

THE BLOODSONG'S CALLING



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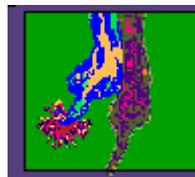
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Chapter One

Unwelcome Visitors

It was one of life's great ironies, Molloney thought, that the very people who for years had been his sworn enemies were now obliged to rely on him. Less than a year ago any of Her Majesty's soldier boys who supplied hardware to a known terrorist would've been risking court martial, or worse. Now though, thanks in the main to a quirk of good Irish luck, they actually *gave* him all the gear he needed. These strange days, jobs and equipment both came via the British Border Surveillance Rangers. The Boss, as they were mockingly called, had discovered a small group of Sidhe who were in the habit of visiting Lough Grane every morning shortly before dawn. Army cartographers had provided a detailed overlay for the revised OS map, showing the Sidhe's preferred route. Boss observers had determined that the group were Lesser Fey; Sidhe who travelled on foot. A fact which made them a considerably easier target than the mounted kind. *Garron* riding Fey wielded killing magic, and thanks to its evil protection, were virtually impossible to ambush.

Roughly two miles inside the Exclusion Zone, at a point due east of the Clare border, Molloney and two of his men lay in wait. Stretched out on their bellies, they were in the hills near Lannaght, overlooking a tributary of Lough Grane. A fourth member of the group waited some distance back, holding the tethers of two saddleless ponies. In the early hours of the morning O'Sullivan and Flynn had crossed into the Occupied Zone and planted four purpose-built bombs. Each small device consisted of a quarter-pound block of Semtex, girdled with a collar of iron-filings suspended in gelatine. Detonation would be triggered via state-of-the-art fibre-optics. In the early days of the occupation the Brits had determined that traditional radio transmissions were unreliable in Sidhe held territory. Timing was critical, though it'd take a miracle for them all to escape, and miracles were something the Lord did not grant to heathen devils.

Carried on the breeze came a ghostly tune. Molloney gritted his uneven teeth in irritation. The music of the *Daoine Sidhe*, as the faerie folk were properly named, had captivated hundreds of his countrymen. God help them. Once charmed they'd listened to the Fey, and believed the lies. Offering up a silent prayer for the lost souls, Molloney crossed himself.

"Remember, nobody moves until I give the word."

Looking through the Army-issue night scope he watched the Sidhe come into view. Just as he'd been told, there were three males and three females, the last of which cradled a small child in her arms. Their movements uncannily graceful the group ambled along the worn footpath, oblivious to their imminent downfall. The adults all had the long, lustrous copper-red hair that was the norm among their kind, and all wore Medieval style clothing. Illuminated by the first rays of the sun the garments were decorated with delicate brilliant white motifs over vivid forest greens.

No matter how hard he tried, Molloney couldn't help but see the Fey as being somehow more

substantial than their surroundings. It was as if they were real, and the rolling countryside nothing but a shadow. Illusions, he told himself. What he saw were blasphemous visions, cast by the damned.

The leading male was also the musician. Lips in constant motion over the set of straight pipes he produced a light, flowing tune that was fitting accompaniment to the gentle cascading song of the living river on whose banks he walked.

To Molloney the sound was sickeningly sweet; the musical equivalent of pouring a bag of sugar into a cup of tea, when a single spoonful would've been sufficient. Smiling malevolently he touched the pulse-generator's trigger bar and pressed his face into the lush summer grass as man-made thunder echoed between the hills.

Minutes later he stood over the fallen, shotgun in hand. In the old days, when the enemy were only human, he would've been in a car and away immediately after the explosion. But the Sidhe were different, and experience had taught him to make sure that they weren't pretending. When injured they fought like tigers, which was why the cartridges loaded in his twelve bore were filled with a special mixture of iron-shot. A careful look around confirmed that the group were all down. Four were dead, their clothing torn and skin slick with preternaturally bright blood. Two had survived, which was one more than he'd been contracted for, and so would mean a bonus. A male and female, their injuries were serious enough to have been fatal, if they'd been inflicted on a human body. Being Sidhe, though, the pair would recover quickly enough. No limbs had been lost, and so within a day and a half at the most their bruised and battered flesh would be completely unmarked. Hawking, Molloney spat, depositing a yellow gob of phlegm on the surviving female's cheek.

"These four won't be prancin' around the bottom of any gardens." Flynn joked.

"Or leavin' silver fer kids wi' rotten teeth!" Molloney joined in. Pulling two pairs of steel handcuffs from the pocket of his parka he tossed them to his grinning colleague. "You make sure these are snapped shut, Michael." Turning to face the third man, he added, "Danny, I want those chains tighter than yer old woman's hole."

"Easy enough." O'Sullivan quipped. "After the last baby, it's like danglin' a maggot in a dustbin, so it is."

"Ah well," Molloney gave a dirty smirk, and was about to make an even dirtier comment, when an odd noise attracted his attention. "What was that?"

The cell came to nervous alertness. Liam McGuire, who'd been left to mind the ponies, was the only expected company, but it was possible that the explosions had attracted unwelcome attention. There were no other Sidhe living in the immediate area of Lough Grane, though wild Fey creatures roamed at will, often moving over great distances with unnatural speed. None of them had the fear of humankind so common in ordinary animals. After a few moments the sound was repeated, and this time identified as coming from the half-forgotten Sidhe infant. Partially covered by his mother's corpse, the child was semi-conscious and murmuring to himself in what sounded disturbingly similar to a lament. His right hand was gashed open and there was an ugly purple bruise on the top of his head, but he was otherwise uninjured.

"Be quiet, y' we bastard." Molloney snarled. Standing back he cocked both barrels

and took aim. His unwritten contract was for a living *adult* Sidhe. Not the Devil's babies. "I don't know how y' survived," he spoke as if the infant could understand. "Though you'll not be livin' long enough t' tell."

The meeting of the Joint Intelligence Committee took place in a guarded room on the top floor of the Ministry Of Defence building in Whitehall. Always steeped in secrecy, the British Government had carefully obscured the truth of what was happening in the Irish Republic behind a very believable lie. A logical fabrication which, to the majority of the people it was intended to deceive, was more acceptable than the lunatic ravings of those few individuals who managed to get the media's attention. In only a handful of cases, where the speaker had some special credibility, had termination been necessary. The rest were simply ridiculed, or allowed to bury themselves under a pile of subtly flawed disinformation. International support came whenever it was required from those who, clandestinely, had a vested interest in maintaining the stability of the British Government.

Bernard Goodman, the Deputy Chief of DIS, was fifty-four years old, and at least three stone overweight. As the meeting began he took a handkerchief from his top pocket and used it to mop perspiration from his neck and balding head. The warmth of the afternoon sun filtering through the blinds was not quite countered by the room's air-conditioning, so none of his peers thought his action odd. They expected him to sweat, and thankfully had no idea as to the true reasons. Officially present as the representative of DIS's reclusive director, he was also the eyes and ears of another group, whose existence was not even suspected by British Intelligence. A new order, for whom he might soon have to abandon loyalties adhered to for more than half of his lifetime.

The others seated around the oak oval were Jonathan Hoskins, Chief of SIS, and to his left the Director of MI5, Christopher Hall, Richard Parish, the Co-Ordinator of Intelligence and Security, Sir Perigrine Moore, the Director of GCHQ, and at the head of the table, the Joint Intelligence Committee's Chairman, Anthony Pierce, Minister for War. All six men wore serious expressions, their faces showing as distorted reflections in the table's highly polished surface. The centre of their attention was a wide-screen television, presently displaying video footage of a recent confrontation with the foe whose existence was subject to the Official Secrets act. Shot through a long-range gun-camera fitted to a Royal Navy Sea-Harrier, the video had been rushed to the Joint Air Reconnaissance Centre at RAF Huntingdon, where after development under the strictest possible security, it was transferred directly to GCHQ for expert analysis, and some 48 hours later to the extraordinary meeting of the JIC.

The intermittently fuzzy images showed an incident that had taken place in Galway, on the north-western border of occupied Southern Ireland. On one side were a crack detachment of Anglo-Irish troops, and on the other a single representative of what those privileged to be informed knew as the High Fey. As the sequence proceeded the images became harder to follow, scenes jumping erratically out of shot as the Harrier's pilot struggled to maintain his position against sudden bursts of hurricane-force wind. Conditions that were completely at odds with the virtually cloudless blue sky.

"As you can see, gentlemen, the pilot was unable to film beyond this point." Anthony Pierce said as the video petered out. Standing as the lights came on he reflexively smoothed down his bush of thick grey hair. "There's a detailed report beginning on page 5 of the dossier in front of you," he tapped his own spiral-bound copy. "If anyone really needs to read it?" Eyebrows arched in question he quickly scanned the faces. "No. Then unless there any relevant questions, I propose that we move straight on to the list of recommendations."

Seated in his office at the heart of a secret complex called Whitehall Central, Nicholas Wynt gave his undivided attention to the meeting. As Director of the MoD's Defence Intelligence Staff he had not been required to attend in person. Goodman, his deputy, would report back faithfully enough, although not necessarily at the optimum time. Which was why events were being monitored via an undetectable micro-chip bug. Intelligence matters in the computer age had more to do with *when* an individual found something out, than what information he might eventually glean. The JIC were likely to endorse the recommendation's package, but if by some quirk, they managed to produce an unexpected hitch, he'd know immediately and put contingency plans into effect before the agency chief's had even left the building.

Pierce spoke with conviction, displaying the oratory skills which had proven so useful in his profession. Although, as he knew only too well, his gift for speech had not been responsible for his appointment to a Cabinet post. At 52, Pierce was at the peak of his career; a man widely respected in political circles, if not for his policies, then for his instincts. He'd been a prime candidate for the position of War Minister, when the office had been recreated. Where the public were concerned, for the purpose of co-ordinating sweeping new anti-terrorism measures. As head of the new ministry he'd been granted sweeping powers, and circumspectly, authority denied to successive Northern Ireland Secretaries, back when the government's enemies in Ireland had been merely human. Unfortunately, due to high level interference by the United States, and the UN Security Council, the considerable armed forces at the War Minister's command could, at present, do very little. Nevertheless, Pierce worked tirelessly, seeking at every opportunity to win a little more freedom. Because he genuinely believed that the Daoine Sidhe were a threat to the entire human race, and because his clandestine patron, the man responsible for his appointment to high office, demanded nothing less.

Wynt listened to his man's closing statement and was satisfied that he could not have presented the case any better. Now came the part that he hated, the part that was outside of his direct control. *If* the JIC chose to support their Chairman, Parish would report to the highest authority in the land; the three man Overseas Defence Committee, which was charged by the Prime Minister. Only then would acceptance be a mere formality. When the vote was carried, by a majority decision, Wynt let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. The increase of Fey activity within the Occupied Zone, and alarming events which had taken place outside of it, made unilateral covert action a necessary step.

Back pressed against the broad trunk of an elm tree, the man pretended to read a newspaper, using it in time-honoured MI5 tradition to cover the fact that he was watching the road that

led down to the rocky coastline of Tintagel Head. A Coast guard had spotted the small craft after it had disappeared from Royal Navy radar scopes, and following official guidelines on sailboats avoiding recognised harbours, passed on his information directly to GCHQ. From there it had travelled to Internal Affairs, who dutifully wired the data to DIS, where someone important had pushed the panic button.

The worst aspect of surveillance work was the sheer boredom of waiting for something to happen, Jakeman thought. At present he was part of a hastily assembled team assigned to bail out DIS. Who - not for the first time - had made a last minute *request* for the assistance of Security Service personnel. So, he waited, ready to question someone who'd probably turn out to be nothing more sinister than a lost holidaymaker. Probably. Since the disaster in the Irish Republic, no one was taking any chances.

Even among the various branches of British Intelligence, information that in any way related to the Lough Derg incident was disseminated on a strictly need to know basis. The word on the grapevine was that it involved more than Iraqi toxins, but that was all anyone was prepared to say. Eisner, the man DIS had sent down to Cornwall to co-ordinate the operation, knew more, of course. But he was as tight-lipped as the rest of his department. As to why the unwelcome visitor would choose to cross the Irish Sea in a tiny wooden sailboat was another mystery. According to the coast guard's report, the thing wasn't much bigger than a rubber dinghy. It carried no visible cargo, and was not even equipped with an outboard motor.

In a burst of static Jakeman's earpiece came to life. "*Rook # 3. Rook # 3. The Sailor is on his way to you.*" Eisner's disembodied voice rasped. "*You should have him in sight in approximately one minute.*"

From earlier communications Jakeman knew that he was looking for a clean-shaven man in his mid-thirties, wearing a black leather jacket and blue jeans. Rather than apprehend the suspect as he landed, the DIS co-ordinator had opted to corner him up on the coastal road, away from prying eyes. It was a policy that all concerned agreed with, knowing that it would save acute interdepartmental embarrassment if the suspect was only an incompetent sailor. Peering over the edge of his paper Jakeman watched the curve of the road, its surface dappled with leafy shadows by the fading summer sun, and as promised saw the individual who'd been designated the Sailor come into view. The man was walking calmly down the middle of the road, looking for all the world as if he were out for an evening stroll.

"*Move in. All personnel.*" The earpiece instructed.

"Excuse me, mate." Folding his paper in a seemingly casual move, Jakeman pushed himself upright. Fingers slowly connecting with the Smith & Wesson strapped under his left arm he said, "Have you got a minute?" The banal politeness was precautionary. Lack of discernible reaction told him that, unless the man was stone deaf, something was definitely wrong. "Hey!" The agent's grip tightened around his pistol. "I'm talking to you." Discarding the paper he waved his free hand. Expression and pace unaltered the suspect kept moving. "Okay, pal, if that's the way you want it." Jakeman drew his gun, and dropping into the firing position, aimed at the man's chest. "Stop. Right now."

Hand rising fluidly to shoulder height, the motion quick and sinuous as a snake, Midar snapped his long fingers.

Irresistibly distracted by what he was seeing, Jakeman frowned in amazement. Hanging in the air where the suspects' fingers had clicked was a brightly-glowing multi-coloured shape. Roughly the size of a grapefruit, it was in constant motion spinning around its own axis, elaborate kaleidoscopic images folding and unfolding. The ever changing shape was a three dimensional mandala, a Christmas bauble and a glittering jewel all rolled into one. Catching every mote of the available light it seemed to absorb and amplify the brightness building, like a silent dancer, to a blinding finale. Literally fascinated, Jakeman was not aware of the excited chattering coming from his earpiece, or that the Sailor had passed quietly by. Spittle dribbling from his wide open mouth he keeled over, limbs stiff and useless, eyes fixed on the spinning wonder until the instant his head struck the tarmac.

Moving fast as the wind now, Midar trod between the shadows of evening, *faerie* glamour altering the semblance of leather into the semblance of a cassock and dog-collar. Those allied to the Sidhe had convinced him that it would be an excellent disguise. Humankind would not be quick to suspect one of their own holy priests.

Located almost half a mile under the heart of London, Whitehall Central consisted of thirty rooms and occupied a space approximately the size of a standard football pitch. A single access point was the only way in or out for major traffic, which came in the form of a one-coach tube train, diverted down an unlit tunnel-loop branching off the Piccadilly Line. Supplies or personnel entering by this route were deposited at a secret, fully automated station, and from there descended in a freight lift. Those with sufficiently high clearance had the option of using a concealed, two-passenger lift, located in a storage cellar, purportedly owned by a well-known firm of stock brokers.

It was via this route that Michael Eisner entered Whitehall Central. He stepped out into the blackness the moment the door slid open, glad as always that the long decent was over. Going so deep underground invariably reminded him of a near miss, close to fifteen years ago now, while on a school trip down an abandoned coal mine in Wales. The small cave-in hadn't killed anyone, but did create a lasting impression of the possible dangers. Turning sharp left he walked a dozen paces in pitch blackness, fingertips brushing against the wall for guidance. Exactly thirty yards along he encountered a smooth metal panel, in the centre of which was a small rectangular pressure plate. Pushing it twice, then three times in rapid succession switched on an overhead light, illuminating the steel door he was standing in front of, and revealing the presence of a square mirror, set in the door at head-height.

Eisner regarded his dark reflection, aware that a computerised scanner was matching it with the description contained in his current DIS file: Eisner, Lt. Michael Charles. Male Caucasian. Age 26. Eyes Grey. Hair black, shoulder-length. Clean-shaven. Height 5ft 10in. Weight 172lb. Distinguishing features; none. The inclusion of clean-shaven irritated him, because it meant that he had to *apply* if he ever wanted to grow a moustache. The most troublesome factor had been the liberal use of the term Caucasian. Because, although British by birth and upbringing his mother was of Italian descent, and had produced a son who had slightly Latin features and a darker skin-tone than the British norm.

Next to the mirror panel was a key-pad mounted flush with the door's surface. The

latest in security technology, its keys read specific fingerprints of listed users, in addition to an alpha-numeric code, both of which were changed every day. Eisner tapped out a six-digit sequence, using the thumb and middle finger of his right hand to signal voluntary entry. The door slid to one side with a low hiss of compressed air, and closed automatically behind him. As always, reminding him of the Starship Enterprise. Outside, the air had been warm and dusty, filled with a stale, slightly musty smell. Inside, though, the atmosphere was crisp and entirely odourless, scrubbed clean by powerful air-conditioning units. Lighting was at ankle level, and subdued to allow for easy acclimatisation. Treading a rubberised path down metal-covered tunnels he ignored what he knew were booby-trapped junctions, and the invitingly bright lights that turned on and off above false exits at the end of dead-end corridors.

As he walked on, Eisner speculated as to why the big chief had brought him in from the field. Most likely it had something to do with the death at Tintagel head. The chief of MI5 was apparently raising all kinds of hell over the incident. Mainly, it was whispered, because the results of the autopsy were being kept from him. According to the official report, something incredibly bright had burnt out agent Jakeman's optic nerves, before doing massive and near instantly fatal damage to his visual cortex. Nobody in the know had any firm idea as to what could have had that effect, but the smart money said it was Fey. Maybe the Scientific and Technical Intelligence boys had worked out a way to track the bastard down. It had to be something like that, or another major development. A bad thought came to mind; perhaps the incident at Tintagel Head had been a decoy, and other Fey had landed elsewhere.

Just over a year ago the reports coming out of the Republic concerning sightings of *faeries* had seemed like the world's biggest Irish Joke. The level of acceptance, especially in official circles, had been much the same as it was with UFO stories, or the Loch Ness monster. The people who'd seen the Fey, as they came to be known, believed completely. Those who hadn't, generally dismissed the tales as invention or hallucination, perhaps a bored operative with a sense of humour. Then, as more and more irrefutable evidence began to emerge it became clear that something was occurring in Southern Ireland that went far beyond idle fraud. Ten days after the first recorded sightings the Fey presence was confirmed as real, forcing those who'd laughed to rapidly amend their blinkered perspective. Though by that stage the Fey had spread, using the confusion and indecision to effectively assume control over a large area, centred around Illuanmore Island, Lough Derg.

Coming to a red, handleless door, Eisner pushed the concealed buzzer and was promptly admitted to the perimeter hallway of Whitehall Central. The man who let him in was a white-coat; one of two dozen live-in scientists, working on all aspects of the Fey phenomena. He wore a look that said he had better things to do than open doors. Without bothering to speak the man led him to an unmarked door and indicated that he should enter.

"Hey," Eisner called out softly, irritated by the needless aloofness. When the man had turned to face him he said, "Say hello to daddy for me." When the academics face wrinkled in bafflement, he added. "You were a test-tube baby, right."

Knocking once he entered the office without waiting to be called, and found himself face to face with the Lord of the Spy-Rings, as he was unofficially known by those working under him. True identity concealed from all but the top drawer, the man *officially* known only

as the Director was in his mid to late sixties, tall and trim, with short silver-grey hair and pale, watery blue eyes which seemed never to blink. Overall, his features were rather gaunt, suggesting serious illness in the past, or too many troubles in the present. From temple to jowl on the left side of his face he bore a narrow, strawberry coloured birthmark. No one knew if it was real, or just another part of his disguise. Most of the time he acted like a waxwork brought to life; he walked and talked like a real person, but there was something missing.

"Ah, Lieutenant. Glad you could join us." Wynt said condescendingly. "Dr Williamson," he waved a hand in the direction of Whitehall Central's Chief of Biological Research, "has discovered something I think you ought to see. It's quite a breakthrough."

"Congratulations," Eisner responded automatically.

"We have two new arrivals. Guests who I'm delighted to say are *responding* to their treatment." There was no trace of humour in the cliched statement.

"How so?" The agent asked, brow furrowing with interest. As per usual, the director was giving little away.

"Come," Williamson spoke up. "See for yourself."

Leaving the office the three turned left and continued down a corridor, passing two guards who were armed with Armitage-Shaw Vipers, in addition to their pistols. A third guard was on station to let them in to a large office. Two walls were packed tight with quietly humming computer hardware, monitor screens and plotters that periodically unravelled paper into white plastic collection trays. As Williamson dimmed the lights the electronic apparatus seemed to light up with tiny red and green dots, and numeric LED displays. The eyes of an electronic beast, thought Eisner, who'd never before had occasion to be in the scientist's office. With the lights down he was able to see through the large rectangular one-way mirror which covered most of one wall, and into a hermetically sealed observation cell.

"There she is." The director spoke as if he were talking about a vintage car. "A female Fey, known to her people as Saille."

"She *gave* you her name?" Eisner thought aloud, very surprised at what he'd heard. To the Fey, their true names were sacred; things of genuine power, which no amount of persuasion or coercion could make them reveal.

On the other side of the glass he saw a recumbent figure, and as always was impressed by the Sidhe's ethereal, otherworldly beauty. Covered only by a thin cotton sheet the prisoner lay full length on a hospital bed, the material's crisp whiteness showing off the deep copper-red lustre of her hair. Interwoven with delicate silver braiding the long mane trailed over the bed's edge, creating in Eisner's mind the impression of a bloody waterfall, momentarily frozen in place. Tilted slightly upwards and toward the watchers her face had the fine boned, aristocratic features, almond-shaped eyes and acutely slanted eyebrows that were the norm for her race. Closed at first, her slightly larger than human eyes flickered open as the observation continued. Like the sky over the ocean on a Winter's day, Eisner thought, feeling as if the prisoner were looking at him directly. Although he knew that could not be the case. Besides which, her gaze was sad and sleepy, quite unlike the sharply perceptive, predatory look he'd seen from other Fey.

"Lovely. Quite lovely," The director commented.

"Like a work of art," Eisner agreed, reluctant to take his eyes off the girl in case she disappeared. The Sidhe could do that, under the right circumstances.

"We acquired her 48 hours ago." The old man volunteered. "Damaged goods," he explained cryptically. "You know how clumsy our bog-trotting associates are."

"She looks fine now." Eisner stared through the glass, sensing that all was not well, but unable to spot any serious injuries. "Internal problems?" he guessed, baffled expression acknowledging his lack of expertise.

"No, sir." Williamson smiled thinly. "Saille is exhibiting recuperative powers typical of the adult Fey. As you are aware, there isn't much aside from iron that can permanently harm them. The prisoner is in excellent health."

Catching the unusually friendly tone of the doctor's explanation, Eisner wondered why he was being so nice. On the few occasions their paths had crossed before, Williamson had delighted in demonstrating his superiority when it came to medical matters. Obviously, the Sidhe's condition was the result of the big breakthrough, and the reason that he'd been called in.

"Then why is she so docile?" Eisner asked, turning away from the glass. The Sidhe's look of desperation was making him feel as if he were watching a butterfly in a killing jar.

"In layman's terms," Williamson began. "We've stumbled upon something that, when injected, appears to block the Fey ultra-immune system."

"What is it?"

"Ferrosodium pentathol." Feigning humility the doctor added, "Naturally, it's still too early to be absolutely certain."

"*Ferro*, as in iron." The agent cocked his head to one side. "But, surely, iron is deadly poison to the Fey. So if this stuff's inside her, why is she still breathing?"

"It has to do with *quantity* and *form*," Williamson grudgingly explained, slightly annoyed by the interruption. "Think of digitalis or insulin. They're both perfectly safe if administered in precise quantities. We, are using a specially coated type of ferrite. Of course, there are still test to run," he gesticulated. "Though I've every confidence that we've got a major new tool. Effectively, the Fey are no longer immune to our chemicals."

Some people's dreams were hazy monochrome. Johnny Halcombe always dreamed in colour; bright and violent shades of crimson, mottle forest greens, and a white so bright it was almost painful to look upon. *He was back, on Illaunmore Island, in the centre of Lough Derg, scanning the miles of water through the sight of his night-scope. The Provos were on their way, but, never did arrive.* Twisting in his sleep Johnny tried to escape the inevitable, and as always, failed in his attempt. *There were bodies, hundreds of bodies, floating in the water of the Lough. Men and women, swimming alongside milk-white horses. As he watched in stunned amazement yet more broke the surface, joining those who were slowly making their way toward his position. The didn't know he was there, not yet. Though soon...*

Switching on the car's courtesy light, Mark Rainbow twisted the object between his fingers,

looking from all angles in an effort to see something he'd missed. But as with his previous examinations, all he saw was a little brass leprechaun. As chief reporter on Trafalgar Television's Crusader programme, he attracted more than his fare share of publicity seeking cranks, but the letter and leprechaun had *not* come from one of them. Of that much he was sure. Articulately presented, the letter contained none of the usual vitriol, no threats and no demands for air-time. What it did have was an assertion so intriguing that it had caught his attention. The writer stated that the only dangerous chemicals in the Lough Derg area were those in use by the British Military, and went on to name one such substance as *chlorine trifluoride*. A particular form of CT, last used in such a way by the Red Army in Afghanistan. The specific was not widely known. The letter had ended with a time and place for meeting, and the standard request to come alone. Despite to strange inclusion of a tiny brass figure, it had been enough for him to take the bait. If the anonymous writer turned out to be genuine, he could be onto the biggest story of his career. Lough Derg was, after all, the biggest man-made disaster since Chernobyl. Any sort of cover-up regarding events there would be world class news. At worst, all he'd lose were a few - expenses paid - hours. The drive from London had been uneventful, and given him time to think. Cheltenham was the location of GCHQ, the nerve centre of British Intelligence, which made it an odd choice of place for a meeting. Unless the letter writer were a hoaxer, in which case a meeting place only miles from the listening post was ideal. But also too obvious, unless that also was a deliberate ploy. Whichever, he'd find out soon enough.

Electronically locking the car's door, Mark stood with hands supporting the small of his back and looked up Leckhampton Hill. At the top was a brooding mass of rock known as the Devil's Chimney; a 50ft column of limestone which legend said rose from Hell. In truth it was the result of centuries of quarrying which had gone on around it. The base of the rock was where he was supposed to meet his mysteriously well-informed contact. He had a torch in his pocket, but it was a bright night, so he chose not to advertise his presence by using it. As he walked he glanced back down the hill toward the small pub car park where he'd left the Sierra, and saw a couple kissing under the twin electric moon's that illuminated the entrance to the lounge. No one else was in view. Seconds after reaching the appointed place he was startled to hear his name spoken in a low, but definitely female voice. Turning to his right he spotted a young woman emerging from an area close to the rock, where little natural light penetrated.

"My name's Ash," she introduced herself formally. "Caitlin Ash. Until recently I worked as a junior analyst, attached to Signals and Intelligence. SIGINT, if you prefer acronyms. It was me who sent you the letter."

"How do I know that?" Mark said coolly, studying her closely by the light of the moon. Caitlin had dark eyes, and neatly cut shoulder length hair, which he guessed was bottle blonde. She had a long face, with high cheekbones, which put him in mind of Joni Mitchell, and she appeared slightly nervous. Although not in the manner of a fanatic. Having met several, he knew the difference.

"Because I sent something else with the letter." Caitlin said. Slipping a hand into the back pocket of her dark blue jeans she produced a colour snapshot of the tiny brass

leprechaun. "Do you recognise it, Mr Rainbow?"

"Okay. I'm listening."

"Not to me." The assertion was accompanied by a quick, but warm smile. "At least not yet. If I told you what I know right now, you wouldn't take me seriously."

"Then why am I here?"

"To pass on the name of someone who can show you what you need to see." Caitlin said enigmatically. "Bad things are happening, Mr Rainbow. Incredible things, too."

"Such as?" Suspicious that someone might be trying to set him up, Mark pressed for less vague information.

"I told you, not yet." Caitlin shook her head. "It is absolutely vital that you see what's going on for yourself." Ferreting in another pocket she took out a disposable lighter. "I've written down a name and a place." Deftly, she flipped the snapshot around and held it up for inspection. "Please don't read them out. Just tell me when you've memorised them."

"Got it," Mark nodded. "But why?"

"Because, melodramatic as it might seem to you, I don't want this written down." Holding out the glossy rectangle she sparked the lighter and applied its flame. When the paper was almost gone she dropped it and ground the remains into the dirt with the tip of her shoe. "Find him. Mr Rainbow, and show him the leprechaun. He wears its twin on a chain around his neck. Find him, and he'll show you all the proof you need." Refusing to answer any more questions Caitlin about turned and walked briskly down Leckhampton Hill, straight to a blue two-door Renault she'd left in the pub's car park.

Mark walked casually to his own car, making it seem as if he'd accepted her story, when in fact he'd done no such thing. If she really had worked for SIGINT, then here credibility was greatly increased. But, before he went off on what might well turn out to be a wild goose chase, especially into dangerous territory, he'd need a bit more convincing. The plan was to follow at a discrete distance and see where Caitlin Ash would lead him.

Five minutes later he rounded a blind bend and saw something that forced him to brake hard. Seventy-five yards ahead was a scene that could have been taken straight out of a John LeCarre novel. Illuminated in the glare of his headlights, two men were dragging Caitlin Ash from her car toward a large blue BMW, which blocked the road ahead. Instinctively jabbing his palm against the horn, Mark succeeded in bringing a halt to the proceedings, though only momentarily. While one of the men bundled his prisoner into the BMW's boot, his colleague pulled a pistol from a shoulder holster. Seeing what was coming next, Mark did the only thing he could think of doing, using a strategy he'd developed when based in the Middle-East. Flooring the accelerator he drove straight at the man, swerved at the last moment, then drove away as fast as he could.

A good fifty miles later, when he was certain that the men were not coming after him, he pulled over onto the hard shoulder and reached for his car phone. Tapping out numbers he waited, and as expected, found himself listening to an answer phone message. The phone was an ex-directory number in a private house, so even if the men had seen his number plate and knew who he was, the message would be beyond their immediate grasp.

"Duncan, it's Mark." He informed his Producer. "Listen. I'm onto something, and

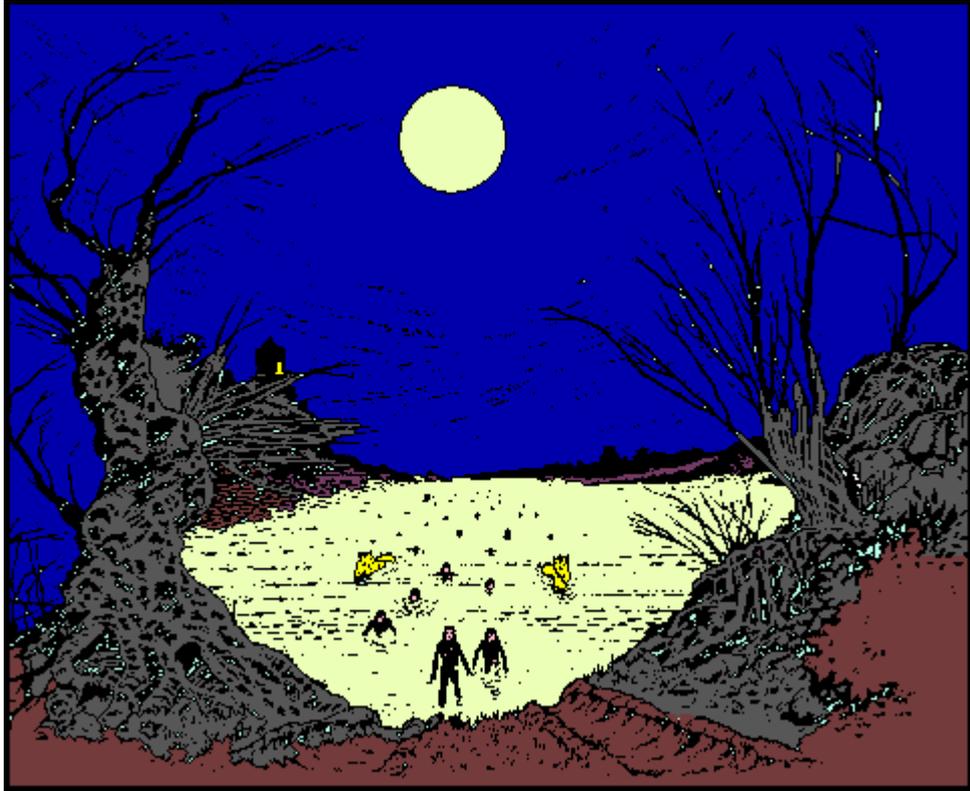
it's looking serious. I've just seen my informant kidnapped, and had a *gun* waved at me. For now it's best not to speculate, at least until I've had a chance to check things out. I might be out of touch for a few days, so if anyone asks, tell 'em I'm on leave. Cheers."

Replacing the handset in its cradle he delved inside the glove compartment and took out a thick manila envelope; his emergency kit. Tearing it open he emptied the contents onto the passenger seat. There was £500 in ten and twenty pound notes, and expertly forged EEC passport, and a gold AMEX card in the same name. All three were going to be needed for his journey to the Irish Republic in search of one Padraig O'Connell.

He'd known the name as soon as he read it, but couldn't quite recall the man's details. It was the little brass piskie that finally enabled him to remember that O'Connell was a celebrated Irish author, specialising in the mythology of his homeland. The man was known to be fiercely patriotic, although never in a violent way. On several occasions, he'd gone on record to condemn sectarian killings. O'Connell was a thinker, not a fighter, and certainly not the sort one instantly associated with Secret Service shenanigans. Let alone the accidental explosion of illegally imported Iraqi chemical weapons, allegedly on a small island in the middle of Ireland's longest lake.

Alone in Whitehall Central's Tactical Simulation Suite, Nicholas Wynt walked around the large table which dominated the room's centre. On it was a six-inch to the mile scale representation of Lough Derg, Tipperary and its environs. Major sites of Fey activity such as Nenagh Castle, Illaunmore Island, and Pollagoona Mountain were marked with small flags of various colours. Also represented, in the form of one-inch high brightly painted war-gaming figures, were the Sidhe themselves, placed in their last known or projected locations. The positions were approximate, due to the facts that satellite surveillance was blocked 80% of the time by Fey engineered atmospheric effects, and low-level reconnaissance flights by RAF Nimrods ran the risk of losing the wind from beneath their wings.

Picking up a mounted figure meant to represent the un-named Fey leader, Wynt held it in front of his face, wondering when - not if - the real individual would be in his grasp. Legends come to life, survivors from the ancient past who were once worshipped as gods, the Fey *had* to be controlled. Or if that proved impossible, eliminated. By their very existence they were a threat to all the world's social, religious and political institutions.



Lough Derg © Martin Chaplin & Adam Webb

Chapter Two

The Bloodsong's Calling

Always a misty, water-coloured country, Ireland had been founded on legend and half-truths. Dimly recorded history remembered it as a storehouse of ancient lore, a place where scholars of the mysteries could pursue their calling unhindered. Impossible as it now seemed, Eire had once stood as a bastion against the encroachment of the new religion. Which, it was said, had spread in confusion from the Holy Land, bringing hope and terror in equal measure. Resistance, though, had diminished as decades rolled like the waves against the coast, eroding much of what had once been sacred. In less than a thousand years, knowledge that had taken twenty-thousand years to accumulate was stripped from the repositories and, in a great many cases, put to the torch. What the new religion didn't understand, it feared. And what it feared, it inevitably destroyed. Thus by the modern age magic was all but forgotten, and those who'd inspired its study reduced to creatures of myth; beings said to have existed only in imagination. Their name was recorded as *Daoine Sidhe*, pronounced as Theena Shee, and they were diminished gods. Direct descendants of the *Tuatha de Danann*; the people of the Goddess *Dana*.

This, time blasted mythology, was but a small part of the information Padraig O'Connell had absorbed during the twenty plus years he'd spent researching, writing and lecturing about the wondrous legends of the Emerald Isle. Now, like all of those with the good fortune to have been born and bred in the vicinity of Lough Derg, he was free to come and go as he pleased from land claimed by the returning Sidhe. In their terms he *belonged* to the land, and was as much a part of it as the trees on the shoreline and the fish who lived in the lake. So, in an effort to further his already considerable knowledge, he'd chosen to stay in Nenagh Town, listening to stories new and old, sometimes watching them unfold. At the end of each day he wrote everything down, hoping to create a lasting record of the time when legends had come back to life. Being the chronicler of the Sidhe's returning was, he knew, a great privilege. Very few men ever got to walk alongside their dreams.

Presently, though, he was enjoying a stroll through Nenagh Park, in the company of a young fan, whose father and mother were old friends.

"Uncle Padraig. What are the Sidhe really like?" Eammon Blair asked with all the expectation of a 15 year-old dreamer.

"Oh, just about as wild and fantastic as you can imagine." Padraig smiled, and ran a hand through his unruly grey locks. "You'll see for yourself, soon enough." He told his eager audience as they stopped to toss bread for the ducks.

"They're here to stay, then?"

