sent shivers through him and his breathing quickened with hers.

I could spend the rest of my life holding her like this. Tasting the thought, James knew it felt right ... real.

A high pitched screech of rage, followed by a series of snarls and growls reverberating throughout the forest, instantly chilled James's heat. Sam gasped, frozen in place. He tensed and eased her off his lap, then he stood, nudging her behind him. "Sam, go wake up the women, then all of you stay in the tent until I tell you it's safe to come out." His whispered command set her in motion.

While she ducked into the women's tent, he backed slowly toward the men's tents, eyeing the thick growth around the camp as he made his way there. Before he reached them, the men, in various stages of dress, rushed into the clearing, each donning heavy objects in their hands for weapons. Spence, a heavy fishing knife clenched in his fist, stepped up next to James and whispered, "What is it? I don't think I've ever heard that type of animal in the bush before."

Before he could answer, Sam ran out of the women's tent, breathing hard and wild-eyed. "Cindy's gone! She's not in there."

Ratana, fully alert and pulling a shirt over her head, appeared right behind her. "She's right, Uncle, the girl is gone."

"Oh, my God. You don't think that those ... those ... creatures might have her? That she's the one they're..." Marc, his face white and pinched with fear, was the only one who clung to his tent flap instead of joining the group now standing together in the clearing.

Nathan held his hand up to Marc, chopping off his words. All listened intently to the loud snarling and screeching taking place just outside camp. Sam clung to James's arm, standing steady but scared. Nathan slipped an arm around Ratana's shoulders, both sure that whatever happened was the will of the Old Ones. Spence held his long knife low and ready, his knuckles white around the hilt. Guilford, clothed in a silk dressing gown and standing alone in front of his tent by the creek, scanned the brush with a hunter's eyes. He held his heavy hunting rifle in the crook of his arm, ready to shoot if necessary.

Abruptly, the birds that had been flitting nervously throughout the trees disappeared. The wind died without a whisper and all sense of life receded. A heavy feeling of weight pressed down on them, saturating the air. After what seemed like hours, a low, gentle voice wafted across the creek. "It be only dingoes killing a roo. I be watching outside for you and no danger there."

A wizened and graying Ernie stood on the far bank of the creek under a big gum tree. He was still dressed in a dirty red headband and wrinkled pair of shorts, his hands tightly gripping his ancient carved spear. Only the moonlight gave his form any definition or detail when it glowed around him, giving him an unnatural look of power, like an awakened god of the rainforest.

Guilford jumped and swung the big rifle around in reaction to the voice. When he recognized the old man, he lowered the gun. "Bloody hell,

Dingo! You gave me a fright! Where the bloody hell have you been off to? I could have used your help with this bloody tent!"

Laughter erupted, abruptly ending his tirade. He turned with feigned dignity and glared at Sam, who led the way, her face becoming red as her laughter gained in volume.

Ernie slowly shambled toward the water then turned back to beckon behind him. When Cindy came into view and took his hand to cross the creek, Sam's laughter choked off. "Cindy! She's with Ernie. Thank God!"

Nathan and Ratana walked past Guilford without a glance, their attention riveted on the old Aboriginal man wading through the water. When he stepped onto the bank next to Guilford's tent, they moved forward and both nodded in respect. Ernie nodded in return and continued forward, Cindy beside him. He walked up and faced James. "The girl be unhurt. She know not where she be." He dropped the girl's hand and turned back toward Guilford's tent.

Sam stepped up and took Cindy's hand, peering closely into her face. "Cindy? Honey, where have you been? Why did you leave the camp?"

The girl seemed disconnected and unsure of herself as her eyes found and focused on Sam's face. "I ... I don't know. All I remember is the old guy taking my hand and now seeing all of you here." Her voice bordered on panic.

Sam slipped an arm around her shoulders and led her over to the campfire to sit down. James and Spence walked over to speak to Ernie, who stood beside the creek pointedly ignoring Guilford's demands for service. The old man spoke quietly to Nathan and Ratana, their heads bent together in conference. Before the two men could reach Ernie, he waded back across the creek and disappeared into the trees.

Guilford stood, hands on hips and a look of pure rage on his face. "What the bloody hell does he think he's doing?" He shouted to Ernie's retreating back. "Come back here, you lazy Abo! You worthless..."

Spence stepped up and hit Guilford squarely on the nose with all his wiry strength. Guilford hit the dirt like a bag of soggy laundry. Spence, rubbing his knuckles, grinned at what he'd done. "There. Now you're no longer worthless." He wiped the clay on his boots onto Guilford's silk dressing gown, exposing the Englishman's red silk thong in the process, nodded with satisfaction at James and stalked away, heading for his tent and the bottle inside it.

Shaking his head and ignoring Guilford's exposed state, James turned back to Nathan and Ratana. "What did he tell you?" His tone held a willingness to listen respectfully to the old man's words.

Ratana's face registered distress but Nathan's voice remained calm and steady. "He said the Yowies are angry at the white men. He also told us we should not enter the portal when we reach it."

James glanced over his shoulder to see if the others were still at a distance. Spence was returning from his tent with a cup in hand. He quickly turned back to Nathan. "Should the others know this? Did he say what the portal is we should look for?"

"That's all he said, Uncle. I know you are to know of these things and maybe Spence too but not the others, I think." Nathan nodded at the two women, now joined by Marc, sitting around the fire.

James nodded in agreement just as Spence joined them. "What's up? What did the old bloke have to say?" His breath reeked of whiskey and James flinched when the fumes assaulted his nostrils.

James indicated Nathan. "You tell him, Nate. I'm going to ask Cindy a few questions." He started to turn and spotted Guilford sitting up, a hand to his swelling face. "It might be best if you talked away from here."

James slowly walked toward the fire, buying time to decide how to approach the girl. The fire, now stoked up again and flickering with renewed energy around a fresh pile of branches, gave the women's faces an eerie look. The play of shadows over Cindy's face as she talked quietly to Sam made James pause and study her closer. Shaking his head and mumbling about 'tricks of the light', he sat down next to Marc, who seemed content to just sit there and

listen.

Leaning forward on his knees, he fixed the women with a look of seriousness that halted their conversation. They looked at him expectantly. Pausing, he collected his thoughts. "Cindy, do you remember at all how you got outside the camp tonight?"

She straightened in her chair and stuck out her chin. "No, I don't. All I remember is going to bed, drained and tired. Then I came to in the middle of the forest with that Aboriginal man standing in front of me. He brought me here. That's all I remember."

"That's exactly what she's been telling me, James." Sam patted the girl's arm and smiled at her. "I think she's telling the truth." She turned an irritated look on James. "It happened to me too, remember? Why is this so important to begin with?"

He leaned back, resisting an urge to snap at them. "Everything is important. After all we've seen and heard you don't know that yet?" He took a deep breath. "Look, there's so much happening here and all of it, so far, has come fast and furious. We hardly have time to think, much less analyze what it all means. Forgive me for pushing but we need to know what we're in the middle of. Sorry, Cindy. Why don't you ladies go grab some sleep?" He looked around at Spence, Nathan and Marc, all now wide-awake and tense. "There'll be plenty of guards tonight, I think." He flashed them a brief smile then hit Marc on the leg. "Come on, Marc, let's go see what we can do to make the ladies feel safer."

He stood and, without waiting for Marc's response, stalked back to Spence, Nathan and Ratana. They stood by the women's tent, talking quietly together. Guilford had disappeared into his tent. James announced, "I won't be sleeping much tonight. If anyone wants to bed down, go ahead. There will be someone on guard all night." He looked questioningly at the men. Nathan shook his head in the negative and Spence snorted in derision. Ratana, seeing the women making their way toward them, remarked, "Someone has to get some sleep. Looks like the women are the only ones with common sense around here." She smiled and ducked into the tent.

Spence, Nathan and James moved away from the entrance when Sam and Cindy approached. Sam smiled at them but Cindy stared straight ahead, her mind turned inward and her face reflecting uneasiness. They entered their tent and James could hear Ratana's greeting to the pair.

Spence watched them go and muttered, "She's right. We have no common sense. If we did, we'd have brought elephant guns with us on this trip."

"Elephant guns? I'm hoping the good war fairy air drops us some rocket launchers tonight." James's grin flashed against his tanned face and a throaty laugh erupted from his mouth. When he saw Spence wasn't laughing with him, he added, "Weapons aren't the answer here, Spence. We're not like Ian or King and I think the best thing for us to do is trust in the fact that we know we're supposed to be here."

"Trust? Trust in what? That we don't have a real clue as to what we're looking for? Trust that those beasts won't tear us limb from limb while we sleep? Right, James!" Spence snorted with derision.

"I guess grandfather is right after all." When he saw Spence's look of confusion and curiosity, he continued, "He always told me the secret to life is taking stumbling blocks and making them into stepping stones." He took a deep breath, savoring the cloying scent of the forest, turned his eyes to the sky and murmured, "Looks like we've been given the blocks to work with, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, in more ways than one ... and the first block I intend to make over is Guilford's head." Spence burst out laughing when he realized his joke could be taken two ways.

The momentary humour of the situation seemed the only way to remain sane until the sun came up again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The harsh Australian sun rose too high in the sky, blistering the clearing with its heat before the camp was packed up and ready to move out. The disturbances during the night, and the lack of sleep resulting from them, had everyone on edge, sluggish and tired before the day had a chance to begin. After a hasty breakfast of damper bread, honey and coffee, the women surprised everyone by cleaning up the camp and being the first ones ready to go.

Sam mopped at the sweat making her hair stick to her forehead. "My God, this place is humid and hot ... and it's not even nine yet." She took a deep breath and pushed some damp strands off her face. Ratana offered a rubber band. Sam flashed a grateful smile at her as she quickly put her long hair into a ponytail. Seeing Marc and Guilford taking their time standing in the creek filling canteens with water, she raised her voice in protest. "Come on, fellas. Even the shade under these trees is hot enough to fry an egg in. Let's get going!"

Marc shouted back. "We're almost done. Don't get your panties in a bunch."

The laughter from the other men working around the campsite took their toll and the women, after a pause, joined in. Ratana bantered right back. "We don't wear panties, Marc. That way you don't have anything to try to get into." The women roared louder than the men did when Marc's reaction to this declaration was to slip in astonishment and sit down hard in the middle of the stream, his shorts soaked and a look of surprise on his face.

Stifling a giggle with a hand over her mouth, Cindy eased her pack down under the tree and then sat down on it. "I don't know why this seems so funny, but it is." She giggled again.

Marc stood up, glaring at all of them then, canteen in hand, he walked out of the creek with as much dignity as he could muster. Guilford had long since distanced himself and now stood under a clump of trees, pretending to inspect something in his pack. James, Spence and Nathan each shouldered a heavy pack and met Marc in the middle of the clearing.

Marc stooped down to his pack and began unbuckling the straps. James frowned down at him. "What are you doing? We have to get going."

"I can't hike all the way back to the Rover in wet clothes. Besides, I need some socks and shoes on my feet." His caustic rude answer set James's teeth on edge.

"Look, Marc, it's bad enough you've roped Nathan into taking you back without holding him up so he has to walk in the midday heat." He watched with disgust as Marc ignored him and took his time picking out a pair of socks.

He turned to Nathan. "Nate, sorry about this but when you get back to the Rover, there's one more thing you have to do. Use the mobile phone in the car and call the authorities. Tell them about the hitchhiker we found. You might have to stick around and lead them to his body. You'll have to tell them about Ian too. Explain why we buried him." He grimaced at the thought then clapped Nathan on the back. "Get back to us as quickly as you can. We'll leave clear markers on the trail for you to follow." He looked down at Marc's bent head. "And don't take any crap from this joker." He stalked off, leaving Marc giving him an explicit gesture with one finger aimed at his retreating back.

Spence grabbed Nathan's forearm with a hand. "Go with the eye of the Great One upon you, my friend. I'll be watching for you tonight." He nodded at James and they moved off toward the women, leaving Nathan to hurry Marc along.

Guilford stood outside the group but watched everything with beady-eyed interest. Spence spat on the ground and inspected him with a wry smile. "Hey, King. How's the nose today?"

"Sod off, you bloody savage." Guilford sneered and wrestled with his pack, struggling to get it on his back. When he had it in place, he settled his heavy hunting rifle into the crook of his arm, arrogantly raised his chin and gave Spence a look of challenge with hate-filled eyes.

Spence spat again, grinned and moved to stand beside James. "Ready when you are, mate."

They moved off into the heavy growth with James in the lead and Spence sandwiching the women between them. Guilford trailed behind, grunting under the unaccustomed weight of a pack and rifle. The women walked closely to each other, heads bent and talking with lowered voices and animated gestures.

The midday heat made walking even in the shade unbearable. Soon the only sounds coming from any of them were grunts when the occasional leech was pulled off a leg or arm, or a groan when the strap of a backpack dug too hard into an aching back muscle. All were determined to keep on walking and refrain from complaining. They trudged on with grim determination until James called a halt and led them to a tall stand of thickly leafed trees. They eased their packs off straining backs with an obvious moan of relief.

Sam rubbed the small of her back with both hands then stretched, moaned again, and eased herself down under a tree covered with brilliant red flowers. The heavy, twisted tree branches arched over her head, filling her nostrils with the heavy scent of Frangipani. She leaned heavily against the trunk, closed her eyes and sighed with contentment.

Ratana soon joined her, while Cindy stationed herself under a neighboring tree and peered anxiously up the trail. Ratana eased gracefully down onto the thick growth under the tree and took a sip from her water bottle. She smiled at Sam and offered the bottle.

Sam took a sip and was surprised to taste a sweet lemony flavor on her tongue. "This is good. What is it?"

Ratana retrieved the bottle and tucked it back into her pack. "It's an ancient Aboriginal secret." A broad, white-toothed grin lit her face up.

Sam leaned back against the tree and picked a tall blade of coarse iron-colored grass. She inspected it with a studied action. "Ratana..." Her gaze lifted from the blade for a moment then dropped back to it quickly. "What happened to James in Jamaica?"

When the silence drew out, Sam glanced at Ratana for a reaction. Ratana was sitting stiffly, staring off into the thick brush. Before Sam could apologize for asking too personal a question, Ratana replied, "He won't talk about it much but I know his obsession with the paranormal began there. His family lived on some kind of plantation and one night ... something ... attacked all the white people on the island in a killing frenzy. James was saved by a black family that he was close to, but his parents were mysteriously killed."

Sam gasped. "My God, that's horrible. You said 'mysteriously'. What killed them?"

Ratana turned to face her, eyes black and intense. "Nobody seems to know, not even James. All he could find out was that some paranormal event connected to the local people's religious beliefs had something to do with what happened. He could never find out any more than that. It was hard for him to give it up too. But, he found a way to deal with it. I think that's why he's so obsessed with these mysteries. I think he's driven by his own fear. I also think he needs to face it and destroy it; or at least understand it ... somehow."

Sam chewed on the blade and asked around it, "How did he end up here, on an Aboriginal settlement?"

Ratana shook her head in wonder. "I suppose you don't know what an uncle is?" When Sam's head came up in puzzlement, she snickered. "When James's parents died, he was left an orphan. He was only sixteen so the authorities sent him here to be raised by his people. Mick took him and raised him like a grandson." When it dawned on Sam what that meant, a light of understanding lit in her eyes. Ratana nodded and continued, "That's right, James's mother was half Aboriginal. He's my uncle not only because I respect him like I told you the other day, but because I'm the daughter of his adopted sister." Ratana dug a finger into the loose soil beside her hip. "My mother died when I was small and James practically raised me. Nathan too. He has a great need to protect people, especially those he loves." Her great, brown eyes peered up through thick black lashes and watched Sam with interest.

Sam threw the mangled blade of grass down and gazed at James talking with Spence. "He's a man of deep passions," she murmured.

"Yes," Ratana stated, matter-of-factly and joined her scrutiny of James to Sam's. "I shouldn't have told you. It's his business and he'd be upset if he knew I told you."

Sam turned back to Ratana and placed her hand on Ratana's forearm. "I'm glad you did. Now I can understand him..." Her hand dropped away. "And that's becoming important to me. I started off just wanting a good story ... now, it's far more than that ... far more."

Ratana nodded, a knowing smile on her lips. Sam blushed and turned away to watch James once again. Ratana's gaze swept over the trail until she spotted Cindy standing alertly under a tree and peering fixedly into the thick brush lining the part of the trail they'd just traveled. Ratana frowned as she watched the strange girl. When Sam stirred, Ratana asked, "Do you know what's going on with Cindy? Ever since we left camp she's been staring off into the bush like she's expecting something to be there."

Sam swiveled her head to look at Cindy's stiff body. She put a hand up to shade her eyes. "You're right, she does seem to be waiting for something ... either that, or she's scared." Sam's hand dropped to lap. "After all, her boyfriend was killed by something strange out here. I'd be paranoid too if it happened to me." Sam peered around at the swaying brush, unconsciously inspecting it for any abnormal movement. "This is a dangerous country, a very dangerous country."

Leaning over to Sam, Ratana whispered, "That it is, my friend." Ratana chuckled. "By the way, I think I should warn you that there are green ants all over this tree. I'd suggest you get away from them. They bite." She laughed, deep and throaty when Sam came springing up from the ground, shouting a string of swear words as she frantically shook her head and brushed her clothes at the same time.

Ratana turned her around and began to brush the ants from Sam's back. "You know you can turn the table on these little devils too. They taste fantastic on a hot day; just like lemons. Give it a try and bite 'em back." Ratana laughed again.

James strolled over. Cocking an inquiring eyebrow at Ratana's continued laughter, he tried to pick the ants out of Sam's swinging ponytail. "Hold still. I'll get them out." He held her chin with one hand while plucking them out with the other. "Ratana, you might want to keep in mind that our guests are not as well versed as we are when it comes to dangerous things in our country." He looked meaningfully at Ratana's blushing face. "People have been known to die here because of ignorance."

When he'd inspected her head thoroughly and pronounced her free of pests, Sam took a deep breath and fumed at him. "Isn't there anywhere in this country where you are free of biting wildlife?"

A crooked grin broke out on his face, deepening the dimples she'd only had a glimpse of before. "Nope. The whole country is covered with them. From now on, check before you sit on something." He chuckled and turned back toward Spence, who had walked ahead to inspect the trail.

As he walked away, she heard him add in an offhand manner, "By the way, you might want to check inside your clothes too. Those things get into everything and they bite hard."

Swear words, louder than before, followed his back. Snickering, he caught up with Spence and squatted down next to him. "Find anything?"

The old man's finger traced a line of markings deep in the clay next to the track they followed. "I don't know yet. I've never seen anything like these marks before. What do you make of them?"

James leaned closer to the markings and froze. The markings clearly showed the same form as the obelisk's engraving of his totem; the totem his grandfather said was a symbol of his travels on this earth. Several minutes passed before he found his voice. "It's the same mark as on the black stone we found. It's the symbol Mick said belonged to me." His eyes rose to meet

Spence's, both sets filled with understanding.

"Searching for the law of the people. Looking for the vagina of the seven sisters. Tasting the breast of the mother. The woman leads, the father protects. The Rainbow Serpent dreams inside the testicles of the twins." Spence recited the chant Ratana had supplied at the park. "We're being led." His finger traced the marking lying in front of James's totem sign. It clearly showed the breasts of a woman pointing to the right of the trail.

"Do you two even know where we're going or is all this just guesswork?" Guilford's sarcastic voice succeeded in breaking the spell of the moment.

James's hand covered the markings while Spence stood up to face Guilford, who tried to crane his neck around and see what they'd been staring at for so long. "Back off, King. You're only being tolerated because James possesses a strong sense of honor. I, however, would just as soon gut you right here."

Spence's set face and the hand reaching for his sheathed knife were enough to send Guilford scuttling back toward the trees, a scowl on his face and curses spitting out of his mouth. Seeing him coming, Ratana and Sam decided to join James and Spence, leaving Cindy serenely chewing on an apple under the tree. Sam, still rubbing spots on her sweat soaked blouse, stalked over to face Spence. "Can't we get rid of that guy? He's dangerous, you know."

James, now rubbing out the markings with his hand, still squatted next to the faint trail they stood on. "Not yet." He stood up and faced her, a serious look settling his face into harsh lines. "Haven't you heard that old saying? 'Keep your friends close but your enemies closer.'"

She snorted in disgust. "Men!"

Ratana took a sip of tepid water from her canteen then fixed the two men with large brown eyes. "What did the signs say? Are we going in the right direction?"

"Signs? What signs?" Sam looked around with curiosity.

Spence glanced back at Guilford before replying. "Yes, we're going in the right direction. What we don't know is how long it will take to get where we're supposed to go. And, we don't know what to look for when we get there."

"We'll know." The certainty in Ratana's voice sounded unmovable. She turned to look back the way they'd come. "Nathan will be coming tonight. He has a message for you. Listen to it very carefully." With that cryptic pronouncement, she walked back to the tree trunk and sat down cross-legged on the thick growth next to Cindy. She reached into her pack and pulled out a clear plastic bag of dried fruit and began to eat, pointedly ignoring the faces staring at her.

