

As translated by Cronan, the librarian.

*... and so it shall come to pass that on the fiftieth day in the one thousandth year from crossover — give or take a day or two, the working out of sums not being one of my stronger points — the skies above Tiernan Og shall be rent by turmoil. When the storm doth reach its zenith, the roiling clouds shall be ripped asunder and a second sun will appear. A black sun, not bright like our own, and it may be slightly oval instead of round, but a sun it shall be. And from this sun, like a swarm of stingy things, will emerge the horde of Snor'kel. And then shall the dark ones be driven from their foul nests, rendered impotent by Snor'kel's divine fury, given a right good shafting. Only then shall our brave new world know true peace.*

### **Book of Prophecies, by Nostra-Ogmus**

*(Written this five mill... six mi... Bugger it! Written this seven hundredth year since crossover)*

## **Chapter One**

There is one thing that can be guaranteed to bite faster than a striking snake, gather pace more quickly than a falling rock, spread more rapidly than an outbreak of strep throat in an old folks home — bad news. The worse the news, the quicker it spreads, infecting everyone who hears it with impending doom. And this news was the worst possible. It infiltrated the labyrinthine tunnels, caverns and vaults of the mountain stronghold of Hope like a plague, carried from person to person in hushed tones. The last bastion of the Ogmus was awash with the ill tidings.

The book had been stolen! Not just any book, but *the* book. The book that held the future of the Ogmus within its carefully bound pages. The Book of Prophecies. It had been taken from the safety of the library grotto while Cronan the librarian took forty winks.

Nostra, the famed seer of the Ogmus, had devoted his short, opiate-dependant life to writing the book. Its cryptic contents provided clues of what was to transpire for future generations, if one could understand his inane musings.

Sadly, as is often the case with drugs, the abuse of Nostra's body eventually killed him. At the tender age of twenty-six, while walking a mountain ledge when totally out of it on concentrated poppy juice, he failed to foresee the savage, body-rending attack from the black dragon that claimed his life. His untimely death had shocked the small community of Ogmus, and led to the creation of the oft-quoted saying: 'Me? Take drugs? Are you out of your nostra? I'd sooner chase the dragon, mate.'

And now his book was missing, presumed stolen. It was a disaster. It was a nightmare. It would prove to be a real headache for the poor sod who had taken it when he tried to make sense of the gibberish that Nostra had written. Most of the verses made sense after the events they foretold had actually happened. But trying to interpret and link them to the future? Tricky.

The painstaking process of translating the verses into plain, understandable Ogmus had kept Cronan busy for the past forty years, and he had only just got to the stage where he was working on the important ones; those dealing with the

future. It was only twenty days into the future, mind, but it was a start. His reasoning for beginning so far back was so that he could get a feel for the way in which Nostra hid the meanings, which should then help him when it came to foretelling future events.

What he hadn't taken into account, however, was how long it would take him to work out the past. Nostra's obvious penchant for narcotics had rendered the later verses all but indecipherable. Cronan had given up entirely on the bits that referred to flying lime-green snugglebunnies.

But worse still, not only had the book gone, so had Cronan's scribbled notes of what was prophesied to happen in just twenty days time. Completely taken aback by the theft, he sat at his desk in the centre of the small, fifteen foot by fifteen foot, vaulted cell that housed the library of the Ogmus. Although given the distinct lack of books, library would appear to be something of a misnomer. With the room's single bookshelf remarkably devoid of the one book that had given the grotto the entitlement to call itself a library, 'bookshelf room' would now be more apt.

In all of his fifty-five years, Cronan had never felt so miserable. He ran a slender hand through his thinning grey hair and stared at the vacant spot on the shelf, willing the book to reappear. But the blank rock wall stared impassively back at him, almost seeming to smirk in the light of the room's single glow-globe.

