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Also By Frank P. Ryan

The Snowmelt River

The Tower of Bones

FRANK P. RYAN

The
Sword
of
Feimhin



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BOOKS

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For Catherine and John

Strangest of all are the suggestions that Tír is linked to a sister world, variously known as Geb, Jörd, Gaia – or even Terra, a name akin to that of our world, Tír. Manifold are the references to this sister world in the legends of Tír, notably those of the warrior races such as the Fir Bolg and Shee. In both traditions the two worlds are spoken of as twins – as if worlds, like infants, might share a single cosmic birth. Communication and even passage between worlds is said to be possible through Dromenon or the power of the Fáil. This same passage is said to have allowed the seeds of war to be carried from one world to the other, though such history is uncertain and largely denied. Most intriguing is the suggestion that the fates of the two worlds might also be entwined, as is occasionally seen, even dramatically so, in living twins. The implications are unknown, perhaps even unknowable. Yet one is tempted to question if the answers to the afflictions of one world might be discovered in the struggles and tribulations of the other?

Ussha De Danaan: last High Architect of Ossierel

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London

‘Smoke!’ Nan exclaimed in surprise, as she performed a small pirouette while still holding on tight to Mark’s left hand, lifting it to duck under his arm.

‘Try not to draw attention to us.’

‘What is this smoke in the air?’

‘We call it smog.’ Mark watched her from the corners of his eyes, aware of the nervousness that had consumed her since their arrival here on Earth from Tír. ‘There are power shortages. I think people must be opening up the old blocked fireplaces. They’re burning coal and wood – and probably any old rubbish they can lay their hands on.’

His old leather jacket, the jacket he had worn on leaving Earth perhaps two years earlier, had proved to be too small for him on his return. He had been no more than a youth on leaving Earth but he had grown and matured to a young man. Back in Clonmel, the southern Irish town where the Temple Ship had brought them on their return, he’d been

obliged to buy new trainers, jeans, several T-shirts, a new black leather jacket – artfully scuffed so it didn’t appear too new – and a navy beanie to hide the oraculum in his brow. As for Nan – she had had a field day becoming acquainted with popular fashions for teenage girls. And now, kitted out in black leather boots that rose to mid calf, a chunky-weave purple pullover and blue jeans under a thick navy woollen overcoat, she twirled around again, then gazed into the distance. ‘But I can see plumes. There are buildings on fire.’

‘Yeah – maybe.’

Somewhere not too far away, judging from what he had gathered on the news, some buildings would still be smouldering from the recent riots. Anarchy appeared to be endemic in London these days.

It was mid-afternoon in a dank October; the light was poor, cloaked by dense cloud and smog. People just thirty or forty yards away looked like ghosts moving through a mist. Even Mark felt nervous about their situation. He sensed, as Nan did, that they were surrounded by danger. They were walking through a thickening smog that might have harked back to the pea-soupers of half a century ago, the ones they had learned about in school. And smog was not the only reminder of more primitive times when poverty was rampant and life was cheap.

It was important that they didn’t draw attention to themselves. But that was proving to be a problem with Nan. On Tír she had been queen of her own dominion: the Vale of Tazan. A teenage queen, but a queen nevertheless. That

royal heritage showed in her face, in her eyes, in her bearing and it made her stand out. He glanced at her, worried. *She must be feeling lost and confused here at every step*, he thought. Only yesterday, at the airport in Dublin, she had stood and stared at the queue working its way towards passport control. ‘These women,’ she’d exclaimed, ‘have painted their lips as red as cherries.’

He had squeezed her lightly. ‘Try not to stare – it’s just a fashion.’

‘On Tír, it was only the recusative priests who painted their faces – they painted them black, along with the palms of their hands.’

Mark chuckled. ‘There – you see, it’s just their fashion.’

‘Fashion? These women – they should ride six miles a day for exercise.’

‘They do. They ride six miles or more, on buses, and tubes, cars and trains.’

‘But this is just sitting on their bottoms with no exercise, other than their lazy imaginations. I suspect, upstairs – is that what you would say, upstairs? – they are as lazy and complacent as they sit on their – how do you say . . .?’

‘Bottoms?’

‘Arses.’

‘That word is considered impolite.’

‘Hah! Yet is it not so? They sit on their arses in their buses and trains. And surely those arses would be a deal less padded if they could desist from eating this execrable fare you call fast food.’

He grinned. 'It would be difficult to ride horses here in the city.'

'There are machines – iron horses. I have seen them.'

'Motorbikes.'

'Well then?'

'It is thought a little unladylike – though some do.'

'I would like to try that – to ride an iron horse.'

He laughed. 'I'd love to see it.'

'And as to the appalling drink you call tea . . .'

'Hey, don't let anyone hear you criticise tea!'

'And no servants – you are sure?'

He nodded. 'I'm sure.'

'It is no wonder they are consumed with despair.'

How lovely she looked, with her olive skin and her cascade of blue-black hair. Mark hugged her to him. He kissed her eyelids, first one and then the other.

He loved her deep chestnut eyes, which contrasted so sharply with the faintly blue-tinged whites. He loved the umbrage in them right now.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

'Don't be sorry.'

'I grumble too much?'

'Grumbling suits you.'

It was hardly surprising that Nan felt uncomfortable here. She came from an utterly different world, closer in its customs to Earth in medieval times. Her lips moved as she spoke, but they didn't pronounce the words in any Earth-based language. She was speaking one of the many

languages of Tír and Mark, a native Londoner, heard her words as though spoken in English; not through his ears, but mind-to-mind, a gift of her power. Right now, walking the smoggy streets of the city, he wanted them both to appear as normal as possible. She said, ‘I shall desist from grumbling.’

‘I feel like doing some grumbling myself. This Church of the English Martyrs – we need to find it.’

‘Yes, we do.’

Bridey, the housekeeper of Kate’s family back in Clonmel, had given Mark instructions on where to find the church where Bridey’s uncle – Father Touhey, a retired Roman Catholic priest – was expecting them. But the church was small and obscure and Bridey had never been to London in her life. Her instructions had been vague, to say the least, and thanks to the destruction brought about by months of rioting, travel had proved to be difficult in the inner city, now a maze of roadblocks and impassable side streets. Their only hope was to find some helpful local, a shopkeeper or a policeman, who might be able to give them directions. Mark shook his head, directing Nan into a side street away from any curious gazes.

He had difficulty in coming to terms with the shocking anarchy and violence that was now commonplace here in London. He had even more difficulty coming to terms with all that had happened to him in the last two years – a passage of time that had felt much slower on Tír. He had crossed, with his adoptive sister, Mo, and his American and

Irish friends Alan and Kate, into an alien world ravaged by war and dominated by an extraordinary and very dangerous spiritual force known as the Fáil.

When he had kissed her closed eyes a moment ago, he had found himself gazing into Nan's jet-black oraculum, startled by the metamorphosing matrix deep within it, tiny arabesques that appeared and disappeared in time with her heartbeat.

