

From free e-book sample: 'Tchernaya Creek'

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A tall pale-skinned woman appeared from the evening shadows surrounding the campsite as the main meal of the day was being cleaned up. There was no alarm at her appearance, no rush to get weapons - although the smallest children were hustled away simply because she was alone. From a small circle of men, an elder stood and moved toward the woman standing respectfully outside the camp's informal boundary. Similarly, the much shorter, wizened elder seemed curious rather than troubled as he moved elegantly to her.

"Welcome you our camp, woman of Russia," he said politely in broken English. The welcome initiated movement toward the camp's fireplace where they sat on the log seats provided. "What we can do for you?" he asked, supposing the woman must need something to arrive at this time of day and alone.

"Thank-you, your hospitality, Mr Ah-wun," the woman responded, bowing respectfully. She peered at him solemnly for a moment and then, seemingly satisfied with what she saw, she professed: "I have become the wife to Nyulang Creek." The wrinkled elder smiled, but then frowned somberly at the implications behind the statement. "Yet, you are here alone?" he queried.

"My husband knows not I am here. He would cross with me be," she explained. The elder raised a brow as he pondered the statements. Lee-chun was old but he was no fool. He was well aware of the problems spawned by mixing with, let-alone intermarrying with the blacks of this land. However, he also knew the black-skinned man, Nyulang Creek, and knew him to be honest, dignified and smart. In fact, the so-called 'savage' spoke better English than any of Lee-chun's family.

"White men chase after us," she told him bluntly. "One of the station managers has cast shameless eyes on me since I was teen. I do not like this man – he is old and smells of stale lust. He heard about the black-fella marriage and he wants my new husband dead and me back with my family; to be given to him," she explained.

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Old Lee-chun thought for a moment and then called softly to someone in the hut closest them. A young woman appeared and stopped in front of them, bowing and smiling timidly. The elder gestured at their visitor. "Our young friend and neighbor is in need of help: brave warrior-type help, I am thinking, Chin-wah," he explained.

"Chin-wah, please to meet Tchernaya Kreyanoff – ah! Tut-tut! Silly old man," he scolded. "It's Creek now my girl, isn't it? Tchernaya Creek," he declared, introducing the two women, who smiled tentatively until Chin-wah understood the elder's meaning. Her petite olive-brown face brightened instantly.

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Ah! My Afghan friends!" she said nodding, instinctively placing a delicate hand on the tall woman's shoulder in comfort.

"How many Yīngguó chase you?" Lee-chun asked.

"A dozen. Twelve. They have horses and have been scouring the lands south of here. My husband's people warn they coming this way," she told him. The elder frowned heavily. This is not good news for our group, either, he understood. The Yīngguó-

whites were violently unpredictable toward Chinese gold-miners when there was no Law around.

"A Mr Dun-Penny leads the hunt, for the foolish old station manager, Mr Ewart," she continued, as Chin-wah suddenly began to move away.

"I go, warn friend. Ask if they help you: help all us!" she sighed, disappearing into one of the huts. Moments later, she reappeared in bush-walk clothing and disappeared into the deepening night, accompanied by two excited teenage boys. Lee-chun took Tchernaya's hand. "Your new husband and his people help us find our way around here – very kind, very generous - teach us finding yěshēng shíwù when we come their country," the elder explained, using his language for, 'wild foods'. "There is Afghan camel camp not far here. They taking supplies inland where no one else go, as they doing across deserts for time and times," he told her, explaining the camel-drivers' presence here.

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"You think they will help me? Help us? When whites with gun hunt us?" she asked anxiously. The old fellow grinned. "Qǐng tīng wǒ shuō," he said, meaning. 'Listen to me please'. "It little known true that Camel-people are desert warrior. They get on ah? In good form with blacks, because they too understand the land. And both peoples live by similar code," he said, chuckling as he continued. "This fierce group here now, like nothing more than to fight, run and fight some more – if friends are in needy. The arrogant Yīngguó have not made any friend of the Afghan, seeing them only as beasts of burden, like camel," the old man said, as he threw wood on the fire.

Yarwun: the Kreyanoff Paw-paw plantation – a good day's ride away – same evening

"Where she could be? It been nearly week now!" Alexei Kreyanoff cursed roundly at his wife, who rolled her eyes at his angry stance as she swept the floor.

"Tchernaya's a big girl; strong and fearless – she probably run off with that native she always making the eyes at," her mother said.

"Galina! You don't talk like that!" Alexei cried. "You know how much trouble we could have if she goes around with those natives!" he said, exasperated at his wife's acceptance of the relationship.

"Love cannot be compelled!" his wife said sagely. Alexei hawked and spat out the door. "Love is evil! It will make you fall in love with a goat!" he said, using another proverb from the old country. Galina throttled the broom-handle as she shooed him out of the house. "He is good man! Black, white, yellow! He is good man and if she want marry him, she will have found good husband," she said angrily, literally sweeping him out with the dust. "He provide fresh meat and fish his family, Alexei Kreyanoff! And! He not likes your demon drink! So he not sit around all day making that rot-gut stinking stuff!" she called angrily and threw the half-throttled broom after his disappearing form.

