

Sacred Wind

BOOK I



ANDY COFFEY

Sacred Wind

Book 1

'Quantum computing is...a distinctively new way of harnessing nature...It will be the first technology that allows useful tasks to be performed in collaboration between parallel universes.'

David Deutsch – Centre of Quantum Computing, University of Oxford.

'There are vibrations of different universes right here, right now. We're just not in tune with them. There are probably other parallel universes in our living room – this is modern physics. This is the modern interpretation of quantum theory, that many worlds represent reality.'

Dr Michio Kaku - Theoretical Physicist and Bestselling Author.

'In infinite space, even the most unlikely events must take place somewhere.'

Professor Max Tegmark - Dept. of Physics, MIT.

'This is a victory for life, a victory for common sense and, ultimately, recognition that consciousness is pervasive in our abundant and wonderful universe.'

Dr Lamb Dopiaza-Pilau Rice – following the 1968 legislation by the Welsh Parliament recognising curries as conscious entities.

MAY ODIN BLESS YOUR WIND!

ANDY

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Sacred Wind: Book 2
Sacred Wind: Book 3
Sacred Wind (Complete Trilogy)
Sacred Wind: The Appendices
Sacred Wind: Songbook



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Chapter 1 - There's something in the air

Baron Bartholomew Vincent Blacktie sat slumped on his sizeable gold and marble throne, scratching his chin. His bejewelled coronet lay slightly to one side on his head and he nonchalantly stroked his pet ferret, Velvet, who was sat on his knee. Looking out at the opulent great hall in front of him, he sighed.

He had been the Supreme Ruler of Chester and the surrounding areas of North Wales and the Wirral for a little over five years, and things had never been better. Tax revenues were high, the people were obedient, cheese production was under strict control, and instances of unauthorised flatulence were at an all-time low. But, irrespective of all this, he was troubled.

'Pimple,' he said to his Chief Courtier, who was standing in one of the decorative stone arches that surrounded the throne room, 'am I a benign and noble leader?'

'Only on Thursday's, my Lord, after you've had a good helping of Ma Chesterton's dumplings, a piece of Cheshire Blue and a goblet or two of port.'

The Baron shook his head, disconsolately. 'Really, Pimple? Oh, I must make more of an effort. For I wish the people to love me, to be inspired by me, and to think of me as someone who has their best interests tattooed indelibly on his benevolent and egalitarian heart.'

'I thought you simply wanted power and wealth beyond all imagination, my Lord?'

'Oh, how little you know me, Pimple,' the Baron sighed again. 'Although my actions make it appear that I seek only omnipotence, subjugation of all beings before me and wealth beyond measure, do you not realise that I also long to be loved?'

'Er, it hadn't really crossed my mind, my Lord.'

‘Nevertheless, it is true, Pimple. I desire to exude bonhomie and joy, so that the people will wish to cling to my metaphoric breasts like suckling kittens.’

Pimple raised a solitary eyebrow and continued to listen attentively.

‘And, to be frank, I also want to exhibit a more positive image in the run up to the next election.’

‘But the next election is forty-five years away, my Lord, based upon the amendments you made last year regarding tenure.’

‘Ah, true, but I do so hate leaving things to the last minute. Time waits for no man, Pimple. You should remember that.’

‘I will, my Lord.’

‘And I need to ensure all of the electorate are completely behind me. Do you remember what percentage of the vote I received last time?’

‘99% my Lord.’

‘And who received the other 1%? Was it not Lord “Goody-two-shoes” Nobleheart?’

‘It was my Lord.’

‘And have you seen him recently?’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘And...?’

‘He’s in the canal where you left him, my Lord.’

‘Ah, how fares he?’

‘Well, he’s lost a lot of weight, my Lord... and some life.’

The Baron looked forlorn, raised a weary hand to his forehead and continued to stroke Velvet. ‘Nevertheless, Pimple, I feel an obligation to convince this 1% of my subjects that, at the next election, they should allay their fears and cast their votes for

me. I wish them to see I am truly their humble servant and offer them succour in their time of need, and protection from our enemies.’

‘I’m not sure you’ll be able to achieve that, my Lord,’ Pimple said, taking a tentative step forward.

‘And why, pray, do you think that will be?’ the indignant Baron asked.

‘Because they’re in the canal with Lord Nobleheart, my Lord.’

The ceremonial fanfare of trumpets blared out and the ostentatious doors to the throne room opened inwards. A troop of armoured men, in full military regalia, entered and saluted en masse, the clang of steel arms on steel breastplates reverberating around the room.

‘My Lord,’ a weasel-faced steward shouted with an air of self-importance, ‘I announce General Ramases Darkblast, who seeks audience to inform you of progress regarding the Scouseland Crusades.’

General Ramases Darkblast, the Supreme Commander of the Knights of Flatulence, the Baron’s Imperial Guard, was an imposing man and a lifelong soldier. Although he was dour and serious, to the point where any sense of humour he had possessed had long since headed off to seek a more fulfilling life elsewhere, he was loyal to the point of stupidity. It was this quality, plus his considerable prowess on the battlefield, that endeared him greatly to the Baron.

‘General Darkblast, your presence is most welcome,’ the Baron said, rising from his throne and depositing Velvet on the floor. ‘Pray, how did you find Scouseland?’

‘Still heavily populated by chip shops, my Lord.’

‘And the local populace, did they show any form of resistance to your incursion?’

‘Someone threw a kebab at us on one occasion, my Lord.’

‘And was your response measured and appropriate?’

‘Yes, my Lord, we threw it back.’

‘A wise move General,’ the Baron commented, ‘there’s no need for unnecessary violence at this stage of the diplomatic procedure. Tell me, though, did you attempt to converse with the indigenous people?’

‘We did, my Lord. At first we tried to parley with them in their own tongue, but we were met with blank stares. Our interpretation of their dialect still needs work, I’m afraid. So we tried an alternative approach.’

‘And this was?’

‘We sang them a medley of songs by The Bertles.’*

‘And was this demonstration of musical affinity well received?’

‘Not really, my Lord, that’s when they threw the kebab at us.’

‘However,’ the General added quickly, sensing the Baron’s growing unrest, ‘we did succeed in obtaining a few volunteers to join the palace guard. A sort of exchange deal, if you will.’

‘Excellent,’ the Baron responded, ‘and perhaps when we have instructed them in our ways they can be sent back as emissaries, to spread words of enlightenment to the masses.’

‘Indeed, my Lord.’

‘Or, of course, we could torture them, brainwash them and send them back as spies.’

‘Well, yes, there is that option, my Lord.’

The Baron walked clockwise around General Darkblast, in a manner similar to a cat circling an injured bird. ‘But enough of business in uncharted lands, my good

General, I have needs of a more local nature that require urgent attention. Tell me do you know the whereabouts of Hob and Nob?’

‘Yes, my Lord, they were last spotted in Mold, disguised as Vagabond Acupuncturists.’

The Baron turned and walked slowly over to the large bookcase that stood against the wall to the right of the throne. He pulled out one of the great tomes from the middle shelf and gently stroked its dusty, leather cover. His eyes sparkled and a smile that contained no joy appeared on his lips. ‘Despatch some of your men to bring them to me,’ he ordered. ‘I have a task for them.’

**The Bertles, or Bert, Saul, Marge and Gringo as they were affectionately known, were the most successful musical band to come out of Scouseland. At one time they topped the charts simultaneously in twenty eight countries. In fact, the ruler of Latvargravia-Crustia, the Grand Emperor Igor Rocakovich, was such a fan that he passed a law forcing citizens to buy a copy of their most famous song, ‘She Loves Me All Night Like A Walrus’, every week to ensure its continuing position at the top of the Latvargravia-Crustia charts. He was eventually overthrown in a bloodless coup that actually involved quite a lot of blood.*

The ancient stones in the Circle of Wind stood firm against the elements, as they had for millennia. A fierce wind cut through the icy air, while above spears of lightning cracked the sky; vast tendrils of light acting as the harbinger for the thunder that was to follow.

In the distance the sound of hooves grew ever closer, their pounding rhythm providing a rumbling counterpoint to the storm overhead. Then, as sheet lightning turned night into day, they appeared over the nearby hill; four giant horses, and on

their backs four mighty warriors, their weapons drawn, challenging the elements to meet them in battle.

One held a giant broadsword, its steel blade shimmering as it reflected the storm's light. One held a mighty axe, its worn edges bearing the hallmark of many battles. The third whirled a spiked ball and chain above his head which, if he wasn't careful with it, could take somebody's eye out. And the last wielded a huge war hammer... which he nearly dropped as the spiked ball and chain nearly took his eye out.

'Will you please watch what you're doing with that thing, Agnar,' Grundi the Windy screamed.

'Sorry,' shouted Agnar the Hammered, 'the old spiked club was much easier to handle.'

'Perhaps it was,' Smid the Merciless (né Pig Herder) yelled, 'but this looks so much better, you just need to keep practicing. You'll soon get the hang of it.'

'That's easy for you to say,' Grundi shouted, 'you're not riding next to him in constant fear of accidental decapitation.'

'Look, if it's causing that many problems why don't you swap with him, Grundi,' Olaf the Berserker interjected.

'You mean I can have the hammer? Aw, that'd be great!' Agnar said. 'Please, Grundi, I'd love the hammer.'

'Oh, go on, then,' Grundi said, 'You can have the hammer, for health and safety as much as anything else.'

'Aw, thanks Grundi!' Agnar shouted. 'I'll take good care of it.'

As they entered the stone circle, the four warriors reared their horses and clashed their weapons together, sending sparks fleeing into the darkness. They swiftly

dismounted, each of them taking a ceremonial position in front of one of the large, moss-dappled stones. And then, in silent salute to the gods, they raised their weapons skyward once more.

‘Smid, would you do us the honour of saying the words?’ Olaf said.

‘I would be honoured indeed, Olaf.’

*‘Odin I beseech thee, accept my gift of wind,
It’s from the heart of my bottom,
It’s a gift I won’t rescind,
I fart for all your glory; I fart for all your might,
Give me the strength to not follow through,
And I’ll fart for you; I’ll fart for you all night.’*

‘Well said, Smid,’ Olaf observed, nodding appreciatively.

The four warriors pulled their pants down, pointed their bottoms to the sky and methane mingled with the cold night air. ‘Someone’s a bit fragrant tonight,’ Agnar said.

‘Ah, that’ll be me,’ admitted Grundi. ‘I ate the Curry of Worry at the Diner earlier and I’ve felt something nasty brewing for a while.’

‘Right, let’s head off to rehearsal,’ said Olaf. ‘We need to work on the set list for tomorrow night, and sort out the timing to the new ending of “My Sword is my Sword”. It isn’t quite there yet.’

‘Agreed,’ said Smid.

And so, they pulled their pants up, mounted their steeds and rode off into the night. Overhead, the storm began to recede, either of its own volition or perhaps propelled by Viking flatulence.

Meanwhile, less than a hundred yards from the Circle of Wind lay the boarded-up entrance to the ancient cheese mine of Hairy Growler. Hardly anyone had ventured inside its dark tunnels and stalactite-encrusted caves for many years; that, however, was soon to change.



The hour was late and Merlin Crackfoot yawned, as he began clearing up the cutlery, crockery and glasses that littered the tables in Cracky's Diner. Outside all was now still, and in an inky, star-speckled sky a baleful full moon illuminated the street, casting shadows where you'd expect shadows to be cast and not doing anything un-moon like.

All in all the first 'Cuisine de la Terreur' night had been a resounding success. The Beefburger of Dismay and The Fish of Fright went down extremely well with his clientele (and thankfully stayed down). True, sales of the Pork Sausages of Panic and the Beans of Apprehension weren't quite what he'd hoped for, but he could live with that. And a minor complaint about the Pasta of Disaster was simply down to his exuberance with the garlic and pineapple sauce. But, overall, people had left with full tummies and happy hearts. And so, it was with a deep feeling of satisfaction that he began the washing-up.

However, as the fruity aroma of bubbling washing-up liquid wafted up his nostrils, his contented scrubbing was interrupted by a knock on the front door. 'Who is it?' he shouted, without lifting his head up from the sink.

'Cracky, it's me, Taff; Taff Thomas. We need to talk,' the voice from behind the door replied, barely above a whisper.

'Wait one minute, I'll just leave these to soak,' Cracky said, removing his rubber gloves.

The glass front door of the diner was now resplendent with its new logo of a wizard clutching a frying pan. Cracky opened it and Taff Thomas rushed in. 'What's spooked you?' Cracky said, quickly closing the door behind Taff.

‘I’ve heard a rumour that Blacktie’s going to be clamping down on cheese smuggling,’ Taff said. ‘I thought you should know that next week’s delivery may be the last for a while, so if you want to add anything to your regular order now’s the time to do it.’

‘Ah, yes, I had heard the rumours. In which case, can you please add a couple of pounds of Purple Caerphilly; only the good stuff, mind, not that rubbish that causes your bowels to move in a rhythmical fashion. And I’ll take a pound of Spitchcock’s Tintern.’

‘That Tintern could be very, very difficult to obtain at such short notice,’ Taff said.

‘Go on, then, how much?’ Cracky said, with a sigh.

‘Well an extra £20 should cover the sundry expenses.’

‘£20! That’s extortion. I’ll not pay more than an extra ten.’

‘I couldn’t possibly do it for £10, Cracky, what with all the bribery, back scratching and philandering that’s involved.’

‘Philandering?’

‘Oh, yes. Old Gwyneth Evans strikes a pretty hard bargain you know.’

‘Well, £15 and I can’t go a penny more.’

‘Call it £16.50 and I’ll throw in a nice piece of Wolfman’s Acorn.’

‘Deal,’ Cracky said. ‘Next Wednesday as usual?’

‘Aye, no problem,’ Taff said, opening the front door and stepping out into the cobbled street.

‘You know, Taff, there’s something in the air,’ Cracky said, as he stood in the doorway, bathed in the full moon’s light.

‘Yeah, I can smell it! Have those bloody Vikings been in tonight? I hope your farting license is up-to-date, otherwise Blacktie’ll shut you down... and more! Remember what happened to Owen Jones, the confectioner. He’s a shadow of the man he once was, and his cola balls have never been the same since.’

‘No, Taff, I mean I can sense change coming. Can’t you feel it?’ Cracky said, looking up into the sky and sniffing the air. ‘Mark my words, Taff, change is coming. And nothing and no-one will be able to stop it.’

‘Well,’ Taff said, as he skulked off down the street, ‘the only way we’ll get change around here is if someone gets rid of bloody Blacktie. And who’s mad enough to try that?’

Chapter 2 - The Cheese of Pleasant Dreams

The alarm clock jingled and danced its merry morning dance, before being silenced by a well-aimed slap from Aiden Peersey's left hand. He sat up, yawned and rubbed his bleary eyes, trying to accept the banishment of sleep and the onset of another day. It had been a particularly late night and he was feeling the effects of a lack of sleep, a tad too much to drink and an overindulgence in pizza. Humphrey stood at the side of the bed looking at him disapprovingly.

'Okay, I'm sorry I got back so late. But if it's any consolation I'm suffering for it now,' Aiden said.

Humphrey said nothing and continued to gaze straight at him, his brown eyes meeting Aiden's with a stony stare, conveying both his lack of sympathy and his obvious disgruntlement.

'Look, I'll make it up to you. We can go out tonight, take a walk down to the canal.'

Humphrey continued to stare in silence. 'And we could get something to eat on the way back, from the chip shop?'

More silence, although accompanied by a raised eyebrow. 'And I'll let you have a swim in the canal?' Aiden said, raising his eyebrows quizzically.

'Woof,' said Humphrey, jumping onto the bed.

'Good boy, now go and get your lead and we'll have a quick walk around the block.'

'Woof,' said Humphrey again, grabbing the lead off a nearby chair and throwing it unceremoniously on the floor.

Outside, Aiden was greeted by blinding early morning sunlight and a garden that needed mowing. ‘A lovely morning isn’t it, Mrs Perriwinkle,’ he called over to his elderly neighbour, as he and Humphrey made their way down the short, gravel path to the gate. ‘How are you today?’

‘I’d be feeling much better if I hadn’t have been woken up in the middle of the night by your noisy friends dropping you off,’ answered Mrs Perriwinkle, waving her garden rake in his direction.

‘Oh, I am sorry, Mrs Perriwinkle. I’ll make sure they’re quiet in future. We’d all had a bit too much to drink, I’m afraid. It was a very good gig, you see.’

‘Well, I know it doesn’t happen very often,’ Mrs Perriwinkle said, lowering the rake, ‘and I know you young people love your “gigs”. And, since you’re such a polite young man, I’ll forgive you on this occasion.’

‘Thanks, Mrs Perriwinkle.’

‘I used to love a good gig when I was younger, you know,’ she went on. ‘Mr Perriwinkle was very good at it. In fact, we’d often be at it for several hours at a time without a break. We’d be covered in sweat by the time we finished.’

‘Really,’ Aiden said.

‘Oh, yes. People would stand around watching and applauding. We’d often have a big crowd around us while we were doing it. And then, after about ten minutes, a lot of them would join in and we’d all swap partners for a bit.’

‘And that was quite common when you were younger?’ Aiden said, shifting his stance uncomfortably.

‘Very much so; I often had over ten partners a night. It was quite tiring and you get a bit sore after a while, but it was very satisfying. We were the Flintshire Foxtrot Champions five years in a row, you know.’

‘Well I never knew that,’ Aiden said, somewhat relieved.

‘Oh, Mrs Perriwinkle,’ he added as he opened the gate, ‘I’m going to be out for most of the day, so are you still okay to nip in and check on Humphrey later?’

‘Of course, not a problem; he’s a lovely little dog, aren’t you Humphrey?’ Mrs Perriwinkle said, smiling at Humphrey and adopting a particularly silly face. ‘What kind of dog is he, again?’

‘He’s an English Cocker Spaniel,’ Aiden replied, patting him on the back.

‘Oh, we’ll have a great time later, won’t we Humphrey,’ she said, her voice rising in pitch. ‘I’ll bring some sticks from the garden and you can fetch them for me. And then we’ll play ball.’

Humphrey gave Aiden a withering look but remained quiet. ‘Thanks very much. I’ll see you later, then,’ Aiden said.

Aiden and Humphrey went for a walk every morning and every evening. Humphrey loved his walks and was fascinated by the conversations of people they’d pass on their way. ‘They lead such simple lives,’ he’d think to himself, interrupting his general thoughts on metaphysics and chasing cats. Today, Aiden had decided they’d only have a quick stroll down Watery Road and across the bridge towards the hospital, before retracing their steps back to number 22 Bright Street, their home.

This area of Wrexham was generally tranquil, and the rows of semi-detached or detached houses had neat gardens and an interesting mixture of trees. Humphrey liked trees, and actually thought they made better conversationalists than humans; at least they could understand him. The old elm on Watery Road just before the bridge was his favourite. He was an absolute hoot and told some splendid stories. Humphrey invariably cocked his leg and watered him by way of thanks every day. This morning,

however, there was only time for a brief ‘hello, how are you’ and a very quick leg-cock before they had to head back home. Aiden had plans for today.

For the last ten of his thirty-five years, Aiden Peersey had worked for Parmesan Systems, an IT company that specialised in innovative telecommunications products. After a series of promotions, he now found himself with the title ‘Head of Design’, a role he thoroughly enjoyed. He was also popular for a geek, mainly because he was affable, performed almost legendary vocal impressions of celebrities and didn’t really show off his intellect too much in social circles. The girls in HR also liked him quite a bit too. ‘Woo hoo, Aiden!’ they’d shout as he walked past their office in the morning, usually followed by something like ‘Oh, isn’t he adorable. He’s so handsome and clever.’ He liked that.

His house phone rang. It was Bob. ‘Hey, lanky, how’s your head this morning?’ Bob said, his voice bristling with far more energy than it had any right to have after last night.

‘I think it’s still on my neck, but it’s difficult to tell at the moment.’

‘Hah! Have you had a chance to listen to the tape from the gig yet?’

‘No, but I’m going out later, so I’ll stick it on in the car. Then when I get back I’ll digitise it, look at the equalization, stick some limiters on it, add some suitable compression and then normalise it before transfer.’

‘You lost me after “car”,’ Bob said.

‘I mean I’ll put it on a CD for you.’

‘Thanks mate, catch you later then. Let’s hear it for the Swingers, yee hah!’

His other passion was music. Not that he could play any instruments or sing, but he listened avidly and found himself ineluctably drawn to music technology. His ambition was to eventually own his own recording studio, but in the interim he had

amassed a reasonable collection of music-related equipment in his house which he enjoyed playing with. He liked mixing live music too.

‘The Hefty Swingers’ were a good-time rock band, and although they hadn’t made it past the first rung on the ladder of stardom yet, they had a strong local following and were very entertaining to watch. Aiden’s friend, Bob, was the lead singer and Aiden was in command of the sound system and the mixing desk. Last night’s gig at the ‘Randy Parrot’ nightclub had been one of their best; three encores and they actually got paid.

Aiden gulped down a glass of water and grabbed the tape. He needed to clear his head this morning, and fortunately he felt somewhat more human after his walk with Humphrey. Today was the day he’d decided to operationally test his new innovation, which was based on an idea that had sprung into his mind last year.

He’d always been fascinated by quantum physics, so when the first forays into the exploration of quantum computing* became public knowledge he saw the potential immediately. His own investigations to harness this new technology had resulted in the design and production of the ‘QC Operating System’ for Smart Phones and Tablets, the first of its kind. The simulated tests all appeared successful, with startling increases in processor speed and memory capacity. But it had now reached the stage where he needed to try out the system practically.

Humphrey looked at him intently, his tongue lolling about in his mouth, and offered Aiden his paw. ‘Ha, good boy,’ Aiden said, patting him affectionately on the head. ‘Now, I’m going to be popping out for a while. I’m having a drive to Llangollen, not been there for ages. And this little baby,’ he said pointing to his new phone, ‘is going to do the navigation for me. Isn’t that cool?’

