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Also By Frank P. Ryan

The Snowmelt River

The Tower of Bones

The Sword of Feimhin

FRANK P. RYAN

The
Return
of the
Arinn



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*For my late mother, who inspired me with her song of
Ree Nashee in the shadow of the magic mountain.*

What none would appear to presume, other than my ageing self, is that all might be part of a cycle. A very great cycle, to be sure, in which a world or even a universe might be renewed. Once one becomes aware of cycles, one sees them everywhere: in flower and seed, in animal display and courtship, in the summer of desire, and the autumn of the fruit of that desire, in the death of winter and the rebirth of spring. The cyclical nature of being, of what we fondly describe as reality, is fundamental to all. But even in the glory of that universal realisation, I see now how other eyes might weigh the same possibilities with avarice. What then would such a rebirth make of that order and justice – the implicit rightfulness of all we hold dear? This provokes a terrifying possibility – a despair that gnaws relentlessly within my spirit.

Could it be that what we assumed as natural and inevitable might be confounded? Could our most fervent hopes be corrupted to the ends of darkness?

Ussha De Danaan, the last High Architect of Ossierel

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Dragon's Regret

Spiralling as he rose on the battering winds, the Dragon King – Omdorrrréilliuc to the worshipful Eyrie People and, more familiarly, Driftwood to Kate Shaunessy – found the thermals that were capable of bearing his titanic mass aloft. On the beach below, every face gazed up in rapture. Kate realised she must look minuscule, waving goodbye from on high to the fast-disappearing Cill children. They included her friend Shaami, and the special one who was already taller and more knowing than the others, the new Momu, who was gazing heavenwards with those big golden eyes. The pain of leaving them, knowing she might never to see them again, felt like a cold splinter of iron impaled in Kate's heart. But all too soon they were gone, the beach reduced to a snowflake of brilliant white before it too was lost behind the clouds that were materialising against the up-thrust mountains.

The dragon's voice remained a rumble as deep as thunder

even when it addressed Kate mind-to-mind: <Weep not for others but for yourself in your coming ordeal.>

‘I’ll still miss them terribly.’

<The heart is a poor guide to reason.>

‘Ah, sure, and where would we be without it?’

<Safer, perhaps. And besides, they no longer need your help.>

‘No. They have a new young Momu to guide them.’

<And who in this war-torn world will guide you when you have proven yourself so refractory to common sense?>

‘I know I’ve been unreasonable, but I’m back now. I do so hope that we remain friends. Please tell me where we are headed?’

<A Dragon King keeps his promises. I shall return you to your equally headstrong friend, the youthful Mage Lord, with his rune-warded spear and his arrogantly ambitious war.>

‘Yes, please take me back to Alan. I’m desperate to see him again. But I had hoped . . . if it will not put us too far out of our way . . .’

<Am I to be a mind-reader, then?>

Kate bit her lip. Even within the shelter of Driftwood’s dense ruff of bright green and yellow feathers she was shivering. The rushing gale of wind was growing rapidly fiercer as their flight gained pace, the cold numbing her cheeks and ears.

<Oh, very well then – I don’t suppose it will take us too far out of our course if we pass by a certain island . . .>

‘Thank you.’

<A small favour – but it is granted on the strict condition that you desist from all further pleadings for help to fulfil even more reckless behaviour . . .>

‘I promise.’

Kate allowed her eyes to close upon sleep. A single night’s rest on the beach had hardly cured her exhaustion. And the dreams she wandered into were hardly refreshing: if there was a landscape she never wished to see again, in dreams or reality, it was the Land of the Dead.

She woke up with a cry to discover Driftwood was gliding in slow wide circles over rocky buttresses that rose upwards for hundreds of feet out of the forested slopes. The air was warmer. Kate whooped – softly – with delight to witness the welcoming flocks of young dragons that rose out of the needle-like pillars of rocky landscape, which proved big enough to accommodate wooded plains on their pinnacles. On her last visit, the young dragons had been no more than babies, and she had delighted in watching them. But on this visit, Driftwood made no attempt to alight and spend time with his brood. For no more than a few minutes they wheeled and soared in the company of the excited young dragons before Driftwood bid them farewell in that deep incomprehensible tongue that Kate recognised, without need of translation, to be the language of beginnings.

‘Permission to speak?’

<Would that you were incapable!>

‘I’d have loved to have got to know them – your family.’

<Kate girl-thing has already forgotten that dragons eat juicy morsels such as herself.>

‘Not your brood – you’re a sea-dragon. You eat fish – sea creatures.’

<What difference in the belly of a hungry dragon – a fish, or a seal or a girl?>

Kate laughed. She just wanted to treasure the experience forever: the great wings beating, or gliding through the icy-cool air, the soaring pinnacles of pinkish rock capped with dense, semi-tropical greenery that were the perfect brood-chambers for the baby dragons, the excited antics of the youngsters, who left smoky trails perfumed with the fiery, incense-like musk of dragon’s breath.

‘Do you tell them fairy stories, like we tell our human children?’

<Baby dragons possess their stories. Each story is gifted to the individual offspring. It cannot be retold – or its lesson revealed to any other.>

‘What’s so special about each individual story?’

<There is a truth for each dragon in his or her story. The story is his or her first journey into self discovery.>

‘How can there be so many different truths?’

<Kate girl-thing has much to learn.>

‘Then explain – enlighten me, please?’

<You do not understand the destiny into which you rush headlong.>

‘How can I understand if you will not explain?’

<Perhaps some destinies are better not explained.>

‘Then treat me as a dragon-baby. Tell me my very own story.’

<You would not like to hear a dragon tale.>

‘Try me.’

<You would experience the story in the telling – it would not merely feel real, it would become real in you.>

Kate chuckled. ‘After what I’ve been through, I don’t think I am capable of being shocked any further.’

<You are a very foolish, headstrong, reckless and exceedingly stubborn girl-thing.>

‘I come from an island people infamous for their recklessness. Oh, please, Driftwood – I thought we were friends?’

<A girl-thing cannot be friends with a Dragon King.>

‘What are we, then?’

<A confusion of purpose. A conundrum.>

‘Why a conundrum?’

<To the Eyrie People I am a god to be adored and venerated with prayer and sacrifice. Yet, it would appear that some foolish, headstrong, and exceedingly stubborn girl-thing assumes she is my friend because she resurrected me from my age-old slumber.>

‘It wasn’t from slumber and you know it. I resurrected you from a self-inflicted death: a death that happened in ages past, when you dragons bit off your own wings and sacrificed yourselves to the depths of the oceans. Moreover, I didn’t resurrect you deliberately. The oraculum in my brow did it all by itself while I slept.’

<Thus would she correct a Dragon King!>

‘Does it offend your godly – your *kingly* – pride that a minuscule girl-thing not only resurrected your poor wingless body but also gave you back your beautiful gold-veined wings?’

<Immensely.>

‘Oh, Driftwood – tell me a story anyway.’

<Even though I caution you against it?>

‘All the more so.’

<Be it on your own head. Welcome to a world of story in which you are now one with that lady of legend, Nimue the Naïve, wife of King Ree Nashee and, by that same marriage, Queen of the Wildwoods.>

‘Well – I’m not sure that I want to become one with this Nimue the Naïve. Can’t I just listen to her story?’

<It is too late to change your mind now. You have been gifted the tale and are now bound by the telling.>

Something . . . *everything* . . . had changed. Within Kate’s being, a veil of time had been traversed and she had somehow lost track of her passage. There was an alien awareness of her surroundings, a heightening, as if her senses had multiplied. Something was whispering to her, bathing her in warmth that invaded her nostrils, filled her vision and then coated her entire skin. Kate only gradually became aware that the warmth was the breath from the mouth and nostrils of a face that filled her entire field of vision, and the tickling sticky sensation that enveloped her was a gigantic tongue. She felt suffused with emotions,

such as fear and joy, and overwhelmed with the alien wonder of it.

‘I never realised . . . I can’t believe I’m experiencing it.’

<You wish the experience to end?>

‘No – no. It’s . . . wonderful, Driftwood. But . . . I’m changing. I didn’t anticipate the profundity, the immediacy of it.’

<HARRRUUMMPPPHHH!>

That deep sigh immersed her as if she had entered a waterfall, a thundering, skin-tingling cataract. Another veil . . . she was passing through veil after veil of experience and strangeness.

‘I’m not a child; I’m fully grown. I don’t understand . . . I know what I feel. I know what I am thinking. I feel so proud of my marriage to the king, but it’s not as I might have anticipated. This is so very different.’

<Indeed: you are still the reckless Kate, but also now the youthful queen. And you are as vain as you are naïve by nature. How haughty your winsome beauty, with your eyes as blue as the summer sky and your cascade of fair hair that extends to beyond your girdled waist and has to be combed by your servant elves for a full hour every self-indulgent morning as you bathe in the pool of loveliness.>

‘Oh, dear! Am I really that vain? And yet within myself I feel merely curious and kind. At least I would appear to be kind.’

<Kindness is no armour within a dragon tale.>

A dragon tale! It certainly felt different from the fairy

tales of Kate's childhood – she really was within it; she was feeling it happen.

'Oh, Driftwood – I am riding through an enchanted forest. It's so real I can feel my nostrils tingle with each breath of air.'

<You, the queen, delight to ride through the dells and woodlands on your silver-saddled unicorn, well-wishing everyone you meet on your travels while flaunting the bridal ring in their faces.>

'But I love them all. I love to greet them.'

<You neglect the danger such hubris might provoke . . . For these are the Wildwoods, and there are other perils that stalk them besides the one-eyed giant they call Balor . . .>

'What are you suggesting?'

<The inevitable fall that accompanies unseemly pride.>

How she loved the fact it was ever high summer here, with the cotton-wool clouds turning lazily in their blue heaven. But even here, a twist of magic could alter the mood of time and place in the blink of an eye . . . and fate. But surely her fate was to wake in the regal bedroom within the enchanted castle? So she reflected with pleasure on a night when there was a full moon shining in through the mullioned windows, the garden outside bathed with luminescence. There was music too, a lilting delight of harp notes, rising and falling, lulling her back to sleep.

Why was it wrong to delight in such bliss?

Queen Nimue glanced around the moonlit bedroom. She

was clearly sleeping alone. Presumably Ree Nashee slept alone too? But surely there would be servants, some watchful figures nearby, who would respond to her needs?

She tried calling out: ‘Hello? I would so love a nightcap . . .’

But no servant answered her summons. She was close to panicking now, wishing she wasn’t here.

‘What is it, Driftwood? What is happening?’

<Your ring!>

‘My ring?’

Her bridal ring! She raised her left hand and stared at it, but there was no ring on her finger. ‘What’s happened to it?’

<You have somehow managed to lose it.>

Panic overwhelmed her, making her feel close to fainting in her downy bed. What would the king say when he discovered she had lost her ring?

‘I must have dropped it – when I was riding through the Wildwoods.’

<Without the ring you can no longer rule beside the king. And your loss will hurt him deeply. Ree Nashee loves you above all else in his kingdom. Your absence from his side will weaken his control over the magic that is necessary for his reign. And without the influence of the king—>

‘Darkness . . . Darkness will rise – as it rose when he was cast into the spell of sleep by Balor.’

<Indeed, and it is already rising. Thus has your vanity condemned you to search endlessly through a forest that has now become threatening.>

‘But how do I recover the ring? How do I make the Wildwoods hale again?’

But even she spoke, she realised the lesson of her personal dragon tale. In her obsession to save the Cill, she had neglected Alan, who loved her and who was facing terrible dangers. Kate, who was also Nimue, felt her vision clouding as if real tears were filling up her eyes.

‘Stop it, Driftwood. Stop this right now.’

But she could not so easily escape from the tale. She was still gliding through those eerie veils, but she was no longer in that sumptuous bedroom, now she was lost in the Wildwoods. She found herself standing by a low wall, below which a mound of pine bark marked the place where elfin foresters might have pulled consignments of logs over coping stones. She sat on the wall, brooding, feeling wan and sad in the pallid moonlight. Her tearful eyes darted between the grey shadows that surrounded her, her fearful fingers toying with the hoary beards of rosebay willow herb clinging to the crevices amongst the sloping stones. And then it dawned on her, with all the impossible logic of a dream, that she had arrived here a million times. She had followed the same ghostly trail, even on her final ride as queen. And now, dressed only in her white cotton night-dress, she haunted the woodland paths. And on this cold, moonlit night, a terrible winter beckoned. Her movements felt leaden with dread as she left the wall and emerged into the lonely glade. In the distance was a lake of utter darkness. She sensed the stillness of the air over the dark water

that reflected the tall forest of pine trees on the far bank. Within the blue-black crepuscular mass, their twigs and needles like roinish hair, she saw tiny flickering lights, like will-o-the-wisps, that called her. All she had to do was float through the veils to join the other ghosts passing soundlessly across the confluences of stone, air and water.

As she stood there, paralysed by indecision, she felt gooseflesh all over her skin.

<Did I not warn you?>

‘Yes – you did. Oh, Driftwood, I am a foolish girl-thing – I’m everything you said of me.’

<I warned you most specifically.>

‘You did.’

<We talked of your reckless desire to save the Momu.>

‘Yes – we talked.’

<I spoke of the dangers. Do you remember?>

‘I remember telling you of my first meeting with the Momu. I described our meeting, in her chamber in Ulla Quemar, the birthing pool amid the roots of the One Tree.’