Sam, hands on hips, shifted her gaze from Ratana, to James standing quietly beside her, then to Spence, who was wandering up the track, inspecting the trail again. She demanded, "What signs? You found some sign telling us which way to go? What is going on here? Why all the secrecy?"

James took her by the arm and moved her back toward the shade. "They were just some markings in the clay but they pointed off in the direction we've been going. Since nothing so far is outside the realm of science fiction at its worst, we'll follow them. As for secrecy, there is none ... except around him." He nodded toward Guilford, who now sat leaning against the tree, unaware of the green ants making a trail toward his exposed neck.

James glanced at Sam as she stared up at him, her face registering a comical look of disbelief and belief. He stopped just before they reached the trees, hot sun still beating down on the parts of his face not shaded by his old bush hat. "Look, Sam, I'm a scientist. I demand proof of everything but you have to admit, just like I've had to admit, that some things just can't be proven or measured; they just have to be believed. This whole thing is saturated with myth, fairytales and apparitions. We have no choice but to suspend disbelief and follow the way we're led." His words stumbled along then ended with a deep breath.

Her eyes softened. "I know that. I've known that from the beginning. I'm just mystified about you. The longer I'm around you and the more I see and

hear, the more of a puzzle you become to me. A scientist, who was raised in a small Aboriginal village, believes in spirits and monsters but has a warm, generous, honest streak running through him. I think you're probably a Pulitzer Prize winning story all by yourself." The tiny smile on her lips widened.

He frowned. "I sometimes forget you're a journalist."

"And that makes you like me less?" She bantered back, aware of the heat emanating between them as they stood close to each other.

He held his hands up in defeat. "I give up. Okay, I admit it ... I like you ... a lot." He stepped closer and whispered, "I thought I'd made that abundantly clear already." His dimples deepened with the secret smile he flashed her.

"You did." She moved her lips closer to his; the whisper of her words giving them added meaning.

"James! Come here!" Spence's excited shout served to bring them back to reality.

Stepping away from Sam, James put his hand up over his eyes to shade them and peered down the trail. He could see Spence hopping around and frantically waving his arms, beckoning James to come quick. "He looks excited about something." He smiled, dropped his hand and trotted down the trail. Spence continued to jump and bob around. James grabbed him by the shoulders. "Bloody hell, Spence, calm down. You're going to give yourself a heart attack. What has you acting like a flea in a fit?"

Spence stepped off the path and over to a small group of black rocks sitting in the middle of a totally bare spot. He stooped down, picked up one and tossed it to James. "These are the reason." The calm smirk on his face belied his body movements. He shifted from foot to foot like a restless teenager waiting for a date.

James inspected the stone, thunderstruck by its lightweight and the incredible precision of its sides. The stone shone, multi-faceted like a professionally cut diamond, capturing the sun's rays and sending brilliant hues of colors flying around the small cleared space of the path.

When Sam caught up with him and peered at what he held in his hands, she gasped. "It's the black stone ... just like the one up north."

Ratana, Cindy and Guilford, panting with exertion and out of breath, pushed their way closer to get a good look at it, each silent and tense with anticipation. Guilford shouldered his way next to James and took the stone from his hands without ceremony. Guilford then took a magnifying glass from his pocket and peered hard at the stone, muttering as he looked. "It has a faint pattern of geometric lines across the entire surface. They're not visible with the naked eye but I can just barely see them. They look like a matrix of connections of some sort." He raised the glass and stated, "This stone wasn't made naturally, that's for sure. An intelligent being carved those lines on it." He scratched his head with one hand while gripping the stone and the glass with the other. "Haven't a clue what the lines mean though. Might be some sort of energy focus." He stared at the stone, completely forgetting the other people around him as he studied it, deep in thought. He jumped when Spence snatched the stone out from under his eyes and glared at him. Guilford shot him a hard look then put his glass away with a snort.

Spence turned his back on King and pointed at the other stones, drawing the attention of the group to the small clearing. Six black rocks, identical in shape and size and cut with the same precision as the one James still held, sat in a perfect two meter circle inside the mound of bared earth. An indentation revealing the original location of the seventh stone sat precisely in the center of the circle. James stepped inside the circle, reached down and replaced it to its niche. Immediately, all the stones shifted and whirled until what remained defied description. James leapt back, his arms sweeping Sam and Ratana back with him. A circle of liquid light, reflecting all the colors of the rainbow, swirled around the center stone as it too shifted and

began to change shape. What met the startled, mesmerized stares of the onlookers was the three-dimensional image of an eye, blinking, intelligent and alive, staring back at them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

James and Spence backed up, the eye following their movements. The others stood behind them, transfixed by what their eyes registered but their brains fought to deny.

"What the hell is that thing?" Sam gasped when the eye fixed on her face in response.

The others pressed forward to look closer. Cindy peered between the two men's shoulders. "It's an eye and it's looking at us." She backed up further, huddled behind Sam.

Guilford fought to get beyond the people blocking his way. James held his heavily muscled arm out and prevented him from getting any closer. "Don't touch it. We have no idea what it is or what it can do."

While Guilford snarled in frustration, still trying to bypass James's arm, the eye, stoned and circle blinked out. What remained was a bare spot on the ground; nothing to even hint at what was there moments before.

Spence took a tentative step forward, leaning over to inspect the site. "It just ... disappeared." His bemused comment accompanied a shout of rage from Guilford.

"You stupid bleeding Aussie smegs! It's gone. We could've taken the stones and studied them. They were worth a fortune! Bloody damned idiots!" He hit out at James, rushed past him and proceeded to tear at the bare mound of earth with his hands.

"What are you doing, King?" Spence asked, sarcasm and disgust dripping from his voice.

"They must have gone somewhere, you sod. They have to be here ... maybe underground." He panted as he dug.

The group moved back toward the shade, all watching Guilford's progress, or lack of it. Shaking his head in disgust, Spence mumbled to himself while he sat down under a tree, his gaze still locked on Guilford's frantic digging. Ratana handed a water bottle to him and sat down next to him. "What do you think that thing was?" She picked up her pack, removed a bag of food from it then settled it behind her as a pad. She took a bite of a pear, keeping her eyes locked on Guilford's activities as well.

Following her lead, Sam took the opportunity to grab a handful of nuts and dried fruit from her pack and then also used the pack as a pillow. She offered some to Cindy, who stood staring off into the brush once again. When Cindy refused to acknowledge her offer, Sam shrugged and began to eat it herself. James, sitting on the other side of her, sat cross-legged in the shade, his thoughts turned inward while he casually played with a huge beetle moving slowly across his path. "I have no idea what it was or what it was doing. I know one thing, though, it'll probably be back."

Cindy finally sat down between Sam and Spence. When Sam shot an inquiring look at her, Cindy smiled back at her then cocked her head at James. Now relaxed and munching on dried fruit, Cindy sat up straighter. "What makes you say that?" She fixed him with a stare, her eyes full of childlike curiosity.

He continued to finger the beetle, impeding its progress across the grass. "Because it had a purpose, a reason for what it did. We just don't know what it is yet but that won't stop it from doing what it's supposed to do. Besides, it may not have even been real. It might have just been an illusion of some sort." He glanced up at her, a smile on his face. "Basic scientific observation."

"Does everything have to fit into the realm of scientific provability before it can be classified as real to you?" Sam asked between mouthfuls of nuts.

"That used to be the case. Now, I'm not so sure." He took a sip of

water and went back to the beetle and his thoughts.

Spence, leaning against the tree, his battered hat over his eyes and his knobby kneed legs crossed at the ankles and stretched out in front of him, lazily murmured, "We really should get on the move again, mate. Do you think we could leave that Pom bastard here to dig his way to China while we slip away?"

"I don't care about what he does with himself, one way or the other. But, you're right, we need to move on." James flicked the beetle in its hindquarters, sending it on its way, tucked his water bottle into his pack and stood up. His gaze swept over the others still lounging under the tree. "Ready when you are." He hefted his pack and settled it onto his back, waiting while the others did the same. Guilford, lost in his digging, continued to throw up handfuls of red clay. "You just might get your wish, Spence. He doesn't look like he's slowing down at all."

Spence, shifting his pack onto his back, took a moment to glance at Guilford then shook his head again. "The man will do anything for a buck or a camera."

With the men's help, the women donned their gear quickly and they moved as a whole back onto the track. Peering to the right where the marker indicated they should go, James ran his hand through his hair. "It's badly overgrown that way. I guess we'll just have to hack our way through. It's going to be slow going though."

Spence pulled out the large knife he always carried and moved into the brush. "Then we'll just have to make our own trail." His small frame moved fluidly through the tangle of vines and undergrowth, ruthlessly slicing through what resisted the pressure of his passage. The others followed single file, quiet and alert. James brought up the rear, his eyes scanning their surroundings for any signs left for them to find. He didn't notice the thick brush behind them as it rustled and swayed.

By the time the sun began to set and the air cooled down, the lightweight cotton shirt and shorts Sam wore felt like heavy wool soaked with sweat. She fell back to talk to James, his movements still alert to anything out of the ordinary. "How do you do it? I mean, keep on walking in this heat without becoming tired or sick to your stomach?"

Noticing her sweat-soaked clothes and her voice dragged down with fatigue, he remembered how grueling these hikes could be and how dangerous to those not used to it. He stopped and shouted to Spence. "Spence. Find a good spot for a camp. I've had enough for one day." When Spence's reply of 'okay' wafted back, he slipped his arm around her waist and started to move forward again.

She leaned toward him and planted a small kiss on his cheek. "Thank you." She beamed up at him as they walked together.

A half-hour later Spence called a halt and waited for James and Sam to catch up. He stood beside a ten-foot pile of boulders hidden in the middle of a thick stand of trees. The area around the site had enough clear space to pitch tents and a small stream ran beside the stack of rocks. "This ought to do the trick, I think." Spence beamed and pushed out his thin chest.

"Good show, mate." James slapped him on the back. He helped Sam slip the pack off her back then did the same and placed his beside the rocks. He slowly walked around them, inspecting them for nooks, crannies and small holes. "Looks like there's no danger of us camping on top of a snake nest." He then walked over and squatted next to the stream. Dipping his hand into the clear water, he drew up a palm full and took a sip. "Water's okay too." Standing back up, his line of vision scanned unconsciously over the rocks. Under the largest one he could make out a faded set of images etched into the stone. He knelt down and peered closer. "Well, I'll be stuffed. Spence, come and look at this." He pointed to the drawings.

Spence knelt down and tilted his head to see under the lip of rock. "I wondered about that."

"About what?" James's long fingers traced the grooves of the pictures.

"The horse, you're totem. It's not an Aboriginal animal, not even an Australian one. I wondered why they gave it to you and what it meant. Now I know."

James turned to Spence with understanding in his eyes. "This is the place I've been sent to find. There could be no other place with that sign on it." The words came out as a statement of fact, sure and confident.

James clapped Spence on the shoulder and stood up, Spence following him. They returned to where the women were sitting on their packs, fanning themselves with anything handy. James looked over the soft, grassy ground and pronounced, "It's a good place to spend the night."

Spence puffed out his chest again and grinned, then he began to unpack the tents and cooking gear. "Yep and we don't have that bloody Pommie prick to muck around with either. I'm a happy man." He chuckled and pulled out a tin cup, rapidly followed by a half-full whiskey bottle.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The kerosene lanterns hanging on the front of the tents threw the mound of boulders the group camped beside into bold relief. The tall, stately rocks took on the look of spotlighted works of art lit from below. Sam sat in her chair facing them and the fire, dinner plate in hand, a cup of tea by her feet, both forgotten. She stared at the way the light played over the smoothness of the rocks, contrasting with the crevices and cracks. Colored lichens of a muted green and blue sprinkled across the tops of every boulder. In the dim moonlight they took on a glowing yellowish-green iridescence. The contrast between the brightly lit bases and their glowing tops fascinated her. The lively argument between Spence and Guilford, who'd caught up with them an hour after they set up camp, much to Spence's disgust, had set her teeth on edge. Tired of the bickering, she'd momentarily tuned out, directing her attention to the primitive lure of the Australian landscape.

James leaned over and nudged her in the arm. "Hey, where are you? You've been staring at that pile of rocks for almost ten minutes now."

She sat her plate down on her lap and picked at the beans and dried beef Ratana had cooked up earlier. "I was just thinking about how beautiful, and how deadly, this country can be. Everywhere you look there are flowers and leaves as big as your hand and the wildlife here is breathtaking. But ... it can all kill." She turned her eyes up to his. "Can't it?"

His gaze shifted to the boulders. "Yes, it can. In the tropics, the plants, insects and reptiles are aggressive in their fight to stay alive. They have to be, there are too many predators here not to." Seeing her look of alarm, he rushed on. "Not the kind of predators you're thinking of; the kind that devastate plants and insects. Australia is the land of marsupials, remember? What I'm talking about is the toxins plants and insects make to protect themselves against each other and against birds and reptiles." He chuckled. "We do have our share of legends about the other kind of predators too, though."

"Oh? What legends?" Sam put her plate down on the ground then settled back, tepid tea in hand, listening with a look of intense interest on her face.

"Haven't you ever heard of the Queensland Tiger, or the Giant Monitor Lizards up north, or the Bunyips that are supposed to be hiding in the lakes and rivers here? All of them supposedly exist and eat people on rare occasions." He chuckled again at the startled look in her eyes. "Just like America, we have our share of strange, unfathomable beings here too. You have Bigfoot, we have Yowies, you have Champie, the sea monster, we have Bunyips, you have UFOs, we have UFOs, you have Bill Clinton and we have John Howard. You see? Our countries aren't that much different." He smiled when he saw her lips twitch then break into a grin.

"I don't think politicians count as aliens. Not yet anyway." She laughed, deep and throaty. "You must believe these myths have some basis in fact if you've spent your life tracking these stories down." Her smile became

bigger when his face flushed red. "Why do you do it, James? It's obvious to me you hate being a laughingstock and that you take it seriously. But why pursue these things when no proof has been found to support their existence?"

"Are you being the 'Journalist' now, or are you really interested?" His green eyes sparkled with reflected moonlight but his face reflected an intensity of emotion.

"I'm interested ... personally interested." Her lips parted and her eyes sparkled to match his.

"Hey you two! No private chatting. Especially when what you're saying is so interesting to all of us and you whisper so we can't hear it." Spence slapped his knee and guffawed with a loud burst of laughter.

Sam flinched, blushed and then bent to refill her cup, obviously trying to hide the look on her face. James, calm and smiling, turned to Spence, Ratana and Cindy. "And what were all of you talking about that is worth us listening to, eh?"

"Ratana was just telling me about the Aboriginal beliefs and how all this makes sense to her in view of those beliefs. Weren't you, Ratana?" Cindy volunteered.

"Yes, but you know the stories already, Uncle," Ratana mumbled, then fell silent.

"I know them but Sam and Cindy don't. Besides, it's not often I get to hear them again ... not since I've been at the Uni, anyway. Please, go on." He smiled and settled back in his chair to listen.

Taking a deep breath, Ratana faced the fire and, turning her attention inward, resumed her discourse on Aboriginal beliefs and how they dovetailed with the present circumstances. "The Aboriginal people have an earthbound philosophy. The earth gives life to a man, gives him his food, shelter, language and intelligence, and the earth takes him back when he dies. A man's 'own country', even an empty stretch of spinifex, is, itself, a sacred icon that must remain unscarred, uncorrupted. Aborigines believe that all 'living things' are made in secret beneath the earth's crust, as well as all the white man's modern things-his aeroplanes, his guns, his Land Cruisers-and every invention that will ever be invented; all slumbering below the surface, waiting their turn to be called forth; back into life."

She looked up and briefly locked her eyes upon the black peaks of the Glass House Mountains, now indistinct but solid against a star-studded night sky. The moonlight bathing the peaks gave them a look of ethereal magic.

She sighed. "This place is a sacred resting ground where they sleep. These mountains are the mother, father and children of the Old Ones. Even their names say as much." She disengaged her eyes from the towering black mountains and shifted them to those who sat around her listening with rapt attention. "That's why we were called here. They have waited, listened, watched and learned, now they beckon for us to come to them again. It is time for the sleepers to awaken ... time for the final act to play out."

"Sleepers? What sleepers? You mean the Old Ones themselves will come back from below the earth and actively take part in things now?" Sam leaned forward, her eyes bright with interest. A small frown creased her forehead. "Final act?"

A loud thrashing in the bush, followed by an even louder shout, brought the conversation to an abrupt halt. "Oroo! Hey you blokes in the camp!" Nathan ducked under the low branches of a lone Flame tree and stepped into the clearing. He grinned when he saw their startled faces, the firelight flickering over them in strange patterns. "All of you look like ghosts. Or did you think I'm one meself?" He chuckled and dragged a foldout chair over to the fire. "Give us a cuppa will ya, Ratana?" He rubbed his hands over the fire and gratefully took the hot cup when she passed it over to him. He sipped the tea and sighed with contentment then looked back into the trees with concern. "Come on out, Marc. You can't hide forever." He chuckled again when Marc walked out of the bush looking shamefaced and the worse for wear.

Loud rustling and high-pitched squeaks followed Marc's progress through

the tree. He spun around, his face white and pinched. "Not again!" He slowly backed away from the tree toward the light of the fire.

Spence shouted about the cacophony of noise from the wide canopy of the tree, "It's okay, mate. It's only fruit bats. They won't bite you."

Marc turned and moved quickly to the fire. "This damned country is dangerous. It's uncivilized." He was breathing hard and took a few minutes to calm down.

James, filled with amused curiosity, switched his gaze between Nathan and Marc, waiting for an explanation. When none came immediately, he shook his head, then settled upon Marc when he lowered himself down into a chair beside Sam. "So you decided to stick it out, eh? Good on ya, Marc."

Nathan found a chair and reached out for a cup of tea. When he had it in his hands he leaned forward to reply. "Nope, mate, he didn't. We've been trekking all today going toward the mountains like we planned. I know me way in the bush but I have to admit, this one has me stumped." He took a sip of his drink. When he looked up he had a frown on his face and a look of bewilderment in his eyes. "We followed the same path in the direction we came from but ... we ended up here. When I saw the lights it drew me up short but here we are." Seeing the assortment of shocked, confused and curious faces staring at him, he shrugged and stated, "I can't explain it."

"I can." The deep, low voice of Ernie, although barely above a whisper, sounded clear and strong across the clearing. He stepped out from behind the high stack of boulders and pointed a long spear at a circle of black stones that hadn't been there before he arrived. They looked identical to the stones they'd found earlier, the etched markings on each one glowing in the flickering lights. His deep brown eyes glimmered with moonlight when he nodded at the circle of startled faces now fixed on him. He stood erect and proud, clothed in native dress, his grizzled gray hair still held down with a bright red headband. He pointed his spear at the circle once again and sang out a series of strange, melodic notes only he understood. Stamping his bare feet in the dust, he declared, "It is time."

The stones dissolved, moving in a clockwise direction, until they became the same swirling pattern of rainbow colors that had held the group in awe earlier. A ring of multicolored hues threw blinding shafts of light beams around the campsite, giving it the appearance of a party sprinkled with the shattered facets of a disco ball.

Silently, they all stood and approached. Circling the spot now remolding itself, they all stared into it with awe and wonder. James spoke first. "What is it, Ernie?" His voice trembled when he spoke. He lifted his eyes to meet those of the old man, a look of deep respect in them.

Without answering, Ernie stepped closer to the ring of light, waved his spear over it and closed his eyes. Within moments, the circle began to enlarge, widen and rise like a plate standing on its rim. It shifted and changed, soon becoming a tall rectangle of pure misty light.

Ratana gasped. "It's a doorway. The doorway to the underground resting place of the Old Ones." She turned to Nathan and grasped his hand, her face alive with joy. "Nathan, you were right all along. You were right."

Sam grabbed James's arm and trembled. "Do you think it's the thing we've been searching for? The thing you're supposed to find?"

Before anyone could answer, the doorway moved back and settled into the face of the boulders, molding itself to the rocks. The boulders shimmered, giving off heat waves, without the heat. The rocks shifted, turned and finally became a larger version of the obelisk they'd found north of Crocodile. Its shiny black surface caught and reflected the light still shimmering around the portal leading into it.

"It is the portal to the Old Ones. You have been invited. Come." Ernie moved into the light and disappeared from view.

Before anyone could act, Guilford King stepped in front of the portal with a large handgun poised level at James's stomach. "This is my discovery. I'm going in there and anyone who follows will be shot." The shadows dancing

over his small features gave him the look of a rabid weasel. His dark eyes danced over the group of people assembled before him, waiting for somebody to challenge his claim. Spence growled under his breath and clinched his hands in frustration. James tensed for action, Sam stared at King, and Ratana froze with alertness.