‘Woof, woof, woof... woof, grrr, woof,’ said Humphrey.

And it was a real pity Aiden couldn't understand him, otherwise he'd have known that 'Woof, woof, woof... woof, grrr, woof,' when translated, means 'I really wouldn't do that if I were you.'

**See appendix 1*

'My Lord, Hob and Nob are here, as you requested yesterday,' Pimple announced, as he walked into the throne room.

'Ah, very good, Pimple; bring them in and leave us. I wish to speak to these gentlemen in private,' Baron Blacktie said, rising from his throne.

Hob and Nob had been spies for as long as anyone could remember. No-one knew where they originated from, nor indeed where they lived; they were an unusual looking pair and people tended to keep out of their way. There always seemed to be an atmosphere of malevolence and subterfuge around them, which was only amplified by their regular apparel of matching wide-brimmed black hats and knee-length brown leather coats. The fact they were so recognisable could be considered a serious disadvantage, given their profession, except they were both masters of disguise. Hob was the taller of the cadaverous pair by several inches, and he carried a black briefcase with him at all times.

'Good day, Baron. I hope we find you in high spirits,' Hob said, his dark eyes barely visible under the rim of his hat.

'You do indeed, my dear Hob. I am feeling most exhilarated about some forthcoming events that you, my friends, will play a part in. But, firstly, pray tell me what have you learned from your little trip to Mold?'

'There are murmurings within the curry community, my Lord,' Hob replied, putting his briefcase on the floor. 'There is talk of revolution in the air.'

‘Well, as long as it stays in the air and doesn’t make it onto the ground that should be fine,’ the Baron said, chuckling.

‘This is a serious matter, Baron,’ said Nob. ‘They are talking about an alliance with the Wrexham Curries.’

‘Hmm, that could indeed be a problem we could do without,’ said the Baron, twiddling his moustache. ‘A mixture of Mold and Wrexham curry is potentially a recipe for disaster.’

‘Indeed, my Lord,’ said Nob.

The Baron continued his twiddling and threw in a touch of musing for good measure. ‘This is something that does need addressing, gentlemen,’ he eventually said, ‘but for the moment it will have to wait. There are more pressing matters at hand, not least the task I have for you now.’

‘More pressing than quashing a curry rebellion? I am intrigued, Baron,’ Hob said, loftily. ‘Your ruthless reputation for nipping these things in the bud before they bloom would appear to be somewhat awry at present.’

The Baron walked purposively over to Hob and stood face to face with him, their noses almost touching. Hob shuffled backwards, recognising and regretting the impertinence of his last statement. ‘Never, EVER, question my decisions,’ the Baron whispered, in a way that sent a chill down Hob’s back, ‘else you will feel, and smell, the power of my wind, which given what I had for breakfast will be most potent. Now, we will deal with the curries when the time is right, but that time is not yet at hand. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Absolutely my Lord,’ Hob said, the deference and fear in his voice tangible.

‘Good. I’m glad that’s settled,’ the Baron said, walking back towards his throne. ‘Now, what know you of cheese lore?’

‘I would consider myself well-versed in that area,’ Nob answered.

‘Excellent. Then what can you tell me about Ceridwen’s Cheese?’

‘Why it is a myth, my Lord. It was known as “The Cheese of Pleasant Dreams”, for it was reputedly not only the finest-tasting cheese ever mined, with the most exquisite texture, but was also said to give one a sense of great serenity.’

The Baron sauntered over to the bookshelf and affectionately stroked the spine of the large book he’d been reading during General Darkblast’s visit. ‘Oh, it is no myth, my friends. Your famous omniscience is perhaps wanting here, as it would appear there are things that even the great Hob and Nob do not know.’

‘Last year,’ the Baron continued, ‘a man was found wandering the streets of Chester in a sorry, yet very happy, state. My guards noted that he was raving about “the lost cheese of the ancient’s” being found and how its discovery would lead to the deliverance of the people. Naturally, most took him for a simple drunken fool, but my curiosity was piqued and I bade my guards to bring him to me for an audience.’

The Baron picked up a large scroll from the bookshelf and unrolled it onto the impressive marble table, to the left of the throne. The parchment sparkled as the light hit it, creating an eerie glow on the face of the Baron as he examined its contents. ‘He had this map with him. It is an old map; a very old map.’

Hob and Nob sidled over to the table and stood either side of the Baron. ‘Do you recognise the map?’ the Baron said.

‘It cannot be,’ Hob said in disbelief. ‘Surely, this is a fake.’

‘It’s no fake, I can assure you. It is the only one of its kind.’

Nob was visibly trembling as he looked at the map. ‘This is treasure beyond all treasure, Baron. Do you really know what you have here?’

‘Oh, I do, my good Nob. This is indeed the ancient map of Scratchy Crotch.’

The Baron walked over to the bookcase again and removed one of the smaller books from the third shelf. There was an ornate leather and gold bookmark placed inside it. He opened the book and began to read.

“Let it be known that Scratchy Crotch was the first of the Evil Wizards of Bala. His power transcended all and he was thought to be invincible. His beard was black and his codpiece firm. No-one knew how he acquired such might and he did not reveal his secret. It was rumoured that all creatures of evil bowed before him, both in this world and in the dark realms; for he regularly communicated with unearthly beings and people from Prestatyn. He lived to be 534 years old and had 77 wives, 43 concubines and 12 barmaids during this period. He fathered only one son, to his 76th wife, the Lady Clarissa of Rhyl; a witch of high repute, great beauty and extraordinarily malodorous armpits. The child mysteriously disappeared before his second birthday, along with Clarissa, and this broke his nefarious heart. Subsequently, he became a recluse, shunning contact with all, until his marriage to Buxom Betty of Betws-y-Coed, the daughter of a local cobbler with plaited nostril hair. During his life, Scratchy Crotch maintained the largest collection of cheese in the land. He would relax by feasting on suckling pig, drinking malt whisky, singing sea shanties and playing the bongos.’”

The Baron licked his index finger and turned the page. ‘There’s a lot more here, including his battle with the Dragons of Denbigh, the destruction of the Parsimonious Wizards of St. Asaph, his fear of embroidery and his obsession with esoteric hair brushes, but I’ll skip to the bit about the map.’

“He amassed many powerful mystical treasures during his time, and shortly before his death he told his servants to bury each of these in secret places. When they returned from their task and told him where each of the items were buried he had

them all killed, meaning only he knew of their whereabouts. This knowledge he allegedly put into a map, written on sacred parchment and inked with the timeless ink of Gringlegore. However, the map has never been discovered and the veracity of this particular tale is thus questionable.”

The Baron closed the book with aplomb. ‘Questionable until now, my friends; for as you can see the map does indeed exist and is in my possession.’

Hob turned to look at the Baron, shaking his head. ‘Unbelievable, my Lord. Yet, if it is written that he was invincible how did he meet his demise?’

The Baron flicked past a couple of pages before locating the necessary passage. ‘The book says the townsfolk, at the end of their tether with his wicked ways and harsh rule, confronted him at his castle. They carried flaming torches and were protected by a variety of cross-stitch shawls, wrapped around their shoulders. The sight of so much embroidery caused him to convulse uncontrollably and he summoned a dark spirit to repel the people. But, in his weakened state, he had not the strength to control the demon and he was devoured entirely, apart from his left foot which was hurled skywards and remains lost to this day. He was never seen again by mortal man; which is a great pity as he sounded like an absolutely splendid chap.’

‘My Lord, this map details the whereabouts of the greatest and most powerful artefacts known to the black arts,’ said Nob. ‘Whoever could manage to bring these treasures together would surely be able to rule the world. If this is the task you would have us complete, simply say the word and we will get you the Aphrodisiac Dragon Horn of Jiggery, the Fragrant Sword of Pokery, the Magical Preserved Left Buttock of King Peculiar-Uliar and even the Mysterious Unknown Book of Ambiguous and Seemingly Useless but Actually Very Dangerous Evil Spells.’

‘All in good time, all in good time,’ the Baron said, waving his hand in a calming motion. ‘Firstly I would draw your attention to this section of the map here, do you recognise it?’

‘Yes, it is just south-east of Llangollen, near the Circle of Wind. There is nothing of interest there, Baron,’ Hob replied.

‘Look closer, my dear Hob, what do you see?’

‘It is a representation of a cheese mine, my Lord. But the only recognisable structure in that vicinity is the disused mine of the dead eccentric Hairy Growler. It used to contain a rich vein of Red Cheekfizzler, but that has long been exhausted.’

‘Indeed, but that was only on the upper levels,’ the Baron said. ‘The lower levels, I am very reliably informed, contain possibly the richest vein of Ceridwen’s Cheese ever to be discovered. It is also where the Ancient Map of Scratchy Crotch has been hidden for the past several centuries, until its timely unearthing last year.’

‘With all due respect, Baron, why this interest in a simple cheese?’ said Nob. ‘There are things of value beyond wealth that can be regained here.’

‘Accepted, my good Nob. Nevertheless, I wish you to infiltrate Llangollen and find out who owns this mine. I can find no record of ownership since the passing of Hairy Growler some twenty years ago. Although I could simply claim the mine as my own, I wish to be circumspect here. There may be other powers at large and I will not take risks unduly. As part of this mission, I also wish you to secretly break into the mine and search for the green and gold cheese of Ceridwen in the lower levels. I have no doubt you will find this, and then you must obtain a small sample.’

‘But beware,’ the Baron continued, ‘I hear rumours there are things that dwell in the mine that are so terrible even Trolls avoid them. Ensure you are appropriately

armed, my friends, for I would not wish you ill... at least not until you have completed your task.'

Hob and Nob exchanged glances and nodded to each other. 'If this is what you desire, my Lord, then we will fulfil your request... for the usual fee... plus 50%,' said Hob.

'You drive a hard bargain, gentlemen,' the Baron replied, smiling, 'but I agree. You will be paid when I have the sample in my hands. Now, I will despatch some of my men to meet with you in three days to ascertain your progress. Have you a place earmarked as your base for this endeavour?'

'I think it prudent if we mingle as much as we can with the locals, my Lord, so we will seek residence at a place called "The Sheep's Stirrup". It is a harmless and nondescript tavern,' replied Nob.

'Good. Now, I'm assuming you will be transforming yourselves into something less conspicuous during your quest, so how will my men recognise you?'

Nob reached into his pocket and produced a small, leather-bound book. He flipped through the pages, with Hob looking over his shoulder. After a few seconds he stopped and pointed at a particular page. A short whispered conversation between the pair ensued before they raised their heads.

'We will be disguised as Vagrant Vacuum Cleaner Exorcists, My Lord.'

'And you deem this disguise appropriate?' the Baron said.

'Yes, my Lord. By all accounts vacuum cleaner possession is rife in the area.'

'Very well, good luck to you. The rewards for success will be great, gentlemen. And failure, as you well know, is not an option.'

Hob picked up his briefcase and they bowed to the Baron, before heading off to encounter some experiences they were definitely not prepared for.

Chapter 3 - Be good for Mrs Perriwinkle

The little, red MG sports car had been Aiden's vehicle of choice for five years. He loved the old styling and liked nothing better than driving with the top down, when the often precarious North Wales weather allowed. Humphrey watched out of the window as Aiden got in and fired the engine up. 'See you later boy, I'll be back in a few hours.'

'Woof, woof, wuf-wuf,' said Humphrey, which translated meant 'I very much doubt it'.

'Be good for Mrs Perriwinkle.'

The Nova QC phone was a very chic device; ultra-slim, with an extra-long-life battery, touch screen control and Aiden's new 'Voiceotronic' guidance system. He pressed the little 'on' button and the screen instantly fizzed into life, playing a classic eighties guitar riff in the process. 'Navigation,' Aiden said, which immediately initialised the navigation app.

'Llangollen, North Wales,' he added, somewhat over dramatically, but it was that sort of day and he had that sort of feeling.

'In one hundred yards, turn left into Llys David Lord, you sexy beast,' the phone said in the sultry female voice Aiden had programmed in.

'Oh, you flirt, Natasha,' he replied, using the name he'd given to the phone.

'You better believe it, now just drive, darling,' Natasha said.

He cruised up Bright Street feeling in high spirits, his hangover now easing but with pizza occasionally repeating on him. The wind coursed through his hair and his sunglasses became a graveyard for flies.

‘In two hundred yards, at the roundabout, take the second exit onto the A483... and then head over to my place big boy,’ Natasha said, followed by a ‘grrr’.

It was after about five miles of smooth travelling that the car began juddering every so often. ‘Bloody tracking again,’ Aiden thought to himself, as he’d had the same problem before. Out of the corner of his eye, though, he noticed the Nova QC phone. The Navigation app map had disappeared and the whole screen was pulsating with a powerful white light. He moved into the inside lane of the dual carriageway and was just about to pull over when there was a blinding flash... and he found himself heading straight for a traffic jam; which was odd, as several seconds earlier there had hardly been a car on the road.

‘You better put that top up, mate,’ a man in a modern-looking blue car shouted out of the window, ‘the traffic wardens will be along any second now.’

‘Pardon, did you say traffic wardens?’ Aiden said. ‘I wouldn’t think we need to worry, we’re on a dual carriageway in a traffic jam; I hardly think that’s classed as a parking offence.’

‘Don’t make any difference to those beggars,’ the man said, ‘since the deregulation of 2024 they don’t care. My old mum was driving in her little hoverchair last week and stopped to exchange pleasantries with a friend. In a second they were all over her like flies. Twenty two tickets they gave her. Terrible, it was.’

‘But that’s ridiculous, can’t she complain, or simply refuse to pay,’ Aiden said, before adding ‘hang on, did you say hoverchair?’

‘What, and get shot?’ the man said, startled. ‘You mean you’ve never seen one of their firing squads in action? Where’ve you been, mate, Scotland?’

It started as a low rumble, just behind a hill to the left of the carriageway. Aiden strained his ears trying to identify the source of the noise, which was steadily

increasing in volume. The other drivers started to panic, seeming to know the fate that was about to befall them; many were crying and some were praying. As the noise drew closer, Aiden turned his eyes towards the hill. He had no idea what to expect, but it's safe to say he wasn't expecting five hundred heavily-armed traffic wardens to appear, their faces resplendent with yellow and black war paint.

'Hells bells,' shouted the man in the blue car, 'it's the Wrexham Posse! We better run for it, they don't take prisoners.'

The Wrexham Posse charged down the hill towards the congested highway, roaring and holding their weapons aloft. By now many of the drivers and passengers had left their vehicles, running in blind panic in search of an escape. But it was too late, and the Posse poured over the two lanes of traffic like a monstrous tidal wave of yellow and black.

Screams began, followed by gunshots and the sound of tickets being indiscriminately slapped onto glass. 'Have mercy, have mercy!' someone shouted from nearby, only to be met with maniacal laughter and the blood-curdling cry of 'You're illegally parked, say your prayers.'

One of the more vicious-looking members of the Posse closed in on Aiden's car, ticket in one hand and Kalashnikov rifle in the other. He was a tall, burly man, probably somewhere in his forties, although with his face painted it was difficult to tell. Thankfully, Aiden managed to get the roof and windows up just before the traffic warden slammed into his car. He pressed his face against the passenger side front window, salivating and staring at Aiden with bloodshot eyes. His identity badge said his name was Mr Peter Twatt.

‘Get out of the car, now. You’re illegally parked and you’re going to get a ticket, you bastard,’ Mr Twatt spat, the saliva running down the window like little rivulets.

‘Now, look, er, Mr Twatt,’ Aiden said, noting the name on the badge, ‘I’m sure that being in a traffic jam doesn’t actually count as illegal parking, you know.’

Mr Twatt’s eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted into a sneer. ‘Don’t you “Mr Twatt” me, nobody calls me that anymore, and if I say you’re illegally parked you’re bloody well illegally parked, you toe rag.’

‘Well what should I call you?’ said Aiden, hoping the small talk might buy him some time.

‘Spine-splitter,’ spat Mr Twatt.

‘Ah, yes, a splendid name,’ Aiden said, in a conciliatory tone, ‘and why have you adopted that particular moniker?’

‘On accounts of me record of breaking the backs of people that won’t pay,’ replied Mr Twatt.

‘And just how many would that be?’

‘One hundred and six, at the last count,’ Mr Twatt/Spine-splitter said, proudly. ‘I’m looking to make it one hundred and seven today, maybe more.’

Another tortured scream attacked his ears and Aiden jumped out of his seat, as a second face pressed against the driver side window, yellow teeth grinning maliciously. ‘This one’s mine, Bogpaddler. I saw him first,’ Mr Twatt/Spine-splitter shouted to the second traffic warden, whose badge identified him as Mr Frank Todger.

‘Now, there’s nothing wrong with sharing, Spine-splitter. Let’s just cut him straight down the middle,’ Mr Todger/Bogpaddler said, producing a large, blood-stained cleaver from beneath his jacket.

‘Bugger off and get your own. I ain’t sharing with nobody, not least a toilet-breathed, wee-wee panted fart like you.’

For a few seconds an uneasy silence fell, as both men stared at each other over the top of Aiden’s car. ‘Wee-wee panted?’ said Mr Todger/Bogpaddler.

‘Yes, wee-wee-panted,’ replied Mr Twatt/Spine-splitter.

‘Toilet-breathed?!’

‘Yes, toilet-breathed.’

‘Fart?!’

‘Yes, fart.’

‘Wee-wee-panted?!’

‘Yes, wee-wee-panted... with stains!’ shouted Mr Twatt/Spine-splitter.

‘With stains?!’ Mr Todger/Bogpaddler yelled.

‘Yes, with stains!!’

‘Nobody calls me ‘wee-wee panted with stains’ and lives!!!’ screamed Bogpaddler, vaulting over the bonnet of the car.

Aiden watched dumbstruck as the two men grappled, hands around each other’s throats, whilst all around was chaos, blood and an exorbitant amount of parking tickets. A scream came from the side of the car and Spine-splitter stood up, bits of flesh dripping off his blood-stained teeth. ‘Your turn,’ he said to Aiden, banging on the window with his gun.

Aiden had never thought about meeting his maker before, but at this moment in time he began to give serious consideration as to what he would say. However,

even before he could decide on the proper form of address, the QC Nova phone sent out another blinding flash of light and he found himself on a clear road, driving at about sixty miles per hour. ‘In one hundred yards take the slip road to the A539, you naughty boy,’ purred Natasha.

Had he momentarily fallen asleep at the wheel? That had to be it; there was no other logical explanation. He laughed out loud and shook his head. A dream, and how ridiculous; traffic wardens with painted faces acting like merciless, roving criminals, gunning people down for not paying. It was preposterous. Although he did admit he could see them going in that direction in the future, if left to their own devices.

As he approached the slip road he recognised the turn off for the A539, and could see the sign that read ‘Llangollen’. ‘At the roundabout take the second exit and I’ll tell you what I’m wearing,’ Natasha said.

Aiden had driven down this road many times and had a reasonable memory of the region. Landmarks were thankfully familiar and he recognised the old pub coming into view. ‘Stay on the A539 for five miles,’ Natasha said as the Nova phone began to glow once more. ‘I’m wearing stockings but I’m not wearing any...’ and then she went silent for a second. ‘Data connection lost. See you later darling,’ she said, as the phone flashed and the road turned from smooth tarmac into a narrow dirt track.

The car bumped and shuddered over the rough terrain. Aiden grasped the steering wheel tightly and hit the brake, narrowly avoiding one of the larger water-filled pot holes that were scattered about. The car scraped along the hedge on the right hand side of the road, scattering little twigs and leaves into the air. Applying the brake even firmer he stopped the car, turned off the engine and breathed a very long sigh of relief.

There was a bottle of water in the glove compartment and he drank deeply as his mind continued to race. He checked the Nova phone. No signal, no GPS. Outside it was peaceful. The narrow lane was flanked by high hedges on both sides, regularly interspersed with tall oak trees. A rabbit scuttled across the road, giving him only a passing look before diving through the hedge. He got out of the car and looked around. There was no sign of any traffic at all. Behind him the lane stretched for at least a mile, its contours and scenery consistent with what lay in front of him. 'But that's impossible,' he thought.

He couldn't have driven more than a hundred yards since the road changed dramatically, and that meant he should easily have been able to see the A539 from where he was standing. Yet the only visible roadway was the narrow, hedge-flanked lane stretching off into the distance. There was also no sign of the old pub.

Perhaps he'd underestimated the distance he'd actually covered? That could have been a possibility, so he locked the car and began to walk back to where the A539 should have been. After about half a mile he stopped. 'There's no way I could possibly have covered this distance,' he said aloud, as the peaceful lane continued to wend its way into the bright countryside.

Back at the car, the little rabbit had reappeared through the hedge with one of his friends. Both were sat upright, looking at Aiden as he opened the car door. Then, without any warning, they both scuttled away again, followed by a large congregation of sparrows who had been perched in the nearby trees. That's when Aiden heard the roar and looked up into the sky.

He estimated it must have been at least fifty feet long, its wing span perhaps half as much again. Enormous flames poured from its nostrils, its red, scaly skin

looked thick enough to withstand bullets, and its talons appeared sharp enough to cut through anything in their way. And in their way currently were Aiden and his car.

‘What the bloody hell is that!’ he shouted, as the huge beast sailed overhead, missing him by no more than a few feet (and ironically those were the exact words that Dave the Dragon was thinking as he soared by). Aiden started the motor and drove as fast as the road surface and pot holes would allow. He didn’t look back.

Now, interestingly, Aiden wasn’t the only person whose morning wasn’t quite going as planned. Half-blind Ron was having a bad day. His attempts to steal a chicken from Farmer Pigwhistle’s coop had been thwarted by the farmer’s fat, but persistent, Labrador dog, which had chased him all the way to the edge of Flopmarsh Lane. Fortunately, the dog refused to cross the boundaries of the farmer’s land, which allowed Half-blind Ron to nip through the hedge and fire off some choice insults at his potential assailant. ‘Fat git! I’ll have your bloody ears off next time, you flea-ridden, mush-for-brains, lardy mutt!’