Ever since he was a young lad he'd had a way with cryptic clues and had become a master at solving the most obscure problems well before he'd left Rock-School. So much so that his ability came to the attention of the Wing Commander, Volgen, who immediately commandeered him to work on Nostra's book. Convinced that the answer to defeating the Dark Ones lay hidden in its pages, Volgen instructed Cronan to find it. None of the previous Wing Commanders had given the cryptic tome much credence, but Volgen thought differently.

Cronan gave a heavy sigh, leaned his elbows on the desk and cradled his head in his hands. He stared at the scarred desktop in despair. What would Volgen say when he found out the book was missing? The Wing Commander was irascible at the best of times, and this news would set him off on one of his rants. Of that Cronan was sure.

After centuries of the Ogmus hiding in their mountain retreat, Volgen wanted to be the Wing Commander that led the last of them out. Back into the world of sunlight, blue skies and green fields; and to bring back the good dragons. He was convinced the answer was concealed in Nostra's scribbles and, two days ago, Cronan had found it — probably.

“Master?”

Not having heard young Tobias enter the room, Cronan looked up in surprise at the sound of the voice. He spotted his apprentice standing before the desk, hands clasped loosely in front of him and hazel eyes filled with concern.

“Is it true?”

The smile that tried to force its way onto Cronan's face gave up and fled in defeat. He nodded in solemn confirmation. “It's true.”

Tobias's eyes widened, the splattering of freckles on his nose seeming to stand out more starkly against his pallid complexion. “The thieving b—”

“Tobias!” snapped Cronan, scraping back the chair and rising to his feet. “I will not have profanities used in my presence.”

“I was only going to say booknappers,” Tobias retorted. His face reddened to match the colour of his mop of wiry hair.

Cronan pursed his lips and shook his head, then sat back down. He chuckled. “Somehow what I thought you were going to say might have been more apt.”

Tobias half smiled. “Any idea who took it?”

“Humph! If I knew that I wouldn’t be sitting here pulling the remains of my hair out, trying to figure out the very same thing.” He looked up and met Tobias’s concerned gaze. “But it has to be an agent of those Blackabbots. May their souls rot in the bowels of eternal hell.”

Tobias nodded, his expression grim. “And just when we were getting to the interesting part. The return of the good dragons.”

“Return of the good dragons? Whatever makes you think the verse referred to their return?”

A frown formed on Tobias’s face. “B-b-but it said that Snor’kel and his horde would emerge like a swarm of stingy things and rid us of the Dark Ones. Nostra had to mean it was the good dragons, didn’t he?”

Cronan gave a wry smile. “Have you learned nothing during your years with me? About how he worked his cryptic clues?”

Tobias flushed with embarrassment and stared down at Cronan, arms folded across his scrawny chest, his foot nervously tapping the floor. “What did it mean, then?” His brow furrowed in puzzlement.

“It meant ...” Cronan sighed. He’d jumped to the same conclusion as Tobias when they’d first translated it, but deep inside he suspected that the verse did not contain all of the information they needed. Such as where Snor’kel would appear, for starters. Tiernan Og was a big place, according to the few crudely drawn maps the library possessed. More so when you were confined to living inside a mountain and didn’t have a clue what the outside world actually looked like beyond the rocky ledges.

As Cronan had found with most of Nostra’s verses, you had to have two or three of them worked out to get the whole picture. But without the book that would now be impossible. Part of him hoped Tobias was right. “It could well mean that, lad. Forgive a testy old goat. My patience is not what it should be.”

Tobias relaxed, a small smile forming on his face. “So it could mean that the dragons and their riders are coming back?”

“It could,” Cronan admitted. Tobias’s infectious smile caused one to appear on his own face.

“I knew it!” said Tobias, punching the palm of his left hand.

“Knew what?” a deep voice demanded.

Cronan’s chair toppled over with a clatter as he jumped to his feet. “W-W-Wing Commander.” A nervous smile tugged at his lips. “Wh-what brings you here?”