When Nathan stepped forward, Ratana moaned and reached out to stop him. Nathan faced King with a look of pained confusion on his face. "Peter Howard told you where to find us, didn't he? That's how you knew where to look and what we were looking for, isn't it?"

James frowned at Nathan. "What are you talking about, Nate? What does Peter Howard have to do with all this and him?" He nodded at Guilford, who now looked as confused at the turn of events as James did.

Nathan turned his head toward James and lifted his head up high before answering. "I have betrayed you, Uncle. Peter Howard has information about me and my friends that he threatened to use if I didn't help him." His head sagged with shame, unable to sustain any dignity under the look of shock on James and Ratana's faces. "He made me tell him where we were going and he made me promise to make sure the old Pom got there first instead of you." His head sunk even further down. "I am so sorry, Uncle, so very sorry." His voice had dropped almost to a whisper.

Ratana reached out to Nathan and held his arm. "What could he know about you and your warriors to make you betray our people and our friends?" she asked gently, her eyes large and liquid with worry.

Nathan grabbed her hand and held on tightly to it as he answered in a monotone. "One night two men came onto the settlement. They came to defile the burial places of our revered ones. I and my warriors caught them at it. We beat them as a lesson and let them go. Later, we heard that they had died and we knew we would be jailed for murder if anyone found out. I swear to you, we did not beat them so bad that they would die." His eyes pleaded with them to believe him. "But when they did die, I knew that I could not allow my men to die in jail. There have been too many black deaths in custody." His hand dropped to his side. "Peter Howard sent a message to tell me that he knew about it and would turn us in if I didn't help him stop you from finding the truth of the black rock. He was angry that you found the first one and he didn't. I was to stop you and fix it so King would find it instead. I could not do it in the end."

Sam stepped forward. "How did he know about that night, Nathan, unless he was there ... or someone else was there who told him?"

"Eddy! It could only have been him. He must have been with those men that night and saw you. I bet he arranged those men's deaths, too, so his uncle could have something on us." The anger in Ratana's voice was edged with certainty.

Guilford sputtered with disgust. "This is all so very enlightening but I have a date with fame and I am eager to be on my way." He took a step back toward the rock then hesitated. He waved the gun at Nathan and sneered. "You are quite right, of course. Peter and I have a deal. He finds the artifacts and I go get them, we both get credit for the find, which furthers our careers, I get to write the books, not to mention a pot of money." He chuckled with satisfaction.

"I thought you were after fame and glory, King. That's what you always claimed anyway. Especially when you were caught with artifacts that turned out to be hoaxes," James sneered.

"Well, for the record, old boy, I much prefer the money and lots of it. Now, if you have nothing of interest to add to this dull conversation, I have a mystery waiting for me to solve." He smiled coldly and stepped toward the portal.

When Guilford's eyes were focused on the opening, Nathan made his move. He threw himself toward Guilford, hitting the older man with enough force to crush him. Nathan grabbed the gun out of his hand and tossed it toward James. Panting hard, the young man stood and pulled Guilford upright with one hand.

Nathan glared into his face. "I no longer care about Peter Howard or what he can do to me. I cannot betray my people or my family." He shook Guilford hard enough to rattle his teeth then shoved the man away with contempt. Guilford landed beside the rocks and lay still.

James stepped up and grabbed Nathan's arm. "It doesn't matter what Howard has on you, Nat, I'll stand by you and so will the rest of the clan." He nodded then added, "You did the right thing anyway. You beat him. You should be proud of yourself for that."

Nathan smiled. "You're right, I beat him." He stood up straight and pointed at the portal still waiting for them. "We must go now. We don't know how long it will stay open."

James reached down and took Sam's shaking hand. "I've waited all my life for this." He grinned at her. She smiled back and nodded her head. They took a deep breath and stepped through the doorway.

Guilford rose shakily to his feet and leaned against the rock. He remained silent but his eyes were focused pinpoints of hate and concentration as he watched Spence move toward the portal with single-mindedness.

"Father, I have finally ended my search," Spence whispered, fingering the greenstone tiki of the Maori that had hung around his neck since birth. He didn't hesitate. He trotted into the light.

Guilford reached out to grab Spence's faded shirt and shouted, "You can't go without me, you bloody..." Guilford's body disappeared inside the rock with a wink.

Marc stood there with a look of sheer terror on his face. "I can't. I can't. I won't."

Nathan patted him on the shoulder. "It's okay, mate, you don't have to but Ratana and I do. Bye, Marc." He patted him one last time and turned to the portal, glancing at Ratana's face with a look of anticipation. "Ready?" She nodded, biting her lower lip.

Before they could step forward, Ernie appeared back out of the portal and turned to watch it disappear, leaving only the blank face of the obelisk behind. He turned to face Ratana and Nathan, who had tried to rush past him but failed to do so before the entrance vanished. "You must stay here with me. It is commanded."

His face, granite-like and deeply etched with age lines, didn't move or show any emotion when they loudly protested. "We have to go! We've come all this way..." Ratana's face registered anguish while Nathan's showed simmering anger at the old man who still blocked the way.

Ernie held up his hand. "No! You cannot go." He turned to look at the blank wall of the obelisk once again. "This time is for them. Your time will come." He stood immovable in front of them, the stern features of his face fading into darkness when the firelight began to die down.

"Who are you?" Nathan whispered, fear trembling in his voice.

"Your future," the old man replied as he stared with deep, black eyes into their faces.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The sound of dripping water echoed off sheer walls so high that light from the one smoking torch fixed to the wall could not reach the ceiling. Rivulets of deep red fluid ran down invisible grooves where they had made their descent for eons. A dim light emanated around them. Sam dug a matchbook out of her pocket and lit another torch she found leaning against the rock, holding it up to get a better look at the solid stonewall behind her. She blinked with surprise when she touched the stone, realizing it was the portal she'd just stepped through. Squinting against the smoke and dim light, she held up the torch and peered into the darkness beyond. "James! Where are you?" Her voice trembled with fear.

He appeared out of the darkness like a wraith, holding a smoking torch in front of him like a flashlight. When he saw her backed against the wall, he smiled to reassure her. "I'm here. I was just taking a quick look around." He

stopped abruptly. "Wait a minute here. If we came through the portal at the same time, how come I got here before you?"

Sam stepped away from the wall. "I don't care how. Besides, this whole trip has been unbelievable so far. Why should one more strange thing bother us?" The relief in her voice turned into a dry humor.

She turned to peer up at the wall again, pointing at the red glow of the water. "What do you suppose that is?" she asked. "And where the hell did the opening go we just stepped through?" She ran her hand over the rock again, searching for any seam or crack that would give away the opening.

James lifted his torch and peered at the wall. "There doesn't seem to be any opening here. But, then, this whole thing seems to be one magic trick after another so I suppose nothing should surprise us anymore."

Sam turned around to face him. "Magic? I don't think so," she replied. "More like Lord of the Rings come to life." She sighed. "Any more of this spooky shit and I'll be marked for life."

James stepped up to her and smiled. "Speaking of marked for life ... Turn around again, Sam. You have something on the back of your pants."

Her eyes widened and she gingerly turned her back to him. "What is it?" Her voice trembled.

His hand ran over the tight curve of her right buttock and she shivered. "It looks like red paint," James stated. "You must have gotten it on you when you backed into the wall we came through." He pointed to stain patterns running across and down the wall's surface.

When Sam held the torch closer to inspect the wall they'd stepped through, she gasped. "It looks like the walls are bleeding."

James reached up and lightly touched the damp wall. He rubbed his fingertips over the slimy fluid then he smelled it. "It's not blood. It's red clay dissolved in water. I had no idea there was this much water under this area ... under the entire continent, for that matter."

"Where the hell are we and where does this go?" Sam asked, shivering.

"I was exploring it when you yelled," he replied. "This seems to be one big open cavern and, from what I can tell, there's a big underground river in here too. Come on, I'll show you."

Holding their torches high, they moved further into the cavern until they heard the echoes of running water. James swiveled around, his torchlight throwing shadows over boulders strewn here and there as if a huge child had thrown them away as forgotten toys. Down the middle of the cavern, there ran a wide, placid stream of water, an underground river.

Sam moved close to James. "Where are we? Do you know? And where are the others?"

He gripped the torch and peered into the darkness as much as he could. "Ernie was here waiting for me when I came through. He handed me this torch and then just melted into the dark. I don't know where he is now." He turned around in an arc, peering hard into the darkness. "As for the others, I have no idea either. If you came so late behind me then they might take awhile to arrive, I'd say. There must be some kind of time warp here. That's the only explanation I can come up with at the moment." He looked down into her face and wanted to kiss her. Instead, he stated, "You're right. Everything has been so strange that we have no right to expect normality now." He chucked her under the chin and turned back to look around.

"We'll never find this tour available at any travel agency, that's for sure." Sam laughed. "Do you have any idea where we may be now? Are we inside the mountain, you think?"

"One of them. I'm not sure but I think we're inside one of the Twins. The prophecy Ratana spoke of is coming true. Remember? Inside the Twins sleeps the Rainbow Serpent?" He ran his hand over the smooth face of the wall once again. "This is odd, though. The Glass House Mountains are all volcanic plugs, yet these caverns are limestone and clay. They shouldn't exist here." He shook his head, still fingering the slimy walls.

"What I don't understand is why Nathan, Ratana and Ernie weren't let in

with us. It would make more sense to me to invite the Aborigines than us," he stated as he turned to squint into the dark cavern.

"Well, there must be some logical reason. So far, everything has had a purpose. You haven't steered us wrong yet." Sam looked up into his face, her expression trusting.

He leaned down and placed a light kiss on her lips. "That's for believing in me ... but, for the moment, I'll reserve judgment about leading us in the right direction." He raised his torch to see a tall boulder, similar to those the obelisk had simulated outside, standing not six feet away on a red sandy surface. "From what I can see so far, and hear from the way our voices echo, this must be a huge cavern inside the mountain."

Sam sniffed the air, her head held high like a bird searching for signs of danger. "At least the air is fresh in here." She sniffed again. "But there's something else I smell too. I can't make out what it is though."

"That river is moving water, not stagnant." He sniffed the air. "I smell something odd too. Interesting ... but not bad. We need to explore and find out what's what here." He raised his torch overhead and began inspecting the wall for telltale signs of the entrance.

Spence, only feet away, rambled among man-sized boulders, inspecting the beaten pathways winding aimlessly between them. The light of his torch bobbed and weaved like an oversized firefly as he moved among them. When he reached another pathway that ended at the river's shore, he stopped, bent down and dipped his fingers into the water. He looked out at the river when James's words wafted across the cave. "Hey mate! About time you two caught up! This bloody cave is huge!"

His torchlight was insufficient to light his view of the furthest wall. "This bugger is wide and it's fresh water, not salt. Interesting. It must be at least twenty meters across." He moved further into the cool water, his old boots quickly becoming wet with red muddy water. "The Aborigines have told of an underground cave system and huge rivers running through them for centuries. I've heard about it but I didn't believe it until now."

James moved away from the blank wall of black rock that was open minutes ago. He reached down and picked up another crudely made torch and lit it with the one he held in his hand. He placed the newly lit torch in a notch in the wall that obviously had been carved out to hold it. "Speaking of Aborigines, where did Ernie go? And where are Nathan and Ratana? And how did you get here before us?" When he saw the bewildered look on Spence's face, James shook his head. "Never mind. Nothing makes sense here anyway."

Spence took a deep breath and turned back toward the jumble of rocks he'd walked around. "I don't know about the others but Guilford came through with me. The lousy bastard grabbed a hold of me then ran like a devil when we got here. I'd like to kill the slimy get." He turned his head to stare at James and Sam. "If I thought for one minute you'd let me, I would kill him too."

Ignoring the venom in Spence's words, James replied, "At least we know he's not armed anymore. The most damage he can do now is to talk us to death. Come on, Spence, we have to find the others and figure out where we are." James stepped toward the boulders in front of Spence.

"I wish old Ernie was here. He'd be able to tell us where we are and what all this means, I bet." Spence spit onto the red clay at his feet.

Sam shuddered, rubbing her hands over the gooseflesh popping up on her arms. "James says Ernie was standing here when he stepped through. I guess he lit the torch he handed to you then went back out. Or, were you here first Spence? I'm confused! We all came about the same time but we all arrived at different times. How can that be?" She glanced back at the smooth face of the wall. "And Nathan, Marc and Ratana didn't come through at all." She shivered again and looked up at James with round, frightened eyes, her pupils made large by the dim light and fear. They looked as black as the wall they all stood beside. "What is this place, James? Why were we brought here?"

He stepped closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "I don't

know yet but I think we'll be safe enough." He flashed a shaky smile down at her. "After all, we were invited, remember? Have some faith. First thing we need to do is figure out where we're supposed to go in this place, then I have no doubt we'll find out what we're supposed to do here." He squeezed her shoulder then moved forward toward the river of black water they could see through the jumble of titans littering a red sand beach. The flickering light from their torches threw shifting shadows across the faces of the huge, smooth rocks James and Sam moved through to reach the shoreline.

"Incredible," he murmured when he spotted what appeared to be a life-sized statue of a horse carved from the rock. It stood on the red sand beach bordering the river. The boulders seemed to be surrounding it. He stepped up to the carving and ran his hands along its sleek lines. "My totem," he whispered.

Sam ran her hand over the smooth surface, surprised and delighted by the silky feel of the rock. "It's beautiful. What does it mean?"

James stuck his torch deep into the damp sand then moved around the statue, inspecting the markings up close. "I don't know but I'm sure we'll find out sooner or later."

Spence, ignoring their conversation and seemingly unaware of the statue, squinted out across the dark water with a frown on his face. "There's something in there. Did you see that?"

Guilford, who had been dogging Spence's trail through the maze of rocks, stepped up, crowding him against a boulder in the process. "See what? What was it?" His breath came fast and hard with excitement. He craned his thin neck over the water, his torch outstretched to its fullest, in an attempt to spot the source of the disturbance in the water. A small wave lapped against his feet.

Spence pushed him away. "Get away from me, you bleeding Pommie bastard." He wiped at his arm, a grimace of distaste on his face. He turned and made his way along the shoreline to stand close to James and Sam, who were still examining the statue. "You found it, did you?" He too ran his hands over the horse, examining it in detail with his torch lighting every curve and line. "Other than the chisel marks on it, I can't see any other markings. Can you?"

James, lost in thought, his eyes and hands glued to the statue standing before him, remained silent. Spence rested his hands on the carving's back and commented, "This is odd. There have never been any symbols or cave drawings of horses in Australia. No horses at all, until European times, for that matter. Why would someone go to the time and trouble to carve one here of all places?"

James took a deep breath. "Well, I know that the earliest cave paintings from Europe were of the horse. It's one of the oldest everywhere else and Mick told me this totem is older than the oldest rock drawings. He said the horse was a symbol of what would come; what had to change." He ran his hand lovingly over the animal's flared nostrils. "The horse changed this country. The European settlements took it away from the Aborigines with horses and armies. Now the horse is back." His eyes burned with the flickering fire of Spence's torchlight. "It means a change is coming again; a big change."

Spence's eyes lingered on the whitened knuckles of James's fingers as they gripped the nose of the carving. "Why would it be your totem then, James? Are you the harbinger of the new Millennium?" The question, low and deep, reverberated with a depth of awe.

James relaxed his fingers. He began to stroke the long nose of the horse like he believed it to be a living thing. "I don't know, Spence. I wish I did." He took another deep breath. "But I do know we'll find most, if not all, of the answers somewhere in here." He glanced around, watching the water lap at his boots like a friendly dog.

Spence held his torch up higher and took a deep breath himself. "Yes, I know we will. I just wish we knew where and how and what beforehand." He chuckled. "Don't ask for much, do I?"

James smiled at him. "You're just getting old." Glancing into Sam's

troubled eyes he declared, "First things first. Let's get everyone together and search this cave thoroughly. There's bound to be a way out or another trail. It's just too dark in here to see it yet, that's all."

Sam, her hand resting on the neck of the carving, suddenly raised her head higher, glanced around and asked, "That reminds me, where's Cindy? Have any of you seen her since we came in?"

Spence held up his torch and searched the space around them. "I don't remember her even coming inside. Maybe she got locked out like the others." His voice held a note of uncertainty.

A shout off to their left bounced off the high walls, sounding almost like the roar of a crowd at a ballgame. James's head came up with a snap. He grabbed up the torch he'd stuck into the damp sand and headed at a trot in the direction of the shouts now coming at regular intervals. Sam and Spence ran close behind him, the light from their torches bobbing along the rock faces as they made their way along the path.

Abruptly, they came to a halt in a large clearing beyond the jumble of rocks they'd run through. Guilford stood beside a roughly made log boat, easily big enough to carry twelve people. A pair of crudely shaped oars lay beside it on the sand. When the group appeared, Guilford's eyes rose from staring at the boat's insides. "Took you long enough. I was debating whether or not to use this bloody thing by myself and just leave you here." He sniffed with disdain, his tone haughty and a fist on his hip.

Walking up to the boat, the trio ignored Guilford's preening declarations about how he'd found it and what they should do next. Spence walked around its rough-hewn hull, inspecting it with the eye of a licensing agent. James and Sam stood at the prow, their eyes searching up and down the riverfront for further discoveries.

After Spence had walked around the boat twice, he rubbed the grizzled whiskers on his face and turned to them with a grin. "Now ain't that fortuitous? This thing is made out of Eucalyptus and will certainly be around long after we're dust. It's watertight from the looks of it too. Wonder who left this here for us?" His head swiveling around and his eyes scanning what he could see lit by the torch light, he continued, "Well, there's plenty of water to put the boat into but no place to steer it once it's afloat, from what I can see. I wonder where we're supposed to go with this thing."

"There. That's where." Sam, now a few yards down the shoreline, pointed to a large opening in the wall several yards beyond her. It could just barely be seen in the dim light. The river flowed into it with a gentle gurgle.

"Right! Then let's be off. I can't wait to see what we uncover next. This is going to be a damned exciting book, I can tell you. I missed out on the Yowie and the black stones but this just might make up for it. Lots of money in this discovery alone." He chuckled.

James glared at him. "We're not going anywhere until we find Cindy. Our group sticks together, King." Seeing the look of rage suffusing Guilford's face, he glared harder. "And this boat goes nowhere until we find her. Understood?"

"Where has that damned girl got off to?" Spence walked down the shoreline, toward the tunnel the river flowed into. "Where is she?" Swelling his lungs to capacity with air, he bellowed, "Cindy! Where the hell are you, girl? Cindy!"

A calm, strong voice responded. "I'm here." She stood in front of the nearest boulder, on the path they'd just used. Her small body, still in tattered shorts and shirt, stood unnaturally stiff and still. Her eyes glowed when the torches the group was holding swung around toward her, highlighting the deep golden flecks within the dark brown.

Sam gasped and started to rush to the girl. James held her arm, preventing her from moving. She looked at him with consternation. "She doesn't look right, James. She might be hurt."

"Exactly. She doesn't look right. Stay here." He dropped his hand from her arm and moved slowly toward Cindy. "Cindy, where have you been? Are you

all right?"

His voice, low and reassuring, seemed to make an impact. Cindy's body relaxed as he approached. She focused large, liquid eyes on his face, the pupils so deep and fathomless they looked like unending wells of ebony. When he stood within arm's reach, she held up her hand to halt him in his tracks. Her entire body began to shake, the tremors starting at the top of her head and moving down her torso and legs, like the undulating motion of a snake. She threw back her head and howled like a wild animal in pain. The long hair she kept tied up in a ponytail came loose from its bindings and flew into the air when she whipped her head back and forth in a frenzy. It made her look like an enraged lion tossing its head in the wind.

James held his hands over his ears, attempting to block out the high keening of her voice as it climbed in volume and pitch. Stunned with the intense assault to his ears, he was unable to move from the spot he stood upon, his entire body helplessly anchored in place. "My God, please stop!" His bellow of pain almost overrode her screams.

Sam, Spence and Guilford still stood rooted around the boat, each as frozen in place as James, and completely powerless to help him. Sam's mouth stood open in a silent scream of her own but no sound could escape her locked throat. Spence grunted in frustration and rage, his face suffused with the pain of effort as he struggled to move.

When her screeching, along with James's howling, finally stopped and only the noise issuing from the slow movement of the water could be heard in the cavern, what remained where Cindy once stood made them wish that a mere scream was all they would be subjected to.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

James collapsed onto the sand, groaning with pain, still clutching his ears. The scream Sam held locked inside her throat erupted into the cavern with the force of a whirlwind. Spence instantly raced forward to James where he lay writhing in agony. He ignored the apparition towering over James's inert figure as he squatted down, wrapping his arms around his friend. Then he froze once again. Guilford took several awkward steps toward the figure looming over James and Spence. He gave the outward appearance of being drunk or drugged, uncoordinated and dazed.

