

1 - Born to be Wild

Monday 4th July 2071 AD

The Trossachs National Park

Scottish Highlands

The forest was alive with the sights and sounds of life—wildlife. Insects and birds were the prominent inhabitants, but other creatures were known to be among the natural selection of species if you knew the signs.

At the front of the small group was Norman, the big man whose profession had once been the maintenance of forestry. “I can’t believe the speed of recovery here,” he murmured.

“In what way?” Bill asked. “Do you mean how well the trees have flourished?”

“No, mate,” Norman said quietly. “I recognised the slight indentation in the tree-line where we entered the forest, but there’s no path. We must be close to what would have been the main forest trail six years ago, but I can’t see any trace.”

“Let me have a look, please.” Victoria brushed past and tripped on a concealed root. She flew headlong through the dense, overhanging foliage.

“Hey,” Bill said, “are you okay?”

Victoria got up onto her knees. “I’m sorry, I was a bit eager there. Norman’s quite right, and from down here you can see that there is a corridor of slightly differing undergrowth.”

“We’ve only just entered the forest, so I think we’ll have to take it slower.” Flint, the fourth member of the group, looked around one more time before moving forward among the trees to join the others. He still kept his laser rifle in a position ready to bring up for defence.

Victoria said, “What do you think *they* are?” She pointed at a prominent growth of healthy young trees slightly farther ahead.

Bill and Flint exchanged a look, and both turned to the forester and the botanist.

Norman stepped forward carefully and squeezed the upper leaves of a sapling. “Gents, this young silver birch is a sign that the forest is alive and healthy.” He pointed. “That one over there is beech, and from here I can see a couple of different pines.”

“Wait a minute,” Bill said, “you said a little while ago that there was a forest trail here.”

“There was,” Norman said, “and now I can see confirmation.” He pointed to a well-established tree a few yards away. “You see that small yellow sign about fifteen feet up ... that’s a

route and growth sign, and it tells me two things. Firstly that this was at one time a forest trail and secondly that the tree is doing well because that sign ought to be quite a bit lower.”

Victoria, being a botanist, was quicker to see Norman’s point. “Not only has the forest started to reclaim the area, but it’s also flourishing.” She pulled back some of the loose foliage and undergrowth around her. “You can see specks and patches of gravel used to reinforce the trail.”

Flint was looking around in wonder. “I thought Harry said that the dust particles in the sky would prevent natural light and growth or whatever.”

“Harry was quite right,” Victoria said. “Think back to when we were coming down the mountainside. From inside the glass corridor, since we first arrived at the hydro plant, we’ve seen a couple of massive holes in the darkness up above, and through them, the sky looked normal. Until now, we’ve never appreciated their true size.”

Bill said, “We agreed that the large holes might gradually increase in size, but we’d still have the dark cloud base left by the nuclear explosions?”

Victoria said, “Harry didn’t want to build up anybody’s hopes, but before we left this morning, he told me certain signs to look for to help with his theories.”

The three men listened intently so as not to miss anything important. Flint was still on edge, and he occasionally looked around, his military training making him suspicious of every new smell or sound.

“Right,” Victoria said. “You’ll all understand that by being inside the mountain for so long, all we’ve seen of the outside are the views from the glass corridor and the enclosed balcony. We’ve watched and noted that generally to the south the sky has remained darker than it should. Everything below the dark cloud is in a semi-frozen state.”

Norman said, “Yes, it’s looked like a separate climate with lower temperature and tundra. We’ve seen that most of the area in view was a wasteland, but as I said, until we left this morning, we’ve never seen the size of the hole in the cloud.”

Bill said, “When I ventured out to check the atmosphere a couple of weeks ago, I glanced at the sky, but the gaps appear to have got bigger rapidly.”

“Precisely,” Victoria said. “We’ve been inside the mountain for six years. What might have been a large gap in the polluted atmosphere has been affected by two main factors; sunlight and the natural gases given off from what has survived.”

“I really want to keep up,” Flint said, “but you guys are gonna have to break this down for me.”

“Thanks for asking, mate.” Bill winked at him.

Victoria smiled. “When nuclear explosions polluted the atmosphere all around the globe, there were two possibilities. The most disastrous scenario would be that the multiple explosions would create an all-encompassing black nuclear cloud.”

Flint nodded excitedly, finally on territory he understood. “Completely wrapping the planet in radioactive particles, like foil around a bar of chocolate?”

Bill and Norman laughed.

Victoria smiled and nodded. “Yes, and in such a circumstance we might not have survived much longer even inside the mountain because it would have brought about a nuclear winter. Without sunshine—natural light, everything would start dying due to the dropping temperatures. Those temperatures would eventually have pervaded the mountains too—including ours.”

“Okay,” Flint said, “I think I’m on the same page now, so what was the other scenario?”