Volgen strode into the small room, resplendent in his powder-blue leggings, tunic and cape. The soft soles of his powder-blue, pointy-toed flying boots barely made a sound on the hard floor. He stopped before Cronan’s desk, folded his arms above his pot-belly and fixed Cronan with a steely gaze. Volgen’s bushy grey beard bristled and writhed as he chewed at his lip. With his bald pate, he looked as if his head had been put on upside down.

Cronan broke his gaze and looked at the floor.

Volgen snorted in annoyance, then looked to the side and saw Tobias. “You still here?”

Tobias gave a nervous smile.

“Well, bugger off!”

By the time Cronan looked up Tobias had fled the room. “There was no need for ...”

Volgen leaned forward and placed his hands on the desk, his eyes boring into Cronan’s. “There was every piggin’ need!”

Rather than flee to the safety of his room, Tobias ran far enough down the corridor to make Volgen think he had, then slid to a halt and silently retraced his steps. Once he reached the library he stood to the side of the entrance, his back against the craggy wall, straining to hear what was being said.

“How could you be so piggin’ stupid?” he heard Volgen roar. “Leaving the damn book where any passing toerag could take it? And your damn translation too? Of all the ...”

“Half translation,” Cronan’s voice quietly interjected.

“WHAT?”

Tobias flinched at the volume of Volgen’s shout.

“Er, I hadn’t quite finished it,” Cronan replied. “I fell asleep before I’d got that far.”

“So that makes it all right, does it? You, you ...”

Tobias tiptoed away, wanting to get back to the safety of his room in the foundling’s quarters. He’d heard enough. He loved Cronan like a father and didn’t want to listen to any more of Volgen’s ranting. The Wing Commander would calm down eventually, in a day or so. He usually did when something upset him. Mind you, nothing as bad as this had ever happened before. The gods alone knew if he would ever recover from this news.

Everyone in Hope knew Volgen’s prime objective was to plot their escape from their mountain retreat, along with bringing back the dragons of the Ogmus that had mysteriously vanished from the face of Tiernan Og over three hundred years ago. Pretty soon after the birth of the six rogue blacks, in actual fact. Even though he had never seen a dragon, let alone ridden one, Volgen took umbrage at any attempt to thwart his plans. And the theft of the one book that could provide them with answers was a pretty serious thwarting in anyone’s book. Or tome, as the case may be.

Tobias increased his pace, negotiating the twisting, turning tunnels and intersections of Hope with an ease born of familiarity. In a matter of minutes he reached the merchants’ quarter, and paused at the entrance. The large amphitheatre was heaving. It seemed that most of Hope’s population of some five hundred souls had chosen this day to do their shopping. With a wry grimace, Tobias wondered why. News of the stolen book, perhaps? He shook his head as he scanned the mass of bodies milling around the huge cavern, very few of whom seemed to be buying anything. Instead the populace stood in small groups, muttering amongst themselves and casting the odd, wary glance towards the tunnel Tobias was about to emerge from. The library tunnel.

Only the food stalls appeared to be doing a brisk trade. The smell of spit-roasted chicken and spices wafted enticingly through the air, tickling Tobias’s nostrils, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten for the past few hours. He

shrugged the pangs of hunger aside and steeled himself to venture forth, knowing that as soon as he was spotted he would be accosted from all sides by people wanting to know if the news were true.

Not being of a mind to further fuel the rumours with idle gossip he ducked his head down, pulled the collar of his tunic up around his ears, shoved his hands in his pockets, and set off at a fast pace into the crowd. He strode forward, not looking up, nor left nor right, as his rapid strides carried him along the central avenue through the stalls. He murmured brief apologies to those he bumped into, but didn't slow.

When he was half way across, he allowed a small smile to grace his face. So far so good. He was nearing the safety of the tunnel leading to his rooms. Another couple of minutes and he would be there.

Unfortunately that was the point where his luck ran out. With his mop of red hair, a rarity amongst the Ogmus who were mostly dark, he stuck out like a boil on a sumo wrestler's backside. As there was only one person answering his description who was likely to be coming from the direction of the library tunnel, the cry was soon out.

