

THE PRECIOUS REWARD

by Colin D. Smith

The last day of the Upland Moor Scavenger Hunt was always the hardest. By now it was late afternoon. The clouds were capped with a tinge of orange from the sun as they drifted over distant snow-capped mountains. A light wind disturbed the leaves on the trees dotted around the moor. Isabel pulled her anorak together and shrugged her shoulders to reposition her backpack. Ahead of her, Stuart walked with bold steps, checking the map every few minutes.

“Are we there yet, Stu?” she called to him, trying not to sound like she wanted to be home in front of the fire with her feet up and a strong cup of tea in her hand.

“Aye, I think so,” Stuart shouted back. He stopped, waiting for her to catch up. “You’re not tired already are you, Izzy?” he said. She forced a smile.

“Of course not.”

Stuart put an arm around her shoulders and coaxed her to lean into him for support. Her aching feet were grateful.

“Did you see the old farmhouse?” he said to her as they walked.

“Is that where we’re headed?”

“That’s what the clue said. ‘Go to the old farmhouse on the top of the hill, and there you’ll find your precious reward.’”

“Is that the prize? Then we can go home?”

“I suppose,” said Stuart. “I think there’s supposed to be a cell phone so we can call base when we’ve found it.”

“What is this ‘precious reward?’”

“Maybe it’s a ring—one ring to unite them all!” Stuart laughed, but Isabel frowned at him. It sounded like one of Stuart’s literary jokes that she never understood.

The farmhouse stood amidst a clump of trees on top of a hill that sloped down to a sheer drop of at least twenty feet. A ten-foot mossy wall surrounded the base of the hill. Stuart managed to find some foot holes in the stonework, and hauled himself on top of the wall. He then leaned over and offered his hand to Isabel.

“I can do it,” she said, slapping his hand away. With a great deal of effort, she managed to pull herself to the top. She swung her legs around so she was sitting on top of the wall. She looked up and Stuart, victorious.

“Well done,” he said, looking up at the flat hillside wall in front of them. “Now to climb the rest. You ready?”

She watched Stuart carefully as he made his way up the hill. He was like a tall, blonde-haired spider, the way he scaled the flat surface. When he reached the edge, he pulled himself over the top, then lay on his front to watch Isabel ascend.

Isabel followed Stuart’s lead. Soon, and with some help from Stuart, she joined him at the edge of the hill.

“There it is,” he said, as they sat looking up toward the farmhouse. “Not far to go now. You okay?”

“Of course I’m okay,” Isabel said.

“Let’s get on with it then!”

The hill was steep, making for a tough walk to the top. Before long they were approaching the large doorway to the farmhouse.

The door was thick and heavy, and it took some effort on Stuart’s part to push it open.

“Ladies first,” he said, holding the door open for Isabel.

“I’m not scared, you know,” she said, pushing past him and into the farmhouse.

The room they walked into might have been the kitchen. There was no furniture save for a large chipped and worn wooden table in the middle of the room. The cabinets and counters were suggestive of food storage and preparation, but it was clear they hadn’t been used for many years.

“Okay, let’s start looking for the reward,” said Stuart, crossing the room to a door on the other side. He pushed on the handle, but it didn’t move.

“What is it?” said Isabel.

“This door appears to be jammed,” he said. Isabel walked over to him.

“Let me see.”

There was a loud bang. The room was plunged into darkness.

“Hey!” Stuart shouted. “Who closed the door?” He started walking back then swore loudly.

“What is it, Stuart? Are you alright?”

“This bloody table!” he said. “I’ll be okay.”

Isabel could hear him limp toward the farmhouse entrance. She heard his shoulder thud against the door. Then he struck it with his foot.

“It’s no good,” he said. “Can you get that other door open?”

Isabel tried the door on the opposite side, but it resisted her.

“It feels like it’s locked.” A lump came to her throat. She was exhausted and hungry. Her emotions were close to the surface, and she was too tired to keep suppressing them. She could feel moisture in her eyes, and she rubbed them to fight back.

“Are you okay over there?” said Stuart’s voice from across the room.

Isabel slid down onto the floor and sniffed. “I’m fine,” she said.

She could hear Stuart making his way back over, this time more slowly. His footsteps stopped nearby, and she felt his body sink down next to her. They sat side by side with their backs to the door.

“What now?” Isabel said.

“I don’t know,” said Stuart.

Isabel felt Stuart’s hand find hers. She gripped it. He must have felt her trembling because he shifted closer to her. She felt his breath on her cheek and slowly turned her head toward him, their noses brushing. She could sense his mouth close to hers.

“If you don’t feel the same way, Isabel, stop me,” he said. His lips brushed gently against hers. She didn’t stop him.

A small red light flashed in the corner of the ceiling. The camera attached relayed infrared pictures to a small office ten miles away.

“Shall we call them, or wait a few minutes?” the hunt coordinator said to his assistant, smiling at the monitor in front of him.