Although he couldn't pretend to understand how, he believed that the power conferred on him and Nan through their oracula was linked to the same Fáil. On Tír the triple goddesses of the Holy Trídédana were incredibly powerful, especially Mórígán, the goddess of death. The black crystal triangles they bore in their brows were oracula empowered by Mórígán herself. He had wondered if that force would still prevail back on Earth. But now, walking these dystopic streets, the very fact that they were able to communicate through their oracula suggested that it did – at least to some degree. And that was as surprising as it was disturbing – even frightening.

'It'd be nice if we could test the situation, Nan. We need to know how strongly Mórígán's power extends to Earth.'

He felt a tremble in her as she kissed him softly.

At Dublin Airport, Mark had steered the inquisitive Nan further along the crocodile queue of prospective passengers, praying they would get through passports and boarding cards without drawing attention to themselves. The passports had been a bit of a problem, even with the

help of a certain Mr Maguire, a useful acquaintance of Bridey's. He had registered them with what looked like genuine green-covered Irish passports, with false names and dates of birth. It might have proved hilarious had he registered Nan's true date of birth, which, if he translated Tír to Earth years, would have placed her birthday somewhere back in the Bronze Age.

As they had passed under the bilingual signs, heading for the X-ray machines, her eyes, round with amazement, had been darting everywhere, from other people, to the 'painted' women, to the overhead monitors and television screens.

Worried that air travel would terrify her, he had offered to take her across the Irish Sea by boat but she had insisted on flying. Then in the departure lounge she had pressed her face against the plate glass windows, twirling a strand of hair in her right hand, staring out in open astonishment at the aeroplanes landing and taking off into the cloudy grey skies.

'Flying for the first time can be a frightening experience.'
'You promised me it would be exciting.'

Mark had tickled her waist, his free hand fingering the battered old harmonica he had somehow managed to retain: the only physical possession that linked him to a man who he assumed was his biological father. A fleeting memory passed through his mind, of standing close to Nan, sharing the view of their reflections in the window, gazing out on the planes soaring into the sky.

When they got to London, she had told him what she'd thought of flying. 'All through the flight I was close to fainting with terror.'

'But you made it – you're here!'

'Yes, I'm here! And you told me London will be interesting. Instead I find myself fearing for my life.'

'Oh, come on – let's not—'

'You tell me' – she tapped him on his leather-coated shoulder – 'you will protect me from whatever danger we encounter. So what is the likelihood I shall end up saving *you*?'

He laughed, squeezed her mildly resisting body close to his own. 'I'm sure you will do it with elegance and aplomb.'

'You might forgive my thinking that anything that could possibly go wrong will go wrong – and I shall be picking up the pieces.'

It had been that journey from Ireland that had created today's immediate problem. He had been unable to bring along the Fir Bolg battleaxe bestowed on him by the dwarf mage, Qwenqwo Cuatzel, back on Tír. A twin-bladed war battleaxe, almost three feet long, would hardly pass unnoticed through the obligatory X-ray machines. Vengeance, he had named it – and now he sorely missed his weapon. Even during his imprisonment in Dromenon he had imagined it, sensed it, always there strapped to his back. He had never otherwise been parted from it since it had been conferred on him – not until the day before yesterday when Bridey's contacts had arrived to smuggle it across by

truck and ferry, concealed among a consignment of agricultural machinery. Since being parted from it he had felt himself incomplete. Even now, he was consumed by the paranoia that he would never get it back.

They headed past tall office buildings and apartment blocks with broken windows into Soho. People were sitting in doorways, smoking and staring. Mark asked a passing woman if she knew the way to the Church of the English Martyrs. She ignored him, hurrying on by with an averted gaze. Mark found it hard to believe that this was his native city. The London he had grown up in had the confident and attractive hustle and bustle of one of the greatest cities of the world. In more normal times he would have enjoyed strolling along here with Nan, like any other couple.

Nan linked her arm in his. 'I have the sense that we are being followed.'

'I feel it too.'

'In an hour it's going to be dark. We need to find the church.'

They ducked into Archer Street, passing the boarded-up shell of a theatre that still had the tattered shreds of its posters hanging from the walls. Mark decided he would try a dingy pub on the corner. He slid a ten pound note across the bar and asked again.

The barman glowered. But he took the note.

'Keep going the way you're headed. You'll come to Peter

Street. It's a small church off to your right – close to the end of the road.'

When they came to it, the shops and houses on either side of Peter Street were boarded up and the street itself was blocked by a ten-foot barrier. Across the barrier was a giant poster with a central logo. The logo was a triple infinity. The poster read:

**DISCOVER THE PROTECTION OF THE
INFINITE TRINITY
DISCOVER STRENGTH, LOVE, SANCTUARY
BE WELCOME TO THE ISLINGTON CHURCH OF THE SAVED**

The Islington Church of the Saved was the church founded by Mark's adoptive father, the Reverend Grimstone. There had never been much Christian love in Grimstone's theology, any more than in his treatment of his adoptive children. Now Mark stared, speechless, at the clever way the poster had warped the Tyrant's symbol of the triple infinity into the Christian concept of infinite trinity.

Now that Mark considered the poster, there was no mistaking its significance. That same sigil had decorated the hilt of the twisted cross Grimstone had used as the foundation emblem of his church here in London. And it had decorated the hilt of the great sword that Padraig, Alan's grandfather, had shown the four friends in the barrow grave in the woods behind his sawmill. That grave was the burial chamber of a Bronze Age prince, called Feimhin. But

when Mark and Nan had revisited Clonmel, they had found the sawmill burnt to the ground, with Pdraig missing, believed dead. The barrow grave had been desecrated, the Sword of Feimhin stolen. Mark and Nan did not believe that Pdraig was dead. They believed that Grimstone's followers had kidnapped Pdraig and stolen the Sword. The robbery had to be important. Pdraig's family, over countless generations, had been keepers of the Sword. Pdraig had explained a little of its history – and the danger it carried. When that ancient prince, Feimhin, had originally wielded it in the Bronze Age, it had led to bloodshed on a colossal scale. Pdraig's term for it had been 'endless war'. He had also shown them that its dark magic was unchanged, even today. And so it was in search of Pdraig and the sword that they had now arrived in London.

It was a cross that wasn't a Christian symbol at all, but the symbol of their arch enemy, the Tyrant of the Wastelands. If ever Mark had questioned whether Tír and Earth were linked, he was looking at its confirmation.

Nan was tugging at his arm. 'What does it mean?'

'I don't know.'

They were jostled to one side as some teenagers barged past, not caring if they knocked them over.

A moment later, a girl's scream came from the direction that the teenagers had been running in. Mark wondered if he should go and investigate, but his instincts told him to forget it. The girl screamed again – a long drawn out strident wail. Then it stopped. He had no idea if it was just

kids playing around or if somebody had just been seriously hurt. But he had no intention of abandoning Nan here while he investigated.