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"That's exactly the point, dearest love of my heart," Alexei mumbled. "He does do

all that, and more! Worse ... he make me look lazy!" he mumbled, as he went to drown his sorrows via the ever-ready potato vodka they brewed and drank here. The following morning: Marmor cattle station – a short horse-ride east from the Ah-wun campsite

"So! It appears they've gone further north-west, me buckos!" Ralph Dun-Penny said to the men finishing breakfast in the station's kitchen. They were a knock-up mob, but the 'boss' hadn't wanted to use any of his own men for a job like this. No, Dun-Penny thought, this 'job' calls for a certain type of man. Luckily for him, they were easy to come by all over Queensland at present, with lots of unemployed and not a lot of skills among them. Men so down on their luck, they'd kill any boong for a few pounds.

And his boss, Mr James, Sir-bloody Ewart, as he'd come to think of him, had already promised a lot of money for this job – enough to buy almost anything their black hearts desired – after the job was done of course. Sir bloody Ewart was no fool when it came to money, he'd found. "How'd ya know they goin' that way then, Guv?" the cheekiest of the lot asked brashly, while cleaning his rifle. "A couple of 'ringers' came through last night, said they saw a black, and a white woman, diving in one of the lagoons up that way – reckoned they were getting long-neck turtle, mud-clams and them water-lily stems them blacks like to eat," Dun-Penny explained as he began to make a move to leave. "Finish up boys! We're picking up a guide who knows exactly where those lagoons are – and we aim to come on them by surprise today sometime," he told them, moving out of the dark interior of the kitchen into the bright morning light outside. Several of their men had readied the horses and with a few saddle and bridle checks, the men mounted and rode northwest. Leather creaked, bridles and stirrups jingle-jangled and the morning sun danced off the oiled rifle barrels strapped to saddles.

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No one at the station or those leaving noticed the young black-skinned serving girl run out the back door and disappear into the thick bush behind the kitchen. Soon, though, the sound of a bull-roarer sounded – humming and singing across the lands of the first people as it had done for generations: a true message for those able to interpret such. As soon as she heard another start up, the girl ran as fast as she could back to the station and her job, obligation to kin complete.

Nyulang Creek & Co.: At the lagoon where they were to meet, Nyulang Creek had bathed and was drinking from the lagoon when he heard the sound of warning on the wind. This type of warning came with set moves: coming from where it was, the warning told him which way the threat was coming. He turned his head toward the sound until he was sure of the direction, then turned ninety degrees left, which faced him directly east. Still, he'd told his new wife that he would be here – and here he would be, come evil spirit or flood! he avowed. He shifted into the high-grass, close to the area they were to meet, and squatted low, making himself as small as possible: another shadow in the tall, rippling Elephant grass. A few minutes later, he heard the unmistakable tinkle of a small bell and he grinned, peering around to find the source of the familiar sound and its owner.

On the opposite side of the lagoon, a small brown hand with the tiny bell in it poked through the grass for moment and then disappeared. Nyulang gave out a soft wallaby cough and moved silently through the grass until he was in thick trees. He moved steadily to where he'd spotted the signal and saw his wife's pale face peering at him from out of the long grass. With her were the young Chinese woman Chin-wah and two boys from her large family. Each moved slowly away from the lagoons into the thicker vegetation, until they were far enough away to stand before coming together. Nyulang and Tchernaya hugged as if each hadn't seen the other for months instead of hours. In spite of his joy, Nyulang abruptly pulled back from the embrace. He looked hard at each of them, though his questions were for his new wife alone.

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"Where have you been? Why are Chin-wah and her brothers with you? And, why do you all smell of camel?" he rushed out, wrinkling his nose at the thick, unmistakeable scent wafting from them. A bullroarer interrupted any response, as it started up much louder and closer this time, yet still from the same direction. As they began to move, another short barking cough sounded from behind. Nyulang spun in surprise, as several of his brothers and uncles from his Bayili Clan appeared, body-painted and war-ready. At that sight, Nyulang's pulse sped up and pride, heavy with impassioned blood, rushed through his body.

"Come, my brother! We go fast!" one said calmly. "They come. We must lead them to our brothers," another of his uncles said, chin-lipping to the land on the other side of the lagoons. Outlined by the rising sun on a hill to the east, they could see the silhouettes of several horsemen moving their way. They turned and began following his clans-people through well-known, well-trodden paths and immediately into land where horses would have difficulty. "We must keep ahead until the creek," they were told, as they watched the chasing group speed silently over their beloved sacred lands.

Chasing the wind

Dun-Penny's tracker-guide-cum-scout was excellent at his job, but then again, he did not have the generations of experience that Nyulang's people were born with. Thus, the chasers followed dutifully and slowly, wherever the tracks took them, and in this case, walking the horses to get through safely. Even when they could ride, it was slow going. They know where they're going and we don't! That's all! Dun-Penny mused haughtily as he walked his mount across a particularly nasty bit of ground. Even walking them, one of the stupid horses had stepped in a hole and had to be put down: Law of this bloody wild land, he knew, and now I am another man down! he thought angrily. Dun-Penny had started out with fourteen keen and desperate men. Through sickness, snakebite, heat stroke and a lethally lame horse, he was now down to nine and still without sighting the elusive pair. He called ahead to their tight-lipped scout, his frustration mounting.