All eyes fixed on the creature. It stood tall, solid, unmoving and silent, like one of the huge rocks rising behind it. Its golden eyes, white-ringed with terror, flickered from one human to the next in a never-ending circular dance. When its great mouth opened, large, yellowed fangs appeared. Its lips, unmoving, a hollow voice, seeming to come from far within the cavern of the beast's massive body, issued forth. "Do not fear. We mean you no harm."

James, propped against Spence's thin chest, shook his head and focused on the being that stood within inches of him. It towered over him, a good seven feet tall, and glistened a brilliant auburn when the silky mat of hair covering its entire body swayed with the creature's movements. Gasping for breath and struggling to his feet, he leaned heavily on Spence's arm. His eyes locked with those of the beast. "Who are you? What do you want with us?"

The deep, echoing voice issuing forth from the Yowie's mouth seemed to carry a touch of humor. "Patience, my friend. Patience. All your questions will be answered and all your quests fulfilled in time. The being you see standing before you is a child of the earth ... a beloved child. It means you no harm and will guide you to us. Have faith."

"No harm? You must be kidding! We saw one of these beasts tear a man into pieces small enough to feed a Taipan." Spence spat out his anger and fear but held his ground.

"That one deserved to die, as others do. We do not harbor foolish human notions that all of your species must live. Some of your kind, lesser-evolved strains, exist to serve their baser needs and wants ... and to harm others in the process. They bring destruction to all and to this world." The voice

paused and became softer, caring. "This being is not a beast. It is more than an animal but less than a man. It feels, it thinks, it cares. Tread carefully in your assumptions." The voice held a mixed note of warning and sympathy.

"Our species? What are you?" James now stood solidly on his own but well away from the Yowie rolling its eyes at him.

Sam, who had walked softly and carefully to join the men, now stood quaking in front of the Yowie. She looked deeply and fearlessly into its eyes. "What happened to Cindy, our friend?"

This time the voice did laugh. "You are looking at her now. This one volunteered to watch over all of you, to guide you and help you reach this place. This one is the same one you call Cindy."

Sam hesitated, bit her lip, then, determination on her face, stepped forward, reached up and placed a gentle hand on the shoulder of the Yowie. It trembled under her touch. "Hello, Cindy. I'm glad you're okay." She awkwardly patted the soft furry shoulder and waited.

The large, yellow eyes locked on Sam's, softened with a gentle look of curiosity, then glowed with affection and relief. The thin-lipped mouth curved into a smile and a hand twice the size of a man's tentatively raised to touch Sam's arm. The fingers felt her skin then gently patted it. Sam's face broke into a big smile. She turned her head toward James and Spence, who stood transfixed watching this display. "She smells like fruit and flowers. Don't be afraid. Can't you see she's scared?"

Spence shook his head in wonder. "That woman has the courage of a titan."

James took a deep breath and moved to stand beside Sam. He reached out and touched the silky coat of the arm still resting on Sam's arm. He sniffed, frowned, and then inspected the Yowie with the practiced eye of a scientist. Looking up into its face he asked, "Did Cindy kill the hiker? How did you manage to maintain her illusion of being human all this time? Is she..."

The voice cut him off in mid-sentence. "No! These beings are gentle and shy unless provoked or afraid. You must be patient. All will be explained. She will row you in the boat we left. We will meet soon." Then the Yowie's mouth closed and animation returned to its face, a tiny, fearful smile still on its lips. It dropped its hand and stood there ... waiting and tense.

"Can you talk on your own?" Spence bellowed, craning his head toward the startled animal but refusing to move any closer.

Sam spun around and pushed at his chest, sending him sprawling. "For pity's sake, Spence. She's not deaf and she's not a foreign tourist. You don't have to shout. Damn men and their sledgehammer ways!" She turned back to Cindy's trembling hulk and softly asked, "Cindy, can you speak? Do you understand us?"

The Yowie whimpered and tilted its head in confusion. Sam patted her on the arm and smiled into her face. "Don't worry. It's okay." She looked over her shoulder at the two men standing behind her, their faces a comical study in confusion and exasperation. "They won't hurt you. Come with me." She grasped a furry arm and tugged lightly, the smile still on her face. Cindy reluctantly followed with large, shambling steps, her head swiveling from side to side, trying to watch everything at once.

Sam led her to the boat and placed her in the front with all the delicacy of a bellman at the most expensive hotel in town. The men followed, muttering and whispering among themselves. Guilford, still anchored beside the boat's prow, slowly backed up when the Yowie approached. He hadn't uttered a word during the entire encounter or its subsequent outcome that led the creature to him. He now yelped and jumped behind James when she came near enough to reach out and touch him. "I don't believe it won't hurt us. This has got to be a trick." He gulped and hunkered further behind James's back.

James reached back and yanked him to the side. "Get a grip, Guilford. If it were going to harm us, it would have done it by now. Besides, didn't you hear what whoever-that-was talking through it said? Don't you believe your own eyes and ears?" James's disgust at the man's cowardice swelled when Guilford

tried to hide behind Spence. He shook his head and moved toward Sam, who now sat in the boat talking quietly to Cindy. When he reached them, he began placing smoking torches into slots designed for them along each side of the boat.

Spence sputtered and stalked off to enter the waiting boat. "Damn idiot yellow-backed Pommie bastard..."

When Guilford saw the Yowie placidly accept their presence and actually smile at Sam, he stood straight and tall as he smoothed his hunting clothes. He moved toward the boat, his head held high, looking down his nose the entire way. When he stepped into the back of the boat and sat down he snorted. "It's just a dumb beast after all. Should be shot and stuffed and sent to a museum."

When Spence turned with a raised fist, he strained his head up even further. "Touch me and I'll kill you, you Kiwi savage." When James forced Spence's fist back down, Guilford declared with all the pomposity he could muster, "All of you are too stupid to understand what we have here. We have the perfect opportunity to grab that animal and take it back to civilization. We'd all be rich and famous."

James gritted his teeth. With slitted eyes, he glared at King's arrogant face. "Shut up, King. Just shut up."

Before the words were completely out of his mouth, the boat began to move away from the shore. Cindy reached out with long arms, snatched up both heavy oars, used one to push its heavy weight out into the water and now rowed the boat out into its deeper middle. She executed strong, steady strokes that made her massive biceps ripple beneath the thick auburn hair covering her arms. Sam grinned and spoke to her, like a proud mother watching her toddler master a difficult feat.

Spence leaned forward and whispered in James's ear. "What's with her? She's acting like that big gorilla is a child." His voice reflected the mystified wonder of Sam's reaction to the Yowie.

James leaned back to reply. "She's a woman and that thing may be big but it is a child, Spence. Haven't you looked into its eyes?"

Spence snorted, sat back and began to scan the water they traveled slowly over. Only yards from the entrance to the tunnel, a large ripple appeared off to their right, its foamy wake almost a jet stream of froth. Spence sat up straight and focused all his attention on the fast moving motion of the disturbance. When it continued to parallel the boat for some distance, Spence poked James in the arm. "Take a look at that. Something big is moving under there and it's following us."

James pulled a torch from its slot and held it up higher, leaning far out over the water in an attempt to light the area better. After watching it for several minutes, he eased back inside the boat but kept the torch tightly gripped in his hand. "There's something there all right. It must be whatever you spotted earlier. What in the world could it be? Unless they have some mighty big fish in this river, I'm at a loss."

"Nothing has been normal on this trip. Why expect it now?" Spence muttered, his eyes locked on the path of the unknown stalker.

Without any outward warning, the movement of their follower abruptly stopped. All three men leaned further out, hoping to regain sight of it. Suddenly, a rounded, grayish domed head, like an upside down metal bowl the size of a beach ball, rose steadily and sedately out of the water. It's face, complete with whiskers and large eyes, gave the impression of an oversized seal bobbing effortlessly alongside the boat. All three men leaned back, mesmerized by the unfolding spectacle of another unknown creature.

Sam, made aware of the sudden movements of the men, turned around in her seat to stare at them, and then at what appeared so close to the boat's side that she could reach out and touch it. "My God! What is that thing?" She moved back closer to Cindy, who continued to slowly row, unphased by the event.

A four-foot long, elegantly curved neck dispelled the image of a seal. The flickering light of the torches sent shafts of multi-colored rays bouncing

around the cavern when it reflected off the metallic sheen of the creature's body. It swam closer and lifted its head higher into the air. Peering down into the boat, its large, liquid brown eyes, rimmed by coal black eyelashes, blinked at them with curiosity. It shook its head, revealing a long, dark mane of hair running down the backside of its neck and disappearing into the water.

James cautiously peered over the side and announced, "It has flippers. It's swimming; keeping pace with the boat. Well, I'll be. I should have known." He raised his eyes to stare at the dog-like face staring back at him. The long whiskers on each side of its upper lip gave it a comical Groucho Marx look. James chuckled, watching it tilt its head at them, shake its mane and roll over in the water like a pet dog begging attention.

"What is it? Should have known what? James, what is that thing?" Sam's reaction bordered on hysteria.

"It's a Bunyip, rumored to be a water monster and better known as the Rainbow Serpent," James stated. He turned to look at her, his face rapidly moving from humor to curiosity to consternation then back again. "It's the Australian version of Nessie." He nodded at Spence. "And the Maori version is called a Taniwha. They've been reported all through South East Australia."

"It's a what?" Sam relaxed a bit, leaned closer to James and tentatively peeked over the edge to get a better look. "It looks like a baby seal with a giraffe's neck and a dolphin's body. More like someone's warped idea of a badly put together kid's puzzle. This is what Nessie looks like?" Her face registered wonder when she looked at the animal playing.

"It looks like Heuvelmans was right after all," James murmured, distracted by the movements of the creature.

"Who's Heuvelmans and what is he right about?" Sam asked, leaning forward to get a closer look at the animal as it swam near the boat.

James continued to study the Bunyip while he talked. "Bernard Heuvelmans, the father of Cryptozoology, always claimed that water monsters are some sort of long-necked seal. This little fellow certainly seems to prove it out, doesn't he?" He reached out a tentative hand and felt the smooth skin on the animal's back as it glided by.

The Bunyip executed a neat roll with its entire body then rose high out of the water and came down with a splash of its two large front flippers. The cool spray that hit the boat soaked all of them to the skin. Cindy cooed and reached out with a long arm toward the rollicking creature. Sam, hair dripping and her wet cotton blouse clinging to her curves, clapped her hands and laughed like a little girl. James, smiling at her obvious delight in the little Bunyip, didn't have the heart to tell her that the stories of their sightings sometimes resulted in someone or something being killed.

"You might well laugh, lady, but these things have been known to eat people and their livestock," Spence grumbled as he searched his pack for the knife he always carried. His hand abruptly stopped its restless search. He took a deep breath and muttered, "'Remember what happens to those who use violence.' Damn my father!" He pulled his hand back out of the pack and sat back, a disgusted look on his face.

Guilford already clutched a big hunting knife of his own. His eyes slitted in concentration on the animal, he slowly leaned out over the water. When the Bunyip made another roll and emerged, its head rising above the boat and a look of sheer joy on its face, Guilford, quick as a striking snake, reached out and grabbed its mane. Before it had a chance to react, he'd sliced off a handful of the coarse hair from its neck and held it clutched in his fist. "Proof! I finally have proof these things exist!" he shouted triumphantly. The animal screamed with fear, plunged under the water and disappeared with a loud splash. A thread of blood ran through the swirl it left behind.

Guilford turned to the others, the trophy held high. "You see? Evidence ... finally, I can prove to everyone that what I've been telling them is true."

Sam leaned toward him, her face contorted with fury. "You bloodthirsty son of a bitch! You've hurt it. It's bleeding. It was only a baby."

Spence lunged at him, his teeth bared and rage etching his craggy face into the mask of a madman. He lurched forward, determined to reach Guilford, the violent rocking of the boat tossing him back and forth. A roar of immense volume erupted beyond the spot where the baby Bunyip had disappeared. Spence froze in midstride then sat down with a thud, the noise, magnified when it reverberated off the cavern's walls, stunning him into silence.

A seething cauldron of water boiled only a few feet from the side of the still rocking boat. Within seconds, a larger version of the creature they'd seen rose like a city skyscraper from the depths of the river. It's head, the size of a Volkswagen, turned toward the thing that had threatened her baby. It roared again and bared double rows of serrated teeth.

Sam screamed, James bellowed, "Row faster, Cindy. Damn it, row faster!" and Spence scrambled into a squatting position, his hands white as they gripped the sides of the boat.

The Bunyip swept through the water like a shimmering submarine, its long neck stretched forward and its mouth open in snarling rage. Within seconds, it slammed into the boat, curved its long neck down and grasped Guilford by the torso. His head and shoulders disappeared in the monster's mouth. His bare legs kicked so frantically that one of his English field boots flew off and narrowly missed hitting Spence in the head.

The Bunyip lifted Guilford out of the boat and up into the highest reaches of the cavern, his legs dangling like a rag doll. With one great whip of her head, she tossed Guilford's body up into the air. As he descended into her waiting jaws, a blood-curdling scream erupted from his lungs, which was abruptly cut off when her teeth clamped down on his torso. She turned her head in the direction of the boat once again. She stared for long seconds, blinked twice then slowly descended, foot by foot, back into the river, leaving behind one circular ripple on the surface of the water and a worn boot floating inside it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Darkness enveloped the boat. The smell of damp, moldy earth wafted around Sam with choking intensity. What instantly came to mind was the image of a cemetery-an old, untended one. Her soaked clothes clung to her, feeling like a tight shroud. Her senses overloaded when the sound of splashing, very close, sent her into a frenzy of fear. She reached out with both arms, frantically seeking comforting arms. "James! Spence! Where are you? Are you okay?"

Two warm arms wrapped around her tightly and drew her to a warm, broad chest. She felt the hammering of James's heart when she threw her arms around his waist in response. His whisper sounded hoarse and unsure. "Hush, Sam. I think we're safe now. She won't be back."

"Where are we? Why aren't the torches lit?" she whimpered into his chest.

Movement in the rear of the boat and a clearing of a throat accompanied Spence's reply. "We're in the tunnel. When the Bunyip got Guilford, water washed over the boat and the torches were doused. I can't get them lit again."

A series of deep grunts, along with a large, furry hand patting her on the back, almost sent Sam screaming overboard. James held her in place. "It's just Cindy, luv. Calm down. You're safe now."

She made herself relax against him but her breathing remained fast and strained. She took a deep breath, consciously shoving the irrational fear away. "I'm okay now." She took another deep breath and sat up, James's arm still draped around her shoulders. She patted Cindy's hand and spoke in her general direction. "Thank you, Cindy." A small grunt echoed around the tunnel in response.

The boat started moving again, its rhythmic forward motion a comfort. Sam settled back against James's chest and sighed deeply. "There are only

three of us left. He died so horribly, James, so violently."

He could hear the tears welling up in her voice. "Sam, he deserved it. Remember what Cindy's controller said? 'Some will die and deserve it.' I believe that, whatever or whoever we find, they aren't violent by nature. Based on what's happened so far, I'd say we're being tested."

Spence leaned forward, his breath hot on the back of James's neck. "Tested? Yep, I'd say so too. Everything that's been going on has that feel to it. Too many coincidences to be coincidental."

"What I'd like to know is, if that's what's happening here, what are we being tested for?" Sam pressed back further into James's chest and reached up to hold the hand cupping her shoulder.

James's hand tightened on hers. "We'll soon find out. There's a light up ahead. I can see the end to the tunnel."

The total blackness they'd been moving through began to lighten. They could dimly see Cindy still rowing in the front of the boat. Every stroke brought details of the tunnel they traveled through into greater focus. Its craggy walls hosted a blanket of leprous slimes and fungi that gave off a feeble light of phosphorescence. Steady dribbles of water seeped down the sides, keeping the tunnel moist and feeding the river as they joined it.

Within minutes a bright circle of light appeared around a bend. "There it is. I wonder what we'll find now." Sam's voice quivered but she sat up straighter when the light became stronger.

Brilliant, white light dazzled their eyes when the boat finally moved out of the tunnel and into a cavern even larger than the first. James blinked and shielded his eyes with a palm, squinting around its huge interior. By the time the boat scraped up onto a sandy shore and Cindy leapt out to drag it further onto the bank, his eyes had completely adjusted. He sucked in a deep breath, stood up and stepped into a scene straight out of a science fiction movie.

He reached down and handed Sam out onto the shore then pulled her over to stand close to his side. Spence leapt out, grabbed their backpacks from the bottom of the boat and tossed them on the red sandy ground. He slipped his on, his eyes glancing around the cavern with animated interest before settling on the object resting on a mound of earth well back from the water. "Well, well. So this is where it comes from."

All three stared at the seamless hull of a dull metallic craft. It sat against a wall of black stone. The wall glittered with embedded gemstones. James stared at the twinkling lights and his mouth dropped open. "Those jewels lay out the pattern of the Pleiades star cluster, the Seven Sisters. Ratana was right, it is a marker of some kind." The others studied the pattern of the gems silently. They cautiously moved toward the craft.

As they approached, they had to crane their necks in order to view the domed structure above the jointed metal legs it sat upon. Spence boldly walked up to it and placed a hand on the underside. "It's a spaceship. Blow me, but it's a flying saucer. I always did say they're real." He chuckled with delight as he ran his gnarled hand over its smooth surface. It hummed in response. Spence leapt back, a look of consternation coloring his face.

"Leave it, Spence. I don't think we're supposed to play with the things we find in here." James peered up at the saucer. "This is like something straight out of Journey to the Center of the Earth." His attention was diverted when he caught sight of Cindy waving her arms at them. "I think she's trying to tell us something." He nodded at Cindy when Spence and Sam turned to face him.

They stared at her, wondering what she was trying to convey. She motioned for them to come back, her actions unmistakably tinged with fear. They wasted no time in getting back to the boat, relying on Cindy's guidance to stay out of trouble. She grunted with satisfaction when they stood in front of her. Then she raised a long arm and, hooting softly, pointed to the wall they'd had their backs toward when they entered the cavern. A blank screen, rivaling in size those found in movie theatres, was nestled into the wall,

almost seeming a part of the rock. Its edges gleamed dully, apparently made of the same metal as the saucer.

James examined the flat, featureless square. "I think Cindy wants us to look at this but if it's a screen I haven't a clue how to turn it on."

He turned to the Yowie and motioned as best he could that he needed her to show him how to use the screen. She hesitantly moved up and placed her hand on a smaller square of metal embedded into the wall beside the screen. Instantly, a diamond-clear picture appeared on it.

The scene being played out depicted a handful of cavemen spread out inside a valley. The leader had just killed a small antelope and reached down to tear a hunk of flesh off its hindquarters. Blood dripping off his chin, his head whipped up and his eyes grew round. He rose up, hesitated and stood there as if listening while he fingered a black stone hanging by a rough cord around his neck.

"James, it's a black stone! Somehow this scene is tied in with what's happening now." Sam stood closer to the screen, studying the actions of the caveman.

The hunter cocked his head, nodded silently and moved off down the valley, leaving his kill behind. Shortly, the other hunters, bearing spears and similar animal skins, joined the lead man. They appeared to be conferring with each other without moving their lips.

"This is strange. They're talking to each other. I can see it by the expressions on their faces. But they're not speaking." Sam flashed a puzzled look at James. "Telepathy? Cavemen?"

"Impossible! Those are Neanderthals. Undoubtedly they had the skills to hunt and survive, they used fire and buried their dead but something as complex as telepathy? Come on! They didn't even have a language as far as we know. When they disappeared out of the valley of the Neander River in Germany and other sites around Europe, they left nothing behind to indicate they had any social skills at all." James frowned in concentration when the images they'd been watching suddenly stopped.

"Disappeared? How did they just disappear?" Sam continued to stare at him, now ignoring the frozen sequence of events on the screen.

"They just did, Sam. Nobody knows how or why. If all of this has something to do with them then it's a damned shaky connection. Why all the mystery? Why do the ones who called us here want us to watch a high tech movie when they could easily come and tell us what this is all about themselves?" James swiveled around, taking in the details of the cavern as he turned. "There's no tunnel other than the one we came through and there are no doors that I can see. It's a dead end. What's the point in bringing us here?"

Spence stepped up to him and laid a hand on his arm. "Son, instead of always trying to figure things out logically, why don't you just go with the flow? They have their reasons. We just have to wait and see what they are."

James turned back to the screen. "You're right, Spence. They're in control here. Bad habit of mine..." When he turned his gaze back to the screen, the scene of the cavemen began to move again. He concentrated on it without further comment. It went on to depict a small village of women, children and the hunters moving out of the valley and entering a large cave. Then it abruptly halted. When the screen went blank, he continued to stare at it. "Is that all? Just the cavemen and their families moving into caves? Was that supposed to mean something to us?"

