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by Alan Laing

Buachaille Etive Mor floated on a grey duvet of cloud inversion. It back-dropped an LED display-screen endlessly scrolling through its messages:

"Welcome to glencoe.co.uk Mountain Environment. Accommodation capacity currently 748. Climbing Permits and daily or weekly insurance available at Ranger Headquarters first right. Underground Parking 300 metres second right. Buachaille Gondola open 8 a.m. till 6 p.m. Sponsored by Campbell's Organic Steak-House, Glencoe Village Resort"

Three generations of Grants stood together in the 20 minute drop-off mini-park and scanned the information. All were bearded: one grizzled, one trim and black, one nearly at the stage of peach-fuzz. The oldest of the three shook his head slowly. The youngest pointed at the Buachaille and asked, "Is that it, the ridge up that left hand side? Is that the Aonach whatshisname?"

Father and grandfather smiled. Rob Grant answered the boy.

"No quite, Adam. You're in the ball park but shootin at the wrong goals. Turn yersel 180 and take a look back there. The Aonach Eagach. One of the finest ridge walks in Scotland. Me an your Gran knocked it off summer and winter. Your turn now."

"Jeez. So we're going for a walk along that, Dad?"

Steve Grant, tapping their permit code into his mobile to send their current location to the Rangers' computer, answered without looking up.

"Yup. And you'd better enjoy it. Like I enjoyed it when your Grandad dragged me along in the rain when I was your age."

"Aye – and for free then."

"So, you decided what you're going to do then, Dad? We'll be about five or six hours, if sunshine here gets his backside in gear."

"I told you. I'm goin to sell my soul again at the VRME centre. Better than nothing, since they've taken away my over-sixty bloody licence – excuse the language Adam. Then I'll get us organised at the motel and maybe have a low-level toddle, if the walk-police allow that."

"Come on Dad, you know what the doctor said. Better safe than sorry. Anyway, see you later at the motel."

"Bye Grandad. No pullin any loose women now."

"Cheeky wee bugger. He'll come to a bad end." Rob smiled, and turned back to the car.

At the VRME centre Rob slotted in his National I.D., typed in the required insurance form information and read the warning messages:

Users must wear appropriate clothing and footwear as temperatures in the VRME chambers will reflect season, altitude and any "special weather conditions" requested. No food or drink to be taken into the chamber. At designated times energy tablets and hydration drinks will be provided.

Do not step off your path simulator while it is moving – if necessary press the "Rest" or "Cancel" button on the wrist strap provided.

Welcome to the Virtual Reality Munro Environment.

Rob clicked "Read and agreed" and moved on to the route options.

"Schiehallion again? Or maybe Ben Alder – plenty time for that. Or how about Beinn Eighe? Up there twice and never saw much. O.K. Beinn Eighe this morning and see if the legs'll take Alder tomorrow. Christ, that would've been an impressive weekend back then."

He punched in the requisite code, slid in his credit card, pocketed the route card which slid back to him and made his way to the VRME chambers.

Checking the number of his chamber he inserted the route card in the slot in the door and as it opened – not with the usual mechanical whirr of such devices but to the sound of a burn over pebbles – he entered. Once inside, arrows on the floor directed him onto a wide, gently-sloping treadmill-style apparatus. In front of him was a screen carrying a further set of options.

"Weather conditions – let's have a nice autumn day, maybe a bit chilly, but clear to the top. Pace. Don't kid yourself – average. Special options: Wind turbine removal? Nah, used to them now. Eagle sighting, let's have that. Never forget the first time. Music? Are you kiddin – we're here for the music of nature. Boots on bracken, burn, gurglin, and maybe a bit of wheezing. Right let's get on the hill."

He pressed "Set Off and Enjoy!" With a barely perceptible hum an all-round vision-screen lowered itself over him, stopping inches above the treadmill, which was already transformed by the visualisation graphics into a stony path, and now flanked by heather slopes.

Two figures, one tall and one shorter, moved steadily along the sinuous Aonach Eagach ridge. From below, their progress would have seemed imperceptible, two exotically coloured insects crawling along a towering grey wall topped by the jagged battlements that were nature's chaotic defence system. To one of the pair the ridge-top was perfectly-designed in degree of difficulty and exposure, neatly balancing challenge and security. To the other it was perfectly-designed to keep him in perpetual doubt about wanting to be there at all. Climbing up, climbing down, climbing round, climbing across; plenty of variety but more or less the same effect for each direction.

The conversation was mostly one-sided and more or less limited to the imperative, the advisory and the sardonic.

"Don't try to go down backwards. Face in."

"There's a big hold up to your left, Adam. That's it. Park a bus on that."