“I’m pleased to report that the other scenario is what we seem to have now. We’ve seen that there is a huge pocket of natural light above and beyond our mountain, and this forest. Without exploration on foot, it would be difficult to assess, but I would suggest that most of the Scottish Highlands are safe.”

“I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.” Norman walked out to the edge of the tree-line and strolled back. “I’ve just looked at the general size and shape of that hole in the cloud base.” He grinned. “Judging from what Victoria has just explained, I think I know the extent of our local safe territory.”

While the botanist smiled, Bill and Flint exchanged a glance before turning to Norman.

“If you think of how much forestry we have across this part of Scotland, we have two holes which are gradually becoming larger, and the poisoned cloud is being kept at bay by the remaining healthy woodland.” He turned to Victoria for confirmation.

Victoria nodded. “As I said, other than an extensive patrol on foot it will be difficult to confirm. On the way back up the mountain, if we look in every direction, we ought to see holes in the sky above any area where there is a substantial forest.”

Norman said, “If that theory proved true, there might be pockets of survival in other parts of the world.”

“Where do you think?” Flint was shrugging off any negativity in the hope of more good news.

“Well,” Bill said, “Harry is still in touch with Marianne in Bolivia. If you remember the size of the Amazon rain forests, that means that parts of South America stand a good chance of recovery.”

Norman said, "I know that Africa had a lot of greenery, but missiles hammered the continent from different directions according to Benji's final broadcasts. That's why we think he was lost. Is there a signal still coming from New Zealand?"

"Yes," Bill said. "We lost voice communication with Jacob when he set sail from Australia, but his radio signal transmits intermittently. We've tried to work out what the hell is allowing it to continue, but there are too many theories."

Victoria said, "Are we ready to venture farther into the—"

The unmistakable howl of a wolf sounded from within the forest, and the explorers all stood still. They continued to listen and glance at each other. The birds still chirped, so there was no panic among the inhabitants of the trees, but it had been a timely warning that these four people were not the only creatures in the forest.

"Are we all ready to go deeper?" Bill looked around the three faces.

All three nodded. They'd survived a global catastrophe and had lived inside a mountain for six years, so the threat of wolves wasn't about to hold them back.

Bill pulled the laser pistol from its holster. "Okay, Norman, I'll take the point, and you stay close behind to keep me heading in the right direction. Victoria, you follow Norman, and Flint continues as Tail-end Charlie."

They set off again with no more than a few paces between each of them. Norman was behind Bill but looking ahead for the telltale yellow signs on some trees—his old guide.

Flint muttered, "What the hell . . ."

"What's up?" Victoria said.

"Oh, nothing," Flint laughed. "I'm probably seeing things."

"Well, you're bound to see a bird, rabbit or fox because the level of noise indicates life."

Flint muttered, "I didn't think rabbits or foxes could climb trees."

"I'm sorry?" Victoria squinted and smiled.

"Nothing—don't mind me."

For an hour they penetrated the forest and apart from brief stops to sip water from one of their containers they kept up a steady pace. Each person was filled with a sense of wonder, excitement and barely-concealed joy. Their part of the planet had survived, and they were determined to continue with the exploration.

Bill stopped and raised his left hand; fisted. He extended his fingers and lowered the hand, palm facing down. The signal was seen and obeyed by his companions who each stopped and

squatted low but remained quiet. Bill turned, and when they met his gaze, he pointed first to his eyes with two fingers and then he indicated for the others to look ahead.

In a clearing no farther than twenty metres away was a natural, almost circular pond. A magnificent red deer stag stood, occasionally stooping to drink before resuming his alert pose. His head turned this way and that, his nose and ears twitching to pick up the slightest sign of a threat. Around the edge of the pond were six hinds and three fawns. The fawns lapped at the water without a care. The hinds appeared to take turns at drinking and listening like their monarch.

The four humans remained in position, transfixed by such a beautiful sight. For ten minutes, the deer drank and enjoyed the peacefulness of the clearing. Following a snort from the stag, they all trotted off among the trees to disappear like wraiths.

When the small Auchcarn group arrived at the pond, Victoria opened her backpack and lifted out two bottles to fill with samples of the water. She capped them and held them up. "It's almost as clear as tap water."

"How can that be?" Flint said. "We're in a forest."

"It could be a spring," Victoria said, "just like the one inside the mountain that feeds all our accommodation along the tunnel. Invariably, when there is massive underground activity like the minor earthquakes initiated a few years ago, new natural water sources might have been created."

Norman said, "I know it's been a while since I've done any work in the forests around here, but we only had one or two ponds, and I don't recall any natural springs in the midst of the woodland."

"Well," Bill said, "it's good to know that the wildlife has a source of water."