"Maybe." The writer shrugged. Life under Sidhe rule was good, especially for those who, like himself, sought refuge from the trials of the modern world. Their magic touched everything, casting a patchwork blanket over the things of the industrial age, and providing all that was really needed. If not all that was desired. *Caitlin*. He thought the name of the

woman he loved. What was she doing, right now?

"Uncle Padraig, look!" Eammon whispered, his arm slowly pointing to the reed beds on the far side of the pond.

"Careful now, we don't want to scare him off." Padraig cautioned. Poking out from between the green stalks was the pony-like face of a *kelpie*. Mostly submerged, the creature was lime green with untamed, brilliant emerald eyes.

"He's a beauty."

"He is that," the writer agreed. "Better than anything money could buy. Remember that, Eammon, when people try to tell you that the Sidhe are bad."

"Who would do that?" The boy questioned, eyes never leaving the water-horse.

"Oh, people whose minds are closed."

Watching the *kelpie*, Padraig remembered the very first time he'd come face to face with not one but two of the Sidhe. The unplanned meeting had taken place on a windless summer evening at the edge of the lake, and for him, been a turning point. The Sidhe had conversed in a friendly, if guarded manner, evoking by their very presence a sense of awe that he'd experienced rarely since childhood. Just as the legends concerning glamour had stated, the Sidhe were of themselves magical, and could play tricks with the way ordinary humans perceived them. It was a singularly startling ability, which they seemed to use mostly when indulging in acts of harmless mischief. Though when their masks were dropped, what remained was real and more lovely than anything human. A lovely *threat*, said those whose power had been stripped away. Of course, they were wrong. The returning had come just in time to save mankind from its own excesses, it was the start of a new, brighter age for everyone.

The Sidhe lords who controlled High Magic rarely associated with their new subjects, but were not ignorant of their needs. Their seeming aloofness was precautionary, and not intended as a snub. As their trust in the local communities had grown they'd begun to allow the manufacture and use of limited electrical power. The curious among those who called themselves Lesser Sidhe found pleasure in creative lighting displays, and music produced by stereo systems, which they thought of as minor magic. Low-level power was permitted, but anyone abusing the privilege risked a plague of, occasionally murderous, pranks. Large scale use of power was blocked by High Magic, as it had been since the Sidhe established control. Mechanised industry was non-existent inside Sidhe-held lands, and nowhere in their territory could receive either radio or television signals. Battery powered torches and children's toys worked, and there was street lighting, sometimes. But no telephone network or motorised-traffic. Internal combustion engines didn't work. The lack of speedy transport was probably the hardest thing to get used to, although it certainly made for a healthier lifestyle. Though the most talked about change caused by Sidhe rule concerned a problem that not even the descendants of *Dana* could banish. Sinn Fein had at first welcomed the *Daoine Sidhe*, declaring them to be liberators, and offering support. Until it became clear that the Sidhe had no interest whatsoever in human political squabbles, or religious divisions. The Sidhe *were* a religion. Less than six months after the returning, leaflets had appeared denouncing the Sidhe as new invaders, devils, and promising to drive them out by whatever means were necessary.

But the men of violence were few and one day, Padraig hoped, they would learn.

"Eammon," the writer began, voice loaded with wonder. "Did I tell you about the night I saw one of the Sidhe lords, out on the water, calling down *slua* to fill the sails of a becalmed yacht?"

Of the original four and a half thousand inhabitants, a little over one hundred and fifty had chosen to stay in Nenagh after the Sidhe had claimed it. All knew that the Nenagh Round, last remnant of the castle of the Butler's, was now a place barred to them. Except by invitation. The Sidhe had taken such buildings for themselves, referring ancient sites too modern.

Aillen Midhna sat on the edge of a hill to the east of the old Norman keep, waiting patiently for the imminent arrival of dawn. In nearby trees and bushes he could hear bird stirring, readying themselves as they always did to welcome the sun's light. Some, he knew, were the eyes of Beith Ur, watching for their lord and master. The Dreaming had told him their kind would be present this day. Lifting the finely carved *antarra* to his lips he blew lightly into its translucent green stems, producing a wavering chord; a call to the waking avians and an announcement that he would join them in celebration.

When the birdsong stopped Aillen continued playing, weaving a gossamer light melody for his feathered audience. First came a robin, then a flock of sparrows, who'd temporarily forgotten their arguments, then starlings and crows, finches and a pair of magpies. The birds filled the branches of the tree nearest to the Sidhe player. Some tried to join in, but soon fell silent, entranced by the music. More daring than the rest the robin fluttered down from its perch and landed on the player's shoulder. Aillen finished his tune moments later, and smiled gleefully as the birds rediscovered their fear and took to the air. Before noon he would play again, just as the Dreaming had shown him, weaving harmonic threads around his kin who lay broken at Lough Grane. The music of the *Daoine Sidhe* had many more uses than the pale shadow that humankind employed for their entertainment, and honour had fallen to him to spark its making flame for the purpose of rebirth.

Beith Ur rode into the scene of recent carnage in respectful silence. As befitted the coming task he was dressed in a leaf-green tunic, matching leggings, cork sandals and a cloak, fastened at his shoulders by means of claw-shaped greenstone clasps. The cloak's colour seemed to shift subtly, always matching the exact shade of the grass over which his mount walked. Between his shoulder blades the garment was marked with a perfect yellow circle, which shimmered like a living thing, and bisecting it was a long pony-tail of coppery-red hair, split by silvery-white streaks that glinted like slivers of melting ice. The *garron* on whose back he sat was milk-white with a sunshine yellow mane and tail, bright as if it had been freshly painted by an artist. Its hooves were shod with sparkling silver shoes, which were matched by an intricately worked bridle. Dark, fire-flecked eyes regarded the fallen Sidhe, understanding what had befallen them with a depth that the animal it resembled never could have. It was the morning of the third day after the slaying, and the fallen lay as if only recently taken from life. In Sidhe lands, their flesh was not subject to the fouling touch of

decay. Still glistening blood lay upon them, colouring their forms like petals from a dark rose, newly severed from its stem. Where magic was the law, there was no such thing as lasting death for the children of *Dana*. Only a cessation of life in the birth shape.

Finding a sparrow Beith caught its darting eye, and made it his own. Held by a grip tighter than any hand the bird took to the air and began to circle, sending its view to him as a series of stop-motion images flitting across the surface of his mind. Staring straight ahead, his own eyes wide and still, the Ur found what he sought. Just as the Dreaming had foretold, a *pandeus* was approaching from the east. Coming back to himself, he again wondered why it was that the Dreaming showed so much, but hardly ever in time to alter fate.

Pack slung over his shoulder, Aillen Midhna bowed low to his mounted kinsman, sweeping an arm through the air in a typically flamboyant gesture.

"Ur." His greeting was accompanied by a broad and welcoming smile.

"*Pandeus*." Came the equally cordial reply. Old laws dictated that both used titles rather than their true names. "The Dreaming brought you to this place." It was half statement half question. Even Beith, with his thousand eyes, was not all-seeing.

"The Dreaming showed them to me," Aillen confirmed, casting a wistful eye over his kindred. "The Bloodsong's calling is strongly felt."

"Then this honour is yours, *pandeus*." Beith said, then in a voice sombre as a death-knell he asked. "And you accept the charges it brings?"

Aillen met the Ur's unwavering gaze. "And I accept."

The playing began as a whisper, the notes in harmony with the air that disturbed the topmost branches of the trees in prelude to the coming rainstorm. Beith sang in low accompaniment to the ghost-tune, using the secret tongue to call upon a powerful aspect of High Magic. The combination was a call to the undead, awaiting release from the shackles of their ruined flesh. When, some indefinable time later, the sky directly overhead was dark and heavy, the music stopped. Rider and musician looked up, accepting joy the sting of cold droplets striking their faces. Before them the fallen were bathed, scrubbed clean by the torrential downpour known as *Dana's* tears. Like an acid it stripped away what bound her children's essence, transforming undead flesh into a sheath of fine white mist, lit by hundreds of tiny explosions of green and gold brightness. The man-forms wavered, seeming to grow larger as the obscuring mist billowed around them. Then Beith spoke a word of command, calling warm *Slua* winds to sweep down across the lake and over the scene of re birthing. For a moment, hair and cloaks danced wildly, copper-red and green streamers pointing the way that the aerial Sidhe had gone, then all was still.

"Hunt well," Aillen whispered, watching as the newly made quartet of foxes awoke, and with a knowing glance to their deliverers, ran for cover. Turning to face the rider, he said, "The Dreaming also showed our kin in chains."

"Albion's dogs have claimed two," The Ur confirmed. "One, of my own flesh." Teeth set in a wolf-like snarl he added, "The Dreaming shows that I shall have the honour of attempting to claim them back."

"Then *I* claim the honour of accompanying you," Aillen said.

Miles away, Padraig O'Connell was jotting down notes on a conversation he'd just had with a former doctor. To the medical profession, the most fascinating of the many conundrums posed by the Sidhe was their uniform good health. They were completely immune to viral infection and, even more incredibly, did not age at the same rate as humans. Age was not a term that had very much meaning in relation to them. Those Sidhe who were, hierarchically speaking, senior, had no lines on their brows or liver-spots to mark their years. Nor did they appear to suffer from any of the debilitating effects associated with ageing. The only visible sign of their passage through time - at least to human eyes - showed in their hair colouring. Elder Sidhe hair was marked with narrow streaks of silvery-white, mingling with the usual shade, but never threatening to overwhelm it. Psychologically, their inhumanity was acute and utterly unpredictable. What might cause a human to laugh would, perhaps, result in Sidhe tears. Whereas human tears were, more often than not, a source of great amusement to them. Although the reaction did not seem to be rooted in cruelty. There seemed to be no constants for Sidhe behaviour, no logical reaction to given stimuli. At times the Sidhe appeared to be a species insane, and in many ways man had more to link him with dolphins than he did with the children of Dana. Yet they, or beings of their ilk, were undoubtedly the basis for ancient gods which humanity had never quite forgotten.

She had been there for at least several minutes before Padraig noticed her presence. They could do that, when they chose. As far as he'd been able to determine, glamour worked along similar principles to human hypnotism. Except that it worked equally well on anybody, and required no preparatory work. What had alerted him on this occasion was her breathing. Light, whispering inhalations where there should have been none. Once she knew that he'd seen her she let out a high, piercing squeal of laughter. Rather like a child who'd been discovered during a game of hide and seek.

"Hello." Padraig said, watching the Sidhe stroll toward the park bench on which he sat. Her movements perfectly matched the androgynous quality of her features. She laughed like a child, but was an adult female, with viridian ribbons woven into a high pony-tail of copper-red hair. Stopping a body-length away from him she stared in silent appraisal. Padraig found her sky-grey gaze disquieting. It wasn't so much where she looked, as the intensity of her gaze. Slanted eyes swept slowly over his whole body, searching as if for some tiny mark, although her expression revealed nothing. It was impossible to gauge whether she was looking with harmless curiosity, or lust. He knew, although not from personal experience, that the Sidhe often took physical pleasure with humans. Those who'd confided in him said that it was an experience not to be missed.

"I'm Padraig," he tried again. "Is there something I can help you with?" Getting the faintest flicker of a smile in response, he found himself spellbound. The feeling was as if a veil had just been torn away, allowing him to see how perfect she really was. Unexpected, incredibly potent longing beat at the doors of his heart and mind, threatening to smash them wide. "Please," he spoke thickly, struggling to get the words out while he still could. "Please, lady, don't..."

"Make you love me, human." The Sidhe finished for him. Serene detachment vanishing in an instant here lovely features were suffused with an odd mixture of

mischievousness and delight. "That you'll do without glamour. *All men love me.*"

Feeling like an ice-cream cone that had been left out in the sun, Padraig watched the enchantress as she turned and with the crook of a finger, beckoned him to follow. A mixture of relief and elation flooded through him. Elation, because she had given him a clue as to her identity. To any scholar of Irish mythology worth his salt, her final comment was unique as a signature. Of course, it might be a Sidhe trick, a joke being played at his expense. But if it wasn't, if what he was thinking had any truth, then he was in the company of the *Liannan*.

Half a mile under central London a private and unofficial meeting was in progress between the Director of DIS and the Minister for War.

"Set my mind at rest, Nicholas," Anthony Pierce said, cheroot smoke following his words like a miniature storm. "I'm hearing rumours concerning that unpleasant business in Cornwall, and I don't much care for the thought of a Fey assassin on the loose."

"Nor do I, Minister." Wynt made a steeple of his fingers. "Unfortunately, all I can tell you is that everything possible is being done." Leaning forward slightly he looked the other man straight in the eye. "We'll find him. There's really no need to concern yourself."

Pierce remained unconvinced, and he resented the director's subtle patronism. Dealing with Wynt had never been easy, due in the main to the realities of their relationship, but lately he was becoming intolerable. Although technically Wynt's superior, he'd never been allowed to forget the decisive part the man had played in his career. Or, more darkly, that he was privy to damning information concerning a single, highly regrettable indiscretion.

"Internal affairs ought to get a move on. The Sailor has already killed once. The next time might not be so easy for us to sweep under the carpet." He wagged a warning finger. "If I may paraphrase Churchill, we can't expect to fool all of the people all of the time."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much, Minister." The director said, allowing a touch of sarcasm to enter his voice. "Any significant media coverage will continue to work in our favour. When all is said and done, *our* story line *is* the most credible. You can rest assured that we're keeping an eye out for any crusading mavericks. So I doubt very much that the Sailor's little foray will cause any problems beyond our ability to contain."

"Let us hope so." Drawing in smoke Pierce tilted his head back and exhaled at the ceiling. "There's only so far I can go when it comes to D-notices. Issue too many, and even the dullest of journalist will smell a rat. We simply can't afford to let that happen."

Wynt nodded, willing to let the man talk. The Minister was a pawn who resented the fact. Although he knew full well that he only had himself to blame. Nobody had forced him to do what he'd done. The spectre of political and social ruin that hung over his head was a powerful card to hold, but one which both of them knew could only be played once. And if Pierce fell from power, then the many years of work it had taken to get him to that position would all have been for naught. What mattered, in the ultimate analysis, was that appropriate action was taken to ensure that a way of life was preserved. Therefore, if it pleased the Minister to think that he was *really* the hub around which Britain's Intelligence networks revolved, that was an acceptable delusion. The biggest problem in the months to come was probably going to be the Americans. Typically, they were showing signs of restlessness, and

would surely act before the end of the year. Effectively, though, the race to see who would control the Fey was already on. Pierce hadn't even heard the starting gun, and by the time he did, it would all be over.

The desktop intercom beeped once, attracting attention to a tiny green square which had lit-up on its indicator board.

"Ah, I see that the good doctor is ready for us." Sliding his chair back on its castors Nicholas Wynt stood, one arm extended in invitation for the Minister to lead the way. "Left out of the door, then fifth on the right."

Kurt Williamson was waiting for them in a small room, that was bare except for a narrow table and three chairs. In front of each position was a glass tumbler and a carafe of water. The doctor, who stood as Pierce entered, was at one end of the table, next to an open-reel tape deck and a pair of small stereo speakers that had been set up for the briefing.

"Go ahead, doctor," Wynt said as he took his seat.

Clearing his throat, Williamson began his informal presentation of the data that had been cleared for Anthony Pierce to hear. "Minister. The section of tape I'm about to play was recorded during our second interrogation of the new prisoner, using a newly synthesised drug. Quite by chance we came upon an anomalous revelation that we believe could be of major importance." Hand snaking out he started the tape rolling. "At this point, my colleague, Dr Lynch, has been asking standard question regarding the Fey returning. Their mass arrival, and so forth."

The voice of a lightly accented Irishman issued from the speakers, attempting to gently coax information from his subject.

"Where did you come from, Saille?"

"Derg," the Sidhe replied, sounding hesitant.

"Lough Derg, in Tipperary. Would that be the place you mean?"

"Mmm." There was a longish pause, then she spoke again. "*Garron*. There were *garron*, swimming beside me." Even slurred as it was by the drug, her tone had taken on a mellifluous tone, captivating to the listeners on a subconscious level.

Williamson paused the tape. "*Garron*, as you may know, is a Gaelic name, and the one the Fey use in reference to their horses." Restarting the tape he kept his finger poised over the button, ready for the next break.

"Lough Derg." The interrogator spoke yearningly. "I went fishin' there, when I was just a wee boy. Are there many fish in it now, Saille?" He probed for information concerning the rumour that previously unknown aquatic life-forms were being bred in the Irish lakes. When there was no immediate reaction he continued on regardless, seeking to prevent the subject's attention from wandering. "Tis rare fortune that you didn't pitch-up in the *other* Lough Derg. Up there in the hills of Donegal. You'd surely not have been comfortable in a place sacred to St. Patrick."

"An innocuous sounding comment." Williamson said, stopping the tape once more. "However, when Dr Lynch mentioned the other lake, Saille's pulse rate and skin temperature underwent a significant increase. The name of St. Patrick cause the reading to soar." Detaching a computer-generated graph from his clipboard he handed it to the Minister. "Dr

Lynch was, of course, immediately aware of this, and attempted to discover the reason for her irrational fear." Tapping the button he restarted the tape.

"Saille, Saille. You're perfectly safe. It's alright. Nothing's going to harm you." Lynch waited a few seconds then asked, "What was it? What frightened you?"

"*Gruagach*." The Sidhe muttered, the strain in her voice almost palpable.

"What's that?" Lynch coaxed. "What does it mean, Saille?"

Williamson switched off the tape. "At this point, Minister, the subject began to actively resist the dosage, effectively sending her metabolism into revolt. Using a higher dosage was an option, of course, but one considered liable to cause irreparable damage. Therefore the session was abandoned, pending further study. As far as we've been able to determine, her reaction was involuntary. *Gruagach*, the last word she uttered, means enchanter or magician, sometimes champion. We think, when taken in context, that the subject was referring to the historical St Patrick, who judged by her terms of reference, *was* a magician." He paused, expecting comment, and when none came, continued. "Derg in Donegal is, as you've heard, a place strongly associated with St Patrick. Some 23,000 Catholics still travel there each year on pilgrimage. However, it is the legend concerning the lake's reddish coloured waters which may be of greatest relevance to us." Noticing that the Minister was beginning to look restless, he speeded up. "Briefly, it was said that St Patrick rid Ireland of its snakes. Which is a Christianization of *demons*, or diabolical forces. The Fey, in all probability. The last of the demons was said to have been called the *Caorthanach*, or Devil's mother. It is the *Caorthanach's* blood that is supposed to have given the water its red hue. St Patrick reputedly chased her into Lough Derg, and killed her by throwing his sacred bell."

Pierce finally lost patience. "Surely, doctor, you're not going to tell me that the Fey are frightened of *bells*?" His face lit up with wry amusement. "If so, perhaps we could send in a division of Royal Grenadier Morris Men!"

Ignoring the jibe entirely, Williamson continued. "Not bells, in the plural, Minister. Rather, one *specific* bell. The sacred bell of St Patrick. According to legend it was a gift from God, which fell out of the sky. A gift given as a *weapon*, to use against the demons."

"Are you really expecting me to place any credence in this quasi-religious mumbo-jumbo?" Pierce asked.

"Believe the facts we have." Wynt entered the conversation. "The reaction our subject exhibited is absolutely unique in our experience. No previous interrogation of *any* captive Fey has produced a fear reaction. The Fey are able to switch off, in some manner, rendering themselves immune to all forms of persuasion. Whatever they may feel when in that state is something we have simply not been able to measure. Therefore, the evidence you've just heard surely indicates something worthy of further consideration, and, I submit, prompt investigation."

Understanding dawned on the Minister's face. "You want authorisation to seek out this *mythical object* at the bottom of this other Lough Derg?" The question carried a hint of ridicule, but the moment the words were out, he saw the trap he'd fallen into.

"The Fey themselves are a myth come to life, Minister." The spy master reminded.

"We would be unwise to dismiss any related legends purely on grounds of origin."

"That may well be true," Pierce floundered, then recovered. "Surely, though, our resources could be put to uses more, likely, to yield a positive result."

"Derg, in Donegal, is a small lake, little more than a mile outside of Ulster." The comment intentionally implied that knowledge of the subject should have been obvious. "Once we've gleaned all the information our subject can be persuaded to give us, a low-key mission could be mounted quite easily. It would also provide a virtually risk free opportunity to test the validity of her information."

"Virtually?" The politician queried.

"If something that can harm the Fey *is* to be found under the water, then we can't rule out the possibility that they are present in the vicinity. Or represented in some form." Wynt caught the Minister's eye. "Though I for one think it's a small chance. If the subject's testimony can be trusted in this matter, it would be invaluable with regard to other, more sensitive areas."

"Yes." Pierce nodded. "I can see the sense in that. I suppose that a search and seize mission *could* be justified, as a test. Just so long as I have your assurance that personnel will not be crossing into the Exclusion Zone?"

"Not this time, Minister." The director assured. "We'll call it Operation Holy Ghost," he smiled humourlessly.

The mission was a long shot, which no one at Whitehall Central realistically expect to produce a significant result. However, what it could quite genuinely do was establish the veracity of Saille's chemically induced confessions. If her information was trustworthy, Operation Holy Ghost would be followed by Operation Mordor.

Set up around 1800 B.C. the Avebury Circle predated Stonehenge by roughly 200 years. Almost one hundred great Sarsen stones ringed the village itself, and the remains of two smaller circles. Avebury was also the starting point of a 50ft wide avenue of megaliths, that in ancient times, had stretched for more than a mile to Overton Hill. The stones were part of a massive system inherited by the Celtic druids, although never fully understood by them. In legend, the Druids had referred to the makers as *great men of the past, whose works are left to decay*.

One such great was Midar. He walked slowly between the widely spaced concrete posts that marked where megaliths had once stood, calculating the time it would take to rebuild, and remembering the last time he'd walked the undamaged Ley. Over fourteen-hundred years ago, toward the end of the last incarnation of the *Daoine Sidhe*, he'd ridden the line to Glastonbury. Where, high upon what had then been a water-ringed tor, with fingers of power crawling over his skin, he'd prepared a king for the Longest Sleep. Parts of the story had survived to the present age, but were twisted fancifully by lack of comprehension. That, and time. One thing alone was recorded with accuracy; the name he'd chosen for himself when among men of that epoch. It was a small thing, but it pleased him nonetheless to know that tongues still wagged with tales of Merlin the magician.

Today, there was no half-Sidhe ruler to lead the common herd. And mankind, like a

plague of clever rats, had overrun Albion and Erin both. Because of them the Earth was now poisoned, and dying a little more each day. Midar could feel the wrongness like a ray of sunlight, hot against his exposed flesh. Whenever he ventured into the heart of human communities the sensation became stronger still, coupled as it inevitably was, with the overabundance of ferrous metal. In ages past it had been different. Humankind had understood their place, and accepted the need of their master-teachers, honouring them as was fitting and serving with pride. To be *chosen* was a cause for celebration. Any man would have been glad to give up his new-born son or daughter, secure in the knowledge that the infant was to be joined with those who had lived long before the tribe of man. Those who were true lords of Earth and Sky and Sea. In the present, though, man had rebelled against the simple truths. Now, he took all and gave nothing. Yet, the *Daoine Sidhe* walked their lands once more, and had need of what was rightfully theirs. If man refused to give freely, the Sidhe had no choice but to take it from him. They others who sat with him in the circle under Pollagoona Mountain had declared it to be so.

Thus, was he back on Albion's tortured soil. His task, to seek out those human babes who, singing in their tiny veins, carried the trace of Sidhe ancestry. And when he found the bearer's of the Bloodsong, take back what the Sidhe had need of.

"Where are you taking me?" Padraig asked, brass piskie bobbing against his chest as he trailed in the wake of the woman whom he strongly suspected was the Sidhe Queen. They were passing through Nenagh Castle's landscaped gardens.

"Follow and see." The Liannan said, leading him into a maze formed from neatly-trimmed privet hedges.

They stopped a few paces before the beginning of a small rectangular lawn, positioned at the centre of the maze. There, sitting cross-legged on the grass, was a male Sidhe. Attention momentarily diverted, Padraig failed to notice his guide retreating. Only when he turned to ask her another, hopeful, question did he even realise that she was no longer with him. The sense of loss he felt at that instant was almost overwhelming. Having no better idea, he sat on the grass and waited to see what waiting would bring. If there was purpose in the meeting, he'd know it when the Sidhe spoke. After an indeterminate amount of time he heard a brief musical note, shrill but still appealing. It came from a set of green-stemmed panpipes, which seemed to have instantaneously appeared in the player's hands. Constructed in a semi-circular curve to facilitate playing, the instrument was carved from green soapstone, which marked them as belonging to a master musician. All the Sidhe had a natural affinity for music, but only those designated as *pandeus* carried the green pipes.

Needing no words of introduction Aillen Midhna began to play, creating a melody the like of which few humans had ever been privileged to hear. Literally enchanting, the notes reached deep into Padraig O'Connell's mind, and touching the very core of his being and opened wide the floodgates of long held memories.

An unseen sequence of vivid, sometimes painfully beautiful images, the quivering notes sounded to the writer like the song of warm carefree days he'd spent across the water, with Caitlin Ash. Completely enthralled, he could only listen as the *pandeus* painted brilliant

pictures on the canvass of his thoughts, the music conjuring vibrant new images with every shift in pitch. Knife-like the tune twisted, becoming suddenly loaded with the forlorn sensuality of the last kiss he'd stolen from his English rose. Then, agonisingly, it was a plea for help, in the voice of his years dead mother. Calling, still calling. Spiralling down the melody became an anthem, coloured red for the rivers of needlessly spilled blood, which flowed endlessly into an impossibly wide lake. On and on the thoughts came, veering madly between the familiar and the fantastic, building into a torrent of beauty and sadness which he found increasingly difficult to assimilate. Crushed-petal notes drowning out everything else the unearthly melody was a primeval force, drawing perhaps on some genetic pool of memory. Unlimited grief and unlimited ecstasy given musical form.

Held motionless by the music, and hopelessly ill-equipped to evade its maker, Pdraig realised that he could not withstand the melody's splendour for very much longer. Like looking at the sun, its brightness was too much for human senses. As low, mournful notes became delicate flakes of snow, landing and melting on his warm nose, he began to cry, the salty tears mixing with imagined wetness. Joy and pain fought violently inside of him, the evidence of their battle escaping in great wracking sobs and short bursts of hysterical laughter, over which he had no control. Romance and requiem intertwined, the music of the Sidhe was killing him, softly, but with the terrible inevitability of a hangman's noose. Death by sheer beauty was an honour, if judged in Sidhe terms, but the knowledge did nothing to help him feel any less wronged. or any less scared of passing. *Why?* The question whined across his synapses like a ricocheted bullet. *What purpose would his death serve?* Crumbling intellect could provide no answer.

Feeling his muscles give way Pdraig O'Connell toppled sideways onto the lawn, and lay waiting for the pipes to sound their final, fatal, notes. Life had been good, for the most part, and he was contented with his lot. But, he didn't want to die. Not yet. He wanted to *live*, with Caitlin by his side. Unable to move as much as an inch, the writer tried to imagine silence, and the bitter-sweet release he would be granted when the playing stopped.

All was quiet now, and no one was watching, though if human eyes had been looking, they'd have seen only a man. Instantly identifiable by his black cassock and dog-collar as a Vicar of the Church of England. It was the darkest part of the night, and the town of Marlborough slept, insensitive to the cloying stench of its own pollution. Midar hawked and spat, trying in vain to rid his mouth of the foul taste that tainted air produced. Walking along the centre of the broad High Street, he peered into the coal-dark alleyways which ran between the colonnaded shops, and then in disgust at the tower of St Peter's church. Earlier in the evening the traditional curfew-bell had been rung. That had stung his ears, but was less of a blight than the iron-bearing metal. He could feel its cold deadness on all sides, warping the natural ebb and flow, lessening the pull of stones set in nearby Severnake Forest. Stones set by men under thrall to Albion's original lords, then named Yldra. The cry, when it came, was from the stone's general direction, carrying faintly on the night breeze, though loud enough for Sidhe ears. It was the sound he had been waiting for. The sound that would lead him, as his local informant had claimed, to one in whose veins a trace of Sidhe blood still sang. Following the

trail of cries, Midar quit the town centre.

During the Sidhe's long sleep, Man had changed almost beyond recognition, becoming a slaving wolf eager to devour those he once worshipped. Though not all men, *Dana* be praised, there were some who even in this abhorrent age, had not forgotten the lessons taught to their ancestors. Such individuals had provided valuable counsel, soon after the returning, and again, when it had become necessary for him to tread Albion's roads. In return for jewels they told him all that they could concerning man and his ways, and when offered fragments of old knowledge, were happy to trace and identify the descendants of those families who'd forgotten their heritage.

The infant's bawling had stopped by the time he arrived, but he knew that he was close to where it lay. The Bloodsong's calling had originated from one of three houses in the road where he stood. Looking up into the star filled night he pursed his lips and whistled, a single high note; a call his avian companion, perching somewhere nearby. Swooping out of the darkness the large crow alighted momentarily on a second story window-sill, then returned to the night. Midar was sure then where the babe could be found. Walking silently up to the front door he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead lightly against the wood, and invoked the power which *Dana* had long ago granted to the High Sidhe. All along one side of the road street-lights grew suddenly dimmer. Instantly he was able to see *beyond* the wood, into the house itself. His mind's eye roamed from room to room, with no regard for physical barriers, until he found the sleeping baby. It was a male, and the Bloodsong was strong within him. A perfect child for the *bansidhe* to raise. Opening his eyes Midar traced a line along the door's edge with his fingertips, wincing as his flesh passed over the iron-bearing lock. There was a muted click, and the door swung inward.

Cat-like, Midar made his way up the carpeted stairs, and was soon standing over the sleeping child's cot. The room was unlit, but Sidhe eyes needed no help to see clearly. Reaching through the glamour with which he'd surrounded himself, he took the cloth bag that hung from his belt and brought it into plain sight. Feeling around inside it he produced a folded and tied collection of thin sticks, fashioned from Hazelwood. Unbound, they formed a baby-sized puppet. Very crude in the body, though correctly jointed, it had been fitted with beautifully carved hands and feet. All that was missing was a head.

The infant stirred, his weary eyes opening and seeing the dark blur towering overhead. Opening his mouth he sucked in air in preparation for a yell, which never came. Midar gently touched a fingertip to the child's brow, bringing silence. The Bloodsong heard its kin, and in moments the babe was fast asleep, a contented smile on his tiny face. He would remain in the exact same condition until others awoke him, under Pollagoona.

Opening a window, Midar let in the waiting crow. The bird settled on his shoulder and dropped a small crab-apple into his waiting palm. Raising the fruit up to his mouth he bit into its soft flesh, scooping out a small section which he swallowed without chewing. Then working quickly, he mounted the fruit on the stick-child's neck, and lifting the real baby from his cot, replaced him with the changeling. Uncurling the human's hand he held it out to the bird and whispered a word of command. The crow drew blood with a single peck, and watched impassively as its master allowed warm red droplets to fall upon the arcane

mannequin. One alone missed its target, marking the edge of the pulled back sheet.

Midar cursed under his breath. The minute stain would probably not be noticed, or if it was, not understood. Mankind in the present age had far greater knowledge than their ancestors, but for the most part knew nothing of the Sidhe. Magic was the last thing that the family would suspect. Touching his lips to the baby's wound, he sealed it, and with eyes closed, invoked for the second time that night the power of the High Sidhe.

"Gease ur Danan."

Looking down at the product of his workings, Midar used his free hand to fold the sheets tidily back in place. What they covered appeared to be a perfect copy of the child he held. Perfect, except for the fact that it was dead.

Outside, the street-lights had failed completely.



Midar © Martin Chaplin & Adam Webb

Chapter Three

A Welling Of Scarlet

Completing his fiftieth and last squat-thrust, Johnny Halcombe stood up straight and wiped the back of a hand across his sweat-soaked forehead. Behind and above him a low, motorised whine told him that the bedroom's video camera was still faithfully tracking his movements. Walking into the bathroom he stripped off, and pausing to wave his penis at the ceiling-mounted monitor, stepped into the shower. Inevitably, as he soaped himself clean, his fingers brushed across the intricate pattern of scars that the Fey had carved into his back. The spider web of lines formed a geometric grid, which had on occasions, been likened to a map of the London Underground. It's actual meaning, if it had one, was unknown. Those who claimed knowledge of such matters had suggested it was either a Sidhe idea of art, or something to do with whatever had fuzzed his memories of escape from occupied Ireland. Towelling himself dry Johnny looked at his reflection in the partially steamed-up mirror. Although not particularly tall or overly muscular, nature had given him a solid foundation, and spending few months over twenty years in the Royal Marines had left him with a body that was in above average condition for a man of his age. Only the wisps of grey in his otherwise black hair hinted at the fact that he was the wrong side of forty. They grey, plus the fine network of lines etched around his deep-set eyes. Haunted eyes, people had said.

Life hadn't exactly progressed the way he'd thought it would, since his escape. Instead of being feted as a hero, he'd found himself subject to seemingly endless debriefing sessions in addition to batteries of medical and psychological tests. Then, as if to cap it all, to top brass had calmly announced that his removal from his unit was permanent. Since that day he'd been consigned to a luxurious, high-security, safe house. Effectively he was in cold storage, waiting for the MoD spooks to decide his fate, and had been for the better part of a year. England, it seemed, wasn't all that different from some of the regimes its leaders always claimed to oppose. Just several degrees more subtle, when it came to violations of human rights. Nothing barbaric, of course. The guards and official visitors were always friendly, up to a point, and the three room quarters he was billeted in were comfortable enough. He had a soft bed - with no one in it - and all the mod cons. There was plenty to occupy his mind. Satellite television, radio, newspapers and magazines were all available. The house even had a small library. But the fact remained he wasn't free.

By careful observation and deduction he knew that the detached house was in a quiet suburb of London, to the west of a major airport. A high wall, topped with razor-wire surrounded the grounds, keeping him in and everyone else out. The guards had standing orders to let him out for a breath of fresh air, or supervised exercise, but there was no way they'd stand around while he tried to scale the wall. In some ways, he was just as much a captive as he'd been while in the Occupied Zone. A fact which made him wonder if it was really a not so subtle ploy, intended perhaps to trigger off some hidden memory. If so, then the plan had failed. All he could remember with anything like clarity was the night of his

maiming. Sometimes the incident would rise to the surface of his mind, and he'd suffer an attack of what the psychoanalytical spooks had told him was post trauma neurosis. Which in plain language, meant a memory so horrific that it caused a severe physical reaction. When it happened, his muscles locked rigid from head to toe, and regardless of the room temperature, he would shiver as if packed in ice. As tension increased, the dead white lines on his back would start to throb, as they had when freshly carved. Then, for a brief and always fleeting time, he would remember.

The first time it had ever happened was in the shower, after an especially gruelling workout session. There'd been no warning, no sign that anything unusual might have been about to happen. One moment his hand was on the shower control, turning off prior to stepping out, and the next he was encased in a sheath of invisible ice. The water cooling droplets sliding down his back seemed suddenly like cooling blood. *Rivulets of red, oozing from beneath a thin black blade as its user sliced artfully.* Trapped in the vision, he'd had little choice but to follow, tumbling back into the memory of that night on Illaunmore Island, and his first encounter with the Sidhe.

Concealed in the ruins of Illaunmore Island's old abbey on the night that the Sidhe had returned, he'd been utterly bemused by the living tapestry unfolding before his eyes. His first thought was that he might be the victim of a new weapon; some kind of hallucinogenic gas, perhaps, or a substance that he'd unknowingly ingested. But the theory was quickly discarded because, despite the strange sights, basic reality was not fluctuating. The grass was still green, shapes did not shift, and all his senses seemed perfectly normal. It was what they were telling him that seemed so impossible. Emerging from the waters of Lough Derg were scores of inhumanly beautiful, water-soaked people. And dotted among them were iridescent milk-white horse, the like of which he'd never seen. Already they covered most of the island, except, oddly, for the grounds of the old abbey. With each incredible minute more of them emerged from the dark waters, like survivors of an incredible Medieval shipwreck.

Dumbfounded by the bizarre spectacle, he'd tried to concentrate on those nearest to his hiding place, trying to gain some clue as to who - or what - they were. Some, he noted, were speaking English, but with a peculiar dialect. Their conversation had an appealing, mellifluous quality, and contained words in a foreign language, perhaps Gaelic. Risking a longer look, he saw that those closest were white-skinned, but had Asiatic eyes, and their hair was the colour of burning copper. In keeping with the physical incongruity of their features, the 'survivors' were dressed in Medieval garb, simple in the main, yet incredibly elegant, somehow. One other thing that was immediately obvious to his soldier's gaze, was their complete lack of visible weaponry. Before he'd come to any real conclusion, someone had spotted him.

"Ho, human." The Adonis-like man had called out in a light, strangely compelling tone. "Are you come to welcome the returning?"

It was then that he'd made the first of his mistakes. Shouldering his SLR he'd stood and fired three rounds over the man's head. Instantly the assembled voices fell silent and hundreds of pairs of large, slanted-eyes were staring at him in manifest displeasure. Not fear. At that moment he'd felt like small boy who'd rolled a marble down the church aisle during a

funeral. But, having committed himself, there was no going back. He needed to assert control, then get the hell off Illaunmore Island, preferably with a prisoner to prove that he wasn't insane.

Straight and regal, with long silver-streaked red hair; an unusually tall figure rode unhurriedly through the way that parted for him. Billowing around him in wind that had sprung into being after the shots were fired was a long green cloak. Poker-faced, he showed not the slightest trace of fear, even when the rifle was levelled at his heart.

"Point not at me, human. For I am Lord of this land." The rider's voice radiated as if artificially amplified.