So, with fresh chicken off the menu, a new strategy was required to ensure lunch would be obtained with minimum fuss and minimum danger. However, as he wandered down the lane, a variety of cunning plots forming in his head, his train of thought was rudely interrupted by a noise from behind.

Aiden spotted him at the last minute, as the car hurtled round a bend. He slammed on the brakes, skidded and stopped with little room to spare between the car’s front bumper and Half-blind Ron’s backside.

‘Oh, you’re alright, puss. Thank god for that,’ Aiden said, as he watched the scruffy grey and black tabby scamper off to the side of the road.

‘Yeah, I’m bleedin’ alright, you flippin’ idiot. Watch where you’re going with that thing, you almost had me tail off!’

Aiden heard the words as clear as day in his head and looked at Half-blind Ron with disbelief, noticing the cat's eye patch for the first time. 'Pardon?'

'Pardon?!' screamed Half-blind Ron. 'You nearly squash me old nuts and chop me bloody tail off, and all you can say is "Pardon"!'

'Er, I'm very sorry.' Aiden said, contritely.

'Oh save it, you prat,' Half-blind Ron said, his thoughts reaching angrily into Aiden's mind. 'I suppose you haven't got any chicken have you?'

'No, sorry again,' Aiden replied.

'Well bugger off then, you scruffy-haired, monkey-brained, lanky git. I'm off to find me some lunch, and me day'll be all the brighter for not seeing you again.'

And with that, Half-blind Ron darted off down the lane in search of lunch.

Chapter 4 - That explains everything...

As Aiden continued to drive, the lane eventually widened and the surface became more conventional. Feeling slightly more relaxed, he tried to assess his recent experiences logically.

Maybe he was still groggy after falling asleep and had accidentally missed his original turning? That made perfect sense. The dragon was probably part of some air display, a customised aircraft of some description. And as for the telepathic cat with the eye patch? Well, the trauma of thinking he'd hit the poor creature must have been playing on his mind, and his overactive imagination must have kicked in. Up ahead he saw a sign that said 'Welcome to Llangollen'.

The place was as picturesque as he remembered, but it seemed unusually quiet. There were no other cars on the roads, although the occasional horse and cart could be seen, which he thought was quaint. As he drove down the main street towards the bridge that crossed the River Dee, he passed the rows of pretty little shops displaying their wares. It was like a throwback to the days before supermarkets and multi-national stores dominated the high streets of most towns. Simpler times, he thought.

For all his love of modern technology, he was invariably happy in places where time had not moved on as much as it could have. He was attracted to historical documentaries and secretly longed to own a broadsword. As a child, and to this day if truth be told, his favourite films involved ancient soldiers, monsters, mysterious creatures, magic and, importantly, scantily clad ladies. Basically, anything that allowed him to escape to a world that was more exciting and with a greater sense of nobility at its heart.

He turned left just before the bridge and parked his car, stepping out and breathing deep from the clean air. On the other side of the road was a lady with two small sheep dressed in children's clothing. They had pirate hats on their heads and were waving little plastic swords.

'Come on children, we don't want to be late,' the lady said to the sheep, looking over and smiling at Aiden.

'Great costumes,' Aiden said. 'Very unusual.'

'Thanks! They love dressing-up, and they've been excited about the festival for the past week. I had no trouble getting them out of the barn this morning,' the lady said, laughing.

'Well, I hope they have a good time,' Aiden replied.

'We will! Goodbye, sir,' one of the sheep said. And off they walked towards the park by the river.

At the end of the bridge, Aiden spotted a charming old pub. He remembered he'd been there once before and had found it to be a particularly friendly place, filled with a potpourri of slightly eccentric locals, unusually normal locals and a smattering of tourists. He couldn't remember the pub's name, but as he got closer the letters on the sign outside came into focus. They read 'The Sheep's Stirrup', and in smaller letters underneath, 'Proprietor: M Fluffywool'.

He turned the handle of the weatherworn, oak door and was met by the musty aroma of beer. The sun was streaming through a far window, creating an atmospheric haze above the rustic, wooden tables and chairs dotted about the room. On the whole it looked pretty much as he remembered... apart from the short man standing behind the bar in a sheep costume.

‘Good afternoon, sir. It is a pleasant day, is it not?’ the man in the sheep costume said.

‘Hi, yes, a lovely day,’ Aiden replied. ‘Is there some kind of festival going in the town?’

‘Indeed there is, did you not see the signs on the way in?’

‘No, it looks like I came via an alternative route today,’ Aiden replied, honestly.

‘Oh, it’s the “Grand Carnival of Shearing and Hoof Waxing”, so most folks are in the park. There’s a fair and all kinds of stalls and amusements. It’s the most important sheep-sponsored event of the year; you should have a look later.’

‘I will,’ Aiden said.

‘By the way, the name’s Maurice, Maurice Fluffywool,’ the man in the sheep costume said, extending a hoof over the bar. ‘I’m the landlord of this fine establishment.’

‘Aiden Peersey,’ Aiden replied, shaking Maurice’s hoof. That explains the costumes, he thought.

‘Can I offer you a drink?’ Maurice said.

‘Yes, thanks, just a half of lager please,’ Aiden replied, putting his hand in his pocket to take out some money.

‘No, no, put your money away. The first one’s on the house.’

‘Thanks. That’s very kind of you.’

‘Think nothing of it; it’s a courtesy I like to extend to new customers. Mind you, the place will be full tonight, so I’ll turn in a tidy profit.’

Maurice pulled on one of the brass pump handles behind the bar and waited until the frothy, amber liquid filled the glass. Then he picked it up with both hooves and placed it on a fresh beer mat on the bar.

‘So, whereabouts do you hail from, Aiden?’

‘Not too far away, Wrexham,’ Aiden said, taking a sip from the glass.

‘Ah, my good friend, Bill Plumprump runs one of the most popular pubs in Wrexham, “The Flopsy Fleece”. You must know it?’

‘Can’t say I do, actually,’ Aiden answered.

‘Oh, well, that is a surprise. What about “The Lamb and Saddle”?’

‘Er, no.’

‘“The Frisky Flock”?’

‘Afraid not.’

‘“The Black-faced Ram”?’

‘Not come across it.’

‘“The Frolicking Ewe”?’

‘Nope.’

‘Well surely you must know the “Mutton Dressed as Lamb” nightclub, it’s the hottest club in the area?’

‘Sorry, never seen it.’

‘Are you sure you’re from Wrexham?’ Maurice quizzed, with a look of suspicion.

‘Not as sure as I was about five minutes ago,’ Aiden said.

As he looked more intently at Maurice, the sun of understanding seemed to rise in his mind, its glorious rays firing little beams of comprehension in all directions.

‘You’re a sheep!’ he exclaimed, his eyebrows doing their utmost to make contact with his hairline.

‘Well, you may not be sure where you’re from, young man, but there’s nothing wrong with your eyesight, I see,’ Maurice replied.

‘Sorry, it’s just that I’m from the real outskirts of Wrexham and we don’t get many sheep running pubs in that area,’ Aiden said, thinking on his feet.

‘Ah, still a bit sheepist there, are they? Well we’re a lot more liberal here, if you don’t mind, we’ve fully embraced the Ovine Equality Act of 1952.’

‘Oh, so around here sheep have been running pubs since 1952?’ Aiden said casually, as he leant on the bar.

‘No, no, don’t be daft,’ Maurice replied. ‘A lot of us started out as glass collectors and worked our way up’.

Aiden swiftly finished his drink and put the empty glass on the bar. ‘Well, thanks very much for the conversation and the drink,’ he said, moving slowly to the door, ‘but I think I’ll go for a little walk now, while it’s so nice outside. One last question, though, well two questions really. Am I actually in Llangollen and what year is this, please?’

‘My lad, are you sure you’ve not been on the old Cheshire Black or something. Yes, this is Llangollen, and it’s 1987 of course’.

Was he hallucinating? Was he dreaming again? Had he wandered into some bizarre genetic experiment? Was it an invasion of alien sheep landlords? Or was he simply cracking up? Two sheep on the opposite side of the road, carrying balloons, shouted ‘hello’ and waved. Aiden slowly raised his hand and politely waved back.

‘It’s a lovely day for it, isn’t it?’ said one of the sheep.

‘Yes, it is indeed,’ replied Aiden, still waving. And then his phone rang.

The ringtone blared out 'What's New Pussycat' and the name on the screen said 'Tom'. Aiden didn't know anyone called 'Tom'... and he hadn't actually programmed any numbers into the phone. 'Hello,' he said, clicking the 'Receive Call' button and tentatively putting the phone to his ear.

'Oh, hi, I thought I'd better give you a quick call as you're probably a bit disorientated right now. And you'd probably like an explanation of what's going down, so to speak,' a voice in a comforting Welsh brogue said.

'Yes, thank you, that would be great,' Aiden said, as he watched the sheep with balloons skipping down the road. 'And you are?'

'Well, I'm Tom. I think you'll find it said that on the phone.'

'And have we met before? I don't recall programming your number into my phone?'

'Well, we've never actually spoken, as such. But I've sort of been keeping an eye on you for all of your life.'

'Well, "Tom", I'm not sure how you got hold of this number, but I'm having a pretty strange day here. I've had a dream where I'm being attacked by traffic wardens carrying Kalashnikovs, I've been strafed by what appeared to be a large red dragon, I've been insulted telepathically by a cat, and to top it all I've been served rather good lager by a talking sheep. So, "Tom", I'd appreciate it if you'd just bugger off and leave me alone.'

'Look, now, there's no reason to be like that, is there,' said Tom. 'Would you like me to shed some light on the events of the day?'

Aiden removed the phone from his ear and took a sharp intake of breath. He looked at the phone's screen and realised there was no network coverage. So how was

he receiving this call? His natural curiosity knocked on the door of his conscious mind... so he let it in and offered it a biscuit.

‘Very well, “Tom”. If you have any information as to what is causing my apparent mental implosion will you please let me know, because it’s reaching the point where I’d just like to go and sit under a tree for a while.’

‘Well, okay,’ Tom said. ‘I’m actually your higher self, or your intuition, if you like. Normally, I can only communicate with you via thoughts or feelings, helping you on your way, so to speak. But, since you’ve managed to cross a dimensional barrier and have now physically manifested in an alternative reality, I can speak to you on the phone now. How cool is that?!’

Aiden took the phone away from his ear again and looked at it for a few seconds. He went to press the ‘End Call’ button and hesitated. Then he slowly put the phone back against his ear. ‘Ah, yes, that explains everything, thank you.’

Chapter 5 - It may be linked to The Prophecy

Prince Theo of Corwen was sat on the bed in his royal chambers, licking his private parts, when Captain Marmaduke entered. ‘Sorry, Your Highness, have I come at an inconvenient time?’ the Captain said, removing his helmet.

‘No, I’m just finishing off,’ Prince Theo replied, licking his paw and wiping it over his face. ‘What’s up?’

‘We have just received word that an unusual event has occurred close to Llangollen, on Flopmarsh Lane. I suspect Your Highness will wish to hear more detail.’

‘Sounds interesting, Captain. Where does your information come from?’

The Captain coughed uncomfortably. ‘From Half-blind Ron, Your Highness.’

‘Oh, not that mad old moggy again,’ the Prince said. ‘Let me guess, he’s been drinking Meow’s Extra Strong Catnip and he claims we’re being invaded by singing pink goblins.’

‘If that were simply the case I would not be attempting to grant him audience with Your Highness,’ the Captain replied.

‘What, you’ve brought him here? Captain, you are one of my most trusted advisors, and also one of my closest friends. I respect your judgement ordinarily, but I’m at a loss as to why you feel I should devote some time listening to a semi-ratted old puss like Half-blind Ron. You must admit that the dear old cat is slightly puddled.’

‘Agreed, Your Highness, but in this instance he assures me he was a model of sobriety, on account of the fact that he needed to have his wits about him for chicken

hunting at Farmer Pigwhistle's. Also, the encounter he claims he had does not appear to be one of his fanciful, catnip induced stories. It may be linked to The Prophecy.'

Prince Theo sat bolt upright. 'Go on.'

'It would be better for you to hear it from Half-blind Ron himself, Your Highness.'

'Alright, Captain, my interest is sufficiently aroused. Show him in.'

The Captain opened the door, made a beckoning gesture and Half-blind Ron ran in. 'Your Gracious Majesty, Royal Highness, Princeness, I am ever your humble servant and am honoured to be in your divine presence,' he said, supplicating himself on the floor.

'Please, stand and face me,' Theo said, waving his paw upwards. 'My Captain tells me you have a tale to tell.'

'Oh, I does, your Princeness. Just this morning I was minding my own business walking down Flopmarsh Lane—,'

'— Er, my Captain says you were attempting to steal chickens, from Farmer Pigwhistle,' Theo interrupted.

'A minor misunderstanding, Your Majesty, Highness, I was merely looking to borrow one for educational purposes.'

'Anyway,' Half-blind Ron continued, 'I was walking down Flopmarsh Lane when all of a sudden this big, red horseless carriage appears behind me, almost flying it was. It headed straight at me and I thought I was goner, Your Princeness. It stopped just before it crashed into me back end. I thought me old jewels were gonna be history.'

'And who was in charge of this "horseless carriage"?' Theo asked, his eyes narrowing.

‘Some lanky, human git, Your Majesty, Highness. A right weirdo if ever I met one. I reckon he was a wizard or a musician or sumfin.’

‘Why say you so?’ Theo asked again.

‘He had strange clothes, Your Princeness, and very scruffy hair, and he was carrying this little box which lit up. If you don’t believe me have a word with Fiery Dave from Denbigh, he saw him too.’

‘Is this true, Captain, is there corroboration to his story?’

‘We have sent word to Denbigh to request this information,’ the Captain answered. ‘We hope to hear back from them shortly.’

Theo jumped off the bed and placed a paw on Half-blind Ron’s shoulder. ‘Thank you for informing us of this. You can trust that we will seek to track this stranger down. We will be in touch shortly.’

‘You mean I may get to meet Your Majesty, Highness, Princeness again?’ Half-blind Ron said, with wide-eyed wonderment.

‘Indeed, for we may wish to speak further when we have ascertained some more of the facts. Your testimony today has been very valuable.’

‘Thank you, thank you, Your Gracious, Magnificent Princeness. Will you perhaps have a bit of chicken on hand next time?’

‘We’ll see what we can do.’

Captain Marmaduke led Half-blind Ron through the door and turned back to Theo. ‘Can you see why I thought you should see him now?’

‘I can indeed Captain. Once again you serve me well, my friend. Do you recall the exact words of The Prophecy?’

‘Not quite, Your Highness, but from my recollection of the text there undoubtedly appears to be a connection.’

‘Yes, it would seem so. The actual passage reads thus,’ Theo said, staring out of the window. “‘One day a stranger will arrive from a land beyond distance and beyond time. He will bring with him strange gadgets and strange ideas. He will tell tales of his home and people will gain strength from his words and his strange ways, although no-one will copy his hair style. He will join a group of heroes and set off on a quest that will deliver the people from fear and suppression. Evil will be vanquished and peace among the lands will follow.’”

There was a knock on the door.

‘Captain, we have word from Denbigh,’ said one of the guards.

‘Go on, man. What do they say?’

‘Fiery Dave reported seeing a red, horseless carriage being piloted by a scruffy-haired human this morning, sir. It was heading towards Llangollen.’

‘Well, Captain,’ Theo said, ‘it would appear that a trip to Llangollen needs to be added to my itinerary.’

‘So, let’s see if I’ve got this straight,’ Aiden said to Tom. ‘Because the QC operating system on the phone works on the uncertainty principle related to quantum mechanics, it does all its computations in parallel universes. So, instead of the Navigation app navigating me to Llangollen in my reality, it navigated me to another Llangollen in an alternative reality, where cats are telepathic and sheep serve rather good lager.’

‘You’re getting there now,’ said Tom.

‘And all this happened because the app selected the most appropriate Llangollen in the Multiverse for me by analysing my subconscious, which, like everything else in the Multiverse, is intrinsically connected consciously on a quantum

level. So, to allow me to be navigated to this other Llangollen, the energy frequencies of my physical body and car were readjusted and aligned to this reality.'

'Yep, that's about the top and bottom of it.'

'And you seriously expect me to believe you?'

'Why would I lie to you? I'm not some smartarse, little demonic prankster, infiltrating your mind and tempting you to stuff your face with another slice of pizza. I'm your higher self for god's sake.'

'Demonic possession, oh come on, I suppose that happens a lot does it?'

Aiden scoffed.

'All the bloody time, to varying degrees. Sometimes it's murder chasing the little monsters off; your drunken visit to the Pizza Plaza last night being a good example. How many slices did you have in the end?'

'Well, I was only going to have one, but... I felt tempted to have more... so I ended up having three. And I was going to go for a fourth but then changed my mind.'

'That was me after I smacked the little sod's metaphorical butt!' exclaimed Tom. 'Pesky little blighter.'

'You make it sound like I'm not in control of my own mind!'

'Well, there's a good element of truth in that. You have to understand that the human mind is a big mish-mash of things. There's you, that's your conscious mind, and then there's a whole host of other elements and hangers on, all vying for control at certain points in time, dependent upon the circumstances. Like your emotions, for example. They're a right bunch of whining beggars, I can tell you.'

'But,' Tom continued, 'and this is the key, you're living in a free will universe; so the choices you make are still down to you, your conscious self. The other elements of your mind and the infiltrators can only influence, although

sometimes those influences can be pretty potent. It's my job to guide you and try to ensure that you do what's best. So, whenever you've followed your gut feeling or instinct, that's generally me nudging you to take the best path at that time. Remember, always listen to me.'

'Right,' Aiden said, scratching his chin. 'So when I felt the urge to chat up Rebecca Clark at the work's party, as I really felt she fancied me, that was you pointing me in the right direction?'

'No, that was your ego, Roger. He's a complete prat. You should never trust that pillock. Now me, I was screaming at you not to go anywhere near her because I knew she was a bloody fruit loop. Do you remember what happened the following week?'

'Er, yes, she chained herself to the old elm tree in my garden and claimed that she'd been sent by the wood nymphs to save it from satanic hair conditioner and inappropriate hieroglyphics. I had to get the police to move her after a couple of days.'

'See, there you go,' replied Tom.

'Excuse me my good man, but do you happen to have the time, please?'

Aiden pulled the phone from his ear and turned to look at a well-dressed sheep, wearing small, rounded spectacles and carrying a trumpet. 'Pardon,' he replied.

'Do you happen to have the time? I fear I may be late for the concert. I get a bit absent-minded these days, and I was so engrossed in a conversation about waistcoats with Mr Ruffle, the sheep tailor, that I've lost track of time completely.'

'Oh, it's half past two,' Aiden said, looking at his watch.

'Thank goodness and bless my clacky hooves,' the sheep said. 'The concert doesn't begin until three, so I have plenty of time. Thank you.'

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Oh, I’m forgetting my manners. I’m Charles Corriedale, trumpet player with the Oswestry Sheep Orchestra,’ Charles said, extending a hoof.

‘Aiden Peersey,’ Aiden said, swapping the phone to his other hand and shaking the extended hoof.

‘Have you ever seen the OSO play?’ Charles asked.

‘No, I don’t believe so.’

‘Well, if you have time, why not pop along to the park by the river later. We’re playing a sterling set today, including one of my favourites, “Where Sheep Safely Graze” by Baach. That always gets a great reception, and it’s a really lovely tune.’

‘I’ll try my best to,’ Aiden said, politely.

‘Please do,’ an enthusiastic Charles said. ‘Anyhow, I must be on my way. It was very nice to meet you, Aiden, but I’ll bid you adieu, good sir.’

‘Nice to meet you too, Charles.’

And with that Charles Corriedale turned and headed over the bridge, trumpet in hand and with a spring in his stride. Aiden swapped the phone back to his right hand and placed it against his ear. ‘So this isn’t simply a bizarre dream?’ he said to Tom.

‘No.’

‘And I’m not hallucinating because I’m having a reaction to something Stoner Steve from the Hefty Swingers may have put into my drink last night?’

‘No.’

‘And it’s not some genetic experiment?’

‘No.’

‘And we’ve not been invaded by alien sheep landlords?’

‘No.’

‘And I’m not having a breakdown.’

‘No’

‘And in this reality, the composer Bach is actually Baach and is a sheep?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you really are my intuition/higher self?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, Everett’s Many Worlds interpretation of the universe, which states that every choice that is made creates a copy of the universe where the actions resulting from that choice are then perpetuated, is actually correct?’

‘Pretty much, yes.’

‘I think I need to sit down.’

‘You do that, then.’

Aiden grabbed one of the solid, wooden chairs at the front of the pub and slowly eased himself into it, keeping the phone pressed against his ear. He gazed blankly over the bridge into Llangollen town centre. ‘How do I get back?’ he said.

‘I’m not sure, yet. This is a very unusual event, you know, not everyone goes dimension hopping. You’re going to have to hold up for a time while I do a bit of investigative work. Look, I’ve got a conference call in a couple of days with the Higher Self Union, so I’ll have a chat with a few well-versed souls and see what I can find out.’

‘A couple of days! But what am I supposed to do? Where the hell am I going to stay? Can I drive back to my house?’ Aiden asked, slightly exasperated.

‘Well, you could. But I’m afraid it’s not quite as you remember it.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Well, the building is there... but it’s used as a nursing home for senile bingo callers.’

‘Great. Do you have any suggestions, then?’

‘Why not get a room in the pub here. It looks quite nice.’

‘Well, for a start I haven’t got any money on me and I doubt very much that they’ll accept my credit card.’

‘But you do have your wallet and bank card, don’t you?’