Two well-dressed and clean-scrubbed young men appeared out of nowhere, asking if they were lost and offering to help them. Under the immaculate charcoal suits they looked fit and well toned – like trained military recruits. Mark wondered if it had been these two who had been following them. He said, ‘Maybe you can help us. We’re looking for the Church of the English Martyrs.’ They ignored his question. Their expressions remained studiously bland. Each was hugging a small leather-bound prayer book.

‘Grace be with you, brother and sister.’

Nan squeezed his arm, affecting a smile. ‘Thank you. May I enquire? Are you members of the Grimstone church?’

‘We are members of the Saved.’

Our Place

'*Stop, look, listen!*' She had said. Now Gully Doughty heard Penny's words inside his head again. 'It's okay,' he muttered to himself. 'There ain't no 'urry.' He stopped for as long as it took him to shove his grimy spectacles up his nose.

Thinks she's smarter than us. An' maybe she is.

His mind reeled, just thinking about it. He didn't want to think about it. Only he didn't rightly know how to stop thinking about it. That was the trouble with thinking. You found yourself thinking about things you didn't want to be thinking about in the first place.

'Now you got to 'old yer breath an' listen,' he muttered to himself again. He held his breath. He listened.

Maybe she's a whole heap smarter than me while I'm a whole year older than her. A whole year! Only she goes right ahead and says it.

Shit! The truth of it was that, when it came to it, he didn't really mind thinking about Penny. And he didn't

mind thinking about Penny at all when he considered it that way about.

Gully made himself listen again. He heard nothing because there was nothing to hear. Then he shoved the cardboard box up through a crack in the wall and into a soot-stained shaft.

So wot – so Penny is smarter than me. But it's only smartipants-ness. She ain't a deal smarter when it comes to finding the bleedin' food so's we can eat. I'm the one who has to go out and do things.

It was dark in the rubble-strewn basement. The temptation was to hurry, but Penny was right. There was no need to. His brown eyes swept the gloom, making sure there was nobody about. There was only this one way in, but it was kind of awkward because the box was so heavy and he didn't want to shine no torch into the gloom; that might let someone know he was there.

The basement was ankle deep in soot and ash from the fire that had burned above it. There wasn't any kind of a door into the shaft, only the crack in the wall where you could squeeze through a gap between jagged bricks and the edge of a wrecked car that stank of piss and cat shit. His bladder always seemed to respond to them smells, like now, so it felt like a balloon just about to pop. But he didn't want the bleeder to pop right here and make the stink worse. He just shoved his back up against the wall, so as to balance the box, and bent his knees up so that the soles of his trainers were pressed against the rusting metal of the other side of the shaft. That way he could shimmy up

the first two floors in the dark, keeping the box safe in the curl of his belly, all the while feeling the muscles of his thighs bunching so hard they was just about splitting the seams of his pants. Foot by foot, he slid his back along the wall, all the way up past the boarded ground floor.

Sometimes there was dossers there. They pulled off the boards and kipped down in the mess and lit fires and scrapped among themselves.

'Don't forget to wait and listen . . .' she always reminded him.

He waited, just for a little, time enough so as to get his puff back, making sure there wasn't no dossers who could have heard his scratching.

'Fuckit – they's too pissed to hear anyway.'

He'd come to the bit wot Penny called the air lock.

'It's the airlock that keeps us safe, Gully. It stops anyone who tries to climb the shaft. It puts an ocean between them and us, leaving us Our Place like a secret island rising above the ocean.'

He liked the idea of that. He liked it when Penny talked about Our Place like it was a secret hideout. It was a mystery to Gully how a lock could be made out of air. But it was a good thing as far as Our Place was concerned. It made it safer. For sure, Penny was smart. He had to grant it to Penny how she got her angles just right. Gully couldn't deny that about her. She had the brains for stuff like that.

He shoved the box out before sliding his body over the big muck hole – wot Penny called the cave of wrack and ruin – where, if you listened when the wind was blowing, you could hear the clatter of parts of the roof still falling

in. When it rained, the water came through here like a river. The fire had burned out them floors in between the roof and the basement. He had watched it happen: flames roaring like a horde of demons through all five upper storeys. The crashing and cracking as the innards tumbled down amid the smoke and the heat had been so loud. When you looked up, you could see a massive crack in the roof. Penny said that this was because the internal walls had gone. He was sure them fire demons was still alive, creaking, up there in the concrete of the roof where it sloped and dangled all over the place.

Emerging out of the shaft, he slid the box along so he could sit astride the I-beam. It was a bitch, because his back was grating against the scratchy cinders. At least the glasses wouldn't come off – he had heated the ear pieces in a candle flame to bend them around his ear lugs. He stood to relieve his busting bladder, while simultaneously removing his glasses with one hand and washing the lenses with his spit between his finger and his thumb. He laughed now to think that he could have shown Penny how well he could multi-task – and all the while perfectly balanced on the one-foot-wide flat of the I-beam. He wiped his glasses dry again on his hooded denim jacket.

Lens-wiping and dick-shaking-off all done, he made a point of resting a calf against the box and holding still for another few moments of self-congratulation on his multi-tasking, while still waiting and listening.

He heard a slithering noise from the floor below. Could

be he heard the whisper of dosser voices. Maybe somebody felt the rain of his piss coming down out of the dark. Gully giggled again. But might be it wasn't such a smart thing to do.

'*Check if Our Place is secure.*' He heard Penny's warnings in his head again.

He felt so guilty that he stopped right there on the giant iron beam, holding himself rigidly still. He closed his eyes so he could listen better.

Once ain't enough, he thought

Gully made his way over the rusted I-beam that bridged the devastation of the collapsed upper stories; a thirty-foot crossing with the cardboard box balanced on his dark mop of curly hair, one hand steadying it. Stepping cautiously in the dark, he felt around with the edges of his trainers with the other hand, registering the hard sharp side of the beam, until he arrived at the junction where iron merged with the ledge of concrete. Manoeuvring himself, and then the box, he pushed himself through the trap door that opened into the shaft and dropped lightly onto the rusting roof of a big, unmoving lift. He hauled the box down off the ledge.

The box held the stuff he had bought from the sale of Penny's drawings. The honey – a tiny pot of the waxy sort Penny liked – was a surprise he had for her. Maybe it would make her think about him like any normal gel should.

'Weird she is. Won't let me touch her or nuffink!' Gully wanted to kick something right there and then. His fists

bunched. ‘Why won’t she let me touch her – not even give her a little hug?’

Penny was smart enough, her ma and da coulda been professors. Yeah – professors or the like. Only she wouldn’t talk about ’em. Never. Only thing she ever said, maybe like she was recalling a thing somebody must have said to her, was, ‘You are the strangest thing – the most disruptive child.’ The hoity-toity accent Penny put on it made it sound like a school teacher mighta said it. Or more like some bleedin’ professor. Not that Gully had ever met a professor in his life.

‘Won’t let me touch her, she won’t. Won’t even let me pull up close to her in the cold. Don’t feel the cold, she don’t – not ever. Not even when her ’ands are blue with it and her skin is covered in goose bumps. Not let me come close, just to warm one another. Paranoiac – that’s wot she is!’