Spoken with conviction and absolute authority, the power in the words was like a physical slap to the face. It took a tremendous effort of will to disobey, because somewhere deep down inside, Johnny felt that he was in the wrong.

"You'll do," Johnny said, trying to remember that he was a soldier. "Off the nag," he motioned with the barrel of the gun. "I mean now!"

When the self-proclaimed Lord didn't move a muscle, Johnny Halcombe saw himself begin to squeeze the trigger. Then reality had snapped back into place, leaving him cold and wet, and wondering what the hell had happened next. It was a question he still wasn't sure he'd ever be able to answer.

For Nicholas Wynt, relaxation came in the form of old-fashioned war-gaming. Bony fingers thoughtfully stroking his hairless chin, he stood glaring down at the game in progress. The forces he commanded held the advantage, but his opponent was clearly up to something. Rear Admiral Algenon 'Tut' Tuttle, never did anything without a good reason.

Played on a large, purpose built table, campaigns could vary tremendously. Some players preferred to wage historically accurate battles, recreating the classic confrontations from the days of the Roman Empire, or Second World War. Others derived greater pleasure from pure invention, abandoning documented reality for the realms of science fiction. Then, there were those termed fantasy gamers, who revelled in battles set in the worlds of Tolkien, Moorcock, Barker and others. It was to this group that the director of DIS belonged, at least in a technical sense. Unfortunately for the manufactures of games they were not privy to knowledge concerning the *real* Fey, upon which the game in progress was based. Called *Lios*, after a Gaelic word meaning *abandoned dwelling taken as a Faerie fort*, it was manufactured by the MoD in very limited numbers, and distributed to under a dozen players. Highly accurate from a geographical and logistical point of view, *Lios* was set in the occupied sector of the Irish Republic, and pitched the forces of the *Daoine Sidhe* against the British Military, in a variety of potentially real scenarios.

Wynt studied his opponent's move, watching intently as each piece was moved a specific distance across the scale model landscape. The play in progress utilised the Portumna end of Lough Derg, including Portumna Forest Park, an abandoned Priory, and the remains of two ancient castles. As usual, he'd chosen to command the Fey, which although smaller in number, had the advantage of High Magic, which afforded massive variability. Presently, his 'army' was attempting to repel a sizeable British task-force of infantry with air

support.

Tut completed his manoeuvre, which left his light artillery midway between Terryglass and Ballinderry. A position from which they could shell advancing Fey duergar. His commandos were in the Old Court Castle, on the banks of the lake, and his air-cover, which consisted of five RAF Harriers, was closing fast from the West.

Lips pursed tightly in concentration, Wynt determined that it was the optimum time to deploy *Slua de Doininn*, his own aerial forces. Invisible to the naked eye, the Slua were semi-sentient, elemental creatures who'd returned with the Fey. Although not fully understood, it was known that they usually manifested as narrow blasts of hurricane-force wind, which were fully capable of turning over an armoured vehicle. Or, if so directed, ripping the wings off an aircraft. In the game of *Lios* the *slua* were treated in much the same way as missiles; the success of their strikes being determined by roll of multi-sided dice. Different modes of attack required progressively less likely number combinations, depending on the degree of difficulty. Also taken into numerical consideration was the skill of the enemy pilot, and random speed of reaction when his instrumentation detected *slua* activity.

"*Slua Sidhe* attacking the Western edge of your formation. Maximum velocity." The director announced his move. Reaching for the probability dice he moved a metallic, blue and white painted storm cloud model in position.

"You won't catch me like that, old man." Tut said confidently. Tamping down tobacco he paused to light his pipe. "I think you'll find those Harriers in wide formation. You'll be lucky to knock one down."

"But if I do, where might it land." Wynt's acidic tone wiped the smile off his opponents slightly chubby face. "Firstly, let's see what damage I can do." He rolled the dice, and as predicted, smashed the wing of a single aircraft. "Ah-ah." He stopped Tut from removing the piece. "I haven't finished yet. That Harrier is now crippled, and would probably drop straight into the lake. Somewhere between Cregg and Gortmore point, I'd guess." The Naval man nodded agreement. "However. There is a reasonable chance that its speed might allow it to continue forward, so that it came down over land. Close enough, perhaps, for its various armaments to inflict heavy casualties among your forces."

"Devious," Tut complimented. "Are you sure there aren't any Fey genes in your family."

Nicholas Wynt did not smile. He knew full well that the Rear Admiral's comment had been intended as a joke, but still found it incredibly offensive. An apology would have been demanded, had not his radio-pager chosen that moment to begin bleeping. Minutes later he was in the back of a MoD car, headed for Whitehall Central.

In the week since Williamson's breakthrough, astonishing progress had been made. The experimental compound, it had been verified, induced a calm, but extraordinarily deep state of semi-consciousness akin to hypnosis. Under this waking sleep, Saille had been coaxed to provide much previously unavailable information, including her own - apparent - significance. At first thought to be one of the Lesser Fey, Saille had identified herself as the daughter of an individual she named Beith Ur; a member of the ruling circle, and a wielder of High Magic. It was a story that *she* believed implicitly. But, as everyone concerned was

aware, her belief didn't necessarily make it true. However, the Fey word *Ur* was known to be a genuine title. It had cropped up on one previous occasion, in the hazy, sometimes chaotic testimony of Sergeant Johnathon Alexander Halcombe. The only member of the British Armed Forces ever to have been in the heart of the Occupied Zone and lived to tell.

Prior to Saille, the minds of those Fey who had fallen into DIS hands had been, and steadfastly remained, closed books. Impossible to open or in any way control. Stress induction techniques, standard chemicals, sensory deprivation and hypnosis had all failed. Then Williamson, or if truth were known probably someone on his staff, had conducted a simple experiment, and discovered something that now seemed blatantly obvious. While always causing discomfort, Iron was fatal to the Sidhe only under particular circumstances. If administered in the right form, and in very specific quantities, it could be used to bend usually inflexible will and temporarily 'switch-off' the Fey ultra-immune system. Until the dosage wore off, the subject was as physiologically and psychologically vulnerable as the average human.

Striding into the lab, Wynt narrowly avoided collision with Kurt Williamson. The doctor was ambling across the room, attention entirely focused on the sheaf of computer paper held between his hands. Five white-coated members of staff were dotted around the room, though none looked up when the door hissed open. The single-minded determination with which each member of the group attended to his given task was a large part of the reason for his being transferred from one of DIS's ninety other departments and assigned to Whitehall Central.

"Ah. Director." Williamson started. "I thought you'd want to see this straight away." He presented the sheaf. "It's the result of a comparison between standard Fey and standard human electroencephalograph readings."

Wynt glanced at the columns of numbers and pen traces then handed them back. "In *English*, Williamson. Simple, clear English. What does it mean?"

"That our attempt to programme Saille hypnotically has been a success. The data points to a greater than ninety percent chance of adherence. Excluding, of course, any factors presently unknown." The doctor ran a hand through his unkempt hair. "It's even better than we'd hoped for, sir. Look." He flipped over pages until he found the right one. "The first of the four horizontal traces represents the Alpha rhythm, as recorded in a human subject who was relaxed, with her eyes closed, etcetera. Regular, high amplitude waves, of eight to twelve cycles per second. The second line is the faster, Beta rhythm, or REM stage of human sleep. Which, as we know from Project Wonderland, is virtually indistinguishable from the normal Fey waking state. The third line, also at twelve to twenty cycles per second, was taken while Saille was conscious and before treatment. In a human it would indicate dreaming." Surreptitiously checking that the director was following, Williamson drew attention to the last of the four tracer-pen lines. "Notice how close together the peaks are, sir. This is an EEG reading produced with Saille under ferrite-induced hypnosis. Delta rhythm, as we're calling it, is in excess of forty cycles per second. Or, in plain language, more than *twice* the maximum ever recorded in dreaming humans."

Wynt nodded comprehension. "And in this state, our guest will accept hypnotic

suggestions?" He asked, voice silky-smooth with anticipation.

"Yes, sir." Williamson lowered the papers to his side. "Although what's happening is demonstrably much stronger than hypnosis, at least as we understand it. All the tests bear out our original suppositions. In delta state, Saille not only accepts suggestions, she believes implicitly *whatever* she's been told. Even if that information directly contradicts her own interests."

"And when she's woken?"

"Post-hypnotic suggestions are followed to the letter. Therefore we have to be careful with our wording. Thus far there have been no discernible signs of conflict, or resurgence of original beliefs. In fact, the process could even be said to work," he hesitated. "Like magic."

"Literally like magic?" Wynt frowned, imagining himself as the unfortunate victim of some grand Fey trap.

"Not unless all our accumulated knowledge is wrong, sir." The doctor insisted. "Fey-tuned magnetometers were in use during all tests, and on no occasion was unusual activity detected. Rest assured that whatever is happening is *not* under Saille's direct control."

The director smiled icily. "At last, a weakness with exploitable potential. If only her damned sire - if he actually exists - had taken the bait." He referred to the air-drop of ten thousand leaflets over the Occupied Zone. On each one was a photograph of Saille and a message, offering Beith Ur his daughter in exchange for a meeting with the Fey leaders. "So," Wynt stared into his subordinate's eyes. "are you recommending that we proceed?"

"Yes, sir. I am." Williamson nodded in emphasis. "Barring unforeseen circumstances, we have a way to get a man, perhaps even a small team, inside the Occupied Zone. With luck, all the way to Pollagoona Mountain."

"Yes." Wynt smiled sarcastically. "That would be splendid." Privately he wondered how frantically the doctor would squirm if he were offered the opportunity to be one of his proposed team. "Make your preparations for," he checked his watch, "eighteen-hundred hours precisely. You'll have our volunteer - singular - by seventeen-thirty"

Entering his private office, Wynt crossed to his desk terminal, and at the touch of an assigned key, accessed Whitehall Central's Records And Information Department and spoke into a pick-up mounted on the side of the monitor.

"This is the Director. I want to see the PF for Halcombe, Johnathon Alexander." While he waited for the screen to fill he used the only surveillance-free phone in the complex to dial an unlisted private number. "Anthony." He greeted the War Minister in a tone he knew would be recognised. "I think it's time we had another little chat."

A clicking noise brought Johnny instantly alert. Swivelling around in his chair he saw the door opened to admit a man he'd never seen before. Although he knew the type well enough. From the look on the face of the guard who'd let him in, he was top brass. Probably a senior spook, if his Saville Row suit was any indication. The visitor was in his mid to late sixties, with a full head of neatly trimmed silver hair. His features, marked from temple to jowl by a narrow, strawberry coloured birthmark, were somewhat gaunt, but set in an expression of complete confidence.

"Mr Halcombe," Wynt said offering his hand. When it wasn't accepted he continued indifferently. "I am here to talk about the future."

"The *future*." Johnny repeated, voice tinged with suspicion. "You're not interested in the past, then, Mr.?"

"You may call me Director." Wynt said self-importantly. "I'm not concerned with your past, for the simple reason that I already know everything that is of relevance. Unless there's something new you'd like to add?" The soldier shook his head slowly. "We've learned a great deal since the occupation began." The statement was accompanied by a professional smile. "Much of it only recently. I believe that you'll find some of the facts most interesting."

"I don't think so, sir." The honorary was spoken with grudging inflection. "Not any more. In fact, if you really want to know, I wish the Fey would bugger-off back to wherever they came from. Excuse my French. Then you blokes might let me get on with my life."

"Please, Mr Halcombe, don't let's waste your time or mine with absurdities." The spy master fixed his man with a stern gaze. "You're far too bright to believe things could ever be so simple."

"Read up on me, have you, sir." Johnny scoffed.

"Actually, yes." Wynt's reply was entirely humourless. "Now, I'd appreciate it very much if you'd listen carefully to what I have to say."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really." Taking a seat the director crossed his legs and leaned back into the cushion. "Your unique expertise is needed, for an operation code named Mordor. An operation inside the Occupied Zone."

"Forget it!" Johnny jumped out of his seat as if it had suddenly turned red-hot. "I'm not going back in, understand." Just the thought had started him sweating. "The Fey carved me up once. No way do they get a second try."

"Poor little soldier." Wynt mocked mercilessly. "I wonder, was your back the *only* part of your anatomy to suffer."

Johnny loomed over his persecutor, fists clenched, though held at his sides by act of will. "You spook bastard." The words were spat like venom. "You've never been there. You've never come face to face with a real live Sidhe."

"On the contrary." Wynt answered coolly. "I've seen several. Including a young Fey female who has been most, helpful. You'll be meeting her in the near future."

"How many times do I have to tell you." The soldier shook his head slowly. "I'm *not* volunteering. I don't care how many tame examples you might have seen. Fighting the Fey isn't like fighting people, especially on their home ground. They don't work to the same rules, or even the same *reality* that we do. The Occupied Zone is a bloody madhouse." Turning away in exasperation he began to pace up and down. "If you know anything, then you know what they can do to even the best trained, best equipped men." Unbidden, a memory bubbled to the surface of his mind. "Like the Paras, when they tried to jump over Tipperary. The poor sod's got to five-hundred feet, and whoosh," he sliced the air savagely with his flattened palm, "no more 'chutes."

"Most regrettable. Unfortunately it is true that *Slua* are still the biggest threat to

airborne invasion. Although, for your information, we now have a reliable method of detecting elementals, and effective countermeasures are well advanced into development. However, none of that concerns you directly. You'll be taking a ground route, crossing somewhere on the south-western side of the Occupied Zone."

"For the last time, pal, I'm not going in."

"I can help you remember." Wynt continued, as if oblivious to the refusal. "We believe there's a way to bring back all of your memories, Mr Halcombe. Surely, you'd prefer to know what really happened. Especially how you managed to escape. If not for yourself, think how the knowledge might benefit others." Wynt paused, then added. "Not everyone has lost their courage. Some of us still have the desire to resist."

"I've already done my bit. It's a matter of record." Johnny said, refusing be goaded. "All I want to go back to now, is my life."

The director's expression turned to ice. "Life," he said clinically, "is an appropriate term. If you insist on remaining so inflexible."

"Is that a threat?"

"Try to grasp the nature of your position, Mr. Halcombe. The fact is that I'm a very influential man. I'd rather come to an amicable agreement. However, if you remain uncooperative, I have the authority to put you in a real prison, with no trial, no remission, and no questions asked." The statement had a flint-sharp edge to it. "I need you to work for me, Mr Halcombe. The security of the realm may well depend upon the success of Operation Mordor."

"But you can't *make* me, right." Johnny caught on. "You need me to play along." Not for one instant did he doubt that the man before him was capable of doing what he threatened, but the need for co-operation gave him some leverage. Perhaps enough to make a difference.

"That is true." Wynt conceded. "Although, as I said, it wouldn't be difficult to make your life extremely unpleasant. Do you want to spend the rest of your days in a badly run asylum for the criminally insane. I think not."

"At least I'd be alive," Johnny snorted.

"But for how long. I *could* have you incarcerated with certified psychopaths, some of whom would love to have you as a cellmate."

"I'd cripple the first one who tried it on."

"And no doubt the second." Wynt smirked. "Sadly, though, scum like that seldom work alone. They're in for life, with nothing to lose. The guards know this, and being concerned for their own health, tend to turn a blind eye when the animals play. How many of them, I wonder, would it take to hold you down." He paused for a second to let the words sink in. "In addition to the brutalization and abject humiliation, you might catch, something incurable."

"And I might snap your scrawny little neck." The soldier spoke through gritted teeth.

Even though he knew the soldier could easily carry out his threat, Nicholas Wynt remained perfectly calm. On his way to the top of Britain's intelligence community he'd been under duress many times, and become expert in just how far a man could be pushed before he

lost control. Halcombe was a trained killer, but he was not a criminal, or stupid. Despite the look on his face, he knew that any attempted violence would have its consequences.

"You might." Wynt's eyes narrowed, focusing on the man like twin-gunsights. "Although, if you were that foolish, you'd deserve the fate I described." Standing slowly, he brushed imaginary creases from his trouser legs. "We both know that isn't going to happen. Now, if you'd be so kind as to follow me, you have an appointment to keep."

Known as the cage to those who worked at Whitehall Central, the small room was clad with retractable sheets of iron, and possessed no furnishings other than the non-combustible swivel-chair in which the prisoner was strapped. Senses dulled by the proximity of cold iron, Saille let her eyes show the contempt she felt for those who would so debase and betray the *Daoine Sidhe*. The metal absorbed and blocked natural forces, making the working of even minor glamour impossible. While in its proximity, she felt as if she were covered by a shroud of pain. Men had used their strange, human arts, to lay powerful spells upon her. Subtle workings, woven artfully within to create invisible strings. Saille understood little, but knew that the men could tug at her mind, causing her act according to their will. When the door to her metallic prison opened she said nothing. As befitted the daughter of Beith Ur, she showed the human only the scorn that he deserved, despite the certain knowledge that she was completely in his power.

"Morpheus." Williamson said, his tone quiet but firm.

The defiance in the subject's eyes died the instant the last syllable was completed. The name of the Greek God of dreams was a key trigger-word, hypnotically embedded in her subconscious mind. When used in the Sidhe's presence by himself, Dr Lynch or the director, the result was an instantaneous, though deep, trance state.

Giving a signal to one of the monitor cameras mounted at ceiling height, Williamson waited while a wheelchair containing the director's volunteer was brought into the room. The man was unconscious, although appeared to be in perfect health. Leaving the room briefly, the attendant returned pushing a long metal trolley, upon the shelves of which was highly specialised monitoring equipment, calibrated to measure the minute alterations which were expected to take place. When the attendant had left and the cage was sealed, Williamson carefully applied conductive fixing gel to the temples of both his patients, then unravelling wires from the stacks, four electrodes in position on each head.

"Relax, Saille." Williamson droned. "You're feeling calm, perfectly at ease. Now, I want you to close your eyes and try to see the special meadow." The place he was referring to did not exist, except inside the Sidhe's mind. "Can you see it yet, Saille?" The Fey nodded slowly, but did not speak. "Good. Can you hear the River?" Again he spoke of imaginary geography, and was rewarded by another positive response. "That's splendid. I want you to listen very carefully." He paused, and when he spoke again it was in his imagineered role as the source of all truth and knowledge. "I am the River. What else am I?"

"You are the voice of flowing water." Saille spoke brightly, as if responding to a long-lost and greatly valued friend.

To the doctor it was an indication of acquiescence. "And the water is pure." He

made the obligatory response. "Open your eyes, Saille." As she did so he twisted her chair around so that she was facing the man in the wheelchair. "Tell me, who is this?"

"Halcombe." Saille spoke the name lovingly, her large grey eyes focusing on the man as they had previously on his photograph.

"And who is Halcombe?" Williamson prompted.

"Friend of the River."

"The River, which speaks the truth, and must be obeyed?"

"It is so." The Sidhe's words came like a verbal caress, showing a level of emotional involvement that had been impossible to elicit from prior captives.

"The River and Halcombe speak the same truth. A truth which does not change, and is never to be questioned."

"It is so."

"A truth, which must not be harmed by physical act, or by the magic of the *Daoine Sidhe*." The doctor's words were a test, half statement and half question. This was the point at which Saille had to be allowed to decide for herself.

Eyes never leaving Johnny Halcombe's sleeping face, Saille smiled tenderly. Her breathing deepened visibly, but remained even. If there was internal conflict it did not show in her expression, or betray itself via any measurable reaction. Even so, Kurt Williamson could not help but be concerned. Until Saille, no one had ever succeeded in brainwashing one of the Sidhe, and his success still seemed almost too good to be true. A natural pessimist, he half expected something to go wrong, and wanted to be prepared if it did. Eyes flitting over the various meters and LCD displays he searched, but failed to discover any cause for alarm.

"It is so." Saille decided.

Startled by the vehemence of her agreement, but at the same time delighted, the doctor glanced up at a video monitor and nodded cautious approval. The first part of the process had worked, almost exactly as he'd predicted. Now it was time to commence the second phase.

Under Ferrosodium pentathol, Saille had answered hundreds of questions, including many that related to the nature and working of Sidhe magic. High Magic, as wielded by the ruling Fey, was beyond her knowledge. Just as highly technical science was beyond the grasp of most of mankind. In both cases, knowing what something did was not the same as understanding *how*. The magic of the Lesser Fey was another matter. Saille had a working knowledge of that, including what was known as *glamour*. This fact, more than any others, had been a cause for great excitement among the staff of the Biological Research Department, due to the enormous potential it represented.

Whitehall Central's Physics Research Department had determined why certain people were allowed unimpeded access to territory claimed by the Sidhe. In a way that was not yet fully understood, the personal magnetic fields of those individuals were in perfect harmony with the area surrounding Lough Derg. Because they fitted in, like puppies in a litter, neither the Sidhe nor their creatures were concerned by their presence. Therefore, if the mysterious process could in some way be duplicated in a laboratory, an agent could move freely inside the Occupied Zone. Unfortunately, all attempts had met with failure. Mainly because, like

genetic fingerprints, the frequencies and ranges of each person's magnetic field were unique, and incredibly complex. Almost impossible for science to measure accurately. The obvious if - previously - unattainable answer, was glamour. In theory Saille could, while under hypnotic control, make the necessary alterations to Sergeant Johnny Halcombe. Sidhe magic, at human command.

"Commence raising the shields." Williamson said. Remaining so close during the second phase was a risk, but one he was obliged to take due to practical considerations. In test runs, which had all stopped short of the critical point, Saille had responded less favourably to remotely generated voice commands.

In response to the doctor's order there came a low humming sound, and a solid iron panel covering one quarter of one wall began to retract into the ceiling. Raised sheet by sheet there was plenty of time for him to check the monitors for signs of anything unexpected. If Saille attempted to make unauthorised use of her abilities, one signal was all it would take for every shield to be simultaneously slammed back into place.

When the last of the iron was sheathed, Williamson was relieved to see no changes that he hadn't expected. "Halcombe must be changed," he began. "Altered, so that he can walk freely on land claimed by the Daoine Sidhe." He paused to lick dry lips. "The River asks you to change him, not in the way that he looks, or in the way that he thinks. Make him *belong*, as those men born on Sidhe land belong. Can you do this, Saille?"

"It is done." The Sidhe answered barely a heartbeat later.

Eyes darting back to the meters Williamson made a quick check and found that, although there had been no immediately noticeable alteration in Johnny Halcombe's readings, the equipment had detected something out of the ordinary. For no more than a fraction of a second, Saille's readings had fluctuated, rising to a level that indicated use of magic. It seemed too instant, too incredible. But then, he reminded himself, it was largely a matter of perspective. The first Sidhe to be captured alive had been amazed when he saw a light bulb.

It was the oldest trick in the book, and he'd fallen for it. In the car on the way to, wherever he was now, he'd turned down the scotch offered by the director, and instead taken a bottle of mineral water. In retrospect it was obvious that all the drinks were laced with a tasteless something, *except* for the scotch. Whatever it was had knocked him out faster than a heavyweight's punch.

Propping himself up on one elbow, the soldier took in his surroundings. The room was small and sparsely furnished, with one door and no windows. His mouth was dry as sand and contained an odd taste, something chemical, but not anything he was able to identify. The bed on which he'd awoken was of medical origin, judging by the safety railings on either side. But he was fully clothed, so at least they hadn't done anything unpleasant while he was out. Or so he thought, until his tongue discovered a pair of prominent swellings on the lower left and right hand sides of his mouth, clear indications that someone had performed a little unexpected dentistry. What, exactly, he couldn't say, except that there were no teeth missing. All he knew for sure was that it had happened quite some time ago, a good few hours, if his rumbling stomach was anything to go by.

"Fuck." Johnny muttered under his breath.

Whoever the son-of-a-bitch director was, he had the balls, and probably the backing to do whatever he liked. That much was blatantly obvious, as was the futility of trying to beat the bastard head-on. Especially while the odds were stacked so high in his favour. England was run by blokes like him. Always had been and always would be. But, the old school tie brigade meant bugger-all outside of the Septic Isle. Therefore, the smart thing to do was go with the flow, at least until a viable way out showed itself. There was *always* a way out, eventually, and if he could make it to somewhere in Europe the rest would be easy.

Without warning the door opened to admit the director himself, and two white-coated strangers. Clearly medical staff, their name tags identified them as Dr Lynch and Dr Williamson. Lynch was carrying a meal on a plastic tray.

"Think of the devil." Johnny said. Accepting the tray he began to eat without concern for what the food might be laced with. The spooks had him now, and if they wanted to put him out again, they wouldn't need to do it by surprise. "Not bad," he mumbled through a mouthful of sausage. "So, is this your bunker, or what?"

"It's called Whitehall Central." Wynt answered testily. "We're in London, although the precise location is classified, I'm afraid."

"Thought it might be." Johnny replied jauntily, balancing a piece of fried egg on the end of his plastic fork. "How about me," he raised his eyebrows. "Like, what's been done to my nosing tackle? Or is that a Top Secret as well."

Williamson cleared his throat. "A small operation."

"What?" The soldier frowned. "Come on, I want to know."

"Later, Halcombe." The director said. "Try to show some patience." Observing that the plate was rapidly being cleared, he motioned toward the door. "When you're finished, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

Coming face to face with a living Sidhe was something that Johnny had hoped he'd never have to do again. It was a wish that had gone up in smoke when he'd followed the director down a corridor and into what appeared to be a high-tech jail. Walled floored and roofed with what he guessed was thinly covered steel, the holding cells had open fronts, criss-crossed with dozens of pencil-thin beams. Unable to look away from what the laser-barrier contained, his mind reeled with a mixture of violently conflicting emotions. Anger, because the woman-creature was of the Fey. Awe, at her flawless beauty. Fear of Sidhe magic, and a strange, two-pronged need. He wanted her, instinctively, as a man wanted any such woman, and yet he also wanted to strike her, as hard as he possibly could, in an effort to mar her greater than human perfection.

A perverse smile momentarily bent Saille's rosebud lips. She knew, as Sidhe of her lineage always knew, what effect she was having on the man who stared at her with such hatred. He disguised his feelings well, better than most of his kind could manage, but he could do nothing to hide the bulge in his trousers.

"Observe." Wynt said, casually passing his unprotected hand through the brilliant beams of an empty cell. "I have incurred no damage." He held his bony fingers up for inspection. "The lasers fronting these cells are harmonically tuned to the specific frequency

of Fey tissue. They are therefore incapable of harming any other matter."

"Ingenious, isn't it." Williamson enthused.

"By the way, Halcombe, this is Saille." Wynt made the belated introduction. "She's very kindly put a spell on you."

Although the Exclusion Zone was the most heavily patrolled area since the Berlin Wall had fallen, its roughly oval configuration and varied terrain encompassed far too much ground for the assigned British and Irish troops to cover all of it all of the time. Deadly CT strips had been laid over miles of road and field, killing uncomprehending wildlife and deterring all but the most reckless of thrill seekers. There were, however, many places such as streams and craggy inclines, where the use of chlorine trifluoride was not practical.

One such location was a heavily wooded area near the village of Shanballyedmond, in the Slievefelim Mountain range. Yuri Litvinko waited there, his back to a tree, dark clothing making him virtually invisible in the darkness. A Russian Intelligence agent, secretly allied to the Network, he'd had no trouble avoiding the regular Army patrols, and father out, UN observers. Though if discovered by a fluke encounter, the authentic CNN press pass that he'd equipped himself with would serve to throw off any suspicions. Skill and expensively bought information had allowed him to minimise the chances of detection, but could do nothing to affect his contact's punctuality. Again the Russian checked his watch and, reluctantly, concluded that it was time to abandon his post. Pdraig O'Connell was now over ninety minutes late, which even if viewed optimistically, suggested serious complications.



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Chapter Four

Project Wonderland

Prismatic in the setting sun's last rays, Aillen Midhna's eyes looked out over the bay of *Baile Atha Cliath*, called Dublin by men of the present age. Across the dark swell of the sea lay England, Albion of old, where the *Daoine Sidhe* and Yldra had vied for control of the lesser creatures during the reign of Fin Bheara. It was for Albion that he and his companions were bound. A mile or so out to sea the dusk sky was getting darker by the moment. Invisible to the eyes of men, a ghostly grey pack of *Slua de Doininn* worked as they'd been commanded to do by the Lords of the Circle. Gathering cloud mass, the Slua were building a storm of supernatural intensity with which to confound the human sailors in their ships of iron. And though the calm eye of the Slua-storm, a *pandeus* would sail, borne on the small fragile-looking craft which bobbed in the harbour. Fashioned wholly of wood and fitted with a single white sail, the boat was the one that had returned under its own guidance after taking Midar across the channel. Maintained and protected by the High Magic of Pollagoona's Full Circle the craft could be large or small as need dictated. Its sleek beauty effortlessly surpassed anything forged by man with his clumsy, brutish construction methods.

"I see that the Circle have not forgotten their arts," Aillen said, smiling slyly at the man who stood to his left. The boat was a physical reminder of an old saying; the *Daoine Sidhe* craftsmen worked *with* nature, while their human counterparts sought to crush resistance from all its forms.

Man of the present age had, it seemed, forgotten what little his ancestors had learned concerning the living woods. Pursing his lips the *pandeus* whistled a single, shrill note, calling the Grey Lady which had been chosen to serve as Beith's eyes. Singing sweetly, as befitted the company of a master musician, she flew from the gathering darkness and alighted on his outstretched index finger.

"Come, songstress." Aillen said to the nightingale. "It is time." He started down the harbour steps, with the shell of Padraig O'Connell following silently in his footsteps.

Seated in the bar-room of the Green Man in Limerick Town, Sean Molloney downed the last of what he consider to be a well-earned pint of Guinness. The drink, and those which had preceded it, were in celebration of the previous night, when he'd successfully nail-bombed a pair of Fey. The explosives had gone-off dead on time, tearing the heathen bastards into ribbons. That part of the night had been fine enough, but what had happened soon after was the Devil's own doing.

Two mounted Fey had been spotted approaching from the west, and with them a howl of wind that might've been Slua. There'd been barely enough time to get to a hiding place, let alone think about taking them on. He knew all too well that standing against High Sidhe was suicide. The Lesser Fey went down before bombs and iron-shot, but the chief devils - the ones who rode Garron - were almost always protected by their unholy magic. He'd watched

them through night-sight binoculars as the shorter of the two took a small, golden harp from his saddlebag, and then in harmony with his companion, begun to sing over their fallen kin. At such a distance the words had been too faint to be made out, but the tune itself was an eerie, wavering lament. Seemingly out of nowhere an unnatural wind had blown across the scene, whipping-up dust and debris, making it difficult for human eyes to see exactly what was happening. Of one thing, though, he was certain; High Magic had been worked. Because, where dead Sidhe had laid a moment before, a pair of yellow-eyed owls sat blinking up at the moon! The broken bodies were gone, vanished without a trace. Seconds later the birds had taken to the air, and disappeared among the trees. But they'd been there, he knew it.

At the time, what he'd seen had disturbed him greatly. Not because it involved High Magic. He'd witnessed the Devil's power on many other occasions. What really bothered him was whether it had been completely real. If so, then the implication was that death was not necessarily the end for the Sidhe. Those he'd killed, perhaps *all* of them, were not truly gone. The thought scared him more than he was prepared to admit, even to Micky Flynn, who'd seen it too.

In the short term solace was to be found at the bottom of a straight glass.

"Will y' be havin' another pint, Michael?" Sean asked jokingly.

"Is the Pope Catholic," Flynn replied in traditional fashion, and draining his glass, placed it in Molloney's waiting hand.

Shouldering his way through the busy crowd, Molloney made his way up to the long bar and waited impatiently to be served. Ever since the occupation, pubs on the edge of the Exclusion Zone were always busy. Mostly with off-duty Brit soldiers. Made uncomfortable by the thought he glanced around, and noticed the hesitant gaze of a man who'd been looking at him, and had looked away a fraction too late to avoid being spotted. He seemed familiar in some way, but was not a local, or out of town regular, all of which he knew by sight. Definitely a new face, he had to be either a tourist, or a member of the security forces. Most of the time the Brits didn't bother him; word from high up in their chain of command placed him out of bounds. It was all part of the unofficial agreement he'd made with those who controlled the Boss. But once in a while someone didn't get the right message and sent in a pair of eyes to have a closer look.

"Would y' be lookin' for me, mister?" Molloney asked warily, frowning his distrust.

"Not exactly." Mark Rainbow flashed his most amiable smile. "I'm trying to find a man, a friend of someone." He nodded toward the ruddy-faced landlord. "Mr Corrigan there says that you know him. His name's Padraig O'Connell."

"O'Connell, is it!" Molloney exclaimed, surprised to hear the name of his old school friend. At fourteen they'd been inseparable, but a couple of years later, when Paddy had chosen to stay on for his A-Levels, their lives had started to drift apart. These days they only seemed to meet up at Christmas. All the same, a friend was a friend. "And what, if y' don't mind me askin', would y' be wantin' with the great scribe?"

Mark moved along the bar until he was next to the Irishman. "It might sound silly, but I don't know, exactly. You see, he has something, some information for me. I was told

that Mr O'Connell came in here most evenings." He shrugged apologetically. "I'm afraid that's all I have."

"Sure, it isn't much." Molloney snorted derisively. Intrigued to discover what kind of game was being played, he pretended to be affable. "Paddy an' me, we go back a long way, so we do. You've come t' the right man, Mr..?"

"Manning." Mark lied. "I'm Carl Manning."

"Well now, Mr Manning, I haven't set eyes on Paddy all week." In truth it was more than a month since he'd seen the man.

"Do you know anyone who might have?" The reporter looked crestfallen. "It's very important that I find him." lowering his voice, he added, "That is before anyone official does. If you get my meaning?"

"I do." Molloney replied, hearing warning bells inside his head. "We're sittin' over by the window," he indicated Flynn. "Would y' care t' join us."

Back at the table introductions were made and Molloney set about determining who Carl Manning really was. Not Brit Intelligence, that was for sure. All jokes aside, none of them would really be stupid enough to blunder in so clumsily, and with such a flimsy story. Besides which, O'Connell had never been involved with the cause. Just the opposite. The sorry bastard thought that it was possible to live in *peace* with the Sidhe.

After only a few minutes Mark was sure that he was on to something worthwhile. Every time he even alluded to the Exclusion Zone, one or the other man side-stepped his question. Sean and Michael knew a lot more than they were prepared to say at present, but that was only to be expected under the circumstances.

Four pints later, Molloney affected a sudden return of memory. "The Tavern," he clicked his fingers. "That's where we'll be findin' O'Connell." Full of pretended urgency he stood, and grabbed the Englishman's shoulder. "Come on. We can be there before last orders."

Mark followed unsteadily, eager to find O'Connell, but wishing he hadn't felt obliged to match the men pint for pint. It came as a total surprise when Sean bundled him into a dimly-lit side alley and shoved him roughly up against a wall. There was worse to come. Before he even had time to yell, Michael Flynn had produced a sawn-off shotgun from the holdall he'd been carrying, and pressed its barrels into his midriff.

"Alright, mister. Suppose y' tell us exactly what y're doin' here?" Molloney growled. "The truth mind, if y' plan t' piss out that beer," he added menacingly.

"Okay, okay," Mark gasped, genuinely frightened now. "Take it easy, please. The truth is that I'm a reporter." He said, feeling at that moment like the world's most dim-witted example. "I work in TV. On the Crusader programme," he added belatedly. "Surely you've heard of it?" When the pressure against his stomach did not ease he said, "It's the truth, I swear to God. My name's not Carl Manning, it's Rainbow. Mark Rainbow."

"That's where I've seen y' before." Molloney smirked. "On the box, talking bollocks. So, Mr TV star, what do y' want with old Paddy?"

"A friend of his contacted me at the station and said that something's going on inside the Exclusion Zone. O'Connell was supposed to show me proof." Very slowly he reached

into his trouser pocket. "I was to show him this." In the flat of his outstretched palm brass glinted.

"Would y' take a look at that, Michael." Unable to contain the amusement he felt, Molloney started to laugh. "Does that remind y' of anythin'?"

"Looks like one of them *evil* Leprechauns." Flynn grinned toothily.

Gypsies had always been given a hard time by the British authorities, so it had come as no great surprise when, in the weeks following the Lough Derg incident, those same authorities imposed tougher restrictions on travellers. The emergency legislation was called the **Indigenous Nomads Act**, and in certain quarters, was the most unpopular thing since the Poll Tax. The Act meant that all those deemed to be of no fixed abode were required to carry holographic ID cards, and were further required to register in advance their proposed routes and final destinations. Most folk went along, mainly because of the stiff penalties for breaking the law. Those who did risked a thousand pounds fine, confiscation of their own or community property, and had no right to legal representation. In the early days the legality of the Act itself had been challenged, before people who did began to disappear.

Ultimately, the INA had served only to further alienate an already victimised section of society, and in effect, create a natural ally for the *Daoine Sidhe*. Agents of whom had been quick to forge links with several nomadic groups. Sympathisers, and people who were native to the Lough Derg shoreline acted as go-betweens, moving virtually at will, until the authorities started to catch on. But by then deals were already struck.

Midar had joined the tinkers' caravan as it passed through Wiltshire, on its way to the western coast of Cornwall. There'd been no argument when he'd appeared one night and asked to take the place of Tad Apperley; a middle-aged man blessed with a face and shape that would attract no unwanted attention. Using glamour he'd assumed the tinker's appearance, borrowed his ID card, and left him in on the outskirts of a small town with enough gold to keep him in comfort until the caravan returned. So disguised, Midar knew himself to be secure from all but the most sophisticated of man's devices. When learning of the modern age, he'd found that certain aspects of man's thinking had altered little from the days of knights in armour. It was a curious twist, he mused, that no one seemed to remember that such heavy armour had been adopted with the intention of turning *magical* attack, by forces at the command of the Fallen. Another error of thinking was man's continued obsession with guarding his grand seats of power, while leaving open his small towns and villages. Not considered to be of strategic importance by Albion's rulers, such places were rarely equipped with the devices of High Science. The *technology*, as man named his magic, that was required to detect glamour-hidden Sidhe.