‘Yes, but how on earth is that going to help me here. Do you suggest I just wander to the nearest ATM and make a withdrawal?’ Aiden said, with a touch of sarcasm.

‘Actually, yes,’ Tom replied. ‘Look, you know the theory that the force of gravity is much weaker than it should be because it permeates all dimensions?’

‘Yes...’

‘Well, believe it or not, it’s the same with banks. Trust me on this. Find a bank, use your normal pin number and you’ll be fine.’

‘That’s scary,’ Aiden said. ‘But somehow I’m not that surprised.’

Chapter 6 - Is there a bank around here?

Merlin 'Cracky' Crackfoot was not quite his usual cheery self today, despite the success of the previous night. Today was the 30th anniversary of his father's death and he still missed him greatly.

Morgan Crackfoot was the last of the great wizards of Llangollen. He was also a kind and patient man who used his powers to help others, and Cracky had always wanted to emulate him. When he was young he would practice magic every day, sitting on his father's knee, whilst the attentive Morgan watched and guided him with wise and loving words. Sadly for Cracky he was what could be described as 'magically dyslexic'. He understood the principles of magic, but he simply couldn't get to grips with it in any kind of practical perspective. That's not to say he couldn't perform any magic at all, it's just that it never quite went as he intended. His first real attempt with fire spells provided a clue to his unfortunate condition.

It all started fine, as he adopted the correct posture, thrusting his arms out and concentrating on the freshly-chopped wood piled high on the log fire. It was only when he opened his mouth that things went slightly awry, with the words 'Inflamus Logs' somehow being translated by his will into 'Inflamus Rocks'. Sadly, the large log fire in the cottage remained unlit, whilst the cat with the flaming testicles made a very swift exit into the nearby stream.

However, Cracky discovered that he did have a natural aptitude for cookery, after imaginatively embellishing a recipe he found one day in his mother's cookbook. He assembled all of the listed ingredients, seemed to know intuitively what to add to enhance the texture and flavour, and created what both his mother and father agreed was a delicious steak and raspberry soufflé.

From this point onwards there was no stopping him, and, if anything, his prodigious talent for creating gourmet masterpieces from mixing together the most unlikely ingredients was the equal of his father's gift for wizardry. However, as gratifying as it was to see his parents so proud of his culinary achievements, he still longed to follow in his father's magically altruistic footsteps... so the cat kept out of his way most of the time.

'Excuse me,' Aiden said, from the doorway of Cracky's Diner, 'but is there a bank around here at all?'

'What?' Cracky said, snapping out of his thoughts. 'Oh, yes, about ten minutes' walk, just on the outskirts of the town centre.'

'Thanks. Er, what's the branch called?'

'The Black Bank, of course,' Cracky replied. 'They're all Black Bank branches now, sadly.'

Cracky looked Aiden up and down, noting his hair, clothes and general demeanour. 'I sense that you're a stranger to these parts, Mr...?'

'Peersey, Aiden Peersey.'

'Well, Mr Peersey, my instincts tell me you are quite a ways from home. And, I would add, not too familiar with this area?'

'You could say that,' Aiden replied. 'But please, call me Aiden.'

'Aiden it is then,' said Cracky. 'I can accompany you, if you like. I need to head down to the bank myself. By the way, the name's Merlin Crackfoot, but please call me Cracky, everyone else does.'

'Thanks, Cracky. I'd appreciate that.'

Aiden found Cracky to be very good company. In the ten minutes it took to walk to the bank, he told him all about his Diner, all about Llangollen and its

inhabitants, and he strongly recommended 'The Sheep's Stirrup' as a place to stay. He was particularly scathing about Baron Blacktie, who, he said, ruled North Wales, Chester and the Wirral with an iron fist, and had introduced many unpopular laws.

The sign in the window of the Black Bank said 'Bank with the Black Bank and Your Money is Safe.' In smaller letters underneath it read 'After all, it's not as if you have a choice'. Aiden could see another poster on the wall behind the counter which read 'Your Money is Our Money... and we like to keep it like that'.

'Right, I'm going to see Mr Grabbitall, the manager,' Cracky said. 'Unless he wants a fight again, I shouldn't be more than five minutes. There's the ATM in the doorway.'

Aiden tentatively inserted his card and fully expected it to be eaten by the machine, no doubt followed by alarm bells, armed guards and god knew what else. Instead, the screen asked for his pin number. He entered his pin and was given the option of how much cash he wished to withdraw. Having no idea what things were likely to cost, he opted for the maximum, which was £200. A few seconds later his card was returned and a little metal flap opened, providing him with a mixture of ten and twenty pound notes. He breathed a sigh of relief, placed the card back in his wallet and examined the money.

All the notes bore the image of Baron Blacktie. On the front of £10 note he was dressed in military regalia, looking out to sea; on the back he was seen playing with children, laughing (although Aiden noticed that the children didn't look so cheery). On the front of the £20 note he was sat on a throne with a ferret on his knee; on the back he was in serious pose reading from a book.

For all his vanity, and there was a great deal of that, Baron Blacktie was as astute with money as he was devious and treacherous. After he was elected Supreme

Ruler, he decided to merge all of the independent banks under one banner, 'The Black Bank.' Now, not all the banks were keen to simply throw in their lot with the Baron, irrespective of his promises of higher interest rates for loans, lower interest rates for savings, and the introduction of harsh penalties for unauthorised overdrafts. The Baron didn't take too kindly to any dissenting voices and made personal visits to see the concerned parties. He was always accompanied to these meetings by his personal bodyguard, Grunt.

Now, Grunt may have been a troll; he may have been the missing link between man and Neanderthal; he may have been abandoned by his parents because he'd never be in a successful boy band; or he may simply have come from Rhyl. Nobody knew, but nobody asked and nobody argued with him. The dissenting voices became assenting voices when they met Grunt.

'Now, come on, Mrs Muncher, you know the rules,' an armed bank guard said, as he escorted a little old lady out of the bank's front door.

'But I'm only 10p overdrawn,' protested Mrs Muncher, 'and that's because I didn't think the direct debit for my new subscription of "Tai Chi Bingo for Beginners" would come out until next week, and that's when I pay my pension in.'

'That's too bad, I'm afraid,' the guard said, as a second guard handed him a large hammer. 'Now, if you'll kindly lie down here so I can get a good swing at those knees, please.'

Mrs Muncher lay down and the second guard grabbed her ankles. 'Now keep still, this will only take a second.'

'What on earth do you think you're doing?' Aiden said, standing in the way of the guard with the hammer.

‘Move out of the way, sir, please. This is a bank matter, I’m sure you understand.’

‘No, I bloody well don’t understand. The lady said she’s only 10p overdrawn and you’re going to kneecap her. That’s barbaric!’

‘Well, overdraft punishment is overdraft punishment, and she drew straws to see which one she’d get after all,’ the guard said. ‘She could have got nostril stretching or severe ear twisting, but she got kneecapping. That’s just the way it goes, I’m afraid. Rules are rules.’

Aiden weighed up the situation. He wasn’t exactly small, but he figured that the two guards would be able to overpower him easily if he physically intervened. Plus, if this ritual was in some bizarre way accepted in this reality he was in danger of exposing himself as an outsider, and the last thing he wanted was any kind of brush with the authorities, particularly if this is how they dealt with overdrafts.

‘So, do you actually want to break her kneecaps?’ he said to the guard with the hammer.

‘Er, no, not really, sir. But, as I said, rules are rules.’

‘But, if you do break her kneecaps it’s pretty likely she won’t be able to walk again, particularly given her age, would you not agree?’

‘Oh, there’s no way she’ll walk again after this, sir. Not a chance,’

‘In fact, it’s possible that she could die from shock, or from a heart attack?’

‘I’d say that’s a very likely possibility, sir.’

Mrs Muncher was still lying on the ground listening intently. So was the second guard. ‘And,’ Aiden continued, ‘if that happened she’d still be overdrawn and wouldn’t be in a position to be able to clear the overdraft.’

‘I never really thought about it like that, but I believe you’d be right, sir.’

A small crowd was beginning to gather, and Aiden felt he was on a bit of a roll. ‘So, you’d actually serve the bank better if you didn’t kneecap her, as that way she’d still be a regular customer.’

‘Are you suggesting that we stretch her nostrils or twist her ears severely instead, sir?’

‘No, no. I’m suggesting that you, Mr...’

‘Tenderhands, Albert Tenderhands,’ the first guard replied.

‘I’m suggesting that you, Mr Tenderhands, make an executive decision to delay her punishment, thereby allowing her to collect her pension next week and pay it into the bank.’

‘And then we kneecap her?’ said the second guard, who was still holding Mrs Muncher’s legs.

‘No, you won’t have to, because then she’ll have cleared the overdraft and there’ll be no reason for any punishment.’

‘Doesn’t sound right to me, Albert,’ the second guard said.

‘Executive decision, eh,’ said Albert. ‘I’ve never had to make an executive decision before. Why it would almost feel like a promotion.’

‘Yes, it would,’ Aiden said. ‘Now, Mrs Muncher, can you promise that you’ll come in next week, as soon as you get your pension, and pay it into the bank to clear your overdraft?’

‘Too bloody right I will,’ Mrs Muncher said, nodding frantically.

‘Well, then, Mr Tenderhands, are you going to bend the rules and make that executive decision, thereby doing the bank a great service?’

‘Bend the rules. That’s a new one, I’ll say,’ Albert said, and you could almost see the wheels of his mind turning... slowly.

‘Right then, Mrs Muncher,’ he said after some serious chin rubbing, ‘I’ve made an executive decision. I hereby grant you a delay in your overdraft punishment, thereby allowing you to clear said overdraft next week when you pick up your pension. Do you agree?’

‘Oh, yes. Thank you, thank you,’ said Mrs Muncher, as she was helped to her feet by the second guard.

‘If you don’t, of course, your kneecaps are forfeit,’ Albert added.

The small crowd broke into a round of applause and Mrs Muncher stretched up to plant a kiss on Aiden’s cheek. Cracky walked out into the street just as the crowd started to disperse. ‘What’s all the commotion here, then?’ he asked.

‘That young man just saved Mrs Muncher from a kneecapping,’ shouted a small, portly gentleman with a red face and matching cardigan.

‘Did he now?’ Cracky said, raising an eyebrow, as Aiden simply shrugged. ‘C’mon, then, I’ll walk you back to the Diner and then lunch is on me. After that we’ll sort you out a room at The Sheep’s Stirrup.’

‘By the way,’ he added, as they set off down the street, ‘do you happen to like rock music, by any chance?’

‘Yes, as a matter of fact I do.’

‘Well, you’re in for a treat later. It’s live music night at the Stirrup and Sacred Wind are playing. They’re actually very good.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Aiden, blissfully unaware of what the night would bring.

Chapter 7 - I'm still getting dressed, darling

‘C’mon, Tikky we’re going to be late,’ Vindy shouted to his wife, from the sumptuous surroundings of the Wrexham Grand Palace morning room. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m still getting dressed, darling, I won’t be too long,’ Tikky, shouted back.

‘Just a little more around the edge and a slight sprinkle on top and then I think we’ll be done, Your Majesty,’ Tikky’s hand maiden, Greta, said. ‘You look absolutely delicious and I think there’ll be gentlemen drooling when they see you today.’

‘You’re very kind, Greta. Let’s just hope the King appreciates all the effort. The people expect us to set an example and the least I can do is to look my absolute best when we go on walkabouts.’

‘Is it Your Majesty’s intention to travel straight to Llangollen, following the parade?’ Greta asked.

‘Indeed it is. The King and I haven’t had a good night out for ages, and I do so enjoy the music at The Sheep’s Stirrup. I’m ever so glad Maurice invited us over. But please remember, not a word to anyone. We want to keep this strictly under the radar,’ Tikky said, as the two of them began to make their way down the main stairway to where the King and his man servant, Harold, waited.

‘My dear, you look absolutely divine. I’ll be the envy of every curry in Wrexham,’ King Beef Vindaloo-Boiled Rice III said. ‘That touch of parsley and sprinkling of coriander really brings out your flavour, and you smell scrumptious.’

‘You don’t look so bad yourself,’ Queen Chicken Tikka Masala-Coconut Rice said. ‘I love the mango chutney, it makes you look sweet. Was that Harold’s idea?’

‘Of course, I don’t know what I’d do without him,’ the King replied.

‘Your Majesty is too modest, in this instance.’ Harold said, ‘Although the idea may have been mine, the choice of placement on the plate was His Majesty’s.’

‘You look very nice too, Harold,’ said Greta. ‘That jacket really sets off your eyes.’

‘And you look as radiant as ever, Greta. It is my honour to walk at your side, as well as to carry my King.’

‘I think there may be love in the air, Vindy,’ Tikky whispered to her husband.

‘Heh, heh. I think you might be right, my darling. I can hear the sound of wedding bells already.’

Wrexham had been a ‘Currydom’ since 1979, following the hardship the people had suffered during the ‘Risotto Wars’. Prior to this, men and curries had lived in peace and harmony for many years, respecting each other’s cultures and sympathetic to each other’s needs. However, following the 1968 legislation by the Welsh Parliament officially recognising curries as conscious entities, dark forces sought to infiltrate the curry community, spurring on insurgency, sabotage and acts of terrorism. Suddenly, eating in a curry house was no longer the peaceful, gastronomic experience it once was. Attacks by suicide Naan breads became common, overly hot poppadoms became the norm, and many curries sought to make themselves unpalatable by ingesting copious amounts of cinnamon.

The self-proclaimed leader of the rebel movement, ‘El Currieda’, was Bishop Chicken Biryani-Onion Bhaji, a mad zealot who believed the words written in ‘The Holy Recipe Book of Curry’ should be taken literally. He blamed men for the corruption of the ‘pure’ curries, and so began his campaign of terror and watery rice. His second in command was the evil genius Dr Prawn Balti-Naan, who desired to

create the 'super curry', conducting hideous genetic experiments involving turmeric powder and strawberries.

However, not all curries viewed the actions and ambitions of Bishop Chicken Biryani-Onion Bhaji as representative. This group, 'Curry Action for Culture and Knowledge', or 'C.A.C.K.' for short, at first sought a diplomatic path with the mad Bishop. Their leader, Colonel Pork Pasanda-Chapati, tried in vain to convince him that his crusade of wanton curry-led violence was tearing the community apart. A series of meetings proved fruitless, largely due to the Bishop's increasing megalomania but also due to a dearth of sultanas. Draft treaties were torn up and the curry community of Wrexham effectively found itself in a state of civil war.

All this chaos let the Italians in, with the head of the Wrexham Risottos, Luigi Risotto Alla Milanese, sensing it was time for them to make their move for power. Spurred on by the division in the curry ranks, the Risottos opened many new restaurants and also took over previously established curry houses. As the ruling council of El Currieda watched the madness of their leader accelerate, and witnessed their rapid decline as the dish of choice, they realised there was only one course of action that could be taken.

Bishop Chicken Biryani-Onion Bhaji met his grim end during a parade through the centre of Wrexham on a cold November morning. The Chapatis came out of nowhere and many suspected it must have been an inside job to get past all the security. Some said they only saw one, others said it was at least two, and many more swear that the last Chapati came from behind a grassy knoll. Nevertheless, the Bishop's plate was wiped clean and only a lone Chapati was caught, and he was killed shortly afterwards by a rogue Samosa. The conspiracy of who killed Bishop Chicken Biryani-Onion Bhaji continues to this day.

With the Bishop gone, Colonel Pork Pasanda-Chapati and his brave second in command, Lieutenant Beef Vindaloo-Boiled Rice III, galvanised the curry populace and took the battle to the Italians. The final showdown took place in Fabio's Pizzeria, with curries and Risottos on the same table for the first time. Bedlam ensued, but the Risottos had bitten off more than they could chew and the curries emerged triumphant... but it took weeks to get the rice out of the carpet.

However, although victory was theirs it came at a heavy price, when an errant Italian waiter knocked Colonel Pork Pasanda-Chapati to the floor. Faced with certain death due to a severely smashed plate, the Colonel passed over command to the young Lieutenant who had served him so well, and who promised to make his wish that men and curries would live in peace once more a reality.

The people of Wrexham, endeared by the bravery and morals of the curries, recognised that their own rulers in the council were actually a bunch of idiots who cared more about attending fetes, filling out expenses forms and erecting statues of themselves rather than governing effectively. So, following a request that they all bugger off, an independent poll was held and it was decreed by the people that Lieutenant Beef Vindaloo-Boiled Rice III be crowned King.

The royal monthly walkabouts in Wrexham were always joyous occasions, and Vindy and Tikky would always make a point of greeting everyone who queued up patiently to see them. As usual, the press were there and the royal couple were also equally gracious to them, always posing for photographs. They understood all too well the advantages of having a good relationship with the media.

'Over here, Your Majesty,' a skinny fellow with odd eyes from the Wrexham Gazette said, to Tikky. 'If you can just turn slightly sideways, please, so I can get a good shot of your bay leaves.'

Back at the palace, the preparations were being made for tonight's undisclosed visit to The Sheep's Stirrup. As the King and Queen returned they were greeted by the head of their Imperial Guard, General Lamb Korma-Saffron Rice.

'Good day, Your Majesties. And can I just say that you both look splendid.'

'Why thank you, Saffy,' the Queen said, using the informal name that both she and the King addressed the General by. 'And you look as dashing as usual. Is everything prepared?'

'Yes, Your Majesty. Your unmarked carriage awaits, and I will accompany you for the trip, if Your Majesties are in agreement.'

'I'm not surprised you're not letting us out of your sight, Saffy, and it is appreciated,' said the King. 'I must say, though, I would have thought you'd have insisted on some form of armed guard for the trip.'

'Well, ahem, although we may be travelling effectively alone, we will be followed by a battalion of elite Tandoori Naans. However, they are under orders to keep their distance and only to move on my command,' Saffy replied.

'Oh, one more thing, Saffy,' Tikky said, as they were carried into the carriage, 'are we still to meet with you know who?'

'We are Your Majesty. I have received communication that both parties will be present this evening.'

'Ok, then, what are we waiting for,' said Vindy. 'Let's hit the road, cause I'm in the mood for dancing!'

'Calm down, dear, you'll make your rice go sticky,' Tikky said.

And with that the carriage sped off to Llangollen and their date with destiny.

Chapter 8 - She may be the last of her kind

Aiden thought the food at Cracky's Diner was rather good, as he quickly polished off a healthy portion of Chicken of Catastrophe and Scallops of Shock, with some Peas of Dread on the side. This was washed down with one of Cracky's excellent home-brewed ales.

'I have to say, Cracky, I'd never have guessed that melon, garlic and chicken would work so well together. That was one of the best meals I've had in ages.'

'You're welcome,' said Cracky. 'One does one's best. Now, I'm not due to open again until 5:00 pm so, if you'd like, I'll walk over to the Stirrup with you. I can have a quick catch-up with Maurice.'

'Thanks, but I was going to have a walk down to the park first to have a look at the fair. I believe there's a sheep orchestra playing and that's something I'd like to see.'

'The OSO, yes, they're very good. Would you mind if I joined you?'

As they began the short walk to the park on the banks of the River Dee, Aiden thought he'd better check on his car. 'Well, bless my soul, you don't see many of these old things anymore,' Cracky said.

'Oh, yes it is a bit of a classic,' said Aiden, proudly. 'I didn't see any other cars on the roads when I arrived, so parking was pretty easy. Is this because of the fair?'

'No, not at all,' Cracky said, 'hardly anyone drives these machines these days. They went out of fashion about forty years ago. I don't think I've ever seen one in such good condition.'

Aiden's look of surprise didn't escape Cracky's notice, and as they walked to the park an uneasy silence decided to hang around to see what was going to happen next.

'I think, my friend, that you are, shall we say, quite a long way from home. Would that be fair?' Cracky said, after about a minute.

'It would appear so,' Aiden replied. 'It's a bit of a long story.'

'Well, I tell you what, then. Tomorrow, after you've had an enjoyable night at the Stirrup and perhaps feel a bit more settled in, why don't you come to the Diner for lunch. I'm cooking a new special, The Salmon of Panic. I think you'll like it; the bananas really bring out the flavour. And perhaps afterwards we can have a chat.'

Aiden smiled and agreed with a silent nod.

The Grand Carnival of Shearing and Hoof Waxing was a kaleidoscope of colour and sound, wrapped up in an intoxicating blend of aromas. People and sheep bustled hither and thither, meandering between the many stalls that were selling a variety of produce. There was certainly plenty of hoof waxing and shearing going on, with the vendors competing vigorously with each other for customers.

'Get your hooves waxed here! Only the finest Welsh hoof wax used. Ten pence a hoof for ewes, fifteen pence a hoof for rams, and its buy one get one free!' a large man in a trench coat and a straw boater hat yelled.

'Free hoof waxing for lambs!' another man wearing white overalls shouted. 'And free lollipops too. We use the same hoof wax as the OSO; it's the finest English Shimmy Shine.'

The stalls offering shearing were equally as assertive with their advertising strategy. 'Ewe, madam, yes, ewe!' a rather dashing-looking young farmer shouted to a giggling group of sheep. 'Look at the styles we've got on offer today. Tight perms,

loose perms, why we'll even perm round your udders. C'mon, the rams won't be able to resist ewe!'

'Latest cuts from the City,' a stocky man with shorts and very hairy legs proclaimed. 'Want to look like a celebrity? Well you've come to the right place. Get the fleece you've always dreamed of. Shampooed, cut and blow dried to perfection. Go on, you know you're worth it!'

Aiden and Cracky watched the OSO perform a couple of well-executed pieces of music to an appreciative crowd. He may have been in a completely different reality but Aiden actually felt quite at ease, thoroughly enjoying the music and festivities. And then he spotted something on the river that made his heart skip a beat. It was a replica Viking long ship, complete with a mighty wooden dragon at the prow and another at the helm.

'Come on,' Cracky said, walking towards the ship, 'there's someone I'd like you to meet.'