Might be a good thing, being just a bit paranoiac. Might keep you alive. But you didn’t want too much of it.

Gully stopped and listened again and only when he heard not so much as a rat squeak did he slide across the rusting roof, heading to the porthole in the wall, where he shoved the cardboard box into the dolly. ‘Dolly’ – that was what Penny called it. She knew the words for things like ‘dolly’. Gully would give her that. She was smart with the sums, and she was smart at remembering the pictures. But for all of her smartpantsness, there was that weirdness about her, in so much as she would think about things

nobody in their right mind had any right to think about. There was scumbags who called her Cat and made meowing noises when they saw her coming. Like they knew that Penny had claws. All the same it frightened the life out of him at times, the way she took no notice. Like she didn't seem to know how to be afraid when anybody with 'arf a brick o' sense knew there was times when you needed to be afraid.

On his knees now on the gritty ledge, he slid the box further forward, finding the port hole in the dolly. He opened the porthole and slid the box into the empty chamber inside. He got it so it was sitting right in the middle and then he pulled on the cord – three sharp tugs. It didn't ring any bell at the top, but it made a soft noise, when the leather spring opened and shut. He waited for Penny to give the single tug back that would tell him she got the message three floors above. She would then haul it up and pass the knotted rope down the other shaft so he could follow.

While he was waiting, he thought back again to the night of the fire.

Razzers had started it in the small tube station next door. That too had been derelict – the entrance boarded up. Gully had watched them tear off the boards and go inside with their cans of petrol. He had watched it burn. The fire had quickly spread to the five storey red-brick office building next door. He had waited to see if the fire engines would turn up, but nobody bothered. The buildings was empty

and there was more important fires elsewhere. So the fire had it all to itself, gobbling up the tube station, until the roof and the walls caved in. But the old red-brick office building had stood the worst of it. Penny said it was because of the I-beams and the reinforced concrete up there in the roof. That and the water storage tank that was perched right up there on the topmost corner, right over the surviving two rooms that were left to them. Our Place had been saved when the tank had split and the water had deluged onto the topmost floor and covered the corner of the lift shaft and a few other bits and pieces, like the dolly, two rooms and the I-beam wot came out into the dangling metal sleeve of the dolly. Otherwise, all that was left was a big empty space, a black hole of cinders and broken concrete and twisty bits of rusting iron.

In the two or three minutes he had been waiting, his knees had begun smarting from kneeling on sharp grit and there had been no answering tug on the cable. Sometimes it took a while, like when she was up on the gantry, drawing her pictures. But this time Penny was taking too long. The thought grew in him that she just wasn't there.

Penny shoulda been there. She shoulda waited for him. She had promised she would.

A mixture of fury and apprehension caused Gully to jerk upright onto his feet, cracking his head on a protruding ledge of concrete.

'Ow – ow! Bleedin' 'ell!' He no longer gave a ratarse shit if the dossers heard him. Wincing and holding his head,

he was forced back over the I-beam and the rusty roof of the trolley car. Here he extricated a plastic torch from his pocket, directing its beam into the well of the lift shaft. Only then did he notice that the knotted rope was down.

Penny really had gone out.

But she had taken the precaution of pushing the loop of rope into the corner and fixing it out of sight under a brick. Gully shoved the glasses back up his nose.

‘Wot’s Gully to think, gel?’

He clambered up the knotted rope within the lift shaft and when he got to the top there was no sign of her. That did not come as a surprise. He didn’t even bother to look for a note. He was the one who left notes.

He moved over to the dolly and hauled on the chain in the channel by its side, muttering and fretting all the while. He hauled out the box and carried it into the kitchen area.

I suppose it must ’a been some kind of impulse, not some emergency situation?

He sat down, his arm lying over the box. He let a puff of air out between his pursed lips – a habit that Penny would have complained about if she was here. *Well, that’s the price you pay, gel, for not being here!* He hoisted out two heavy bottles of drinking water, which he been allowed to fill up at Mrs Patel’s corner shop for free, and set to preparing two sandwiches – beef for Gully and salad for Penny. He placed his sandwich on a small, clean square of toilet paper, right there on the pink-tinged Formica table, carefully wiping away the crumbs so that it became shiny again. He had so

wanted to tell Penny how he had bargained on the Hawksmoor picture with that Reverend woman. He could rip off her high-pitched la-di-dah voice just perfect. She was an old biddy that ruled the same church as in Penny's picture, the one who made him laugh with her purse dangling on a bleedin' chain.

'Squeezed twenty quid out of 'er, I did, wot bought the groceries, lots of fruit and vegetables and such like – an' the lice comb. She tells me the picture makes the church come alive. I just thought you'd a liked to hear them things.'

He flopped down on the concrete floor by the side of the dolly and lit up a cigarette, gathered together from the dog ends he had collected. He took a drag on it – still damp from his spit on the paper glue – and thought about all them things as was going wrong, and was going wrong all the time, all over the place. That was what made him feel so worried. He wanted to talk about his worry with Penny. He needed to see her here. He needed her. What she did, what she cared about, what she told him, was right. Mrs Burlington had hit the nail on its head. That was the thing about Penny – the magic about her. She made things beautiful. Her pictures made buildings come alive.

Just about all of the money from Mrs Patel had gone into the box. He had so wanted to impress Penny with his haul. He picked out the little pot of waxy honey. He wanted to see the look in her eyes when he gave it to her.

But then, he asked himself, wot would Penny see if she looked him back in the eye? Goggle-eyed glasses, flecked

with eye crud and finger marks. He had a sloppy bridge to his nose that caused the glasses to slip down, no matter how hard he tried to stop it happening, even to the extent it was putting wrinkles on his face.

He had chosen the denim jacket he wore because of its six pockets; the upper two zipped and the lower four flapped, so he could carry stuff when he was on the move. Now he emptied what change he'd kept from the ten pounds fifty pence Mrs Burlington had given him when another station picture got sold at the post office on Clemshod Street. He placed the note and coins in a tin.

'One of us is doing it, Penny. One of us is keepin' body 'n soul alive!'

But that wasn't really fair. Penny painted the pictures.

There was still light enough in the sky to see the sights – pigeon fashion. It was here Gully and Penny would have come to celebrate his success. Only she wasn't here like she promised. He grumbled some more about that, moving around in the gloom, spreading the blinds he had rigged up, pulling them all tight before he lit the candle in the wax-splatted saucer.

'Mrs Patel,' he heard himself tell Penny, "as these two evil cats: a black tom with 'alf his ear bitten off, called Spike, an' a tabby wots more cunning and sinister, called Moll. Soon as they get me all to themselves they come rubbing up against me calves. Moll does all the begging, with her smoky blue eyes. Spike's eyes is a kind of snake-like yellow, so he got no begging appeal at all. They think

they can read my mind – honest – even before they makes a move. Cats is mad about food, especially food that's nice and bloody. That's how I get them in my control. I gives 'em the juicy giblet bits of me trapped birdies.'