The dragon’s voice deepened to what sounded like a rock-splitting roar. <There – there in your reference to the One Tree . . .>

‘What is it?’

<The One Tree was a twig of the greater tree – The Tree of Life – and in its roots you discovered Nidhoggr.>

‘Yes – he was trapped there, being starved of its sap, wasted to a ruin.’

<So you took it into your head to free him?>

‘Yes. I—’

<Even in that void I warned you afresh.>

‘Yes.’

<Do you now recall my warning?>

She remembered calling on Driftwood in a moment of the greatest peril. She recalled her very words on his arrival. *‘Oh, Driftwood – if you are really here, please help me. The Tree of Life is being sucked dry by these horrible worms. I must stop them, but it’s beyond my ability. I need to revive Nidhoggr.’*

<I would warn you> he had said, <that the soul of Nidhoggr is Chaos.>

‘Life, it seems to me, is nothing other than chaos – and that’s certainly true if what I saw in the black cathedral is the Tyrant’s vision of order.’

<You must understand how dangerous this might be?>

‘There is danger everywhere I turn. But there’s so much at stake – not just the Momu. These black worms are vast and there are millions upon millions of them. They’re sapping the life out of the Tree. I dread to think . . .’

Kate hesitated now, in a very different and yet equally perilous landscape. She sensed how even Driftwood shuddered.

<You remember now, Kate girl-thing, who is one with Nimue the Naïve, Queen of the Wildwoods, who has lost her ring?>

Kate nodded. Her heart thudded so forcefully it was nauseating. Before her a cart track twisted and turned, insisting that she took it even though it was in a state of disrepair.

She walked past a gnarled old oak and on into a coppice of evergreens. She sank her bare feet into its carpet of leaves. Her footsteps excited a musical tinkling from the crunching icy needles. The cold had contracted to a patina of grey over her skin.

<You freed Nidhoggr! And in doing so, you released Chaos into this world, and also into your own world, your beloved Earth.>

There was a flash of memory – the destruction of the Cathedral of the Dead by Nidhoggr; the screaming motes that were the souls of millions of dead. The experience had been terrifying – the most frightening scene that Kate had ever witnessed – and she could no longer bear the memory. She squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them she was standing on the bank of the lake. The night was silent.

Something glittered below the surface of the water. When she peered more closely, she thought she could make out something twinkling golden, like an eye opening and closing where the penetrating moonlight ended and darkness began.

The ring . . .

A clawed finger was beckoning her. A pallid hand extended towards her, the Ring of Ree Nashee in its open palm.

Kate froze with terror.

Now the silence was fractured. The water of the lake began to ripple with waves, washing against the shore, as

if it were the edge of an ocean. There was still the same dreamy quality, as if time worked differently here. Her feet were exposed to the lapping waves. Her ears were filled by the sounds of the night: the hooting of owls, the liquid hiss as creatures broke the surface, the lapping of the waves. The cold was numbing her feet and hands. That same numbness was spreading, like a mask, over her face, beginning at her upper lip and cheeks. She felt dazed by the growing effects of the cold inside her mind, and spellbound by more subtle sensations: the symphony of the water, the attenuated reflections of moon on surface and the glimpse of bats fluttering across her vision.

I let Alan down.

How she loved him – a very special kind of love, the love that time and pain had not been able to destroy.

‘Please – please let me go to him.’

<Have you forgotten the ring?>

‘I don’t want the ring any more. I can’t go into the water to get it. You know I’m afraid of water now – I’m afraid of drowning in it.’

<It doesn’t matter, reckless girl-queen. Nothing matters. Not any more . . .>

Who was speaking to her now, mind-to-mind? Was this truly the voice of her friend Driftwood, the dragon? Was she still blundering on within the dragon tale – her own special tale? Her numbed feet no longer registered the shore on which she was standing. It created an impression of dizziness, of floating on a cushion of air. She heard the

screech of some hunting creature from the dark landscape behind her.

‘I’m feeling breathless!’

Driftwood did not speak.

How could you feel breathless in a dream? Yet she had to breathe: she had to fill up her lungs with air. She swallowed past difficulty, looking down at the iridescent reflections of moonlight on the water’s surface. She summoned up all of what remained of her courage and stared down once more into the rippling water. The hand was still there, the golden ring twinkling within its palm.

<Go on!>

Whose voice . . . ?

She had to press her hands against her thighs to stand erect. As she took her first tentative steps into the shallow water, a roaring invaded her ears. Nervously, as carefully as she could manage with her tingling fingers, she pulled off her nightdress. She began to wade out over the unstable shingle. For a fraction of a moment, she couldn’t feel the water through her numbed skin. She reached out her hand for the ring. The cold ate into her, burning like a flame. Her nostrils stung with the sharp tang of ozone. The flesh on her legs tightened so violently that every hair jerked erect, above and below the water, and neuralgic spasms locked her knees and cramped the muscles in the small of her back. Her feet, instantly losing all feeling, began to slip on the scummy stones and the sharp edges cut through her socks like broken glass.

She stopped, the water now halfway up her thighs. The moonlight danced on the coruscating surface as the wide lake rippled with hidden movement. It was as if a solid mass of tiny creatures were beckoning her with a strange wild hunger, impatient for her to join them in the water.

<Go on!>

‘Who are you?’

<Don’t stop – don’t stop now!>

And then dread rose in her, paralysing her. ‘I – I don’t want to be here.’

<I did warn you that you would not like it.>

‘Take me away. If you are still here, Driftwood – take me out of here.’

In the next moment she was back, her heart beating in her throat, within the safety of the dragon’s ruff.

‘I don’t ever want to go there again.’

<But now a part of you will ever return to it.>

‘Oh, please don’t say that. You were right. I am the most stupid and stubborn of girls.’

<Sleep!>

‘How on earth can I sleep? I’m too terrified.’

Yet sleep she did. When she roused again, Kate saw that they were crossing over the tops of a great mountain range, its razor-sharp summits high above the clouds.

‘Where are we?’

<We are crossing the spine of the land – what the Eyrie People call the Flamestruck Mountains.>

The Wastelands into which Alan had taken his Shee

army! Kate couldn't imagine how they would have crossed these immensely high and treacherous-looking slopes. While asleep, frost had formed in her eyelashes and her nostrils were rimed in ice where her breath had frozen. She had never felt so cold in her life. She curled her body up and snuggled deeper, closer to the inner furnace of that monumental dragon's heart and the hillocks of pounding muscles where the warmth of their circulation would protect and comfort her.

'Can't you forgive me my stupid curiosity? You are, after all, supposed to be my friend.'

Silence other than the wailing of the wind.

'I did wake you from the dead.'

Still no answer.

'What are you scared of – you, Dragon King?'

Driftwood issued such a deep groan that it reverberated through the pounding muscles of his wings, folding around Kate's being like thunder.

<I think, perhaps, I should have eaten you when I had the chance.>

A Threat in the Dark

Mark's eyes lifted from the blazing barrier that blocked the road ahead and looked towards the small town beyond it, and the pitch black night sky above. He thought he'd heard the drone of an engine. Then he heard it again high overhead, above the blanket of clouds from which two days of spindrift snow had been falling. The snowflakes hitting his upturned face felt hard and sharp, like tiny icicles. He couldn't help shivering.

'What is it?' Cal's voice sounded behind Mark.

'A plane, sounds like an airliner.'

'What's it doing?'

'Circling, maybe. Looking for an airport?'

Cal clicked the safety on and off on the belt-driven Minimi machine gun he carried. 'Don't they know the grid's down? There are no lights to guide them in. No radar. Nothing!'

'Poor beggars,' Mark replied, then looked down again.

He had needed a break from the interior of the Mamma Pig where Pdraig lay, deeply unconscious. The old man's breathing was rasping and his temperature was so high his skin felt like it was on fire. They were heading north in a desperate attempt to get him to Resistance HQ hidden away in the hills of Derbyshire, where he could be treated by military doctors. But they couldn't follow the obvious route: the M1, which would have taken them there in a matter of hours, as the motorways were traps. Field Marshall Seebox had taken them over under martial law and the Resistance were now fighting elements of what had formerly been the regular armed forces; those blinkered enough to follow Seebox. Armoured soldiers were patrolling all major roads. Seebox's forces had also taken control of the ports, power stations and the major towns and cities. But it was unlikely that he had managed to extend this control to the smaller towns and villages – as yet.

Despite this, the burning barrier up ahead was no regular army checkpoint. Several buildings, maybe whole streets, were already burning in the town behind it. That suggested Razzamatazzers – and likely irregulars like Paramilitaries and Skulls. Mark knew there would be some manning the barrier, while others would attempt to block the Mamma Pig from passing through the town, and he had no idea what weapons, if any, they might possess.

Mark looked up at the sky again. It was difficult to ignore the drone of the aircraft still circling overhead in the dark.

He wondered if it had been a good idea to leave Gully back at Tudor Farm. Gully knew things about the now ravaged London. He might have been a useful source of intelligence for the people at Resistance HQ. Besides, Mark had taken a liking to the streetwise kid. He regretted the fact that they had failed to rescue Gully's friend, Penny, when they had seen her at the arena. All they had of her was her extraordinary mural. What was the word Cogwheel had used to describe it?

A palimpsest!

A medieval word to describe one picture superimposed on another. But according to Gully it was about more than just pictures; Penny had been seeing visions in which creatures from some dark world were rising up and invading the famous streets and squares of London. The layers in the mural showed exactly that. They showed what Penny called the City Above, which was the normal world of the city, being invaded by another more alien world that Penny called the City Below.

Mark had his own reasons for finding Penny's vision deeply disturbing. He had been shown a similar vision by the strange Belizean woman, Henriette, and had witnessed wraith-like beings that invading the normal streets of central London, drawn by the Sword of Feimhin. From what little Henriette had explained, they were coming out of the strange in-between-world called Dromenon. And, if he understood her correctly, they were possessing the young Razzamatazzers, driving them insane.

Now he examined the sky not with his eyes, but through the black glossy triangle of crystal that was embedded in his brow: the oraculum of the Third Power. It held magic that derived from another world called Tír, and a goddess of that world, Mórígán, the third member of the Holy Tríédana, and goddess of death and the battlefield. Through this power he could see beyond the falling snow and the clouds above to gaze into the starry heavens, where brilliant flares of colour rent the air. The vision resembled an explosive aurora borealis, but Mark knew that it had nothing to do with the beautiful northern lights.

He thought back to what they had witnessed in London. A black rose, a colossus of crystalline darkness a mile high, had enveloped the old city. From this a spectral image had been projected into the sky: a triple infinity, pulsating with enormous energy and constantly reforming; darkly magnificent and utterly terrifying. The obscene invasion of spectres, the Sword of Feimhin and the Black Rose were all somehow linked. Mark was in awe of the Rose even now, some thirty-odd miles northeast of the M25. He felt its malignant power reach out and overwhelm him with a presentiment of dread.

Nan emerged from behind the rear doors of the Mamma Pig to put an arm around Mark's neck. She must have been sharing his worries through their common oracula.

'How's Padraig?' Mark asked.

'The same.'

'He's stubborn. I know there's a surviving consciousness

inside there still. If only he can hold on until we can get him medical help.'

'Let's hope so.'

He kissed her lightly on the lips.

Nan turned towards the blazing barrier. 'There's something else there – something more than just Razzers. You must sense it too.'

'Yeah.'

Cal picked up on their conversation: 'What is it?'

Nan said: 'I don't know, but I sense an alien danger.'

'Mark?' Cal said.

Mark looked ahead, using his oraculum to penetrate the flaming barrier and see into the main street beyond. Illuminated by the fires, the buildings were a higgledy-piggledy arrangement of different frontages and sizes, some two- and some three-storied, some abutting the road. They had no idea what town it was since any helpful signs had been removed. An old Bedfordshire town they had to assume, that had grown in an unplanned organic way over the centuries.

'You see it?'

'Like Nan, I sense something. It feels a good deal more malignant than Razzamatazzers – it doesn't feel human.'

'But it knows we're coming. It'll be waiting for us,' Nan said. 'You think we should turn back? Find a way around it?'

'We don't have the time. Not with Padraig's condition.'

Mark had felt a mixture of exhaustion and elation as the mechanical bulk of the Mamma Pig had made it back in through the stone gateposts of the Tudor farm the previous evening. The return from London had not been easy. They had been forced to abandon their bikes at the arena and their escape from the city had been interrupted by road-blocks and machine gun battles. Luckily, the armoured walls of the Pig had guaranteed that nobody was hurt. Nan had fallen into an exhausted asleep against his shoulder and Mark had been obliged to wake her so she could look after Pdraig while they looked for medical help. He'd joined Cal as he'd emerged from the Pig into squalling snow. It had been too soon for the snow to coat the ground to any extent, but it had blown into their faces as they'd run towards and entered through the big oak door into the main farm building. The moment they had walked in, they had encountered Resistance troops in camouflage uniforms dashing around the place. Cal had spoken to a guard:

'What's going on, mate?'

'An evacuation.'

As Cal hurried away to find an officer, Mark headed towards the ground floor chamber that had been put aside as an infirmary for the wounded. He discovered an empty shambles and the single, stressed-out figure of Sharkey, who was sitting on a camp bed with his denim shirt wide open at the front, his injured left shoulder and arm inside the body of the shirt.