As they got closer, Aiden could see a huge man in a Viking costume standing proudly with his arms crossed on the prow, watching over the throngs of people and sheep on board. 'Five minutes until we sail!' shouted the Viking. 'For Odin, for glory and for Sacred Wind!' Then he uncrossed his arms, lifted his huge broadsword into the air... and farted loudly, which was met by cheers from the crowd.

'See him,' said Cracky, pointing at the Viking. 'He's the lead vocalist and guitarist in the band you'll be watching tonight.'

'You're not serious?' Aiden said, with a smile.

'Oh, yes. Fantastic voice and a pretty good guitar player.'

'My, my and how is my good friend Mr Crackfoot today,' a small man with a very long, grey beard said.

‘I’m very well, Mr Olafson. Nice to see you again,’ Cracky replied, warmly shaking the bearded man by the hand. ‘And this here is Aiden Peersey.’

‘Oldfart,’ the bearded man said, extending his hand towards Aiden.

‘Pardon,’ Aiden replied.

‘Mr Olafson... Oldfart Olafson,’ the bearded man said, keeping his hand outstretched. ‘But please call me Oldfart.’

Aiden couldn’t help but smile again. ‘Pleased to meet you, Oldfart,’ he said, accepting the handshake.

‘Are the band well-prepared for tonight’s gig at the Stirrup?’ Cracky asked.

‘Well, that’s what they tell me,’ Oldfart said. ‘They’re trying out a couple of new numbers tonight, so we’ll have to see how they get received. It’s a very strong set list now, though, and I reckon they’re ready to move on to the next level.’

‘Oldfart’s the manager of Sacred Wind,’ Cracky said to Aiden.

Aiden was continuing to eye the Viking ship on the river, which didn’t go unnoticed by Oldfart. ‘Would you like a trip on the boat? I’m sure we can squeeze you two in somewhere.’

The man in the Viking costume released the anchor, whilst another equally large Viking untied the thick hawser that moored the boat to the old, wooden jetty. The craft then moved silently out into the river, steered manfully by Oldfart Olafson. The passengers cheered again and Aiden felt rather splendid. The sun was shining and the river glistened as it reflected the warm rays. ‘Isn’t this exciting!’ said one of the little sheep that Aiden had met earlier, still dressed in its pirate costume.

‘Yes, it is rather,’ he replied, truthfully.

It was after about five minutes that Aiden started to think about propulsion. He couldn’t detect a motor, there was nobody rowing, and even though the huge sail was

raised there didn't really seem to be enough wind for the ship to be travelling as effortlessly as it seemed. The big wooden dragon that towered over Oldfart, as he navigated the ship, stared silently ahead, like an immense, unmoving guardian. Then, only for a split second, it moved its eyes and looked sideways at Aiden.

‘Cracky, did you see that? That dragon’s eyes moved, I swear to you.’

‘Really?’ Cracky responded. ‘You’re very honoured, she normally doesn’t give most folks the time of day.’

‘She?’

‘Ethel,’ Cracky said. ‘That’s her name. She’s very rare, you know. In fact she may be the last of her kind. It’s her ship. Well, essentially, she is the ship.’

Aiden stared up at Ethel, but her eyes were now unblinking, focussed on the river ahead. ‘Would you like to hear the story?’ Cracky said.

‘I’d love to.’

‘Okay, then. Legend has it that long, long ago a fleet of Viking ships set sail in search of adventure and treasure. They sought a magical island that was thought to be lost, yet which had been sighted on several occasions by sea farers. After many weeks of searching, they finally sighted the island; but then, from nowhere, a mighty tempest erupted around them. The storm claimed all but two of the ships, but both were badly damaged, although they eventually managed to reach the island. Now, Odin, who as you may know is the King of the Norse Gods, watched these events from on high and was impressed by the bravery of the men who had managed to steer their ships through the violent storm. Many, though, had died and those that were left were close to death. So, the legend says, he gave them the Blessed Bottom Breath of Life, thus reviving and repairing their bodies, and enriching their souls. Also, in order for them to safely return home, he gave the same gift to the two ships, infusing them with life...

and a soul. This is one of the reasons that Vikings regard the passing of wind as sacred. They believe every fart is a blessing.'

'Oh, I see,' Aiden said, with a barely-concealed smile.

The dragon once again turned its eyes slightly towards Aiden and winked. 'I really have seen everything now,' he said, as the ship turned and began the journey back to the fair.

'Actually you probably haven't,' chuckled Cracky. 'Anyway, let's head for the Stirrup when we get back on shore. We'll get you sorted out with a room and then I need to open the Diner.'

Chapter 4 - We'd like a room, please

'I am Mr Breezy and my partner here is Mr Waft,' the tall man holding the briefcase said. 'We'd like a room, please,'

'Yes,' said the shorter man, 'preferably one with a view of the river.'

'It's your lucky day, good sirs,' said Maurice Fluffywool. 'We've only two rooms left but they both have a lovely view of the Dee.'

'We'll only need one, thank you,' Mr Breezy said.

'Oh, I see,' Maurice said, winking. 'Well, we're very enlightened around here, so that's not a problem.'

'Ah, I fear you may be incorrectly assessing our status,' Mr Breezy said, his face reddening. 'Ours is purely a business relationship. There is, I assure you, no impropriety of any nature. We share a room so we can keep our costs low and so that we may discuss and plan our business strategy.'

'Indeed,' Mr Waft added, 'we sometimes sit long into the wee hours discussing the ins and outs of things.'

They both wore long, green coats and had matching black, bowler hats. Maurice thought they looked a bit shifty so he decided to probe. 'What kind of business are you gentleman involved in, then?'

'These are strange times, Mr Fluffywool,' Mr Breezy said, dramatically. 'We are here on matters of extreme sensitivity. Our clients do not always like to wash their dirty linen in public, so to speak.'

'Ah, so you two are spies are you?' Maurice replied.

'Er, no, no, of course not,' Mr Waft said, slightly agitated. 'What makes you think we are spies?'

‘Well you do have the look of spies about you gentlemen, and I’ve met a few in my time. Also, isn’t that black briefcase a spy kit?’

Mr Breezy and Mr Waft looked at each other and laughed. Then they looked at Maurice and chortled. Then they tittered... and ended with some ‘tee, hee, hees.’

‘No, Mr Fluffywool, we are purely Vagrant Vacuum Cleaner Exorcists, trying to earn an honest crust,’ Mr Breezy said.

‘Oh, I had no idea vacuum cleaner possession was an issue these days,’ Maurice said. ‘I’ve certainly not heard of anything of that nature in these parts of late.’

‘Ah, you would be surprised, Mr Fluffywool,’ said Mr Breezy. ‘We have just crossed the border from England and the situation in some villages there was horrendous.’

‘Horrendous,’ echoed Mr Waft.

‘Indeed,’ said Mr Breezy. ‘Sadly, we got to one village too late and they had already begun burning vacuum cleaners at the stake, fearing this was the only method they could employ to stem the evil tide. It was a terrible sight.’

‘And a dusty one,’ Mr Waft added.

‘We hope that the special blessings we can bestow on your town will perhaps prevent you from witnessing the horrors we have seen. This is our goal, this is our purpose, this is our quest,’ Mr Breezy said, grandly.

‘Here, here!’ shouted Mr Waft.

‘Well, in which case, I can only wish you gentlemen good fortune,’ Maurice said. ‘And I’ll certainly sleep more soundly in my bed knowing that my vacuum cleaner is far less likely to indulge in projectile-vomiting and speaking in tongues when I try to get into those tricky corner areas. Right, the room will be £10 a night,

including our rather delicious Welsh breakfast. How many nights will you be staying?’

‘I would envisage just two,’ Mr Breezy said. ‘Although this will obviously be dependent upon when we feel our mission, and your safety, is assured.’

‘Well, if you can just sign here, please, Mr Breezy,’ Maurice said, passing him the guest book. ‘And here’s your key to Room 13. Go up the stairs and it’s the last room on the right, at the end of the corridor.’

‘Thank you, Mr Fluffywool,’ Mr Breezy said, as he and Mr Waft walked towards the stairs. ‘Oh, one more thing,’ he said, turning back to Maurice. ‘We have a passing interest in ancient structures and we noticed a fascinating old cheese mine near a large group of standing stones as we travelled here. Do you perhaps know anything of this mine and who it belongs to?’

‘Oh, that’s been closed for many years. It used to be owned by a quaint old chap called Hairy Growler, but he transferred ownership to the McSvensson clan just days before his death.’

‘The McSvensson clan!’ Mr Waft said, somewhat alarmed.

‘Yes, have you heard of them?’

‘We have,’ Mr Breezy replied, as he and Mr Waft exchanged nervous glances. ‘They are the most feared warriors in the land.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Maurice. ‘But Angus McSvensson bequeathed it to his cousin as a birthday gift, on the understanding that he takes care of it from time to time. As you can imagine, the McSvenssons don’t tend to travel to these parts much.’

Mr Breezy and Mr Waft relaxed visibly. ‘And would you know the whereabouts of this cousin at all?’ Mr Breezy said.

‘His name is Agnar the Hammered and he plays drums in a quite excellent band by the name of Sacred Wind. They are performing in this establishment this very evening, so I’m sure I can introduce you.’

‘Thank you, Mr Fluffywool, that information is much appreciated,’ said Mr Breezy, as they went up the stairs.

‘I thought he was onto us for a minute there,’ Nob said, closing the door to room 13 behind him.

‘Yes, but I feel our supreme acting skills have once again ensured that our disguises remain intact,’ Hob replied, putting his briefcase down next to one of the two single beds.

‘Quite,’ Nob agreed.

Hob went over and stared out of the window at the pleasant view of the town and river below. ‘So, it belongs to a drummer,’ he said. ‘This could make our task easier than we thought.’

Virtually as soon as Mr Breezy and Mr Waft had disappeared upstairs, Aiden and Cracky walked through the door. Aiden was still smiling. ‘You seem very happy, Mr Peersey,’ said Maurice. ‘And good day, Mr Crackfoot, I believe that the “Cuisine de la Terreur” went very well last night.’

‘Good day, Maurice. Yes, it did, thanks,’ said Cracky. ‘I just need to take it easy with the garlic and pineapple sauce next time.’

Maurice immediately began to fill up two glasses for them. ‘And I do feel much better now, Maurice,’ Aiden said, as he and Cracky leaned on the bar. ‘I was feeling a little odd before, but the visit to the carnival has cleared my head a bit.’

‘Cheshire Black,’ Maurice whispered to Cracky.

‘Aiden would very much like a room, if you have any spare,’ Cracky said.
‘Although we’re not sure how many nights this would be for.’

‘You’re in luck, Aiden,’ Maurice said, ‘I’ve only one left, but it’s very nice with a lovely view of the Dee. Mind you, it’s a good job the two spies who’ve just checked in only wanted one room.’

‘Spies?’ Cracky said.

‘Well, they said they were Vagrant Vacuum Cleaner Exorcists, but I’m pretty sure they’re spies. I can smell them a mile off. They want to chat to Agnar about that old mine of his. I suspect they’re probably harmless but I’ll keep an eye on them.’

‘I knew a lady whose vacuum cleaner became possessed once,’ Cracky said.
‘It used to drive her up the wall... and even onto the ceiling sometimes. I’ll check out these two “spies” tonight, as well.’

Maurice placed their drinks on the bar and Aiden produced his wallet, only to be waved away by Maurice’s hoof. ‘No, this one’s on the house, gentlemen. First drink is free for guests and as Mr Crackfoot kindly recommended my establishment as your abode of choice, he can have one too.’

‘Very kind of you, again,’ Aiden said.

‘Yes, cheers, Maurice,’ said Cracky.

‘So, did you enjoy the OSO today?’ Maurice asked, bringing out the guest book from under the bar.

‘Very much so,’ Aiden replied.

‘My brother, Henry, is their conductor and musical arranger, you know. He’ll be around tonight, as he tends to stay over when they’re playing in the area. If you’d like I’ll introduce you to him. He can be a bit snooty but he has a good heart really.’

‘I’d be delighted,’ said Aiden.

‘Right then, the room will be £8 a night, including breakfast. And just wait until you’ve tried my Blanche’s sausages! I swear you’ll never want to taste any other sausages again. Sign here please.’

Aiden signed his name and Maurice handed him the key to room number 11. ‘Up the stairs to the left and it’s the third room from the end of the corridor, on the right hand side.’

‘Thanks, Maurice. I’ll have a quick look now, but then I need to go back into town to try and buy some spare clothes. Can you recommend anywhere?’

‘Well, you could try “Ruffles Garments”,’ Maurice said, ‘although he tends to specialise in sheepwear. There’s also “Chez Viking”, but I’m not sure if their styles would suit you.’

‘Yes, I think Aiden requires something a little more contemporary,’ Cracky interjected. ‘I would have thought that “Mr Kneepatcher’s Trouser and Jacket Emporium” may well fit the bill.’

‘Now, why didn’t I think of that!’ exclaimed Maurice.

‘Right, then, if you walk with me back to the Diner now, I’ll give you directions. It’s literally around the corner,’ Cracky said. ‘But watch out he doesn’t try and sell you his entire stock. He’s a nice chap but he can be pretty pushy.’

Chapter 10 - Would sir like a cravat with that?

‘So what is it that sir is looking for exactly?’ Mr Kneepatcher quizzed, his tape measure draped around his neck and his glasses perched on the end of his long nose.

‘A couple of pairs of pants, jeans preferably, some t-shirts, socks, underwear, a shirt, a pair of boots and perhaps a jacket,’ Aiden replied, as the pound signs began to light up in Mr Kneepatcher’s eyes.

‘Of course, sir, of course, absolutely-dutely,’ Mr Kneepatcher gushed, as he pulled the tape measure from around his neck. ‘Please come this way so I can take sir’s measurements. Has sir had a good day?’

‘It’s been interesting,’ Aiden replied.

‘Is sir going to the concert at The Sheep’s Stirrup tonight, to see Sacred Wind?’ Mr Kneepatcher said, as he took Aiden’s inside leg measurement. ‘Ooh, I do love those Viking costumes. They make me go all of a dither!’

‘Yes, I am, as a matter of fact. I’ve heard they’re very good.’

‘Oh, they are, sir,’ Mr Kneepatcher said, putting the tape measure around Aiden’s chest. ‘That Olaf, the singer, he gives me goosebumps when he sings the high notes in the big ballads. Mind you, I’m not surprised when his trousers are that tight. I swear I just go to putty.’

As Aiden was being measured up for just about everything, he looked out of the shop window. The Hefty Swingers had used many different methods of transporting equipment to gigs in the past; vans, cars, even by train once. However, he was pretty sure they’d never used a horse and cart.

‘Watch out for that pothole, Smid, my right bass drum nearly jumped out of the cart last time,’ Agnar the Hammered shouted, from the back of the cart.

‘We’ll be fine, Agnar, Smid the Merciless said. ‘The suspension’s been fixed and old Bertha’s calmed down a bit now that stallion’s not in the field next to the pub anymore.’

‘I do hope Roisin will be there tonight,’ Agnar said, with a dreamy look.

‘Oh, you’re not still trying to woo her, are you?’ said Grundi the Windy.

‘She’s out of your league.’

‘Aw, now c’mon, Grundi,’ Agnar said. ‘She smiled at me the last time we played here.’

‘I think that may have been wind, my friend,’ Smid laughed. ‘Anyway, didn’t she say she was happy just being friends? That’s what girls say when they don’t fancy you. I mean, how many times have you asked her out?’

‘Twenty-four,’ said Agnar. ‘But they do say that Odin loves a trier.’

‘Well, maybe you’d have more luck asking Odin out,’ said Grundi.

‘Knowing my luck he’d be washing his bloody hair as well!’

The three band mates laughed heartily as the cart pulled up outside The Sheep’s Stirrup. ‘Whoa, Bertha,’ said Smid, pulling on the reigns.

‘What time did Olaf say he’d be here, Grundi?’ Agnar said, as he grabbed one of the large PA speakers from the back of the cart.

‘Anytime now, I would think. He went round to see Ophelia earlier this afternoon. She’d promised to shine his helmet again.’

‘Maybe I should ask Roisin to shine my helmet,’ Agnar suggested.

‘I really wouldn’t,’ Smid advised.

Mr Kneepatcher was also very keen on helmets, particularly selling them, and he passed one to Aiden. ‘No, thanks, I don’t really think it’s me,’ Aiden said, looking at the cone-shaped, metal headwear.

‘Oh come now, sir, I think you’d look very dashing. Just give it a quick go,’ he enthused, trying to place it on Aiden’s head.

‘Honestly, no thanks, but I would like to have a look at that jacket, though,’ Aiden said, pointing to a thick, brown leather coat that had more pockets than one would ever really need.

Mr Kneepatcher flamboyantly threw the helmet onto a handily placed sofa and smiled the smile of a shopkeeper whose customer had asked to see something expensive. ‘Of course, sir, your taste is divine,’ he said.

‘Now,’ Mr Kneepatcher cooed, ‘this princely garment has been fashioned from only the finest Scottish leather. It was tanned by an ancient family of Scottish tanners, who ate only haggis for supper and whisky porridge for breakfast during the process. The leather was ripened in the glens of the highlands and then taken over foggy lochs in rowing boats, where seagulls would sing to it. Then it bore witness to the sacrifice of a virgin haggis and the ceremonial burning of the boots of Old Charlie McSniffysoles. Finally, it was serenaded by a lone piper in the light of the full moon before being tanned to perfection. It’s easy on the eye, comfortable as the warmest faerie’s bed and tough as sheep’s hooves.’

‘How much?’ Aiden asked, as Mr Kneepatcher helped him put the jacket on.

‘To you, sir, £40.’

‘Well, I am buying quite a few other items,’ Aiden said, feeling the need to haggle, ‘so why don’t we say £25?’

Mr Kneepatcher developed a nervous twitch in his right eye and a few beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. ‘Did I tell you the lining has been blessed by the Avuncular Monks of Lothian, and that it has been stitched with the finest thread by the Uncanny Old Ladies of Inverness.’

‘£25,’ Aiden said again.

‘£35 and I’ll let you have a free pocket knife.’

‘£30, but I’ll still take the pocket knife.’

Mr Kneepatcher shook his head with the look of a man who had actually got the price he really wanted. ‘You drive a hard bargain, but £30 it is.’

‘We have a deal,’ Aiden said, shaking Mr Kneepatcher’s hand.

‘Wonderful!’ Mr Kneepatcher said, clapping his hands together. ‘Now, would sir like a cravat with that?’

As Aiden walked back to The Sheep’s Stirrup he was thinking about Humphrey. He knew that Mrs Perriwinkle would look after the little dog until he could return home, and she’d give him a hard time for leaving Humphrey alone for so long. A nice box of chocolate gingers would probably soften the level of Mrs Perriwinkle’s scolding, and he’d make it up to Humphrey by taking him on a really long walk, including canal swimming, and buy him some serious doggy treats, maybe even some steak.

And so, feeling slightly better, Aiden crossed the road in front of the pub, just as the sun began to set. In the clear sky above, the first speckles of starlight appeared, like the distant lanterns of faraway travellers. He drew in a long breath from the clean, crisp air and smiled; blissfully unaware that this was actually the calm before the storm.

Chapter II - Metal and Curry

As Aiden walked into the pub he was greeted by the sight of one of the biggest drum kits he'd ever seen; two huge bass drums, eight concert toms, a huge floor tom, a very deep, steel snare drum, at least ten cymbals of varying sizes, and the obligatory peddle-operated hi-hat cymbals. A couple of side-lights on the wall shone down, highlighting the polished chrome fittings, in stark contrast to the gloss black finish of the drums themselves.

Maurice was behind the bar, watching the band set up and cleaning glasses. 'Would you like a drink, Aiden?'

'No, thanks, I'd better take this lot up to my room,' he said, pointing at the large bag of clothes he'd purchased from Mr Kneepatcher.

Room 11 was pretty much as Aiden had pictured it in his mind. It was scrupulously clean with two very neatly made single beds, both with little bedside tables and accompanying lamps. There was a writing desk and chair by the window, and a large, oak wardrobe stood ominously in the far corner next to the television. The adjoining bathroom was bright and immaculate, plus it even had a little cupboard stocked with toiletries, including a new toothbrush and toothpaste.

Aiden was quite surprised to see a television, and he made a mental note to ask Cracky more about the history of this reality after they'd had their conversation tomorrow. As there didn't appear to be a remote control, he simply pressed the 'On' button.

'Good day, you're watching the Blacktie News channel,' a man dressed in a dark suit with a flamboyant cravat said. 'Welcome to the news at six. Today, our glorious leader, the revered, ennobled, handsome, clever, artistic, charming, well-endowed and virile Baron Blacktie announced that all entries for The Cestrian Music

Tournament 1987 have been received and that the tournament will take place this Wednesday at the Grand Gateway Theatre, Chester. On this year's judging panel will be none other than Colin Mowsel, the Head of Dee Records. As this year celebrates the tournament's 100th anniversary, Mr Mowsel has kindly agreed that the winner will receive a one-album international recording deal. As usual, the entries have been wide and varied, covering the entire spectrum of musical styles... apart from heavy rock and metal, which, of course, the Baron has banned. In other news, a local hair salon had its flatulence license revoked after being reported for exceeding its allocated number of farts per hour. The owners of the salon blamed the events on the accidental inclusion of Bishop's Bowel Bubbler cheese in the selection of hors d'oeuvres being offered to customers. Also, a local man stands accused of the heinous crime of cheese sniffing without consent. Witnesses say that whilst in the "Pandemonium of Cheese" outlet store, he blatantly sniffed cheese already purchased by Mr Douglas Crumbly-Texture. An angry mob gave chase and eventually cornered the man, who was then handed over to the authorities. If found guilty, he will be sentenced to the maximum penalty of extreme forced teeth flossing and fifteen years of community service...'