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"Where do you think they're headed for? Mr Perribone?" he asked sarcastically as he wound his way through the broken ground on foot. Again.

"Dunno! Could be the Calliope, or the Boyne. Or some fuckin' place that doesn't have a name but 'as enough water an' food to keep 'em goin,'" he was told in the man's dry, laconic manner. "There's more of 'em now, though, Guv," Perribone said, surprising Dun-Penny who stopped mid-step and was almost pulled over by his horse. "More of who? More of what, Mr Fucking Perribone?" the shocked leader asked, incredulous at the casual revelation.

"More fuckin' people, Mr Dun-Penny! Quite a few more by the looks, I'd say," he said, glaring eye to eye with the angry man. Dun-Penny badly wanted to allow his rage freedom, though he kept a tight rein on it for now. "And when were you going to tell us this new information? And exactly how many more are we talking about here?" he said, not moving as the group gathered closer to hear.

"Well, there's your two: the black and a white-woman, and there's three small-footed folk that could be children, with some sort of slippers on, and there's a few wild blacks leading them – have been ever since the lagoons back there – thought you knew! Blind fuckin' Freddy could see there's more than two lots of feet there!" he said, pointing down to a soft spot on the ground below where, as planned, several bare footprints were standing out quite clearly.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuckin' fuck it! We still outnumber 'em boss! And we got guns and horses! They can't get far!" one of his men called. "Yeah! C'mon Boss!" another said. "Let's catch up with the coon-dangle cunts an' show 'em what's what!" Dun-Penny faced the men. "I am not going back now! A few more bullets to shut any loudmouths up, eh boys!" he assured them. A white-Russian, breeding with a black! God only knows what would come of that unholy union! Dun-Penny mused naively, as they were finally able to mount and make up some lost time.

8

The Creek with no name

The foot-walkers arrived at the creek from white-dust flatlands. The tiny creek, nestling between the even smaller towns of Bajool and Marmor, doesn't show up on most maps. Its bigger sister, Eight Mile Creek, a little further north, gets the map plaudits and all of its water in flood. On the other side of creek, the ground rose to a small, thinly treed hill and, when they crossed over and reached its apex, Tchernaya was dumbstruck.

Down the hillside and out of sight, she saw full-bearded Afghan men in loose flowing robes mounted on camels, with long-barrelled rifles slung across the huge saddles. There were Chinese men and youth with bow and arrow, dressed in loose black silk pyjama-type garments. Below and behind those were more of Nyulang's people: weapons to hand and painted for war. It was a stunning sight. The smaller

group quickly moved down to join the mix and match war party, made up of three distinct races that had come together to make a stand of their own. Once more this day, however, they were given no chance to talk things through. Suddenly, they heard hoof-beats and the snorting of horses, as the group of white men rode hard across the dry flats, directly toward the hidden party, made up of decent people with several different skin-colors, Tchernaya, the 'white-Russian' whose family ran from the 'Reds' suddenly thought, and which caused her to break into hysterical giggles.

To defeat the hysterics, she grabbed her frowning husband's hand and held it tight as they walked uphill to meet the horsemen before that group reached the creek-bed. Apparently, so she'd found out on the way here, Nyulang's people don't believe in ambush in any way shape or form. They consider it unfair! Tchernaya had to stop from giggling again. It's just nerves, she thought, castigating herself mentally as they rose over the hill's apex. And as each group saw the other ...

Careful what you wish for

9

As he drove his horse across the white-soil flats toward the dry creek-bed, Ralph Dun-Penny's thoughts were bitter: I wish we could just find this slippery black bastard, grab the fuckin' Russian bitch, collect my money and go home. I am so fucking sick of this fuckin' heat and flies and ... Thoughts that dissolved as his body reacted to sight and used his hands to pull back hard on the reins. His mount threw its head around wildly in protest at the cloying dust and being forced from go to whoa in a few steps. Dun-Penny's alarmed mind followed suit.

Holy shit! They are here! Here they are! All together – and quite a few, also! A friggin' meeting of nations! ran at speed through Dun-Penny's mind as his group's raucous dash halted behind his shocked reaction. The horses created a cloud of white dust as they came on fast, and slowed just as fast. Dust from their wild run swirled up and over them, falling back onto bodies, clothes, eyes, hats and weapons.

It coated everything, making them look like ghost-riders: dusty grey beings mounted on horse-shaped apparitions that threw their big heads up and down and whinnied in protest at the sudden forced halt. The large, white-dusted creatures were the only ones unsurprised by the sight of so many humans and camel suddenly appearing in front of them. The creatures had scented the various strong wild scents of human and camel even as they were whipped across the clearing toward them. Dun-Penny and his men had no such senses and at first sighting, reactions varied only in the distance it took to stop as quickly as possible....