

CHAPTER 74

A TONIC FOR TROUBLED TIMES

'This is a dangerous situation,' Odin says. 'Those things can obviously materialise wherever they want.'

'We must be on the alert at all times. Starion, will you position your warriors between each of the wagons?'

'Yes sir.'

'Addric and Dheago, will you take the lead with Sabu?'

'Yes, we will,' Addric says.

'The children will travel in the wagons and those on foot or horseback are to follow along behind.'

'Eenah, Wimple and Boo-tee, could the Krugwah attend to aerial surveillance. Is that a reasonable request?'

'We can be doing that,' Eenah says.

'Them naughty bad things will not get the better of us,' she says. 'We very powerful, you know.'

'I know that all too well, my friend, and if you do see any of those naughty bad things, do what the Krugwah do best.'

'We can be doing that,' Eenah says, her eyes bristling with a newfound loathing.

'Hector, you have weapons I presume.'

'We have a compact hand-held device capable of unleashing a concentration of electro-magnetic firepower.'

'But compared to what you just did, I don't think they will do much more than stun those things.'

'That is better than nothing,' Odin says. 'What would you prefer to do, take the front or the rear?'

'Perhaps it would be advisable if we spread ourselves out through the ranks as well.'

'Better still,' Odin says.

'Demetra and Felicity, if we ever needed masters of the arcane arts, it is now.'

'I am at your service,' Demetra says.

'As am I,' says Felicity. 'What do you want us to do?'

'You have *the sight* and, in a place such as this it will be one of our most valuable assets. Perhaps it would be advisable if you walked close to the wagons along with everyone else.'

'Of course,' they said.

A cavalcade of over fifty wagons heads off into the depths of an ancient forest surrounded by a floating mist that gives it a distinctly eerie feel.

This would be the perfect place for an ambush, and it would be impossible to tell if it was just the wind rustling through the trees. The ever-vigilant Krugwah fly one way and another and scan the environment as only they can do. But to those like Lezula and Emphora it's apparent that this is not just any old forest.

'We have company,' Lezula says.

'We do indeed, and they have been keeping a close eye on us ever since we got here,' Emphora says.

'What manner of creatures are you talking about?' Slinky says.

'Elementals and nature spirits, amongst other things,' Emphora says.

'Tell me about elementals,' he says. 'What are they?'

'They have existed since the beginning of time Slinky. 'They're the caretakers of nature, energy beings of a sort that come in many shapes and forms.'

'The great spirits of nature are called devas, but they're never visible to the naked eye. They are powerful in their own right as you would have to be when your domain is a forest or a river.'

'They attend to the details of an evolving world and make sure that everything gets the nutrients they need to survive.'

'Nature spirits inhabit the very ground on which we walk, every rock and stone and the water in particular.'

'But there are others yet again, such as elves and fairies, and when they appear, they are a wonderful sight to behold.'

'Tell me about these fairy things,' Slinky says, 'and what being their job?'

It's obvious that he has been listening closely to every word that Emphora has said.

'Well, fairies are very small, no bigger than your finger in most cases. They usually have gossamer wings and fly from one flower to another.'

'Some glisten like fireflies at night, and if they're good fairies, they can be most helpful to a traveller that has lost his way.'

'And then of course, there are other things such as sprites,' she says in such a way that Slinky almost leaps off the ground.

'Sprites,' he says, 'they sound like mean little critters.'

'They can be sometimes, but not always. They have a bit of a reputation in some places, but they have a part to play as well.'

'And elves you said, what being they?'

'Elves, now that's a good question Slinky. I haven't had much to do with them, but I have heard that they're industrious little characters who offer a helping hand to anyone who needs it.'

‘An enchanted forest,’ says a pensive Slinky. ‘I used to think a forest was just a forest, and a field of vegetables was just a field of vegetables. And if it hadn’t been for Felicity, I would never have known otherwise.’

‘And then of course,’ Emphora says in a tone designed to impress, ‘there are other creatures yet again, like those grand and imperious centaurs hiding all around us.’

‘Where,’ Slinky says, ‘where are they?’

‘If I am not wrong, there is one behind every tree that we have passed so far.’

‘And what being them,’ he says.

‘They’re called centaurs are they are very unique creatures indeed,’ Emphora says, ‘centaurs are half-man and half-horse.’

‘Oh, you be making that up, Emphora, nobody could be half and half of two different things.’

‘Some creatures are, and in one world I have visited, I know of a fish that lives in the depths of a real ocean, in a world of total darkness.’

‘It’s a very strange-looking fish with a face like a dog, and so that it can see where it’s going, it has a lantern hanging from a hook attached to the top of its head.’

‘Now, you’re pulling my leg,’ Slinky says.