Aiden shook his head and switched off the television, and then the floor began to rumble. 'Can I have a bit more bass in the monitors,' Agnar shouted to Oldfart, who was manning the mixing desk situated at the back of the room.

'Okay, try that,' Oldfart said, twisting one of the little knobs on the desk. Smid played a few notes and Agnar gave Oldfart the thumbs up.

As Aiden wandered up to the bar, drawn to the sound check like a moth to a flame, the front door of the pub was flung open and the huge Viking he'd seen on the ship earlier in the day walked in, with a guitar case and a ridiculously shiny helmet. 'May Odin bless your wind!' Olaf the Berserker shouted, followed by a loud fart.

‘May Odin bless your wind!’ the other members of Sacred Wind shouted back, responding with farts of their own.

‘Where’ve you been, Olaf? Assuming you are Olaf,’ Smid said, shielding his eyes. ‘I can’t really make out your face because of the glare coming off your helmet.’

‘Well, you know what Ophelia’s like,’ Olaf said. ‘She wants me to look my best so she just kept on rubbing!’

‘Was that after she’d finished shining your helmet?’ Grundi said, laughing.

‘Very funny, Grundi,’ Olaf said, with a grin. ‘And I know that I’ve gotten out of carrying any gear in, but I’ll make sure do plenty of humping after the show.’

‘We can imagine,’ said Smid.

‘Is Roisin coming to the gig with Ophelia later on?’ Agnar asked.

‘She is,’ Olaf replied, ‘but you’re not going after her again, are you? I fear you’ll have no luck there, my friend.’

Agnar looked slightly crestfallen and gave his snare drum a good whack.

‘We’ve already had this conversation,’ Grundi said to Olaf.

Olaf took his guitar out of its case and plugged it into his amplifier, which was sat on top of two large speaker cabinets. He checked the tuning and then walked up to the microphone, perched high on its stand in front of him. ‘One, two, one, two,’ he said, checking that it was actually switched on. ‘Right, shall we have a run through “Metal and Curry”?’

‘Why not,’ Agnar replied, counting them in. ‘One, two, three...’

The first thing that struck Aiden was how good they were. If truth be told he was expecting a bit of a train crash. However, they were all more than competent musicians and Olaf’s voice was superb.

‘Hello there, Aiden,’ Oldfart shouted, as Aiden joined him behind the mixing desk. ‘Glad you could make it. What do you think?’

As Aiden listened closely to the band’s sound, it quickly became obvious that he could radically improve it. Oldfart’s experience at mixing appeared to involve pushing the little slider controls for the levels to create a balance, but didn’t extend to tweaking the equalisation and other knobs on the mixing desk to enhance the sound. Not wishing to be rude, but itching to make the changes he knew would make a drastic improvement, he decided to combine diplomacy with fact.

‘Pretty impressive, I have to say, but the bass guitar sounds a little muddy.’

‘You sound like you have some experience here, my friend.’ Oldfart said.

‘It’s a hobby of mine, actually,’ Aiden replied.

Oldfart could see that Aiden was like a dog waiting patiently to be told he could now have the bone being held in his master’s hand. ‘To be honest, this isn’t really my area of expertise. So, if you wish, I’m quite happy to let you take the console, so to speak. Our last mixing engineer had a bad experience at his bank, I’m afraid, and we’ve not been able to find a replacement.’

‘Was he overdrawn by any chance?’ Aiden asked.

‘Sadly, yes,’ Oldfart answered, ‘it may take some time for his ears to recover.’

Aiden went at the knobs on the desk like a man on a mission, tweaking and twiddling away. He gave the bass more punch and tone, gave the drums more crack and sparkle, gave the guitars a much more defined and powerful sound, and stopped Olaf sounding like he was singing through a sock.

‘That’s incredible,’ Oldfart said. ‘I’ve never heard them sound as good as that before. You, my young friend, are a genius.’

The band stopped playing and Oldfart waved them over. ‘This is Mr Aiden Peersey,’ he said, introducing Aiden to the band, ‘and, if he has nothing better to do this evening, I think we should ask him to mix the sound for us. It’s powerful enough to stir Odin’s bowels, trust me.’

‘I’d love to,’ Aiden said. It seemed like the natural thing to do.

Agnar gave Aiden a friendly smack on the back, which nearly pushed most of his internal organs through his rib cage. ‘Well done, my scruffy-haired friend! This place is going to be rocking tonight!’

Chapter 12 - The name of vengeance is Sacred Wind!

‘Are we nearly there, Saffy?’ King Beef Vindaloo-Boiled Rice III said, bubbling with excitement.

‘Honestly, Vindy, you’re acting like a young curry whose rice has just been boiled for the first time,’ Queen Chicken Tikka Masala-Coconut Rice said affectionately to her husband.

‘I know, I know, Tikky. But it seems like ages since I’ve been able to loosen up and just let everything slide around my plate.’

‘We’re just coming into Llangollen now, Your Majesty,’ Saffy shouted, from the driver’s seat at the front of the carriage. ‘I can see The Sheep’s Stirrup from here.’

Within a minute or so they pulled into the carriage park next to the pub and the driver tethered the horses, before disappearing inside, carrying Saffy.

It was now 8:00 pm and The Sheep’s Stirrup had transformed from a quiet country pub into a heady mix of chatter, laughter, music and dancing. People and sheep mingled happily together and conversation was light and joyful, the perfect end to a day of celebration. Two members of the OSO, Oriana Oftsheared (flute) and Cliff Corriedale (cello, and nephew of Charles) were performing a lively impromptu duet in the corner, and a small congregation of children and lambs were showing their appreciation through traditional dance.

‘Hello, General, lovely to see you again,’ Maurice said as the driver placed Saffy on the increasingly busy bar. ‘Are the “special guests” outside? I have a table prepared for them.’

‘They are indeed, Maurice, and it’s equally pleasant to be in your company once more,’ Saffy said. ‘The King is very excited; I thought he was going to lose his chutney at one point during our trip.’

‘Typical! It’ll be good to see Vindy again,’ Maurice laughed. ‘Is Her Majesty still looking as delectable as ever?’

‘She is, and although she’s a bit more composed than His Majesty, I know that she’s really looking forward to the evening. Are the two rooms ready, by the way?’

‘Yes. The King and Queen are in the deluxe suite in Room 1 and you’re right next door in Room 2.’

‘Excellent, and thanks again, Maurice. I’ll go and escort them in,’ Saffy said, beckoning the driver to pick him up. ‘Is there any sign of the other “guests” as yet?’

‘I’m assured that the good Doctor and the General will be arriving at around 10:00 pm. I’ve reserved a room for them too.’

Upstairs, Aiden was just finishing his bath. Given all the trials, tribulations and shocks of the day so far, it was nice to soak peacefully in warm water and suds, letting the stress just drain away. Oldfart had treated him to a quite excellent bar meal of steak and chips, and he was genuinely looking forward to the evening’s events. After he’d dried himself with one of the sizeable, fluffy towels in the bathroom, he started to get dressed and overheard voices in the corridor.

‘Now remember, let’s simply mingle in with the crowd and try not to attract too much attention,’ Mr Breezy said.

‘Understood,’ replied Mr Waft.

‘Let’s see what we can find out about the mine from this Agnar, but let’s not be too pushy and make him suspect we have any ulterior motives.’

‘Good plan,’ Mr Waft agreed.

Aiden opened the door as Mr Breezy and Mr Waft were making their way down the stairs. Although he couldn’t quite make out what they’d been saying, he had

an uneasy feeling about them. As he made his way to the bar he saw Cracky chatting to Maurice. ‘Hello, Aiden. How’s your room then?’ Maurice asked.

‘It’s lovely, Maurice, really welcoming.’

‘Would you like a drink?’ Cracky said.

‘I would, thanks. Just an orange juice though, I’m mixing the band later.’

‘Are you now? My, you are full of surprises. Orange juice it is then, and can I have another pint of Riggley’s Piddle, please, Maurice.’

As Maurice poured the drinks, Aiden turned and saw three of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen in his life walking towards him. They were all quite petite, and he almost felt himself physically melt as they noticed him and collectively smiled. There was a stunning blond girl in a green outfit, a sultry brunette, dressed in black, and a gorgeous redhead, whose exquisite face was set off by a mass of copper-coloured curls. She gave Aiden another smile, as they stood at the bar next to him, and said ‘Hi, fella,’ in a lilting Scottish accent. They all had quite extraordinary green eyes, curvaceous figures and very shapely... gossamer wings.

‘Queen Ophelia, what a delightful pleasure to see you and your charming friends again,’ Maurice said. ‘To have my establishment blessed by the sight of such beauty is a gift beyond price.’

‘Oh, you smooth talker, Maurice,’ Ophelia replied ‘Are you flirting with me?’

‘I might be Your Majesty,’ Maurice said, smiling. ‘Would the Queen like her customary gin and tonic?’

‘Yes, please, Maurice. Roisin, what would you like?’ she said to the raven-haired beauty.

‘Ooh, let me see, can I have a vodka and lemonade, please,’ Roisin replied, in a beguiling Irish brogue.

‘What about you, Mara?’ Ophelia asked the lovely redhead.

‘I’d like a whisky and blackcurrant please,’ Mara replied. ‘Not too heavy on the blackcurrant, though, Maurice.’

Cracky gave Aiden a quick dig in the ribs. ‘If you don’t close your mouth soon, my lad, you’ll be letting flies in.’

‘Oh, right,’ Aiden said, tearing away his open-mouthed gaze and trying to regain his composure.

‘I gather you’ve not seen too many faeries before,’ Cracky said, smiling

‘Er, no, not really.’

‘The blond girl there is Queen Ophelia,’ he explained. ‘She’s engaged to Olaf, believe it or not. Her two friends are actually her hand maidens. I think Mara has her eye on you.’

‘Hey, Cracky, who’s the new eye candy?’ Mara said, pointing at Aiden.

‘This splendid chap here is Aiden Peersey,’ Cracky said, putting his arm on Aiden’s shoulder. ‘He’s visiting these parts, although somehow he’s managed to get himself a job mixing the band tonight.’

‘Nice to meet you Aiden,’ Mara said, winking at him. ‘Perhaps we can have a chat later on.’

‘Mara, you’re such a flirt,’ Ophelia said, giggling. And with that the three girls grabbed their drinks, waved at Aiden and were escorted to an awaiting table by Maurice.

‘It’s quite a night for royalty, you know,’ Cracky said, taking a long slurp from his tankard. ‘Do you see that table over there in the corner? Well, believe it or not, that’s the King and Queen of Wrexham. They visit every so often, but always unannounced.’

Aiden looked over at the two young people sitting at the table, with three plates of curry in front of them. ‘They look so normal,’ he remarked.

‘Well, as I said, they don’t like to draw attention to themselves on trips like this, so they tend to dress down a bit. Would you like me to introduce you?’

The closest Aiden had ever got to meeting royalty was when the Queen of England waved and smiled at him on one of her visits to Wales. He was only three-years old at the time and dropped his ice cream in the excitement. As he’d already had the pleasure of meeting one queen this evening, and given that he didn’t have an ice cream in his hand...

‘Yes, I’d be happy to.’

‘Okay, I’ll pop over to say hello and ask if I can introduce you.’

Cracky wandered over to the table and shook the hands of the two young people whose smiles and easy manner indicated they’d met him before. After a brief conversation, Cracky beckoned Aiden over with a wave.

‘Very pleased to meet you Your Majesty,’ Aiden said to the young man, bowing slightly and keeping a firm hold on his drink. ‘And also you, Your Majesty, and you look radiant, if I may be so bold,’ he said to the beautiful young woman.

‘Oh, he’s very charming, Cracky. I see why you like him so much,’ the young woman said, without moving her lips.

‘Indeed, he seems like a splendid fellow. Pleased to meet you Aiden,’ the young man said, also not moving his lips.

Given Aiden’s previous experience with telepathic cats, he remained completely at ease with this new-found form of communication. He even tried it himself by thinking ‘thank you, Your Majesty.’

‘Am I to understand that you are meeting some “friends” later?’ Cracky enquired.

‘We are,’ the young woman said, again without moving her lips. ‘The good Doctor and General should be joining us around 10:00 pm. It’s about time we got together to talk.’

Then the young man actually spoke. ‘Pardon me, Your Majesty, but some of your mango chutney is about to slide off your plate, shall I take care of this for you?’

‘Oh, yes please, Harold,’ King Beef Vindaloo-Boiled Rice III said.

Aiden dropped his glass on the floor (*See appendix 3*).

‘Are you alright, young man? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,’ General Lamb Korma-Saffron Rice said to him.

Aiden realised that this new voice seemed to be coming from the third plate of curry on the table, bubbling ever so slightly as the words hit his ears. ‘Yes, I’m fine, thanks. My glass just slipped that’s all, I’ll go and get a cloth.’

Maurice had already heard the noise and appeared armed with a cloth and a small dustpan and brush. ‘Sorry, Maurice,’ Aiden said.

‘Oh, don’t worry about it these things happen all the time in here. It won’t be the last broken glass this evening.’

‘Anyway,’ Cracky interjected. ‘We’ll take our leave at this point and let your Majesties drink up the atmosphere, and importantly the music. The band should be arriving shortly.’

‘I’m really looking forward to seeing them,’ Tikky said, bubbling. ‘They play such great songs. I’ll just have to watch that my husband here doesn’t get too carried away.’

When they returned to the bar, Cracky gave Aiden a look which suggested he already knew the answer to the question he was about to ask. ‘So, I’m guessing that you’ve not seen too many curries either?’

‘Oh, I’ve seen plenty of curries before, Cracky, I’ve just haven’t come across any with the power of speech.’

Cracky laughed. ‘Well, as we said, let’s have a chat tomorrow. I’m beginning to think the more I understand of your situation the more I’ll be able to help.’

Aiden ordered them another drink and it was at this point that he noticed a large plaque behind the bar.

‘The Sheep’s Stirrup is hereby granted a license to permit flatulence in this establishment under the following conditions – Monday to Saturday inclusive:

1) No more than a total of ten farts per hour from the hours of 12:00 –

2:00 pm.

2) No more than twenty farts per hour between the hours of 6:00 – 9:00 pm.

3) No more than thirty farts per hour from 9:00 – 11:00 pm.

A special dispensation is also granted thereby permitting a “happy hour” of unlimited farts at the proprietor’s discretion on a twice weekly basis. Flatulence is not allowed on Sundays under any circumstances.’ It was signed ‘*B V Blacktie.*’

The atmosphere in the pub was building nicely and Aiden was enjoying himself. Mr Kneepatcher had arrived feeling ‘all of a dither’, wearing a bright blue shirt and cravat, and Maurice introduced Aiden to his brother, Henry Fluffywool. Henry was delighted at the compliments Aiden paid to the OSO. ‘You have sublime taste, young man,’ he’d said.

Mr Breezy and Mr Waft were sat at the end of the bar being generally cordial, without getting involved in any meaningful conversations. They had asked Maurice if

he would let them know when Agnar arrives, to which Maurice had cryptically replied ‘oh, you’ll know when he gets here’.

Aiden was wondering where Oldfart had disappeared to when he arrived at the front door, with a strangely dressed companion; a very short man with a floor-length black cloak. The hood of the cloak covered the majority of his face, with the remaining features obscured by a tightly-wound, black scarf. His hands were barely visible at the end of the sleeves and he seemed to be wearing ill-fitting gloves. He was holding a large notepad in one hand and a pen in the other. Oldfart led him over to the table next to the mixing desk and then headed straight for Aiden.

‘The band will be here any minute,’ he said. ‘Let’s go and get ready.’

Next to the mixing desk was a cassette deck. Oldfart produced a tape out of his jacket pocket, inserted it into the deck and pressed play. He also pressed a button on the console adjacent to the desk and dry ice started to fill the room. Maurice switched the pub’s main lights down low and Oldfart flicked a couple of switches on the lighting console. Four strategically-placed spotlights lit up and shone through the atmospheric fog. A low rumble emanated from the PA speakers and then erupted with the sound of thunder.

‘Today, four great warriors will take to the battlefield. They have been sent by Odin himself to vanquish the foes of freedom, to conquer the enemies of valour, and to triumph over those who repress our right to fart freely.’

The crowd cheered.

‘For vengeance has a name, and let this name strike fear into the hearts of all who seek to follow the path of injustice, tyranny and persecution; for the name of vengeance is SACRED WIND!’

The crowd cheered again.

Anthemic orchestral music started to blare through the PA as the narrator said *‘Can you hear the sounds of battle? Can you feel the thunder stir your bowels? They have the power of wind and metal coursing through their veins, and they have come to free you from fear and destruction. Behold, they are here!’*

Oldfart ran over to the front door of the pub. ‘Prepare for Sacred Wind. Your salvation has arrived!’ he exhorted, opening the door and pointing outside.

The crowd didn’t need that much of an invitation and the vast majority ran out into the street. The air was still and all was silent, apart from the faraway hooting of a solitary owl, a melancholy lament echoing wistfully in the night. And then the silence was broken by the sound of hooves, distant and indistinct to start with but growing closer by the second.

Coming over the bridge in front of the pub were two giant, black horses, their riders twirling their weapons above their heads. On the road to the left another black horse and rider could be seen, and then another on the road to the right. They were equidistant from each other and approaching at breakneck speed. They screeched to a halt in front of the pub and the riders reared their horses, clashing weapons in a show of solidarity. ‘For metal, for glory, for honour and for Odin!’ Olaf the Berserker shouted, twirling his huge broadsword around his head. ‘May Odin bless your wind!’

‘May Odin bless your wind!’ the crowd outside shouted.

‘Right,’ said Oldfart, ‘let’s get the flashbombs ready.’

Chapter 13 - My Sword is my Sword

Aiden reckoned he got his sight back after about twenty seconds or so, and really wished he'd listened to Oldfart when he told him not to look at the stage. By this time, Sacred Wind were blasting out the instrumental overture to their first song and the atmosphere in The Sheep's Stirrup was crackling with anticipation. The overture ended with a mighty crescendo, followed by some very impressive guitar, bass and drum interplay. A crunching guitar riff and lead solo then set the scene for eight bars before Olaf burst into song...

*We drop our pants for Odin
And climb upon our steeds
We pass the Sacred Wind
Until our bottoms bleed
It's all in praise of Odin
We feel him in our hearts
For he gives us our power
And we give him our farts*

*Fart for Odin, Fart for Odin
Raise you bottom to the sky
Fart for Odin, Fart for Odin
Spread your cheeks, spread them wide
Fart for Odin, Fart for Odin
Let your bottom burp with pride
Fart for Odin, Fart for Odin
To the circle of wind we ride*

The Sheep's Stirrup was indeed 'rocking'. The crowd were obviously familiar with the song and sang along enthusiastically to the chorus. Mr Kneepatcher had fainted as soon as Olaf had started to sing and was being revived by Roisin. 'Ooh, have you seen how tight his pants are. I'm all of a dither again!' he said, fanning himself with his hand.

Aiden adjusted the sound and equalization levels slightly, to account for the fact that the place was now filled with people and sheep. It was sounding pretty good; loud, but clear as a bell.

*We hail the mighty Asgard
With fire in our veins
In all its strength and majesty
In flatulence it reigns
Oh hear this mighty Odin
From one who is so true
My rear end shakes like thunder
As I let one go for you*

*Fart for Odin, Fart for Odin
Raise you bottom to the sky
Fart for Odin, Fart for Odin
Spread your cheeks, spread them wide
Fart for Odin, Fart for Odin
Let your bottom burp with pride
Fart for Odin, Fart for Odin
To the circle of wind we ride*

A symphonic mid-section had the crowd waving their hands in the air and Henry Fluffywool turning his nose up disapprovingly. Grundi the Windy then launched into a screaming guitar solo and Aiden was treated to the sight of some sheep playing air guitar... quite well, actually.

It was at this point that he noticed the strangely-dressed, small man that had arrived with Oldfart. The little chap was scribbling away on his notepad, hardly ever looking up and actually watching the band.

‘Fart for Odin’ reached its rip-roaring finale and The Sheep’s Stirrup exploded with cheers and applause. ‘It’s good to be back,’ Olaf shouted, with a huge grin on his face. ‘So, are you people ready for metal?’

‘Yes!’ screamed the crowd.

‘Are you people ready for curry?’

‘Yes!’ the crowd screamed again, and General Lamb Korma-Saffron Rice looked around nervously, raising one of his mini poppadoms in the air protectively.

‘Well, if you’re ready for metal and you’re ready for curry, what are you ready for?’

‘Metal and Curry!’ roared the crowd.

‘I can’t hear you!’ Olaf screamed back.

‘Metal and Curry!’ roared the crowd again, much louder.

‘Metal and Curry!’ screamed Olaf, and off they went.

*Another town, another pub
Another place where I can get my grub
My axe is honed
It's in fine fettle
My pants are tight
And I'm ready for metal*

*Metal and Curry, Metal and Curry
Give it to me now 'cause I'm in a hurry
Metal and Curry, Metal and Curry
Pile my plate high and there'll be no worries*

‘Try not to listen to the words, Your Majesty,’ Saffy said to Tikky. ‘They may upset you.’

‘Oh, don’t be so prudish, Saffy. It’s only a song,’ Tikky replied. ‘Anyway, I like this one, it really tenderises my chicken.’

‘Tikky!’ Vindy cried. ‘You shouldn’t say such things in public... you should wait until we’re alone afterwards,’ he added, simmering ever so slightly.

*Another night, another gig
Another table
And my plate is big
The crowds are wild, they don't want no crock
They're primed for metal
And they're ready to rock*

*Metal and Curry, Metal and Curry
Give it to me now 'cause I'm in a hurry*

*Metal and Curry, Metal and Curry
Pile my plate high and there'll be no worries
Metal and Curry, Metal and Curry
Give me poppadoms too cause I want a full tummy
Metal and Curry, Metal and Curry
Make my plate big, don't be a dummy*

Olaf and Grundi then executed a scintillating guitar dual, with Smid and Agnar hammering away in the background. Mr Kneepatcher was at the front of the crowd continually supplicating himself in front of Olaf.