"Get off your knees. They're for praying on. Or is that maybe what you're doing?"

"That's right Dad. I'm praying for some rain now, just to make things really perfect."

Rob gradually felt his legs and body adjust with less and less conscious thought to the ever-changing flexible surface below him as it altered its angle or broke smoothly into wide steps. He'd used the VRME before, on a variety of routes and, despite his initial scepticism, had to marvel at the degree of sophistication involved: the incredible graphics, the blending together of sight, sound and smell into "A Virtual Outdoor Experience of Stunning Quality". He'd known that computerisation had moved on since his day – he'd seen some of the games Adam immersed himself in – but was still always surprised at how quickly the suspension of disbelief kicked in.

There was nobody to chat with of course, though you could always hire one of the big multi-chambers as a group. But there was something to be said at his age for the “intensified experience editing process”, which trimmed the route time down to a comfortable couple of hours. You still experienced each significant change of view or terrain, just more briefly. There had been times in the past when that particular facility would have appealed, he supposed, as he and his mates had slogged up a scree, two steps up and one down, or hacked and kicked steps up a hard-crusting snow slope.

The dialogue was even more one-sided, but the tone had softened.

“Keep focusing, Adam. You’ll be getting knackered now. That’s when accidents happen. You’re doing great though. Take a look down there. That’s the Clachaig Motel. The ridge stops above it. Get down there and I’ll maybe buy you a half of Re-energiser.”

“A Re-energiser? That’ll make this...torture all...worthwhile. And thanks for the rain by the way. Did you order it specially?”

“D’you not remember. You put in an order for it a couple of hours ago. Now you’re getting the real Eagach experience. Lucky lad.”

Calling up the “Journey Statistics Screen” with the wrist strap button, and temporarily blocking off part of his view of “Beinn Eighe”, Rob saw that he had progressed half way, in 28 minutes, used 300 calories and his heart-rate was in the “Safe” category. Clicking back to his 360 degree view he looked over to the quartzite peaks of mighty Liathach and Alligin. He’d always thought the Torridonian mountains the best-presented in Scotland. Laid out like masterpieces in an art gallery. Space between them so you could take them in one by one. And always that feeling that you were looking at some of the oldest lumps of rock in the world.

“60 million years old, and that’s just those tops. There’s some numbers the wee human brain just can’t comprehend.”

Then he realised what he was saying to himself. “Those tops”? “Those tops” were no more than a set of pixels, nano seconds old and probably three feet away.

From the furthest point of his peripheral vision he saw it, or maybe he even sensed it. Before he’d ever seen one he’d often mistaken other large predator birds for it. Once he’d definitely seen one – and that was only a handful of times in a lifetime – he didn’t make the mistake again. The golden eagle: lord of the mountains, monarch of the skies – give it whatever rank you wanted, it didn’t care. If ever there was total self-sufficiency on wings this was it. Rob pressed “Rest” as the bird floated nearer. The graphics were faultless: every detail of the golden neck feathers and the russet plumage was sharp and precise. The beat of the gigantic wings filled his ears.

Rob’s mind went back to that first eagle sighting, in a Torridon of his memory. A Torridon he had experienced over the years in eight hour days of mist, smirr, lashing rain, and the occasional blazing sunshine. Hard slogging, wondering why you were doing it, then that great series of feelings: the last bit of track; the boots prised off; watching the first pint being poured; that sense of ...

“Dad! Look up there! There! Is that an eagle?”

Steve paused, one hand anchored to the rock, one shading his eyes against the watery sun which had finally emerged. The bird was big right enough, but too far to identify with accuracy. More likely to be a raven, but you did get the occasional eagle sighting in the area. As he turned to Adam he could see the excitement in the boy’s eyes. Was this really the time for a bracing dose of Scottish scepticism?

"Hey, I think you're right. Certainly big enough. Well spotted. Took me years to see one of those."

The bird spiralled downwards and below the ridge.

"Not a bad way to finish your day, that. See the path down there? Half an hour and we should be down. Manage that O.K.?"

"No bother – but I'll try to go slow, considering your age."

"Thanks for that. I'll just take these boulders out of my rucksack then. So, enjoy that then? Bit of a challenge?"

"What challenge? Nothing to it. What'll we do tomorrow?"

Steve grinned. Looked like the kindling would catch.

Rob took another look round the pin-sharp perfection of the mountain landscape, watched the immaculate image of the magnificent bird diminish.

Ahead he could see the flawless reproduction of the summit, a summit still clear in his memory. He clicked back on-screen, checked the time still left to go. His hand hovered over two of the buttons. Then pressed "Cancel".