He looked over at Cindy. She still stood beside the small metal square. She raised both her hands and put her two thumbs on the pad of the square. The screen lit up again, this time with a collage of scenes flashing one after the other. It started with a panoramic view of the earth as seen from space. It then rapidly moved from scenes of unfinished pyramids, to Mayan temples, to battles between medieval armies, then to several people they all recognized from history books and movies: Nostradamus, Plato, Hitler, Einstein, and more.

"It appears to be the complete history of mankind. They must have been watching us and recording this for centuries." Sam turned to stare at the

saucer. "It's all true." Her voice vibrated with wonder and awe.

James crossed his arms and frowned. "I fail to see what any of this has to do with Yowies, Bunyips, UFOs or this place. Maybe I'm just being thick but this strikes me as a bit flamboyant and unnecessary."

Spence cackled and slapped him on the shoulder with a dirty hand. "Listen to you, Mr. University. Does everything have to be complicated before you get it?" He cackled again.

Before James could think of a suitable retort, Cindy let loose with a series of emphatic grunts, groans and whimpers. Their attention on her completely, she nodded her great head and waved an arm at them while she shambled toward the back wall behind the saucer. They followed and shortly came to a small tunnel entrance that had evaded their search of the cavern. Cindy stooped and entered the tunnel, still anxiously checking over her shoulder to make sure they followed. James led the way, Sam stayed close to his back and Spence brought up the rear.

The tunnel opened into a smaller version of the outside cavern. A large circle of seven black stones, the largest in the center, sat exactly in the middle of the rounded cave. The walls surrounding the black stones twinkled with the same gemstones they'd found next to the saucer.

Spence stepped up to the nearest wall, lifted a torch from a bracket, brought it close and stared at the stones flashing inside the clay. He ran his hand over them and turned to James with a lopsided grin. "This is Orion. See the belt and the outline of the star cluster?" He followed the curve of the cave and inspected each set of gems, James and Sam slowly moving behind him. He stopped when he reached Cindy, who stood patiently waiting for them to finish their inspection. "All of these are constellations. There's the Southern Cross, that one's Andromeda, that's Scorpius..."

"What does it mean? Are they just decorations?" Sam leaned into the torchlight and took a good look.

A shimmering light lit up the interior of the cave, startling all of them into breathless silence. They spun around to face the circle of stones. It formed into a doorway. None of them could have possibly anticipated what stepped through the doorway and into the cave. Sam gasped, James gripped her hand so tightly that her fingers turned white and Spence stood, dumbfounded, with the torch still raised over his head. Cindy knelt on the hard packed clay of the cave and touched her forehead to the ground, her arms spread in obeisance.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A soft, melodic voice wafted inside James's head. It sensuously insinuated itself into his conscious mind. _Greetings. I am Amaru. Welcome and be at ease._

A vision of female loveliness stood in the circle of the black stones. A flowing white gown draped her slender body from swan-like neck to dainty ankle. Tiny bare feet poked out from under the hemline. Her long hair glistened with gold and silver highlights. When she fixed large, languid blue eyes upon James and smiled, he felt real gut-wrenching fear for the first time since they'd started their journey.

Spence lowered his torch then dropped it on the sandy floor. His mouth hung open and his eyes gleamed. "She's beautiful." His whispered declaration accompanied a slow shuffled walk toward the apparition.

James lunged at him, blocking his forward motion and grabbing both arms in the process. "Spence ... Spence, get a grip, mate. She's not real."

"She looks real enough to me, James." Sam cautiously eased forward, examining the woman with cynical eyes.

The woman gently smiled then spoke out loud. "I am real. However, you are quite correct in your caution, James. Things are rarely what they appear to be in this world." She closed her eyes, nodded her head and transformed into the short, broad form of a wizened prehistoric woman. She still wore the white gown but the golden hair that had spread like a halo around her face now

covered what they could see of her body. When she lifted her head and met their astonished gazes with startling yellow-brown eyes, she smiled again. "I hoped to spare you the shock of my true appearance until I was certain you could handle it, but I see the good doctor is not so easily fooled anymore."

Spence gaped at her. "Is everything we've seen so far an illusion?"

At the same time, Sam blurted out, "How did you do that?"

Amaru held out her hand, palm outward. Her voice, still soft and musical, silenced them. "Only the necessary illusions are used with humans." She indicated Cindy's prone form. "It was necessary to have you accept Cindy as one of your own so she could help you. But everything else we have allowed to be revealed to you is very real." She turned her attention to Sam. "To answer your question, it is done with our minds. We have abilities that have made it possible for us to remain undetected from humankind for centuries. It's a simple matter to use these abilities to deceive others for their own protection ... and ours."

James stepped between the woman and his friends. "What are you? Why have you brought us here? And what has happened to our friends?"

Her voice never faltered in the face of his demanding questions. "I think it would be better served if I show you what you seek." She beckoned with an outstretched hand for them to join her in the circle.

James hesitated, glanced at Spence and Sam, then turned and walked boldly into the circle of stones. Spence and Sam, following his example, also stepped into the circle but huddled closely to each other and James. The trio faced the woman and waited. She nodded her head in approval then turned to Cindy who now stood upright and awaiting her command. "You may go back to your clan or join us, my dear. You choose."

Cindy turned her lips up into a parody of a smile and eagerly stepped into the circle with them. She shyly moved to stand beside Sam and patted her on the shoulder as if to reassure her there was no reason to be afraid. Sam smiled up at Cindy and took her hand.

Within moments, with no indication of motion, sound or sense of having moved from the cave, they looked out into the interior of a bustling center of activity inside a high-tech building. The walls shone with the same polished metal they'd seen on the saucer. High glass walls towered several stories up into the center of the complex, giving it the look of a giant's fish tank just waiting to be filled with interesting specimens. Groups of assorted beings moved with purpose around and inside the complex, working at terminals, viewing large screens like the one in the outer cave and moving up spiral staircases to levels above. Some of them appeared to be human, including young children. Some of them were almost identical to Amaru, with the exception of hair color. They ranged from black to almost white but all were covered from head to foot with a thick coat. Some were clearly animal-like in appearance, their faces and bodies unclothed and awkward moving. All of them ignored the newcomers and busily went about their business.

"What is this place? Where is this place?" Spence swiveled his head back and forth, trying to take it all in at once.

Amaru, a smile still on her face, swept an arm around the room, long golden hair sweeping with it. "This is our home. Come. I will take you to a place of comfort where we can speak of these things. All your questions will be answered in time."

She moved gracefully toward a wall filled with closed panels of the same metal used in the central area. She placed a surprisingly feminine hand upon the first panel in line and it disappeared into thin air. Amaru turned and beckoned them to enter.

Deep plush carpeting deadened their footfalls when they entered the room. It had the deep green feel and smell of a forest floor on a sunny afternoon. Diffused lighting caressed walls painted with murals of the rainforest, giving the room a comforting, peaceful look and feel. Long, elegantly curved couches of deep mushroom leather beckoned from around the room.

Sam, the first to step through, moved into the center of the room and felt all her pent up tension dissolve. "This place is incredible." She settled down onto a couch facing the door and returned the smile Amaru flashed in her direction. Cindy settled herself on the floor at Sam's feet and studied the murals with childlike wonder.

Spence joined Sam on the couch, inspecting the room with darting eyes. James sat on the arm of the couch, crossed his arms and waited for Amaru to seat herself before he spoke. "Yes, this place is incredible but Amaru still hasn't answered our questions. Where are we, why are we here and what are you?"

Amaru smoothed the folds of her gown down around her legs then settled back with a sigh, locking her golden-brown eyes upon James. "You humans are always impatient; always wanting everything immediately." She sighed. "I will answer some of your questions now but, soon, I will show you things that will answer the rest. When you see, you will understand. This will save much time. Is this acceptable to you?"

They all nodded. James uncrossed his arms and replied, "Yes, that will work. Please, forgive my rudeness." He ran a hand through his hair and ventured a shaky smile. "We've been through a lot these last few days and you have to admit, a lot of it is just plain hard to believe."

Amaru nodded her head in return. "Yes, I understand. I will tell you what I can. The rest will wait." Taking a deep breath she continued. "You are inside the mountain called The Mother. We have dwelt here for centuries waiting for a time and an exact set of circumstances to arise. That time is now and events are such that we know we must take action."

She held up her hand when Spence leaned forward, his mouth open to speak. "Please. Let me finish, then I will answer more if I can." When he leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest, she went on. "You asked what we are. To put it simply, we are of the race you know as Neanderthal people. Eons ago we were called here to establish this place. We had no idea for what purpose but we obeyed and came. Since then, we have built what you see now. What we do will be shown to you. The 'why' will also be explained. For the time being, just know that we are here to help."

She hesitated and lowered her eyes. Sighing deeply, she raised them again and swept her gaze over them. "You three are the keys to saving this world. That is why we tested you, let you assimilate some truths most humans would deny and why we brought you here now."

Spence sputtered. "The Neanderthals were primitive. They didn't even have a language! How can you sit there and expect us to believe you're what you say you are and that you built all this." He swept his arm around the room.

Amaru smiled again and shook her head. "Humans are so predictable ... and so arrogant." She locked eyes with Spence. "Did it ever occur to you that what you think you know might be wrong?"

The look of startled surprise on all their faces made her laugh, a sound of a wind chime swaying in the breeze. "You found skeletons of my people, imagined what we looked like, assumed we are primitive and apelike and all of it based on nothing but bones and a lack of any real evidence to the contrary."

She stood and walked to a side wall. Holding her palm against it brought forth another screen. She turned to them like a teacher with a class full of slow students. "Let me show you."

The screen came to life, this time with sound, smells, thoughts and the distinct feeling of existing in the scene with the caveman squatting by the dead antelope. The look of deep pain within his eyes moved them when he reached out and gently caressed the face of the dead animal. Then he eased a stone knife down to the animal's chest and cut out the heart. Lifting it to the sky, then to his lips, sent a shudder through them. The onlookers became totally entranced when they could hear Garagh's thoughts. His words and feelings, coming directly from his mind, echoed into their own brains.

I regret your death, my little friend, but it is the way of the people to need your help to survive. You give your life for ours. For this, we honor you. Your heart is my heart. From this day forward we are one. You do not die in vain. Those who made us will welcome you to green hills and many females to comfort you in your new home. Forgive those not of the people who kill your kind without respect. They kill to enjoy killing and would kill the world if they could.

James, Spence and Sam could feel this man's fear, his love for his people and for the valley they'd always known as home. They could also 'hear' the complex thoughts, ideas and concepts surging within the man's brain. They experienced a heightened awareness of the world around him: animals, plants, air, sunshine and other people. They could feel the power of his mind as it effortlessly tapped into abilities mankind was just now becoming aware of, and which they still didn't know how to use.

My son, the hill you stand upon is one without shelter from the spears of those not of the people. Hide yourself from their eyes for they walk in violence and blood and will not spare you. Tanatha, take your men and move to the north for the hunt is there today and it is safe. Do not take more of our antelope friends than you need to feed the village. I will meet you at the black rock when you are finished.

When the voice of Garagh's guide came into his mind, James, Spence and Sam reacted like it spoke into their own. All three opened their eyes wider, seeing into the far past.

Garagh, it is time. Your journey must start now. Take your people and go to the sacred caves. There you will find the circle of stones. Take your people into the circle and find your new home. What you now do, you do for your children and the children to come for many moons. Your mother awaits you with welcome arms. Open your own arms in greeting to your brothers when the time is ripe. They will perish without you. Be strong, use the gifts you have been given and never let love leave your heart or those of your brothers. Have no fear, I am with you, always.

By the time Garagh and his men had gathered the village together and moved into the caves, James, Spence and Sam knew just how wrong they'd been and how much they'd underestimated the beings represented by the one standing patiently before them. When Garagh's voice and image disappeared, they felt themselves jerked back to the present with a whiplash of intense emotion.

Amaru tilted her head, her eyes gleaming with affection, and smiled once more. "Now you understand what we are and where we come from. Don't you, my children?"

Sam was the first one to stand up. Her face a study in serious contrition, she stepped up to Amaru and hugged her tightly. She pulled back and looked her in the eye. "Yes, now I do," she whispered. She hugged Amaru one last time and moved away to sit back down on the couch next to Cindy. She took Cindy's hand and watched while the men approached Amaru.

James stepped forward and offered his hand. "Thank you for this. So many things make sense now. Your people chose to live as they did because it was in harmony with the world, not because they didn't know any other way, and they used no language because you had no need of it. So many things we do not know." He took a deep breath. "But there is more, isn't there?"

She patted his hand. "There is much more. You were brought here for the same reason we were brought here. The weight of the world rests upon your shoulders, my son." When James paled at her words, she tightened her grip on his hand and reached up to stroke his cheek with the other. "You are not alone. We are with you and, through you and Sam, we are one."

He smiled. "Yes, I know we are." He slowly turned to Sam and held out his hand to her. She rose and came to stand next to him, her hand tightly encased within his.

"And what about creatures like Cindy? You control them; use them?" Sam rested her hand on Cindy's back as she tried to control a feeling of protectiveness welling within her.

"We do not control Cindy's kind or any others. They willingly work in harmony with us. They understand we are all bound together in this world and, in order to save it, we must be as one, as we were meant to be in the beginning."

Spence stepped forward and touched Amaru's hand. "You said earlier that you tested us. How, Amaru? Was everything we've seen and experienced a test?"

She took his hand into hers. "Come with me. Your minds are now ready to accept the truth. The rest of what you want to know will be explained. There is much you must see and time is short." Still holding his hand, she moved to the panel and opened it once again.

The room they stepped out into curved away in each direction and met directly opposite them to form a perfect circle. Several beings of different types manned terminals placed around the outside curve of the walls. They peered intently at a large screen placed in front of each one of them. Each screen depicted different people in different settings, doing different things.

Spence stopped so abruptly when he entered the room that the others almost crashed into his back. "What the...? We're in a different room than the one that was here before. This is confusing."

Amaru indicated the terminals around the room. "This entire complex is spread throughout the world. The room we just left is in Australia, this one is in South America. Every door like the panel we just stepped through is a transporter."

Spence almost jumped up and down with glee. His face registered the impish delight of a leprechaun. "Transporters? Like Star Trek?"

Sam rolled her eyes and sighed. "Amaru, what are all the screens for?"

"This place is where we monitor the events of this earth. This is where everything that impacts upon our world is searched, watched, stored and analyzed. This information keeps us up to date with world events ... and disasters."

"Everything? Can you show us what happened to our friends? Marc, Nathan and Ratana?"

Amaru strolled toward the nearest terminal and bent to instruct the operator, a human man, who immediately punched several buttons then stood up to give her his chair. The image of Nathan, Ratana and Ernie leapt to life in front of them. They sat cross-legged around a small campfire, the tents off in the background.

Ratana leaned toward Ernie, anxiety on her face. "Do you know where he went?"

"He has gone to the place he belongs."

"Ernie, we need a straight answer. Where did Marc go? He may be in danger out here all alone," Nathan asked in a respectful tone.

"He is where he must be."

Nathan turned to Ratana. "I don't think he's going to tell us any more than he has."

Her shoulders slumped. "I wish I knew why we weren't allowed to go with the others. This waiting is getting on my nerves."

"Yeah, mine too." Nathan moved closer to her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry, they'll be back. Ernie says they're safe where they went. We just have to wait ... that's all ... just wait." His shoulders slumped a bit too.

The terminal went blank.

Sam turned to Amaru. "What happened to Marc? Where did he go?"

Without lifting her gaze from the terminal, Amaru murmured, "I don't know."

"How do we find out?" James demanded.

Recovering herself, she looked up at all of them staring at her. "He will be found." She bent back down to the operator and whispered more instructions into his ear. He nodded.

She turned back to them. "Now, to the business at hand. There is more,

much more, you need to see. Shall we go?"

Without a word, they followed her toward another doorway.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Looking through the window, the inside of the operating room appeared distorted and unreal. James, hands spread upon the glass, leaned as close to the pane as he could without fogging it up with the rapid-fire breaths of air he struggled to suppress.

Amaru, standing behind him, put her hand upon his shoulder and said, "It's all right, James. I understand your fear."

He turned away from the sight and leaned his head upon the coolness of the stainless steel wall. Clenching his eyes tightly together, he shuddered. "How could you? Why?"

"Why? Because we have no choice. We've never had a choice."

The sadness in her voice compelled his eyes to open. The pain and the tears running down her face to mat the hair around her neck looked genuine. His gaze searched out Spence and Sam to see how they were reacting to the scene they'd walked into without warning.

They stood staring at the bustle of activity inside the room. Sam's face registered nothing, but her body looked frozen in place-rigid and unnatural. Spence's reaction defied description but he too stood silently watching. Both of them clenched their hands so tightly droplets of blood dripped onto the metal floor-unnoticed and unfelt.

James's mind screamed with rage and fear but he gathered the iron self-control he'd exercised for so many years and used it to force himself to look into the room once again.

A woman lay on a stark metal table. She stared, unemotional and unmoving, up into the large light suspended above her body. Moving around her were several small figures with large heads and black, unblinking eyes. Their smooth, unlined bodies, no taller than four feet high, gave the impression of children playing doctor. But, the various instruments they used to take samples from the woman's body glinted under the light, dispelling the illusion and replacing it with the reality. Their movements bespoke efficiency and purpose as they moved between her and the specimen jars lined up on a steel tray beside the far wall.

Finally, the silence broke when a sob of anguish erupted from Sam's pale lips. She closed her eyes and whispered, "Make it go away. Please make it go away."

Galvanized by her words, James rushed to her and pulled her into his arms. She buried her face against his chest. He turned a look of abject pleading toward Amaru. Without hesitation, she took Spence's hand and led him away from the window, like a comatose patient unable to move on his own. James followed her closely, without looking back, when she opened a panel and disappeared inside.

They stepped back into the rainforest room and moved like shell-shocked soldiers toward the couches. James eased Sam down onto the cushions and sat beside her, holding both her shaking hands as steady as he could. Amaru helped Spence over to the facing couch but remained standing when he collapsed upon it. She turned away from them, her small body visibly shaking with the effort to gain control over her emotions.

Without turning to face them, she spoke clearly and with a steady voice. "Yes, it's true. All of you at one time or another have been here; have been tested as the woman in there is now being tested. I am sorry but it is necessary that you remember everything. The only way to bring that about was to take you back there." She turned to face them, her face composed and gentle. "This is not done to hurt people. It is done to acquire the body samples we need. We had to find those of the human race who are genetically programmed in such a way that they can save it. Do you understand?" She asked the question with a soft, choked voice, pleading with them to forgive the unforgivable.

Spence launched himself off the couch and stood glaring at Amaru, his lean body trembling. "You barbaric butchers! Who do you think you are? God? You steal people's lives, their sanity, and their families with your bloody experiments. How can we understand such violent invasions into our lives and bodies? How can we ever forgive..." When he took another step toward her, James jumped off the couch to stop him.

Amaru's eyes flashed with bright golden anger. She held her hand up, halting all forward movement with nothing more than a thought. Everyone froze in place. She stepped up to Spence and stood toe to toe with him, her words trembling with emotion. "We work to save mankind. What excuse do you have with your senseless violence? Your atrocities toward other humans? Your joyless and unnecessary slaughter of all living things? Your ruthless raping of this planet and all it provides for you?" When the anger died out of his face and she knew he was no longer a danger to her or himself, she raised her hand and released all of them.

Spence collapsed onto the carpet, sobs wracking his body. Cindy moved from the door, where she'd tried to hide herself, and approached his prone figure. She whimpered and reached out to gather him into her arms. In response, his arms snaked around her neck. His face wet with tears, he buried it in the thick hair of her chest. She rocked him, cooing to him like a mother with a hurt baby.

Amaru reached out to him when Cindy laid him gently on the couch. She knelt, placed her hand upon his head and whispered, "Sleep now. Trust in yourself and us. All will be well. I promise you." He closed his eyes and slept.

Amaru took a deep breath, stood up and turned to face James and Sam, her face troubled. "Do you feel the same way?"

"No." The simplicity of this one word gave it the weight of a prophecy in James's ears.

Sam had come to stand beside him when Cindy moved Spence to the couch. She nodded and took James's hand. "We understand why, Amaru. It ... it was just a shock to remember..." Taking a deep breath, she paused. "Is that what happened to me when I lost time on the way here? The night I went into the bush and couldn't remember it?"

"It is." Amaru stood straight and regal, her hands clasping each other and resting on her waist. "We have been watching you for some time now. We were sure you carried the coding we need but, somehow, you always managed to evade us." She smiled. "We had to get a sample and test it before we could allow you to come any further. Now we are sure."

"You mentioned this before, that Sam and I are keys. Keys to what? You said it has something to do with coding in our genetic makeup. What do you mean by that exactly?" James unconsciously rubbed at the triangular scar on his shoulder.

"That is a very complicated thing. However, I want to show you something that will serve to explain part of it. Unlike the earlier unpleasantness, I know you will enjoy it at the same time. Shall we?" She raised bushy eyebrows and swept her arm toward the door panel.

