

Serpentoid Site Scouts

“Smell that?” Kerigoo hissed, his tongue flickering as he tried to identify the unusual scent on the wind. Debraa slowly lowered her spyglass and began to taste the air in turn, her eyes roving over the human fort that sat four hundred furlongs to their south. She nodded silently; it smelt quite different to wood or peat smoke, yet somehow similar enough that it had to be something burning.

The blockhouse they had been hired to examine sat inside a ring of barbed wire approximately twenty furlongs to the west of the old town of Oughterard, along what had once been the primary – read only – overland route towards the port of Galway. Of particular note were the pair of parallel metal tracks that ran adjacent to the old road, stopping in a faux-rock barrier. They looked similar to the mine cart tracks in the tunnels under the hills – or they would have, if they had been carved into the underlying rock and not lain on top of thick wooden boards.

“Possible iron horse,” Debraa growled, taking a note of the sun direction as a rough estimate of the hour. Graa had mentioned that before they left Maam Cross. Something about the paleskins and shortlegs – *surface men* and *tunnel men*, she corrected herself – having found a mechanical way to emulate the horses that had once run along the tracks. Something that would be damn useful up north, if reality was willing to cooperate.

“Over there.” Kerigoo jabbed a claw to the southeast, drawing her attention towards an ugly black metal box that crept out from behind some trees. Towards the back, they could see small glass slits in the sides and facing towards the front. The first box that followed it was much lower, painted a drab grey and filled with crates. The second was entirely metallic and bore a hemispherical gun emplacement on top. As the convoy drew to a half near the blockhouse, a group of surface men exited from behind the building. One of them appeared to be pushing a cart.

“No sign of how they managed to summon it. Must be on a schedule.”

“Or those...what do call them...wireless machines?”

She emitted a musing whiff. That was a possibility – word from up towards Letterfrack was that a rather eccentric Fomorian noblewoman had not only recognised that the military could do this, she had actually managed to build something that could listen in on these aetherous messages. If only they knew what to look out for. Deciding that it wasn't important, she focussed on the crates being carted inside.

“This would appear to be a supply run,” she commented. “Possible food or ammunition supplies for the mounted guns.”

“We haven't heard them firing at anything. Why would they need a resupply, and how much do they have in the first place?”

She lowered the spyglass again, about to concede that both were excellent questions, when her ears picked up a low drone coming from the south. She turned her head that way, and mentally swore as she saw the machine curving through the air to its left, all wires and thick wooden planks sticking out from a box-like body. Stubby black wheels hung underneath the body. She didn't know the exact name for it, but she knew exactly what it *was*.

An aeroplane. One of those flying machines that the surface men had built in stark defiance of the natural order imposed by gravity. Faster than anything alive – certainly too fast to shoot with the revolvers they had. In fact, as it dipped behind the blockhouse it was just fast enough that it might not-

A staccato burst of gunfire forced everything else out of her thinklump. Both of them froze, eyes rotating every which way as they tried to work out where it had come from. The soldiers around the blockhouse darted towards piles of sandbags, while a few more heads appeared above the roof. It almost appeared as though they were looking to the east, or slightly north of it. Behind them, the turret on the cart spun to cover its tracks.

“What is that war bird running from?” Kerigoo pointed to the west. Debraa's eyes followed his claw, locking onto a specimen that, even if apparently under-sized, was still just about the same

height as the surface men. A brief glance through the spyglass as the bird sprinted away in erratic bursts confirmed that it had no rider or even any sign of a harness. She couldn't see any paint on it from here, which further suggested that it was a feral. "That sounded like heavy repeater fire, but the blockhouse isn't firing. So what *is*?"

No sooner had he asked that than the machine reappeared to the east, curving around to its left. As it levelled out and tilted towards the ground, a muzzle flash and gunshot erupted from one side of the metallic front of the body. Half a heartbeat later, another followed, and Debraa could have sworn that she saw the bullets glowing as they streaked towards the hapless bird. A heartbeat later, the cycle repeated as the bird staggered with an agonising shriek of pain. After what must have been twenty shots, it collapsed into an undignified heap on its left side.

The machine did not let up firing until after the glowing bullets had begun to impact the ground beyond it. It tilted its snout back up again and tilted to its left as it drew closer and closer, becoming louder as it lined up on them. Debraa felt a tendril of terror run down her spine. Had it seen them? Were the clumps of grass they had lain among thick enough to hide them?

"It's seen us!" Kerigoo hissed, emitting a whiff of fear to match another already present. Had he emitted one already, or was that *hers*? Just as she thought it would start firing on them, it passed overhead and continued to turn to the left. "Let's get out of here before it comes back."

Without specifically agreeing or even suggesting it, they turned and began to slither towards the trees that lay three furlongs away. They'd measured that previously, knowing in advance that the clumps of yellowing grass and yellow-flowered pricklebushes through which they slithered would provide them with enough cover to get there, but the appearance of the aeroplane made it suddenly feel much further away. At every other scale-length, they glanced over their shoulder, expecting to see that infernal machine bearing down on them.

It wasn't until they were finally well within the treeline and had found Avaa waiting at the camp that they allowed themselves to relax. She took one sniff at them and immediately began to pour them a finger of the pricklebush wine she had brought as a "medicinal beverage". Debraa thought about refusing it – surely she couldn't be *that* out-of-sorts! - but Kerigoo had no such inhibitions, tilting back his head and swallowing it in a heartbeat.

"Neither of you have ever smelt like this. Even after going up against war birds. Does it have anything to do with that noise?" Avaa waved a claw in the direction of the droning aeroplane.

"One of those...plane-airs? Air-planes? One of them attacked a war-bird." Kerigoo paused as though for dramatic effect, before continuing, "The long-legs have stuck heavy repeaters on a flying machine."

"Go away out of that! Next you'll be telling me they can hover in mid-air," Avaa hissed derisively.

"He speaks the truth. We do not know how either came to be there, but it was able to detect and attack the war-bird before the blockhouse garrison could." Debraa was about to continue, when an even more terrifying thought popped into her thinklump. What if they *could* hover, and what if they had other weaponry?