'Those pigeons will be the death of you, Gully.'

'Nah!'

'You go crawling out onto that broken concrete roof, you never know when it's going to give way.'

'Listen to me. There's folks down below would pay good money for fresh pigeon. I could set up a market stall.'

'You're just dreaming, Gully.'

A Psalm for the Dead

White-haired and unshaven, Father Noel Touhey paused in his shaky progress down the main aisle, to announce the words for the dead into the clammy emptiness of his abandoned church. The light coming in through the oriel windows above his head was so poor he had borrowed a brass candlestick from the altar, its uncertain flame casting dancing shadows into the echoing nave, with its silent rows of pews.

'De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine.'

His hands were blue with cold and stiffly arthritic, so he rested the candlestick on the lid of the coffin – the first time he could recall the need for candlelight since he had been a child in his grandmother's whitewashed cottage on the foothills of the Comeraghs. Or had it been an oil lamp? At eighty eight years old, it was hard to recall. An age ago, certainly. Just thinking about it caused him to lose track of his progress. He picked up the candlestick

again, reminding himself of where he was and what he was doing.

‘We have to show respect for the dead.’

‘Yeeesss, Fadah Toowee.’

‘Touhey,’ he corrected her for what must have been the dozenth time.

‘Toowee, Fadah,’ she acknowledged.

His Belizean housekeeper, Henriette Boleyn, was a tall, elegant woman who exuded presence. She dragged a brass bucket over the black and white tiled floor, causing the round-headed brass brush to clang against its sides, like a bell. She was wrapped to the ankles in a pea-green gingham dress and a matching band was tied around her brow, with a big knot holding together her bun of ink-black curls at the back.

‘It’s hard to remember at my age.’

‘Weh, de good Lord forgive you Fadah.’

My good and faithful Henriette!

She had taken care of him for a long time. Or at least, she felt so familiar he thought she must have. Tsk! If only he was not beset by a failing memory. These days there was a part of him that wondered if his entire life was a dream; his memory playing tricks with him. A lot of recent events were missing. He found himself shaking his head with bewilderment. He even wondered if it was true that the Lord would forgive him. His thoughts lagged behind his legs these days, so that he stood still for a moment or two on the glazed tile floor and waited for his memory to catch up with him.

The words, in English, wandered sluggishly through his mind as the Latin of the Tridentine Mass for the Dead emerged from his lips.

*Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord,
Lord hear my voice,
And let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.*

No wonder they had changed from the Latin to the vernacular. What did words like these mean to ordinary folk grieving over their departed loved ones? Yet still there was a place in his heart for the lovely Latin cadences and the poetry of it.

The young curate was surely gone – gone as every single one of the parishioners was. They had fled . . . or worse. Father Noel turned and looked around at the shadowed emptiness of both nave and chancel. The church had a presence all to itself. It was something he had always felt about it. It was as if it were watching, listening, feeling. A silent presence, sadly observant, as an old man being tended to – only its melancholia was deeper, more poignant.

Folk were afraid. Who could blame them?

I'm afraid too. But I have nowhere else to go.

There had been no electricity in weeks. Cabs and buses no longer frequented the area and half the tube stations, including the one nearby, were no longer functioning. All that was left was him and Henriette; faithful Henriette, who had cooked him a pot of her ‘Caribbean beenz soop’ just

before the service, ignoring his grumbling and complaints about it. Oh, and she had such a lovely alto voice in the hymns. But there were no hymns to sing any more. No altar servers. No parishioners. No relatives to mourn the dead.

Reaching down with a trembling hand, he removed the brush from the bucket, its black horsehair wetted in the holy water, and he continued his progress around the coffin, his course widening to avoid the wooden horses that supported it at the furthest limit of the central aisle, just within the locked and bolted doors.

‘Are you all right, Fadah?’

He was far from all right. His heartbeat felt irregular, as if an upended turtle were struggling to find its feet in the empty bowl of his ribs. Where in heaven’s name was the curate? It was cruel, at his age, making him remember the details of the service. Latin had fallen out of favour for a while. But then it had been permitted again for special circumstances. And surely these amounted to special circumstances. And its poetry and majesty comforted him, reminding him of the old days, familiar in a way the vernacular had never really been.

The elderly priest stood amid the flickering light and attempted to clear his mind. He was expecting visitors. He thought it was today, but he could be mistaken. He did get the days confused. A young man and a young woman. No point in attempting to remember names, he found that almost impossible now. And he had no way of confirming the date or day since his mobile had died.

His thoughts alighted on the object he had to give them.
‘You put it somewhere safe?’

‘I hide it good.’

He didn’t ask her what she meant by that. He’d rather not think about the ‘it’, or know where she had hidden it. The thing frightened him. When it had arrived, brought into his flat by two hard-faced fellow countrymen, he had taken one look at it and refused to handle it.

Now he carried on, walking around the oblong shape of the coffin, splashing the holy water onto the waxed yellow wood. Oh, yes – if there was a place and a time for the ancient resonance of the *De Profundis* . . . His mouth moulded itself around the psalm again, as if the words were metamorphosing into something deeper, something solid as a shield, against the morbid hush of the empty church.

*If Thou, O Lord, shall observe iniquity, Lord who shall
endure it?*

*For with the Lord there is mercy and with him plentiful
redemption*

And He will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

‘Hurry up, Fadah!’

‘I’m doing my best.’

Father Noel had been thinking about the message from his niece, Bridey. Lost in his thoughts, he was startled by the arrival of a high pitched musical tone, as if the finest

pipe in an organ were sounding directly into his ears. The hackles rose on the back of his neck.

‘Hurry up! It startin’ again.’

He was struggling to think clearly, already sensing the change. There was a tingling over his skin, as if the air had become charged with static electricity. Then the eruption of shouts and cries from outside.

‘What in the world?’

‘De Razzamatazz, Fadah.’

‘The what?’

‘De young people. Jigi-jigi!’

Her patois was so strong at times he had to stop and try to figure out what she was saying. Did jigi-jigi mean what he suspected?

‘Are we secure?’

‘I lock all de doors. But de light . . . !’ He followed her gaze to the uncurtained windows. His trembling hands were unable to do it. It was Henriette, wetting finger and thumb in the pail of holy water, who snuffed out the flame, plunging the church, and Father Touhey, into deeper shadow.

The Feral Girl

Oggy's Café was on Lower John Street, the bottom floor of an ancient multi-storey block in which all of the upper floors looked forsaken. Inside Mark and Nan found a half dozen or so Formica-topped tables in an otherwise empty room. They chose one by the window, with stools that were screwed to the floor. Outside the window the air was so smoggy it felt as if dusk were falling.