As the band continued with classic songs such as ‘Warriors of Asgard’ (which contained quite a few references to buxom damsels in distress), ‘Rock, Rock, Rock, Rock Ragnarok’ (which told of the doom of the gods when ‘all things will go boom’) and ‘The Power of Cheese,’ (which paid homage to... cheese), Aiden was convinced that Sacred Wind were one of the best live bands he’d ever seen, even if the lyrics did seem slightly ridiculous on occasion.

‘What do you think, then?’ Oldfart said.

‘They’re fantastic, Oldfart. I can’t believe I’ve not come across them before.’
And then he remembered where he was.

‘This one’s for all the ladies, ewes and chicken tikkas in the audience,’ Olaf shouted, to the screams of ladies, the high pitched baaing of ewes and the hysterical yelp of delight from Queen Chicken Tikka Masala-Coconut Rice. ‘This is called “Sail with Me”.’

*I was just a fool
Playing by the rules
Ravaging and pillaging
And trying to look cool
Then you made me see
All that life can be
Now you are inside my heart
I want you here with me*

Stay by my side

*Make my life complete, baby
You are the one, you're my light
Now you've made my helmet shine*

*Sail with me
Now I've found you I never wanna let you go
Hold my oar
Forever more
Sail with me
Now I've found you I never wanna let you go
Hold my oar
Forever more*

Mr Breezy and Mr Waft stayed glued to the bar while the band continued to play. They sipped their drinks politely but looked increasingly uncomfortable. 'How long is it until they finish?' Mr Breezy asked Maurice.

'Oh, well they're due off stage at about 10:00 pm, so I guess about another fifteen minutes or so. Are you enjoying the concert, gentlemen?'

'It's an experience we'll always remember,' said Mr Waft, with a deadpan face.

'It's just a pity they can't play in the Cestrian Music Tournament next week,' Maurice said. 'I'm sure they'd have a great chance of winning.'

'I'm sure they would indeed light up that particular event,' Mr Breezy said, with barely concealed sarcasm.

Henry Fluffywool was stood next to them and couldn't help overhearing. 'Of course it's not real music,' he said. 'I'll grant they can play their instruments and sing, but where are the nuances, the subtle counterpoints, the soft adagios, the delicate pastorals, the exhilarating allegros?'

'Yes, it's not really our cup of tea either,' said Mr Breezy. 'Our tastes are more, how shall we say, quieter.'

‘I couldn’t agree more, my good man,’ Henry said. ‘Give me a nice flute concerto any day and I’m happy as a ram in mating season.’

‘This next song is for the Viking on my left,’ Olaf said, as he and Grundi picked up acoustic guitars. ‘For a long time now, Grundi the Windy has been in love.’

‘Aah,’ said the crowd.

‘But this is a love that is unrequited,’ continued Olaf.

‘Aah,’ said the crowd again, and Grundi looked genuinely downcast.

‘For he is in love with a goddess; and not just any goddess, but the wife of our Lord Odin himself.’

‘Ooh,’ sighed the crowd.

‘Long has he yearned for her beauty, long has he yearned for her touch, long has he yearned to smell her armpits, but alas this is something that can never be.’

Grundi shook his head, dejectedly.

‘And so, in honour of our friend’s love we have written this song about the goddess of his dreams. This is called “Frigg”.’

Aiden panicked a bit, because there hadn’t been any sound check for the acoustic guitars. Fortunately they both sounded crisp and tuneful through the PA. Olaf’s voice was tender and mellow, and several members of the audience held little lanterns aloft. Dry ice drifted out from the stage area, creating a soft and wispy blanket that went up to everyone’s knees.

*In times of silence
I think of you
You're in my dreams when I sleep
And my heart when I wake
You are my goddess
And my sword is yours
Your beauty shines like the sun
As my tears fall like rain*

Then Oldfart hit the flashbomb button again as the chorus erupted.

Frigg... your face is eternal
Frigg... your body is divine
Frigg... your mouth speaks only wisdom
Frigg... your armpits smell of wine
I wish I could be your lover
Odin's such a lucky bugger
Frigg

Another heartstring-pulling verse followed and things really took off after the second chorus, when the guitar solo kicked in. Grundi played as though his life depended on it, hitting soaring notes, ripping through blindingly fast arpeggios and ending up on his knees with his head thrust backwards. The audience went crazy and Mr Kneepatcher was in tears. ‘I love you Grundi,’ he shouted, waving his tear-soaked hanky.

One of the other bar staff whispered something in Maurice’s ear and he nodded in understanding. He picked up his cleaning cloth and walked over to the King and Queen’s table. ‘Your Majesties, I am informed that the other “guests” have arrived. They are presently awaiting your company in the room I have prepared upstairs. I have taken the liberty of telling them it would be better to wait until the band have finished before having discussions.’

‘Thank you, Maurice,’ Vindy said. ‘That makes sense. And, as much as I’m looking forward to meeting our esteemed guests, it would be a pity to miss the end of the show.’

‘I second that,’ said Tikky.

As the noise of the crowd died down, Olaf held onto the microphone stand with two hands, letting his guitar hang loose on its strap. ‘I’m afraid that this is our last number for this evening.’

‘Aw,’ the crowd cried.

‘But, I’d just like to say that when we play our next gig, the audience there will have a lot to live up to, because tonight you’ve shown that Llangollen is the most rock ‘n’ roll town in the land!’

The crowd went completely wild, whooping and hollering. ‘This is for all of you. It’s called “Sacred Wind”. Now let me see some hands!’

And so the band launched into their theme tune with virtually the entire pub clapping along. Even General Lamb Korma-Saffron Rice was clicking his mini poppadoms together.

*I can feel it building
From deep down inside
Can you see my cheeks tremble
As the gases start to rise
It's the breath of Odin
And it's forever hallowed
You better head for the hills now
Cause it's about to explode!*

*You can run
And you can hide
But you're never gonna last
Cause you'll be felled
By my sword
And a blast from my ass!*

*Feel the power of my wind
Sacred wind
Feel the power of my wind
Sacred Wind
Sacred Wind*

*See my foes as they scatter
As they flee from the smell
With my sword and wind with me
I'll send them straight to hell!
And they'll take a message
To tell to far and near
About the power of my sword
And of my bottom of fear*

‘Sacred Wind’ ended with more flashbombs, dry ice and the stage area awash with strobe lighting. Then everything went black and when the lights came up the band were gone.

‘More! More! More!’ yelled the crowd, apart from the sheep who yelled ‘Baa! Baa! Baa!’

A minute or so of wild applause passed and then the lights went down once more. A single spotlight shone and Olaf the Berserker appeared. ‘Thank you so much. We love you all!’ he roared. ‘Now, we do have one more song for you.’

‘Here we go,’ said Oldfart. ‘This should be pretty spectacular.’

‘Many years ago there were men who wished to keep both people and sheep in a state of fear. They were bad men. What were they?’ he asked the crowd.

‘Bad men!’ shouted the crowd.

‘When we saw the deprivation these men had wrought, we knew we had no choice but to intervene. So, this song is based on a true story. It’s called “My Sword is my Sword”.’

The crowd went potty as Olaf, Grundi and Smid played the opening notes. Agnar battered a fast drum fill and then they were off; a galloping double-bass drum beat supported scything guitar and bass, with Grundi playing an emotion-filled guitar solo.

*When we came to this land
There was evil in the fields
The trees had no leaves
And the sheep were in trauma
So we made a solemn vow
And gathered up our arms
And rode past all the farms
And the people were waving
(We said)*

*Have no fear
Help is here*

*And we ride now to bring you salvation
This is our song
It will make us strong
It will free you from fear and destruction*

*My sword is my sword
My shield is my shield
Together we ride
Into the battlefield
And our foes will fall
At our feet
As we fight
For honour
And glory*

The audience sang along joyously to the chorus and even Aiden felt compelled to join in. The little fellow with the cloak was getting very giddy, trying to clap along while holding his notepad and pen... which he dropped on the floor.

‘Bless my clacky hooves,’ he said, as he picked it up. It was a voice Aiden found vaguely familiar.

*So we polished our steel
And rode to the bad men's castle
We said there would be no hassle
If they left the people alone
But they laughed at us and swore
And showered us with spears
But we did not show fear
And that's when we got our swords out
(We said)*

*You will fall
Death will call
He waits now in anticipation
We will not fail
Yes, we will prevail
So for death now you should make preparation*

A second uplifting chorus was followed by yet another virtuoso guitar solo from Grundi... and that's when the two armed warriors burst through the door.

The crowd parted so the two warriors could get to the stage area, where they began clashing swords and hammering away at each other's shields. The sound of metal on metal was audible above the PA as the music died down to a whisper. Then Olaf sang again, accompanied only by a dulcet bass line from Smid.

*The battle was fierce
But we stood our ground
And their shields broke
As our swords crashed down*

Then the band came in with crushing staccato bursts.

*And so they got scared
And they ran away
So we sang our song
We had won the day*

Somewhat inevitably there was an audience participation section, with more singing, baaing, clapping, poppadom clicking and lanterns, before the final chorus and massive flashbomb-littered finale. The band left the stage to thunderous applause and, after acknowledging the appreciative crowd, went straight over to the large table Maurice had reserved for Queen Ophelia, Roisin and Mara. Ophelia jumped up and gave Olaf a big kiss before sitting down on his knee.

'Right, then,' Oldfart said to Aiden, as he switched off the PA and lighting rigs. 'I don't know about you, but I need a drink.'

As they walked over to the table, Aiden looked around to see if the little fellow in the cloak was joining them, but to his surprise he was nowhere to be seen.



Chapter 14 - Ooh, can I have your autograph, please?

‘To good health, to Odin and to all of you, my friends,’ Olaf said, raising his tankard high, before farting loudly. ‘And you, Aiden Peersey, gave us the best sound we’ve ever had on stage, so... to Aiden,’ he added, raising his glass again.

‘Yes, the sound was fantastic,’ Mara said to Aiden, smiling invitingly. ‘You were wonderful.’ Then she turned to Ophelia and whispered ‘I’m going to kiss him afterwards.’

‘Do you have to kiss every nice boy you meet?’ Ophelia whispered back.

‘No, of course not... only the really good looking ones!’

Agnar was sitting next to Roisin, trying to look as appealing as a puppy. ‘Did you enjoy the gig, Roisin?’

‘You were excellent, Agnar. One of your best shows ever.’

‘In which case could I possibly have a celebratory kiss?’

‘No, don’t be so cheeky!’ she said, smacking his hand.

Agnar’s face dropped and he took a dejected slurp from his tankard. ‘He is very sweet, Roisin. And he obviously really likes you,’ Ophelia said to her. ‘Maybe you should give him a chance.’

‘He is sweet, Ophy, but he’s not really my type.’

Unsurprisingly, Sacred Wind were the centre of attention and they were quite happy to shake hands, sign autographs and chat to everybody. ‘Let me through, let me through!’ Mr Kneepatcher shouted, squeezing his way through the throng of people surrounding the table.

‘Ooh, can I have your autograph, please?’ he said, stuffing a photo of the band and a pen into Olaf’s face.’

‘Of, course,’ Olaf said. ‘Who do I make it out to?’

‘To my good friend Gilbert Kneepatcher,’ said Mr Kneepatcher.

Olaf wrote the message on the photo and signed it with a flourish. ‘There you are, and thank you, Gilbert.’

‘He called me Gilbert! He called me Gilbert! Mr Kneepatcher screamed. ‘Ooh, my heart, my heart, I’m all of a dither.’ And then he fainted again.

As the celebrations continued, Aiden noticed the two odd-looking men from room 13 making their way over to the table. ‘I don’t like the look of these two, Oldfart. I think they’re up to something.’

‘My good fellows,’ said Mr Breezy. ‘Firstly, we’d like to congratulate you on a most excellent show.’

‘Indeed,’ added Mr Waft. ‘It was an experience to live long in the memory.’

‘Thank you,’ said Smid.

‘But for us, the piece de resistance...’ said Mr Breezy.

‘The piece de resistance...’ echoed Mr Waft.

‘...was the drumming of Agnar the Hammered. Sir, we salute you.’ Mr Breezy said, doffing his hat and bowing.

‘We salute you,’ echoed Mr Waft, mimicking Mr Breezy’s doff and bow.

Agnar seemed quite taken aback. ‘Well, thank you, gentlemen. Did you like my paradiddles?’

‘Superb,’ said Mr Breezy.

‘Sublime,’ said Mr Waft.

‘And did you notice the snare drags in the verses of “Frigg”?’

‘Almost poetic in their execution,’ Mr Breezy gushed.

‘Poetic indeed,’ gushed Mr Waft.

‘In fact, it would be a great honour if we could possibly spend some time in your company to discuss the finer merits of your playing,’ Mr Breezy said.

‘An honour,’ said Mr Waft.

‘I don’t see why not,’ a particularly flattered Agnar said. ‘Grab yourself a couple of chairs and let’s chat.’

Mr Breezy and Mr Waft listened patiently as Agnar talked them through drum tuning, double-bass drum playing, accidentally hitting your nose with a drumstick, and how he once thought he was having a spiritual experience during a drum solo.

‘Mr the Hammered you are inspiring,’ Mr Breezy complimented. ‘It is surely a rarity to find a drummer who speaks with such intellect, erudition and passion. Why it’s almost intoxicating.’

‘Intoxicating,’ said Mr Waft.

‘But, may we be so bold as to ask you a non-drum related question that pertains to some information we received earlier today?’

Agnar was now very feeling very relaxed in their company, plus the three tankards of ale he’d drunk greatly assisted in loosening his tongue... which needed little encouragement on most occasions anyway. ‘Fire away,’ he said.

‘We are men of many interests, Mr the Hammered.’

‘Many interests,’ Mr Waft echoed.

‘One of these just happens to be a fascination with ancient structures, and we were told that the cheese mine near the Circle of Wind is in your possession now?’

‘That old thing, oh, yes, it was a present from my cousin Angus McSvensson a few years back. Well, I say a present; it was more a request to take care of it.’

‘So you do not actually own the property?’ Mr Breezy said, with a worried sideways glance at Mr Waft.

‘Oh, it’s my mine alright,’ Agnar said. ‘I’ve got the paperwork somewhere. Mind you, I’ve only been inside once and I got chased out by bats.’

Mr Breezy rubbed his chin, feigning being in deep thought. ‘Hmm, it could be that we may be able to help out here,’ he said. ‘A client of ours may be very interested in taking it off your hands, for a good price of course.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t sell it, Angus would kill me,’ Agnar said. ‘Although, I’ve not seen him for a bit so I could always ask him.’

‘No, no,’ Mr Breezy and Mr Waft said together, holding their hands out as if to avert an invisible danger.

‘That will not be necessary,’ Mr Breezy continued. ‘We would not wish to be the cause of any potential family disagreements.’

He looked at Mr Waft and nodded. Mr Waft nodded back. ‘Well, the hour is getting late and we must be up early tomorrow as we have a long journey ahead of us. So, if you don’t mind we’ll take our leave and retire to our room and into the arms of Morpheus.’

‘Oh, well don’t let me keep you, gentlemen,’ Agnar said, winking. ‘Is she a bit of alright, then?’

‘Who?’ Mr Waft said.

‘Morpheus.’

‘You misunderstand, Mr the Hammered,’ Mr Breezy said, laughing. ‘We are simply going to sleep.’

‘Of course, I understand,’ Agnar said, with another wink. ‘Goodnight my friends and may your night be full of pleasure, naughty dreams and fragrant wind.’

‘Good night, Mr the Hammered, it has been a joy to meet you,’ Mr Breezy said, standing up and shaking Agnar’s hand.

‘A joy,’ said Mr Waft. And with that they retired to room 13.

‘What a complete idiot,’ Hob said, as he sat on the bed. ‘This complicates matters a great deal.’

‘I agree,’ said Nob. ‘If he is unwilling to sell the mine, then the Baron may have to take it by force.’

‘I doubt he’d want to do that, the McSvenssons are not people you would wish to cross. However, there may be another solution but we will need to talk to the Baron first.’

‘Would this have anything to do with the tournament?’ Nob said.

‘It would, but we’ll need more information. Let’s get out of here after breakfast tomorrow morning and pay the Baron a visit.’

Down the corridor in room number 4, another conversation was taking place that would also have an impact on the momentous events to come. ‘Your Majesties, it is good that we meet at last,’ said Dr Lamb Dopiazza-Pilau Rice. ‘And may I introduce you to the head of our armed forces, General Beef Madras-Wholegrain Rice.’

‘Yes, it has been too long in coming,’ Vindy replied. ‘And I am delighted to make your acquaintance, General.’

‘The honour is all mine,’ the General replied.

‘Indeed, my good Doctor,’ Tikky said. ‘We meet as friends with a common goal and I hope we will also leave as friends.’

‘If I may,’ the General said, ‘I would like to share some information that has come to light that may force our plans to be expedited.’

‘Go on, General,’ Tikky said.

The curries were placed strategically on a large table near the window. Greta and Harold sat silently by. 'Harold, will you please check there is no-one eavesdropping outside the window?' Vindy said.

'Yes, Your Majesty,' Harold replied, pulling back the curtains and looking out the window. 'It looks clear, Your Majesty.'

'Please continue, General,' Vindy said.

'Mold has been subject to infiltration by two of Blacktie's spies. We fear they have already informed the Baron of our potential alliance.'

'That's not good,' said Tikky.

'Indeed,' continued the General. 'We may need to move sooner than we would have wished. As we speak, I have four battalions of our finest Spiced Chapatis, three battalions of Garlic Naans, four battalions of Samosa Commandoes, and our own Rogan Josh Imperial Guard ready to move. We could be at Chester within the day. If you could provide a similar force I feel we could take the city.'

'General, I do not doubt the quality and bravery of your forces, or of ours,' Saffy said, 'but to simply attempt to take the city in this way at present would be curricide.'

'Why so? We're led to believe that the Knights of Flatulence are engaged in the Scouseland Crusades. The city's defences are severely weakened by their absence.'

'Who told you that, General?' Saffy said. 'The Knights returned to Chester last week. If I were you I'd check your sources more carefully, and if I didn't know better I'd say you may have a saboteur in your ranks.'

'Did the information come from the Brotherhood, by any chance?' Dr Lamb Dopiazza-Pilau Rice asked.

‘Yes,’ replied the General.

‘You suspect someone, Doctor?’ Vindy said.

‘Sadly, yes. Not all view this alliance of ours as salubrious. There is one in particular who has been most vocal in his opposition. He also holds supreme influence over the Brotherhood, and he advocates conflict with Wrexham as opposed to unity. If this is part of some subterfuge of his creation then I would guess that Your Majesties’ safety may also be in jeopardy.’

‘Whom do you speak of, Doctor?’ Saffy said, angrily crunching a mini poppadom. ‘I would seek words with this insolent and no doubt tasteless curry.’

‘He was once a holy curry, a member of the Order of Dhansak. These were curried monks pledged to live the simple life. They gave up their spices, dispensing with fineries like Basil, Sage and Chives, and sought solace in prayer and meditation. Brother Vegetable Jalfrezi-Basmathi Rice was once a shining light in the Order, but something or someone turned him against the holy ways.’

‘So now we have enemies within our own community,’ said the General. ‘These are sad times to be a curry.’

‘At least we seemed to have foiled this particular plot,’ Tikky said. ‘And I’m sure you gentlemen will be doing your utmost to have a talk with this “monk” when you return.’

‘I think Your Majesty can rely on that,’ said the Doctor.

Downstairs, things were starting to wind down. Most folk had now left the pub and Aiden was beginning to feel very tired and slightly tipsy. He hadn’t drunk that much, but the drink had gone straight to his head and he felt it was time to retire.

‘Oh, you can’t leave so soon,’ Mara said, grabbing his arm as he got up off the chair.

‘I’m sorry, Mara. You’ve all been delightful company but I’m absolutely beat. I’m sure we’ll all meet again soon.’

‘Well, here’s something to remember me by,’ she said, pulling him towards her and placing a lingering kiss on his lips. By the time she’d finished he was bright red and the table was full of smiles.

‘Mr Aiden Peersey, you may consider yourself to be an honorary member of Sacred Wind,’ Olaf said, raising his tankard again. ‘So, to Aiden, the finest scruffy-haired mixing engineer we’ve ever had.’

‘To Aiden,’ everyone on the table said, raising their glasses and tankards in salute.

‘Goodnight, Aiden. I wish you sweet dreams,’ Mara said, waving as he walked up the stairs to his room.

And so, as he climbed into bed and fell asleep almost immediately, the strangest day in Aiden Peersey’s life so far came to an end. He didn’t know at the time, but as strange as this day had been, there would be even stranger days ahead.

Chapter 15 - I've heard your sausages are to die for

Bright sunlight sneaked surreptitiously through the curtains, as the sound of a cock crowing heralded the start of a new day. Aiden woke up with a start and looked at the little clock on the bedside table. It said 8:05 am. The delicious aroma of bacon and sausages infiltrated his nose and he sat up, stretching. He looked around the quaint room, his eyes blinking as the rays of the sun danced across his face.

He took a quick shower, brushed his teeth and felt considerably more awake after his morning ablutions. His stomach was imploring him to stop ignoring the smell of breakfast, so he got dressed and wandered downstairs.

The Sheep's Stirrup had a small restaurant area, in a room adjacent to the bar, and several guests were already availing themselves of the early morning fare.

'Good morning,' Mr Breezy said, through a mouthful of toast.

'Good morning,' said Mr Waft, gesticulating with a sausage skewered on his fork.

Aiden nodded to both of them and sat down at a table near the window. 'It's a beautiful day out there today,' said a small sheep, wearing a bonnet. 'What can I get you for breakfast, young man?'