Victoria said, "Once we've analysed this back at Auchcarn, it will be handy to know if we have drinking water available while we're out and about like today."

They continued along what appeared to be the old trail which was heavily overgrown. They marvelled at how nature had stepped in and reclaimed the entire forest floor.

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"That's about five miles we've covered through the forest now," Norman said.

"Are you sure?" Bill said. "It feels like more for some reason."

"It was around two miles to reach the forest after we exited the mountain. Between the trees, up ahead I can see a grey area which must be a road. The nearest tarmac road would be five miles from our start point. I'm trying to remember if there might be anything significant nearby to the east when we leave this section of forest."

Ten minutes later they stepped out of the woodland to see the remains of a tarmac road. The four of them stood line abreast along the edge of the once smooth surface, looking in wonder at how greenery had crept up over the edges. No white paint or cat's eyes studs showing anywhere meant it was a 'C' class route. In some places, the tarmac had given up the fight. Nature was taking advantage of the cracks to strive for a crossing in both directions.

Victoria squatted to check the strength of the vegetation. "This stuff has a firm hold, guys. I'd say another couple of years without traffic along this route, and we'll be looking at another aspect of our old world disappearing."

"Could it really take over in a couple of years?" Flint squatted to mimic Victoria's tugging motion to test the strength of the roots and stems in the cracks.

"Flint, if it can do this in six years, this road will all but disappear in the next five or six years. It will be more like the trail we'd have expected to find in the depths of the forest."

"Wow, that is bloody impressive."

Bill and Norman had walked away a short distance. They were in a serious conversation about something as they walked back.

Victoria stood. "Have you found something interesting, guys?"

"Interesting is a good description." Norman turned and pointed. "Can you see where there is a road junction about one hundred metres away?"

"Yes," Victoria and Flint chorused as they stared in the direction of a bend in the road.

Norman seemed preoccupied as he looked around. "There's a road sign lying on the grass verge which confirms that my guess at the distance was pretty accurate."

"Why, what's the sign?" Flint said and laughed.

"West Highland Wildlife Reserve and Sanctuary," Norman said.

"Oh shit," Flint said. "What did they normally have in there?"

"As you'll recall, Scotland was the first place in the British Isles to abolish zoos. Up here, we were heavily into the idea of a massive reserve."

"What was in there, Norman?" Flint said, with less amusement in his tone.

"Alpacas, bison, wild horses, wildcats, a few species of primates and then the more dangerous species like brown bears, wolves and a few big cats."

Flint looked up and down the edge of the overgrown road. "That changes my view of a walk in the forest."

Norman said, “We can’t be sure what survived and what didn’t. Not long before our world leaders turned the planet to rubble, the reserve also had a couple of exotic species. We’re not going to know unless we check it out.”

“Check it out?” Victoria was suddenly as alert as Flint. “Apart from not being sure about their survival, isn’t this a normal habitat for bears, wolves and lynx?”

“It is,” Norman agreed, “but we don’t know how many of those animals might still be around.”

Bill had remained quiet but alert and looking around while Norman delivered the news. “As we were walking back along the road, we were discussing the options.”

“Which options?” Victoria said and looked from Bill to Norman.

“We could head back through the forest, go up the hill and back inside to the safety of the mountain, or we could go a little bit farther.”

Flint said. “Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

Bill nodded. “We could go ahead to check out the condition of the reserve.”

“I’ll be happy for us to investigate, but it would take us hours,” Flint said. “The place will be massive. It would be a few miles square, not to mention that we don’t know what’s in there?”

Norman said, “I suggested to Bill that it would be better if we knew for sure. We’ve heard wolves howling in recent days when we’ve stepped out of the portal to get acclimatised to the taste of fresh air, but a wolf howl carries for miles.”

Victoria said, “Have you guys got a plan?”

Bill said, “We were aiming to go straight to the reserve entrance, which is the most logical thing to do. From that, we’d get some idea of the condition of the place. As Flint said, the place will be massive, but if we can see the reception area, it will tell us something at least.”

Victoria said, “While we have this section of roadway, how about taking a few minutes to snack and have a drink?”

“Good plan,” Norman said and pulled off his backpack before sitting on the road.

All four of them enjoyed water and the fruit and nut protein bars that Ramona had made for them. They sat together, having their surreal lunch-break in the middle of the overgrown road.

Bill said, “Now that we’ve come so far today, I wish I’d checked the atmosphere earlier. It means we’re behind in everything we do.”

“Hey,” Victoria said, “don’t start sounding like Craig. It’s taken us a couple of years to get him seeing the positive in situations.”

Norman said, "As I recall, Bill, back in our early days, it was you who volunteered to leave the old tunnel alone to test the air in the glass corridor. None of us knew if it would be safe."

"It seems like a long time ago now."

Flint brightened up the tone. "Wasn't it a rabbit which caused the excitement?"