'Hey mate – Good to see you!'

‘Thought my friends had abandoned me.’

‘No chance of that.’ Mark sat down on the bed next to his friend. ‘Where are the fighters headed?’

‘Who knows? Most are heading for Resistance HQ – at least that’s as much as I’ve been able to gather.’

‘So, there’s some new plan?’

‘Dunno! You think they’ve confided in me?’

‘C’mon, Sharkey,’ Mark had said, as he’d helped him into the shirt. ‘We need to get you out of here.’

They’d come across the bespectacled Jo Derby sitting on the floor of the corridor outside the chamber accompanied by a nervous looking Gully. She hauled herself to her feet on recognising them.

‘Oh, Mark – Sharkey! Thank goodness!’

‘We need the medics. Any idea where they’ve gone?’ Mark had said.

‘I doubt there are many left.’

‘What’s happening to the farm?’

‘The military are moving out. Their presence is likely to attract attack now that Seebox is getting organised. There are hundreds of civilians, mostly families, who would be put at risk.’

‘I’ve got to find a medic, Jo. We have a seriously injured VIP.’

‘Who? One of the crew?’

‘Padraig.’

‘Oh, my goodness! I think there might be at least one doctor left. Come on – I’ll help you to find him.’

Jo was proven right. There was just one medic left in the building: an anaesthetist named Hall. Mark had found himself half running beside Hall as he'd headed out to recover the gear he had already stowed in the back of a Landrover in preparation for leaving. Their conversation had been hurried; Mark helping him carry to the stuff back in while explaining Pádraig's situation. Meanwhile, Bull had hauled the emaciated body of Pádraig out of the Pig and onto the camp bed evacuated by Sharkey in the infirmary. Dr Hall had taken a brief look at Pádraig and had said something about ketotic breathing.

'What's that?' Mark had asked.

'It's the kind of breathing you'd expect in someone who has been subjected to long term starvation.' He'd put a nasogastric tube down one of Pádraig's nostrils and put his fingers into Pádraig's gaping mouth, ferreting about at the back of his throat to guide the tube down into Pádraig's stomach. 'This'll help get some fluid, calories and essential vitamins into him.'

'Is there anything more you can do?'

'You want me to try setting up a central line?'

'Anything that might help.'

Mark had watched in tense silence as Dr Hall had made an incision above Pádraig's left collarbone, and inserted a much finer tube into a vein.

'There you go – one subclavian line.'

'Thanks.'

'You understand what it does?'

‘No.’

‘It goes down into the right atrium of his heart.’

‘What’s it for?’

‘Gets even more fluids and calories into the circulation. But more importantly, this line won’t clot so easily as a peripheral. It’s the best way to deliver antibiotics. But he needs a lot more than I can do for him – he needs intensive therapy by trained staff in a proper ITU. He won’t get that here.’

‘We’re heading for somewhere he might get it.’

‘If you make it, that is.’

‘Yeah. If we make it.’

‘Well, good luck!’

‘Thanks, Doc.’

While Nan had assisted Doctor Hall in cleaning up Padraig – redressing him in a hospital gown and then finding several thick blankets and two old hot water bottles to keep him warm – Mark had spent a few minutes talking to Jo.

‘Take care of Gully for me, will you?’ Mark said.

‘I’m afraid I can’t. I’ll be leaving with the last of the military.’

‘Aw, please, Mark, don’t leave me ’ere!’ Gully begged.

‘I don’t want to leave you, Gully. But you’ll be safer here with the other civilians.’

Gully had attempted to break away from Jo’s restraining arm, his tear-filled eyes looking into Mark’s.

‘Jo, you sure you can’t take him?’

She'd grimaced, seeing the pleading look in Mark's face. 'Where we're headed, it wouldn't be safe for a child.' She'd put her arm around Gully's shoulders. 'Lady Breakespeare will look after you.'

Gully wailed: 'Old Pinky Ponky don't know how to look after herself!'

Now, facing the barricaded town, Cal's urgent mutter broke through Mark's memories of Gully. 'We need a clear plan before we go in.' Mark, Cal and Nan had joined the others in the overcrowded belly of the Pig. Patting Tajh's back, who had been nursing Padraig, Mark inched his way forward to join Cal in watching over Cogwheel's shoulder as he drove. They descended a small hill on the approach to the flaming barrier.

'Way I see it,' Cal murmured thoughtfully, 'the fifteen tons behind the guillotine blade should be enough to get us through the barrier, but we don't know what's waiting for us on the town side of it.'

Bull snorted from behind them: 'They'll hail every sort of crap on us from every angle, that's what.'

'I know you think we need to use the Minimi's, but we're going to expose ourselves to Molotovs if we open the ports.'

'No way we'll get through without the guns,' Bull replied.

'Even with the two guns, we can't man front and rear as well as the sides.'

Mark spoke: 'Maybe Nan and I can help?'

'What do you suggest? You going to magic us through?'

‘Something like that, yeah.’

Cogwheel nodded. ‘We can’t go in without covering the windscreen.’

‘You saying we go in blind?’ Bull replied.

‘The flaps are slitted. We’ll see enough to get through the barrier.’

Mark said: ‘Let Nan join Cogwheel in the cab.’

‘What good will that do?’

‘She can probe the field ahead even through the steel flaps, maybe stop us careening into something ugly – like a dug-out pit.’

Nan added: ‘And I can fight.’

‘Makes sense to me,’ Tajh spoke.

‘Okay,’ Cal nodded to Nan. ‘We can’t avoid being exposed on every front. So we rake ’em with the Minimis on either side – that’s Bull and me. You get the heavy one, Bull.’

Bull’s sweating face broke out into a grin under the interior light. ‘Roger, that!’

Cal nodded. ‘Okay! So we’ll batten down the sides going through the barrier. Soon as we’re through we chink the side flaps open just enough to fit the barrels. And that’s where you come in, magic boy. You cover the rear.’

Mark snorted, but he began to inch his way to the back again, nodding to Tajh who was adjusting the drip rate on the central venous line to Padraig’s heart.

‘Okay – everybody ready?’

There was a chorus of grunts. Then a single voice of dissent from Sharkey: ‘Hey, fellas, what about me?’

‘You can’t handle a Minimi with that shoulder.’

Bull’s voice cut in: ‘Damned hippie can help me nurse the belt. Belts don’t last long at 800 RPM.’

‘Yee-hah!’ Sharkey dragged two heavy belts along the metal floor to sit beside Bull’s allocated porthole.

‘Step on it, Cogwheel.’

‘I have no foot to put down, boss!’

‘Take off, then!’

Sharkey started humming the Marley song *Exodus* as Cogwheel revved the engine to screaming pitch, moving through the gears. Bull and Cal took up their positions with machine guns at the ready as the Pig rocked and rolled towards the blazing barrier. The collision, when it came, threw everybody forwards, provoking a chorus of curses. The barricade was bigger, and heavier, than they had anticipated, made up of half a dozen burned out cars and trucks. As the Pig’s guillotine blades tore into it, big chunks of blazing scrap slammed into the armoured windscreen, scraped across the bonnet and ricocheted off both sides. Had the flaps been open they would have been ripped off.

‘Here come the Molotovs!’

Within moments the Pig was a mass of flames as the petrol-filled bottles fell upon them from front, sides and rear – the noise was deafening. In the windows of the three-storey buildings to either side of the main road they could make out the spectral outlines of figures – maniacal Razzers – dancing and chanting as they ignored their own safety to hurl bottle after bottle into the conflagration. Flames came

in through the slitted portholes to either side, forcing Cal and Bull to keep them closed for the moment. Through his oraculum Mark caught the same picture Nan did: the Mamma Pig had become a blazing inferno.

‘Go for it, Bull!’ Cal roared from the left side port, which was now opened up a slit, just wide enough to take the barrel of the smaller Minimi. ‘And watch our back, Magic Man. Let them have it!’

Through the inched open side portals the Minimis poured deadly hails of lead, belt following belt, filling the cabin with the toxic smoke of cordite, and amid this frenzy, the Mamma Pig guided solely by Nan’s oraculum, crashed and sliced its way through every obstacle, screaming in topmost revs. Mark poured a fury of black lightning behind the vehicle, adding a new horror to the lurching, grinding progress of the Pig.

It wasn’t until they’d cleared the town that the noise abated. A mile further on Cogwheel jerked the Pig to a halt, threw back the windscreen flaps and shouted at them to open every port.

The burning town lit up the horizon behind them. Cal, Bull and Mark got busy with the fire extinguishers, spraying the tyres and undercarriage, then anywhere that looked like it needed it. Tajh waited for the hissing of the cooling metal to lessen so she could hear herself speak. Then she turned to Mark and spoke to him in a husky whisper:

‘Was that us back there – screaming?’

Mark met her eyes, shrugged his shoulders.

‘Dear god!’

‘We made it. That’s all that matters.’

Tajh shivered. Her face was ashen, her pupils dilated. Maybe, like him, she could still feel the heat of the flames and hear the screaming in her mind.

Mark put his arm around Tajh’s shoulders.

Tajh took a juddering breath. ‘I can’t believe we got through. Was it something to do with you and Nan – your presence?’

‘I think we fluked it between us.’

Cal came back from the rear and suggested they give the Pig a good look over, to make sure they had caught every last spark.

Tajh’s eyes hadn’t left Mark’s. ‘I heard you say something back there. You said you detected some presence?’

‘We did.’

‘Something scary.’

‘Could be.’

‘But you don’t know what?’

Mark shook his head. He stared up into that same night sky and felt the same skittering fall of snowflakes as he had before going through the barrier.

He thought back to the extraordinary events at the gladiatorial arena in London: Gully had run forward to cry out to Penny, who was on the rostrum next to Grimstone. But there had been a third presence: a small innocuous looking man. He had radiated power. Only the Tyrant could be that powerful. Yet, he’d held back from destroying them when

Mark's battleaxe had been pulverised with ease by Grimstone wielding the Sword of Feimhin. The Tyrant's reticence had had something to do with Gully, and presumably, also Penny. Mark had no idea why this should matter to such a dangerous and powerful figure.

'Jesus,' he muttered, 'I think I might have made a mistake leaving Gully back there.'

Fate

Penny was gazing into a reflection of her own face while standing erect within the landscape of a dream. She didn't know how she could gaze into her own reflection without a mirror, or water, or any medium that would make it possible.

Am I changing?

She sensed that she was, but she wasn't sure. For some time she had not been sure about anything. She didn't know if she was dreaming or not, or where she was, or what it meant to be here, looking at the changing features of her own reflection – or if there was an even wilder, more extraordinary, alternative.

She studied the mask of her own face.

Her skin looked smoother than normal, almost ethereally so, and her eyes looked more shiny, more silvery. Her hair was ivory-blond, bunched up to make a springy coconut peak within a filigree helmet of cross-hatched

beaded strands; jet alternating with pearl and diamonds. She had no memory of making up her own hair, any more than she could recall donning the jewelled helmet, which covered her entire head and face. Around her throat, and one with the helmet, was a corolla of virginal white florets; an exquisitely delicate version of an Elizabethan ruff. The ruff itself was also a part of the dress, which fell to her ankles and was the same virginal white.

That extraordinary image, purportedly the reflection of her own face, caused Penny to stare at it in astonishment.

In the reflection, she saw unbearable sadness in her eyes: the acquiescence to her fate, whatever that fate might truly prove to be.

She spoke: 'I am within the Black Rose.'

<Yes> She heard Jeremiah's voice as it sounded mind-to-mind.

Nothing of this seemed real to Penny. It was as if her being had become detached from her will. Somehow she had been transported into a magical world. But it wasn't how she might have imagined a world of fairytales, with elfin princes and princesses, goblins and witches. The landscape, the three-dimensional ambience, looked and felt solid enough, but she was sure that it wasn't real. The strangeness of it both intrigued and terrified her.

Without speaking it aloud, being careful to keep her fears from showing, Penny plucked the thought from her mind: *am I a prisoner here?* The idea frightened her. It felt as if she had just woken from a strange and disturbing

nightmare only to find that the nightmare had not gone away.

She called out: 'Jeremiah?'

<I am here.>

'But you are merely in my mind. I can't see you. I can't hear your voice in my ears.'

<Why would you need to see me?>

'I feel so isolated. I'm a prisoner here – wherever here is. I want to explore this place – your city, or whatever it really is.'

<It is time I taught you the infinite possibilities of Dromenon. This you must grasp or you will fail me.>

His words, their strange implications, reverberated in her mind: *You will fail me!*

Her surroundings changed. She found herself enclosed within organic shapes, sweeping abstracts composed of curves and arabesques, as if she were within the labyrinth of a gigantic spider – one that wove a wonderland of multi-hued crystalline webs. When she took a dozen strides, swivelled and spun, changing the direction of her movement, the weave changed too, metamorphosed in a fluid, curiously plastic, way. But it continued to envelop her.

Jeremiah's laughter echoed within her skull. <You like to paint your impressions – so paint them.>

'But where do I paint them? There are no flat walls, not even ceilings. And even if there were, I have no brushes, or crayons or pencils.'

<You have no need of walls, or brushes. You have your

extraordinary creative mind, your incomparable imagination.>

‘I don’t understand.’

In moments Penny was surrounded by the wheeling images of what looked like spectres and ghosts. There was a feeling that these insubstantial beings resented her presence.

‘What are these wraiths?’