The situation in London was far worse than Mark had anticipated. It had been such a miraculous stroke of luck when they found a way of returning to Earth from Tír. Being subsumed, body and spirit, by the Third Power had left him and Nan marooned in Dromenon. They had been devoid of physical substance. For all they knew they might have been dead. They had risked everything on a foolhardy plan. Recalling a legend told around the fireside by his friend, the dwarf mage Qwenqwo Cuatzel, in which the Temple Ship was referred to as the Ark of the Arinn, Mark

had gambled on the possibility that the ship might carry them back to Earth. The gamble had paid off.

Just to have made it back, to have recovered his flesh and blood again, should have been more than enough to satisfy Mark. But now, with the discovery that Padraig was missing and the Sword of Feimhin stolen, their joy had been short-lived. And now they had arrived in London he and Nan found themselves lost in a dystopic nightmare, with raving mobs rioting in the streets and fires making a wasteland of large areas of the city.

And now, heading over to the galvanised-zinc counter in the greasy café, Mark was confronted by the male reincarnation of the Willendorf Venus. The eponymous Oggy was no more than five foot four, but looked equally wide, with pendulous man boobs and a belly wrapped in a curtain-sized apron that overflowed half way across the counter. A wicked-looking meat cleaver dangled from a hook by his shoulder.

‘Yeah?’

Mark looked over the menu, which had been drawn in chalk on a blackboard amid numerous ‘For Sale’ posters and ads for cheap accommodation. The safest item looked to be the English breakfast.

‘English breakfast – for two, please.’

Dark eyes in a face that merged, with a mere dimple of a chin, into a truck-sized chest, looked Mark up and down. The voice that wheezed out of the fag-decorated mouth said, ‘That’ll be twenny pahnd.’

The price was outrageous. But very few cafés had survived and Mark was obliged to shove the twenty-pound note across the greasy metal surface.

‘I’m looking for the Church of the English Martyrs.’

Oggy ignored the question, affording Mark a slanted perspective of his backside as he swivelled around to shout the order through a serving hatch in the poster-strewn wall behind him.

Making his way back to the window table, Mark thought that Nan looked increasingly restless. He saw it in the pallor of her bronze-hued face, her skin lit by the neon street-lights, which had been fooled by the murky light to come on early.

Moving so he was sitting adjacent rather than opposite to her, he reached across to take both her hands in his. ‘Come on – don’t look so worried!’

‘I sense danger. I sense it very strongly. But I cannot say what it is – or why it should so alarm me.’

‘The state of the city is alarming, even for me. I can’t figure how it could have deteriorated so much in the short time I was away.’

‘I’m confused by so much that is unfamiliar. But you know what is the most challenging?’

‘What?’

‘So much despair in the hearts of the people here. I have gone for so long without experiencing such sentiments. Feelings can be overwhelming when you have become unused to them.’

‘It’s the oraculum, Nan. Maybe you should switch it off?’

Her hands were cold, the skin waxy. He reached up to brush the outside of his fingers over her face. ‘Hey – I won’t let anybody, or anything, hurt you.’

She took his hand, kissing it, then clutching it tight between her own. Her eyes darted about the empty café. ‘This place – it is not a good place to spend any time!’

‘It’s just a greasy café.’

Mark looked over at Oggy, who was pulling a stainless steel teapot down onto the working surface. He scoured it with steam, dumped a couple of tea bags into it, then slapped it under the stream of boiling water. Glancing across at Mark and Nan, those piggy eyes glowered before he carried the pot over to their table.

Nan had released Mark’s hand in Oggy’s presence. But as soon as he had gone, she caught hold of it, squeezed it tight. ‘I sense the same unease growing in your mind too. You’re sensing danger.’

Oggy was back, slamming a tray with the two breakfasts onto the table. Lifting the plates, cutlery, the tiny pot of milk and then the two mugs, he used his filthy apron to wipe sweat from his face before waddling away again, avoiding any direct eye contact.

Mark waited for him to go. ‘What is it?’

‘He knows something. They all do.’

‘Such as?’

‘He’s refusing to help us. He knows where the church is – it is surely somewhere near to here.’

Mark lowered his voice. 'So why is he doing that?'

'He's afraid.'

'Afraid of what?'

'I don't know.'

'But you sense something?'

'I think everybody we meet is afraid. That's why they are all refusing to help us.'

'But what are they afraid of?'

'Maybe they know something we do not know.'

Mark thought about that. What could be so important about some tiny church that it scared someone like Oggy? He shook his head. It didn't make sense. He saw that Nan had pulled her overcoat tighter around her throat. She had refused the food, even the tea, leaving her mug untouched on the bare wood surface.

They know something that we don't.

Sipping despondently from his mug of tea, Mark had also lost his appetite. He peered at his own reflection in the window – at his beanie-covered head, the rim pulled down low over his brow. Looking further, through the steel mesh that protected the glass on the outside, he saw the occasional person hurrying through the spoiled streets. Were they really as scared as Nan suspected?

Mark shouldn't have been surprised by Nan's reaction to London. A modern city must appear completely alien to her. He wanted to comfort her shock at the size and complexity of the city, at the electric lights, the speed of mechanical things, the cars, and cabs and buses – even

the bicycles – that rushed about through some of the streets.

‘Do you want to go back to our hotel room, Nan? Call off the search for today?’

‘No.’

‘All right. But you must try to relax.’

‘How can I relax when there is so much that dismays me? These people who press by you, never meeting your eyes!’

Mark kissed the palm of her hand, an awkward kiss, with her fingers close to scratching the skin of his cheek. It was so good just to be able to touch her, the living girl he loved. Not very long ago he had so longed to be able to do just this; they had been trapped in Dromenon as nothing more than soul spirits, unable to touch one another, even to communicate with each other except through thought alone, unable to express their feelings in any physical form at all.

‘You know, maybe it’s understandable that people are frightened. So much is going wrong here. They don’t know where to turn.’

‘Mark – there is something wrong here. It isn’t merely the people.’

‘What’s wrong? Do you sense something specific?’

‘I think I do. I think what I’m sensing is the proximity to great evil.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It’s the same feeling I sensed before the calamity.’

Mark glanced back out through the filthy window. Those streets out there were grimy and threatened with anarchy, ruin – but Nan was suggesting a more arcane danger. He presumed that by calamity she meant the war and invasion of her mountain fastness by the Tyrant’s Death Legion, which had resulted in the fall of her civilisation two thousand years ago, in Tír.

‘Proximity to great evil?’

Nan was a lot more experienced with her oraculum than he was with the same power embedded in his brow. It was possible that she was more sensitive. He felt a prickle of disquiet constrict his scalp.

A sound: a faint rapping on the steel mesh beyond the glass, so close it seemed only inches from his mind, startled him, and focused his attention on somebody who was standing on the other side of the steamed-up window.

Unkempt fingernails, like claws, withdrew from the mesh to be replaced by a spectre. A face was peering in at him, through the white lettering of the words HOT SANDWICHES painted on the window: a pale face, the skin semi-transparent. The eyes were a pale shade of grey that looked almost as clear as glass. The large black pupils were starkly highlighted. He saw tawny yellow hair, filthy and matted, tied into rat tails with rolled-up strips of silver foil. It was a girl, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old. She was pressing her cheek and brow so hard against the mesh that her face was distorted by it. When she moved back slightly, Mark could see she had a beaky face, a pink tip of nose, a

sharp little chin, and heavy lids over those pallid eyes. The confrontation was so direct and unflinching he felt obliged to shake his head, motioning her away.