"Yes," Norman said. "When we first arrived in the hydro installation, Harry worked with Victoria and me to estimate how long it would be before the atmosphere would be safe. Our best guess was a minimum of five years before anyone should go outside."

Victoria said, "It was five years later when I was in the glass corridor with some children, and one of them saw a rabbit on the mountainside. *'What's that, Victoria?'* the child said, and I cried tears of joy." She smiled. "I gathered all the children to show them what a rabbit looked like."

Flint said, "I've never understood why we waited another full year before anybody came outside."

Bill said, "I was ready to get out and check the air was okay, but it was Harry and our two scientific friends here who said it would be better to watch the seasons pass for a year. The vegetation had always looked okay, as you know, but it was the knowledge that rabbits and foxes were still thriving which told us it was time for one of us to do the walk of hope."

Norman said, "I still think you were brave to be the first one to test the air again."

Flint said, "I was more impressed when Bill went down to the loch within a week and caught fish." He sipped his water and looked thoughtful. "Before we go on, I think you all ought to know something,"

The others turned to him.

"A long way back through the forest I thought I saw something—"

"I remember," Victoria said, "and I joked about the noise level of nature."

"Yeah, well I thought I saw a ... monkey."

Nobody laughed, which was what he might have expected.

"Go on, mate," Bill said. "Can you remember any details?"

"It was mainly light brown and had a bright pink face ... like a human who was blushing."

"Was it large or small?" Norman said.

"Small, I suppose ... does it make any difference?"

"It sounds like a capuchin or a macaque, but we must keep something in mind. If there are any primates in the forest, they're likely to attract the attention of predators, and I don't mean foxes."

“Well, boys,” Victoria said as she stood, “if we’re going to put our lives at risk to move on and check out this wildlife reserve I think we ought to do it while it’s daylight.”

Flint said, “At least I’ll know what I’m shooting at if it’s necessary.”

Bill slapped him on the shoulder. “If we have to, mate, let’s try to frighten wildlife instead of killing any.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Flint laughed.

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The minor road they’d arrived at outside the forest had been in bad condition, but the road which led to the reserve was almost entirely green. Patches of tarmac could be seen where it was cracked and warped, standing up in small lumps as if it had been raked over with a giant claw. Most of the surface was green, but in many places, young trees were striving to gain more height.

“The gates are open,” Norman said.

Bill said, “In that case, I think we need a strategy before we go inside.”

“What do you propose?”

“I’ll take point with the handheld laser and Flint should continue to cover our backs, so you other two guys stay close together and between us.”

“I’m happy with that,” Victoria said, turning to look around as they approached the broken and dangling high wire-mesh gates.

“Me too,” Norman said.

“Whatever we come across now,” Bill said, “we mustn’t run away.” He looked at all three of their faces in turn. “There aren’t many wild animals that we could outrun, and if we stay still, it will allow Flint and me the time to frighten off anything with big ideas.”

He got three nods, and they set off through the gate. As a wildlife reserve, the grounds were laid out to give the impression of freedom and the narrow road for visitors blended well among the trees and bushes. Now, six years after being abandoned, the road was no more than a narrow trail. It wound its way through substantial batches of foliage where hedgerows and undergrowth had assumed control.

The noise of wildlife in the local area increased, which was a subtle warning. Certain animals and birds had not only survived but had opted to stay in the vicinity. It was a half-mile trek along the green carpet of the narrow trail before they arrived at the car parking and reception areas.

In keeping with the theme of a nature reserve, the few buildings were timber rather than steel or concrete. What had been the reception and souvenir shop now resembled an African safari camp which had been overrun by elephants. Before reaching the first building, the team stopped to

decipher a large sign which had fortunately fallen forward at an angle so that the information higher up on the sign was still intact and legible.

Being a big, muscular man, Norman opted to lift the sign so that they could all read.

“It looks like you remembered it well,” Bill said and turned to Norman. “Alpacas, bison, wild horses, wildcats, primates, bears, wolves and lynx.”

Victoria leant forward and pulled off a sizeable clinging plant. “Not to mention birds of prey, elk, camels, arctic foxes, polar bears, snow leopards, tigers and ... whatever would have been named on the two badly damaged pieces at the base of the sign.”

Bill laughed. “I suppose we’ll find out soon enough if it’s something particularly dangerous.”

“*Particularly dangerous?*” Flint said. “I think we’re doing okay with polar bears, snow leopards and tigers?” He looked around as his alert level rose again. “Jeezuss.”

A loud screech came from the reception building not far away, which had no glass remaining in the windows or doors. All four of the team crouched back among nearby bushes as a small group of primates raced from the building to disappear among the nearby trees.

“And baboons.” Victoria nodded toward the creatures disappearing among the foliage and smiled.