James took two steps, hesitated and looked down upon Spence's snoring figure. "Will he be okay here?"

"Of course he will. Cindy will remain with him until he awakens, won't you, my dear?" Amaru tilted her head and smiled down at Cindy's cross-legged form sitting on the floor next to Spence's head.

Cindy grunted and used her long, thick fingers to stroke Spence's unruly gray hair back off his face.

Amaru nodded at her with approval, then she opened the panel and waited for James and Sam to move forward before stepping through.

The second Sam put her booted foot into the room she froze. James held her arm and whispered, "It's not the other place, Sam. You know we have to find out everything so let's do it with style." He tugged on her arm, wrapping it through his own. She stiffened but moved forward.

A bank of blinking data screens covering the left wall gave the room the look of a twisted version of Frankenstein's laboratory with a disco beat. The right wall contained a series of computer stations currently manned by two of the small green beings they'd seen in the operating room. They ran elongated fingers with round pads at their ends along the flat surfaces of keyboard panels and watched streams of data scroll down flat, glowing screens mounted in front of their large, black eyes. Row upon row of clear man-sized glass tubes filled the center of the circular room. Hoses and switches ran from their tops like Medusa tendrils and disappeared up into the dark ceiling looming stories above their heads.

"My God, we're in the middle of the X-Files. Thank God they're empty," James muttered, his eyes scanning the tubes with intense interest.

"Yes, except this is no movie set and there's no Fox Mulder to come along and bail us out of here," Sam whispered back.

Amaru's voice wafted into their minds at that moment. And no Agent Scully to tear it into believable scientific pieces either. They could hear her laughter echo inside their skulls.

With the impulsiveness of children, James and Sam both laughed with her. They turned their heads to see her coming back from inspecting the work stations the beings had now left unattended. Her small body, its flowing white gown sweeping around her, seemed to float toward them from out of the darkness.

"What is this place, Amaru, and what are those small beings? Are they aliens?" James felt silly asking the obvious but couldn't restrain his curiosity any longer.

Amaru's laughter took him off guard. She threw her head back and gave into it with abandon. James and Sam stood awkwardly by until her barks of laughter subsided into mild sniggers of amusement. When she finally stopped altogether, she looked at them with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Aliens? Whatever gave you that notion?"

His jaw clenched and his cheeks flushed pink. "You know as well as I do the whole world has been flooded with pictures of aliens and those ... things ... look just like them."

Amaru stood up as straight as she could, primly folded her hands in front of her body and looked him in the eyes. Her bearing and dignity made her look like a hairy replica of Queen Victoria when the tiny monarch was angry with an underling. "That, my dear boy, is one of the reasons why you are here now; to dispel some of these absurd tales your kind seem to love to believe."

"But you ... but they look ... but you said..." Sam sputtered.

Amaru unfolded her hands and smiled indulgently at them both. "What I said is that we have many things here. All of them are of this planet." When they still looked confused, she continued. "Come with me. This place will show you what I've been doing such a bad job of trying to explain."

She beckoned, swiftly turned and made her way toward the forest of empty tubes, interweaving through them until she reached a door panel at the back. It opened before she'd reached out to touch it. The sound that assaulted their ears when the door opened came was more of a surprise than the room they now stood inside. The raucous sound of children playing echoed through the doorway. They stepped through.

The room, a replica of the rainforest room without furniture, undulated with activity in every corner. A variety of small ones, some Yowies, some grays, some humans and others of unknown ancestry, mingled into groups then split and reformed into new ones like the ebb and flow of an ocean. Each group appeared to be working on strange, complex constructions made from rods of crystal. When the group split, the newcomers took up their task and added to what the last group left behind.

"Children? What is this, Amaru?" Sam stood transfixed by the faces and forms moving around her like an eddy of fluid water, each touching her and smiling up at her as they passed in procession.

Amaru smiled, nodding at the young ones as they passed and nodded to

her. "I should think it is obvious. It's our nursery."

James grinned idiotically at a small gray that had approached him and now stood with its large head tilted with curiosity as it felt the texture of his clothes. He glanced up at Amaru and Sam. "They're beautiful. These are the replacements for the colony?"

"No, James. They are the future of mankind." Her great golden eyes turned from James to settle upon Sam. "And you now carry their leader. Their hope ... and yours."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Pregnant? I'm pregnant? Wha ... how, how could you know?" Sam gasped, her face a study in shock, bewilderment, joy and confusion.

James stared at Amaru with open disbelief and a touch of fear in his eyes. "She is?"

"Please, wait a moment." Amaru fidgeted in her chair. "If you don't mind my putting you off a bit, I'd like to start from the beginning. I admit the news so delights me that I didn't wait for the proper time to tell you." Her face glowed with joy when she looked at Sam. "May I frustrate your questions a bit longer and tell you in the right order?"

James took Sam's hand. They both nodded in mute silence. Amaru separated them by inserting herself between their rigid bodies and taking each one by the arm. She quietly, but firmly, ushered them back through the door. Once back in the tube room, she moved them to the right and another door panel. It slid soundlessly open.

The room they entered looked very much like the room they'd just left ... except this room had tubes that were occupied. Each contained a growing embryo. A wall of delicate air bubbles radiated from the bottom upward through pale blue liquid, giving each one the look of a modern fish tank.

Sam gagged, staggered and would have fallen if Amaru hadn't had a firm hold of her. Seeing her pale face and look of distress, James moved to reclaim her hand. He placed an arm around her waist and supported her shaking body while he slowly walked her over to a bank of chairs along the wall next to the door. He eased her down gently into a padded chair, then stroked her hair while anxiously studying her face. "Are you okay, love?"

She nodded dumbly while covering her eyes with shaking hands.

Amaru sat down on the other side of Sam and reached out to lay her hand upon Sam's arm. She hesitated before speaking, then, taking a deep breath, she leaned close to Sam and spoke in a soft, pain-filled voice. "This place is not what you are thinking it is, my dear. I can see I must explain thoroughly to dispel this sickening fear and revulsion you are feeling now for us and our work."

Sam slid her hands down to stare into Amaru's face. "Work? You call this work? It's inhuman is what it is."

Amaru maintained her composure but held Sam's gaze with a steely one of her own. "Judging by what humans deem to be acceptable 'human' behavior, I'll take that as a compliment." After a pause to register the look of shame on Sam's face, she continued. "Now. Are you finally ready to stop jumping to conclusions and hear the truth?"

James sat up straight but continued to hold onto Sam's hand. "Yes, we are. That's what we came to find ... the truth."

One short nod of Amaru's head acknowledged his concession to an open mind. She turned to stare at the bubbling water and began to speak like one in a trance. "In the beginning, after we came here, we were guided to build this complex, but more importantly, we were given the gift of knowledge ... knowledge of a purpose. This purpose compelled us to venture from this place in order to collect samples of the seeds of life from everything we could gather, including different races of humans."

James held up his hand. "Before you go on, I've been wanting to ask you something ever since you showed us how your people came to be here. Do you know who sent you? Who guided you and taught you?"

"James, my child, we have no need to know. Our knowledge has reached a point where we now realize that this obsessive need to know all the answers actually stops you from moving on and learning them." When she saw the look of disappointment on his face, Amaru added, "If it's any consolation, I can tell you that it truly doesn't matter, James. What does matter is that we continue to move forward, learn, grow and become one. Does that help?"

He patted her hand again. "Yes, it does. I can see the wisdom in your words but I know it will take a while to shed the habits of a lifetime." He smiled. "Please, go on."

She smiled back at him before continuing. "In order to accomplish this, we were also given the gift of illusion and communication with each other and other intelligent beings around the world. With this ability we were able to collect what we sought in invisibility, in safety, leaving the rest of the world ignorant of our presence."

"Are you talking about DNA?" James leaned forward, his full attention on what she related.

"Yes, DNA. All life contains the seed of its beginnings and its endings within its cells. This is what we knew we must collect and preserve for this day. It is also through this minefield of information that we sought the one, unique combination of DNA that held within its heart the answer we needed; the fulfillment of the purpose. For millennia, we have searched for what we now know is the answer to everything. At first, like your human ancestors and your present day scientists, we sought this miracle in the wrong places. We wasted thousands of years looking for it, first in the basic life forms of this world, then in the human race. Like you, after all that time, we arrogantly believed the human species to be superior to everything else. We believed this sophisticated and complex combination could only come from them and them alone."

Startled into attention at what she was hearing, Sam too leaned forward to stare at Amaru's profile. "You mean that after all these abductions and experiments you still haven't got it, this magical DNA combination you've been looking for?"

Ignoring her question, Amaru continued her story. "The result of that search is the children you just met. Our first attempt to find the right combination by splicing our Neanderthal genes with those of a lower life form, the gorilla, resulted in those you now call Yowies. We chose the gorilla for its family loyalty, its intelligence and its capacity to care and feel."

"The Yowies are half human?" James leaned closer until he almost fell out of his chair. Moving closer to Amaru, he waited for her answer.

Sam's response erupted at the same moment James asked his question. "Are you trying to tell us those sweet creatures are merely failed experiments? Something to be played with then tossed aside as so much imperfect matter?"

Amaru's eyes widened in shock. "Haven't you been listening to me? What we've created here is our children, precious life as valid and as valuable as any other."

Sam's cheeks flared pink. "I'm sorry, Amaru. I thought ... I'm sorry. Please go on and finish with your explanation."

Amaru took a moment to collect herself before speaking. "Our next attempt was with a much more intelligent and adaptable species, the dolphin. This resulted in what you now call the 'grays' and regard as aliens. They, too, were not what we sought but they turned out to be remarkably intelligent and focused. They have become our scientists, in fact, and lead our teams in looking for the genetic materials we search for. What you think are space ships are merely vehicles we designed to assist us in the gathering of these samples. We use them, along with the aid of the grays, to accelerate this gathering of information. We allowed them to be seen, hoping the world would bind together against what they perceived to be a common threat. It accomplished just the opposite. Now, your nations snarl over this new technology like jackals over a dead animal. It has segregated your people even

more than before." She sighed deeply and shook herself.

"From there, we went on to try different combinations using ourselves as the parent base until we'd exhausted all avenues we could explore. That's when we turned to other races and started over again. Slowly, we gathered information, recorded events, focused and sampled those humans who showed extraordinary ability or intelligence."

"That explains why someone like Adolph Hitler would be shown as a pivotal figure in our history," James muttered. He looked up at Amaru. "How do all these ... crosses between human and other species fit into the solution?" James asked, his forehead creased with concentration.

"I know this will sound simplistic but know that it's the truth ... We have found that any species can coexist and flourish in harmony with each other if they share common knowledge and a common purpose, like an ant community. Every living thing upon this earth has its place. We've proven here that individuality can be maintained without sacrificing the good of the whole. This ability to communicate with each other through the mind has opened doors that are impossible for humans to even find. It links us all, gives us all access to what every other living thing linked with us knows and experiences."

"You mean you all know what each other knows ... all the time?" Sam asked.

"That's right. And here's another thing it has produced for us. It completely eliminated all the barriers your people cannot seem to overcome in order to unite the world. This intimate and very personal mental link of ours produces an environment of family, of loyalty, of caring, because we do not suffer from nationalism, racism, or barriers of any kind that would keep us apart from each other, as your race does. You cannot hurt a man when the pain he feels comes back to you." A sad, tight smile tugged at her lips.

"This is just too fantastic to be true. It can't be this simple. It just isn't the way things are in the world." James ran his hand through his hair and stared at the floor in deep thought.

"Oh, but it is. Remember I told you we wasted thousands of years looking in the wrong place? You're doing the same thing. Throughout history, humans have always focused on things, deeming them important at the time. However, at no time throughout history did anyone ever focus on what they should have looked harder at, been aware of or opened their eyes to see ... the whole picture."

"The whole picture? What do you mean by that? If you mean we haven't been trying to clean up the environment, the air, stop the ozone from disintegrating the atmosphere or made an effort to stop the wars and destruction then you're wrong, Amaru." Sam sat up straighter and waited for Amaru's rebuttal of these documented facts.

Amaru sat back down, turned to Sam and smiled. "I know all you say is true, Samantha, but it is not and has never been, enough to stop what we are all on the brink of now ... annihilation. Total, final, irreversible annihilation." She took a deep breath. "No, what I am referring to is the failure of anyone, anywhere to stop focusing on only one part or element or few elements of this world at one time. When we finally woke up and realized the answer lay within the simple instead of the complex then, and only then, did we know what to look for ... and we found it. The question is, did we find it in time?"

James and Sam locked eyes at this latest revelation. Neither of them spoke, determined to hear the story to the end. Sam held both of James's hands tightly and waited.

"We feared that one day events on this planet would reach such a critical state that we'd be called to finally use our knowledge to save it. Those events are now taking place."

"You mean all the prophecies, myths and legends are true? The world will one day end in total destruction?" Sam whispered, her eyes round with fear.

"Yes." That one word statement sent an icy cold chill through their bodies as it sank into their minds.

James reached out and took Amaru's chilled hand. "And what was the purpose you were charged with, Amaru? What needs to be done to stop the end from coming?"

She squeezed his hand and looked into his eyes. "The purpose and the solution are one and the same."

"And that is...?"

"I told you ... to find the one combination of DNA in the world that would restore the earth and all life that resides upon it, including mankind, to the balance it had when created."

"That is the purpose but it can't possibly be a solution to all the sickness and destruction on the earth today," Sam stated, a hoarseness to her voice, combined with the frantic twisting of her hands in her lap, betrayed her fear.

"My dear, it is the only solution. The seed is what lends life to the tree, not the tree itself. Can't you see? When the world was created and life sprung from what you call the 'primordial soup', everything was in perfect balance. All was dependent upon everything else, supporting and nurturing all its diverse parts. This individual balance was just the beginning. All the stars and planets in our universe, equally balanced and tuned, are bound through lines of energy to each other. Now, the balance is gone. The earth hums in distress within this net of energy binding the cosmos."

"My God! You're saying that unless we get back this biological and ecological balance between the earth, the air, the water and the wildlife here, the entire universe will shatter?" James's voice shook as he spoke.

Amaru's silence spoke volumes. When she knew he'd answered his own question she went on to explain further. "This resonance-the functioning of a perfectly balanced planet-will spread like a disease throughout the heavens. A tuning fork, if you will, that has run amok, destroying all the discordance it can reach ... and beyond."

Sam gasped when the enormity of Amaru's revelation hit her. "It's impossible."

Amaru stood up and turned to face them. "No, it is not impossible. Our mistake, or what deflected us from finding the real answer, was to look too eagerly to the end product of time, instead of at its beginning. We made the childish mistake of thinking that time had honed and perfected what it had started with. We were wrong." She moved to stand before Sam and looked down at her. "When we finally discovered our error and looked to the source, the pure source of all life for the answer, we found the solution and can now fulfill the purpose. That answer lies within your womb."

Sam bolted out of her chair. "The pure source of all life? What source is this you keep ranting about?" Before Amaru could answer, she turned to stare at the bubbling tubes. "What the hell are you trying to tell us, that it has something to do with the baby you say I'm carrying? How can a child save the world?" She paced frantically back and forth before the two seated figures. "Hell, I don't even know that I am pregnant! For all I know you're filling us with a load of horseshit and expecting us to swallow it whole." She stopped and glared at Amaru's calm face.

"It is the truth and you know it. You can now hear her..."

"If you found your damned solution then why are you still experimenting on people? That woman in the lab..." Sam's anger made her tone harsh and unyielding.

"She is one of us. She volunteered to help us perfect..."

"Shut up damn you, just ... please ... shut ... up!" Sam's scream of rage echoed around the room. Her body was as tightly drawn as it could be without snapping in two as she silently sent daggers of hatred and rage at Amaru's small form, still sitting calmly looking up at her.

"Do you really believe this to be true after all you've experienced, seen and heard leading up to this time, as well as what you are hearing and

feeling now, Sam?"

When Amaru's soothing question settled into Sam's fevered mind, she collapsed like a broken doll into her chair, sank her face into her hands and sobbed. James wrapped his arms around her and rocked her until her tears subsided.

A pained look of anguish passed over Amaru's face. "You know you carry this child within you and you know when and how it was conceived. You don't need me any longer to tell you, do you, Sam?"

When Sam lifted her pale, drawn face back to Amaru, a new strength shone in her eyes. "I know."

James lifted his face from Sam's hair. He reached out with a forefinger and placed it under her chin, forcing her to look at him. "What do you know, Sam?"

She sat up straight and pulled out of his arms. Her reddened eyes boldly stared into his. "I know the child is there and I know when and with whom it was conceived." She took a deep, shuddering mouthful of air. "The child is yours James. We made it the night I went into the bush and lost time."

He shot out of his chair, his eyes never leaving hers in the process. "What? Mine? How can that be? I didn't lose time that night, I slept through..."

"You did lose time, James. You just didn't come to in the bush to make you aware of it, is all. You are the father of this child." Amaru's flat statement of fact echoed around the room with the same intensity Sam's scream had produced.

James stood there, his mouth open and eyes glazed while the memory, and certainty, of this fact filtered into his conscious mind. When it had, he closed his mouth and a gleam of understanding and joy radiated from him. "I remember now. I remember meeting Sam outside, walking with her into the bush and taking her into my arms. I remember loving her and wishing it would never end. I remember..."

Suddenly, his knees felt weak and every muscle in his body threatened to stop working. He sank back down into his chair and looked, speechless and dumbfounded, from Amaru's smile to Sam's uncertain one. He touched Sam's face with gentle fingers, a look of awe and wonder on his face. "How do you know these things, Sam?" He turned to meet Amaru's gentle eyes. "Is this another part of the miracle?"

Amaru's lips twitched with a tiny, secret smile. "In a way, it is. Sam was not aware of it but she has always been able to 'see' and know things. She thought it was just her keen journalist's instincts." Her smile broadened at Sam's look of amusement.

Amaru met James's gaze with the same smile but a serious look to her eyes. "Now, of course, the child heightens the ability." She hesitated and her voice lowered. "And more..."

James leaned forward. "More?"

Having regained most of her composure, Sam asked, "Amaru, how will this child of ours, a mere human child, fulfill this promise of hope for the world?"

Amaru simply leaned forward, locked her eyes upon Sam's belly and uttered one word. "Speak."

Yes, it is time. Thank you, Amaru. My mother, my father, it is time to make my presence known and to tell you the rest of what you need to know ... hear me and know the truth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Amaru closely studied James and Sam as the knowledge of the child's existence and power seeped through the shock she knew they felt. She also knew this was the fatal moment ... the cusp, the time of turning when the plan, the hope, would either fail or succeed. All they had done to prepare these two humans for this moment, all the testing, the patient journey, revealing

information and secrets long protected, all the revelations and explanations, could now collapse like a house of cards if they rejected that tiny one sentence plea that flooded into her mind at the same time it had theirs. She held her breath and waited, fully aware of those linked around the world that listened and waited with her.

~*~

Sam slowly moved her hands until they covered her flat stomach. The beatific radiance that shown on her face as she looked down at them and the unborn child that was sheltered beneath them warmed James's heart to its depths. He reverently reached out to place his larger hand upon hers. When he felt his vocal cords unlock and his ability to speak return, he whispered, "She spoke to us. She's alive and she spoke to us." He looked up at Amaru's glowing face. "How can that be? She's only a day or two old, at the most. She ... it ... she's only a microscopic bundle of cells. There's no brain yet..."

Amaru interjected. "A mind is not dependent upon a body or a brain. She was aware from the moment of conception." When she saw the stunned look on James's face, she added, "This is the combination we sought, James, the miracle we searched for ... and you and Sam have brought it to the world."

"She called me Mother." Sam's eyes flashed a brilliant, crystalline blue when she finally looked up, her hands still tightly pressed against her belly.

James leaned over and gently pressed a kiss on her lips. When an arm surrounded his neck and her lips parted to return the kiss, his heart shattered within his chest. He felt himself meld into her, through her, with her and the child, joining with them as one. An overwhelming feeling of completeness, of belonging and of peace flooded into every cell of his body. When he lifted his mouth from hers, he knew the three of them, together, could accomplish anything.

"I am relieved you are not angry with us for interfering as we did. We could plainly see you two are in love, but we couldn't afford to wait any longer. I'm afraid we ... forced you to hurry up." Amaru coughed and covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes twinkled with mirth.

James and Sam looked at her with shock then both dissolved in laughter.

"I'm so glad you did ... and you're right, I do love her, with all my heart. I was just too stupid to tell her." James beamed at Sam, his eyes filled with unshed tears.

Sam laid her head upon his shoulder when he encircled her within his arm, holding her close as a fierce wave of protectiveness washed through him. He turned to the forgotten figure sitting quietly observing them and forced himself to finish what they'd started. "She will tell us the rest?"

Amaru nodded, her face almost as radiant as Sam's. "If you wish. This does not surprise you, James?"