<You might regard them as the result of my imagination.>

‘What purpose do they serve?’

<All that you witness serves my purpose. There is no room in my world for what might prove useless.>

‘I still don’t understand.’

<Then allow me to demonstrate.>

He plucked a thought – her image of him surrounded by his nimbus of wraiths – out of her mind and he twiddled his fingers and it became a sculpture in crystal. <You see. There is no need for surface or brushes.>

‘How did you do that?’

<I thought it into being.>

‘But I . . . I couldn’t possibly—’

<You are eminently capable.>

‘How?’

<I don’t have the human word for a quality that is quintessentially non-human. Invent your own description, since you have such a way with words. Be assured that you can be thus creative.>

‘I cannot.’

<Pluck the thought from your mind.>

Penny had no option but to try. She hesitated, gazing at an empty space in the corner between two out-curving walls. She imagined a waterfall amid rocks as white and smooth as marble.

The waterfall became substance.

Penny gasped, her hand reaching out to feel the blue falling water, gazing with delight at the tiny rainbow evinced by the play of light through the gossamer-fine mist.

‘It’s . . . perfect.’

<I have no use for anything less than perfection.>

But her art was not the only thing that had undergone a profound metamorphosis. Penny’s sense of the passage of time had changed. It was as if she were passing in and out of a never-ending hallucination. Gradually, she had become aware of the fact that she was not alone. There were more obviously female figures, as insubstantial as ghosts, who clustered about her. She cared – she cared because she wanted to care – but there were many, all so grey and ghostly, that she feared caring for them all would consume her, and drag her down into a despair that would accomplish nothing.

‘Who are they? Why do they look so sad?’

<Do you care?>

His question caused her to hesitate. She whispered, ‘Yes.’

<Why do you care?>

She could not answer. She didn’t know why she, in this

strange, beautiful dream, should care about what appeared to be spectres.

<Will you remember them when they are gone?>

‘I . . . I don’t know. Perhaps.’

<Why?>

She didn’t know why she should remember or even care about all these grey shades who flickered in and out of existence. Why was he testing her so?

<Your concern for others is a weakness. You wish that you could help them. Should I grant you this wish, I will require a gift in return.>

‘What is it you want of me?’

<To serve me.>

‘I have already agreed to serve you.’

<I want you to serve me, not in dutiful obedience, but willingly – I want you to serve me with every fibre of your being.>

Penny didn’t like the idea of serving him. The very thought of it sickened her. But how could she avoid it? She had promised to serve him to save Gully. ‘I . . . I need to see you, to hear you.’

He appeared then, exactly as she remembered him: an elderly man, small and neat with a white beard wearing a navy cloak with curiously roomy sleeves. But his eyes were not the kindly eyes she recalled from the rain-swept night in the back streets of London. His eyes were devoid of iris or white. They were a glistening black.

She turned away from him, spoke as if to her reflection:
 ‘I can’t stand the thought that I must lose my will.’

‘On the contrary, you have made a bargain of your will
 to me.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘There are two sides to a bargain.’

‘I fear what you will expect of me.’

‘Your fear is understandable, given the circumstances.’

‘Am I your slave?’

‘That would make you imperfect in my eyes.’

Penny shook her head. ‘Are you real? Or am I imagining
 this conversation within my own mind?’

‘My presence is real.’

‘Where is this place?’

‘It is a projection from within a domain known as
 Dromenon.’

‘A projection?’

‘It is both within and without the city of London.’

‘Within the Black Rose?’

‘Observe!’

Penny’s eyes widened as she saw the landscape draw
 apart to form a lucid oval, as if a giant eye had sprung open
 to reveal a ruin of broken masonry, engulfed in ashes.

‘Oh, my god! This is London?’

‘Yes.’

Tears sprang into her eyes. ‘You promised me—’

‘I promised to preserve the landmarks you so admired
 – and of course your street urchin friend.’

‘Why must you do these things? Why do you so hate us?’

‘There are major considerations at stake. I have many enemies far more formidable than humans. Your world, as indeed my own, has become increasingly perilous for me and my purpose.’

Penny could not keep the exasperation out of her voice. ‘Will you not explain where I really am? What is really expected of me? What do you really want from me?’

His image softened, so he appeared almost as friendly as the Jeremiah she remembered from the rainy night street. ‘I can reveal some things, but not all that you would ask.’

‘Please don’t confuse me further. Am I entirely lost? Have I abandoned everything?’

‘Being human, you were never really free. Absolute freedom is an illusion for a finite being.’

Penny felt so frustrated, so afraid, she could explode. ‘You said there were two sides to a bargain?’

‘I will reciprocate your serving me.’

‘What does that mean? How do I know I can trust you?’

‘You can never entirely trust another. But there are degrees of trust. That is an important consideration.’

‘How then can I judge these . . . these degrees of trust?’

‘Who, in your life, have you ever trusted?’

She hesitated. There had been very few people she had ever trusted: her parents, her father in particular. But even then her trust in Father had been limited. Perhaps Gully was the only one she had even come close to really trusting?

In her imagination she saw his face. She heard him say, ‘Penny – Penny, gel! Where ya hidin’?’ She and Gully had had no option but to trust one another, to rely upon one another, because it was the only way they could survive in the chaos that had become London. Gully had warned her against exploring the Tube tunnels. He’d been right. How she wished now that she had taken his advice. She was still thinking about Gully, with her eyes clenched shut, when Jeremiah’s voice interrupted her thoughts:

‘Your trust is about to be tested.’

Penny discovered that she was surrounded by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of figures, each covered with gauzy veils. Not wraiths as before, but real living creatures. The tallest of those standing erect were no higher than her shoulders, and many were much shorter, so she felt like Gulliver among the Lilliputians. She put her hands to her face, probing through the beaded lattice to confirm that her skin felt real, that it wasn’t just a complex dream. The figures were covered by shrouds that completely blanketed them, tent-like; the material finer than any gauze or lace she had ever seen, as delicate as a creamy white smoke.

‘What’s happening?’

‘They have come here to celebrate your epiphany.’

Here? How had they entered the Black Rose? Penny’s eyes darted around to discover an alien landscape. Had Jeremiah taken her out of the Rose to some other destination? If so, how had he done so in the blink of an eye? And what did Jeremiah mean by an epiphany? Penny was still

attempting to figure out if this was just a dream – or another frightening reality.

‘They’re humming,’ she said.

‘Incanting!’

‘What are they incanting?’

‘A hymn to the glory of their coming sacrifice.’

‘What sacrifice?’

‘Why – of the most important thing they have to give: their lives.’

When Penny examined the nearby figures more carefully, she saw that every one of them held a sharp-looking dagger to her breast.

‘They’re sacrificing themselves?’

‘Of course.’

‘To what – to whom?’

‘To you.’

He spoke the words in a quiet voice, devoid of emotion. A shocked Penny fell silent for several moments. ‘Why me?’

‘You are their Lady of Sorrows.’

‘I don’t understand. Why would they do this?’

‘It’s an ancient rite. They have devoted their entire lives to this sacred moment. In the act of self-sacrifice they will become one with you.’

Penny looked at the sea of faces, trying to make out what she could hear of the incantation. How could the rite be ancient if it was dedicated to her? Jeremiah had to be lying to her. Nothing of what he said made sense. But then her mind froze. She remembered his words when she gave

herself up to him. <You will become a goddess.> Was it possible that time was entirely malleable to the being she knew as Jeremiah, a being she knew now, with absolute certainty, was not human. It was a horrifying thought.

‘Who are they?’

‘You would regard them as religious devotees – idolators. All of their conscious lives have been spent in worship of you. The ceremony will be their reward for unlimited homage.’

‘Their reward?’

‘They will experience the Rapture.’

Penny felt a shiver of fright run through her. ‘Oh, please, you must put a stop to this! You have to if you want my cooperation!’

‘Would you deny them what means everything to them?’

Wisps of a carmine-coloured vapour were condensing among them. Penny began to move; she shook their shoulders and she tried to rip away the strange gauzy material that enshrouded them. It tore in her fingers, like the finest, silkiest spiders web.

She shouted at them: ‘Wake up!’

They ignored her. It was as if both she and Jeremiah were invisible to them. With every head bowed, they continued with their incantations.

He said: ‘You still do not understand. Take the rapture from them and they will not survive anyway. In their grief, they will kill themselves. Their final experience will be despair.’

Penny heard the first ecstatic moan.

The Unbroken Circle

The cold greys and warm pinks of early evening fought one another in the cloud-wracked heavens. Alan stood on a surviving section of the Tyrant's fortress wall, leaning his weight on the shaft of the Spear of Lug, and gazing through the drifting black smoke at the scene several hundred feet below him. His friend, Mo, together with Qwenqwo Cuatzel and the orang-utan form of Magtokk, stood in companionable silence beside him. After two cruel days and nights of fierce and bloody battle, the fortress had fallen and now, below them, the Shee made preparations for the ceremony of their dead. High overhead, wheeling Gargs performed their own respectful spirals for the lost. Garg and Shee together – a remarkable act from two peoples who had, until recently, been mortal enemies. At least half the dead had perished in the initial assault, ripped apart by the cannonade from those fearsome curtain walls before Alan's First Power had had time to strike. And the assault itself

had been the grimmest battle yet, fought in the close quarters of the vast labyrinth of passageways and tunnels that riddled the fortress and the divergent curtain walls.

The Tyrant's Legionaries had been hard, brave soldiers who fought to the last drop of blood. The defenders in the fortress might have been routed by Alan's use of the First Power, but the tens of thousands within the walls and buttresses had refused to surrender. They had employed well-drilled strategies: appearing to give ground only to lead their adversaries into rooms where the floors would suddenly give way into the moiling furnace of the volcano beneath them. They were heedless of the fact that the traps sometimes caught their own, displaying remarkable bravery. But a greater bravery had been demanded of the Shee. The ceaseless carnage had exhausted all of them.

Alan's eyes lifted from the haunting scene in the river of solidified lava below, to the vista to the north of the craggy promontory on which the fortress had been built. Sharp ridges and crags flowed in wave after wave into an azure-tinted smoky distance that marked the location of the Tyrant's citadel. What premonition was this – supposedly a preliminary skirmish – of the onslaught that would be required to take Ghork Mega, and finally end the Tyrant's reign of terror on Tír?

A sudden trumpeting from far below warned them that the Shee ceremony was about to begin. It forced Alan's vision back onto the lava below, still cooling from when the Shee had blocked the flow. They couldn't hang around

this place for very much longer; the loosening of the magma and his own use of the First Power had weakened the headland on which the fortress stood. There were rumblings in the rocks, tremors he could feel through his feet. Thick black smoke erupted from the widening cracks and fissures filling the sky with gloom. The main army of Shee had moved several miles northwards to settle a new camp at a safe distance. Alan and his companions had watched throughout the afternoon and early evening as Shee and aides had carried the bodies out onto the still cooling river of rock. And now a raft of dead, fully fifty yards long and a third as wide, formed the outline of a Shee galleon, its prow directed towards the west and the setting sun. They had cushioned and overlain the bodies with what little dry scrub they could gather, held down with rocks. Already the pyre smouldered and smoked, the air filled with the unpleasant aroma of singed hair and baking flesh. Lightning balls, which announced that the gates barring the magma were about to be re-opened, roiled and scattered upriver. The last of the Shee climbed up higher, coming towards Alan. There was a thunderous crackling of disintegrating rock as the superheated magma burst out into the valley for a final time to hiss and splutter out over the landscape, rushing towards the giant pyre of bodies.

Eight hundred and seventy two Shee: that had been the cost of taking the fortress. Alan watched the crawling river of fire come closer to the smouldering cremation pyre. He

couldn't help but shiver as the flames erupted at the prow of the formation.

At the same time, the formal ceremony commenced. The voice of Bétaald carried on the wind: her hymnal cadences an orison that echoed with feeling in his mind.

'For those of our sisters who feared not to die . . .'

Alan had noticed before how the Shee always died in their human form. There was something cruel about leaving those tall, elegant bodies to be melted and absorbed into the molten stone. But the Shee had a different attitude to the dead. The dead were duly honoured with the ceremony, but in another sense they lived on in their astonishing cycle of life: the mother-sister making way for the daughter-sister. There would be deep veneration of the bones of the lost, but at the same time there would be no maudlin despair, merely a determination to learn the lessons taught by it. The new would replace the old and the old would live on in memories, contributing their experience to the fighting prowess of the new generations. It was a strange cycle of reproduction, yet one that carried the gift of immortality. Such was the reality of normal life for the Shee.

'Eight hundred and seventy two dead,' Qwenqwo muttered, 'and three times as many left seriously wounded.'

'I know,' Alan nodded.

Regardless of the daughter-sister standing by to replace each individual dead, the injured required that their

wounds be treated, their broken limbs splinted, their pain nursed by the comfort of healwell. At the new camp three miles further north, a small army of aides was busy with such duties.

‘Oh, Alan!’

Mo was dabbing at her cheeks, her eyes moist. The rising smoke didn’t help to quench her tears. Clutching at his left arm, she slid her head beneath it so he was embracing her slim shoulders.

‘Yes, I know.’ He understood what Mo was thinking. He wished that Kate was in the embrace of his other arm.