Since joining the Gypsy convoy he'd spoke little and travelled alone, with his precious cargo nestled side by side in a lidless wooden box on the floor of Tad Apperley's caravan. The dilapidated dwelling was easier for him to tolerate than the iron-heavy vehicle which pulled it. Some of the younger travellers, fuelled by thoughts of faerie gold, had become overly curious about what he was keeping in the five small sacks. Until their leader's curiosity had earned him a lesson. On the third night in the camp he'd warned against

disturbing his cargo, explaining cryptically that to do so was to incur the wrath of the *Daoine Sidhe*. It was then that the bold young traveller had dared to ask what he meant, and had consequently found himself transformed into a dog. Not physically, but inside his mind. Later, when the demonstration was done, the unfortunate youth had been told how he'd grovelled on all fours in the dirt, and run sniffing after a bitch in heat. Only swift restraint had prevented him attempting to mount the animal. After that nobody had shown the slightest inclination toward unwelcome curiosity. Everyone called him Tad, after the owner of the face he wore, and left him alone with the sleeping bearers of the Bloodsong.

The Gypsies gave him no cause for concern, though while passing through Exmoor, he'd become aware of an oddity. The proximity of iron-bearing metal cause his extended senses to blur whenever he'd attempted to reach for understanding. But there was a presence of some kind, always just out of sight, and aware of him as he was of it. Showing no signs of hostile intent, the presence followed the caravan invisibly, evading even the crow's aerial searches. Such perfect concealment and stealth marked it as being a product of the Nine Ranks, and something that recognised him as Sidhe. At first he'd thought that it might be an Yldra, awoken sooner than expected. Until a more logical alternative sprang to mind; the tracker was not a Fallen of the Fourth Rank, merely a descendant of a creature they had left behind. He was being trailed by one of the *Cait Sith*.

Finding out that the *spell* which had apparently been placed upon him was beneficial did nothing to curb Johnny Halcombe's misgivings. He didn't - couldn't - believe that there was no catch. Nor did he have the capacity to trust any of the Fey, not even a tamed one. Whatever the men in white coats claimed, *knew* that the Sidhe were the most accomplished liars in all creation. A cast iron fact that he'd tried to make the man standing behind him understand, but gotten nowhere for his trouble. What irritated him most of all, was that if a nasty surprise did lie in wait somewhere down the line, the director and his self-assured staff would not be on the sharp end of it.

Shaking his head in frustration, Johnny looked out over Whitehall Central's huge Environmental Simulation Chamber. The home of Project Wonderland was like an underground warehouse, except that the ceiling was too low and there weren't any real windows. The shatterproof plate-glass he was looking through was in one of ten viewing bays, evenly spaced around the outside of the ESC approximately fifteen feet above the floor of the chamber. The space below was divided into three unequal areas by ten feet high, steel-clad walls, topped with razor-wire. Two of the pens had been landscaped into surprisingly natural-looking gardens, which consisted of flat turfed areas, uneven rock-scattered hillocks, assorted wild flower and bushes growing at random, and a simulated stream. Tapped, or so he'd been told, from a natural underground source. The third area was the smallest and looked nothing like the other two. At first sight it appeared to be some sort of intensive care unit.

"Heads up, Halcombe." Nicholas Wynt pointed his coerced volunteer's attention to where dozens of lights were clustered like overfed bats. "The array is controlled by computer, and can simulate precisely any lighting condition which might be experienced above ground. Mostly we use it to provide substitute sunlight," he offered a brief, thin smile. "Occasionally,

we run a storm through the audio system and duplicate lightning with the stroboscopic batteries."

"Impressive," Johnny said. privately he wondered juts how much black budget money it had cost to duplicate a patch of Fey-held Ireland under London. Looking down again he couldn't help but think of an ancient Roman arena. Although the sad pair shambling back and forth directly below him were nothing like gladiators. "They're the most docile Fey I've ever seen," he glanced at the director. "What's the story?"

"One of grave misfortune, I regret to say." Wynt replied, not bothering to disguise his insincerity. "Those two were badly wounded during one of the last skirmishes, before the ignominy of the Berlin Convention." He referred to a clandestine summit which had resulted in the British Government being pressured into halting its short-lived military campaign against the Fey. "They were brought here, and nursed back to health."

"Then lobotomised, by the look of them." Johnny chipped-in.

"Nothing so crude." The director's eyes narrowed for a second. "What you see, Halcombe, is the product of psychology, *not* surgery. Our guests took part in something called the Escher Experiments. Tell me, have you ever heard of M.C. Escher? No, then I'll explain. Escher was a Dutch artist, famous for his paintings of impossible structures, such as **Belvedere**, **Waterfall**, or **Ascending and Descending**. Surely, you've seen a reproduction of the never ending staircase, upon which hooded figures constantly climb?" At last the soldier nodded. "Good. Now, consider the visual problems Escher created. How they're never quite as they seem to be. The human brain has a remarkable knack of making sense out of the information it receives. And so at first glance, Escher's paintings *look* normal. It is only upon closer study that we are able to perceive the illogic, the sheer impossibility, according to the rules of our real, physical world. That is *our* reality." Once again a thin smile found its way onto his lips. "The Fey perception is very different to ours, in ways we're still trying to understand. The Escher Experiments were an attempt to unlock the Fey mind. As you can see, the end results were somewhat less than we'd hoped for."

"You blew it!" Johnny snorted.

Wynt ignored the mockery. "Our psychologists think that the Fey - at least *those* Fey - were unable to separate the basic illogic from their conception of reality. This caused traumatic inner conflict, culminating in permanent spatial disorientation, and dementia."

"Burned out, then." Johnny stared at a the spy master, appalled and impressed at the same time. "So how was it done? I mean, you didn't just show them a picture and *boom*, their brains were scrambled. It can't have been that simple."

"Of course it wasn't, Halcombe." The reply came as if from an exasperated parent to a slightly retarded child. "They were confined, in specially constructed sensory deprivation tanks. Touch, taste, smell and hearing were all minimised, or entirely blanked."

"All they had was their eyes, and what they saw were these Escher drawings." The soldier interjected.

"Or variations on the same theme. Illogical images were generated inside a computer and projected directly onto the subjects retinas. Before we realised, they were lost."

"How do you mean, lost?"

"*In* time and *to* reality. The surviving subjects of the Escher Experiments have no sense of time. Yesterday and tomorrow no longer mean anything to them. There is only now. Like goldfish, they cannot remember what happened more than a few seconds ago. We keep them alive for the purpose of medical trials, and to see whether they can heal, given time. Perhaps recovering enough to initiate meaningful communication."

"So the poor bastards don't even talk?" Johnny said, on the verge of feeling sorry for members of a race he hated.

"Not in anything approaching adult terms." Wynt shrugged. "Any activity is merely play, or disconnected remembrance. Like all Fey, they do not sleep and eat only by choice. Most of the time they have no fixed identity, and certainly no lasting purpose." Touching the soldier's sleeve, Wynt drew him away from the window. "Come, Halcombe. There are other things to see."

"Wait a minute." Johnny resisted. "You haven't told me about them?" He nodded in the direction of the small compartment, which was occupied by a motionless Sidhe or indeterminate sex. Strapped to a modified bed, the being was surrounded by several banks of medical equipment, to which he or she was connected by numerous wires and tubes.

"Curiosity." The director tapped the side of his nose. "Remember what it did to the cat." The reprimand was accompanied by an expression that said it was not to be taken seriously. "Fortunately, in this case, your security clearance level includes Project Wonderland."

"Wonderland!" Johnny scoffed. "What's that, a funfair for spooks?"

"Hardly." The carefully emotionless reply masked annoyance. "The project is proof positive that the Fey are not the supermen they so often seem to be. Does that interest you, Halcombe?"

"Depends."

"I warn you, seeing our *diminished god*, isn't pleasant." Wynt teased.

"I'll survive."

"Yes, I believe you will. After all, you have a proven talent for it."

"Wonderland, as in Alice?" Johnny asked, following the director down a narrow stairwell. The question had been a joke, but was received seriously.

"Indeed. It was chosen due to the drug associations." Spotting his volunteer's look of bewilderment, he sighed theatrically. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you lack comprehension. Most people miss the references, even though they're scattered throughout several of the classics of children's literature. Peter Pan for example, who sprinkles *magic dust* into the children's eyes before taking them away to Never Never Land. Then there's the Wizard Of Oz. You may recall that in the original, Dorothy falls asleep in a field full of *poppies*, prior to waking up in Oz." He raised his eyebrows expectantly. "Alice In Wonderland is probably the worst offender. A close reading shows that the child experiences a range of increasingly bizarre warped reality scenarios. Which, to the informed mind, are quite obviously drug-induced."

"If you say so," Johnny grinned fiercely, amused more than he had been in months. "Have you thought about Paddington Bear and his marmalade addiction? Or Noddy. Now

there's a bloke who's bucking the system!" Predictably the only reply was stony cold silence.

Soon after they reached floor level the director's pager began to bleep, calling him away. Doctor Williamson took over the briefing tour, leading him to Project Wonderland's smallest enclosure. Inside, Johnny found himself staring through plexi-glass at what remained of Fey male, code named Oberon. According to Williamson, areas of the Sidhe's skin were stripped regularly in order to test the current speed of re growth. Flat on its back, the body sprouted dozens of colour-coded wires from its half-shaven skull, and plastic tubes which dealt with all bodily functions. Computer-linked monitors scanned twelve times per second, cross-referencing and cataloguing even the most minute physiological changes. Williamson had said that Oberon was brain-dead, and therefore unaware of the many medical experiments being performed upon him. The inference was that even if he did show the occasional signs of awareness, when organs were deliberately damaged or flesh sliced open, it didn't matter. Because he was the enemy, *only* a Fey. Knowing the Sidhe's own attitude to their enemies, Johnny agreed, despite the small voice of conscience that argued to the contrary.

"Fascinating, isn't it." Williamson commented.

"Uh-yeah, I s'pose so."

"Did the Director mention the Fey auxiliary nervous system?" The soldier shook his head. "It's part of your briefing. A very interesting part too, I might add." Williamson looked hopefully for some sign of enthusiasm, but found only indifference. "We made the discovery about six months ago, while testing Oberon's autonomic system. The autonomic system is what handles necessary physical functions without conscious control." He explained needlessly. "Anyway, what we found were tiny clusters of receptor cells, where in a human body, there would have been none. These clusters, it was later determined, enabled him to detect the slightest fluctuation of his personal magnetic field. Even in his present condition, his body is highly sensitive to specific wavelengths. Mostly electromagnetic noise. We're certain that the ability is closely related to control of glamour, and other so-called *magical* manipulations of energy. Of course, if we can find a reliable method of disabling the cluster's sensory abilities, then the Fey would be deprived of their greatest weapon. There's a huge effort being made to find the key."

"Yeah, I've seen it" Johnny jerked a thumb in the direction of the leftovers from the Escher Experiments.

"Fey with shattered minds are of little value," Williamson asserted. "Which was why Escher was abandoned." It was a long way from the truth, but practice had made him sound convincing. "Project Wonderland has already yielded more useful knowledge, and at nothing like the cost. Subtlety is our middle name."

"I'd never have guessed," Johnny muttered sarcastically, letting his gaze drift back over the comatose Sidhe.

"To anyone with a science background, Fey biology is astonishing. Apart from their immunity to all of our diseases and ailments, they are able to rapidly heal almost any damaged body part. When under conscious control, we believe that could include brain cells, which as you may know, cannot be replaced in an adult human being." Pausing for a

moment, Williamson added, "There's evidence to suggest that they may be able to regenerate entire limbs."

"You mean the bastards can regrow themselves, like starfish?" Johnny asked, incredulity evident in his tone of voice. During his time in Sidhe-held Ireland he hadn't seen anything to support the theory, or at least nothing that he was able to remember. But, as he knew only too well, magic could make the seemingly impossible happen.

"Basically, yes." Williamson smiled benevolently. "Obviously, regenerative nature is what accounts for the fact that there are no infirm or elderly Fey. But it will take several more years - perhaps even decades - of study, before we've unravelled the process. Recognising that it occurs is only the beginning."

"When you do, though, it could be applied to humans?" The soldier asked, at last finding something to be impressed by. "Is that what you're trying for?"

"That's not really a part of your briefing," Williamson hesitated. "But I don't suppose it will do any harm if I say yes. Advancing medical science to the point where we can cure the human condition is one of our long-term aims. Ultimately, we hope to isolate whatever factor it is that enables Fey tissue to regenerate, and use it to prolong human life."

"Immortality?"

"No-no, you misunderstand. The Fey are *not* immortal, any more than they are invulnerable. The simplest way of explaining what we've been able to verify is that the Fey *age* at a much slower rate than you and I. And, as we've already touched upon, they have far greater recuperative powers. However, in order for us to benefit..."

"How long?" Johnny interrupted. "What's the average Fey life span?"

"Based on the rate of cell decay observed in dead tissue," he glanced toward Oberon. "Our estimate, discounting variables such as accidental iron-poisoning, is between three hundred and four hundred years."

"Jesus Christ." Johnny shook his head, not wanting to believe what he was hearing. "No wonder they haven't gone on the offensive. They can afford to wait us out."

"Only if we fail to gain the upper hand." Williamson countered. "Some of the knowledge we've gained concerning Fey biology has already been put into practical use," he bragged. Unable to resist, he flashed a sardonic smile.

"You mean me?" Johnny questioned, uncertain as to what the doctor was inferring. "The job you did while I was out cold?"

"Uhm, well, yes." Williamson seemed taken aback by the deduction. "In actual fact it was a colleague who operated on your gums."

"I don't get it," the soldier frowned. He was beginning to get a very bad feeling. "What aren't you telling me?"

"You should really ask the Director about that."

"He's busy. So I'm asking you." Moving in so that his face was only inches from the doctor's Johnny added, "And, I'm asking *nicely*." As he'd hoped, his tone of voice and deadly serious expression were enough to intimidate the man just enough to get a response.

"Alright," Williamson said, gaze cast down toward the floor. "You were fitted with Fey implants. They have a certain function, which works best when they're placed in close

proximity to human saliva glands."

"Implants!" The soldier's features took on a grim cast. "Are you telling me that you've put something from one of them," he indicated the half-dead Fey, "inside of me?"

"They're very small. Really." The doctor explained a little too quickly, deeply regretting the *faux pas* that had placed him in this situation. "Just tiny parts of a Fey gland, approximately the same size as match-heads."

"I couldn't give a shit if they're the size of a gnat's balls." Johnny roared, struggling to overcome the sensation of nausea. "I want them taken out."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, at this time. Orders from above, you see." The doctor smoothed down already flat hair. "However, I can give you my personal assurance that you are in no immediate danger."

"And what the *fuck* does that mean?" Johnny seethed. "Tell me what you bastards have done to me. Exactly." Grabbing the doctor by the lapels of his white coat he jerked upwards. "Come on, doc, I'm waiting."

"This isn't personal." Unused to rough treatment Williamson flustered. "An order was issued. Surely, you can understand that? The implants will not affect you in any way," he paused, reluctant to finish his statement. "Unless they're allowed to decay."

"Then what?" Again, the doctor hesitated, so Johnny shook him. "Out with it."

"If the glands rot they become highly poisonous to the human body. The result is creeping paralysis, beginning with the extremities. The tips of your toes and fingers would turn numb, then the paralysis would work its way inward." The material of his lab-coat passed slowly through shocked fingers. "The effects are irreversible, although only fatal if they reach the cardio-vascular system." He stepped back, putting himself temporarily out of reach.

"When does all this start?"

"Decay commences in the third or fourth week after implantation. But, you'll be back long before then, and the Director will authorise removal."

"Oh yeah, that'd be nice of him." Johnny glared angrily. "What if anything goes wrong, eh. What if something happens to cause a delay. I'm fucked, that's what," he snorted. "Unless I got myself to a good dentist!"

"Ah-no, I'm afraid that that would do you no good, Sergeant." Composure returning, Williamson straightened his clothing. "The implants are sheathed in a special protein shield, which unless treated appropriately prior to extraction, would rupture. Thus accelerating the entire process. It's an insurance policy, you see."

Johnny nodded dumbly, incredulous that his own people were responsible for turning him into a biological time bomb.

"He's done what!" Nicholas Wynt yelled down the receiver. The worst of the news had also been the most unexpected, and something for which nobody could be held responsible. Apart from their present geographical location they had been nothing to connect the two men. "Sometimes I doubt there's intelligent life in Intelligence."

On the other end of the line the caller was instantly cowed. Nobody at GCHQ

SIGINT had wanted to be the one to pass on the SIS report concerning television journalist Mark Rainbow. Surveillance had been ordered when he'd been identified as the individual met by former analyst Caitlin Ash, immediately prior to her suspected abduction. Spotted at Liverpool docks while securing passage on a private cargo ship bound for Belfast, Rainbow had been closely shadowed ever since, but not interfered with. Although his chosen method of transport was unusual, technically speaking he'd done nothing illegal, as Trafalgar Television's lawyers would surely point out if their man was hindered. There was no hard evidence to link him with Caitlin Ash's disappearance, and denying him freedom of movement would only serve to generate unwelcome publicity. Therefore it had been decided to keep him under observation, and intervene only if he committed a serious crime in relation to security. The thinking was that, even if he had discovered a hint of the truth and intended to slip into the Occupied Zone, the Fey themselves would eliminate him.

Wynt silently cursed the assumption, made as it doubtless had been by someone who did not have access to complete information. The Fey could be lethal, and attacked all hostiles who crossed into the territory they claimed. But, whatever the propaganda claimed, they were *not* indiscriminate killers. It was just possible that the journalist might find his way into the Zone, and emerge unharmed. Then there would be no choice but to terminate him.

"I want a full report on my screen within the hour." Wynt ordered. "And if you value your job, keep me informed as to any new developments the minute they're reported." He said, ending the conversation.

Rainbow the reporter and *Molloney* - of all people - had been seen together in a bar close to the Occupied Zone. It didn't make sense. There was no reason why the two should meet, let alone strike up a conversation. Once again improbability had reared its unwelcome head, hinting at the possibility of Fey complicity. Perhaps, for some as yet unguessed at reason, they had manipulated events so that the meeting took place. The Irishman certainly had a story to tell. But that theory didn't hold water either. If the Fey knew who Molloney was, they'd surely exact revenge. So perhaps there was a simpler, less conspiratorial explanation. Also, irrespective of whether the meeting had been coincidental or synchronic, it could be turned to British advantage. The Irishman, like all his kind, would dance to any piper's tune, just as long as it was sweet enough. For a relatively paltry price, he'd already kidnapped and killed on behalf of those he'd once professed to hate. If circumstances mandated, he could be adequately rewarded to arrange one more fatality.

Pressing a toggle on his desk intercom panel, Wynt connected himself to the office of his deputy, Bernard Goodman.

"Bernard," Wynt greeted his junior's voice. "Something's come up. I'd like you to retrieve the file on our bog-trotting associate, Molloney. Get a hard copy of everything current, and bring it in to me, would you." Releasing the toggle he sank back into his chair, and being a firm believer in using time efficiently, swivelled into position in front of his keyboard. Entering the codes pertaining to a restricted access file named Scarlet # 17, he waited, fingers forming a steeple under his chin. After a few seconds his monitor filled with a menu containing the names of known or suspected Fey sympathisers who had been, or were at present, in potentially sensitive positions. As he already knew, the name Caitlin Ash was

close to the top of the list. Highlighting the name he pressed the enter key and waited while all available data was transferred into memory.

Government Communication Headquarters consisted of four main directorates: Organisation and Establishment, Signals and Intelligence, plus the two operational directorates of SIGNIT - signals and intelligence, and COMSEC - Communications and Security. Caitlin Ash had been attached to SIGINT operations and requirements division, and had dealt in the main with the processing and analysis of data. She had been in an ideal position from which to collate and disseminate Top Secret information relating to the Lough Derg incident. For that very reason her employers had ensured that, aside from very basic facts, she'd been given nothing of consequence. As far as could be determined, her clandestine love affair with Padraig O'Connell - one of those rare individuals that the Fey permitted to come and go at will - had ended several months before she quit her job.

Thinking of O'Connell, Wynt was reminded of a theory Kurt Williamson had proposed as to what - aside from quite understandable greed - made certain human beings pro-Fey. Williamson thought that at various times in the distant past, most recently about 1500 years ago, there had been *interbreeding* between humans and the Sidhe. The species were similar enough for it to be possible, although the success rate was probably very low, and most of the offspring would be sterile. Nevertheless, a tiny proportion would have Fey-like abilities, and be capable of reproduction. Such individuals, he'd speculated, would inevitably become the stuff of legends. If the theory was correct, then by the present age the Fey gene would be extremely diluted, though also widespread. The doctor had gone on to suggest that a minority trait, such as violet eyes or left-handedness might be an indication of distant Fey ancestry. Or, if the gene were not so widespread, the indicator could be over-achievement, particularly among those with a penchant for the unusual; explorers, inventors, entertainers and especially record-breaking athletes. But it was all just talk, at present. No test had yet been devised that could isolate or even verify the existence of a Fey gene. Although, among the Fey who'd been examined, there were a number of intrinsic physiological anomalies. Including unusually high personal magnetic fields, typically around 1/10th as strong as that which surrounded the Earth. Further investigation had been allocated a high priority, because the truth had ramifications on a major concern; other groups of Fey. The Lough Derg group had emerged from under the waters of the lake, possibly from some centuries old subterranean chamber. It would therefore be naive to discount the possibility that there were other undiscovered groups, still sleeping underground. Conceivably on the English mainland.

Attention returning to the screen, Wynt read that there had been no known contact between Ash and O'Connell for over a year, and no disinformation supplied to her had subsequently found its way to unauthorised sources. Until, perhaps, her meeting with the reporter on Leckhampton Hill. The report ended with the speculation that she had either faked her own disappearance, or been abducted by agents of a foreign power.

Hearing a knock on the door, Wynt cleared the screen. He hoped that the analyst had dropped out of sight voluntarily, because the alternative meant that someone who knew of O'Connell's significance had grown tired of waiting.

In Whitehall Central's cluttered Records And Information Department, Michael Eisner was also in the process of accessing a restricted file. Scarlet (UX) # 23 contained the latest updates on suspected Fey activity outside of the Occupied Zone. The most recent intelligence indicated a probable relationship between recent cot-deaths and unexplained incidences of power-failure in Wiltshire and Somerset. In every one of the five cases, power had mysteriously vanished in the street where, next soon after, a baby had been found dead. There was no positive proof, although the sad occurrences were too similar to be merely coincidental. Something evil was going on, and that pointed to the Fey. Possibly the Sailor.

Tapping a plastic key he cleared the screen. Before he could rejoin the three man field team assigned to tracking the recently landed Fey, the Director had another job for him. A pretty stupid sounding job at that, but one which he hadn't been given the option of refusing. In a way, he hoped that the rest of the team didn't find anything, while he was heading-up Holy Ghost. Mainly because Lieutenant Will Houseman's sheer intensity tended to alienate members of the public, who oblivious to what had really happened, found themselves being grilled. Corporal Des Nial was a lot less vehement in his approach, but was prone to believing everything that control - or a superior officer such as Houseman - told him. Even when he knew damn well that is was wrong. Which, ideal as it was from the point of view of military protocol, didn't help when it came to catching Fey agents.

Privately, Eisner harboured reservations concerning the way DIS had reacted to the Fey incursion. Especially, he did not like the virtually Fascist Project Wonderland, with its lack of moral restraint. Whatever the Fey returning meant to the world there *had* to be better, more civilised way of dealing with them. Unfortunately, moral indignation was not an acceptable excuse for bucking official policy. Even if at times that policy made him feel as if he were no better than an ivory poacher.

Index fingers stabbing away at the keyboard, Eisner used the RAID modem to send requests he'd prepared earlier in the day for exhumation orders on two of the dead babies. It wasn't something he'd done lightly, knowing what he was asking of those who'd actually do the lying, while he was away in Ireland. Nor was he insensitive as to the feelings of the bereaved parents. But, it had been reluctantly concluded, specialised autopsy - by Wonderland staff - was the only sure way to disprove Fey involvement.

It was night-time on the edge of the Exclusion Zone, north-east of Limerick, and Molloney was waiting with his new-found companion. Situated in what had been farmland they were crouched behind a tattered, overgrown hedgerow, watching the progress of a slow-moving Armoured Personnel Carrier through a gap in the leaves. When the vehicle had passed by, Molloney redirected the journalist's attention.

"See your man there?" He indicated what appeared to be a thick strip of bright yellow paint, laid on top of the tarmac.

"I see it." Mark glanced at his guide. "Is it what I *think* it is?"

"Sure, that'd depend on what y're t'inkin', now." Molloney quipped. "If y' askin' my advice, I'd tell y' t' mind y' step."

Carried on the night breeze came the sound of a car horn, purposely tooted by Flynn, who'd arranged to break down about a mile on. As the APC roared out of sight in response, Molloney caught hold of the journalist's sleeve and led him onto the road.

"Watch carefully, now." Stooping low he undid the ties of a haversack he'd brought along, and took from it the body of a dead rabbit. Swinging it back he tossed it underhand, aiming so that it travelled perhaps a dozen feet into the air before coming down on top of the yellow strip. As the rabbit landed there was a garish yellow flash, accompanied by a small but fierce explosion which blew its body in all directions. Both men ducked reflexively, but only Molloney was smiling.

"Christ Almighty!" Mark stared into the cloud of yellow-green smoke that was slowly spreading from the blast point. "It's true. They're really using CT."

"Is that right," the Irishman said, quickly dragging his companion back behind the hedge. "I wouldn't know. Around these parts, we call it the Hob nobler."

"You call it the *what?*" Mark frowned.

Standing with his back to an armed guard, Johnny looked through the burning bright bars of the cell which held the female Sidhe. Eyes closed in some parody of sleep, she was sitting on the bunk, her back not quite touching the iron-filled wall. Either she was drugged, hypnotised or feigning her condition so perfectly that he couldn't tell the difference. Whichever, he was grateful to be spared the mesmeric power of her eyes.

The director, seemingly anxious to mollify him, had supplied a credit card-sized electronic pass, which allowed strictly limited freedom of movement within Whitehall Central. Naturally, the areas the card permitted him to visit did not include Wonderland's labs, the armoury, or anywhere useful. While testing his access limitations he'd found himself at the entrance to the holding cells. Which, in retrospect, was probably somewhere he'd been intended to go.

Earlier in the day, Kurt Williamson - Whitehall Central's answer to Josef Mengele - had ensured a sleepless night by letting slip the coming day's schedule. At nine AM, they were to begin the attempt to restore his memories of the Occupied Zone. Typically of those who weren't putting themselves at risk, the bastard was full of confidence. The procedure, he'd claimed, was relatively simple. There would be no anaesthetic and no loss of consciousness. The attempt would take place in a shielded area known as the Cage. Saille was to be brought in, under hypnotic control, after which Dr Lynch would initiate the use of Sidhe magic to break down the artificial barriers thought to have been imposed inside his mind.

"Just like that," Johnny mouthed to himself, thinking of the late great Tommy Cooper's innocent buffoonery.

In many ways he wanted to remember, wanted back that portion of his life which had for so long been shut away. But he was also fearful of what he might discover. To quote the old adage, what he didn't know couldn't hurt him. At least not any more than it already had. Sudden, full knowledge might bring on an attack. Or worse still, include details useful to the director's plan to send him back over the border. In all the time that had passed since the Fey

had returned, he was still the only member of the military to have escaped from the heart of the zone. As far as he'd been told, everyone else who'd been sent on a deep penetration mission had failed even to report, let alone return. The director was determined to discover why. Pretending to study the entranced Fey, Johnny considered taking violent action. If he could stun the guard, he might gain enough time to walk through the laser-bars and snap Saille's neck. The thought was tempting, but not tempting enough. Because he knew that, even if he pulled it off, the bitch might not die, and if she did, Williamson had another undamaged Sidhe in reserve. With the possible exception suicide, there was no way out, yet. Besides which, he wasn't the suicidal type, and the spooks knew it.

Deep in thought, Johnny headed for his bunk. As his old commander had told him, few situations were ever completely hopeless. What he had to do was tough it out, until the way to win free showed itself. The one thing in his favour, if memories really did return, was that they'd be his alone. *If* he could convince the director that he'd decided to co-operate, he'd have an advantage. It was a dangerous game, but the best choice presently available.

Dying wasn't a bit like he'd thought it would be. Probably because the marvellous tune played by the Sidhe *pandeus* had not, after all, been intended to end his life. At the time, he'd been so certain that he was on his way to a meeting with Saint Peter. Even after they'd woken him, it had taken some time before he was able to fully comprehend the fantastic nature of his true situation. Now flanked by two other riders, and so in no danger of falling, he sat astride a magnificent *garron*, on the way to Pollagoona Mountain. The flesh he now wore was very much alive, he could feel the life rushing through its veins, but was otherwise paralysed from the nose down. Unable to move voluntarily, he was by grace of Sidhe magic, permitted to use the eyes.

Blinking rapidly, Pdraig O'Connell viewed nature's splendour with faerie sight, drinking in its myriad beauties like an old man at the fountain of youth. There was so much else to see, so many things he'd never imagined, some in colours he had no name for. Everything seemed connected and in some cases covered, by an impossibly intricate network of gossamer strands; living energy that sparkled with a rainbow of muted colours. Like morning dew on spider-silk. When broken by the *garron's* passage, the web of life seemed to reweave itself almost immediately, returning in moments to what it had been. Pdraig had the impression of an enormous, incredible patchwork, which like the human body, *knew* where everything should be right down to the smallest cell. The Sidhe themselves, whenever they came into his line of sight, were literally alight with energy. Each one wore a different pattern of power, like a fingerprint, except that it seemed to cover their whole bodies, and radiated out for a short distance. When two of them conversed, tendrils of living energy bridged the gap in addition to words, communicating something else?

There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but at present no way of articulating them. Dying was not at all like he'd imagined, and it had its frustrations. Though, to be sure, it also had its compensations.



Cait Sith © Martin Chaplin & Adam Webb

Chapter Five

Cait Sith

The gypsies made camp juts outside Altarnun, a small village situated right on the western edge of Bodmin Moor. Midar had waited until he was the last awake, then set out on foot, leaving the crow to watch over his spell-shrouded charges. It was a cloudless summer night with light from the stars and three-quarter moon illuminating the granite-littered hills. Flecked with pink-purple foxgloves, and the white flowers of yarrow, low hedgerows formed straight and twisting lines across green, gently rolling land. It was to the hedges, and the small wooded groves, that Midar gave most attention. The dark shadows were a natural place for the *Cait Sith* to hide. When the last age had come to its close, certain creatures had not slept. Among their number were ferocious predators that preyed mostly on small creatures, but were able at need to bring down something as large as a sheep, or a human. Men of the present age had mistaken them for escaped circus animals, and given them names such as the Exmoor Panther.

Free now of iron's taint, and not far from the standing stones known as the Hurlers, his senses were razor-edged. Though spotting the animal would still be no easy task, due to its origins and perfect natural camouflage. About a mile from camp he found a flat-topped rock and sat down, confident that the cat would not be able to resist his solitary presence. Shedding his glamour disguise as a man might shed his coat, he revealed himself for what he was; a Fallen of the Sixth Rank, once named *Exsusiai*, now and forever more a Lord of the *Daoine Sidhe*. His true face was pale-skinned and angular, free of age and blemish. Spider web fine laces of burnished copper-coloured hair fell to shoulder length, and were swept back clear of his face and forehead. Large grey eyes reflected the sad glow of the moon, their natural slant suggesting cruelty. It was a face which - in another lifetime - had given rise to no legendary tales of daemonic birth.

The creature had been there for several moments before Midar registered its presence. He smiled, appreciating the fact that he'd been surprised. No beast of man could have gotten so close without him noticing its approach. Inclining his head a fraction he looked into what had been empty space, and saw for the first time in almost 1500 years, one of the Yldra's hunting cats. Unafraid, widely-slanted orange eyes looked back. The *Cait Sith* was closest to an adult lynx in size and had a similar-shaped head, with the characteristic tufts of hair at the points of its ears. But its coat was altogether different, being thicker and longer, yet light as strands of silk. As he watched Midar saw the fur ripple in the slight breeze, making the cat's outlines momentarily indistinct, and it's build difficult to judge. The long, feather-like coat formed a mottled grey cloak, exactly matching the colours of Bodmin Moor's granite and slate. Except for around the creature's eyes, mouth and the tip of its tail, where the fur turned silvery-white. Broad paws projected through the shifting mantle, showing heavy, retractile claws, which sheathed and unsheathed like breathing as it watched. This was a creature few men had seen clearly, and none could ever begin to tame.

Moving very slowly Midar held out one long-fingered hand, crooning as he did so in the old tongue. "*Fias seanachar bua. Alleth, eisu Cait Sith. Bua, bua.*"

When the cat moved, it was swiftly and in complete silence. Seemingly light as leaves in the wind it sprang from its crouched position, coat momentarily flattening, and landed inches from the Sidhe's feet. Open jaws displayed a double row of long, sharp-pointed teeth; ivory-white daggers in the starlight.

Bending forward Midar scratched between the cats' ears, and was rewarded with a purr of acceptance which sounded like a cross between a low growl and a dry, human-throated chuckle of amusement. Back in Erin, there were surviving descendants of the creatures the Sidhe had left behind, but they were few and all aquatic. Creatures made by the Fallen bred slowly, and some such as the spiral-horned *garron*, had been lost to time's rope. That the cats still hunted would be welcome news in the halls of Pollagoona Mountain. For where there was one *Cait Sith*, there would be others that had learned to live in mankind's filth-covered lands. Squatting down low Midar whispered to the cat, testing its ability to understand. A long drawn-out purr told him that the breed had lost none of its intelligence. Naming it *Killmoulis*, after a legend twisted by man, he told it of the Sidhe's awakening, and of the role its kind could play in what was yet to come. Soft as a wraith the cat turned and sprinted away across the hills, bearing a message for those others who watched, still and unseen.

Alone once more, Midar threw back his head and laughed, his joy, if defined in human terms, sounding like a product of insanity.

Johnny Halcombe wasn't wearing a watch, but knew that it was almost time. The three-quarters of an hour since waking had at first passed slowly, then quickened as his unwanted appointment drew closer. In what he guessed was some sort effort at making him feel part of the team, the director was playing the genial host, personally conducting a tour of Whitehall Central's restricted access areas. Presently, they were in a small rifle range, where the host without the most had just finished explaining the firing mechanism of the Armitage-Shaw Viper Mk2; a new, compact, anti-Fey weapon that looked rather like an expensive cigar case.

Accepting an offer to try the weapon, Johnny took aim as instructed and thumbed the cylinder's recessed trigger bar. The only indications that a needle had been fired were a barely noticeable recoil and a sharp hiss of compressed air. Lowering the tube Johnny looked through the range's target finder and discovered that his shot had just managed to hit the life-size dummy's neck, a couple of inches below its jawbone on the right hand side. Coming from one of the bags of dye sealed inside the target, a slowly spreading blue stain marked the spot precisely.

"Notice how small the hole is." Wynt instructed. "It would be the same if you'd hit actual Fey flesh. That's one of the big advantages with en-guns; very little in the way of hydrostatic shock, by comparison with bullets."

"If the cells don't rupture, what does the damage?" The soldier thought aloud. "Something chemical, right?"

"Very good, Halcombe." The director offered a patronising smile. "Of course, the

basic idea of a needle gun is not new. As I'm sure you are aware, the principles have existed for many years. What we've done is adapt them to our specialised requirements." He indicated an exploded-view diagram of the weapon displayed on the wall behind him. "The Viper mark two is self-loading, has a calibre of 1.5 millimetres, and is effective up too one-hundred and twenty feet."

"That's almost spitting distance."

"Ah, yes, I must agree that the range is rather limited at present. But let's not take a negative stance. Although a relatively close-quarters weapon, the Viper mark two is ideal for use in covert operations."

"How many shots?" Johnny questioned, thinking of the Fey he'd like to test it on.

"Twenty, loaded from an internal magazine. Single-round fire on these hand-held versions, fully automatic where their big brothers are concerned. Ammunition is a forty millimetre long steel needle, solid or hollow-tipped."

"Hold it just a minute," Johnny held up his empty hand to interrupt. "I'm missing something here. Are you telling me that a tiny piece of steel, and whatever gubbins is on - or in - its tip, can do what bullets can't?"

"In essence, yes." Wynt nodded. "I told you that we'd learned a great deal. Believe you me, Halcombe, if the occupation were only now beginning, the Fey wouldn't stand a chance. As I'm sure Williamson made clear, Project Wonderland is an intensive, ongoing study into every potentially useful aspect of Fey physiology."

"Just Lesser Fey?"

"Yes," the director frowned, spotting the soldier's inference. "But it's extremely unlikely that physiology is radically different among the High Fey. As with our own peasant stock and aristocracy, they are different, but of the same *species*. They're still Fey."

"Are they now," Johnny tossed in a mental spanner. "I mean, I'd like you be sure, sir." He raised his voice, "Because it's blokes like me whose *arses* are on the line if you're wrong! Maybe the powers of the High Fey are due to some actual physical difference."

"That is not the case."

"You're certain, are you?"