'Well, I've heard your sausages are to die for,' Aiden replied, with a smile.

'Oh, I see Maurice has been singing my praises again, bless him,' Blanche Fluffywool said.

'He has,' said Aiden. 'I'm guessing that you're Blanche?'

'That's right, and I'm guessing you must be Aiden,' Blanche said, placing a tray of toast on the table. 'He spoke a lot about you last night. You've obviously made a good impression on him.'

'The feeling's definitely mutual,' Aiden said.

‘Well, then, we’ve got my speciality sausages, smoked bacon, both locally farmed of course, mushrooms, hash browns, poached eggs, fried eggs, the finest drippydizzle beans, and fried bread,’ Blanche said, taking a small notebook and pen out of her pocket. ‘What would you like?’

‘Would you think it greedy of me if I asked for a bit of everything?’

‘No, of course not, I’d take it as a compliment. Now would you like any tea?’

‘Yes, please.’

When breakfast arrived, it was indeed the feast Aiden’s stomach had been hoping for, and he wasted little time in cleaning the plate. ‘Blanche, that was possibly the finest breakfast I’ve ever tasted,’ he said, as she came to take away the used cutlery.

‘Ah, I bet you say that to all the ewes,’ she said, giggling.

At that moment a panic-stricken Maurice ran into the restaurant, puffing and blowing like he’d just been chased by a herd of rabid dogs who fancied some lamb cutlets. ‘We have an emergency,’ he said, catching his breath between the words as he spoke. ‘Mr Breezy, Mr Waft, I fear we may need your expertise.’

‘Er, whatever for, Mr Fluffywool,’ Mr Breezy said, with a worried look.

‘It’s Mrs Ripsnorter, the handkerchief vendor’s wife. She’s claiming her vacuum cleaner is possessed.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Blanche, ‘that’s terrible.’

‘It is indeed,’ said Mr Waft, with a nervous glance at Mr Breezy.

‘Quickly, gentlemen, she’s outside now with the infernal machine. We may not have much time, it’s started levitating.’

Mr Breezy and Mr Waft exchanged more nervous glances and Mr Waft shook his head. ‘I’m afraid we may not be able to assist, Mr Fluffywool,’ said Mr Breezy,

feigning disappointment. 'If a vacuum cleaner has reached the levitation stage, there's not really anything we can do. Also, we have urgent business in Chester that we must attend to.'

'Yes,' added Mr Waft. 'There have been several substantiated reports of vacuum cleaners reciting the black mass and shaping their hoses into inverted crucifixes. We must make haste, lest we fear the worst.'

'Or you could just be scared,' Aiden said, as he stood up from the table.

'Scared? Scared?!' Mr Breezy said, defensively. 'Don't be so insolent my good fellow.'

'How dare you!' added Mr Waft. 'Why would we, of all people, be scared of confronting a possessed vacuum cleaner?'

'Of course, how silly of me,' Aiden said, his mind whizzing. 'You gentlemen obviously laugh in the face of fear and would no doubt banish the foul demon in a second. It's just a pity that in situations like this, scurrilous rumours of cowardice can spread. But I'm sure your reputation is such that people would never believe them.'

Everyone in the breakfast room looked at Mr Breezy and Mr Waft, whilst outside an eerie howl was followed by the sound of high-powered suction. 'Perhaps we can take a quick look, then,' Mr Breezy said, with a nervous smile.

'Are you mad?' Mr Waft whispered. 'We may be found out.'

'It will look far worse if we don't,' Mr Breezy whispered back. 'We may need to use this disguise again. Look, let's just say a few incantations and get out of here.'

Mr Breezy stood up and grabbed his briefcase and Mr Waft finished the last piece of toast on the table. 'You are right, my good fellow. It would indeed be remiss of us to not assess the situation and to offer our services in this time of dire need. Come, Mr Waft, we have work to do.'

Outside, a distraught Mrs Ripsnorter was being comforted by a friend as her vacuum cleaner span in the air. Its hose was flailing about and it seemed to be moaning in at least three different voices. Mr Breezy raised his hands in a grand gesture and started to speak.

‘Oh foul demon of the netherworld, we command you to leave this poor vacuum cleaner. Be gone and do not return!’

‘Yes, be gone, dark spirit!’ added Mr Waft, dramatically.

The vacuum cleaner stopped spinning and pointed its hose at Mr Breezy and Mr Waft. ‘And who the bloody hell do you think you two are, then?’ it said, in a rasping voice.

‘Er, we are highly-trained Vagrant Vacuum Cleaner Exorcists,’ said Mr Breezy. ‘And we have come to send you back to where you belong.’

‘No you’re not!’ the vacuum cleaner spat. ‘You look like a right couple of plonkers to me. Buzzer off, I ain’t going anywhere.’

‘I can assure you we have banished many of your kind back to their dark holes, where they now fester for all eternity,’ Mr Breezy lied. ‘Now, by all that is holy, by all that is cheesy, and by all that is held sacred by the Philosophising Priests of Penrith, may you be discombobulated, eviscerated and rusticated!’

‘You’re making this up, aren’t you?’ said the vacuum cleaner.

‘I am not,’ insisted Mr Breezy.

‘You, are!’ the vacuum cleaner said, chortling. ‘Look, I’ve been exorcised loads of times and you’re not saying any of the right words.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Mr Waft.

‘Well, for a kick off, I’d expect something along the lines of “We who stand before you have tickled our armpits, have drunk the holy sweat of Topsybugger and

have danced naked through the frozen wastes of Holywell. So, shoo, shoo, shoo, oh nasty one. Get thee hence before we reveal our underwear.” And then you’d bounce on one leg, clapping vigorously. That normally does it.’

‘Ah, yes, of course,’ said Mr Breezy, ‘but we were hoping we would not have to resort to incantations of that potency. It now appears you leave us little choice.’

Mr Breezy stood on one leg and Mr Waft followed suit. ‘We who stand before you have tickled our armpits, have drunk the holy sweat of Topsybugger and have danced naked through the frozen wastes of Holywell. So, shoo, shoo, shoo, oh nasty one. Get thee hence before we reveal our underwear!’ Then they hopped up and down, clapping vigorously.

The vacuum cleaner stopped spinning. Then it pirouetted. Then it gasped and emptied most of the contents of its bag on the ground. Then it gave out an anguished cry and fell to the floor with a bang... and then it started to laugh hysterically. ‘I can’t believe you two fell for that. I mean, I’ve come across some real idiots in my time but you two take the bloody biscuit. Absolute quality, that was!’

Mr Breezy was incandescent. Mr Waft was puffed out.

‘Oh, hang on,’ said the vacuum cleaner, ‘I’ve got a message coming through from the other side. Oh, yes, from the darkest pits of the nether regions this stems; a lost soul trying to get through to her loved ones. Here it comes.’

All went momentarily dark and the vacuum cleaner span faster. ‘It’s here, the message is here...“Oh, my dearest, please help me. I am forced to boil hosiery all day, and then when I am finished I have to garnish them with pepper and eat them. Oh, the torment, the torment. For this I must do for all eternity”...’

The vacuum cleaner went silent and stopped spinning. Then it pointed its hose right into Mr Breezy’s face and cackled hysterically. ‘You mother cooks socks in hell!’

‘I think it is about time we made our exit,’ said Mr Waft.

‘Agreed,’ said Mr Breezy.

‘Yeah, bugger off before I get the urge to stick this hose up your trousers,’ the vacuum cleaner said.

And with that, they turned on their heels and ran off into town. ‘I think we must give more cogitation to our choice of disguise before our next assignment,’ Hob said, puffing as he ran.

‘Drifting Feng Shui Practitioners?’ Nob suggested.

‘My thoughts exactly, my good Nob.’

‘Had enough, boys?’ said the vacuum cleaner, triumphantly, as Hob and Nob disappeared from sight. ‘Vagrant Vacuum Cleaner Exorcists my arse. Now, then, who’s next?’

People and sheep backed away in fear and the vacuum cleaner looked smug, or at least as smug as a possessed vacuum cleaner can look. It randomly span to and fro, giggling gleefully and twirling its hose. ‘Why don’t you see if you have any messages for me?’ Aiden said, stepping forward.

The vacuum cleaner stopped spinning with a jerk and pointed its hose at him, moving it from side to side and applying a mild suction action, as if it were sniffing. ‘That’s funny,’ it said. ‘I’m getting nothing from you at all.’

It repeated the process, but more frantically. ‘You’re weird. Where are you from?’

‘I’m from a place where vacuum cleaners don’t have bags,’ Aiden said.

‘Bagless vacuum cleaners? You’re not serious,’ the vacuum cleaner said, startled.

‘Oh, yes. And they never lose their suction.’

‘Oh, come on now, you can’t expect me to believe that,’ the vacuum cleaner said, dismissively. ‘You’ll be telling me next they don’t get possessed.’

‘Never,’ said Aiden. ‘We worked out how to stop all that.’

The vacuum cleaner looked concerned. Its hose began twisting slightly and bits of dust started coming out of the seam of its bag. It moved back several feet. Aiden threw his arms up in the air, theatrically, and spoke in a booming voice.

‘I call upon the power of our Lord Dyson...’

‘Now, let’s not be hasty,’ the vacuum cleaner said.

‘... to rid the Multiverse of this entity...’

‘Can’t we talk about this?’

‘... for all time and...’

‘Sod this, I’m off,’ the vacuum cleaner said, dropping to the ground and switching itself off. A rush of wind was felt by all and in the distance a shrill cry could be heard, fading softly in the morning mist.

Mrs Ripsnorter tentatively approached the inert vacuum cleaner and prodded it with her walking stick. ‘It’s been cleansed!’ she shouted, and burst into tears.

For the second time in as many days Aiden found himself receiving a round of applause, just as Cracky was wandering over from the Diner. ‘You know,’ Cracky said, smiling, ‘if I didn’t know better I’d swear you were just an attention seeker, Mr Peersey. Now, would you like to join me for that chat we planned?’

Chapter 16 - You allow them to enter if they pay a bond

Velvet the ferret had the mouse cornered in the throne room. She was looking at it with a sadistic smile and kept tapping at it with her paw, as the little thing trembled.

Velvet enjoyed torturing small creatures, and she considered herself to be quite adept at it. She also craved attention, sulked if she couldn't have her own way and would do anything to get what she wanted, not caring how she did it or who got hurt in the process. If she were human, her ideal career would be a TV reality show contestant. She really wasn't a very nice ferret at all.

'Hmm,' she said, 'shall I kill you now, or wait for later?'

The little mouse cowered pitifully, holding its front legs across its face. 'I'd rather you didn't kill me at all,' it said, with a quivering voice.

The door to the throne room opened and Baron Blacktie marched in, with Pimple in close attendance. His bodyguard, Grunt, followed, looking menacingly around the room. 'Looks like it's your lucky day,' said Velvet, smacking the mouse with her paw, causing it to fall on its side. And then she ran off and sat in her basket next to the throne.

'What did they say exactly?' the Baron asked, as he sat down imperiously.

'They left a message with Stacey on reception saying that they urgently needed to see you and that they'd be here in less than an hour,' Pimple replied.

'I hope for their sake that it's good tidings,' the Baron said, looking straight at Grunt. 'Otherwise it may be necessary for chastisement of some description.'

'Grunt crush?' said Grunt.

'Not yet,' replied the Baron.

'Grunt rip?'

‘No, not yet.’

Grunt smiled, raised his huge hands and made a snapping motion. ‘Grunt break?’ he said, somewhat hopefully.

‘Perhaps later,’ the Baron replied.

‘Oh, Grunt plop,’ said Grunt, looking a bit embarrassed and feeling the back of his tattered trousers.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, I’ve told you if you need to go to the toilet just go!’ the Baron yelled. ‘You don’t have to wait for permission. Do you want to be put back in nappies again?’

‘Grunt sorry,’ said Grunt, bowing his head.

‘Get him cleaned up, Pimple. If that smell gets out the throne room will be off limits for days.’

‘Do I have to, my Lord?’ the horrified Pimple said.

‘Yes, you do. Now get him out of here.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Pimple, reluctantly taking hold of Grunt’s hand.

As Pimple and Grunt left the throne room General Darkblast entered, flanked by two of his imperial guard. ‘You summoned me, my Lord?’

‘Yes, General. It would appear our two spies are returning early on a matter of some urgency. I thought it best that you be in attendance when they arrive.’

The doors to the throne room swung open and Hob and Nob rushed in, unannounced. They were both breathing heavily and were drenched in sweat. After bowing courteously, Hob placed his briefcase on the floor. The Baron stood up in anticipation. ‘So, gentlemen, I believe you have news that demands my ear?’

‘We do, my Lord,’ said Hob.

‘Did you manage to obtain a sample of cheese, as agreed?’ the Baron questioned.

‘Not yet, my Lord,’ Nob said. ‘We encountered complications and thought it best to impart the news we have gleaned. You can rest assured we will return and acquire the sample of cheese you desire.’

The Baron’s mood darkened and his eyes became like slits. He walked around the throne, picked up his imperial mace and placed the tip into Hob’s left nostril. ‘You are lucky that my friend Grunt cannot control his bowels, otherwise your physical appearance would be altered quite radically.’

‘Please, hear us out, my Lord,’ Hob pleaded. ‘We know who owns the cheese mine that was once Hairy Growler’s, and we have a plan as to how you can make it yours.’

‘Go on’, said the Baron.

‘The mine is now in the possession of one Agnar the Hammered. He is a drummer in a band called “Sacred Wind”.’

‘My Lord, this is good news indeed,’ interrupted General Darkblast. ‘Given that he is a drummer, he would surely let you have this mine for a bag of sweets or some shiny trinkets that would keep his small mind occupied. And if he were to refuse this legitimate route, why we can simply take it by force before he can get his drumsticks out.’

‘If only it were that simple, General,’ Nob said.

‘What do you mean?’ the Baron asked, removing the mace from Hob’s nostril and placing back behind the throne.

‘Although he owns the mine it was a gift from his cousin, who has bade him to take care of it,’ Hob said.

‘And this “cousin” may prove to be difficult if the mine were somehow spirited from this Agnar’s grasp. Is that what you are saying?’

‘Yes, my Lord. For the name of his cousin is Angus McSvensson.’

The Baron reeled backwards as if he’d been hit by something quite big that didn’t have protective padding. ‘He’s related to the McSvenssons! Yes, now I see what you meant about complications.’

General Darkblast stepped forward, putting his hand on his sword in a gesture that implied he wished to use it quite urgently. ‘Come, now, Baron, we should not be deterred by some cousin from a realm that is quite distant. Why, we could appropriate the mine with minimum effort before any word reached his tartan ears.’

‘General, am I right in thinking that your men have encountered the McSvenssons before?’ the Baron said, walking over to a filing cabinet and sifting through the contents of the top drawer. ‘Ah yes, I believe I have the report right here.’

The Baron removed the file and read the first page. ‘So, it was a reconnaissance mission to Arbroath, is that correct?’ he said, passing the file to the General.

‘It was, my Lord.’

‘And would you say it was in any way successful?’

‘Well, in the sense that the men performed reconnaissance, yes.’

‘But you didn’t get too much information, would that be correct?’

‘It’s true the information we received was not what we had hoped, my Lord.’

‘And in what form was this information?’

‘It was in the form of a letter from...’ the General opened the file and located the letter ‘... from a Morag McSvensson.’

‘And it said?’

‘It said “Go to hell ye Sassenach bastards. If ye send any more men up here ye’ll get them back as a collection of mini haggis without the trimmings”.’

The Baron dusted off one of his sleeves and sat back down on his throne. ‘And what would you say you learned from this information?’

‘That they’re not very keen on the English but they do like haggis,’ the General replied.

‘Indeed,’ said the Baron. ‘So, General, how many men did you send?’

‘Seventy-two were sent, my Lord.’

‘And how many returned?’

The General skipped through the report before replying. ‘Seventy-two returned, my Lord.’

‘Let me stop you there for a second and I’ll rephrase the question, so that we can perhaps get an answer that is both more specific and more accurate. How many men returned intact?’

‘Er, none, my Lord.’

Baron Blacktie rose, walked back over to the General and grabbed the file off him. He flicked to page six and passed it back ‘Could you please read out the inventory of what was actually returned?’

‘Of course, my Lord. It reads “Seventy-two men despatched, seventy-two parts returned as follows – twelve legs, nine arms, eight heads, ten hands, eleven toes, four thumbs, five testicles, three livers, seven ears, two fingers, one small penis and a bag of hair of indeterminate origin”, my Lord.’

‘Quite,’ said the Baron. ‘So, General, I wish my plans to be executed with the minimum of fuss. This has to be a low risk exercise and the last thing I need are hordes of very angry, psychopathic, kilt-wearing maniacs ravaging through the palace

looking to cause as much dismemberment to my person as is humanly possible. Do I make myself clear?!

‘Yes, my Lord,’ the General replied, nodding frantically.

Hob put his hand to his mouth and cleared his throat. ‘My Lord, we believe we may have a solution to this dilemma, but we need some information first.’

‘What do you wish to know?’ the Baron said, his rage dissolving into curiosity.

‘The Cestrian Music Tournament takes place in three days, is that correct?’ asked Nob.

‘Correct,’ replied the Baron. ‘How is that relevant?’

‘Have the band Sacred Wind applied to be in this year’s competition?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ the Baron said. ‘This is the band you say Agnar the Hammered plays drums for?’

‘It is my Lord. If we could trouble you to find out if they have entered the tournament it would be appreciated.’

The Baron looked at Hob and Nob quizzically, before picking up the phone on the small table by the throne. He dialled a number and a polite lady answered.

‘Stacey, get the contestants for this year’s music tournament out for me and check to see if we have an entrant called “Sacred Wind”.’

Some seconds passed and the Baron drummed his fingers on the table impatiently. ‘A band called “Sacred Wind” did apply to enter the tournament, but they were rejected, my Lord,’ Stacey eventually said. ‘In fact, they’ve applied for the last four tournaments and have been rejected every time.’

‘Why is that?’ the Baron asked.

‘They are a heavy rock band, my Lord, and are therefore banned from playing in the city.’

‘Ah, of course,’ the Baron said, putting the phone down. ‘They have applied, gentlemen, but were rejected due to the fact they play heavy rock.’

‘That is excellent news,’ said Hob.

‘It is indeed,’ said the Baron. ‘I cannot bear to have my ears stained by that grotesque racket. Heavy rock has been banned for several years now and I have no intention of lifting the ban. General, what happened to the last heavy rock band that tried to play in the city?’

‘We informed them that if they continued to play then they would be decapitated. However, this threat was not successful.’

‘Why so?’ the Baron said, with incredulity.

‘I believe they said that it was a great idea and would provide an excellent addition to their stage show.’

‘How, then, did you make them see the error of their ways?’

‘Oh, we decapitated them anyway, my Lord. But this led to them getting an encore from the audience.’

‘How, pray, did they manage to play an encore with their heads separated from their bodies?’

‘Not too successfully, my Lord. The audience got restless after two minutes and began a slow handclap, until the lead singer’s body convulsed and sprayed blood into the crowd. This was very well received.’

Hob marched over to the Baron, intently. ‘You must let Sacred Wind enter the tournament, Baron.’

‘Are you insane, Hob? I cannot be seen to rescind this law. It could be construed as a weakness by any enemies I have left who are not in the canal. And anyway, how would this assist in gaining possession of the mine?’

‘You allow them to enter if they pay a bond, say £10,000,’ Hob said. ‘As it is extremely unlikely they could raise that kind of money, you ask for collateral instead; for example, property... or a cheese mine.’

The Baron smiled and patted Hob on the shoulder. Hob visibly winced from his touch. ‘Interesting, very interesting. Go on.’

‘You say that the mine will still be theirs if they win the tournament, but if they lose then the mine is forfeit. And this applies not only if they do not win, but also if they fail to participate in the tournament... for example if some mishap should occur which would lead to them being unable to reach the city in time.’

The Baron’s chilling smile grew wider.

‘You could spin the fact that you were letting them enter as a sign of your great benevolence and your wish to expand horizons and create equality,’ added Hob. ‘The people would not only believe this, but your popularity would soar.’

‘Yes, yes!’ the Baron said, walking over to the large bookcase and, again, stroking one book in particular. ‘Obviously, we ensure that this Sacred Wind do not get to the city, and that should be easy to arrange. And as the agreement between Agnar and I will be a legitimate transaction, Angus McSvensson would direct any wrath at the loss of the mine to his cousin and not towards me.’

‘Exactly,’ said Nob.

‘You have done well, gentlemen,’ the Baron said. ‘I fear Grunt will have to wait a while for his exercise.’

Hob and Nob exchanged glances and looked visibly relieved.

‘We will need to speak to the band to initiate this most excellent plan. Who is their contact?’ the Baron asked.

‘They are managed by a man called Oldfart Olafson,’ Hob said.

Baron Blacktie twirled dramatically, his leather cape sweeping out in an arcing motion before settling back into place. He placed one foot on the throne and stood flamboyantly with his hands on his hips. ‘General, let it be known that I wish to speak to this Oldfart. We will travel to Llangollen tomorrow. Prepare your men.’

Sacred Wind: Book 2 - Preview

- You'll gasp as Baron Blacktie's dastardly scheme starts to fall into place...
- You'll gasp again as a horrible kidnap is perpetrated...
- You'll nod knowingly as the Prophecy is revealed...
- You'll cheer and put out bunting as our heroes set sail for Chester...
- You'll be terrified as we delve into the depths of the mine of Hairy Growler...
- You'll hide behind the sofa as the Battle of the Pig's Trotters begins...
- You'll do some more gasping as the Baron reveals his secret...
- You'll smile winsomely when an unexpected companion appears...
- You'll have a great desire to learn Ancient Welsh Witchinese...
- And you'll be very concerned about the Tan-Y-Lan Tuffies skill at charades...

All this and more awaits you in... Sacred Wind: Book 2.

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