The entire Shee army could not be spared for the ceremony. It was too vast, and the forward limit of their march must now be defended against potential counter attack. But many thousands had formed an honour guard on the surrounding slopes. They went down onto one knee now and the funeral chant began, a mournful choir, in perfect unison. He squeezed Mo to him as the scurrying Shee ignited the flame arrows of the bows of a hundred archers, who fired into the still-smouldering pyre that had not yet been consumed by the laval heat. And now, bearing a respectful witness on the promontory, Alan was reminded of a similar feeling of wretchedness and desolation that he had felt on the banks of the Snowmelt River, when he had witnessed another funeral, this time of a single Shee novice warrior called Valéra, who had saved Alan’s life. He recalled how he had been pressed, against the resentment of an older Kyra, to examine the wound that the Preceptor’s

spiral blade had inflicted. So dreadful was the memory that even now, half kneeling on the promontory, Alan clenched his eyes shut and gritted his teeth against the remembered agony that had resulted from his poisoned fingers. And in examining the venom-blackened wound, he had discovered the new life growing in the warrior's womb, the daughter-sister, as yet unborn, who would replace, and in her way fulfil, the life of Valéra.

Another clarion call of trumpets signalled the movement of the venerating Shee, in a slow, great clock-wise circle, holding hands.

'They call it Neavrashvahar,' Alan said softly.

Mo asked: 'What does it mean?'

Alan peered down at the thickening pall of smoke, scented by something, perhaps some kind of incense that had been sprinkled over the bodies. 'I think it's something like their vision of heaven. The passing on of the wonder of life from mother to daughter – the word means "the unbroken circle".'

He recalled how, with the realisation of what was at stake as Valéra died, he had blundered out of the bower and run blindly into the icy snow. Never in his life had he felt so useless. He had fallen to his knees, his head bowed, his arms adrift by his side, his fists clenched. He had poured his anguish into the oraculum, finding himself in a flat wilderness that stretched to the horizon in every direction. Now, with greater experience, he realised that he had entered Dromenon. A strange presence had hovered before

him. He knew what that presence was, now: A True Believer . . . It had spoken to him in riddles, provoking anger because he had needed clear explanation.

<I am not the one you call yet I might have the answers you seek . . .>

Alan's memories were cut short by a powerful hand squeezing his shoulder. He blinked, gazing down once more at the great funeral pyre.

Qwenqwo Cuatzel said: 'My friend, the blessing of the flagon?'

'Not just now, Qwenqwo. The Shee – Bétaald and the Kyra – might think it disrespectful.'

'What they cannot see cannot hurt them.'

Alan felt, rather than saw, his friend, the dwarf mage, take an almighty swig from his flagon. Qwenqwo deserved the drink. None had fought more bravely through the smoke and flame-filled chambers and corridors of the fortress. Alan felt the supporting hand tighten on his shoulder. The entire boat-shaped mound was now ablaze, flames crackling in the evening air. As the conflagration intensified to a bright orange, Alan felt a sudden flash of power, a signal – or perhaps a window opening mind-to-mind – from the Oraculum of Bree in the Kyra's brow. The signal was not directed at him, but westwards, to the Guhttan mountains thousands of miles away and across the Eastern Ocean, to where the new generation of daughter-sisters would inherit the sacred warrior mantle of the mother-sisters, whose bodies needed to be consumed by

the cleansing action of the flames for the circle to be made whole again.

It comforted Alan that the daughter-sister of Valéra would be among them. That the Shee who had save his life now lived again.

‘Blow it!’ He accepted the press of the flagon, took a swig. He spoke, in little above a whisper, to Qwenqwo: ‘The Shee have a beautiful expression for the portal they cross after death, they call it “The Harbour of Souls”.’

He had learned this in that same conversation with the True Believer on the banks of the great river.

The first stars were twinkling in the evening sky as Alan, Mo and Qwenqwo made their way to the new camp. None of them fancied the jolting ride that would result from being carried by an onkkh. They were content with making their way on foot; the dwarf mage lurching somewhat from his consumption of liquor, while Alan and Mo trudged through a weariness that leached into their bones. Shee guards were everywhere, even if not always apparent, because of the camouflage effect of their cloaks. Even as they arrived into camp, some miles north of the funeral, the air still reeked of burning flesh and the more sulphurous smell of the lava. Alan would never forget the sight, his mind still echoing the final lament of the Shee as the pyre of the fallen was consumed:

<Let our fallen sisters be one with the communion of mother-sisters. Let our daughter-sisters be the future and hope of the unbroken circle.>

Lost in sorrow, Alan was slow to notice the sudden darkening as a great cloud filled the sky. At the same time he became aware of the swooping figure of Iyezzz and heard the Prince's excited call. What was Iyezzz doing up there in the gloom at this belated hour, when he must be feeling every bit as exhausted as Alan himself?

In that same moment Qwenqwo tensed, the Fir Bolg battleaxe drawn from its sheath across his back, his eyes ablaze.

'What is it?'

Alan gripped the Spear of Lug with both hands, following the dwarf mage's upturned eyes to gaze heavenwards. All of sudden Shee were materialising from all around him, hundreds – thousands. They were forming a gigantic circle around the Mage Lord and the dwarf mage, all eyes turned heavenwards to where the cloud was descending in an enormous arc.

'It's Kate!' Mo's voice was shrieking in his ear.

'Kate?'

'The powers preserve us!' Qwenqwo chortled drunkenly. 'It's the dragon come back, filling up the entire sky.'

No, Alan thought: *the shadow is not the dragon. It's merely its tail. The curve is the tail coming down to meet the ground.*

'Alan!'

The cry arrived into his ears a split second after the cry in his mind.

It was Kate – Kate calling to him.

His exhaustion from the two days and the intervening

night of unrelenting battle was lifted from his shoulders. His heart, his spirits, were already soaring.

Kate was descending out of the night sky on the cusp of the arc – the tip of the gargantuan tail. The dragon must be as enormous as an island.

Alan thrust the Spear of Lug into the hands of his tottering friend, who was beside himself. Then Kate was in his arms. Her tear-filled eyes were confronting his own. Their oracula had burst into blazing light, rubicund upon emerald, emerald upon rubicund.

‘I’m so sorry I abandoned you. I let you down.’

‘No, you didn’t.’

‘I did. Oh, Alan, can you ever forgive me?’

‘I don’t care what you did. All I care is that you’re back.’

He didn’t know what she was talking about. He didn’t give a damn about forgiving her. He was lifting her high into the air, then spinning her round and round in dizzy circles, laughing like a clown. This was his beloved Kate. She was once again in his embrace, his lips kissing hers, her lips returning his kiss. He never wanted the kissing to stop. He never wanted to stop hugging her, whirling her round and round and round . . .

Binoculars . . . and a Bike

Gully Doughty hesitated on the frozen ground outside the basement window before switching off the penlight for a spell. The night sky was hidden by clouds, likely promising enough snow to bury this shithole for the rest of winter. He paused to take a good look around, making sure there wasn't nobody about. He flicked the pencil light on again, giving him enough light to get close to the tiny square window that looked into the basement. He tested it out, pressing his fingers against the frame. *Dead easy to make it rattle.*

'Rest 'ere.'

The old bat, Pinky Ponky, had said that to him when the crew had dragged him in through the big front door.

'Rest 'ere.' He whispered it again, for the benefit of his rage.

Bollix!

Bollix – it was a sexy word that he'd got to like. Heard it

from the soldier geezer built like a tank with a shaved head who was carrying the body of the old man out to the Mamma Pig. Gully couldn't believe it when Mark told him they was leaving without him. He had struggled to get away from the Derby skirt. He'd demanded to know why they was leaving him behind.

The soldier had grunted: *'Because it's all a load o' bollix, kid.'*

It made no sense at all to Gully. He wanted to go with Mark in the Mamma Pig, but the tall skirt with the red hair and the glasses had held onto him like glue, and she was as strong as two men.

'Lady Breakespeare will look after you, Gully.'

Not in this bleeding universe she won't. Not old Pinky Ponky, who wanted him to read books. *Books!*

He couldn't believe they'd had left him behind with these loonies in this creaky old barn, with them poor families who'd been driven out of London.

Like noffink bad was going to happen to some fallin' down farm because it belongs to Lady Pinky Ponky!

He felt sorry for the families, he really did, but they was caught up in the same bollix. He extracted the pencil light from pocket left 2 – O for observation. He shone the light on the window catch and saw it was crap. The window felt loose because the old brass catch was snapped.

'Bollix is right!'

He extracted the short flat screwdriver from pocket left 1 – P for Protection – and he slid it under the frame. The casement popped open an inch or so. Enough for him to

get his fingers into the crack and widen it so that he could slip his body through into the basement.

Stop. Look. Listen . . .

Noffink to worry about 'ere, mate. Not a bleedin' squeak.

He switched on the pencil light again and did a recce. It was exactly like he had imagined. There was a whole bunch of rooms with no windows, and every one of them was full of junk. But junk could be useful. Place like this a regular Aladdin's cave – and he had all the time in the world to explore. There was old chairs, that looked like aluminium piled up on top of each other, furniture gone green with rot, some things what looked like old mannikins, with no heads on the top; boxes stuffed full of junk! Strewth! There was pots and kitchen stuff, and bathroom stuff, and stuff the likes he knew nothing about. A bunch of old bikes all crusted with dust. One of them – probably years old – had bent handlebars and a fancy bunch of gears. A racing bike with them down-sloping cross-bars. Taking a rag from right pocket 2, he wiped some of the crap off it and saw it was bright red underneath, with a word in the middle of it. He couldn't make out the word. Then he wiped the crap from the second bar and made it out easy. RALEIGH. He figured he was looking at a lady's Raleigh racer.

Lucked out or wot!

The rag was already caked in crap, so he spat on it and wiped more crap off the back mudguard. It was silvery chrome underneath. *Wot a find!* All lovely and gleaming red

and chrome! Penny would have gone head over heels for this bike. He peered at the cobweb-encrusted gears.

They was coated in rust, but they wasn't half bad. If only he could lay his hands on some oil!

He brushed off the saddle. Even the pannier bag attached to the back of the saddle was red. It was real leather too. He searched for a dynamo but couldn't find one. He blew away clouds of dust to take a closer look at the saddlebag and managed to smudge out the glasses dangling from his nose. Sighing with frustration, he took them off and spat onto the lenses, then wiped off the crud with his shirt tail. Then, blinking owlishly, he shoved them back on his nose, fastening the curly bits around his ears. Inside the saddlebag he found a set of mini binoculars.

Perfeck or wot!

He read off the make using the binoculars, letter by letter. M-I-N-O-X and D-e-l-u-x-e. *Minox deluxe*. Oh, neat! Minox Deluxe 10x25.

Maybe take a peek at them birds from up there off the roof?

He had a think about it, then stuffed the binoculars into pocket right 1 – P for protection.

He was all ready to move on, thinking maybe he should quit while he was ahead. But then it occurred to him that he ought to take a second look at the red bike. It looked sort of special. Like in its day it could have been top o' the range. He squeezed the tyres and wasn't surprised to find them flat, but there was pump slung under the bar. Of course there was. Top of the range – what do you bleeding expect?

Maybe he'd come back here again, after he finished the recce. He might even have a go at pumping up them tyres.

But the thing he felt bad about, the thing what he was thinking about right now, wasn't the idea of nicking the stuff – nobody even give a damn it was there – he felt bad about the fact they was nice people, even if they was stupid. The truth was he even felt a bit sorry for Pinky Ponky.

Oh, Jesus, wot does she fink is going to 'appen here now the rebels is gone? She fink it's going to be hunky-dory just being nice and hanging around the crappy old place? Don't she know wots goin' on in London, just twenty miles away? Don't she fink them shitheads are gonna come right 'ere on her doorstep? Do she fink them Skulls is going to swarm in here an' say please and thank you very much?

'Stop it, Gully! You's getting yourself into a state,' he said aloud.

He counted to twenty.

Stop, look, listen . . .

Just minutes later, Gully found himself up on the top of the roof, trying to cool off in the parky night air. The roof set him thinking about his pigeons. He was pfeffing his breaths, like Penny hated him to do, tapping on his pockets and kinda humming to himself, because he knew what was likely coming and he couldn't bear to think about what would likely happen to these bleedin' stupid but nice people.

But was no good worrying about everyone and everything. *No good getting yourself upset, Gully!* Now he was up here, he might as well figure what was what. He knew it was a very

old place; a Tudor farm was what people called it. Kind of an ancient old place it was really, with all them leaded window panes. And the roof wasn't just a flat or pitched, it ran up and down all over the place. He rubbed his hand over a gully what ran right around the edge, where the rain water was collecting into channels, then heading out onto spitters for the fall pipes. It was a piece of work, and no mistake. It was what his nan would have called exceeding fancy. And now the snow was melting, it was running along them channels at a fair old lick. Funny that – how the snow was melting so fast when every night had been freezing cold for weeks, but he didn't have time to figure that out. He felt a whole load better now, getting to know the way it all worked. Gully sorely missed his pigeons. He fiddled with the binoculars, kind of itching for daylight so he could test them out. Right now there was nothing to see other than the cloudy sky and the gloom of the old farm with its barns full of desperate folks, the glimpse of stars he had seen earlier already snuffed out. *Penny, gel, I tried to warn 'em, but they won't listen.*

And he had. He'd told old Pinky Ponky, who owned the rambling old junk heap what would happen, but she'd just looked at him like *he* was the idiot. .