He grinned at her, finally released from all anger and doubt. "No, it does not. What does surprise me is how blind we are to the simple truths that surround us in this world. We bury ourselves in the complexity of details we think are the answers when the smallest of things lurk under our noses. I now understand that those simple things are the source of truth and understanding. That's something I couldn't see before ... but I do now."

Her smile broadened. "And do you also see now what I mean by going back to the source of all life for the solution?"

"I do, Amaru." Sam's radiance still showed from her face. "You literally mean the source, don't you? The pure genetic material that existed at the beginning before all the varied life forms to come left it to follow their own path."

Yes, my mother, you are correct. In the beginning, distilled within one small pond of water, there existed the potential for thousands of life forms to originate. This source has disappeared over the aeons but its legacy has not. Within every living thing upon, in and above this earth there still exists separate but accurate pieces of the original puzzle. What Amaru and her people spent those aeons seeking was the one being that embodied, again, all

the threads of life necessary to the well being of this world. No multiple combining could possibly succeed in this, it had to be two individuals, each with their necessary half of the puzzle, coming together to produce the living whole. Those two are you, my parents, and, within me, once again, the cycle of rebirth can be accomplished._

James, enrapt with the new experience of mentally speaking with his unborn daughter, stood up and leaned down close to Sam's stomach. "How can you ... how _will_ you do this?"

They could hear the distant tinkle of tiny laughter. _My father, I am not a god, as you are thinking. I am a human, your daughter. My genetic code is the miracle, not I. When all comes to pass and the world is emptied of the seeds of destruction then I will be called upon to help with replenishment. Those left, like you, Mother, and those you have seen here, will be the true instruments to completing the rebirth. When that time arrives, I will merely be the catalyst that works with the natural elements already here. My seeds will once again restore to the earth that which it gave in the beginning. Harmony will be restored._

"Your children will be the beginning of a new human race?" Sam asked, awe in her voice.

No, Mother. I cannot have children as you will have me. I am the bank that stores all the codes for all the lifeforms needed by the earth to heal herself. I will supply that which no other can supply yet. All will be as it was before. There is no other way.

Sam glanced up at Amaru. "What I don't understand is, with all these powers all of you have, why didn't you intercede before now? Why didn't you stop things before they became this bad?"

Amaru shifted in her seat and sighed before answering. "My dear, we know from history that anything we offered by way of help would merely add fuel to the flames." She sighed again. "Sam, if we'd offered this knowledge and technology to the world as we know it now, do you really believe it wouldn't be used to conquer, to damage, to kill? By anyone?"

Sam's hands tightened against her belly. James sat back down and put his hand over hers again. "It would be a forgone conclusion, I'm afraid," Sam nodded in agreement.

"I know it sounds heartless but we have come to view these events with another perspective. Maybe I can help you understand why it is necessary for some of your race to ... pass away." She took a deep breath. "Throughout time, the way of the earth has always been to shed those who cannot or will not adapt, grow and live in harmony with all else. This is especially true of those who harbor seeds of self-destruction within their core. Given ages to prove themselves, and failing, the earth turns on them, eradicates them and brings herself back into balance once more. To do otherwise would be contrary to the logical order of things."

Amaru turned to James and pierced him with a penetrating gaze. "James, you have studied the nature of Mother Earth's heart. Did you not recognize that the smallest of her truths is also the largest? Have you not discovered that every living thing that has or still dwells with her is compelled to live in harmony with her or perish?"

Sam returned her stare, thought deeply, then replied, "This world has never been any other way. I see the logic of it, Amaru. As humans, we have a childish tendency to think the rules should not apply to us ... but they do."

"Another thing of great importance we have discovered is that the earth is criss-crossed in a net of great energy. It is very much like a spider's web. When points of power are threatened or any part of the web is weakened, signals of approaching danger are sent out to the whole. This net of living energy binds all who live upon it to each other and to the earth."

"This is incredible ... and it makes perfect sense ... finally." James blindly stared at the small embryos moving in the tubes, but his thoughts were turned inward. _My God. It's true. We've had the evidence in front of our noses since the beginning but we ignored it. Our self-serving blindness is

what will kill us in the end. How sad._

When Amaru noticed Sam avoiding looking at the tubes, she came to sit beside her. She reached out and took Sam's free hand into her own. "My dear, let me explain about these devices." She nodded toward the tubes. "I can see they still distress you."

Sam shuddered and kept her head down, focusing on James's hand covering hers. "Yes, they do. They remind me too much of some hideous experiment in a horror film ... I'm sorry, Amaru."

Amaru patted her hand. "No need to apologize, my child. Your reaction is quite understandable. However, you need to know that growing our children this way is the only means available to us. Does that help you understand why we view it as something wonderful instead of ... horribly abnormal?"

Tell her, Amaru. It serves no purpose to withhold information now.

"You are right, little one. Now is the time for all the truth to be told." She turned glittering golden eyes on James and Sam. "This is a secret I have withheld from the people for centuries. To know such a thing would have taken their heart away. Although, in hindsight, I wonder if I have not underestimated them." She sighed. "The truth is, for centuries now, my people, the Neanderthal people, have not been able to procreate. Myself and the other elders of the clan have kept this from them."

"But how in the world could you keep it from them? It's im..." James asked.

She smiled. "Our powers of the mind work on each other too, James. It is generally frowned upon to cloud someone else's mind but we knew, and agreed, that this was necessary."

"Why?" It was obvious from her facial expression that Sam was searching for the right question. "Why keep it from them? Why ... why would it matter?" Her voice trailed off with uncertainty.

Amaru smiled a sad, small smile. "We kept it from them because we could not stand the inevitable pain they would feel when they knew our people, as a whole, are doomed to extinction. You ask why it would matter ... it matters because, even though the goal would not have changed and they would certainly have continued to work toward it, it would have hurt them to know ... for no other reason."

"But I saw Neanderthal children playing in the nursery!" James pressed forward to look at Amaru's face.

"What you saw were hybrids, not Neanderthals, James. For centuries we have not been able to produce one child, in or out of the tubes, that didn't have other genetic material to hold it together. My people are dying." The last sentence was whispered.

"I don't understand why. With all your knowledge and technology and ... gifts. How could this happen?" Sam's eyes filled with tears.

Amaru peered into Sam's eyes with great sadness. "Because sometimes things just have to be the way they have to be. It is a part of our world and our lives that we, all of us, must come to accept without question. What is, is and sometimes we cannot change it."

"That sounds too damned negative to me. It sounds like you've given up on your own people while you work so hard to save ours." James's anger was apparent in the tone of his voice. "Sometimes I think we don't deserve to be saved."

"You do your race credit, James. Here you sit on the brink of either dreadful things or great things, yet you feel deep pain over our passing." Amaru's face cleared and she sat straighter in her chair. "That is why you _are_ worth saving."

"Isn't there anything at all we can do to save you? To help?" Sam almost sobbed.

"No, we have labored for centuries and could not find an answer. Besides, our goal is to finish what we were brought here to do. With your help, we will ... and that is enough."

Amaru stood and held her hand out to them. "Come. It is time for you to

go now. Your work is not completed and neither is mine."

Amaru led them back to the door they'd arrived through and, when it opened, they stepped back into the room with the empty tubes and workstations. She ushered them over to two empty chairs, each facing a large darkened monitor. "Please, sit down. This is the final step you must take before you leave us."

When James and Sam were comfortably seated, she continued. "These machines will endow each of you with all the knowledge and powers we enjoy. Once you have this common knowledge and the ability to mind link with all of us here, you will be prepared for one last great task."

"What task?" James studied the monitor, flat keyboard and dials with interest.

"You will know shortly. Using vocal cords to communicate is tiring for me and it would take too long to explain." Amaru smiled.

James picked up what looked like a set of headphones without a wire attaching it to anything. "Is this what we use?"

Sam picked the headphones up in front of her and inspected it while she spoke. "We'll be linked to all of you here? Just like you are with each other?" She raised her head and blinked in wonder. "And like we are with the baby now?"

Amaru nodded. "Yes. You will never be alone ... unless you want to be. We will be with you, guiding you, protecting you and being one with you."

"You say we have a task to complete outside of here. Shouldn't we stay here to protect our daughter ... our Gaia, until she's born. We can't afford to lose her." Fear shook Sam's voice as she glanced down at herself, seeing the child lying within her womb.

"Gaia?" Amaru paused, confusion on her face. Then it cleared and she smiled. "Yes, Gaia. Earth Mother. It is appropriate." Blinking, she returned her attention back to Sam. "Have no fear, Sam. She is protected and so are you two."

The confidence in Amaru's voice calmed Sam and she nodded, took a deep breath and made herself concentrate on this new information. She, along with James, set the headphones on her head and calmly watched Amaru as she sat down at an adjoining console and began to type in commands.

Only seconds passed before Amaru was removing the headsets from them. "How do you feel?" She glanced anxiously from James to Sam and back again.

"Feel? I'm still waiting for it begin. What's wrong, why did you decide to stop?" James frowned at her, waiting for an answer.

The answer came from within his mind. Images, voices, activities, colors, sounds, smells: all of it now hit him like a freight train. With the sensory information, the memories of millions of years flooded into his brain. It overwhelmed him into mute silence, his eyes rounded with surprise. Sam sat stock still, her hands gripping the arms of the chair as if she feared falling out. They both felt a subtle shift inside their minds, an awakening.

Amaru smiled. "It has begun ... finally."

Yes, the final days have arrived, Amaru. You have done well. My parents are now ready for the challenge. The hope of the world now rests with them. We can only pray the world will listen and accept._

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The cicadas stopped their song so abruptly that the silence echoed louder than the overwhelming chorus had. Ratana, carrying water to start a pot of coffee, was squatting to set it on the fire when black shrouded phantoms, no discernable faces showing, detached themselves from the pile of boulders and silently eased out of the rock like living shadows. Ratana jumped to her feet and screamed. Nathan and Ernie trotted over beside her, both holding spears ready and poised for action.

The leading figure held up a very human hand, reached up to slowly slip the hood down and smiled at them. "Don't you even recognize your friends and family anymore? Or have you been going native too long?" James chuckled at

their startled faces.

"Uncle!" Ratana threw herself at James and surrounded his wide shoulders with strong arms, capturing his surprised body in a rib crushing bear hug.

Nathan jabbed the spear into the ground and stepped forward, flashing a toothy smile, his eyes flitting from James to Sam and Spence then back again. "We knew you were coming but not when. It's good to see you again, Uncle, Ms. Louis, Spence." He grabbed James's forearm in an ancient greeting between brothers.

James responded with a grip of his own and smiled into Nathan's face. "It's good to be back." He slipped the dark cloak off and hung it over the boulders where it instantly disappeared. Sam and Spence followed suit then moved to stand behind James, the trio looking like a spearhead of a very small army. They flashed tiny, tired smiles at Nathan and Ratana but remained silent. Ratana moved to stand beside Sam and slipped an arm through hers. Sam relaxed and her smile widened a bit.

Ernie stood his ground but lowered his spear in salute. He nodded at the three returned travelers then locked his eyes upon Spence. "There is much to speak about this night."

Spence responded, his voice raw with fatigue. "Yes, there is, my friend. Too much." Shaking his head like a dog just out of the water, he sighed and closed his eyes. "I don't know what they did to me but I feel like I could sleep for a week."

Ernie stepped forward, took Spence's arm and quietly led him away. James shot an inquiring look at Nathan and Ratana but refrained from interfering. With an unspoken agreement, the four moved over to the campfire and sat down in their familiar chairs. A small gust of wind kissed the fire and sent a wave of brightly lit orange sparks spiraling into the night sky to mate with the stars. The cicadas had resumed their song. Their music and the smell and sound of the creek running lent the moment a feeling of Paradise.

Nathan cleared his throat. He leaned back into his chair, crossed muscular arms and strained to inject a casual tone into his words. "We know what happened and where you went, James. We now have the link too."

Sam, startled from her inspection of the stars overhead, snapped her head down and stared at Nathan and Ratana. "You do? You know?"

Ratana nodded. "Yes, we know. While you were gone Ernie instructed us just like Amaru instructed you. We've been given the knowledge, the abilities and the task we must complete before we can return."

"A task, huh? Seems we all have something to accomplish before it's too late," James replied.

"What we don't share is our individual task with each other. Ernie tells us this is important so we won't ask what yours are. But ... will you tell us what it was like in there?" Ratana's eyes gleamed with curiosity.

Nathan snickered. "What she wants to know about..." He turned to laugh at Ratana's blushing face. "...is the part about how the Bunyip got Guilford."

Two hours and several pots of coffee later, James and Sam had told them the whole story from beginning to end. All, except the part about Sam's pregnancy. James wanted to reserve that secret between Sam and him for as long as they could. Nathan and Ratana, both yawning with sleepiness, had gone off to bed, leaving James and Sam sitting comfortably next to each other around the long dead fire. Shooting stars arced through the sky, putting on an exhibition designed to inspire poets and writers alike. Sam lay back in her chair watching them, a smile of contentment on her face. James studied her in the moonlight, realizing that he could never live without her now ... never.

Sam slowly moved her head to stare into his eyes. Her thoughts reached out to him.

Please...

"Yes?" There rang a world of meaning in his question.

...touch...

"I love you." His throat tightened until he could barely swallow.

...me. I love you...

He reached out, took her hand and pulled her to her feet. Deep in her eyes he could see her hunger, her need. He knew his own need billowed out in waves of heat when he looked at her, touched her. Searching his mind, he found what he sought. He led her into the rainforest to a pond of water formed by a stack of rocks damming up the creek. Silently, gently, his lips met hers. Easing out of his arms, she stood back and began to undress. When she stood naked, the moonlight bathed her sleek body with a luminous glow, broken by rippling shadows from the trees. A throaty laugh of joy erupted from her. Turning swiftly, she plunged into the pool of water and disappeared from sight.

Stripping quickly, he plunged in after her, a laugh welling out of his throat. The cool water rippling over his nude body dispelled some, but not all, of the heat. The feeling of floating, of being a part of the universe, overwhelmed him. He stayed under the water, searching for her, until his lungs screamed for air. When his head bobbed to the surface, his gaze found her immediately. She stood dripping beside the pool, her eyes glittering with reflected moonlight. Long muscular legs planted in the deep moss lining the edge, she challenged him with the tilt of her hips. She smiled, her lips curling up like a jungle cat that had spotted something deliciously edible.

He swam to the shallows, planted his feet on the sandy bottom and slowly stood up. Grinning, he moved agonizingly slowly toward the shore, knowing her view of him was building a heat that would soon overwhelm them both. When he finally reached the bank and stepped close to her, she was visibly trembling with desire. Her body glowed, full, ripe, ready.

You're beautiful.

Come to me, my love. This time is ours and from now on we and our child will be one in mind, body and soul. I love you.

He gathered her into his arms, crushed her to his wet chest and captured her mouth with his own. They sank as one to the velvety moss underfoot. Their hunger for each other erupted in a frenzied movement of hands, lips and bodies seeking, touching, savoring each other.

When he entered her, his universe, his world, his life became hers and their daughter's. The rhythm of a man and a woman, united, bonded in love, touched the primal cords within each of them. It was as steady, as strong and as necessary as a heartbeat. As their bodies united, their minds swirled around and through each other, seeking, locking, becoming one.

The moment when logic and conscious thought utterly and completely dissolve, when eyes lock and people are lost inside each other, completely merged with each other, is the time when from within a tiny piece of a person, a lone, bewildered voice asks, "Are you the one?" When this moment arrived, James no longer heard the voice or the question. He knew. For the first time in his life, he knew, and his body, mind and soul were finally complete.

~*~

Morning light played across his eyelids, setting off an internal alarm clock James didn't want to answer. He shifted away from it, his arm still locked around Sam's naked waist. She mumbled in her sleep and nuzzled deeper into his neck, her breath warm and moist against his skin. His body responded with its own warmth, waking him fully. He buried his face in her hair, smelling that sensuous combination of plants and flowers mingling with her own scent. His hand rested lightly on her flat belly, aware of the special life growing there. He sent waves of love and protectiveness to them both.

"Hey! You two gonna get up sometime today or do we have to eat Ernie's damper bread by ourselves again?" Ratana's face showed briefly through the tent flap before she ducked back in embarrassment. "We've got fresh honey," she shouted before returning to her breakfast.

James ignored the intrusion and ran his tongue lightly over Sam's neck and shoulder, groaning as her hips moved against him under the sleeping bag. Her lips moved up to his ear and whispered, "Now's not the time, stud." Then

she laughed deep in her throat, kissed him and threw off the cover. When she looked at the evidence of how she had affected him, she stared with admiring eyes and giggled. He put both hands under his neck, leaned back and grinned up at her, enjoying her admiration. When Ratana hit the side of the tent with the flat of her hand and uttered, "Come on you two!" he jumped, groaned again and rolled out to grab his clothes and boots. He could hear Sam's laughter ringing inside his mind and grinned. Later, you vixen, he sent out to her and heard her laugh audibly in response. By the time he had his shorts, shirt and boots on, Sam had ducked out of the tent and the two women were chattering together over coffee, hot bread and honey they'd found in a nearby hive.

He blinked and squinted his eyes against the hot sunlight already streaming into the clearing. Stretching his long arms and legs, he watched Sam admire his form and grinned. When she turned back to talk to Ratana again, he went to the stream to wash. The cold water coming down off the mountains woke him up completely. A faint noise of low voices reached him across the water. He could see Ernie, Nathan and Spence in deep conversation among the trees on the opposite shore. They sat cross-legged on a mound of grass and were showing each other various tattoos and markings on their bodies. James shook his head and chuckled as he turned back to the clearing. When he reached the women, Sam was already holding a hot steaming cup of coffee out to him.

"Oh, that's heaven," he sighed after taking a sip and sitting down. He stretched out his long, tanned legs and eased back into the chair with the smug look of a man who has everything.

Ignoring the hot looks passing between James and Sam, Ratana asked, "So, when do we leave? Nathan and I have instructions to get back to our people as soon as possible. How about you two?"

"We leave today, just as soon as we get packed up," James replied, his attention still on Sam as she poured another cup of coffee and grabbed another hunk of damper out of the pan.

Ratana rolled her eyes and stood up. "Okey-dokey, Uncle. I'll go get the other blokes and tell them to start dismantling the tents. I'll be packing if you have any further orders." She threw him a mock salute and strode away, snorting with suppressed laughter.

James smiled at Sam's knowing look. I want you.

I know. She smiled.

Tonight. He grinned.

Yes. She closed her eyes and let a small moan escape her lips when an image he sent rippled through her brain.

Sam jumped up, blushing furiously. "We have to pack. We have a long way to walk and a lot of work to do when we get back." She bent down and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Later!" Smiling broadly, she followed Ratana toward the tents.

~*~

The trek back to their original camping site was remarkably quiet and peaceful. By the time they spotted the parked Rovers through the bush, they'd all mentally exchanged any information they needed to share and felt secure in the link they knew they'd carry with them when they returned. Ernie had sent Nathan off in another direction but refused to tell the group why. Feeling Nathan's presence off in the distance, they felt no alarm at his absence.

Before the last bush was pushed aside to enter the clearing, James hesitated, his face clouded with concentration.

"What is it?" Sam touched his arm and tilted her head to peer into his eyes.

Ratana flashed a smile back over her shoulder. "Can't you hear her? It's Cindy. She's here, saying goodbye."

Sam's shoulders relaxed with relief. "I've been hearing her for the last several hours now." She too turned toward the clump of trees they knew the Yowie hid behind, watching them with a sad longing. "She's going to miss us."

James nodded his head, his lips curled up at the corners. We'll be

back soon, Cindy. This is our home now and you're part of our family. We'll miss you too. _ He sent her a wave of affection and felt hers return instantly.

Sam's forehead creased with worry. "James, what do we do about the dead boy, Guilford and Ian? Do we report their deaths to the authorities when we get back?"

Ratana stepped forward. "No! They'd come in here to investigate. Besides, we'd have too many questions to answer ... and we can't."

"She's right, Sam, we can't." He found Cindy with his mind again. _Cindy, the deaths of the human males?_

All will be well. My clan has already buried the unmoving ones parts. None know they were here. Nor will any find them if they search.

Question? Why did you cry for the human on the trail when we found him dead if you were not his friend?

I cry for all life that ends, Uncle James. Mostly, I cried for my baby brother's blood the unmoving man had on his body. I miss my brother.

Sam and Ratana looked at each other with a mixture of surprise and understanding in their eyes. Ratana whispered, "We mourn him too, Cindy."

_I go now. Have no fear. Amaru watches and waits for your return. So do I. _

They could feel Cindy smile.

Sam's shoulders relaxed. James placed an arm around her waist. His head snapped up when he felt Nathan approaching.

Spence and Ernie stood back to allow Nathan to reach James. His chest heaved as he quickly recovered from the exertion of jogging while carrying a heavy pack. He reached up and dragged his forearm across his forehead, wiping away the sweat dripping into his eyes.