But she refused to be dismissed.

The feral girl withdrew from the screen but she still stared at him as if she somehow knew him. Her eyes darted from his face to Nan's. Mark saw that Nan's fringe had parted. The black triangle in her brow, with its pulsating arabesques, was visible. Mark felt at the rim of his beanie to make sure he was hiding his own. He guessed that the girl had spotted the oraculum in Nan's brow and now there was a heightened restlessness about her, an urgency that he felt unable to ignore. She was scribbling something into a grubby little spiral notebook. He sensed something very strange, something very needful, about her. And he sensed that it mattered to him, and to his purpose here.

'Nan?' he whispered.

'I see her too. Her mind! It is so difficult to enter, so different to read. It's as if she were erecting barriers to every effort of my probing. All I'm getting is . . . is pictures. Extraordinary pictures.'

'Maybe she was following us through the streets.'

'Yes – I think so.'

The girl pressed a single page of her notebook against the glass. Mark thought it was whatever she had been sketching. He was gazing at the drawing of an entrance to what might be a church.

'She knows what we're looking for.'

‘But how?’

‘I don’t know. But she might be able to help us.’

Mark had forgotten his chair was screwed to the floor. In his hurry, he almost tripped over his own feet. He stumbled out of the warm café, with its comforting food smells, and into the refuse-strewn coldness of the street. But the feral girl had melted away into the smog.

The Dragon Graveyard

Kate Shaunessy's teeth were chattering with cold as the dragon Driftwood descended from the obscuring banks of pure white cloud onto a vista that took her breath away. This couldn't possibly be their island: huge rocky buttresses rose sheer out of forested slopes and needle-like pillars soared into the air. Yet even these, as they descended and neared them, were capped by small plains dotted with mature pine trees. It was in a wheeling arc, directly towards one of the tallest of these pinnacles, that the dragon's descent took them. Major changes were in the air. But then, how could she have possibly imagined that there would be no changes when Driftwood himself had changed so very much?

Somehow, and she hadn't understood it then any more than she did now, the power bestowed on her by Granny Dew – the Second Power of the Holy Trídédana – had resurrected him from a petrified death. He had perished long

ago at the end of a terrible war fought between the dragons and titans, led by Fangorath, a being that was half divine. Driftwood – or Omdorrréilliuc, as the Gargs had called him – had been the King of the Dragons and himself half divine. To save the world from imminent destruction, the dragons had sacrificed themselves to Mórígán, the goddess of death. Mórígán had defied Fate to accept the sacrifice, thus bringing an end to the Age of Dragons. But this had ultimately led to her arrival here on Tír, along with her three friends: Alan Duval, the young man she loved, and the adoptive brother and sister, Mark and Mo Grimstone.

And now she was returning to the same land where she had been tormented and hunted by the Great Witch, Olc, to see if she could save the Momu and thus restore the hope of fertility and rebirth to the people known as the Cill.

They were alighting on a broad, flat ledge of stone hundreds of feet above a valley verdant with trees. The dragon had become so enormous that their landing involved Kate first climbing down from her comfortable nest in the brilliant green and yellow feathers of his ruff, then making her way through the valley of his wings and down the stairway of his spine, to the very tip of the hundred yards of tail. She walked around the scaly body until she could sit, cross-legged, by the grounded head, to one side of a huge nostril and beneath a reptilian orange eye as large as a tractor tyre. The membrane of the eye performed one of the dragon's sideways blinks.

His voice was so deep it rumbled like thunder through

the ground beneath her. Kate knew that she could not possibly interpret his communication through the minuscule ossicles of her human ears. She was hearing his words and translating them from the language of beginnings, through the oraculum in her brow, which was one with her mind and her being – what the people here called her soul-spirit.

‘I wanted you to see our island once again.’

‘Oh, Driftwood, I’m enchanted by it – what you have made of it.’

‘I did not create this wonder – you did.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The bed of rock on which you slept – it was not a single grave. It was the graveyard of many.’

Kate’s heartbeat rose into her throat. Was Driftwood saying what she thought he was? Had she resurrected not just one dragon, but a race of such extraordinary and wonderful beings?

She had to take his word for the fact that this was the same island where she had discovered him. How it had changed! It was as if a magic inherent in the land itself had been awakened. The ecology, even the geology of the entire island landscape had evolved. It was as if aeons, rather than weeks, had passed, during which time it had become lusher than before. Even the trees had changed. Staring up into a dense canopy hundreds of feet overhead, Kate saw that these were no longer the oaks and birches that she herself had planted. These soaring titans resembled . . .

‘Oh, my! They’re the ancient trees you showed me – they

really are. It's where the baby dragons nested in your dreams.'

'Not my dreams. In the memories you saw as dreams. You and I, Kate, girl-thing – we need to talk.'

'I love to talk with you.'

His snort rumbled and echoed throughout the ground beneath her feet. 'You must understand the value of patience – and the need for caution.'

'Caution?'

'Blood 'n' bones! Guts 'n' gizzards!'

He had resurrected his childish exclamations. She didn't know if he was joking with her or genuinely mad with her.

'Don't be cross with me.'

'Pah!'

'Please?'

'This has ever been a perilous world. And things have begun to change.'

'What changes are you talking about?'

'The Tyrant feels threatened. The situation has become far more dangerous even than the struggle with the Great Witch. It is inevitable that he will take measures to rid himself of that threat.'

'But you are hungry, and weak. You need to rest and prepare yourself for the ordeal that is to come.'

Ordeal?

Oh, heavens! Driftwood was right, as always. She really was starving, and frightened too. The use of her oraculum, the Second Power, had drained what little remained of her

reserves of strength and will. She was only slowly recovering from her torture in the Tower of Bones, where she had been Olc's prisoner. She needed to rest.

'Should I be worried, even when I'm here with you?'

'You should be worried anywhere and everywhere.'

'What am I to do?'

'You must heed the fact that the Tyrant has access to the Fáil.'

Kate shivered, recalling what she had witnessed of the third portal. It had been hidden within Dromenon, at the spot marked by the Great Witch's Tower of Bones. The colossal power of it frightened her – the danger it represented.

Driftwood pressed her, gently. 'But there is a more immediate danger.'

'There is?'

'You think of the Cill as pure.'

'I wouldn't have put it that way.'

'How would you have put it?'

'I think they live in innate harmony with nature: they have a sense of oneness with what is good in the world. This, surely, was why the Great Witch, Olc, tried to destroy them.'

Driftwood took a great breath in through those scaly nostrils. When he exhaled his breath was hot, sulphurous, like throwing open the gate on a furnace capable of melting iron. 'You are indeed naïve, Kate girl-thing. There were other reasons why the Witch sought to destroy them.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘A conflict of power.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Your kindness, when coupled with your oracular gift, is a temptation more dangerous than you might realise.’