Jesus, Penny – Penny gel! Why'd you leave me here on my own? You're in real trouble an' nobody gives a shit but me.

He could see her there – Penny – in his mind's eye, standing on that wooden platform where the lunatics was killing one another with swords. He could see the desperation in her eyes. He could hear her anguished shout:

'Run, Gully! Run from the City Below!'

But wot about you, gel? We just upped an' left you behind.

When he'd tried to warn them, that white-haired old reverend had told him to stop swearing, when all he was trying to do was shout some sense into the madness around him.

'Child. You sound like Isiah crying in the wilderness. What terrible visions do you see?'

He'd just shaken his head and scarpered.

Penny might have explained things better, but then, Penny never really explained nothing except in pictures. Gully couldn't, not in a million years, have explained what Penny meant by her 'City Below', and he hadn't believed a word of it when she'd spoken about it, but now he knew that Penny had been right all along: there really was a City Below. And he knew, deep in himself, that it was as important as it was terrible – maybe even worse than terrible – but he didn't have the words to explain what he felt.

With tear-blurred eyes, Gully put the binoculars to his face and looked into the night sky again. There still wasn't much to see, but then what had he expected?

Oh, Penny – Penny, gel! I can't hang about 'ere. I can't just sit and wait for it to happen with these people wot understand noffink about wot the Skulls, and Paramilitaries will do to 'em.

He heard her voice in his head: *'What is it, Gully?'*

'There's fings going on, fings wot shouldn't be going on nowhere, no how. Really bad fings. Dangerous.'

Nobody other than Penny would listen to him. Nobody

else would care or understand. And Penny wasn't here to listen.

Gully began his ritual count to twenty. His fingers flew over his pockets, incanting the codes . . .

The he heard a whine up there in the sky. It sure as heck wasn't no bird. He'd have recognised a bird. It was a whine like a motor might make. Out of the corner of his eye Gully saw a quick flash of light where he had heard the whine. It was as if an eye up there had blinked open and then closed again.

He opened up the binoculars and peered up at the place where he had seen the light. He moved around in a circle, looking.

Noffink.

A minute, two minutes, five . . .

His fingers were slipping on the focus because of the cold.

Give it up, Gully.

Nah – not yet.

Then he heard the whine again – and he saw the light. He didn't need no binoculars to be sure he saw it: there was something up there in the sky, something with a motor holding it up in the air and it had a penlight on it. That light was flashing on and off, like a blinking eye. Well, he was sure of one thing: it wasn't spying on him. The bad guys didn't waste their time spying on people who was nobody.

A Respite of Sorts

In the murky light of pre-dawn, Cal's face looked lumpy and drawn, dark stubble attesting to the fact that he hadn't shaved for several days. He was sitting on the second step under the passenger door of the cab of the Mamma Pig, a few feet away from an equally exhausted Mark, who was sitting in the dirt, his back resting against the huge front tyre. They should have reached Resistance HQ by now. They had headed north in a somewhat elliptical fashion, attempting to keep roughly parallel to the M1 motorway. They had got as far as fifty miles south of the junction with the A38, but at that point they had been warned to take evasive action by an urgent message on the com: it appeared that they – the crew – were being hunted by killer drones.

Cal growled: 'That bastard, Seebox!'

Mark nodded, tiredly. From the sounds of it, Seebox had it in for their crew personally. Which boded ill for the future. *It has to be Grimstone acting behind Seebox*, Mark thought.

They had been forced to travel throughout the night, passing through pitch black towns that had removed their road signs, eventually making camp in the shade of some hawthorns somewhere close to the coastal town of Foulness.

Cigarette smoke curled out of the open window above their heads. They could hear Cogwheel instructing Tajh on how to connect some portable IT appliance to the aerial dish up on the roof. Everybody was getting jittery with the notion of being hunted by drones. Nan was the only one who had settled down to sleep, wrapped up in a duvet in the belly of the Pig. The only consolation, as far as Mark, was concerned, was the fact that Padraig's temperature was coming down with the intravenous fluids and the antibiotics.

'Shit!'

Mark glanced over at Cal, who was staring at the ground between his boots.

'What's up?'

'The whole thing – towns without signs. This is England, for fuck's sake! What's happening gives me the creeps.'

'It'll only get worse.'

'Tell me something I don't know.'

'You don't know the Tyrant of the Wastelands.'

'This imaginary enemy who has declared war on Earth?'

'You didn't think Padraig existed,' Mark pointed out.

'Okay, so we got him out of there. And now we have come under more than the usual amount of attention.'

Mark gritted his teeth. 'Has it occurred to you there could be more than one explanation for the attention? That it isn't just Pdraig? That maybe they're out there looking for me and Nan?'

Cal blew air out through his pursed lips. 'As a matter of fact that very thought has occurred to me.'

'You know, I'm getting tired of your grumbling.'

'Appears to me that ever since you two joined the crew we've become the focus of far too much attention.'

This argument was a continuation of one that had been going on ever since their arrival among the crew. It was close to dawn, icy cold and foggy. In the tense silence, as Mark tried to think through his exhaustion, he could hear the washing of the surf against the nearby beach. He yawned and scratched at his unshaven chin. He shifted his bum, trying to find a more comfortable position. It didn't help. His back itched. In fact he was itching all over. He hoped to hell he didn't have lice.

'What more reassurance do you want from me? I can't explain everything, but I know there is some kind of logical explanation to what's going on here. An explanation for it all, on Tír and on Earth, no matter how confusing things might appear.'

Cal had fallen silent but Mark could read his expression: he didn't share Mark's faith in logic.

And now Mark was unsure if he was even convinced by his own logic.

Cal accepted a lit self-roll cigarette from Tajh's

disembodied hand, dangling down out of the opened window above their heads. 'Okay, for argument's sake let's say you're telling the truth: there's something going on; the old geezer is important in some way. Shit, who's to say if he's going to live? What proof can you show me that any of this is real?'

Mark thought about Padraig and moved from scratching his stubbly chin to the side of his brow, close to the oraculum. He thought about what they had seen in London. Their escape had hardly been an orderly affair. Nor had it been covert, given the clanking bulk of the Mamma Pig. So they were an easy target. With Seebox's regular army reinforced by the Paramilitaries, and now the possibility of killer drones, it was a nasty situation. That was why Sharkey and Tajh were attempting to rig up a radar link to the roof-mounted satellite dish.

But, as Cal had just reminded him, they *had* rescued Padraig. It had seemed impossible, but the fact was that they had.

Who would have bloody thought it!

For Mark just thinking back about Clonmel and Padraig brought home a deep pang of nostalgia for those lost days: a summer of high sunshine and friends. He recalled leaning back against the wall of the dairy in Padraig's garden and looking up into the ancient pear tree, its stunted branches providing shade in the hot sunshine. He recalled how Padraig would bring Mo a moth or a butterfly in the cradle of his hands. How delighted Mo was as she let them go,

gazing up at their erratic dancing flight. He recalled the joy, the intimacy of friendship . . .

Mark turned his head to the sceptical Cal. ‘You know that this thing in my brow, this oraculum, is embedded in my brain. It has changed me. And Nan’s has changed her too. I can’t explain how it works in any logical way, but I do know that on Tír the oracula connected us to a source of power that we could use just by thinking about it.’

He stopped talking because he didn’t want to elaborate on where the source of power came from: not merely a goddess, but Mórígán, the goddess of death. But now a new thought crept into Mark’s mind, and the implications frightened him.

‘This thing, you say, connects you to something powerful? You realise how that sounds to me?’ Cal said.

‘I suppose I do.’

What was increasingly frightening Mark was not Cal’s scepticism, but his realisation: *What if the real connection is to the Fáil?*

‘Sounds like bullshit – that’s what it sounds like to me.’

‘Well, maybe I can understand that. But these things in our heads, they do more than just give us powers to fight. They do . . . deeper things, allow us enhanced communication for example. We can read people’s minds. We can understand what somebody is thinking. We can understand their speech, even if they’re talking in a language we’re never heard before.’

Cal shook his head, exhaling smoke. He took a final drag

on his cigarette before docking the butt-end against his heel.

‘I can see how implausible it might sound to you. But the fact is you have helped Nan and me in rescuing Padraig. I know you don’t have any idea of why that might be important, but we think it is. We’re both grateful to you.’

‘You put the crew through unacceptable risk.’

‘We both think the risk was worth it.’

Cal spoke quietly, but with an underlying tenor of strong emotion; resentment, frustration – anger. ‘This crew is a guerrilla structure.’

‘I know.’

‘But have you figured out why?’

‘Security.’

‘Attrition, pal. The average survival time of a crew is no more than a few months. They get wind of us, one way or another, they take us out.’

Mark fell silent.

‘Maybe it does have something to do with you. Maybe they are hunting you, not even you and Nan, but specifically you. I don’t know shit. But one thing I do know – I bloodywell feel it – is those bastards are getting closer.’

‘Nan and I, we might be able to help.’

‘How?’

‘We sense things. We might sense it if the crew is in danger.’

Cal grunted. ‘Maybe you could, maybe you couldn’t.’ He wiped his hand across his sweating brow. ‘This country is

going to pot. I don't understand it at all. I can't believe it is happening. All I know is I'm going to fight it. But –' He struck his open hand against the side of his head '– it's so difficult to fight against something that you don't understand. Something you don't have a clue as to why in the name of god it is happening.'

Mark nodded. 'I understand.'

'I wonder if even now you see what I'm getting at? It's all down to attrition, man!'

Sharkey, who was barefoot and had stripped down to a T-shirt and shorts, interrupted the tense atmosphere by heading towards the sea, hopping from one foot to the other in the freezing dirt. He still had a dressing over his wounded shoulder, but he had found an oil-stained pilot-styled cap and was doing his Biggles act:

'Damn near bought it, there, old chap!'

Mark found himself smiling, as he looked at Sharkey – all elbows and knees, jogging away into the mist. Sharkey had broken the tension and even Cal looked a little more relaxed.

'You boys feel like joining him?' Tajh's head was poking out of the cab window. Her voice was inside his head: *Do it! Don't lose the opportunity to bond.* Mark sighed. He felt too tired for this, but he climbed to his feet.

'Shit – okay!'

It was probably a daft idea, but Mark and Cal abandoned their jackets, footwear and jeans, and followed Sharkey's lead.

The deserted beach was no more than thirty yards away, a steep drop into a tiny cove of tide-worn rocks and brown sand, easier to run on where it had been wetted by the tide. The water was a darker plane beyond the sand merging into the mist. They ran at the tide, splashing out through the shallows, their feet slipping and sliding on seaweed before they fell into the freezing water. It wasn't long before all three of them were forced back out onto the sand, the bodies blue with cold, the steam of their breath clouding their vision.

Sharkey lay back on the elbow of his uninjured arm, showing the white of his toothy grin against his dusky skin. 'Why's this old fart so important to you?' He asked Mark.

'I think, maybe, he might understand what's going on.'

Mark joined Sharkey, sprawling flat on his back, his heels close to the surf. Cal flopped down on the other side of him, lying prone, the side of his face pressed against the sand. Mark's jaw trembled with cold as he spoke. 'We were only kids. None of had any real idea of what we were getting into. All I know now, looking back at it, is that we were seduced into something . . . well, something incredibly dangerous.'

'And all that shit has to do with what is happening here?' Cal said.

'Yeah.'

Sharkey looked Mark in the face. 'I don't share Cal's scepticism. You're talking about something I can empathise with: the idea of getting involved in something dangerous – something you can't ever wholly escape from.'

Mark squinted at Cal's prone figure, a dark silhouette against the lightening sky.

Sharkey said: 'We did a whole bucket load of stupid things when we were kids. Me and Bull, we got ourselves involved in a couple of wars. Sometimes I think we never escaped from those wars.'

Over the ensuing minutes, the first clear shafts of dawn broke over the sea, awakening greys, then pallid blues, then the flush of violet. They gazed at the silvery horizon. The first glimmer of daylight amid the dissipating mist was beautiful. Frost crinkled the seaweed nearby. This was England, not just Cal's country, it was Mark's country too – and yet it felt curiously alien to him, as if the very molecules of his being no longer belonged here.

'Hey, the dip was fun!' Sharkey grinned.

The tide was coming in. Mark sat forward, bringing his goose-pimpled thighs up to his chest and holding his legs bent up with his hands. Seagulls shrieked overhead. 'I really do think there are too many things in common with our experience on Tír for the events here to be coincidence.'

Cal spoke then, his voice a growl from deep within his chest. 'Don't treat me like I'm stupid, pal!'

'I'm not.'

'I know what you're doing. I just figured it out. You're slipping and sliding around the truth.'

'How's that?'

'What's really happening – you're ignoring what's behind it all – the word for it is evil. You think you can

pretend that evil don't exist? I've been up to my nostrils in it, all my life. Hoping nobody was going to make a wave. Nearly drowned in it when those fuckheads murdered my father. Heard Tajh tell you that – she tells everybody. But don't you go thinking you understand. I'm talking about my father, the dad who abandoned me as a kid. You moan and groan about being adopted. Nobody ever took the trouble to adopt me. I thought a whole lot about that when I was growing up, in and out of trouble. I knew my father was out there somewhere and when I was ready I went looking and I found him. I made it my business to find him when those tattoo-heads started laying it on people like him. I found him. And you know what? He was just another alcoholic shithead, an ex squaddie just like me. And here's me, an idiot who goes into the fucking army, man, to try to have something to believe in, something to fight for. I saw things to believe in all right. I saw evil every fucking day.'