Within moments Tobias was being buffeted, both verbally and physically, as people demanded answers:

“Is it true that the book's been stolen?”

“Has the Wing Commander murdered Cronan yet? If not, when will he?”

“Has the senile old duffer misplaced the book? Is he using it to prop up a table?”

“Is it the work of the Blackabbots?”

“Do you fancy a shag, big boy?”

That was the one that did it for Tobias. Until then he had politely declined to answer the questions and had been steadily forcing his way through towards the safety of the tunnel, although the press of bodies made it damned hard work. But when that question was asked, by probably the ugliest old crone Tobias had ever laid eyes on, and accompanied by a suggestive tongue movement, fear spurred him on. Not caring who he injured, he elbowed and kicked his way out of the melée, much to the disappointment of the aforementioned hag, who threw her walking-cane to the floor and glowered after the retreating figure in disgust.

After what seemed like an age, Tobias reached the tunnel and ran as fast as he could towards his rooms.

Not wanting to be too far away from the library when Volgen had finished with Cronan, few gave chase. Those who did soon gave up and settled for shouting abuse at Tobias's fleeing form.

As the final turn came into sight, Tobias breathed a sigh of relief and slowed. He was knackered. He hoped Jophrey, his roommate, was up and about. He was bursting to tell someone what had happened, and Jophrey was the only one he could trust with such news. His friend had no love of the Blackabbots, either.

Like Tobias, Jophrey was an orphan. He'd turned up at Hope's foundling annex two years ago, alone and bedraggled, his parents having been killed by Lord Blackbishop and Mandrake, his black dragon, while they were out on the mountainside. The poor lad had been traumatised, so it was only natural that Tobias should take him under his wing and look after him. With them both being fourteen cycles old at the time they had soon become firm friends, and had remained so ever since.

Tobias grinned. Jophrey was fascinated by the dragons — the ones that had vanished so many years before — and was as eager as he to know all about them. That was why Tobias kept him informed of how the translations were going.

Reaching their rooms Tobias paused in the doorway, his hands pressed against the jambs as he fought to catch his breath. “Jophrey! Jophrey! You in there?” No answer.

Tobias frowned and stepped into the living area. It was unlike Jophrey to not be up and about at this hour. Mind you, he had been working the late shift at Pies R Us, the fast food outlet, so he was probably still in bed.

Eager to tell his friend the morning’s news, he moved across the small room, carefully negotiating the clutter of papers, cups, plates and dirty clothing that lay scattered on the floor and piled on the room’s two chairs. He headed towards the door leading to the sleeping area. When he reached it he gently thumbed the latch and pushed the door open to poke his head through.

“Jophrey? You asleep?” Still no answer.

Tobias pushed the door fully open and stepped inside. The light coming from the room behind spilled in. Tobias’s shadow stretched across the rug-covered floor towards Jophrey’s rumpled bed. It was empty, devoid of anything remotely resembling the sleeping form of his friend.

A frown formed on Tobias’s face as he raised a hand to switch on the glow-globe. A soft, pale light bathed the room. He sucked in his breath. The drawers of Jophrey’s dresser were all pulled out and his clothes had gone.

Seeing some crumpled papers on the floor, Tobias moved across to inspect them. A terrible foreboding struck him as he stooped to pick them up and place them on the dresser-top. When he had smoothed them out the foreboding became a gut-clenching dread and his eyes widened. He recognised the neat, flowing script upon the paper. It was Cronan’s handwriting; a translation of one of Nostra’s earlier verses dealing with the rise to power of the black dragons.

Tobias stared at the papers in disbelief, his lips compressing into a thin line as he tried to make sense of what he had discovered. Mouthing an oath, he screwed up the papers and threw them to the floor in fury.

Jophrey was the thief. He must be an agent of the Dark Ones. During the past two years the double-dealing toerag had played them all for fools. The thieving little b—