‘For goodness’ sake!’

‘Have you already forgotten your time spent with the Momu?’

She had spent many hours in the company of the Momu, during which she had been introduced to mysteries of being that were deeper than mere images, or words, or even feelings. She had experienced a transcendent level of communication, something deeply intimate, enabled by the harmony of thought and being that was intrinsic to the Cill – even now the memory of it was so moving she didn’t want to lose it. Still, Kate recalled how Driftwood had warned her even then to beware the Momu.

‘Beware her hunger . . .’

But what had he meant by hunger?

Kate wasn’t altogether sure. She felt so ordinary in herself. She wasn’t brave. All she had, she believed, was a deep, instinctive empathy with what was natural, what was living – and somehow, although she couldn’t define it altogether logically – with what was decent. Yet the Momu had sensed something special about her. They had become very close, spiritually intimate – whatever that really entailed.

Kate had no memory of being brought back to her chamber in the Cill city of Ulla Quemar from the cave of

the Momu, and yet, at the moment of first waking, it felt as if her mind had expanded with important knowledge. It was as if she had, during the short time they had spent together, absorbed a new level of . . . the word that came into her mind was wisdom.

‘I don’t have your understanding of what’s going on, Driftwood. It all seems so complicated.’

‘Yet you know what I mean by understanding the need for patience. And you know what caution means.’

‘Yes, of course.’

Her lips were pressed together to stop the tears of frustration that threatened to break free.

Wisdom! It was such a weighty word!

I’m frightened that too much might be expected of me. I’m terrified that I’ll make a dreadful mess of things.

The one thing she did understand, something vital to the survival of the Cill and their lovely underwater city, was the fact the Momu was dying. It was clear that her time was very limited. And this presented Kate with a dilemma.

‘A new Momu, young and fertile, must be born.’

Driftwood snorted again, provoking another echoing rumble through the landscape. The membrane over those enormous orange eyes performed another sideways blink.

But before the Momu could give birth to her successor, or whatever was necessary – Kate felt a stab of panic in realising that she had no real idea what would be required – she would have to get over her feelings of inadequacy. And to do this she must have hope.

Driftwood's grumble cut across her thoughts. 'I cannot accompany you into the city of the Cill. As for you, I very much doubt you are ready for such a trial. Yet I can see you are determined on this course.'

She found her perch again within the sanctuary of his neck, ready to soar above the mists that were rising.

'Remember – there is no happenstance, only Fate.'

'You're teasing me with riddles.'

'Friendship is not a matter of reason or even of experience.'

'No. It's a question of caring.'

'Pah!'

'Thank you, Driftwood. You know that I care for you and I know you care for me, but we're never going to agree on this.'

'For a trifling girl-thing, you require a considerable bulk of caring.'

Kate smiled, despite her misgivings. 'Is that a joke?'

'I might fail to make you laugh, but I do care for you and you have little understanding of the perils of what you are attempting to do.'

'I will do my best to be scrupulously careful – I promise.'

'Such a promise is doomed in its very inception. To do one's best implies the potential for failure.'

'I can only try.'

'No, you must do better.'

'How?'

‘You must determine to do, not to try.’

Kate hesitated. In the distance a giant bird, possibly an eagle, hovered over a pinnacle on which she presumed there might be a nest. The bird was magnificent in its ordered movement, the perfect symmetry of its flight and its delicate landing on the topmost point.

Then she realised that it was no eagle.

‘Oh, my goodness – it’s another dragon!’ There had to be . . . oh, wonder of wonders, a nest. Baby dragons.

Driftwood ignored her wonderment. ‘I fear for you.’

‘What exactly do you fear for me?’

‘Of all the races on this world, the Cill are the least predictable.’

‘In what way?’

‘They answer to a central being – a force, a mind – which can hardly be entirely unselfish.’

‘You’re talking about the Momu?’

He made a sound that might have been the dragon equivalent of a *tsk*. She looked around herself again, with new eyes. How exhilarating was this landscape? It had been a dragon graveyard, but was now utterly transformed into a landscape of life.

‘Please explain to me what you are really worrying about.’

‘I would urge you to think again – to consider the true nature of the people you call the Cill.’

‘Why? They are the most beautiful, the most perfect beings I have ever seen. Their city is a wonderful union of

ocean and land. They take pains to protect the ecology and environment of their world. They venerate the cycle of life, in a perfect balance of people and nature.'

'There are no perfect beings any more than there are perfect worlds.'

'The Great Witch, Olc, weakened it, as she destroyed all the other Cill worlds.'

'No.'

'No?'

'You were invited into her realm. What did you learn from your time with the Momu?'

'I – I don't rightly remember all of it.'

The dragon snorted. Maybe it was meant to convey irony.

'We met in her chamber – well more like a cave. There was a birthing pool I had to wade across. She was waiting for me in the roots of the One Tree.'

The dragon reared, his wings extending to a monstrous proportion, before settling back onto their beautiful, if terrifying, prominence. Kate had to cling on to her perch at the root of his long neck.

'There you have it.'

'What do I have?'

'The nature of what will most likely threaten you.'

'And what is that?'

'Where is her power derived from?'

'The One Tree?'

'And the One Tree in turn?'

Kate recalled her experiences back in the roots of the

Tree. The Momu had attempted to persuade her to stay in Ulla Quemar, when she was so desperately needed to help end the tyranny of the Great Witch, Olc, and the more dangerous Fangorath. She recalled the words of the Momu, desperate to save her world.

‘Nidhoggr, the serpent-dragon – who gnawed at the roots of the world – fertilised a seed of the Tree of Life. That seed grew into the One Tree whose branches make up the roof this chamber: a chimera of serpent-dragon and Tree of Life. Sadly, the One Tree is dying, as is her beautiful city, Ulla Quemar. I, the first child of Ulla Quemar, I who am almost as old as the One Tree herself, am dying with her. There will be no more Shaamis.’

‘The One Tree is an offshoot of the Tree of Life.’

‘Indeed. And thus you would stumble headlong into a maelstrom of peril.’

Kate sat back, deep in thought. ‘This peril? Are you referring to the Tree of Life – or the serpent-dragon, Nidhoggr?’

‘Both.’

‘Then all I can do is to promise you that I will take the utmost care to conserve my own safety.’

It took Kate a moment or two to recognise that the thunderous resonations that were booming and echoing through the landscape were the dragon’s laughter. ‘Alas, Kate Shaunessy, foolish girl-thing, still more do I worry.’

‘Then tell me what to do.’

Those huge eyes gazed back at her.

‘Rest a while. Take time to consider what you will face in the challenge. Though you possess the Second Power of

the Holy Trídédana, you are not ready for what you will face in the city of the Momu. You are naïve. Beware the trap of kindness.’

Kate experienced a sense of *déjà vu*: the Momu herself had said something very similar when they had first met.