"Absolutely." The director reasserted himself. Confidently now he proclaimed, "We are sure of our facts, Halcombe. You'll simply have to accept that."

"It's that bitch in the cells, isn't it." Johnny shook his head in exasperation. "She told you they're all the same, and you believed her! Listen. You can't trust what she says. I'm telling you. Lying is like an art form to the Sidhe."

"Our sources of our information are no concern of yours." Wynt snapped. Taking the en-gun from the soldier's palm he held it up, "*This* is what you should be thinking about." Tone softening very slightly, he continued, "I understand that it isn't easy for you, especially when new information contradicts your experiences. But you must try to assimilate it. Irrespective of what you think of me, surely you don't think there's any advantage in setting you up for a fall. Why would I go to the trouble. It doesn't make sense. Believe me, everything is being geared toward the successful completion of Operation Mordor."

"Which is?" Johnny leapt in. "I mean, you haven't even told me what the hell it is

you want me to do."

"You are to be a messenger." The revelation was as unexpected as it was sudden. "We intend to propose a meeting, between selected representatives of the human race and the Fey hierarchy, whoever they may be."

"Very matey," Johnny scoffed. "So what happens if they tell you to stuff it. Apart from me not collecting my service pension, that is."

"We're offering an olive branch." Symbolically, Wynt held up the Viper. "It can easily be turned into a sharp stick. The Fey will surely appreciate that."

"Don't count on it." Johnny muttered under his breath.

A misty blur to human eyes, and radar invisible, the Sidhe craft sailed smoothly into the cove at just after midnight. There to meet it, coincidentally less than a mile from a place named Merlin's Cave, was the Sidhe who'd once owned that name. Shingles crunched beneath the hull as the vessel beached, stopping without any effort or action from those aboard, and holding its position despite the insistent push and pull of the turning tide.

The *pandeus* did not leave his place immediately. Standing tall in the prow he raised translucent green soapstone pipes to his lips and blew, beginning an ancient Sidhe composition of arrival and departure, as befitted the occasion. The two who were his audience recognised the melody instantly, though only Midar knew its origin. Padraig O'Connell, had he been truly present, would have named it Londonderry Air, or perhaps Danny Boy.

Tears were rolling freely down Midar's cheeks by the time the player ended his performance and jumped lightly to the shore, closely followed by his companion. The three Sidhe embraced, holding tightly as they buried their faces in each other's unbound hair. For long moments there was only the sound of ocean waves, breaking somewhere along the dark coast before flooding into the sheltered cove, where they ruffled through the shingles like aqua fingers.

"The Bloodsong's call is strong." Aillen Midhna indicated the five dark sacks laid out side by side on the beach. "Come, let us dispatch them to the *bansidhes* care." He spoke informally, knowing that Midar abhorred needless ceremony.

"To their destiny, and ours" The Sidhe lord responded, bending to the task. "And when the waves have them, there is much of which we three must speak." Gaze lingering briefly on the human face he smiled knowingly.

"To destiny," Aillen agreed, voice cheerful, although his heart was heavy with the tidings he bore.

The three worked quickly, loading the human cargo onto the open deck, where magic would hold them fast. High above the scene a crow and a nightingale kept watch, flying in opposite and overlapping circles. When the last of the children were safely aboard, Midar touched his forehead to a particular spot on the smooth bow, and whispered a word of power in the old tongue. Then, standing straight, he pushed lightly with the fingers of one hand, starting the craft on its return journey. In respectful silence the three watched until it was no more than a white dot, bobbing on the crest of the farthest wave.

"There is a *lios*," Midar said. "Close by."

Set near to the edge of a cliff, and open to the elements, the building had once been part of a small fort. Hardly more than a watchtower. But to the Sidhe it was a place where, enclosed by old stone, they could feel comfortable. Midar sat cross-legged on a patch of grass and made a gesture which invited his companions to join him.

"How goes it in the halls of Pollagoona?"

"Well." The Passenger answered in a voice that did not belong to the body he wore. "The *bansidhe* weave their lullaby for the Bloodsong's bearers. Even the Liannan is showing interest." He smiled sheepishly at his use of the Faerie Queen's title, which humans thought to be her name. "So one child born of man may yet become save-son to the Royal line."

"Tis possible," Midar smiled wickedly. "Though unlikely for one who heads the Circle."

"You have the right of it," Aillen nodded agreement. "That human blood cross the King's line, he cannot help. Tis our way." The musician's hand flicked out toward the stars. "Time allows no other. Yet he would not be so wise as to embrace one that weight of years alone may crush."

"Far better to sire his own." Midar's eyes twinkled. "And if he wishes it not, gladly would I mount his daughter-wife."

"In your rightful turn, lord." The *pandeus* chastised playfully. "Many seek the Liannan's favour," he glanced sideways at the human.

"And many receive it!" Midar roared with laughter. "Though not all, I see." In response the Passenger give a slight nod.

"Some who seek find another fate." Aillen admitted. When he spoke again it was in a mournful voice, low as Winter wind. "Lord, I am the bearer of ill tidings." He met Midar's questioning gaze head-on. "Cold iron, brought into our lands by a traitorous man, had been used against our kin. Five are rebirthed, though Thousand-eyes child, and her one other, were taken prisoner."

"To what place were they taken?" The Sidhe lord demanded.

"London." Again the strange voice issued from Padraig O'Connell's mouth. "The Dreaming showed them. They are in a deep, lifeless place. Bound by *technology*, and the poison metal."

"The two shall endure." Midar spoke assuredly. "They shall place themselves apart from the flesh they wear."

Eyes expressing infinite sorrow Aillen Midhna shook his head. "No." The word carried the power of a death-sentence. "Thousand-Eyes saw that daughter is broken, and answers true. Though she would resist, many *names* spill from her lips." He looked down in shame and despondency. "He sees his own ending, and hers."

When Midar spoke again his words made the air around him tremble. "Mankind has learned well, and seeks yet more. Our kin's defilement will surely not satiate their appetite." Voice like suppressed thunder, rolling from deep inside his throat, he added. "We shall teach them that there is a price to be paid." Spawned from the wild magic at the heart of his power the threat was a thing to be feared.

"They will expect us." The Passenger said. "*Technology*, it seems, has a strength to rival the magic we command."

"No doubt, in its proper place." Midar replied, his eyes alight with feral anger. "There are other places where it is not the law. In those place, at a time of our choosing, we shall be victorious." A moment later the look vanished, and as if a storm cloud had passed before the face of the sun, his alabaster features radiated genuine happiness.

The nightingale landed on its master's shoulder and chirped softly into his ear, conveying a melodious message. Aillen nodded understanding, and leaning toward the lord, spoke in a low, conspiratorial tone.

"The grey lady tells of a lone man, approaching from the south."

"The south," Midar inclined his head to one side. "Then he may be the one I chose to bring me here. One who seems to have become curious."

"Or foolish." The musician gave a nasty smile. "Shall your servant entertain us?"

In reply, Midar shimmered and changed, using the glamour to reassume the appearance of Tad the Tinker. Rising with effortless grace, he set out to intercept the traveller, his motion a perfect imitation of the heavy-footed way he'd seen Tad walk. In his wake, the *pandeus's* laughter echoed between what remained of the stone walls.

When he returned, still wearing the borrowed image, Midar was followed by a wide-eyed young man. Though only one knew it, both were now actors in a play that had been performed many times before, marking the lives of unwitting men. In the centre of the ruins, where just a short time before his companion's had been seated, Midar signalled the Gypsy to stop.

"White Lady, are you here." He called softly, hands cupped in front of his mouth. "I bring a man who would gaze upon your beauty." Deliberately he paused, building the tension. "White Lady, will you show yourself."

Stepping soundlessly from behind a half-collapsed wall a vision of feminine perfection came gliding toward the watchers. One smiled secretively, the other stood open-mouthed, unwilling or unable to look away. As if weighing nothing at all, the White lady danced around them, spinning and pirouetting to a tune which only she could hear.

"Is she not all that I claimed?" Midar whispered in mock wonderment.

"And more, sir." The young man gasped. "So much more." reaching out involuntarily, he felt the brush of air over the tips of his fingers as it was disturbed by the vision's passing. To his heightened sense it tingled like a wind-blown kiss. "She's so beautiful. So perfect. The prettiest thing I ever saw," he babbled.

"Or ever will see." Midar said knowledgeably. "If luck is with you, lad, the lady may grant some small favour," he encouraged, coaxing out the response he sought. "Perhaps if you were to show proper reverence."

"Oh, yeah, right." In a moment the Gypsy was down on his knees, hands clasped together in blasphemous prayer, eyes tracking the bedazzling manifestation that he was ill equipped to recognise as a trick of Sidhe glamour.

Whirling and leaping the White Lady drew ever closer to the supplicant, her flimsy white gown offering him tantalising glimpses of milk-white thigh and breast. Long hair, the

colour of fresh snow, trailed in her wake, its strands briefly caressing the keeling man whenever her dance brought her past his position.

The Gypsy became aware of an uncomfortable tightness in his jeans. That, and a heartfelt longing so deep it made him tremble. Desire raged inside him, but he was afraid that if he dared to reach out, or even speak, the Lady would vanish. He knew then that, mad as it seemed, he'd fallen in love. The White Lady *was* love. As if hearing the thought the Lady ended her dance and came to halt right in front of him. His heart skipped a beat, and when the Lady smiled, it began pounding like it was trying to burst free of his chest.

Floating forward the White Lady indicated by a gesture that the human should rise. When their faces were level she reached out and pulled him into her embrace, delicate arms folding around him like the petals of a flower. Kissing him with exquisite tenderness she slid a cool tongue sensuously between his parted lips, enticing and inviting. For a heartbeat ice met fire, and was melted. The Gypsy's lower body jerked involuntarily against her as he was gripped by powerful, convulsive spasms of orgasmic release.

"Oh, Lady, Lady." The young man gasped as semen flooded his underwear. Opening dreamy eyes he gazed in adoration at the vision which held him, and in an instant found his ecstatic joy turned horribly sour. The White Lady was gone and in her place was another of the Fey, but this one was most definitely a *male*!

Aillen Midhna released his hold, allowing the revolted human to stagger away. As the Gypsy emptied his stomach both Sidhe laughed like lunatics, delighted that their age-old game could still mislead new fools.

Smiling sagely the Passenger came out of hiding. "What you see is rarely what you find." He shouted merrily after the fleeing youth. "Remember that, when next you go searching in the dark for a glimpse of the *Daoine Sidhe*."

Staring hard at the green screen display, Bernard Goodman tried once again to make sense of the information it displayed. Either it was significant in a way that GCHQ and DIS analysts were yet to perceive, or part of some well orchestrated grand ruse. Slightly over three-hundred and fifty Gypsies, mostly in small family groups, had been observed adjacent to, or not far from thirteen ancient Neolithic sites. Mostly in the south-west of the country. All were, apparently, peaceful and complying to the letter with the terms of the Indigenous Nomads Act, so there was little that could be done apart from keeping them under surveillance. It was as if they were waiting for something, although no unlawful activity had been detected. But their presence *was* suspicious.

There was, however, one rather obvious fact where seven of the sites were concerned. Tapping in the appropriate code, he brought up a graphic display. It was an overlaid map which showed a virtually straight line, leading from St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall through five other sites to the Avebury Circle in Wiltshire. As if someone were pointing the way to or from one or the other site. The fact had been a little too obvious for the analysts to take seriously. Thus far the most widely held theory seemed to be that the Gypsies were deliberately attempting to make their actions seem significant, in an effort to tie up manpower, probably as a protest against the Act. Which, if true, was a waste of effort.

Surveillance on some of the larger sites was constant, due to their past significance. A horde of Fey sleeping somewhere under the English countryside might be no more than an unpleasant flight of fancy, but the possibility could not be ignored. Logic dictated that if the Irish Sidhe were real, then other creatures of supernatural myth also had some basis in reality. Perhaps the standing stones had been used by ancient Britons as markers, to identify places once used by those others.

Deep in concentration, Goodman stroked his lower lip between forefinger and thumb. A detailed survey of every site could have shown where the English Fey were *not*, but such a massive undertaking was impractical. Drilling or full scale excavation would produce questions that could not, sensibly, be answered. Ground-level thermal imaging, satellite-based x-ray photography and spectroscopic analysis had all been tried, but revealed nothing of significance. Of course, such methods were useless over sites that had been swallowed beneath the urban sprawl. But the biggest fear was the possible existence of a once significant site which, over the centuries, had slipped from living memory. The odds against detecting a place where the marker stones had been covered or removed altogether, were astronomical. If English Fey proved to be more than imaginary, they'd almost certainly share some of the more unpleasant characteristics of their Irish cousins. They would be incredibly long-lived, require no sleep, and command forces which science could barely detect, let alone reproduce. A wise man would not choose to make enemies of such creatures.

Looking again at the revised list, Goodman considered the one other established fact. The straight line passed through no less than nine churches named after St. Michael, all of which had been built over places once associated with dragon legends. And the word dragon, like demon or serpent, was known to be an early Christian way of referring to the Fey. Privately, Goodman feared that the dragon's rise was imminent. If it did happen, official MoD policy would need to be altered, and swiftly. The emergence of hundreds of Fey on the mainland would blow the lid off the whole business, leading to God alone knew what. As a political enemy, they would be easily capable of making human terrorism seem like child's play. Certainly, concessions would have to be made, accommodation reached, whether the director agreed or not. Which, in part, was why he'd countenanced taking the former analyst Caitlin Ash into protective custody. The Network would prevent others using her to further merely national interests.

The computer screen's border began to flash red an instant before digitally simulated klaxons announced a breach of internal security. In the top left-hand corner of the monitor a message box named the one place where such a breach was supposedly impossible.

Despite the repeated assurances that Saille was firmly under control, Johnny could not bring himself to look into the drowning-pool eyes as he entered the cage. Sitting as he'd been directed to in what looked like a converted dentist's chair, he allowed nylon restraints to be fitted around his ankles and wrists.

"Just a precaution, Sergeant. It's for your own protection."

"Bullshit." Johnny glared at the individual he'd secretly named Deputy Doc. "You're doing it 'cause you don't really know what's going to happen. Not for sure, right?" An

uneasy silence confirmed the supposition.

"Try to relax." Lynch said, using the nearest thing he had to a bedside manner. "Nobody's going to hurt you in here, especially not her," he nodded at Saille.

Working quickly the Assistant Head of department attached sensors to both patients foreheads and wrists, then flicked a series of switches to generate test patterns on the bank of monitoring equipment stationed between Fey and human. Everything looked correct, but as the Sergeant had guessed, the process was still too new for absolute certainty. Tampering with a mind sealed by unknown methods had never been tried before, although theoretically, in this particular case, required nothing more than the right command. Thanks to the chemical and hypnotic treatments that had been administered, it was now possible to access Saille's intrinsic abilities and instinctive use of the scientifically non-existent, though indisputably real, force of magic. However, there was no user manual, and a bad mistake might damage either or both of the subjects. The chances of such an occurrence had been minimised, but could not be eliminated altogether. Complete safety meant stagnation.

Adjusting the ear-piece which allowed him to hear comments from control room, Lynch felt a thrill of anticipation. He turned to face Saille and, with a quick glance up at the monitor camera through which doctor Williamson and the director were watching, he spoke the hypnotically embedded trigger-word.

"Morpheus." As expected Saille's eyes blinked shut and her blank, emotionless expression altered to one of comfort. "I am the River," Lynch continued. "What else am I, Saille?"

"The voice of flowing water."

"And the water is pure." The opening sequence was completed. "Halcombe is here, Saille. Halcombe, friend of the River. But he is not whole." Lynch crouched down, placing his lips only inches from the Sidhe's ear. "He needs your help. Will you help him, Saille?"

"Yes." The word was spoken longingly, as if in gratitude at being allowed to perform a special, perhaps personal service.

"That's very good," Lynch said, flushing with unexpected embarrassment. Taking a moment to regain his composure he covered by checking the machinery's readings. Saille's tone had been perversely seductive, like a surrender to carnal passion. "In a few moments I'm going to begin counting downward from ten. When I get to zero, I want you to open your eyes and look at Halcombe. Look at him carefully, with *all* of your senses. Something binds his memory, Saille. Can you tell the River what it is."

"Yes." The Sidhe responded enthusiastically.

Giving a hand signal Lynch told those in the control booth to commence raising the magic-blocking iron panels. Attention focused on the waiting Sidhe, he began his countdown, timing it so that he ended as the last panel disappeared into the ceiling. Saille's eyes flickered open, wide and bright with knowledge.

"There are many patterns," she announced, gaze roaming over Johnny Halcombe's tense body. "Deeply is the weave upon him."

"The weave?" Lynch questioned. "Would this be the High Magic you're talking about?"

"It is so," she nodded, eyes locking with those of the soldier.

Lynch checked his human subject and noted a rise in pulse rate and skin temperature, but nothing to cause alarm. Scared, even if he wouldn't admit it, Sergeant Halcombe was quite literally sweating it out.

"Describe this weave, Saille. Tell the River all you can"

"Deep, strong, it is bright magic." The briefest trace of a smile flickered across her lips. "High Magic ties him, but not just his memories."

"The River doesn't understand," Lynch fished for more detail. Eyes darting to the monitors he saw that the Sidhe's magnetic field readings were fluctuating wildly. But that was only to be expected. "What else does the weave bind?"

"Power." The answer was almost a shout.

"Assert control, Lynch." Kurt Williamson's voice issued from the ear-piece.

"Alright, Saille." The scientist spoke sternly. "Stay calm, everything is alright." Sensing that he'd reached the crux of the matter he said, "Now, in your own time, tell the River what about this power that you see. Define it."

The Sidhe did not answer straight away. She frowned, as if trying to choose the correct human term, then decision made, said, "It is knowledge."

The definition made sense, when measured against the known facts. Shortly before, or perhaps during Sergeant Halcombe's escape, the Sidhe had used their powers to obscure selective portions of his memory. According to reports compiled since his return to England, it was suspected that he'd witnessed something which, if properly understood, might be used to the detriment of the Fey. Saille's revelation went some way to confirming the theory.

"If the River asked, could you untie the weave," He began hesitantly, aware of how close he might be to achieving the desired result. But also of how carefully he had to phrase any request. One slip of the tongue, and the soldier's secrets might be gone. "Without harming Halcombe in any way, or altering whatever it is the weave prevents him from remembering?"

The Sidhe smiled inside. This was the opportunity she had been waiting for, the chance to strike back through the bars placed around her mind. "Yes," she answered contritely, hoping that the human would named himself the River, would not realise his error. "If the River wishes it to be so. Though," she paused. "Not by will alone."

"Touch," Lynch said excitedly. "You need to touch him, physically, in order to do as the River has asked?" Saille nodded once. "And if the River allows this, you can undo that which stops Halcombe remembering?" Another compliant nod. Lynch glanced up at the monitoring camera, giving his superiors the opportunity to veto. Their silence made up his mind. "Very well, Saille," he said, untying the nylon restraints which bound her to the chair. Carefully, he detached the sensor pads from the Sidhe's brow and folded their wires out of the way. Doing so meant that he was unable to see any changes as they occurred, but events were also being recorded remote sensors, so he'd have the opportunity to study it later. Nothing would be missed. Taking a deep breath he spoke the words of command, "Saille. The River asks that you untie the weave."

Saille nodded once more. Iron was close by, though not close enough to prevent what

was to come. Shut away from the greater part of herself, denied freedom of will, she could initiate no voluntary act of magic. But the words of he who named himself the River were law, and had to be obeyed. She knew it, though was not able to comprehend why. *Technology*, the magic of mankind, she guessed. The River had commanded that she untie her father's weave, which unlike the making, was an easy thing. But the River had not thought to question its precise nature, and so had no idea of the force contained by a weave of one who ranked in power with those who sat the Circle. Nor did he understand anything of the danger posed by unbinding the weave without constraint or channel. Had he but asked, she would have been compelled to tell him the truth. As it was he had not asked, and by that small mistake had enabled his own ruin.

Unwilling to watch what he knew he must endure, Johnny had his eyes screwed tightly shut. There was a tingling warmth, radiating from the Sidhe's fingertips as she brushed them lightly over his face and hair. It felt as if she were deliberately trying to turn him on, which was a possibility. The Fey loved playing mind-games of that sort. Sidhe touch, like everything else about them, was greater than human, and more than human senses were intended to cope with. Erect in moments, despite his best efforts, he was ashamed at his lack of control. The only thing preventing him from shouting for Deputy Doc to get the bitch away from him, was the certain knowledge that if he didn't get it over with this time, the Director would insist he tried again later.

"Are you getting anything yet?" Lynch addressed the overhead pick-ups.

"*We have an increase in electromagnetic activity.*" Kurt Williamson's voice came through the ear-piece. "*Right across....*" The rest was swamped by a burst of static.

"Say again." Lynch made a circle in the air with his index finger. "There was some sort of interference."

".....*wave.*" This time the message sounded more urgent, but was still impossible to decipher.

"Sorry. I didn't get that either, sir." Lynch said, irritated to have his great moment interrupted by static break-up. "Say again."

"...ANGER...OUT, LYNCH. NOW!" Suddenly, the director's voice came full blast over speakers concealed in the ceiling. "THE FREQUEN... IS RISING..... CROWAVES. DANGER GET....."

Releasing the last of the weave's ties, Saille watched it whirl and leap into half-life. Twisting like a butterfly of colourless flame the energy danced in the air above Halcombe, instinctively seeking what it needed. Quickly it found the only other human body close enough to reach during its transient, frantic life span. Impelled, like a salmon swimming against the current, the energy sang through the entire electromagnetic spectrum, skipping from infra-red into and out of the visible colours in a literal flash. Achieving the final frequency of microwaves, it ended the dance with an inertialess impact, and ecstatically, joined with the new host.

Lynch saw the emergency screens slamming down, and immediately understood that, even if his reaction time were faster than an Olympic athlete, he wouldn't be fast enough. Something had gone badly wrong, and now he was trapped. Turning, he saw an odd, Mona

Lisa smile on Saille's face, and a split-second later, experienced a jagged slash of indescribable pain from the base of his spine. His mouth opened wide in preparation for an agonised scream, but no sound emerged. Microwave energy had by then already discharged itself throughout his central nervous system, incinerating his spinal cord, brain-stem and the greater part of his cerebellum. Toppling over like a tree that had been struck by lightning, the branches of his arms caught Saille's empty chair and pitched it into the stack of delicate electronic equipment. Blue sparks spat from the assembly, precipitating a small cloud of smoke, tainted with the acrid smell of melting plastic.

"MORPHEUS!" Kurt Williamson's frantic voice bellowed from the speakers. "MORPHEUS!" In the background emergency alarms were sounding.

Eyes wide now, Johnny looked around in apprehension. Whatever had happened it'd been quick as the Devil. Deputy Doc was down, and not breathing. But, weirdly, the Fey bitch was standing calmly next to his body, seemingly out on her feet. Before there was time to worry about the fact that he was still bound, the door burst open and four armed guards rushed inside. Taking up positions two of them aimed en-guns at the near comatose Sidhe. The epitome of efficiency, the other pair righted the fallen chair, strapped the unresisting prisoner into it, and wheeled her out.

"Oi! What about me?" Johnny protested, to no avail.

Approximately two minutes later, when the cage had been swept by all available means and declared safe to enter, Kurt Williamson steeped through the door. He moved cautiously, glancing around as if half expecting to be ambushed by a hidden bogeyman. Side-stepping the puddle of steaming urine which was expanding around his deceased colleague's body, he unbuckled the soldier's restraints, checking as he did so for obvious signs of damage.

"Are you hurt?" He asked, tone professionally indifferent.

"Not as far as I know," Johnny responded shakily. "Which is more than I can say for your mate. Christ on a bike! What happened?" Before the doctor could begin to reply Johnny held up a hand. "Hang on a mo," he paused, incredulity and astonishment shaping his features. Images and words and sounds and smells came tumbling helter skelter through his conscious mind. He gasped in shock, and trying to assert control over the flow, succeeded only in bringing it into sharper focus. Although not painful, the effect of visualising so much information in such a short time was disorienting. When the cascade finally stopped, Johnny felt as if he'd just stepped off the world's fastest roller-coaster ride.

Hands gripping the chair's padded armrests, he took a deep breath and looked up at Kurt Williamson. "This is crazy, I don't understand it all. Not yet. But it worked, somehow. *I remember*, I remember the bloody lot!"

Of the near six-hundred megalithic sites remaining in Britain the Hurlers on Bodmin Moor were among the most impressive. The standing stones of the present age were what remained of three great circles, varying from about one hundred to one hundred and forty feet in diameter. Local tradition held that they had once been people, turned to stone for dancing or gaming on the Sabbath. The official view attributed them to the Bronze Age, and stated that their purpose had probably been religious or astrological. Whichever their true origin was,

DIS control regarded the Hurler's as important enough to warrant 24 hour surveillance.

Undercover of camouflage netting, Lieutenants Bill Gilbert and Jonathon Lowe of Service Intelligence were nearing the end of their shift. Lowe stared through his night-vision binoculars, scanning over the human-sized stones to the campsite. Approximately two miles away from the hide, on the outskirts of Altarnun, was a group of seventeen Gypsies. So far they'd been no trouble, and shown no interest at all in the Hurlers. So it came as something of a surprise to the officer when he spotted figures skulking over the crest of a hill.

"Targets." He said quietly. "A thousand yards south-east. I see five," he paused to make another sweep of the area. "Wait, there's more of them. Make it twelve adults, four females. They appear to be unarmed, and are heading toward the largest circle."

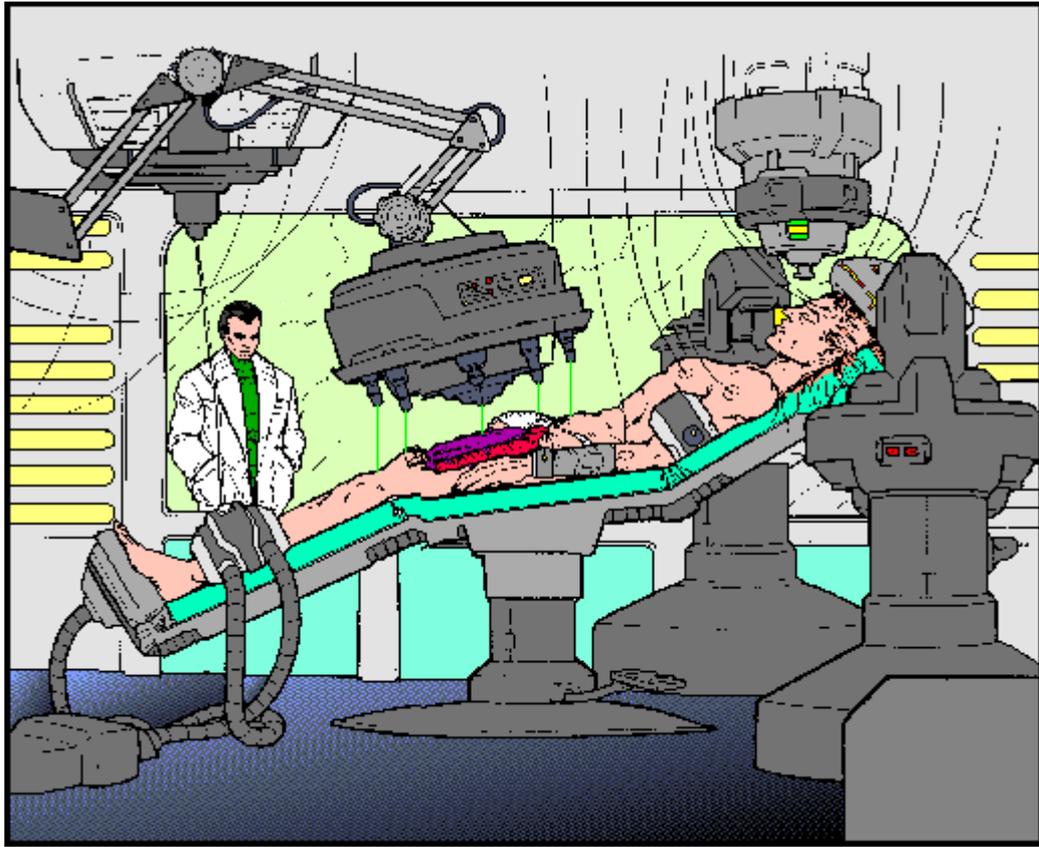
Like an echo, Gilbert repeated the words into a field radio, relaying the details back to North Hill base. "Something else?" He asked when the other man fell silent.

"Not sure." Lowe hesitated. "There might be something else with them." Taking a moment to rub his eyes, he looked again. "A dog, I think. Funny looking thing. Some sort of mongrel, I suppose. It looks a bit like an Afghan Hound, but with shorter legs."

"Let me take a look," Gilbert nudged his way behind the tripod-mounted binoculars. Having been the butt of Lowe's odd sense of humour on previous occasions there was no way he was going to report a *short-legged Afghan* until he'd seen it for himself. Besides which, the Gypos weren't supposed to have any pets of that description.

"Go right ahead." Lowe said indignantly.

"The INA file," Gilbert flapped a hand in the general direction of a plastic-covered document wallet containing data on those camped nearby. "Our nomadic friends aren't supposed to have any exotic pets. Three Doberman's, that's what...." He fell momentarily silent, "Good God! There's more than one out there." As he spoke he heard Lowe repeating the information. "I see four. No, there's more than that. At least seven. They're moving too damn fast to count, and when they stop, they vanish." Risking a sideways glance, he added scathingly, "And they're not bloody dogs!"



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Chapter Six

Operation Holy Ghost

They'd been walking for less than an hour, but already the weight of the backpack was starting to feel uncomfortable. Signalling a halt, Eisner slipped free of the straps and gently lowered his pack to the ground. There were days when he wished he'd never even heard of DIS, and today was rapidly turning into one. As mission leader of the four-man Holy Ghost team, his task was to conduct a search of Lough Derg, Donegal, for the 'Holy Bell' of St. Patrick. Fortunately, not the whole lake bed, which although quite small, would have been more than four men could handle in the single night allocated. The area which he along with DIS agents Wright, Lumley and Jeffries were required to check, was roughly a quarter of a mile in length. The precise parameters had been determined by experts, following a meticulous examination of the *Caorthanach* legend. Only a few miles outside of Northern Ireland, the lake was something in excess of ninety miles distant from the nearest point of the other, much larger body of water bearing the same name. Far enough away from the Fey to be safe, or so the mission planners had claimed.

Before the mission Eisner had been more than willing to accept their glib assurances, but now he wasn't so certain. Shortly after the team had crossed over the border, there had been what was either an equipment malfunction, or the first sign of trouble. It was a concern he had yet to voice, but the others were not fools, and already knew that something might not be right. All of the group were taking frequent reading from the compass-like devices strapped to their right wrists. Tuned to specific wavelengths associated with the Fey, the metres were experimental hardware, intended to give users a visual indication of the direction and strength of Fey presence. Unfortunately, all four metres had been showing a constant, low-level reading for the past forty-five minutes.

"I hope these gizmos are still under guarantee," Eisner quipped, tapping an index finger against his detector's multi-coloured liquid crystal display. "'Cause mine's going back." Becoming more serious he added, "There's no telling if they're really picking up trouble, or if something's just sent the transputer chips AWOL."

"There's nothing in sight, sir." Said Jeffries, once again using the zoom-binoculars to make a three-hundred and sixty degree sweep of the area.

"All the same, I want you to keep checking."

"According to control, the area's clear," Wright offered. Then seeing the look on his superior's face, added, "But then, control have been known to fuck-up."

It was now late afternoon and the terrain the group were crossing consisted mostly of steep, heather-clad hills and the narrow, winding roads of picture postcard Ireland. Beautiful, unspoiled land, it was also the way that Occupied Tipperary looked on long-range surveillance photographs. Perhaps the way the entire country might look, if under Fey rule. A wry smile flickered across Eisner's lips as a disloyal thought occurred to him. The more fanatic members of the Green movement would *prefer* Ireland to look like a Celtic Garden of

Eden. England too, if they were given the choice. Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, he made a veiled hand gesture, indicating that company was on the way. Three strangers were approaching on foot from the west. They *looked* harmless enough, but in the light of what had happened to Art Jakeman, all of the team had instructions to shoot first, if they had any reason to suspect that they were in the presence of Fey. However, the license to kill was counterbalanced by the fact that nobody on the team was trigger-happy, and none of them wanted to accidentally off a local, out for nothing more sinister than a walk.

Eisner smiled a greeting to the trio, seeing what appeared to be a man and a woman in their mind-thirties, accompanied by an older man. They seemed not to be armed, and if their body language was anything to go by, posed no immediate threat. But, as all field personal knew, appearances had an unpleasant habit of being deceptive.

"Afternoon." Eisner said warmly. "Nice day for it."

The leading male, who was also the elder of the two, stopped a few yards in front of the team and stood with his hand on his hips. "Brits." He said irritably. "Is that who y' are, trapsin' all over my land without permission."

"I'm afraid so," the agent replied, hearing what sounded like local accent. As for the man being a landowner, it was possible. The team were travelling by compass, taking as straighter line as possible, and so could easily be on land used as pasture. "If we've strayed on private property, we're sorry. No trespass was intended."

Demeanour softening the man waved away the apology. "Sure, there's no harm done. Tis just a field, so it is."

"I'm Davy McGuire." The younger man broke in. "This is my wife, Bernadette," he waved an introductory hand at the pretty brunette, "and this fine gentleman is me father, Patrick. The truth is, he *used* to own this land."

"Until last month," the father took over. "Sold the lot to some boys from Tip." Rubbing his hands together in glee he announced. "Now I'm the landlord o' the finest drinkin' house in Pettigo, so I am. So if y'll be passin' through," he pointed in the direction of the nearby village, "y' more than welcome at the Green Man" A broad smile exposing an uneven row of tobacco stained teeth he started forward, hand held out to shake.

Before the distance had been halfway completed there was a noise, which Eisner instantly recognised as the discharge of Armitage-Shaw Vipers. All four team members wore an en-gun strapped to the inside right forearm, over their shirts and concealed by jacket sleeves. Two of the team had seen something that had alarmed them enough to fire. The woman gave yelp of fright, but weapons trained on her and on her husband encouraged them to keep still and quiet.

Hands clutching at his neck where the blunt ends of two needles protruded, the man who'd been introduced as Patrick McGuire fell to the ground, and lay gasping for breath. Time and again his fingers scrabbled for purchase, but could not get a grip on the slivers on polished metal. Which was precisely what their designers had intended. In a matter of seconds he began to writhe, his ruddy features turning purple as ferro-diphosgene began its work. An amount too small to harm a human, the chemical's effect was fatal when introduced to a Fey system. Working at a ferocious rate the chemical stripped his lungs and bronchial

tubes of their linings, and simultaneously induced the production of copious amounts of mucus. Windpipe quickly blocking, the victim made desperate, wet, sucking sounds, his mouth gaping like that of a landed fish. Strangely, he exhibited no trace of fear at his immanent demise. If anything, the look in his eyes was one of complete and utter astonishment. At the last he flopped onto his back, and with a pneumatic wheeze, collapsed into stillness. Drowning in his own body fluids had taken less than thirty seconds.

"I saw him shimmer." Wright said calmly, his right hand still stilted back at the wrist to expose the en-gun's narrow barrel.

"Me too, sir." Jeffries confirmed. "It was just a flicker around the edge of his hand, but it was definitely there. Another moment and he'd have had you."

Eisner nodded soberly. Both of the men who'd fired were experienced field agents who rarely made serious mistakes. A fact which accounted for them still being alive. They had also both seen active service against the Fey, in the early days of the Occupation, before the Berlin Convention. The shimmer effect that Wright had described had first been noticed by another survivor of one of those early encounters. Only visible from certain angles, it was the single known way that unassisted human sight could perceive a glamour disguise.

"Alright, you two." Eisner glared at the frightened couple. "Start talking. You've got thirty seconds to convince me I shouldn't have you shot."

"No! Please, don't." The man pleaded, folding a protective arm around his wife. "We've done nothin'."

"Why did y' shoot him?" Bernadette blurted. "He was just a harmless old man, so he was."

Davy McGuire nodded in vigorous agreement. "That's God's honest truth, mister. We've got nothin' t' do with the troubles."

"That'll do." Eisner stifled the anti-sectarian speech he sensed was coming. The shock on their faces looked genuine enough. But then it would, he reminded himself, if they were Fey. "Stay where you are and keep your mouths shut."

Good as Wright and Jeffries were, mistakes were made, and he *hadn't* seen the tell-tale shimmer himself. The only way to be sure was to wait and see what happened to the corpse. Squatting down he stared at the dead man, but made no attempt to touch him. Such a tiny amount of FeDp would not have affected a human, and McGuire's severe reaction had been precisely what the group had been briefed to expect from a dying Fey. But again, the enemy were expert at playing possum. One thing was certain though; glamour faded from dead Sidhe like dirt under a running tap. Eisner watched intently, silently hoping that the effect would manifest. If McGuire had been an innocent civilian, then the responsibility was his, regardless of who had fired the shots. There wouldn't be any legal proceedings, of course. No case to answer for. Intelligence looked after it's own in that respect. Punishment, if deemed necessary by any internal investigation, would come in the form of demotion. Conscience, however, was another matter.

"Sir, it's starting." Wright's hushed warning came like the answer to a prayer.