Mark and Sharkey dropped their heads in silence.

Cal lifted his face to the sky and he exhaled. 'I hardly had time to get to know my waste of space father before he became another of those statistics nobody gives a shit about.'

He turned on his heel and stalked back to the camp.

Mark followed him. But he wasn't so stupid as to think he could console Cal in his present mood.

Mark looked in on Pádraig, nodded to Tajh and Nan who were looking after him, then wrapped his leather jacket

around his trembling and jerking shoulders. He looked down at the battered harmonica he lifted from his pocket.

Fathers and sons!

Cal had returned to his perch on the step.

Mark stood over him. 'You're lucky.' Mark could actually hear his teeth chattering. 'At least you got to know your father.'

Bull looked down at the pair of them from the top of the Mamma Pig, where he was still working on the satellite dish. Tajh came down out of the cab to put an arm around Cal's shoulders.

Mark shrugged his shoulders at Tajh. 'Sorry.'

Nan signalled to him from the open porthole in the side of the Pig, but he was still concentrating on Tajh. She shrugged, her eyes closing with a sigh. At that point the heavy engine started up. They heard it revving, as if Cogwheel was testing it – or maybe deliberately breaking up the mood.

Tajh said: 'We're all fagged out with exhaustion. I've been lying awake all night thinking about things.'

'Thinking about what?'

'Thinking about you, what you and Nan have been telling us. There are things that we've been noticing too that make little sense as we understand things.'

'Like what?'

'I'm beginning to believe you – maybe there is a pattern to what's been happening in London: the riots, the wasted streets, whole districts in flames. And now the whole country.'

‘What sort of pattern?’

‘I just can’t say, but I’m just beginning to see that it isn’t just random chaos, as people were assuming.’

Mark thought about that walk with Henriette, seeing London from a very different perspective. Then he looked back towards the porthole only to discover that Nan had disappeared.

Cal asked: ‘What’s happening with the drones?’

Tajh answered: ‘I don’t know.’

Mark was still wondering about Nan. Where was she? What was it she had been attempting to tell him? He felt so anxious about her he searched for her presence with his oraculum.

‘Shit! Something’s wrong. Nan is gone.’

The crew reacted with surprise. The atmosphere immediately grew tense.

Tajh jumped up into the Mamma Pig to confirm that Nan was not there. Sharkey, Bull and Cal were just standing there, all looking at Mark. He searched for Nan through his oraculum.

<I’m fine> she countered, mind-to-mind. I am down at the beach, looking at the sea.

<You picked a strange time to go for a walk.>

<Something was wrong. The gulls had gone quiet. I looked for the reason why. I sensed changes in the wind: in its force – which was rapidly growing – and changes in its direction, which was blowing in, landwards from the sea.>

Mark looked at Tajh: 'It's okay. She's safe.'

Nan clearly overheard him. <We are not safe.>

<What is it, Nan?>

<Open up your senses through the oraculum. The wind has risen ten-fold in the last few hours. The temperature has also risen several degrees. I came down here to the sea to examine the movements of the waves. Where was the tide when you left it?>

<Half way up the little beach and rising.>

<Well, now it has retreated so far I cannot see it.>

Mark swung round to face the crew, who had been staring at him in silence as he communicated with Nan, his oraculum flaring. 'She says that the wind is rising. The sea has gone out a mile.'

Sharkey said: 'That just ain't possible, man.'

Cogwheel, who had been leaning out of the window of the Mamma Pig with a fag between his lips didn't agree with Sharkey. He flicked the sparking remains out into the dirt. 'Shit, guys, I really do hope I'm wrong, but what Nan is describing sounds like only one thing I know: a tsunami.'

<You hear that, Nan?>

<I hear it. What is this tsunami?>

<A gigantic wave. You better get back here fast as you can.>

Mark took off, shorewards, to meet her. 'Hell, Nan! I was worried about you.'

'Worry about yourself. I've been moving in a circle around this spot. Something very strange is happening.'

‘Strange, how?’

She shook her head. ‘The changes in the birds, the wind, the tide – it’s becoming very peculiar indeed.’

‘Your chatting is not helping us,’ Cal barked from the topmost step of the Mamma Pig, where he stood glowering down at Mark and Nan. ‘What’s the fuss? Are we being tracked? Can we expect a clone attack?’

Nan spoke: ‘I don’t know if we are being tracked or not. I don’t think we are under a clone attack, but I do believe we can expect a storm, a very big storm, coming in from the sea.’

Cogwheel chipped in: ‘She’s talking about a tsunami.’

Cal laughed. ‘We don’t get tsunamis in England.’

‘Hsst!’ Tajh waved them all to silence.

Then they all heard it: a roaring, rushing sound in the far distance.

‘Shit!’

The Mamma Pig became a commotion of activity. They threw everything that had come out of the Pig back in through the portholes, meanwhile Cogwheel started up the engine. As Mark helped Nan back in through the port, Cogwheel performed a five point turn, then headed out, revving through the heavy gears.’

‘Where we heading?’

‘We’d best take a twisty route; keep the things in the sky off our backs. Tajh, can you plot a route that’ll give us the least hassle?’ Cal hesitated long enough to light one of

Cogwheel's self-roll cigarettes off the dock-end of his previous.

'I have a question,' said Mark.

'Uh-huh?'

'Sharkey is right. Tsunamis don't usually hit the East Anglian coast. What if this isn't down to natural forces?'

Nobody volunteered an answer.

A Sense of Purpose

Mo woke with a shock to realise that she was listening to birdsong. It had been so long since she had heard anything so sweet that it threatened to disorientate her. When she stepped outside her tent, closely followed by her Shee guardian Usrua, she spotted the two slender olive birds with yellow breasts that had woken her with their song. They resembled chiffchaffs back on Earth. Then she noticed lots more of them, and other varieties too. They were feeding off insects that buzzed and swarmed around a proliferation of tiny red, pink and yellow lichens that peeped out of the cracks between the rocks.

‘Isn’t it strange, Usrua, how loveliness could still survive, despite what’s been happening here?’

‘Life is life.’

‘It troubles me that we had to kill them all – all of the defenders.’

‘We were obliged to do so. We offered quarter but none

responded since surrender is forbidden to the Tyrant's legionaries.'

'Why would he be so cruel as to forbid defeated soldiers the opportunity to surrender? What purpose would it serve when all is otherwise lost?'

'Their lives matter only in as much as they serve his purpose. Once surrendered, they would be of no further purpose to him. As captives they might even prove useful as informants to the enemy.'

'But that is monstrous.'

'It is the logic of war.'

Mo shut her eyes. She recalled the arrival of Kate on the dragon, how it had blacked out the evening stars. At the time it had appeared to put a cap on those days of never-ending battle, the chaos of flames, the fury and horror. There was a particular memory she would have preferred to forget, when the Shee had set fire to the base of a tower full of desperate defenders. Now Mo wondered if she would ever rid herself of the awful memory of that tower consumed by flames, wheeling Garg sentinels in the sky directing new avenues of attack, the screams of the dying.

Mo opened her eyes again to gaze up into the dark-skinned face of Usrua, seeing her feline features in the flared and flattened nostrils that were already half way between those of a human and a great cat. She also saw a hint of stripes coursing over her guardian's brow, larger than usual canines and butter yellow eyes that could open wide to become all pupil, so moonlight reflected off the

retinas like mirrors. Even the prickling patterning over the curve of her cheeks suggested the whiskery profusion that would spring out when she transformed into her battling feline spirit. Mo thought about the description she had so often overheard when human-like races on Tír spoke of the Shee: they called them a warrior race. How astonishing to think of them as beings bred specifically for war . . .

‘Must we kill every foe we come across in this war? Does Alan feel this way? Is there no possibility of compromise?’

‘The enemy has ever been obdurate in terms that might have mitigated suffering or ended hostilities.’

Mo hesitated, the fingers of her right hand sub-consciously caressing the Torus that dangled on a thong around her neck. In her memory she saw the Torus around the neck of an old aboriginal woman caught in the rays of the setting Australian sun, its elongated shadows throwing her naked skin into relief. The old woman had been carrying a long cylindrical basket. She had reached into the basket and raised a stick with a rattling pod at the end of it, then addressed a young woman whose name was Mala, and who was seated, cross-legged, by a dark, still pond. The old woman had rattled the pod before Mala and said, ‘*Tjitji*’, which Mo understood to mean child. Mala, as Mo now knew, was her natural mother and Mo was the *tjitji* – the child developing in Mala’s womb. She had seen the old woman transfer the Torus to the neck of Mala. Now, Mo looked down at it. It was a ring, maybe two inches diameter, of strange grey-coloured rock, aglow with efflorescences

of blues and greens, ultramarines and turquoise. It was . . . alive with . . . with power. Mo had increasingly come to realise that the Torus was similar to the oracula her friends bore – she could sense the most intimate thoughts and feelings of other minds, other hearts.

She sighed. It was hard to believe that they had learned no lessons from the two and a half days of carnage. The ferociousness of the fighting had so shocked Mo that it disturbed her sleep now. She intended to take it up at her meeting with Alan and Kate later in the day. Surely she would find support with Kate, who must be every bit as shocked by the violence and bloodshed as Mo was?

She was so relieved that her friend Kate was back, Mo had deeply missed her company. They had met, hugged one another, rejoiced, but that joy had been marred by the sight of flaming buildings and the continuing efforts of the Shee to winkle out the last outposts of Legionary resistance. Since then there had been no time for the two of them to sit down and talk.

Mo felt that she desperately needed to talk. That was why she had sent a message to Alan and Kate suggesting the meeting. She also needed, of course, to hear every detail of what had happened to Kate on her mission to rescue the Cill, but there was a deeper, more urgent, reason she needed to meet up with her friends.

I need to tell them everything. I need to explain what has been happening to me and why it so frightens me.

That was why the birdsong had been such a welcome

intrusion: it had been the reminder that joy still existed in the world.

Mo turned her face to the sunshine, appreciating the faint fragrance of flowers in the cool morning air. She saw two children nearby chasing butterflies, a scene so heart-warming and charming Mo couldn't help but watch them. Oh, how she would have loved to join them! They looked like a couple of Olhyiu ragamuffins, a boy and a girl, perhaps ten and nine years of age. Then she wondered: *What parent could have been so careless as to expose such innocents to the fury of a war zone?* It was a wonder that they had survived the arduous journey here, never mind the recent battles.

Her curiosity aroused, Mo walked across the gritty dirt to speak to them, ignoring the towering shadow of Usrua who followed close on her heels. 'Why, hello! Who might you two be?'

The girl, who was the elder, cast a wary glance in the direction of the Shee, whose nostrils were visibly twitching, sniffing the air around the two children.

'Beggin' pardon, Milady, but I'se Moonrise an' this is me brudder, Hsst.'

Mo laughed. 'Hsst is a funny kind of name.'

'It's on account of 'e's deaf.'

'He's deaf? Oh, dear! I think I'm beginning to get the picture.' Mo lifted her eyebrows in sympathy, but also bemusement.

'Where are your parents?'

'We ain't got none.'

‘So you look after your brother?’

‘I looks to ‘im an’ ‘e looks to me.’

‘When did you last have something to eat?’

‘We gets a bit o’ soup, from Soup Scully Oops.’

‘When was the last time you had a bowl of soup?’

‘Only . . . Well . . . mebbe . . .’

Mo could see from the bruises on their faces and limbs that the children had been ill-treated, and not just recently – there were bruises of various shades that suggested earlier mistreatment. Mo had experienced such brutality at the hands of her adoptive parents, Grimstone and his wife Bethel, so she remembered it only too well. The little girl also had a swollen eye, all caked in pus.

‘Moonrise. You have a huge styne there.’

The little girl rubbed at the inflamed eyelid with a filthy hand.

‘It looks really sore.’

Moonrise squinted down at her brother, who was barely above her shoulder. Tears moistened his eyes as he alternately looked up at her and threw fearful glances at the Shee. He inserted his hand into that of his sister and sucked on his free thumb.

Mo said: ‘Please don’t be frightened by Usrua. She’s just taking care of me. She won’t harm you, not unless you try to harm me.’ Mo laughed, taking a gentle hold of the girl’s free hand. ‘I don’t think you are planning to harm me, are you, Moonrise?’

Moonrise shook her head.

‘I’ll tell you what we’ll do. I’m going to send Usrua to find an aides. The aides will know how to treat your eye. She’ll also find you something to eat.’

Moonrise looked up at Mo with alarm. She attempted to retrieve her hand from Mo’s, but Mo resisted.

‘It’s all right. I’s okay, Milady . . .’ she said.

Mo kept her voice gentle but insistent. ‘No, it really isn’t. You’re both starving. And your eye is infected.’

Usrua, who had been observing all this with statuesque stillness, now inclined her head to purr quietly into Mo’s ear. ‘The Mage Lord, Alan, approaches, together with the Kyra, Kate and the dwarf mage. You had requested a private conversation with them, if you remember.’

‘Yes, of course. I really need to talk with them, but I don’t want to do so on my own. See if you can find the magician, Magtokk.’

Usrua nodded, but she hesitated as she looked down at the children.

‘Don’t worry. They’ll hardly understand what I’m about to discuss. And the little girl really needs attention for that eye.’