‘You may not believe this, Slinky, but there is also a fish called a whale, a creature that’s as big as a house, and it is said that they communicate with the cosmos.’

‘Why being that, if it be true,’ he said.

‘Oh, it is, my friend. Whales have a most unusual style of singing. Can you still hear that beautiful music out there?’

‘Yes, Mam I can,’ he says, ‘it be sending tingles up my spine every single minute. Touches me to my soul, it does.’

‘Well, the music of a whale is like that, Slinky. And some people have a theory that they transmit essential information to the universe for one reason or another.’

‘Now, isn’t that amazing.’

‘It is indeed,’ says an ever more curious Slinky.

‘But is there anything else that I should be knowing about Emphora?’

‘If you look up there in the sky, you will see a horse of a very different kind Slinky. And if you are lucky enough to spot one, it should have wings.’

‘No Emphora, you are not saying that there is such a thing as a flying horse, are you?’

‘Yes, Slinky I am, and if you ever encounter one, you will be amazed by its magnificence. But if you are clever enough to catch one, they have to take you for a ride, but that isn’t always an easy thing to do.’

‘Well, I never, in all my living days,’ Slinky says. ‘What next you will be telling me about?’

‘Well, there are quite a lot of strange looking animals in this universe of ours, but in one world that I know of there are thousands of them.’

‘Take a giraffe, for example.’

‘A giraffe,’ Slinky exclaims. ‘You may not be believing this Emphora, but I be knowing what a giraffe is. I have even seen one for myself.’

‘So then, why shouldn’t there be creatures such as unicorns, centaurs, gryphons and flying horses?’ she says.

‘I give up,’ Slinky says. ‘You win Emphora. I be knowing you be telling me the truth.’

‘But, what is this gryphon thing?’

‘Oh, it’s a very noble creature indeed,’ Emphora said.

‘I used to have two of my own once upon a time. They have the head of a bird, the body of a lion and wings like an eagle.’

‘I not be knowing what any of them animals are at all,’ he says.

Slinky is astounded, but he isn’t the only. The New Soul Children are equally enraptured by Emphora’s tales.

‘And do you know anything about the New Soul Children?’ Pluto says.

‘I do my little darling.’

‘Oh, tell us please, I would love to hear a story about us.’

Those within earshot of the covered wagon are amazed to hear that Emphora knows so many things about the mysterious creatures that inhabit the secret world of an enchanted forest.

Emphora is a master of many forms of magic, and as she knows from experience, a story is one of the oldest of all forms of magic, and one of the best tonics of all.

‘Now, I know several things about the New Soul Children,’ she says. ‘Some people believe they are nature and that is possibly true.’

‘Nature spirits come in many forms, like the adorable Krugwah, for example, but the New Soul Children, who are equally adorable in every way, have a very special place in the scheme of things.’

‘We do,’ Queroladis says.’

‘Indeed, you do, my friend. Of all the creatures that inhabit this universe, you have one of the most special jobs of all.’

‘Tell us more,’ Sipitarcha says.

‘At night, when people are asleep, they dream. Secretly, they dream of good things, but sometimes they need a little helping hand.’

‘In dreams, people see familiar faces, friends and family and sometimes strangers, and some of those are really New Soul Children in disguise.’

‘Really,’ Barclay says.

‘Yes,’ Emphora said. ‘I once heard a story of a little boy who had a dream that he would one day wear a crown, and that he would be king for a day.’

‘Little did he know that the stranger in his dream was actually one of the New Soul Children in disguise. He told that little boy that one day that would happen to him.’

‘I wonder who she’s talking about,’ Conrad says.

‘I wonder too,’ Emphora says, as she winks at Barclay. ‘It’s probably someone you know.’

‘We never get to meet those people, really,’ Pluto says, ‘never.’

‘Well, I know it’s against the rules to tell you,’ Emphora said, ‘but that little boy is sitting right beside you.’

‘Barclay’ they said.

‘Yes, isn’t that true, Barclay.’

‘Every word of it, Emphora.’

‘I could tell you all about that beautiful day if you wish.’

‘Oh, please do,’ Pluto says, ‘but start at the beginning.’

Their journey passes without incident, but every now and then Barclay feels a slight twinge in his shoulder. The Children instinctively sense his pain, and rather than miss out on a moment of his wonderful story, they place their hands on the back of his neck.

Barclay is a very special friend and they are not about to lose him, not to those nasty and horrible creatures. They have lost far too many of their special friends over the years. And when they saw what they almost did to him, they could not believe their eyes.

‘That was a beautiful story,’ Pluto says. ‘Do you think you could tell it again?’

‘Okay,’ he says. ‘now, one night...