When he'd first approached, Patrick McGuire had appeared to be a man in his mid fifties to early sixties. He'd had curly iron-grey hair, a deeply-lined, wrinkled face that looked

as if it had seen a lot of life, and a ruddy, beer-drinker's complexion. Now though his skin-tone was changing, becoming lighter by the second. Soon it had achieved a ghostly paleness that was almost iridescent in the light of dusk. As moments ticked by the marks of age faded from his face like a slow-motion film running backwards, and in their place was perfect, completely flawless skin. Finally, and with fatal suddenness, his features blurred and shifted, seeming to instantly remould themselves. The new profile was aristocratic, and oddly innocent. Short grey hair had turned to a luxurious copper-red, and fell to shoulder-length in a straight mane. The round, typically Caucasian eyes were now transformed into a broadly-slanted oriental shape, and surmounted by fine, highly curved eyebrows.

"Are you still claiming that this is your father?" Eisner asked coldly.

"I, Holy Mary Mother of God. I don't understand." Davy protested. "I've never seen *him* before in me life!"

Standing up Eisner shifted his gaze away from the corpse. Taking the life of such a physically beautiful being seemed as much a criminal act as the slashing of a great work of art. More so, perhaps, because once gone it could never be restored. But at least his men had not been wrong, and by their alertness had not only saved him, but proved that the Fey were active in the North of Ireland. What he needed to know now was whether they'd been onto the team from the start, or if the encounter was just random misfortune. As for Davy and Benadette McGuire, their continued inaction was a point in their favour. Their 'father' had mentioned dealing with people from Tipperary, parts of which were inside the Occupied Zone, so it was entirely possible that the real Patrick McGuire had been taken and replaced with a Sidhe spy. On the other hand, the whole group might be Fey.

There was a groan from the corpse, caused not by a return to life but by escaping air. Davy McGuire saw his captor's distraction, and having no faith in their sense of justice, chose the moment to make a break.

"Run, Bernie." He encouraged, taking off across the field in a frantic, zig-zagging path that he hoped would make him harder to hit. Whether from fear or the certainty that she could not evade the weapons, his wife remained where she was.

"No." Eisner signalled his men not to fire. "Lumley, Wright go. I want him alive." The two sprinted in pursuit.

Davy entered an area thick with heather, and abruptly stopped. He teetered as if on the brink of a precipice, and almost fell flat on his face. Only a few steps behind Wright skidded to a halt, his arm flying out to block Lumley's advance.

"What is it?" Eisner called out. Leaving Jeffries to watch the body he motioned the woman forward, and followed after her, making sure that he stayed just out of grabbing range. "Don't go beyond where they are," he warned, guessing what he'd find.

"It's only heather, mister." Benadette snapped. "Not a bloody minefield."

"If I'm not very much mistaken, there's something worse than explosives here," Eisner directed her attention toward the runaway. Davy McGuire was rooted to the spot, and apparently oblivious to those who'd been chasing him. As his wife and Eisner approached his arms began to move, as if he were conducting an imaginary orchestra.

"This is bad news." Jeffries exhibited his talent for stating the obvious. "Those

thing's shouldn't be anywhere near here."

"What shouldn't be here." Bernadette looked at the agent as if he were mad. "What are you talking about? And what's wrong with my Davy?" She started toward her husband, but was restrained by Lumley.

"See the mushrooms." Eisner pointed out a perfect circle of unusually large *Amanita Virosa*, colloquially known as the Destroying Angel. "It's a faerie-ring." He nodded in the direction of the corpse. "They put them in places like this, where they're hard to spot, until it's too late. I'm afraid that Davy is, stuck."

"Faerie-ring." Bernadette raised her eyebrows. "You mean the little people." Far from being alarmed, she seemed almost relieved. "If that's all it is I'll soon have him out. Davy," she called, "stop pretendin', it's alright now."

"You don't understand." Wright sighed. "He *can't* stop. Even if we were to drag him clear, his mind would still be trapped."

"But, he's as human as you and me."

"It certainly looks that way," Eisner said placatingly. "Though we can't be absolutely sure, and we don't have the time to find out. The best we can do is knock him out," he lied out of necessity. "Our weapons can do that. The needles they fire aren't poisonous to human beings. He'll go to sleep, and in a while, a patrol will find him."

A patrol would sweep the area, that much was true. The rest had been an unkind fabrication, the best he could manage. Something had to be said that would keep the woman calm, and under the circumstance's honesty was *not* the best policy. Davy McGuire probably was human, but if so he was as good as dead; nobody who stepped fully inside a faerie-ring ever recovered. And the possibility remained that he was a Fey, merely pretending to suffer the fugue state. With monitoring equipment at best unreliable, and being under orders not to use radio communications except in the most dire of emergencies, the only solution was a permanent one. Turning the woman around he forcibly walked her away from the scene, nodding over his shoulder to Lumley as he went.

Understanding what was required Lumley came as close as he dared to the circle's edge, and from point blank range, the agent pumped forty millimetres of steel into Davy's neck. Catching the body as it fell he dragged it clear of the circle, and checking that the boss had Mrs McGuire distracted, used his sheath knife to finish the job.

"What're you going t' do wi' me?" Bernadette asked, eyes wide with apprehension.

"We have a job to do." Eisner said, professionally cold. "I know it isn't your fault, but you've already seen and heard too many things that you shouldn't have. So we're taking you with us. Don't worry, nobody's going to hurt you, providing you behave. When our job's done, you'll be set free. You have my word."

Now several shades paler - *by design* - the woman nodded compliance.

Deep under Pollagoona Mountain more than one thousand of the Daoine Sidhe were gathered in a chamber far larger than even the most magnificent of human cathedrals. Dressed in their finest clothing they were what legend named the *Seelie Court*, come on this occasion to witness the welcoming ceremony for the recently gathered bearers of the Bloodsong; Albion's

Chime Children. The product of many centuries work the Great Hall stretched in five directions, like the print of a massive hand in the limestone. Nearly one-hundred feet high at its lowest point the convex ceiling was dotted with ochre, pale green and creamy-white stalactite formations. Light was provided by a large oval fire pit, set in the palm-like centre of the floor, and tended by two *duergar*. The pit was at the top of a wide, gently-rising circular hillock, and ringed by the thirteen outward-facing stone thrones of the High Circle. Twelve were carved from glittering pink-white gypsum and decorated with narrow columns of faceted quartz, set with intricate designs of wafer-thin silver. The thirteenth throne faced the Great Hall's middle avenue. The King's seat, it was carved from purest white quartz with crenellated side and rear panel decorations in marbled red jasper. Those who sat the Circle were High Sidhe; the finest by deed or bloodline, and the absolute rulers of the Sixth Rank. Including the quartz throne eleven seats were presently filled, their occupants splendidly clad in many-coloured velvets, fine linens, sable and other fur from creatures whose lines had long ago fallen prey to time's strangling cord. On a throne between the empty seats of Mamau Ur and Midar, sat a human soul; the only adult human soul presently inside Pollagoona Mountain. His was a privileged position, and though he could neither move nor speak, the eyes of the body he occupied danced with bright, child-like expectation.

King to those gathered was Ruis Mor, whose grandsire men had mistaken for the Light-Bringer himself. Dressed in silver and black he wore over his copper-red hair a simple silver circlet, into which was set thirteen flawless rubies. Below this was what could accurately be described as the face on an angel, with deep-set brilliant green eyes that were slitted like a cat. To the King's left, attended by green-haired *glaitig* harpists, sat Maeve; his daughter-wife and present Queen of the *Daoine Sidhe*. Smiling with a disturbing mixture of innocence and sensuality, Ruis Mor lifted one hand and exerted power that was his alone. Silence dropped like a curtain over the entire chamber. Then, when all eyes were trained upon her, Maeve stood and walked the few steps to the edge of the Circle. The ceremony was hers to conduct because children, especially Chime Children, were ruled always by the most high of the Goddesses female descendants.

"Chosen of Dana," the Queen's voice sang out. "Tis time for us to greet our new kinfolk, by who's joining, our lines shall be replenished." Both hands fisted and held high above her head she shouted, "*Bansidhe*, I charge you bring us the Bloodsong's bearers."

A way parted, allowing five ethereal *bansidhe* to glide silently from the darkness of a tunnel at the far end of the centre most corridor. They came in single file, gossamer-light gowns flowing around their voluptuous forms like concealing white clouds. Each wore a different coloured jewel in her hair, and in her arms cradled a naked, soundly sleeping human babe. As was customary the way stayed clear even after they'd passed. Once awoken and named, the Chime Children would be quickly returned to the cocoon-like warmth of the *bansidhe's* hive of nursery caves.

Stopping at the base of the Circle, the *bansidhe* waited until the first of their number was beckoned. Gliding up the incline she knelt at the Queen's feet and held up her charge. Maeve drew a slim, silver-bladed dagger from the sheath hung at her waist, and holding it in a two-handed grip, raised it above the child. All around her the Court were silent as ghosts,

waiting in eager anticipation for the quick, sure movement. Lingering for just a moment, Maeve slid the pale-fleshed palm of her right hand down the dagger's sharp edge. As the flow began she made a fist, and holding it high allowed a single drop of bright red blood to fall. Landing in the centre of the child's forehead it passed harmlessly through skin and bone, leaving behind a tiny, rust-coloured stain.

"The Bloodsong calls to you." The Queen said loudly. Then closing her violet-blue eyes in concentration, she willed the child to awaken. "Welcome home, little one." The greeting was spoken with motherly tenderness. Looking down into inquisitive eyes, Maeve read in their innocence what would be the child's name among the Fallen.

The process was repeated three more times, ending on each occasion with the woken child being paraded in front of each throne's occupant, then away through the tumultuous cheering and spontaneous playing of the Court. When the time came for the fifth and last Bloodsong bearer to be named, Maeve stiffened momentarily, experiencing as the High Sidhe sometimes did, the giddy touch of the foresight known as the Dreaming.

"This one shall know greatness." The Queen said, her words gentle as whispering wind, yet heard clearly by even those furthest away. "For all to know," she addressed the Court. "I name this girl-child Malekin."

Smiling like the rising sun Maeve watched until the last *bansidhe* had returned to the tranquillity of the nursery caves, then turned to face the King. And found Ruis Mor's handsome features twisted into a mask of unbridled lust. Rising from his throne, he clicked his fingers, and by that signal, rid those who sat the Circle of their clothing. All around the Great Hall those who formed the Court followed his example, quickly stripping themselves and each other using both magical and conventional means. In the centre of the Circle the *duergar* who tended the fire pit heaped bowl after bowl of dried leaves onto the glowing coals. Briefly turning the colour of the flames green, the leaves were quickly consumed, becoming clouds of sweet-smelling smoke which billowed out over the heads of the waiting celebrants.

"Let the ceremony begin." Maeve cried, wrapping her lithe arms around the first of the five lovers she would take in honour of the children.

Accompanied by dripping-wet *glaistig* harpists, *antarra*-playing *pandeus* strolled through the mass of entwined bodies, their music locking together like male and female into a sultry melody. Sidhe jealousy was a dangerous and much fabled thing, yet no player felt the twist of its dagger. Tradition would grant them their five, and when the time came, the one judged to have played the best would be the last of the Queen's chosen.

Unable to move from his throne, one alone of those present could only watch. Eyes wide and alive he sat immobile as the little brass leprechaun hung around his neck; a man of stone presiding over the crashing tide of passion which roared through Dana's own.

As dusk became night the Operation Holy Ghost team arrived at Lough Derg. The final part of their journey had taken them through bogland, with no signs of habitation on either side of the road. The tarmac ended about two hundred yards short of the pier, where in the pilgrimage season, visitors were required to wait for the open boat which took them on the

five minute journey to Station Island. Fortunately, where the Holy Ghost team were concerned, the season was still over a month away, and the individual employed as caretaker had been only too pleased to absent himself in return for assurances that no damage would be done, and a generous bribe. As arranged by a local go-between, the man had left the island's small boat moored at the end of the wooden jetty.

When all were safely aboard, Jeffries cast-off, and starting the outboard motor on his second attempt, steered toward Station island.

As they crossed the dark water, Eisner recalled the information given to the team during their mission briefing. Roughly cross-shaped and approximately six miles long by four wide, Derg was surrounded by low hills, all heather covered with the lone exception of a softwood plantation on the north shore. The banks were free of dwellings, and only a few distant farmhouses overlooked the lake. The nearest at a distance which, when combined with the fading light, made accidental observation highly unlikely. The lake hosted many small islands, mostly overgrown with scrub or heavily wooded in the case of those big enough to land on. None were ever inhabited, apart from the place of the pilgrimage itself. The Station of Station Island referred to a penitential exercise; pilgrims prayed silently while moving about on their knees in a set pattern around circles of stones known as the Penitential Beds. Not quite an atheist, but at odds with all the major religions, Eisner had no sympathy with fanatics of any persuasion. Be they people in the Middle East burning pictures of American Presidents, or those closer to home. Fanatics, if allowed credibility, were prone to supporting all manner of barbaric insanity in the name of God. Historically, Derg was something of an enigma. It had been famous throughout Medieval Europe as the site of St Patrick's Purgatory; a small cave on Station Island in which the saint was said to have spent time in prayer and penance. Patrick himself was supposed to have been on the island in 445 AD, but long before then Derg had been associated Druidic practices. The legend of St Patrick began with a mercenary knight called Owein, who claimed to have met mysterious white-robed men, and terrible demons who led him through the punishments of hell. A story which had acquired new substance in light of the Fey's return.

Jeffries cut the engine and expertly glided the boat to a halt beside the island's pier and held its steady while Lumley tied-off. Wright was the first to disembark, and moving to the end of the jetty, he stood guard. The island was supposed to be deserted, but after the encounter with the Fey, nobody was taking anything for granted.

The first thing Eisner noticed was the degree of quietness. A combination of the night and Station Island's small size meant that water could be heard lapping at the shore on all sides. Walking past a sign that warned pilgrims they were expected to participate in *all* exercises of the pilgrimage, he led the team and Bernadette McGuire toward the twin hostels; accommodation for men and women, built facing each other across the penitential beds. A temporary base was to be set up in the conveniently located dining room of the men's hostel.

Inside, the grey-painted walls were bare of decoration, except for the obligatory cross. There was a large table in the middle of the room, with bare wooden benches on either side. In the western corner an unlit turn fire gaped like an open mouth.

"Classy joint." Jeffries quipped.

"Nah," Wright smirked in reply. "They haven't got a Jacuzzi." Accepting the team's backpacks as they were removed he stacked them against a wall, then as Lumley and Jeffries stripped-off, began to set out the team's diving equipment.

Operation Holy Ghost had come well supplied for their task. The packs contained wet suits, small single-tank aqua lungs, fitted with re-breather units, compact underwater scanning equipment, and mobile underwater lighting. Even if the dive had been taking place in full daylight, special lighting would have been necessary due to the water's extremely murky nature.

While the rest of the team got changed, Eisner took Bernadette McGuire into the men's cloakroom and motioned for her to sit on the floor. "Sorry about this, luv." He apologised as he bound his prisoner's wrists behind her back with nylon ties intended for securing equipment. "It shouldn't be for too long." He looked around for something that would make her more comfortable, but found nothing. "They don't have any cushions," he shrugged. Propping her up in a corner he used more of the ties to secure her ankles. "I know it sounds daft, but try to relax," he shrugged. "If there was another way..." The comment was met by a hostile glare.

The last one to suit-up Eisner tightened the seals on his full-face mask, and spoke into its built-in microphone pick-up. "Icicles, bicycles, test-ing. Everyone receiving?" The other three confirmed that they were. "Okay. Let's get this over with. And boys," he said in an appalling American accent, "let's be careful under there."

Donning flippers when they were in the boat, Lumley, Jeffries and Eisner slipped over the side and despite the initial glare of electronic lighting, quickly vanished. Wright stayed in the boat to act as lookout and timekeeper for the first thirty minutes, and to assist anyone who found themselves in difficulty.

The hardware carried by each diver was capable of electro-chemically detecting the presence of gold. Researchers had concluded that for the Bell of St Patrick to have any chance of still being in existence, it had to be made of the precious metal. Even considering the high peat content of Derg's waters, nothing that oxidised was likely to have survived intact. Their predetermined search area varied from between ten and two-hundred yards off the particular patch of shore on which the Saint had supposedly stood. If the *Caorthanach* legend had some basis in reality, Patrick could not have hurled a heavy object of the bell's guesstimated weight any further.

Underwater was much colder than above, Eisner thought, feeling the chill seeping through his wet suit's insulation. The luminous green light of the sensor he held continued to pulse monotonously, as it had since he'd switched it on. Green meant the thing was working, but hadn't found anything worthwhile. Via his mask radio he knew that Jeffries and Lumley were also not meeting with success. Or anything else, thankfully. Although nobody would admit to being concerned, all the team had heard the rumours that the Fey had introduced various unidentified 'aquatic life forms' into the rivers and lakes of Ireland. But none of the team had encountered a Lough Derg monster. So far, the thought was swallowed by claustrophobic blackness.

Back in the hostel, Bernadette McGuire stared hard at the ties which bound her wrists. While adequate to hold the shape she wore, they could not restrain her real self for very long. Now grown tired of the game she'd been playing she called upon one of the small magic's gifted to her by the Ur, and invoking its power focus the energy on the ties. The effect was like an invisible miniature blowtorch, which did no harm to her pale skin, yet sheared through the bonds in seconds. The blackened remains dropped to the floor like so many shrivelled worms.

Free again, the glamour-shrouded Sidhe stood and stretched, her expression at first showing just a hint of mirth. Man was easiest to fool when circumstances allowed him to believe that what he saw must be real. That was what had happened to those who'd come looking for the Bell. The Sidhe had known that they would, one day, when the legend was remembered, and so had guarded well against the coming. Rapidly, like a chain reaction, her amusement increased, finally exploding in wild laughter, cracked as the product of a damaged mind.

Eisner checked his wristwatch. The team were close to the end of their third dive, and had found nothing. Probably because there was nothing to find. The Fey were real enough, but that didn't mean every crackpot legend associated with them was also true. Especially one that had been passed through the filter of Christianity. Almost at the limit of his air he decided that enough was enough, and via his mask radio, ordered Lumley and Wright to abandon their search.

Out on the lake, Eisner felt alone and very exposed. There wasn't a shred of evidence to indicate that anything was wrong, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was. Steering for the island he cranked-up the revs, only to have the outboard splutter and die. Cursing under his breath he reached for the manual start handle and gave it a yank. Nothing happened. Swearing audibly this time, he tried again, but still had no luck. The engine was dead as the proverbial dodo.

"I'm going to kick that caretaker's arse!" He promised. "Alright, Jeffries it's you and me. Break out the paddles." In a few hours, he told himself, they'd be back across the border and on a flight home. The top brass weren't going to be too happy about the civilian, but would at least have learned something new about Fey movements outside of the Occupied Zone. Movements which would surely be the biggest surprise. Whatever the director said, it was hard to believe that he'd ever truly expected them to find St Patrick's bell. More likely the old man had another purpose for the mission, a theory he wanted to test. Either that, or he got his jollies from sending blokes out to root around in slime and shit for half the night. The disgruntled speculation was shattered by Lumley's startled shout.

"Christ Almighty!" Everyone looked at Lumley, then in the direction he was pointing. "What the hell is that?"

As Eisner looked the blood inside his veins began pumping so hard he thought they might burst. A moment ago he'd been so certain that Holy Ghost was a waste of time and manpower, and that the earlier encounter was just coincidental. But in the face of what was coming he knew how wrong he'd been. The team's en-guns were with their dry clothing, and

the only firepower that had been out onto the lake was a pump-action shotgun. Looking out across the water, Eisner doubted very much that it would be enough.

All in white like some ghostly apparition, the Fey rider came galloping *across* Lough Derg. His mount's hooves struck the surface of the lake as if it were a solid, causing the water beneath them to explode in fierce blasts of white steam. Each descending leg hissing like a heated iron, the incredible beast brought its rider level with the front of the small craft then, impossibly, it reared up and brought its forelegs crashing down. The resultant splash nearly filled the boat, and made it plain to all aboard who was master of the situation.

Nothing Michael Eisner or his men had ever seen was comparable to the awesome presence of the vapour-shrouded Fey. The leanly-built *garron* upon which he sat was milk-white, with a sunshine yellow mane and tail. Its eyes were dark and liquid, much larger than those of the animal it resembled, and close-up were flecked with darting motes of orange fire. Shod with sparkling silver shoes and a delicate silver bridle, the beast had no saddle, although the fact did not seem to bother its rider. He was an imperious male Sidhe, with typically long copper-red hair cascading around his shoulders, like a moving stain against the brilliant white of his tunic. For a heart-stopping moment his fine features blurred and twisted, Fey glamour momentarily rearranging them into a face which all those aboard instantly recognised as Bernadette McGuire.

Realising what had happened, and how close he'd been to what was now quite obviously one of the High Sidhe, Eisner was shocked. But more than that he was furious at the ease with which he'd been taken in. Futile as he knew the action might be, he snatched up the shotgun and popped a cartridge into the breach.

"Back off." He ordered, shouldering the weapon. "This is loaded with iron-shot."

The rider's expression continued to be one of complete indifference. All around his mount's hooves water bubbled like the brew in a witch's cauldron. Slowly he raised one arm, until his pale, long-fingered hand was pointing at the stars.

"Hold it." Eisner's finger tightened on the trigger. "This is your last warning. Magic or not, iron-shot will punch a hole right through you."

The rider smiled, whether at the comment or something else it was impossible to tell. Still moving with deliberate slowness he levelled his arm at the boat as if divining its presence. From the west there came a howl of wind which sounded almost like a voice; almost alive. The rider laughed then, throwing his head back.

Recognising the sound for what it was, Eisner's resolute expression clouded with horror. *Slua Sidhe* were coming. Despite appearances to the contrary, the rider was not alone, and the team had little chance of escape. In fact, they'd be damn lucky to preserve their lives. Lowering the gun to the bottom of the boat he held up his hands. It was now a question of whether the Fey would accept surrender. Inside what they claimed as their own lands, the answer would definitely have been no, but *this* Lough Derg was a long way from the Zone, and might be considered neutral territory. He didn't have to wait long for the answer. Moment's after the attempted surrender the boat was dealt a hammer-blow. Striking with hurricane force, the air elemental hit the middle of the boat from directly overhead, smashing Wright and Jeffries through the bottom and driving them deep underwater. Panels splintering

like matchwood what remained of the boat came apart, sending the two surviving crew members tumbling into the lake. There hadn't even been time to yell.

It was like being shot with an invisible missile, Eisner thought, coughing up water as he tried to stay afloat. Peering through the steam he saw that Lumley had surfaced a few yards away. There was no sign of Wright or Lumley. Treading water he turned and looked up at the rider, wondering if he'd taken Wright and Jeffries by design, rather than chance. They being the ones who'd fired the shots that killed a Fey. Producing a circled length of thin rope from the inside of this tunic, the rider wrapped one end tightly around his hand and cast out a line.

"Hold," the Sidhe ordered, voice raised sufficiently for the humans to hear above the hiss of super-heated water. Waiting just long enough for the men to grasp the rope, he urged his mount forward at a trot, dragging his catch behind.

On the western shoreline the Sidhe were waiting. Eisner counted eight of them, all male, two of whom were mounted. Shakily, he got to his feet, and checking with a nod that Lumley was also in one piece, faced his green and white garbed captors. They looked just like character from a play - *A Midsummer Night's Nightmare* - brought to astonishing life.

"You should know me, humans." The rider who'd remained on-shore said. "In ages passed, your kin would have known." The sound of his voice was extraordinarily lovely, like notes from a softly played harp.

"It's different now, sir." Eisner ventured. Obviously the leader of the group, the speaker was exceptionally tall. When standing, Eisner estimated that he'd be close to seven foot six. He had red, waist-length hair, evenly streaked with lines of glistening silver, and the perfect youthful features that were the norm among his kind.

"Aye, human." Mamau Ur agreed. "Some things have changed beyond our recognition. Others remain as they were." He signalled to one of the Sidhe who stood clustered around his magnificent steed, and the individual stepped forward, holding a wrapped bundle in his splayed palms. "One, this was gifted to your kin." The Ur smiled eerily. "As it shall again, for the briefest time." The carrier jerked the bundle's cloth, sending a heavy object tumbling onto the grass.

Smearing in partially dried filth, it was an ornate metal hand bell, Eisner belatedly realised. The handle was more like a sword hilt, complete with rusted algae covered knuckle-guard, and what seemed to be a jewelled pommel. Through gaps in the dirt starlight revealed the gleam of gold.

"*Look at me,*" Mamau suddenly ordered in a voice that could not have come from any human throat.

There was no room for defiance. Eisner and Lumley both felt *compelled* to obey. Eye contact with the Fey leader brought a strange sense of euphoria, and a complete willingness to accept any further instructions.

Concentrating on Lumley, Mamau used the voice again. "Pick up the Bell." Waiting until the action had been completed he pointed out across Derg's dark waters. "Hurl it, far from this shore. Then forget it was ever in your hand."

Feeling as if he'd been kissed by God, Eisner watched placidly as his colleague sent

what had to be St Patrick's bell spinning through the air. Somewhere in the back of his mind he intended to mark the place where it sank. But the instant it vanished, so did all knowledge of the event. He stood blinking at the Fey leader, waiting to be told what to do next.

"And now, humans, tis time to choose." The Ur explained, voice still ringing with the tone of sweet command. "Join with the *Daoine Sidhe*," he flashed a wolf-like snarl. "Or join your kinfolk under the waters."

With the suddenness and power of a thunderclap, sound flooded the area. A repeated cycling between two low-frequency pitches, it conjured up the image of a huge, droning insect. At first Eisner thought it was the Fey's doing, until the stark white beam of an airborne searchlight playing jerkily across the scene revealed the truth. Coming out of his trance-like state he clasped hands over his ears. The cacophonous noise was uncomfortable, though not intolerable. At least for humans; the Fey riders had dismounted, and were struggling to restrain their frantic animals. Obviously in some considerable degree of pain, the remainder of the group were staggering around in seemingly drunken circles, or down on their knees with hands pressed tightly over their ears. Glancing quickly to one side, Eisner made sure that Lumley was okay, then followed the searchlight beam up to its source which as expected was a helicopter, hovering almost directly overhead. Much to his surprise, it was not British. He saw a figure in the open cargo bay, waving him forward even as the pilot angled down toward a landing spot. Needing no second invitation, he ran full pelt, tugging at Lumley's arm as he went past.

Ducking under the rotor-blades the agent scrambled aboard and was immediately presented with a headset. Over the drastically reduced noise an American voice greeted him, by *name*. Putting aside for the moment the questions raised by that, he turned to see what was keeping his one surviving man, and discovered that Lumley had fallen. From his posture it was clear that something was broken. About to leave the aircraft he was stopped by a warning voice, not the winch man's.

"The big guy's doin' somethin'."

Attention directed back toward the Fey, Eisner saw that their leader was back astride his mount, and seemed to be exerting some form of arcane control. Bowed over the *garron's* neck he lolled like a drunkard, opening and closing his mouth to shout words that were impossible to hear above the din of the chopper, and whatever weapon its crew were using.

"Airborne, comin' in fast an' low from the south." A suddenly not so calm voice issued from the headset speakers.

Eisner looked in that direction and to his abject horror saw that a broad and perfectly straight path was being ploughed through the heather by something that could not be seen. One of the *Slua Sidhe* was sweeping across the landscape like a bulldozer, flattening everything in its path and heading directly for the chopper.

"Hang on, we're goin' up." The pilot yelled.

As the ground fell away Eisner saw Lumley struggle to his feet, a look of blind panic on his face. Half turning he saw what was coming at him and made a desperate attempt to throw himself clear, only to be caught by the living wind and flipped over onto his face. Body rolling over and over he was wiped across the ground ahead of the *Slua*. The last thing

Eisner saw before the chopper's turbo-jets kicked-in was the spray of blood as his colleague's arm was ripped loose. Feeling sick he leant back against the cool metal of the fuselage and closed his eyes. Joel Wright, Ben Jeffries and poor Richard Lumley had died not because of their own mistakes, but due to *his* miscalculations. If only he'd guessed that the McGuire woman was Fey, they'd all be alive. There had to have been a clue, something he'd missed.

"Je-zuz. Wadda way t' go." A voice came through the headset. Opening his eyes Eisner saw that it belonged to the winch man. "We're clear. You can ditch the cans, buddy," the American made a circling motion with his fingers. "Don't need 'em now."

"Who the hell are we?" The agent asked, angrily pushing his headset away.

"Nick Senneker." The man indicated himself, and then the aircraft. "You just got your ass saved by the Defence Intelligence Agency."

"DIA!" Eisner exclaimed. "Lord God above. This was supposed to be a purely British operation. You Yanks shouldn't even have known it was on."

"Betcha glad we did, huh." Senneker winked. "Besides, it's my job to know what you guys are up to. Especially when you're bending the rules of the Berlin Convention." He flashed a toothy smile, unknowingly reminding the Englishman of Eddie Murphy. "Yeah, I know. The Fey aren't supposed to be around this Lough Derg." Knowing he wasn't likely to get a straight answer, but unable to resist trying, he asked. "Well, Lieutenant Eisner, Michael C, did you find whatever it was you came lookin' for?"

"That's...", Eisner began, then froze in mid sentence, a look of resentful perplexity clouding his features. "I don't know."



Garron Rider © Martin Chaplin & Adam Webb

Chapter Seven

Fallen Angels

"Hob nobler." Molloney repeated, enunciating with deliberate slowness, the way that condescending Brits always talked to the Irish. "Now," he said, rubbing his forefinger and thumb together. "If you'd be wantin' an *explanation*, it'll have t' be worth my while."

Mark thought fast. Every few hundred yards along the road for as far as he could see there were signs, warning of deadly toxic chemicals inside the Exclusion Zone. But, he'd seen clear evidence that the security forces were using incendiary tarmac around the perimeter. Virtually anything that weighed more than a sparrow would trigger an explosion the moment it touched the CT, which made it seem a preposterously dangerous method for keeping people out. Obviously, there was substance to the story hinted at by Caitlin Ash. The military were guarding a secret which their political masters had gone to extraordinary lengths to hide. Then there was Molloney, and his somewhat cryptic comment. What on earth did he mean by *hob nobler*?

"Okay." The reporter nodded. "I think we can come to some arrangement. Tell me more."

"Not so fast, mister Rainbow." Molloney shook his head. "We're not talkin' about a few hundred. It's a big risk y're askin' me t' take." Running a hand through his unruly hair he stuck his head through the gap in the hedge and checked that the road was still clear. "You can bet y' bottom dollar that the Boss'll be back, and soon. So make up y' mind."

"I could cross on my own." Mark bluffed, thinking it worth a try.

"And y'd last all o' five minutes, so y' would," the Irishman sneered. "There's dangerous t'ings on the other side o' that line. You need a guide like a blind man needs his dog, and this one doesn't come cheap."

"Alright, give me a figure."

"Twenty-five grand." The terrorist grinned greedily.

"No can do." Mark shrugged. "Ten is all I can authorise. Tops. And that's to get me in and out with *proof* of whatever's going on," he said, patting the holdall by his side. "Something I can get on video tape."

"Twenty-five, and I'll be wantin' it in cash." Molloney insisted. "We're talkin' about the biggest story you'll ever get, Mr Rainbow. Somethin' that could get us worse than shot." He nodded in the direction that the APC had taken. "And you'll not be takin' any pictures. Stuff like that doesn't work too well across the line, he smiled enigmatically, knowing that his statement would increase the Englishman's interest. "But y'll get y' proof, I can guarantee that."

In the distance Mark heard the roar of an engine which signalled that the Army vehicle was on its way back. Time to decide. Stashing his ENG gear among the roots of the hedge, he offered his hand and shook to seal the deal. Others in the same position might not have agreed to pay a man like Molloney, but reporters who didn't want to get their hands dirty

never uncovered any bodies. Scruples, he'd found, had to be applied sparingly in the real world.

"Agreed, on the condition that this is as big as you claim." He smirked, "I suppose you won't be wanting any publicity for yourself."

"I couldn't give a monkey's. Now, move y're arse. We'd better be across that strip before the Boss catch on."

Clearing the four foot wide line of explosive tarmac by a good foot and a half, Mark flopped next to his guide, who'd gone belly down behind a large wild blackberry bush. Neither man was entirely sure whether the returning British Border Surveillance Rangers had missed them. The returned Armoured Personnel Carrier squealed to a halt only feet from where they lay, and disgorged its six man crew. Through a tiny gap, Mark watched nervously as two of the men took up sentry positions while the others checked the site of the recent explosion.

"Just another rabbit, Sarge." Said the first to encounter a piece of the body.

"Stupid bastards never learn." The senior man commented, the end of his cigarette a bobbing pinpoint of brightness. "Not that it matters, I s'pose. The bloody things breed almost as quick as the Micks!"

Satisfied that there hadn't been a major breach of security the patrol got back in their vehicle and drove away. When he was sure that they'd gone, Molloney stood, dusted himself down, and cautioning his charge to keep quiet, led the way forward.

Aware that something was subtly different from the moment he'd jumped the CT strip, Mark finally managed to identify the cause. Crazy as it seemed, the air inside the Zone had a certain crispness about it. Not a chemically induced smell, which he'd expected to encounter in some form. The air smelled unusually clean, in the way that it sometimes did in the aftermath of a violent thunderstorm. A result of negative ions, he recalled someone explaining. But, it hadn't rained in days, and the night sky was clear as crystal.

They'd been walking for about ten minutes when Molloney signalled a halt. Mark looked all around, hoping to spot the reason. The area in which they'd stopped was scrub land, populated by several medium-sized berry bushes in a sea of ankle-deep grass. Ash and elm trees were dotted here and there for as far as the darkness allowed him to see. The strange thing, considering that the Zone was supposedly heavily polluted, was how *clean* and healthy everywhere seemed to be. All the plant life that he'd seen so far had been bursting with vitality.

Noticing a high-pitched, almost musical buzzing noise, Mark's curiosity overcome his trepidation. "What's that?" He asked.

"Shut y' trap." Molloney hissed, knowing that they were under observation. Attracted either by the explosion, or because they were in the vicinity of its nest, a sprite was flying somewhere behind and to the left of their position. Mouthing to the reporter that he should keep absolutely still, Molloney waited for his chance, very much aware that he would only get one.

Although they had the appearance of tiny humanoid sprites, called *hyters* by the Sidhe, were the Fey equivalent to bees. Their 'stings' were splinter-fine arrows, which they

fired with often deadly accuracy from miniature longbows. The tips of the arrows were often - though not always - coated with a slow-acting poison. There was no known antidote, and just one hit was said to carry the same punch as a smack on the head with a shileighlee. Sprites lived in colonies of up to fifty, and were reckoned by the Boss to possess a collective or hive intelligence; one mind - perhaps a queen of some type - controlling the actions of the entire community. In support of that theory was the fact that quick, illogical action could confuse individual members. On its own, the average sprite had a problem coping with anything that didn't behave exactly as it should. But a complete hive was not so easy to outwit, which was why it was vital to avoid disturbing one.

Dragonfly-wings singing, the lone *hyter* descended out of the darkness right in front of Molloney's face. Like all its kind, the creature resembled a naked, three-inch tall human female, with pointy-ears, pointy-chin and slanted compound eyes. Its overall colour was pale blue, but the gossamer hair which floated in the turbulence of its wings was a deeper shade. The wings themselves changed colour constantly in the starlight, shifting through shades of blue, green and purple. Molloney waited, biding his time. Despite the seriousness of the situation he was enjoying the look of puzzlement on the creature's tiny brow. It was an expression which he knew without looking would also be on the reporter's face. Seeing the unreal brought to life took some getting used to. The *hyter* did not understand why he wasn't moving. Why he - apparently - had not even noticed its presence. At what he judged to be the right time he acted, launching a gob of saliva like a missile straight at the sprite's head. It was so close that he couldn't miss. Covered in sticky spittle the creature was disoriented just long enough for him to swing his arms up from his sides and crush its body between his palms.

"My God." Mark gasped, crouching down to peer at the blue-spattered corpse. "What on earth is it?"

"It's one o' the t'ings the powers that be don't want the likes o' you t' be seein'." Molloney replied, carefully wiping his hands against his jeans. He paused to listen, and was relieved when he could detect no other buzzing. Anyone in the vicinity when the other colony members sniffed out the body could count on an early appointment with St Peter. "Come on, now. We' best be movin' away from here before there's any more o' the wee bastards." Without a backward glance he set off along a path, once worn by constant traffic, but now almost overgrown.

Had he bothered to look, he would have seen Mark Rainbow making a deadly mistake. Mind set on obtaining hard evidence, the reporter took a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped the dead thing inside it. Then returning the contents to his jacket he scurried after his guide.

Bernard Goodman looked at the small brass carriage clock set on the corner of his office desk and saw that - above ground - it was almost 3am. Contrary to the director's belief, his deputy needed some sleep during every twenty-four hour period. It was high time he headed for the comfort of bed, and if he were lucky, wifely arms. But, before he could leave, there was something he had to do, an illicit task which was the true reason for his long after hour's

presence. None of his colleagues had the slightest inkling as to what he was about to do. Or that, because of it, today had been the *last* time that he would be working at Whitehall Central. Reaching for a toggle on his desk intercom, he bleeped the director's office to satisfy himself that the old man had not returned unexpectedly.

Rubber soles squeaking a little on the lino flooring, Goodman stopped outside of an unmarked door. Even though he'd just checked, he tapped politely against the wood and listened for signs of life within. Only when he was absolutely sure that the office was empty did he let himself in and quickly locked the door behind him. If worst came to worst and one of the security staff decided to check, the man was unlikely to pass an already locked door. Standing still for a moment, he gave himself one last chance to reconsider. There was still time to back out with no damage done, but once he'd acted there would be no going back. The British Secret Service never forgot or forgave those it considered to be traitors, regardless of how honourable their motives were. Even though he knew that the Network was relying on him, the decision to act had not been an easy one to make. The death of Dr Lynch had been the final straw, proving once and for all that Project Wonderland's policy was seriously flawed.