The Shee stretched to her full height and her eyes narrowed. ‘I shall inform an aides of the children’s needs, and meanwhile find the monkey trickster as you command. But beware, Mistress! Danger comes in many guises. This is not the first time I have noticed these same urchins at play nearby. Even in the most innocent of circumstances you must anticipate treachery.’

*

Mo watched the approach of Alan and Kate with some trepidation, noticing Alan still carried the Ogham-runed Spear of Lug in his right hand. She sensed the same heightened wariness in Alan's heart and mind as she had in Usrua's. Was he still wary of pockets of enemy that might suddenly spring out of a cleft in the rocks, or some hidden tunnel, and attack them? Was he being overly protective of Kate, now she was back with him? Judging from his expression, Mo saw that he was very distracted. How her childhood friend had changed! How all four friends had changed since their arrival here as naïve teenagers from Earth.

Alan was now very tall. She guessed he was almost the same height as his beanpole grandfather, Padraig. But then, Mo herself had also grown exceptionally tall. It was scary to feel, and see, things happen to oneself without having any control over them. Mo knew that people were now somewhat daunted by Alan. Even the Shee treated him with respect and the Olhyiu appeared to regard him as semi-divine, much as the Gargs regarded Kate. But Mo didn't fear either of her friends, no matter what legends were now growing up about them.

She and Kate flung themselves into one another's arms, promising to find hours and hours to gossip all by themselves, but this was not the moment. As Mo hugged Alan in turn, she was surprised at her own palpable nervousness when she whispered the words into his ear: 'We need to talk. There's something I must tell you and Kate.'

Alan held her by her shoulders at arms length, as if to

fully appraise the changes he must see in her. There was the suggestion of a smile on his lips. 'What is it, Mo? Are you still worrying about Mark?'

'I can't help worrying about him.'

Alan spoke, quietly. 'I guess all of us have been wondering if Mark got there – if the Temple Ship took him back to Earth.'

Kate and Mo nodded. All three of them were still thinking the same thoughts. Their friend, and Mo's adoptive brother, Mark, had been unsure if he was alive or dead after he was reduced to a soul spirit by Mórígán. He had been so haunted by the uncertainty he was determined to return to Earth and find out.

'I am worried about Mark, but that's not why I asked for the meeting. I have something important to tell you.'

Mo grabbed hold of Kate's hand.

'Mo! What on earth is it?'

'I hardly dare to speak of it. Not on my own.'

But then she was relieved to see Usrua returning in the company of Magtokk, who was knuckle walking in an attempt to keep pace with the strides of the Shee. He resembled a great ball of fur, dragging locks of it through the dirt behind him. The deep-set orang-utan eyes furrowed as they gazed into Mo's, and then she saw his face lift, sensing her state of heightened emotion.

Kate said: 'Mo's about to tell us a secret, but she refused to say a word until you're here.'

Magtokk blew out a sigh through those huge rounded

cheeks and then raised his enormous sausage-fingered hand to stroke his gingery-orange beard.

‘I take it you’re going to talk about your mother?’

Mo said: ‘I’m going to tell them everything.’

Alan sat directly opposite Mo, his head dipped and eyes slightly narrowed against the flurries of wind that blew sandy grit into his eyes. Kate sat beside him, her hand squeezing Mo’s. They were clustered together on a dry ledge of tufa, with a ring of Shee guardians keeping to a discreet distance of fifty or so yards away. Magtokk and Qwenqwo completed the circle. ‘I’m sorry,’ Mo spoke in a voice just above a whisper. ‘I was supposed to keep it a secret from you for now, but I can’t stay quiet about it any longer. I think you both should know right away.’ Mo took a deep breath. ‘Magtokk took me to see my birth mother.’

Alan’s eyes opened wide in surprise. ‘He did what?’

‘I wanted him to. It was something I desperately needed to do.’

Qwenqwo toyed with an unlit pipe in his gnarled hands. He lifted his emerald green eyes to look directly into Mo’s. ‘I can see that it meant everything to you, Mo. But how was this possible?’

‘Oh, Qwenqwo, there has always been so much that was never fully explained to us. We were drawn into Tír and expected to do whatever the various powers demanded of us. And we’re still doing what they demand of us, as if we have no choice in the matter. Magtokk was very helpful to

me. He recruited Thesau – the eagle you will recall from our journey down the Snowmelt River. It seems that Thesau is not an eagle, and was not protecting you, Qwenqwo, or your runestone. It's a True Believer and it is still up there, or somewhere close by anyway, and its purpose was ever to protect me.'

Qwenqwo snorted. He busied himself with the pantomime of lighting his pipe, refusing on this occasion to do Magtokk the favour of lighting a second. Then he puffed away, but with hardly his customary contentment, imbuing the faint stink of the distant toxic exhalations of the volcanic lava with the more pleasant aroma of his pipe tobacco.

In looking across at his friend, Alan could hardly fail to notice how Mo was changing. Her face was lengthening and her eyes were turning up at the outer edges. She had always been stunningly beautiful, but now she looked curiously different, even a little alien. Every time she looked into a mirror, it would probably make her wonder about her own nature. It was a feeling he had become familiar with himself.

Kate spoke: 'But you haven't answered Qwenqwo's question, Mo. How could Magtokk possibly take you to meet your birth mother when we know, or at least we think we know, that your mother is dead?'

'Magtokk helped me to make a dream journey into the past, like when you, Qwenqwo, took us back to the destruction of Ossierel and the death of Ussha de Danaan.'

Alan was increasingly shocked by what he was hearing. 'Magtokk, you've been playing games behind our backs.'

‘No, my friend. I have never lied or played games with regard to my position. When Mo asked for my help, I felt obliged to help her.’

‘I doubt that it was like that. You’ve had your eye on Mo since you first appeared. None of us could fail to notice your obsessive attentions.’

‘I do not deny it.’

‘Oh, Alan, none of you really understands! Magtokk is one of them. He’s a True Believer.’

Mo’s words provoked a flurry of exclamations.

An enraged Alan turned on Magtokk: ‘Is this true?’

‘I’m afraid it is.’

‘I can’t believe it.’

Mo put her hand on Alan’s shoulder. ‘It would explain how he disappears and reappears. The True Believers don’t have any corporeal reality. They can come and go through Dromenon.’

‘They can cross between worlds? They can journey back in time?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is this true, Magtokk?’

‘Indeed it is.’

‘You took Mo on a dream journey to meet her birth mother?’

‘Not merely to meet, to witness.’

Alan shook his head, even more bewildered. ‘Why?’

‘Is it not obvious? So she could understand who, and what, she truly is.’

‘What did she discover then?’ Alan turned from his fierce interrogation of Magtokk to look at Mo. ‘Do you really know yourself better now?’

Mo’s face fell. She looked so bewildered that Alan regretted raising his voice. ‘I’m sorry, Mo. Forgive me. It’s just that—’

Kate put her arm around Mo’s shoulders and embraced her. ‘Hush, Alan. Allow Mo a moment or two.’

Alan sighed, nodded. Magtokk’s great shaggy arm reached out to hug Mo on the opposite side. His other arm reached out to tap Qwenqwo on the shoulder, his huge face putting on such a comical expression of pleading that the dwarf mage couldn’t help but smile, however much he disapproved. Qwenqwo filled a second pipe, lighting it and passing it over. The flagon wasn’t too long delayed in appearing after that.

‘Magtokk! Will you, for goodness sake, tell us what’s really going on?’ Alan said.

‘Of course,’ he puffed, with his eyes closing in a look of contentment. Then he sighed and opened his wise old eyes again. ‘Like you, Alan – and like Kate and Mark – Mo’s role in the big picture was fated. She serves a greater purpose in this world. I was appointed by my fellow True Believers to help protect Mo. Such has ever been my purpose, and privilege, among you. There was neither deceit, nor treachery, merely the determination to protect and enable her. And Mo’s purpose draws nearer.’

Kate clasped Mo’s hand between her two. ‘Mo!’

Mo smiled at Kate. ‘It’s true, Kate. Magtokk has been

wonderful to me. It was so beautiful to meet my birth mother, Mala. She looked so young and vulnerable. Just an aboriginal girl, so lovely to meet and so innocent.’ Mo hesitated. ‘I hope Magtokk won’t mind my telling you. She is – she was – my virgin mother.’

Mo’s words astonished Alan and Kate.

Alan couldn’t speak for several moments just studying Mo, who had always been the strangest of the four friends. She was the only one who had not been given a crystal by Granny Dew in the cave of the Whitestar Mountains. Right now she was pursing her lips, the way she had done on the first day he had met her, together with her adoptive brother, Mark, after Padraig had caught them trespassing in his woods. Even then there had been something special, something different, about Maureen Grimstone – a difference Padraig appeared to sense right away. Padraig had taken her under his wing, just as Qwenqwo and now Magtokk had done here on Tír.

Alan took a deep breath. ‘Mo, we may soon be under attack again. We’ve all been under tremendous stress. Stress does things to your mind. This journey, riding these bone-shaking onkkh. I wonder at times if I’m going slightly bonkers myself. Those black blots invading my mind. I have nightmares in which I wake from sleep tormented by those vile shapes, spinning and changing inside my head, but I’ve come to the conclusion it’s just being stupid to allow them to trouble me. They’re just stress hallucinations.’

‘I don’t think I’m hallucinating, Alan.’

‘You really believe your mother was a virgin?’

Mo nodded.

‘Virgin pregnancies don’t happen, Mo. Not in the real world.’

‘By real world, you mean Earth. But Tír is not Earth. And whatever happened with my mother, no matter that it happened in Australia, the presence of the True Believers tells me that it didn’t follow the rules of Earth.’

‘Mo, you need to be sceptical of everything you see and hear. Isn’t it possible you’re your thoughts, your dreams, are being manipulated?’

Magtokk interrupted: ‘It is you who are being naïve, Alan, if you think that every child is born of man and woman. Have you forgotten your friends, the Shee? What if the pregnancy was placed within Mala in a manner beyond her capacity to understand?’

‘What are you talking about? Some kind of artificial insemination?’

Mo smiled and took Alan’s hand with her free left hand. ‘I think we have all discovered that Tír is very different to Earth. There are forces here that would not make sense back home. Like the power that brought us here. Or the Fáil. What about the oraculum in your brow? Does any of that make sense from a common sense Earth perspective?’

‘We’re human, Mo. Our perceptions are human.’

Mo spoke to Alan quietly, still holding his hand. ‘I’m sorry, Alan, but I no longer take any comfort from common sense.’

The Beginnings of a Plan

The brat of a girl was squealing like a stuck pig as Kawkaw twisted her ear with his surviving thumb and forefinger. She had been describing how she and her brother had pretended to play as they watched the tall, strange female, Mo, and the Mage Lord, and the Kyra, and the dwarf mage, and the monkey-man talking seriously together.

‘Talking? About what?’

‘Don’t rightly know as what. They shushed us.’

‘Don’t play the fool with me. I know the mute can read lips.’

‘Tried to ’e did. Honest. But the cat woman shushed us right after the aides woman treated me eye. So we was too far away even for Hsst to lip ’em.’

‘Think they’re your new friends, do you? Treated your scabrous eye! Does that make you think you can get one over old Kawkaw?’

With a flick of his right arm, the razor-sharp knife was

in his hand and brushing the salve-smeared swollen eye of the mute brat.

‘I ain’t lyin’. Honest.’

‘Ach!’ Keeping the blade pressed against her face, Kawkaw thought about her words. ‘Devilry – that’s what they are up to! Scheming and devilry!’

The tip of the blade bit into the purplish ooze of the girl’s flesh; a wash of pus, stained with blood, began to run, like a tear drop, down her swollen cheek.

‘She told us we wuz to go back.’

‘Suffering hogspiss!’ He could hardly think straight. He wiped the scutter off the blade on the girl’s rags. But something in what she had just said burst the balloon of his rage.

‘Who told you?’

‘Mo did. She says as we ’re to go back to see ’er, the aides woman what treated me eye. For ’er to see it’s gettin’ better.’

‘What – just the old aides witch?’

‘Mo too. But Hsst is afeared of ’er ’cause she’s got that Shee warrior with ’er all the time, even when she sleeps in ’er tent.’

‘The brat, Mo? She wants to see you again?’

‘Yeah.’

Kawkaw scratched his stubbled neck with his hook. Could it be that the fates had offered succour at last, just when it had looked nigh on impossible to extract even a morsel of benefit from this situation? Was this his

opportunity to avenge the Preceptress' taunts? Did they not say the fates work in ways that are not immediately apparent?

'You're sure? The brat, Mo?'

'Yeah.'

His eyes bore down onto the squirming face, the knife slipped back in his pocket, but her now swollen ear was once more clasped in the pincers of his finger and thumb.

She squealed anew, but she was nodding.

'You wouldn't lie to old Snakoil Kawkaw?'

She shook her head.

The brat wouldn't dare to lie to him. It had to be true. Snakoil Kawkaw couldn't believe his luck. Something important was going on. Why else would the Shee witch drive them away? Was she becoming suspicious of the brats? Was their spying becoming too obvious?

He gave her ear a final twist before he released it. The brat made snuffling noises through her nose, which was running with snot.

There was something for him here: the beginnings of a plan.

'See to it that you do go back! And you make sure that the mute keeps his eyes open and you keep your filthy little ears wagging for anything – the smallest squeak – that might be useful to me.'