James waited patiently for him to speak, his face a mixture of anticipation and excitement. "What is it, Nathan? I can feel you holding back, now give."

Nathan's smile was so big it stretched his lips to capacity, showing a mouthful of white teeth. He silently held out his hand and placed a small bundle wrapped in leaves onto James's palm. The others peered hard at the small package and raised their eyebrows at Nathan, who stood quietly ignoring their looks and instead watched James.

James unwrapped it to reveal a flattened black stone with a pattern of gemstones twinkling upon its face. He shoved his face closer and exclaimed, "Those are diamonds. It's the Pleiades! The Seven Sisters." He looked up at Nathan and grinned. "Where did you get this?"

Nathan nodded at Ernie. "He told me where to go to get it. He said you'd need it soon. It's a gift from the People and a stone of power."

James gazed at Ernie's impassive features, waiting for further explanation. When the old man grunted and shambled off into the bush without a word, James turned back to Nathan. "Strange bloke." He shook his head slowly while watching the large fronds of a palm sway where the old man had walked through. "Where's he going, Nate?"

Nathan's eyes also followed Ernie's path. "Where he's led to go, I suppose. He'll be back, just like we will."

Sam reached out and took the stone from James's hand. "A stone of power? What power? He said James would need it? What does that mean?"

Nathan shrugged. "I don't know. That's all he said to me. That, and you'd know what to do with it when the time came."

Ratana studied the stone over Sam's shoulder. "It's the same as the marking over the spacecraft back in the cavern." She locked eyes with James. "Yes, we know ... Don't question it, Uncle. If Ernie says you'll know when the time is right then you'll know." She turned toward the Rovers and pushed the vines and leaves aside to step through.

When Nathan, Sam and James stepped into the clearing, they were assaulted by a loud voice that sent them all running toward the cars. "Where the hell have you guys been? I'm starving here. If you had to go out looking for your stupid samples so early in the morning couldn't you at least left me

something to eat besides overripe bananas?" Marc sat on top of the hood of their green Rover playing with his laptop and absent-mindedly swatting at mosquitoes.

Sam rushed toward him, her face lit up with joy. Before she could throw herself at the young man, James's voice thundered into her head. No, Sam! He doesn't know. He thinks we were here this morning. He has an altered memory of the last two days. Thank you, Amaru.

Sam finished the last few steps toward the Rover at a slower pace. When she reached Marc she placed her hand on his arm and asked, "What are you doing there? Anything interesting happen while we were away?"

He snorted with disgust and laid the computer down on the hood when he noticed them gathered around him waiting for a response. "Interesting? In this place? Right! The most interesting thing happening here is the noises of things creeping up on you-things you can't see. I got so bored I actually packed everything up for you guys. I couldn't even get any decent photographs taken." He snorted again and picked his computer back up. "At least some of my pictures from yesterday came out."

James stepped up and peered at the computer monitor. A picture of a Kangaroo peering out of the forest at night was clarifying itself on the screen. James chuckled. "Looks like you got some good shots there, Marc." He slapped Marc on the shoulder and turned to let out a deep breath.

Sam saw his look of relief and smiled. Seems they can control what images a camera captures too, she thought, knowing the rest of the team could hear her.

Marc looked up and asked, "Did you get the samples and information you wanted? Are there any pictures you want me to take to go with the story?"

"There is no story, Marc. We looked all day and couldn't find any evidence to support anything out of the unusual here. Guess this is nothing more than another one of those strange stories that goes unexplained." Sam smiled up at Marc's puzzled look.

"But the black stone up north, the markings, all the..."

Sam placed her hand on his arm. "Just a black rock, nothing more." She took a deep breath. "Our work is done here, I'm afraid. Time to go home."

"Whatever you say, boss." He grinned and slid off the car. Grabbing his laptop, he stood ready to leave. "Truth is, I won't be sorry to see the last of this place. Weird and scary shit here." His grin belied the statement.

"Oh, I don't know. I've fallen in love with the place, not to mention certain of its citizens." She smiled at James.

"So, that's how it is, heh?" Marc chuckled. "Fast work there, Louis." He turned to Spence, Ratana and Nathan. "I won't miss this place but I will miss the people."

Nathan and Ratana smiled back at him. Nathan replied, "We'll miss you too, Marc, even if you are a Sheila in the bush."

Spence laughed then announced, "Well, mates, it's time for me to go home. Anybody need a ride?" He looked at Nathan and Ratana with a knowing look.

"You bet, mate. We're with you," Nathan responded, taking Ratana's arm.

They climbed into Spence's Rover and with a wave and a shout of "G'day! See you later," they drove off in a cloud of red dust.

Waving at them as they disappeared, Sam had a look of sadness on her face. James stepped up to her and slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry, love, we'll see them again ... and soon, I think."

Sam smiled up at him then laid her head on his chest. "I know. It's just that so much has happened that I feel like they're family. I'm going to miss them."

You won't miss us for long. Nathan's good-humored quip sliced into their minds.

We'll be back and so will you. Spence was chuckling.

Kiss that man for me. Ratana's voice echoed in their minds.

They kissed, smiled and headed for the car.

EPILOGUE

THE NEW YORK TIMES

New York City, New York, USA March 15

Today, the world was stunned when the heads of every country in the world met for an emergency meeting of the UN. This meeting, all by itself, is not an event to stagger the public. However, it is interesting that countries presently at war with each other and out of favor with NATO also attended.

Doctor James Hay, a well-known and much respected scientist specializing in Cryptozoology, and Miss Samantha Louis, a world-class award-winning freelance journalist, were invited to be the key speakers at this historic meeting of world leaders.

What they planned to address the assembly about is a mystery. Media representatives for the UN are refusing to comment on what the meeting is for and what will be discussed today. The eyes of the world are watching and waiting to learn the outcome.

THE AUSTRALIAN

Sydney, New South Wales, Australia Mar 23

Doctor James Hay and his American fiancée, Miss Samantha Louis, an award-winning journalist, landed at Sydney airport this morning. They were met by every known newspaper and agency, each hoping to get an interview about this dynamic couple's trip to address the UN last week.

When asked what they had presented to the UN delegates and what the outcome was, Doctor Hay merely stated, "The world will know soon enough." They both declined to comment further. It would seem the mystery is to remain a mystery a little longer.

THE TOWNSVILLE BULLETIN

Townsville, Queensland, Australia March 26

Our own Doctor James Hay, of James Cook University, along with his new bride, the former Samantha Louis, an award-winning freelance American journalist, arrived in Townsville today. They plan on honeymooning on Magnetic Island, where they have leased a hilltop villa with top security. When this reporter asked the newly married pair about their trip to the United States and what their plans are now, Mrs. Hay commented, "We had a nice time in the U.S. but all we want now is to enjoy our honeymoon."

It would seem that the couple is determined to remain silent on the subject of the talk they delivered to the UN last week.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

New York City, New York, USA March 26

Are the prophecies of the Bible, Nostrodamus and the ancients finally coming true? The world is in chaos following the breakdown of the emergency UN talks yesterday. News of more wars erupting throughout the world was announced today. Many are convinced that we are on the brink of another, and a final, world war. After years of uneasy peace, the world powers have declared a worldwide state of emergency following the outbreak of conflicts between countries traditionally peaceful.

THE TOWNSVILLE BULLETIN

Townsville, Queensland, Australia March 29

Doctor James Hay and his newlywed wife, Samantha, have been reported missing by their security guards today. Sometime in the middle of the night, the pair mysteriously disappeared from their honeymoon villa on Magnetic Island. Locals and news people who had camped out around the villa in hopes of speaking with the couple report the presence of mysterious lights in the skies during the night. The security guards were unaware of any strange happenings as no alarms were set off.

When interviewed, the head of security, Mr. Edgar Thomas, stated that the night before the couple seemed almost euphoric. When asked what he thought might have happened, he stated, "I don't know. The Hays were happy and looking forward to returning home this morning. They presented each member of the security team with a generous bonus check before retiring for the evening. All

I can say is that we know they didn't leave the grounds in any traditional way and that my people are baffled."

A massive search of the island and all ferries to and from it are being conducted. Investigators and local police refuse to comment on who may have taken them or how they disappeared from their villa.

~The End~

And the beginning...

Watch for the last two books in this trilogy, coming soon from NovelBooks, Inc...

A Glass Darkly

Looking Glass

SCIENTIFIC NOTES

You may now be asking yourself the question "Is this story a complete work of fiction, or is there some basis in fact?" That question is not as easy to answer as you might think. In fact, before I can answer we need to look at the separate parts of the story.

THE NEANDERTHALS

Neanderthal is the common name for a subspecies of the human race. Modern humans like you and me are graced with the scientific name of Homo sapiens sapiens. Our cousins the Neanderthals are known in scientific circles as Homo sapiens neanderthalensis.

In 1856, limestone quarrymen in the Neander valley in Germany discovered the bones of an ancient man in a cave. Originally thought to be an arthritic soldier from Napoleon's army, he quickly had the epithet 'caveman' attached to him, together with a whole range of misconceptions. Neanderthals traditionally are depicted as shambling subhumans that represented a low form of humanity that was quickly replaced at the end-point of the evolutionary ladder by the upright, handsome, intelligent, modern man. In recent years, Neanderthals have undergone considerable rehabilitation. New discoveries throughout Europe and the Middle East have shown that Neanderthal Man was in fact an intelligent subspecies that cared for its infants and old people. They used fire and stone weapons. They even performed elaborate burial ceremonies that showed they had the concept of an afterlife. Certainly Neanderthals had bigger muscles, a heavier bone structure and lacked a chin. But they also had a larger brain than modern man.

The physical differences between modern humans and our ancient cousins are relatively slight. In fact, William Straus and A. J. Cave, two recent researchers, have said that "if he could be reincarnated and placed in a New York subway-provided that he were bathed, shaved, and dressed in modern clothing-it is doubtful whether he would attract any more attention than some of its other denizens."

Whether or not Neanderthals possessed a language is still hotly debated. The soft parts of the throat like the vocal cords and larynx or the speech centers of the brain, which might tell us these things, do not usually fossilize. Other structures like the hyoid bone that anchors the muscles controlling the tongue, larynx and jaw would tell us something, but hyoid bones are fragile and, until recently, had not turned up in the fossil remains. We now know they definitely possessed a hyoid bone, removing any reason for them not to have a language.

What then, of their large brain? While the brain itself does not fossilize, we can generalize about it. You don't evolve a large brain if you don't use it. It appears from the shape of the brain case that the Neanderthal brain was put together in much the same way as modern humans. Various authors, such as Jean Auel, have argued that Neanderthals had other "talents" in their large brains. Whatever the truth of the matter, a mental ability is not likely to be revealed through a study of their bones.

Put their large brain together with their physical strength and they appear to be a superbly adapted species. Yet something happened to this

superbly adapted human species that removed it from the face of the earth. The disappearance of the Neanderthals is an enigma. Some scientists argue that a more violent subspecies (our own) wiped them out; others say that modern humans mated with Neanderthals and removed them by swamping their gene pool. Whatever the reason, we know that about thirty thousand years ago, a very successful subspecies of human vanished suddenly, to be replaced by the subspecies that has spread throughout the world and brought so much ruination to it.

YOWIES

So much has been written on the subject of manlike animals that I do not intend to go into the arguments for and against their existence here. Well-read people worldwide have heard of such creatures as Bigfoot, Yeti and Sasquatch. Fewer, though, would realize that creatures like these are known all over the globe under a variety of names. The Australian equivalent is the Yowie. This manlike beast has been reported along the whole East Coast of Australia, though the sightings are concentrated in areas such as the Blue Mountains behind Sydney and the Glass House Mountains north of Brisbane.

Many scientists discount sightings of Bigfoot and his cousins as hallucination, hoaxes or misreporting of sightings of ordinary animals. Some researchers are convinced of the existence of something out of the ordinary, though exactly what is another matter altogether. Often these sightings are reported by people that we would have no hesitation in believing had they reported something else. Every researcher into the subject has his favorite theory. Some argue that the creatures are prehistoric survivors of some early ape such as Gigantopithecus. Others feel that they are more human and represent another species of man. A few even regard them as a psychic manifestation having no real existence outside the human mind. Certainly, the literature reveals cases where the beast in question has left no footprints in soft earth, or has just "evaporated" in front of startled witnesses.

UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS

Interestingly, sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFO's) often occur at the same time and in the same area as Bigfoot sightings. Although there is only one (suspect) report of a Bigfoot actually getting out of a UFO, there are many instances of people seeing them near where a UFO has been reported. Janet and Colin Bord, two researchers of these and other mysteries, argue that it is possible that atmospheric and electromagnetic fluxes create an image in the minds of susceptible people that is interpreted in different ways. It is interesting to speculate that if it was possible to manipulate electromagnetic forces precisely enough, one could actually influence what people saw.

BUNYIPS

The Bunyip is another purely Australian mystery, though like Bigfoot, it has parallels elsewhere. The Bunyip is traditionally a water monster that inhabits lakes and rivers from which it emerges to devour animals and, occasionally, people. The mention of a water monster immediately makes one think of the Loch Ness Monster, "Champ" from Lake Champlain in North America, or the "taniwha" of the New Zealand Maoris. The image one gets from reading eyewitness accounts of all these beasts is of a large creature with flippers and a long neck. The popular press often sensationalizes reports of water monsters as survivors of the dinosaurs and equates them with the long-extinct plesiosaur. It is far more likely that if these infrequent sightings are of a real creature that it is something like a long-necked seal. Many witnesses have reported the existence of a mane or whiskers, both traits of mammals rather than reptiles.

There are many reports from around the world of unknown creatures. In past times, these reports have been dismissed as mistaken identity or hoaxes perpetrated on gullible visitors. This century, however, has seen a large number of new animals discovered, from the okapi and the mountain gorilla, to the Blue Ox and the Vietnamese goat. It is certainly possible that there are other creatures waiting to be found. The science of Cryptozoology deals with

the study of unknown animals. For many researchers in this field, the main avenues of research are old reports, or vague sightings, perhaps backed up by the occasional footprint or dead domestic animal. Other researchers seek evidence in the field, trying to track the beast down, or spending days, months or years in the pursuit. Not every unknown animal is an exciting one like a Nessie or a Bigfoot though. Equally valid unknowns exist with the myriad of insects or deep-sea creatures waiting to be discovered by some industrious worker in the field.

THE ABORIGINE PEOPLES

A word needs to be said, too, about the indigenous peoples referred to in this book. The North American Indian, the Australian Aborigine and the New Zealand Maori all share a love for the land and a caring attitude toward the creatures in it. The myths and legends of the creation from each of their cultures show an awareness of man's place in nature and the harmful effects of ignoring the need to live with a spiritual connection to the land, the animals and the plants. Many references are made to the 'Dreamtime', that period of Aboriginal history and belief that vastly predates any recorded history. The author has striven to record the legends and beliefs in a sympathetic and accurate manner at all times.

So we return to the original question. To what extent is this story fiction, and to what extent is it fact? The characters are fictional for the main part, though Dr. James Overton's mother had the surname Hay, he works at James Cook University in Townsville as a Biologist, he has a New Zealand friend called Spence, and Aboriginal friends called Ratana and Nathan. The author's birth initials are S.L. Like the heroine, she is American, she came to Australia, fell in love with and married the hero. So I'm afraid you must make up your own mind. If you think the information on Yowies, Bunyips and the like are too unbelievable, read some of the books and journals listed below before you decide. Whatever your decision, I hope you enjoyed the story!

Dr. James M. Overton Ph.D., MSc.

Botanist, Biologist, Cryptozoologist

Townsville, Queensland, Australia April 1999

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- _Cryptozoology_, J. Richard Greenwell, Sec'ty, International Society of Cryptozoology, Tucson, AZ
- _The Psychic Sasquatch and Their UFO Connection_, Jack "Kewaunee" Lapseritis M.S., Wild Flower Press, a division of Blue Water Publishing, Inc.
- _In Search of Prehistoric Survivors_, Karl P.N. Shuker, Blanford

About the authors of Glass House...

What does an assistant dog trainer in L.A., a team roper who competed in pro rodeos, a woman who was the only female to ride a classic Harley Flathead Hog with the Hells Angels, a professional horse trainer, a database creator who lectured CEOs, and a comedy radio show hostess in Australia, author, artist, gardener and lover of ferrets have in common?

Ariana Overton

Always versatile, Ariana has led a life that spans continents and

countries. Traveling around the U.S., Australia and New Guinea, meeting exciting people, experiencing exotic lands and cultures, gave Ari a diverse catalog of characters, settings and storylines her writing can't help but reflect. After traveling to Australia to research her trilogy on the Australian mysteries, she met Max Overton, her soulmate, husband, best friend, and writing partner.

Her genres and cross genres novels are as eclectic as the author-murder mysteries (Trapdoor, The Devil Is in the Details-EPPIE finalist 2001 and Frankfurt nominee), Time Travel Thriller (Tapestry-EPPIE finalist in 2000), Action/Adventure (Glass House, A Glass Darkly and Looking Glass-EPPIE finalists in 2001 and 2002) and A Gift for Roo [children's picture book-inducted into the children's E-book hall of fame]

She heads the Art Department for *NovelBooks, Inc.*, designs custom covers for others publishers and private clients. She was one of five finalists for the 2002 INDIE Graphic Artist Achievement award, nominated by three publishing houses, and is consistently top ten in the Preditors & Editors graphic artist polls.

To view Ariana's creative designs, go to <http://communities.msn.com/ArianaOverton/bookcovers>

Max Overton is a new author specializing in historical fiction, although he has also written extensively on biological non-fiction.

His first book, Lion of Scythia, (an EPPIE finalist in 2001) deals with conflicts between the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great and the tribes on the borders of his realm. A second book in this trilogy, The Golden King, is also completed and the third and final book of this series is now being written. A series of murder mysteries with a historical basis is also being planned, taking place in Athens of the fifth century BC.

Born in Malaysia to English parents, Max has traveled extensively, living in England, Belgium, Germany and Jamaica before settling down in New Zealand. Moving to Australia, Max took up a position teaching at James Cook University. He also undertook studies in tropical butterfly ecology for his doctorate, which earned him the name of 'The Butterfly Man' in Queensland.

Max met Ariana in Australia and, after two years exploring the outback, the tropical rainforests, and New Guinea, they moved to the United States where they continue to write, side-by-side.

The two authors recently teamed up to write a novel together. The result is Looking Glass, being lauded by reviewers as 'the Australian Jurassic Park.'

Personal author's website <http://www.angelfire.com/ri2/theovertons>

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Balkan smuggling conspiracy entangles two Americans

Apology for the Devil by Stewart Thomas

American Secret Service Agent Lia Blaine and Major Robert Garrick of the elite British Special Air Services find themselves thrown together into a violent maelstrom of corruption and treachery which leads up into the White House.

Too Many Spies Spoil the Case by Miles Archer

Hard-hitting, quick thinking and an irreverent mouth propel Doug McCool through a tight action thriller with plenty of bodies dropping, bullets flying and, of course, too many spies.

Improbable Solution by Judith B. Glad

Gus Loring comes to town seeking forgetfulness. Sally Carruthers can only dream of the day she can leave. But there's something about Whiterock, Oregon, that makes every encounter between them more compelling, more complicated than simple desire.

Moon of Little Winter by Margaret Marr

Chely and Ty must remember their past to defeat the Lady in Red, an evil witch who holds the key that will unlock their memories and help them regain a love they've shared since childhood.

The Scent of Stone by Savannah Michaels

Tintagel Castle, secret caves, and a tantalizing scent cause havoc on two unwilling lovers. Throw in the magic of Merlin and his delightful sidekick, Aili, and you'll never look at a stone the same way again.

Desert Dreams by Gracie McKeever

Old World Evil vs. New Age Passion ... Can their love survive?

Dangerous Medicine by Jane Toombs

_Life at Harper Hills Hospital means living on the edge. Nurse Lynn Holley and Dr. Nick Dow must overcome their dark pasts and deal with the dangerous present in order to look forward to a future together. _

After the Rain by Connie Vines

Cheyenne Maddox knew it was wrong to love Brede and his daughter-because whoever had tried to kill her would return. It was only a matter of time!

Back to Tomorrow by Gaye Walton

_Drawn back in time to 1889 Tombstone, librarian Emily Dennison meets Zachary Tremaine, and gets involved in a mission that leads to more adventure than she ever imagined. _

Skull Dance by Gerd Balke

A pulse-pounding, globe-trotting adventure where the world is held hostage by terrorists.

Diamondback by Elizabeth Dearl

When novelist Taylor Madison discovers a mysterious letter among her late mother's effects, she heads for West Texas in search of her father's identity. But small, sleepy towns don't appreciate rude awakenings and Taylor soon finds herself up to her neck in rattlesnakes and long-kept secrets-a deadly combination.

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