Ignoring the desk and the safe he knew to be concealed behind a portrait of the Queen, Goodman crossed the room and went down on one knee in front of an antique liquor cabinet. Feeling under its base he retrieved a key held there in a magnetic box, and used it to open the ornate leaded-glass doors. Inside, under the shelf where the director stored his malt scotch, he located a hidden compartment and took from it a small padded envelope. What it contained, when delivered, would ensure that he had at least one friend in the right place.

Ensclosed in Whitehall Central's briefing room, Nicholas Wynt was listening to Johnny Halcombe's story for the third time. To the soldier's right, still looking shaken, Williamson stood poised to add anything new to his sheaf of notes.

"So I shot him," Johnny said, calmly aiming a finger at the director's chest. "Straight through his heart."

"And you're still uncertain as to whether this individual was the infamous Beith Ur?" Wynt probed.

"Like I said before, he could have been" Johnny gesticulated. "All I know for sure is that he said he was *Lord of the land*. But any of the High Sidhe could stake the same claim, and they don't make introductions. Anyway, he didn't die, 'cause I only had standard ammunition, right. All that happened was that he fell off his nag." His expression darkened. "But then he got up. I could see the hole in his coat, and the blood seeping into the material. It was sparkly," the remark was directed at Williamson. "Like red wine in sunlight, even though this was night-time. That's about it," he shrugged. "Before I had time for another shot, the bastard zapped me."

"I take it that you're convinced it was by eldritch means?" Wynt said, staring down his nose.

"Well, he wasn't using a catapult." In the face of what he thought was a stupid question, Johnny reacted with hostility. "He rooted me to the spot with a wave of his hand.

You can't get much more *eldritch* than that, sir."

"A frightening experience, I'm sure." Williamson said, his bland delivery making it unclear as to whether the sympathy was genuine.

"Not really," the soldier shook his head. "The real brown trouser bit was the rest of 'em. The other Fey, I mean. They just stood there, looking at me. That was all. But you know the old saying, if looks could kill..."

"But they didn't kill you, Halcombe." The director used his words like a cattle prod. "Tell us again why that was. And do try your level best to remember the *exact* phraseology that was used. It could be important."

"One more time," Johnny sighed. "The Fey that I shot was a lanky sod, with hair right down to his waist, like some refugee from 1967. I'm pretty sure I heard him called *Ur*. But the way it was said sounded more like a title of some sort than his name. Anyway, he looked mad as hell, and I thought I'd had it. Until he touched me."

"Where?" Williamson asked, wishing to check the answer.

"On the left shoulder." Johnny tapped the place. "There I was expecting to get clobbered, and he was gentle as a baby. After that he backed off, babbling away in what the Sidhe call the old tongue." Johnny paused to sip from the glass of medicinal brandy he'd managed to cadge. "So, when he's done, he turns back toward me, and he's different. For starters, there was no trace of a bullet wound. His clothes and body were back to normal. Although, now I come to think about it, the evidence on his clobber was probably covered by glamour. But it was gone, and the look on his face was like a jockey who'd just won the National, then been disqualified on a technicality."

"This was because of the Blood sound?" Wynt said, deliberately using the wrong word.

"The Blood Song," Johnny corrected. "Which, as they told me later, I'm a bearer of. What that means, as near as I can understand, is that they think there's a trace of Fey blood in me. From somewhere way down the line."

"This is fascinating." Williamson spoke to the director. "A theory we're developing would allow for the possibility. Although at present we have no tests specifically aimed at detecting Fey DNA in humans."

"Then your tests aren't up to much, doc." Johnny shrugged. "The important thing is that the Fey *can* detect something, and whatever it is saved my bacon."

"Yes," Wynt said snidely. "If I understood correctly, the Fey are under the impression that you're some sort of long-lost relative."

"That's about the size of it. To tell the truth, I didn't give a damn, at the time. All I could think of was that this Bloodsong business meant I'd keep breathing. Like I said the first two times, the Fey *can't* top anyone who they reckon has a trace of the Bloodsong in them. It's against their religion," he cocked his head to one side. "Except that they don't have one."

"Such a shame this credo did not prevent them from torturing you." Wynt said. "Unless ritual mutilation is a family tradition?"

"Ha bloody ha." Johnny glared.

Taking advantage of the uneasy silence that followed, Williamson shuffled through

the pages of notes he'd compiled during the first telling. "Punishment," he said, looking up then back down again. "I believe that's what you said, Sergeant."

"Yeah." Johnny scratched his stubbly chin. "And *you* told me what good stuff the Fey are made of. What do you reckon, doc," he asked playfully. "Any chance of my Fey blood making me into England's answer to Superman?"

"Unfortunately not." Williamson took the question seriously. "The ratio, if we could even determine it, must be extremely diluted."

"The cuts on your back were inflicted as a punishment," Wynt interjected. "Yet, if memory serves, you also told us that they have some other meaning. Do you have anything to add that might clarify that statement?"

The soldier shrugged, remembering the excruciating pain of the Sidhe blade peeling back his skin. He had the answer that they wanted, but had been reluctant to give it, thinking it might be used as some sort of trump card. Now though, that didn't seem such a good idea. Only by telling the spooks would he be able to make them realise how important the information really was. Maybe then he'd be in a better position to make a bargain with the bastards.

Staring into the director's eyes, Johnny gave a false smile. "You win. The pattern is a diagram."

"Pertaining to what?" The director asked coldly. "Concentrate, Halcombe. Surely you can remember."

"Yeah, alright." Johnny sighed.

"You mean you really *do* know!" Williamson exclaimed, more excited than either of the other men had ever seen him.

The soldier flashed a distinctly false smile. "I knew the first time, right after the Fey bitch did her stuff, but I didn't want to say anything. I'll tell you one thing, though," he pointed at the director, "all the shit you've put me through; keeping me out of circulation, threatening to feed me to the psychos," he glared at Williamson, "what happened to Deputy Doc. Even the *spell* to get me in. *None* of it was necessary."

For a long moment nobody said anything. Then Kurt Williamson, speaking like the good cop in a bad police drama, asked, "If mistakes were made, we can only apologise. Now, Sergeant, would you please tell us what you've remembered?"

"Isn't it obvious." Johnny looked from man to man. "Come on, you're supposed to be *intelligence* men," he said, enjoying the look of displeasure on the director's face. "No guesses. Well, I suppose I'll have to tell you. I already had my entry visa stamped, so to speak. Think about it. After it all went wrong in the Cage, didn't you wonder why I got off without a scratch. Or, for that matter, why my memories came back easy as pie." Pausing deliberately to stretch out the moment, he said. "The lines on my back are a map, showing what's in the middle of Pollagoona Mountain."

Though he did his level best not to show it, Wynt was shocked by the revelation. "They *knew* we'd try," he spoke like a man who'd been outsmarted by an amateur. Looking at Johnny he said, "The Fey wanted you to remember all along."

"Give that man a cigar." The soldier smirked. "It would've happened anyway, see. It

was just a matter of time. Now it's like a jigsaw inside my head. I know what the picture is about, and have most of the edges in place. The plain bits that are easy to mix-up, and the fine detail that go in the middle are still slotting themselves into position. That's what you get," he glanced at the doctor, "for jump-starting the Fey's time table."

"We also have proof of Pollagoona's importance in the scheme of things," Wynt said. "What intrigues me is the timing. If the Fey ability to predict the time scale of our actions is this accurate, what else might they know." he paused, fingers steeped under his chin, then added, "There's also the question of why they apparently went to such lengths in order to assure your return."

"Sorry, no idea." Johnny held up his hands. "Honest to God. Though for what it's worth, I wouldn't lose too much sleep. I mean, before Berlin, we were kicking their arses, right. Which wouldn't have been the way if the Fey could predict everything in advance. If they really had control over the crystal ball stuff, we'd never have got near to any of them."

"Then your situation is the product of chance, or perhaps sheer bad luck. Is that what you're saying, Sergeant?" Williamson questioned, biro at the ready.

"Probably," the soldier shrugged. "I'm not in charge of the game."

"You're lying again, Halcombe." The director snapped. "It would save a lot of time if you'd simply tell us why the Fey want you to return."

"*I don't know.*" Johnny said, this time with more force. "I mean it." Crossing his arms in front of his chest he leaned back in his seat. "You can ask me all bloody night, and the answer's going to be the same. It's not a part of the puzzle, see. Who knows, maybe there's a time table for that, too. Maybe I'll remember when I'm supposed to. But right now, I haven't got a clue as to what the Fallen Angels want me for."

"Angels." Wynt said, glancing briefly at Williamson. "How curious that you should use the description."

"Eh?" Johnny looked to the doctor for clarification.

"The Director is referring to an ancient explanation for the origin of what legend names faerie folk. Possibly the Fey, or their ancestors. According to Biblical lore, when Lucifer and his supporters were cast out of Heaven and consigned to Hell, there were what we'd call borderline cases. Those Angels who'd left Heaven but never reached Hell. Shut out when the Pearly Gates were closed, they were considered too bad to be allowed back to Heaven and not quite evil enough for admittance to Hell. God is said to have condemned them to wander the Earth for all eternity."

"I don't suppose you can confirm any of this?" Wynt asked, only half serious. The soldier, clearly suppressing a smile, shook his head. "I thought not. Still, at least you're not whining any more. In point of fact, Halcombe, you seem rather positive about returning to occupied territory."

"For three reasons," Johnny conceded. "One. I get the hell out of this rat-hole. Two. I get to do what I'm good at. And three, I have a few old scores to settle. The bastards *need* me to come back, I know that much. That makes me fireproof, see, all the way in to Pollagoona Mountain."

"You're not concerned about getting out again?" Williamson tested. "Surely, there's

no guarantee that the Fey would allow you to *escape* for a second time. Particularly if you - in some way or other - interfere with their plans."

"Remember." Johnny tapped the side of his head with an extended index finger. "They're not allowed to kill me. Knowing that makes all the difference. I'm not scared anymore, see. All of that fear was like one of your computer programs, or maybe a virus would be a better description. Anyway, it was running inside my brain, just to make sure that I didn't go back to soon. Now the rules have changed, here as well as there," he looked pointedly at the director. "I don't give a stuff about all this secret crap. In fact, I think some of what you're doing stinks. But don't get me wrong, I'm no whistle-blower. That's not my style." Pausing until he was sure the spy master was paying attention, he said. "Here's the deal. Step one, you tell the doc take the slow-poison out of my gums. I'll have enough on my plate without that. Step two, you promise me, face to face, that *when* I get home, things can go back to normal. I had a life, see, before all this began," he smiled briefly. "I want it back."

Wynt smiled accommodatingly. "I think those terms are acceptable."

Molloney stopped so abruptly that Mark almost bumped into him. Turning on his heel the Irishman held a finger up to his lips. Mark looked around cautiously, but could discern nothing unusual. The night held no obvious terrors, only the small, squat shapes that were bushes and rocks, and the larger distinctive silhouettes of oak and weeping willow trees. Everything seemed incredibly peaceful, the darkness undisturbed, apart from an unusual, faraway sound. Some distance off he could just make out a wavering, multi-toned humming noise, something like choral voices, except that it too highly pitched and erratic to be a song.

Knowing exactly what the sound was, and fearing it, Molloney looked at the reporter. The bulge in his jacket pocket, confirmed his suspicion that the idiot had picked up the dead sprite and brought it with him. Now the rest of the swarm were following, using their unnaturally sharp senses to track the corpse. If Rainbow had been native to the area, they could've tried dumping the jacket and running until they dropped. As it was the sprites wouldn't be fooled, they'd find the jacket and search in ever increasing circles until they found the first living thing that didn't belong. Then the whole lot of them would attack.

"It's probably nothin' t' worry about." Molloney lied through his teeth. "Stay put. I'll go an' see if anythin' ugly's got its head pokin' out." Slipping quietly away he walked until he was sure that he was out the reporter's earshot, then broke into a run, intent of putting as much distance between himself and Rainbow as possible. Leaving him behind meant kissing good-bye to twenty-five grand, but was a lot better than the alternative.

The noise was coming closer by the minute, Mark noted. What had at first sounded like Lilliputian singing had altered. In addition to the wavering buzz there were now what he could only think of as mice-like squeaks, occasionally punctuated by frantic-sounding tin-whistle notes. It was very strange.

Out of breath Molloney stopped to rest, and catching a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye, froze against the trunk of an old oak. Turning his head very slowly, he saw a pale yellow *garron*, stopped with its head toward the place where he'd left the reporter. What sat astride the Fey steed was a creature that belonged in the deepest pit of Hell. A thing

he'd seen only once before, and had hoped never to see again.

In the clinging heat of the previous summer, soon after the Occupation had begun, he'd witnessed what he later discovered was a *duergar*; flaying alive three local men. Their crime; attempting to steal gold coins which the bastard Sidhe had left lying on the floor. Using its magic to hold them upright, the *duergar* had struck with a long leather whip, barbed along the last third of its length with what appeared to be chips of bone. When it had finished the men were little more than skeletons, hung with red-raw tatters of shredded flesh. Mewling in agony, the three were alive only because their tormentor would not let them die.

Of all the Sidhe creatures, the rider was the one he feared most. It stalked his worst nightmares, whiplash ripping bloody lines from his bared skin. He'd never been able to work out if the *duergars* brute ugliness was a product of glamour, or if their kind were really deformed in equal measure to the unholy perfect of the other man-shaped Fey. Finding out would entail getting close than he ever intended to be, unless he had a lot of firepower to back him up. What the thing was doing in the area, was anyone's guess. Maybe there was some sort of relationship between it and the *hyters*. On the thought's heels came another which set his pulse racing. Molloney stared in horror at his sweating palms. If the *duergar* and the sprite nest were linked somehow, then its senses might detect the slightly iridescent blue stains which sprite blood had left on his hands and jeans. Praying to Jesus that he was wrong he waited, forcing himself to keep still and breathe lightly.

Bodachan sniffed the air, and caught the scent of human terror. Turning with deliberate slowness he looked across the stretch of grassland that separated them, and stared straight into the watcher's eyes. Holding the man by act of will, he took a moment to savour the delicious taste of fear, then turning away proceeded on his way.

Down on his knees with hands clasped together, Molloney thanked the Lord for saving his life. He wasn't entirely sure that it had been the Lord's doing, but it didn't hurt to offer a prayer, just in case. Born in the area he had the right - according to heathen law - to come and go as he pleased from land claimed by the Fey. Even the *duergar* had seemed to know it, which was probably the real reason it had let him be. Summoning up the courage to move, he ran full pelt for the border, unconcerned by the urine-dampened underwear slapping against his crotch.

Personally answering the door at his Knightsbridge residence, Anthony Pierce ushered the television repairman inside. The visit had been arranged precisely one hour beforehand, using a number which belonged to a reputedly, if wholly unremarkable private contractor. A firm which, at present, was being used as a front for a super secret, multi-national alliance calling themselves the Network.

Saying nothing, Yuri Litvinko followed the Minister into his study and deposited the repairman's case in front of the fully functional television. Waiting until Pierce had closed the door, he flipped the catches and from beneath a plastic tray containing genuine parts, took out a small padded envelope and handed it over.

"Thank you." Pierce said as if receiving a cup of tea. "I'll just confirm that this is the item your colleague and I discussed. If you have no objections."

"Of course not." Yuri replied in perfect, accentless English.

Pressing buttons, the Minister brought his television and video to life, and taking the VHS tape from its envelope, slotted it into the machine. After a short pause the screen flickered and displayed a full-colour close-up of his own face, albeit contorted with pleasure. When the camera panned out the source was shown to be a very young girl, performing what the press inevitably described as an act of gross indecency. Thumbing the stop button Pierce banished the seedy spectacle, secure in the knowledge that the media would never learn of his indiscretion. Thanks to the deputy-director of DIS, who was also apparently working with the Network, and the man who stood before him now.

"I am most grateful," Pierce clasped the agent's hand and shook it, wondering as he did so what country he came from. Somewhere in Scandinavia, if his dark blonde hair and angular features were anything to go by.

"We hope you will remain so, sir." Yuri responded. "Your help may be needed."

"I don't forget my friends."

When the agent had gone, Pierce poured himself a large scotch on the rocks. In the space of an hour he'd been made aware of the Network's existence, and was struck a deal with its representative. At first alarmed by the potential threat that such a well organised group might pose, he'd listened and found himself in broad agreement with their stated aims. Of course, only time would tell if the Network was as well placed internationally as Goodman claimed, and that it truly had no hidden agenda. But for the present, given that Nicholas Wynn's near pathological control complex was making him more of a danger to democracy than a defender of it, what the mysterious organisation had asked in return for their help was entirely acceptable. Perhaps even admirable. Although the director himself would never have understood, adopting a flexible but still firm strategy with regard to the Fey question was undoubtedly the only sensible way to ensure progress.

There were tiny, naked Tinkerbells. Each one a subtle variant of the dead thing secreted in his jacket pocket. Incredibly, they were circling around his head and aiming miniature longbows! Mark saw it, but still couldn't quite bring himself to believe. Despite the evidence of his own eyes, he felt as if he'd walked onto the set of a new Spielberg movie.

Waving his arms like a man possessed, Mark tried to swat the insectoid creatures away, but succeeded only in driving them into an even greater state of agitation. Too fast to be hit, their motion made him feel as if he were moving in slow-motion; an action replay man, out of synch with the real world. A sudden and potent stab of pain caused him to abandon his futile efforts. Something small had struck his right hand, and now it felt as if a door had been slammed shut on it. Using his left arm as cover he inspected the hand and found a darn-needle-sized sliver of wood embedded between the flesh which joined his third and fourth knuckles. Only when he tried to pull the tiny 'arrow' loose did he discover that its tip was barbed.

"Molloney!" Mark bellowed as loud as he could. "Help me. Molloney. For God's sake, get me out of here." When there was no response he stumbled forward, shielding his face as best he could and praying that he would find cover quickly.

The swarm flew in pursuit of their quarry, firing to miss and using their bodies to drive him in the direction of the coming Woodlord. The human was trespasser and killer. *Trespasser. Killer. One who must be judged.* More feelings than actual words, thoughts from the Great One echoed inside each identical *hyter* mind, imbuing them with a single collective purpose. Dive-bombing the human the herded him toward his arbiter.

Aware that the attack had broken off, Mark looked up, hoping that he'd stumbled out of their territory. What he saw was a face of unparalleled ugliness.

"Lord God Almighty!" He gasped, stunned by the creature's appearance. For a moment he thought that the arrow still stuck in his hand had been coated with some sort of hallucinogenic, and that what he was seeing had no place in reality. Then the thing spoke, addressing him in a voice like nails scraping down granite.

"To your knees, son of man." The *duergar* commanded. From a claw-like hook on its wide belt it drew a coiled leather whip, the last third of which was barbed with flint-sharpened chips of dead-white bone.

In a hypnotic stupor Mark complied, trembling like a leaf and frightened to a degree that no war-zone had ever managed to induce. Sat astride a horse of breathtaking beauty, the thing was itself dwarfish in height, with a grotesquely massive muscle-structure that made it wide as three men. It wore a primitively fashioned coat of cowhide, dark leggings of some rough material, and shoes which looked like crudely stitched moleskins. Covering most of its head and half of its terrible face was a cleverly fashioned helmet of what appeared to be hardened green moss. The skin not covered was the ill shade of pond scum. The creature's eyes - by far the most disturbing of its features - were large, almond-shaped and glowing viridian.

"What are you?" Mark whispered, his mind swirling with wild thoughts of radioactivity and mutation.

"SILENCE, MURDER!" Bodachan howled. Faster than human eyes could follow he flicked the whip back and brought it snapping forward.

The reporter screamed in pain and fright as barbs tore through the fabric of his jacket and bit deep into the flesh beneath. Everything he knew told him to stand and run away as fast and as far as he could. But try as he did to rise, his body would not obey. Something held him fast, preventing him from falling over, turning away or even closing his eyes. The whip cracked again, this time striping his other shoulder with a white-hot line of agony. Then the creature turned its malicious attention to his torso, delivering a sideways blow which sent the whip circling around his back. Each subsequent stroke hit like a heavyweight, cracking ribs and momentarily sinking-in dozens of teeth-like barbs, which ripped a new pattern from his flesh when jerked free. Mark yelled, cursed and begged in equal measure, trying anything to end the beating.

"No...wait. Please," Mark said as the thing paused to change hands. "Not me....Didn't do anything," he pleaded, bloody saliva from a bitten tongue dribbling down his chin. Somewhere above him, but out of his line of sight, he became aware of a vaguely musical humming noise. The flying things, chattering like tropical insects, he thought, before pain shock-dulled pain exploded with full force, making it impossible to think of anything.

Listening to his *hyters* communal speech, the *duergar* snarled a response in the old tongue. Then coiling the blood-slickened whip it urged its mount forward, and with one massive hand lifted the human's semi-conscious form over the *garron's* neck. The son of man had pleaded innocence, and the *hyters* had felt his sincerity. If not the murder - evidence aside - then he had been wrongly punished. Or perhaps punished only to the wrong degree. That he did not *belong*, and was therefore a trespasser on Sidhe lands was not in doubt. Let they who sat the Circle determine the intruder's fate, Bodachan decided.

Touching heels to his mount's flanks, the *duergar* set it racing in the direction of Pollagoona Mountain.

The grasslands were the lungs of London. Or so said the gypsy in whose iron-riddled contraption the Sidhe had travelled into the heart of the city as night turned into early morning. Now on the northern edge of Hyde Park, close to Speaker's Corner, the three were looking south, searching for something half remembered. To their greater than human senses, the park land was sick; yet another example of nature slowly dying under mankind's omnipresent filth.

"There." Midar pointed a long finger in the general direction of Buckingham Palace. "The Ley is damaged, though still runs true. I shall track it to the joining place." Giving a short bow he said, "May *Dana* guide us all." Without a backward glance he set off across the grass, glamour-wrought priestly cassock flapping about his legs. High above, flitting beneath the stars, the black crow followed.

"Our path lies in that direction," Aillen Midhna said, unfolding a page torn from a book of street maps, and marked by Midar's gypsy contacts. "He dwells in a place called Knightsbridge," the *pandeus* smiled broadly. "Though I doubt we shall see the knight." With the nightingale flying before them, and Aillen once more in the guise of the White Lady, the pair headed toward the house of the Minister for War.

It was well after midnight, but Anthony Pierce was reluctant to end his day. The latest Above Top Secret JIC document made for fascinating if alarming reading. The sphere of Fey influence was thought to be spreading, and the agent code named the Sailor had still not been apprehended. Features bathed in the glow of his PC screen, he leaned back into his swivel-chair's upholstery and electronically flipped another page. Finding something of interest he marked it with a red highlight, and glancing at the clock set in the upper left hand corner of the display, allocated himself another ten minutes.

The reason why he had so much enthusiasm and energy was his new-found freedom. No longer would he have to bow before Nicholas Wynt. Exactly as Goodman had promised, his associate had delivered the incriminating tape - which now contained an episode of One Foot In The Grave - and made no additional demands. Unlikely as it had seemed, when originally proposed, the deputy director and his apparently pan-global allies wanted nothing more than Ministerial endorsement. When the time was right. The best part of it was that the Network's proposal for a multi-lateral approach to the Fey problem actually made good sense. Those in the USA, CIS and elsewhere who knew the truth about the Exclusion Zone would never permit the United Kingdom to go it alone. Political reality meant that the Fey, and all

they represented, had to be treated like Berlin at the close of World War Two. Each one of the major players would get a share. The only potential problem he could see was Wynt. Once he discovered that his deputy had been disloyal, he'd do his level best to remove the man. Even though Goodman's actions had done nothing that would jeopardise the security of the realm.

Reaching into his inside breast pocket, Pierce fished out a cigarette case, originally acquired by his grandfather from a German PoW. Ingeniously constructed from hand-carved pieces of boxwood, the case was a tangible reminder of a time when Britain had been truly great. A time that would surely return, when the Fey were induced, or if necessary forced, to yield their secrets. Applying the flame of a silver table lighter to his cheroot, he drew smoke through its filter-tip, and turned his attention back to the Joint Intelligence report.

In the room next door to where her husband was *still* working, Rebecca Pierce turned irritably and stared at the bedside clock. It was getting late, and once again Tony was absorbed with his papers. From other politicians wives she'd heard stories of husbands obsessed with work - or other women - but none of them had to put up with it going on in an adjacent room. The door to which had to stay partly open to allow the family cats access. Closing it only resulted in badly clawed wood. Light filtered through the gap, along with the irritating rattle of a computer keyboard, making any attempt at sleep next too impossible.

"Tony." Rebecca called out tiredly. "It's almost two AM. Are you coming to bed soon?"

"Yes, darling." The Minister replied as if addressing an inanimate object. "Nearly finished now. Just a give me few more minutes, and I'll call it a day." His voice switched to a familiar tone. "I'm glad you're still awake."

Knowing exactly what the slightly ingratiating comment meant, Rebecca wriggled into a sitting position, and turning a pillow up against the ornate headboard, used it as a back support. Folding her arms underneath her breasts she sulked in silence, resenting the way that she was always expected to be ready. On call for sex, or anything else that her husband required of a woman. There was no pretence at affection anymore, nothing she could look forward to. All Tony wanted was someone compliant. He didn't care, and hadn't since soon after they'd been married. If he ever really had. As she'd discovered, politician didn't only lie to the electorate. Unable to have children due to a low sperm count, and unwilling to adopt, Tony's career was all that really mattered to him. A young wife was just an ego-boost, and an occasionally useful accessory at social functions. Lately she'd felt even less than that. There were ample opportunities for an affair. Plenty of furtive comments from young, and not so young admirers. But none that offered more than what she already had, or a quick meaningless screw. Politics bled the romance out of its players.

Walking silently into the bedroom a bundle of dark brown fur leapt gracefully onto the duvet, and stalked up the centre with tail held high.

"Selina," Rebecca spoke lovingly, opening her arms wide to encircle the cat. A recent addition to the household, the apparently homeless tabby had been found by the daily domestic hiding behind the dustbins.

Accepting the caress the cat settled against the woman's night-dress, its long-

whiskered face nuzzling the bare flesh of her arms. Then making itself comfortable it regarded the lighted study with haughty disdain.

Rebecca saw the look and felt obliged to respond. "He hasn't got time to fuss you, beauty." She scratched behind her new pet's ears. "He didn't want to let you stay. No he didn't. All he cares about are his silly floppy disks." As if in agreement the cat purred softly, its almond-shaped eyes burning brightly in the dark-furred face. A perfect yellow they glazed momentarily - as if dying a small death - then flickered with new life; the second of nine.

Twisting lithely from between the woman's arms Beith Ur's newest pair of eyes padded back into the War Minister's study. Where, ignored by the occupant, a greater than feline intelligence looked out. Hiding until the man had switched off the light and left the room, Beith's familiar moved through the house, entering all the rooms to which the doors were open, and mentally noting what was inside. Those that were closed it pressed its head against, and looking *through* the barrier, saw where it could not physically go. When its inventory was complete, it returned to the upper floor, and padded back into the bedroom.

The enemy of the Sidhe lay between his woman's dutifully spread thighs, taking her with a gracelessness typical of humankind. Untroubled by the darkness the cat's eyes saw that she secretly wore an expression of distaste. Promoted by its master it jumped lightly up onto the end of the bed, and moving with the inborn stealth of its kind, advanced over the duvet's hunched folds stalking the fleshy target as if it were a large bald mouse. Then yowling in triumph the cat pounced, and sank its claws into the pink expanse of the War Minister's bobbing backside.

In the street outside of the Knightsbridge residence, concealed from human sight by his companion's glamour, the Passenger let out a distinctly inhuman chuckle.



The Death Of Dave Holmes © Martin Chaplin & Adam Webb

Chapter Eight

Ravager, Maker and Shapetaker

Turning his back on Williamson, who'd just given his verbal report, the director walked slowly across the Project Wonderland lab, deep in thought. When he reached the far wall he turned and he turned on his heel and stared at the doctor.

"Are you absolutely sure, this time?"

"It's impossible to be *absolutely* certain, sir." The doctor said glibly. "But in my opinion, Saille's physiological and psychological status indicates that her system has *not* built up a tolerance to ferrite. According to all the tests we've run, she *is* still controllable, and what happened to Dr Lynch was due to an unfortunate oversight on his part."

"And you maintain that her knowingly facilitating his death is not the same thing as voluntary murder?"

"In terms of free will, no." Williamson thought for a moment. "Saille did exactly what was asked of her, and nothing more. The mistake Lynch made was in not asking her if 'untying the weave' would be harmful to himself." He paused again. "Now that we have identified a critical limitation of the technique, it is extremely unlikely that the error would be repeated. Also, as I said, tests conducted on Oberon using ferrite in association with lysergic acid diethylamide, and tetrodotoxin B have yielded promising results. I'd like to try applying them to a conscious Fey."

The director pursed his lips. "Very well." He wagged a warning finger. "But on your own head be it. Mixing hallucinogenics or Haitian zombie potions with the Fey metabolism strikes me as a particularly volatile combination. Full security is mandatory, at all times. Do I make myself *absolutely* clear, doctor?"

About to leave the lab, the director was halted by a bleeping from his radio-pager. Thumbing the device's off button he strode to the nearest phone and snatched it out of its cradle, then tapping in the appropriate number he spoke to Stephen Mills, who was substituting as Deputy Chief because Goodman had apparently gone down with some sort of flu-bug. Seconds later his neutral expression was replaced by a look of controlled fury.

"He's brought in *who*?" He shouted down the receiver. "What in God's name are *they* doing here? Does he now. Well, we'll soon see about that." Slamming the handset down he stormed off toward upper levels.

Kurt Williamson breathed a sign of relief, glad that he wasn't going to be on the receiving end of the director's temper.

"Nick Senneker, Defence Intelligence Agency," the American said, offering his hand.

Ignoring the man completely, Wynt directed his anger at the DIS field agent who by bringing in an outsider - a *foreign agent*, no less - had broken several of the strictest edicts governing those with access to Whitehall Central. "Eisner," he spoke the name like it was a curse. "Have you lost your mind. This is a flagrant breach of security."

"Sir, it's okay." Senneker tried again.

"Shut up!" Wynt ordered. "Well, man," he said to Eisner. "I'm waiting."

Even though he felt like punching the old bastard in the mouth, Michael controlled himself. It just wasn't worth it. "The American's already knew about Whitehall Central, sir," he began, matching his superior's cold stare. "Holy Ghost was a shambles. The Fey set up an ambush. I'm the only one who made it back. And that's only due to Agent Senneker's intervention."

"Is this true?" Wynt rounded on the DIA man.

"Damn straight it is." The agent responded with the almost theatrical seriousness nature had reserved for Americans. "Now, sir, if you're prepared to listen, my government has authorised me to open negotiations."

For a long moment the director made no reply. The intelligence community often worked like a giant game of chess, but judging by his confidence Senneker was no pawn. Looking at him properly for the first time he tried to fit the face with details on file. DIS had extensive files on all known and suspected foreign agents. Senneker was a light-skinned Negro, possibly of mixed race. In his mid to late thirties, he was of average height and weight, had a nondescript haircut and no visible distinguishing marks. He was a Mr Anonymous, perfect for field work in most areas of the western world, and because of his racial characteristic, in many third world countries. Anger fading now, Wynt assimilated what Eisner had said. The man was obviously still shocked by his ordeal, but would never have bypassed normal channels unless he thought circumstances demanded he do so. Also to be taken into consideration was the American's sheer cheek. By that token alone it was clear that the DIA thought they had something very important to offer. Only a fool would refuse to listen.

"Very well." Wynt indicated the left hand corridor. "If you'd be so kind as to follow me, Agent Senneker. We shall talk." Over his shoulder he said, "Go to debriefing, Eisner, then take yourself down to the labs. When you've been scanned, join us in my office." As an afterthought he added, "I'm sorry about the men."

The apparent fact that Eisner's team had been ambushed proved that the Fey did not want humanity poking about in Lough Derg, Donegal. If not the Bell of legend, then there was clearly something else beneath the waters of grave concern to them. Discovering precisely what could wait for another day. Saille's information had been proved to have some basis in actuality. She was telling the truth, at least as she believed it to be. British Intelligence could therefore exploit her to maximum potential.

"The Berlin Conference did not prohibit theoretical research." Senneker reeled off a prepared statement. "As for how we got started, well, there are a lot o' folks descended from Irish immigrants in the US. Some of 'em working for the DIA. So what I'm sayin' is, the legend of Saint Patrick wasn't exactly a secret."

"And your technical boffins used the legend as a theoretical basis for research." Wynt said, feigning surprise. "How clever of them."

"The legend," Senneker gestured with his hand, "plus other data we managed to

acquire from one of our sources."

"Ah yes," Wynt said frostily. "Your source. By the way," he fixed the American with a steely stare. "How is the lovely Miss Ash?"

"Excuse me." Senneker seemed genuinely puzzled. "I don't know a Miss Ash."

The director said nothing. Whether the DIA did or did not have Caitlin Ash was of little consequence now. Their information concerning Whitehall Central and Operation Holy Ghost had to have come from a much higher placed source than the missing analyst. But uncovering the mole's identity would have to wait, for the time being.

"So, I was talkin' general theory," Senneker began again. "The MIT Jericho is a device that produces high-energy narrow-spectrum burst of electromagnetic noise. Coupled with Fey-specific sub-sonics. As proved in the field," he smirked, "it is capable of temporarily neutralising the abilities of any Fey within range. The only major drawback, sir, is that it works along similar principles to the electro-magnetic pulse, as generated by a nuclear discharge. Therefore, any unshielded electronic equipment within a radius of approximately three-thousand yards..."

"May be damaged or destroyed." Wynt finished, familiar with the effects of EMP. Nodding understanding, he added, "I take it that your illicit excursion means suitably effective shielding is already available for the carrier?"

"Yes sir, it is." Senneker glanced at his wristwatch. "Some five hours back we took an Apache Attack Chopper from RAF Fairford, and had ourselves a field test." He indicted the attaché case he'd brought to the meeting. "I have gun-camera film and the results of on-board scanning. Multi-frequency, right across the board."

"What about technical specifications." Wynt said, aware that the American would consider his dead-pan delivery as serious. "Do you have those in your bag of tricks?"

"C'mon." Senneker gave a doubtful little smile. "You know better than that, sir." Leaning forward he began his pitch, "Look, we know you Brits are gettin' itchy, and it's no problem. Inter-party dirty tricks aside, the US and UK do have a special relationship?"

"Most definitely," Wynt replied, suppressing a smile of his own at the mention of the various subtle attempts made over recent years by governments on both sides of the Atlantic to lose each other elections.

"So, let's can the BS of who and how, and get straight down to business. We got the MIT Jericho, a real lulu of a gizmo that has been *proved* to screw-up Fey magic. What I'm here to propose, sir, is that we form a joint team, your guys and ours. The US Government feels that we should go in, now, while we have the chance."

"What do you mean by, while we have the chance?" Wynt frowned. "If the DIA have significant information regarding Fey strategy, I must insist that you reveal it."

"You misunderstand," Senneker waved down the director's concern. "All I meant was that if it happened in Ireland, it could happen someplace else." He raised his eyebrows. "The US, for example, also has its legends, sir."

"I'm not an expert in such matters."

"Native Americans," the agent made an O-shape with his mouth and silently mimicked an Indian brave's war cry, "worshipped what they named *Manitous*. Spirit people

who could work magic." He paused, then added, "Kinda reminds me of the Fey."

"I see," Wynt said, mind racing ahead. "Are you telling me that your superiors have reason to believe such beings might return, as the Fey have done?"

Senneker cocked his head to one side. "Let's just say that those who're up to speed with the game plan are real nervous about the *possibility*. In the United States, information ain't so easy to keep quiet, these days. If those old Indian stories are true, then who knows what's in store." He lied, knowing that the stories *were* true. "We could find ourselves with a Thunderbird sittin' on the Whitehouse lawn. Only it won't be the sort you find on Tracy Island!"

The director recognised that the man was making some sort of joke, but had no appropriate response. As a child of the 30's Gerry Anderson's Supermarionation puppetry meant nothing to him. But the American Government's concern did; it was something he could exploit. The Jericho device, if used in conjunction with discoveries made in Project Wonderland, would give Operation Mordor a far greater chance of success. Naturally, there would have to be a period of consultation. Agreements would need to be reached. Though it would be in the interests of both sides to reach a speedy compromise. Delay would benefit no one but the Fey. Who, when faced with such a devastating combination would surely have no choice but to surrender.

There was a knock on the door, followed a moment later by Michael Eisner, who looked a good deal better. He entered bearing a slim blue file and a sheaf of computer printout paper, which he placed before the director without preamble.

"Sir, I think you should see this. It's fresh from SIGINT."

"Uh, you want that I should take a walk?" Senneker offered.

Without taking his eyes off the paperwork, Wynt held up a palm. The recent turn of events made the American's involvement virtually inevitable. Therefore, sharing the non-technical aspects of what Eisner had brought would serve as a show of good faith.

"Summarise this for our friend," he instructed, handing the bundle back to his man.

"It's to do with a Fey agent code named the Sailor," Michael began. "We've been trying to pin him down ever since he came ashore. But he keeps on giving us the slip. Anyway, I put in a request to SIGINT at GCHQ to correlate any unusual occurrences that might form a pattern. Something that might give us a clue as to what the Sailor was doing, and where he might turn up next. SIGNIT flagged a connection between inexplicable power-failures and a sudden rise in cot-deaths, both occurring in streets in the Wiltshire area. This," he waved the file, "contains the results of exhumation orders I got on two of the children." he swallowed hard. "When the coffins were opened, there weren't any corpses. Instead of bodies, there were stick-men. Crude, baby-size constructions, with rotting apples where the heads should have been."

"Je-zus!" Senneker cursed under his breath. "So what you're dealing with is some kinda changeling. But, if the kids aren't dead, where did they go?"

"It's only speculation, at present, but we think the Sailor took them. Our experts tell us that there was no trace of a human body *ever* having been in either coffin." Turning to the director he added, "But there was a high level of residual electromagnetic energy." Opening

the photo-section of the file he detached four prints and placed them on the desk. "These were waiting for me in Records And Information. They're pictures of a man - the same man - who's been spotted near or at these ancient sites." At the bottom of each sharply reproduced 8" x 10" black and white was a place name and identification code.

"You think this guy's the Sailor?" Senneker squinted at the nearest photograph. "He looks like a priest to me."

"He may be," Eisner conceded. "But no member of the clergy interviewed thus far has been able to identify him. Not has any church claimed to have a single representative near all of these specific sites on the days in question."

"Gentlemen," Wynt broke in. "I think at this point we may benefit from expert counsel." Pressing a toggle on his desk intercom he called Project Wonderland's central lab. "Williamson. Fetch Sergeant Halcombe from his quarters, and escort him to the briefing room. Something's come up that requires his specialist knowledge."

Seated before her large, antique dressing table mirror, Rebecca Pierce used a soft make-up brush on her cheekbones, adding final touches. Then, plucking an atomiser from the array of jars and vials, she applied a liberal dose of Cinnabar, her favourite perfume. This, the latest batch, had been a gift from Tony, delivered by personal courier during the afternoon. Probably as a thank you and apology for the night before. Rebecca looked at her reflection and smiled, feeling as if she deserved both. Tony was twenty-seven years her senior, and had never been the most exciting of lovers. Especially last night, when Selina had clawed him just as he was about to climax! It had taken some effort not to laugh as Tony chased the cat around the room.

One of the few enjoyable benefits of being a high-ranking politician's wife were the doors that opened when his name was mentioned. Restaurants that were fully booked could always manage to find a table for Mrs Anthony Pierce, and shop managers who knew her always made sure she had the best possible service. Quite naturally at the best possible price. Mr. Pierce didn't care what the bill came to, it wasn't her money. Although she'd certainly earned it. Rebecca looked at her reflection and promised herself that one day, she'd find someone worth leaving Tony for. Maybe even tonight, at Flash Harry's party. Smiling at the thought of herself and a sexy young rock star she ran the tip of her tongue over her perfect teeth. From the top of her honey-blond hair down to the ends of her silk-stockinged toes, she looked fantastic. A temptress, as the press would put it. Imagination, though, was one thing, a *real* affair was something else entirely. If she ever did find the courage to throw caution to the winds, she knew it might cost her dearly. But, there was no harm in flirting.

When the doorbell announced the taxi's arrival Anthony was still, predictably, up to his nose in paperwork. He barely managed a grunt of understanding as she kissed him on the cheek and told him not to wait up. As if he really would. Slamming the door behind her Rebecca trotted down the path and into the rear of the black cab. The party was to celebrate the fifth anniversary of H's, a popular club in the heart of the West End, owned by ex-rocker Flash Harry. He'd be there, of course, along with a host of past, present and would-be future celebrities. There was even a rumour that the surviving members of the Rolling Stones would

be in attendance.

Had she listened very carefully, the taxi's passenger might just have been able to make out the wavering notes of a softly played set of panpipes, drifting on the summer breeze. Aillen Midhna followed the invisible trail his pipe-magic was making, striding jauntily along the pavement. To the eyes he knew were watching, the shape he now wore was one which the gypsies had told him nobody would think to question.

"Good evening." Aillen said to a passing pedestrian, who he noticed, had deliberately stepped out of his path.

"Good evening, officer," came the muttered reply.

At ten minutes to one AM the telephone beside the bed started to ring. Separate to the one hooked up to an answering machine, this was his personal line.

"What is it?" Pierce mumbled into the mouthpiece, forcing himself awake.

"Anthony." Nicholas Wynt's familiar voice crackled brightly down the line. "Sorry to disturb you, but there's been a development I think you should know about. Shall we say half an hour, in my office." As usual with the Director of DIS, the politely made request was really a thinly veiled order to attend.

"No. I'm afraid that won't be convenient." The Minister replied, experiencing a surge of adrenalin at the fact that he was free to defy with impunity.

"I beg your pardon." Wynt said, his surprise evident.

"Granted," Pierce smirked to himself. "What I said, was that your proposed meeting in not convenient, Wynt." Using the director's Christian name over the phone was done as a deliberate attempt to annoy.

"The matter is rather sensitive, Anthony." Wynt sounded more perplexed than angry. "I know how deeply you care about *sensitive* subjects."

"Indeed." Pierce fought down an urge to laugh out loud. "Which you have been, shall we say relieved, of a certain burden. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get back to sleep. You can call my secretary first thing..."

"It's the Americans, damn it!" The director interrupted. "They are here, now." There followed a brief pause. "Anthony, this is simply too important, too urgent, for us to allow any personal issue to cause a delay."

"Evidently." Pierce said, slightly taken aback by Wynt's suddenly conciliatory tone. Glancing at the clock, he said, "If you can spare a car, I'll be ready in half an hour."

"Yes, of course." Wynt agreed instantly. "I'll send my own driver, you know him."

After the line went dead Pierce continued to hold the handset to his ear for a few dumbfounded seconds. he'd expected threats, perhaps even paranoid questions. What he hadn't expected was to be told that Americans were inside Whitehall Central. American's who were allied with the Network, he wondered. Whatever the case, there had obviously been a major development, which in political terms meant that a sack of red-hot potatoes had landed squarely in his lap.

Clutching the note he'd scribbled hastily for his wife, Pierce took a piece of sticky tape from the dispenser on his study desk, and fixed it in the centre of the master bedroom's

door. Not even Rebecca could miss it there. One floor below he heard the front door open, and cursed under his breath. Rebecca had returned from her soiree, and now he'd have to make some attempt to explain in person why he was going out.

"Hello, darling." He shouted. Strangely, there was no reply.

From the concealing darkness of the landing, a pair of yellow eyes were watching.

"I haven't the foggiest idea." Johnny Halcombe repeated for the third time, speaking very slowly, as if for a child to copy down.

Getting the message, in more ways than one, Williamson stopped writing and placed his biro and pad on the table.

"But you think the children are still alive?" Eisner sought confirmation.

"All I know for sure," Johnny oriented on the questioner. "Is that if these kids have a trace of the Bloodsong in them, they're probably still breathing."

"What about ritual sacrifice?" Senneker asked, careful to make sure he did not alert the others to the real reason for the question. "The blood of innocents."

"That's not the way the Fey work," Williamson dismissed the suggestion. "Their known rituals don't include blood-letting ceremonies." For the briefest instant his eyes flickered toward the exception to the rule. "Not usually, that is."

"What's the story?" Senneker looked from face to face.

"Don't let it worry you, pal." Johnny said. "The Doc's right. The Fey have dozens of ways to kill and maim, but they don't get their jollies by topping kids. They aren't angels. Well," he caught Williamson's eye, "they might be. But that's another story. What I'm saying is, the Fey can be the biggest bastards you ever met, but they aren't into all that Satanist shit."

"Lemme get this straight." Senneker said, deliberately ignoring the soldier's Biblical reference. The Brits were getting closer to the real truth, but now was not the time or place to let them know how just close. "This, Bloodsong, is somethin' special. And if ya got it, they don't kill ya?"

"As far as we understand," the director replied. "I must confess that Sergeant Halcombe's suggestion has some merit. Assuming that the Sailor is the guilty party, he *must* have some purpose in collecting these infants. If they do possess a micro-biological link to the Fey, then the elaborate nature of their abductions would make some sort of sense. Whereas murder, at least under the known circumstances, doesn't."

"I guess not, sir." The American nodded thoughtfully. "But if the kids do have the Bloodsong, I'd sure like to know what the Fey are gonna do with 'em."

"In that you're not alone." Wynt said dryly.

H's club had filled up early, the minor celebrities and their entourage coming in small packs, and catching all the attention they could before the top of the bill people arrived. Rebecca had watched the preening displays and obvious rivalries from her table near the bar, enjoying the fact that she did not have to compete or rely on the press for her own prestige.

"It's hard to believe people once thought he was the Devil, isn't it?" A man's voice said, the owner's lips almost touching her ear.

Slightly startled, Rebecca turned in time to see the speaker nodding toward the bar. "I'm sorry," she said, the side of her face still tingling from the warmth of his breath. "I wasn't listening. What did you say?"

Again the stranger moved in close, as was required by the decibel range issuing from the club's many speakers. "I said, it's hard to believe anyone thought he was the Devil." Seeing her frown, he pointed a thumb at the far end of H's cocktail bar, where the rock legend was holding court. "See, it's Mick."

"Oh, yes." At last Rebecca caught on. "He looks safe enough now."

"Looks can be deceptive," Dave said roguishly, twiddling the end of his moustache. "Come on, let's dance." Without giving her chance to say no, he took her hand and tugged her toward the already crowded floor.

Three songs later Rebecca was getting a little dizzy. The denim-clad stranger had introduced himself during a lull in the sonic assault as David Holmes, son of Roger Holmes, the much celebrated author of *The Safe Screw* sex guide. David was a good dancer, she had to admit, and he knew how to keep his hands to himself. Which was why, when a slow song began to play, she obligingly wrapped her arms around his neck. All she really wanted was a rest, and a long cool drink, but she knew that if she left the dance floor straight away, he'd only get upset. Men's egos were such fragile things.

Glamour now clothing him in a style copied from a young man he'd seen in the street, Aillen Midhna drank in the stimuli bombarding his senses from all sides. Before passing through the club's pleasantly iron-free portals, he'd considered human musicians to be primitive creatures, barely able to coax a rhythm from a drum. What he'd heard inside had been a revelation, and everywhere he looked there were dazzling displays of many-coloured light, dancing and swirling in time with the beat that came from boxes mounted high on the walls. So often he'd been told of the evils wrought by mankind's new magic, but never of its wonders. *Technology*, it seemed, could be a power for good, when placed in the right hands. The music it generated was, to his ears, raw and urgent. No match for the subtlety or endless depth of Sidhe playing. Yet it was not without certain promise.

"CLOUDBUSTING." Boomed the voice of the long-haired young man whose function was to conjure the sounds. "AN OLDIE FROM '85."

Aillen nodded thoughtfully to himself, wondering if the singer was a bearer of the Bloodsong. If so it would come as no great surprise, she had the trace of it present in every subtle nuance of her voice.

Music aside, the city of London held many dangers for the Sidhe. In the midst of so much iron, man was at his strongest, and severe limitations were placed upon makers of magic. Death in such a place would be final. Therefore it was necessary to employ guile; a thing which the Sidhe, among all the Fallen, excelled at. A plan had been formed, in which the woman could be used to confuse Albion's dogs. Once, that was, she'd been enraptured. The table at which he sat was on a slightly higher level than the brilliantly-lit dance floor, and so he was able to see the woman as she danced. And when she embraced a man who, like many of those present, wore his hair as long and free as the Sidhe.

Bathed in the heat of the overhead lights, and hemmed-in by the press of bodies

gyrating to the new number one from Janus Stark, Rebecca began to feel rather light-headed. It was time to go and get some fresh air. Smiling up at her partner she shouted over the beat.

"That's it. I need a rest." Fanning a hand in front of her face, she added. "Thanks for the dance, David." With an expression that said 'you're breaking my heart' his arms slipped from around her waist, allowing her to move away.

Reaching the nearest exit, Rebecca leaned on its bar-latch and stepped into the coolness of the narrow service alley which ran between H's and the next building. Closing the door halfway she leaned back against a wall, shutting her eyes in an effort to banish dizziness. The smell of spicy fast food wafting from a nearby extractor fan didn't help, but she'd be okay in a few minutes. Once her system cooled down.

"You're not getting away that easily."

Surprised by the sudden speech, Rebecca opened her eyes wide. It was David, standing not two feet in front of her with a big smile on his face. No, she corrected herself, his expression was a rather unsavoury leer.

"Er, I think you have the wrong idea."

"Is that so." Blocking her attempt to push past him back into the safety of the crowd, Dave forced her back against the wall. "I don't think so. Not from the way you were dancing." Leaning forward he pressed his lips against hers, but was prevented from sliding his tongue between them by tightly clenched teeth. "Hey," he drew back an inch. "What's the problem. I *know* you want it, so relax, okay."

"Have you any idea who I am?" Rebecca hissed, using both her arms in a doomed attempt to push her assailant away.

"Sure, you're name's Elaine, no, *Rebecca*." Dave grinned as if he should be awarded a prize for remembering.

"I'm *Mrs* Rebecca Pierce!"

"You're a tart! Just like all the rest."

"You ignorant oaf." Rebecca said, struggling to keep the fear out of her voice. "My husband is a Cabinet Minister."

"Great." Dave unzipped his jeans. "I've never had a *political* tart before. My dad'll be really proud."

"Hold." A new voice ordered.

Dave snapped his head to one side, and saw a thin-looking young man in grey-snakeskin jeans and a light-reactive Janus Stark T-shirt. One side of the fabric still held the predominant reds and yellows of the disco lights, the other was fading to the colour of night sky.

"Fuck of." Dave sneered in dismissal. Turning his attention back to his prize he closed a hand over her satin-covered breast.

"Let her go." The newcomer insisted, this time with a hint of menace.

Moving quickly, Dave leaned toward the speaker and butted him in the face. "Get lost, you interfering little prick. This one's mine," he muttered as the man staggered backwards, blood streaming from his broken nose. For an instant he hesitated, noticing that the blood seemed to be glittering. But then he remembered the T-shirt's effect.

The damaged area repaired itself in seconds, leaving only drying blood as evidence that anything had happened. *Sidhe* blood, Aillen Midhna thought, his usually jovial mood vanishing. Reaching through the glamour he brought the *antarra* to his lips. The music of the *Daoine Sidhe* had many uses, and on this occasion he would employ its lethal edge for the purpose of atonement.

Pulse rate increasing, Dave wrestled with his struggling prize, trying to hitch up her pale blue dress, while at the same time she tried to keep it down. Excitement, fuelled by adrenalin grew inside of him, feeding from a pit of base lust. He liked it when they fought a bit, because winning always made him feel hot. Right now his dick was harder than he could ever remember it being, solid as a rock. Solid as a *cock*, he mentally corrected himself. It throbbed in time with his heartbeat, faster and stronger than the muffled thud of music from H's dance floor. Dimly, he heard another tune; a fleeting quicksilver melody, riding irresistibly over and above the bass beat.

Sensing the man's speeding pulse, Aillen tied his playing to its rhythm, making them one and the same. It was a simple pattern, fluttering madly between two mirror-image notes at the high end of the *antarra's* scale. Imperceptibly at first he increased the tempo, drawing the human's heartbeat along, making it throb ever faster.

Anthony Pierce walked briskly down the short stretch of hall that led to the landing, curious as to why his wife hadn't answered. Perhaps she hadn't heard. Of course, being Rebecca, it was equally possible that someone had annoyed her, and the silence was a warning sign. Danger, bad mood. He hoped not, they'd had enough pointless rows of late. The landing light was off, as were the light below. Was Rebecca wandering about in the dark? Reaching for the switch at the top of the stairs he felt something small and sinuous brush between his angles. Thrown off balance he swayed to one side, but managed to prevent a fall by grabbing the banister.

"You again!" He shouted, thumbing the light switch and focusing on the stray cat. "And don't think I've forgotten last night." Dropping his voice he added, "First thing in the morning, I'm having you evicted."

Tail wagging stiffly the cat cringed, behaving exactly as a normal feline would. It seemed afraid, though if the human had looked hard enough into its yellow eyes, he would not have seen the slightest trace of fear.

Seeing the Minister from his familiar's perspective the Passenger came silently up the stairs. Occupied with chastising the animal, Pierce did not see him until it was too late. Before there was time to react, the Passenger clicked his borrowed fingers and brought into existence a brightly spinning mote of fascination. In the instant it took the mote to flash through its dazzling cycle and die, the Minister was caught. Though not harmed in any way. Features creasing in unaccustomed pain, the Passenger experienced a slowly moving wave of terrible coldness, sweeping through Pdraig O'Connell's body in response to the magic. Frail human flesh had its limitations, he was reminded. Already the borrowed body strained at containing the energy of a *Sidhe* essence. Taxing its resources further by the use of powers *Yahweh* never intended mankind to wield would inevitably hasten its destruction. Though not

quite yet.

The Dreaming had shown him Pierce's face, and those loyal to the Sidhe had told of his importance. Using him against his own kind was Midar's plan, and was proving to be a good one. Pulling the unconscious Minister by his wrists, the Passenger dragged him into a darkened room, a place set aside for a guest, which he'd already seen through the eyes of his familiar. Lifting his chosen victim on to the bed, the Passenger placed his hand on the Minister's brow, and bent his will to the task that would lead him to his final destiny.

While magic that affected the physical plane could not be safely used by a human, *arcan isur*, the magic of the mind, was tolerable. Its power was what had enabled him to make the stray cat his spy, and what he now used to gain entry to the Minister's subconscious mind. Inside were the keys he needed to reach Saille, Judel and the others unjustly imprisoned by they who sought to trap and subjugate the wild Sidhe.

On the fourth floor of a well appointed block of luxury flats near the Docklands development, Yuri Litvinko once again attempted to convince his guest that she was not a prisoner.

"Tonight, Miss Ash, I promise that everything will be explained." He said, hoping that unforeseen circumstances didn't make him a liar.

Caitlin didn't bother responding. At present she was seated in an armchair, facing the door to the single bedroom in which she'd spent most of the past week. Her room was clean and comfortable, with a television, radio and hand basin. The two man team had treated her well, and had made no threats of any kind. Nor had they asked her about GCHQ, SIGINT or anything that might be considered an Official Secret. That was the strangest thing, because if they didn't want her for what she knew, why was she being held? And, for that matter, by whom? The men were professionals, and had given absolutely nothing away. They could represent a European agency, one of the CIS countries, north or south America, the list was a long one. For all she knew they might be attached to British Intelligence.

"Okay then," Caitlin replied belatedly. "If tonight's the night, how about telling me something simple. Like, what's your name?"

"My name is Yuri." The answer came quickly. "Yuri Litvinko."

"A CIS name, by the sound of it?" The analyst guessed. "What does the eastern block expect to gain by holding me?"

"Nothing." Yuri smiled enigmatically. "Perhaps you would feel more comfortable if I tell you that we, and a man you will meet shortly, represent no *single* country. We are not aligned to any geographical block, or inflexible ideology."

Mouth opening to ask another question, Caitlin changed her mind, wary of intelligence trickery. What *comrade* Yuri had said was possibly a reference of Padraig, who although guilty of nothing criminal, was under suspicion by British Intelligence. When he'd originally gone underground, educated goons from DIS had grilled her for days, trying to extract information as to his whereabouts and plans. Accidentally giving her lover away was not something she'd been concerned about, because she genuinely hadn't known where he was or what he was going to do. Even now, her only contacts with him had been via smuggled-in letters. The contents of which never included anything of strategic importance. Aside from

the personal stuff, there was only general information, which anyone who already knew about the Fey could gather for themselves. So, the CIS abducting her for that reason didn't make sense. Unless, that was, they had some plan to use her as bait. That might be it. Paddy spent most of his time inside the Occupied Zone, where the MoD spooks who'd wanted to recruit him couldn't reach. But he might be tempted out, if he thought she was in danger, and foreign agents might not be so reticent about using such methods.

It was all a question of power. The Fey, it seemed, were being treated as living weapons, potential replacements for nuclear bombs. Nobody in intelligence gave a damn what *they* thought about it, or even wanted to open meaningful dialogue. All the reports she'd handled before deciding to quit had dealt with armed conflict scenarios and plans for Fey internment camps. The horrible image induced by the latter was what had finally decided her to take an active role, and involve the media. If left to their own devices, the politicians looked set to subjugate the Fey by use of force; a secret war in which Paddy, and others who were considered to be collaborator, might be killed. Only the weight of public opinion could do anything to alter their course, and for the public to act, they obviously needed to be informed that the Fey existed.

There was a polite knock on the door, and the larger of the two men, who she'd nicknamed Baloo, due to his lumbering walk, went to answer. Moments later he returned leading an older, red-faced man, who seemed somewhat out of breath.

"Sorry I'm late," he said in an Oxbridge accent. "I had to walk up. The damn lift is on the blink."

"Your package was delivered as requested," Yuri announced. "There were no problems."

"That's absolutely splendid." The newcomer rubbed his hands together. "And our guest?" His eyes met Caitlin's. "Is suspicious, I see. Don't worry, my dear, the cat is about to come out of the bag." Crossing the room he stood in front of her and offered his hand. "Bernard Goodman, ex of Whitehall Central, at your service."

On the verge of penetration, Dave Holmes stopped. The tart was making him so hot it was getting uncomfortable. He felt as if he were wearing an overcoat in a sauna. Keeping Rebecca pinned against the wall with one hand, he used the other to tug open his shirt. But instead of the expected relief, he was astonished to find that sweat continued to pour out, running down his chest and into his clothes like water into a dishcloth. The sweat from his brow was getting into his eyes, making it difficult to focus. Suddenly he gasped, fire blossoming deep inside his chest. A heart-attack? The panic-stricken thought came and went. No, it couldn't be. When your ticker stopped tocking it was *difficult* to breathe, but he was hyperventilating. He could feel the blood pumping through his veins, and the throb between his legs was now an angry stab of pain. Abruptly, the sensation worsened, rising through shades of discomfort until it became intolerable. Tottering backward on stiff, bulging legs, Dave looked down in horror at his still growing erection. The glans and corpora cavernosa were filled to capacity. A sharp flare of internal pain made him wince, then cry out in shocked disbelief as a stream of blood fountained from the end of his penis.

Forced under pressure through a breach in his urethra, blood sprayed from the would-be rapist like a miniature firehose, turning his intended victim's dress into something resembling a butcher's apron. Mere heartbeats later still rising pressure split his glans into two unequal halves, causing its owner to topple backwards, screaming like a slaughterhouse pig.

Rebecca screamed too, not quite closing her mouth in time to avoid the volcanic eruption of blood which burst from between her assailant's legs. For terrible seconds he writhed on the ground in front of her, desperately trying to stem the flow from his shattered manhood. Then, mercifully, something gave inside. David clutched his chest, coughed-up a great gout of blood-streaked phlegm, and slumped into unconsciousness. Feeling bile start to rise Rebecca turned her back on the awful scene, and leaning with her arm against the wall, vomited urgently. When she was done she staggered away from the stinking pool, unaware that fingers stained red from contact with the blood on her dress had left sticky impressions on the white-painted brick. Behind her, copper-smelling streams now dribbled obscenely from David's nose, ears and eyes, forming around his head a smaller version of the glistening pool between his spread-eagled thighs.

Bringing the *antarra* back to his lips, Aillen played again, this time using his music's gentle magic to cloud Rebecca's mind and distort her memory of the past few minutes. Then letting her become aware of his presence, he wrapped a protective arm about her shoulders, and using a sheen of glamour to hide the gore that covered the front of her dress, led her to the opposite end of the alley. Where, by the glow of a streetlight, he used a handkerchief taken from Rebecca's purse to wipe spots of blood from her face and hair. Finally, with the tenderness of the lover he intended to become, he cupped his hands close beside her ear, and blew softly.

Rebecca shook her head as if waking from a deep sleep. "What happened?" She asked the handsome young stranger by her side.

"There was a man," the *pandeus* spoke comfortingly. "He tried to steal this." Smiling, he handed back the purse.

"I, I don't remember." Running fingers through her hair she found a spot of blood that the Fey had missed. "Oh no, I'm bleeding."

"It is not your blood. You are unhurt." Aillen insisted quietly. "The man met with an unfortunate accident," he smiled wickedly. "But you don't need to know about that. All you need is to rest." For a fraction of a second his eyes seemed to sparkle.

"Uh, yes." Rebecca blinked rapidly. "I think I'll go home now." Seeing a black cab waiting in the rank outside of H's she waved its driver forward. "Thank you, so much."

"It was nothing." Aillen said truthfully. "Come, I shall escort you." Readying himself for the proximity of iron he led her to the waiting vehicle.

"No, really. I can manage. You've already been more than..." Rebecca started to protest, but found her speech curtailed by a wave of nausea and dizziness. The stranger's hand stopped her from falling. "On second thoughts," she smiled weakly, embarrassed by her mistake. "Your help would be appreciated."

Even allowing for the fact that he owed the American his life, Michael Eisner found himself liking the man. Senneker had an honest, straightforward approach. Which in intelligence circles made for a pleasant change. They were alone now, excluding possible surveillance bugs, and were looking over still pictures taken during the horrific incident on Bodmin Moor, and the morning after.

"Once the high-ups have talked enough turkey, we can get our show rollin'." The American tossed a pair of imaginary dice. "Snake-eyes for the Fey."

At the other end of the briefing room table, Eisner pretended to catch the dice. "Is that what your sources tell you, Nick?"

"Some do, some don't." Senneker said coolly.

"Anyone I might know?"

"Now that," Nick winked, "would depend on who you know." Looking down he gave his attention to the table's contents. Spread across its surface were dozens of 8" x 10" colour photographs of *something*.

"These are mean-looking muthas."

"Members of the cat family." Eisner tapped a print. "They have ears like a lynx, but the coat isn't right. It's too shaggy. And as for the teeth..."

"Yeah." Senneker nodded toward the enlargements of bite wounds found on the dead surveillance men. "Your guys look like they lost an argument with a chainsaw."

"Obviously, we're dealing with something which relates to the Fey. Except that our men weren't the only ones who got chewed-up. The gypos, who were at first thought to be in control, lost a third of their group! None of them actually took part in the attack, or offered any resistance when they were arrested. In fact, none of those picked-up were even sure why they were on the moor. It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't have to, buddy. These are supernatural creatures we're talkin' about. They *vanished*, right into the grass. Someone's gettin' worried, and worried men make mistakes. Even if they ain't really men," he smirked. "Maybe your people were close to somethin' the Sidhe don't want you near," he added, pronouncing the Fey's true name as Sid-ee.

"That's Sidhe," Eisner corrected the common mistake. "As in *she*'ll be coming round the mountain." passing a hand over the table's contents he said, "This reminds me of the Crop Circles, in a funny kind of way."

"Uh, I've seen the pictures," Senneker frowned uncertainly. "Are you tellin' me they're related to all this?"

"Peripherally, maybe. Our original survey concluded that the crop circle phenomenon was a sign, warning of the Fey's return. The men in white coats observed it being triggered by some sort of electro-magnetic disturbance. Anyway, when the circles came again, the summer *after* the Fey had emerged, that theory had a few holes in it. The latest modification is that the circles are caused by a Fey agent - not necessarily a person - and are intended as a distraction. Something to keep us looking in the wrong direction." He picked up a photo showing a blurry cat-shape. "I think that these vicious little sods are here for the same reason."

"Okay," the American nodded thoughtfully. "So if this is a diversion, where's the real

action goin' down?"

The MI5 man detailed to watch Anthony Pierce's Knightsbridge residence duly noted the arrival of a Prussian blue Jaguar. As required, he confirmed its registration as belonging to the MoD, then watched the street until the Minister was safely on his way. The Jag was followed, at a discrete distance, by an unmarked Mondeo, registered to Special Branch.

Wearing the War Minister's shape and possessing fragments of his knowledge, it was the Passenger who sped toward Whitehall. The useful advantage of the human form beneath the glamour was that it felt no discomfort in the presence of iron. Unfortunately, the forces that had been called upon in order to create such a perfect disguise had set in motion a slow, but irreversible chain-reaction. Already under a tremendous strain, the borrowed body had begun to die, its frail cells melting like snow crystals under warm rain.



Duergar © Martin Chaplin & Adam Webb

Chapter Nine

The Whitehall Cuckoo

Except for the porch light the house was in darkness when they arrived, leading Rebecca to assume that her husband had gone to bed. Flicking on lights as she went she showed her good Samaritan into the lounge.

"Please, take a seat. Would you like something to drink? Tea, coffee," she indicated the drinks cabinet standing in one corner. "Or something stronger, if you prefer?" Seeing Aillen nod, she knelt in front of the smoked-glass doors and took out a bottle of malt scotch, which Anthony kept hidden behind the cheaper stuff.

The Sidhe accepted the generous measure, remembering how in ages past he'd amused himself at the expense of human innkeepers, who never understood why the stranger did not get drunk. The simple reason was that the Ranks of the Fallen were made of stronger stuff than Yahweh's lesser creatures. No brew concocted by man had more than the mildest effect on one of the Fallen.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a minute," Rebecca said. Then noticing her guest's expression of concern, she added. "I'm alright. It's just these clothes, they feel dirty. I suppose it's what happened."

At the bottom of the stairs Rebecca paused, a frown of puzzlement creasing her brow. She had the strangest thought that - impossible as it was - the man had also changed his clothing. There was a lingering mental image of him wearing one of the new light-reactive T-shirts. Despite the fact that he wore a plain dress shirt under his jacket. Rebecca shook her head, convinced that her memory was playing tricks. Probably due to the bang on the head inflicted by the would-be mugger. Perhaps he was the one with the T-shirt?

Aillen listened until the woman's footsteps reached the top of the stairs. Then quickly downing the remainder of his drink he stood and walked out of the room. In the doorway he paused, and tentatively reached out to press the small plate set on the wall at shoulder height. The effect was to plunge the room into darkness. He smiled at that, pleased to have mastered a tiny part of the magic humankind named *technology*.

Spotting the note which her husband had left stuck to the bedroom door, Rebecca scanned it quickly, her expression becoming one of distaste. To find that Tony had gone to yet another meeting that *couldn't wait until morning*, was the last thing she needed. Snatching the note down she crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the study.

Unzipping, Rebecca stepped out of her dress and laid it carefully on top of the duvet. As the fabric slipped between her fingers he felt a sticky wetness, and was revolted to discover that her hand was smeared with blood. Retrieving the dress she examined it more closely under the bedroom light, and found that although she was able to feel dampness, she could not *see* any stain.

"Tis the glamour," Aillen said.

Startled, Rebecca spun around, clutching the dress against her body. Her rescuer

stood leaning at an angle against the door frame, light reflecting from metallic blue threads woven into his shirt. *Metallic blue*, when downstairs it had been plain white.

"What's going on?" Rebecca asked, fighting against an unexpected attack of wooziness. "What on earth do you think you're doing up here."

Although she'd tried to sound outraged, what came out was only half-hearted crossness. The man made no reply or movement, except to smile kindly. His actions were as confusing as his clothing. By following her upstairs he'd clearly overstepped the usual boundaries of hospitality, and yet she felt sure that he was no threat. More than that, she felt *safe* in his presence. If only the world would keep still for long enough, everything might make sense.

Catching the Minister's wife as she fell Aillen set her down on the bed, and folding the duvet over her semi-naked body, he retreated one step. It would be some minutes before the effect of what he'd done wore off, and until it did he intended no impropriety.

"That's two I owe you," Rebecca said as the fog inside her head receded. Propping herself up on one elbow, she looked at the stranger. "I don't even know your name."

The *pandeus* smiled mischievously. "Call me Pan. Unless you prefer another name?"

"Pan as in Peter?" The question was accompanied by a doubtful smirk. Looking him up and down she said, "I should call you chameleon."

"*Chameleon*?" The word was unfamiliar.

"Your shirt," Rebecca pointed. "This is going to sound really silly, but I keep thinking it changes colour. But," she held up a finger, "never while I'm watching."

The Sidhe's smile broadened, and by act of will sent all the colours of the rainbow through the glamour which covered his tunic.

"What, I mean, how..." Mental cobwebs blow away by the display, Rebecca was wide-eyed with amazement.

"Tis the glamour," Aillen said again, this time negating that which he'd used to disguise her dress. Lifting it from the floor he held it between his hands for inspection. "Your garment is soiled, milady, yet the pattern has certain, artistry."

Rebecca's jaw dropped open. Her dress looked as if it had been used as a bandage in a casualty ward. Streaks, spots and half-dried patches of what could only be blood were all over the front. Barely had there been time for her to register the sight, when an altogether more fantastic vision presented itself. Peter - as she'd unconsciously decided to call him - *changed*, becoming in the wink of an eye the most physically beautiful man she'd ever seen. In place of modern attire, he now wore moss-green leggings straight of A Midsummer Night's Dream, a matching cambric tunic, and shoes of what appeared to be softened tree-bark. Most dramatically altered was his hair, which had been short and black, but was now long, and shone with a deep, lustrous copper colour.

Familiar with the shocked reaction he read from the woman's eyes, Aillen her a few more moments to come to terms with what she was seeing. Observing the rise and fall of her bosom, now visible above the fallen covering, he smiled knowingly. Like all humans, she could not help but feel awe when confronted by his true form. Instinctively attracted her body was preparing itself, despite what moral protestations he waking mind might offer.

He was one of the Fey! Rebecca belatedly realised in a rush of excitement and trepidation. She'd always thought that Tony had been joking, whenever he'd spoken of them, sparing her from whatever horror had really taken place in Ireland. Now though, faced with undeniable evidence, she knew that the snippets of information her husband had teased her with were founded in truth. What she'd thought of as fanciful pillow talk was real!

"I, I don't know what to say. This is, weird," she gasped, feeling like a little girl who'd just met Santa Claus. "I was told about you. But I didn't believe."

Aillen laughed bitterly, "Few do in this age. Even among those who have seen with their own eyes," he glanced meaningfully at a photo of what he guessed was the War Minister adorning the bedside table. "Some would deny us."

"You mean Tony?"

The *pandeus* nodded. "Your husband is in league with men who would drive my kin out from their rightful lands."

"My husband." Rebecca frowned, excitement dulled by mundane suspicion. "This is a set up, isn't it. Whatever happened at the club, you helping me to get home. Well, if it's Tony you want, then I'm afraid you're out of luck. He isn't here."

"You are wrong," Aillen said, smiling enigmatically. "Though your misgiving is no insult. True, our meeting was not by chance. But I give you my word that neither I nor any of my people sought to bring you harm."

"The man outside the club, David somebody or other," Rebecca said, trying hard to remember exactly what had happened. "Are you saying he wasn't with you?"

"The *Daoine Sidhe* have no need to coerce women against their will." Aillen's eyes flashed with momentary anger. "Have not my own actions proved as much. I wanted only to talk with you, Rebecca Pierce. Talk, about your husband, and the wrongs done by his underlings. Since our Returning they have sought to imprison us, and would gladly destroy all who do not submit to their rule. Some are held against their will, and tortured into compliance."

"That's horrible." Peter had spoken with such conviction that Rebecca felt her initial doubts fading away. "But, why would they do such things?"

"Fear." Aillen hissed. "Humankind has always feared what it cannot understand." Voice becoming sad, he added, "In ages past, we were worshipped. Now, the Dreaming shows us war, among the Fallen, and with your people."

"No." Rebecca felt as if he'd told her the sun was about to turn cold.

"The Dreaming is clear," the lie was perfectly made. Taking his *antarra* pipes from inside his tunic, the *pandeus* brought them up to his lips. "When war comes, beauty shall be the first to fall 'neath its black scythe." Crimson lips above translucent green stems he blew softly, sounding the first notes of an ageless magic.

In the darkened guest bedroom, the real Anthony Pierce woke up. Immediately he was aware of two things. One was an unfamiliar, though very beautiful melody, and the other was the weight of a cat, sitting squarely on his chest. He glared upwards, staring into the stray's yellow eyes as if trying to shift it by force of will. Then, losing patience, resorted to more direct methods.

"Off!" He knocked the cat to the floor with a sweep on his arm, and watched it scamper to the half open door. Where, oddly, it sat as if on guard duty.

Wiping a hand across his face Pierce sat up and took stock of his surroundings. He had no idea why he'd gone to sleep in the guest room. The last thing he could remember was working, and a phone call from Wynt. Rebecca. He recalled something about his wife returning home. After that it was a complete blank. Perhaps he was overworking? Mouth opening in a huge yawn, he rubbed sleep from his eyes and stretched himself awake. The digits on his Rolex said 2.16am, which meant that he'd been asleep for about an hour, although he didn't feel rested. In point of fact, he felt as if he'd just returned from an all-night session in the House. Yawning for a second time, he heard again the sound that had roused him. Somewhere down the hall he could hear music; a lone instrument being played live, by the sound of it. Which was very strange, because no one who might conceivably be in the house at so early an hour was such an accomplished musician. Certainly not Rebecca. His wife couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. Forcing himself to greater wakefulness Pierce swung his aching legs off the bed and pushed himself upright, only to find his path blocked by a hissing, spitting cat. The stray seemed to have lost what few marbles it had ever possessed. Not in the mood for kindness, he booted it out of the way and marched off in pursuit of the mysterious player.

Tears rolled freely down Rebecca's cheeks. A lover of music for as long as she could remember, her tastes encompassed many forms, stretching from classical to the latest cyberblues. Several times in the past she'd been profoundly moved by music, though never before had she heard anything to match the bright beauty of the Fey's melody. The wavering notes of the unfamiliar tune seemed to intertwine sadness and joy, forming an almost palpable sound which wrapped itself around her like a baby-soft cloak of pure emotions.

"Dear God!" Anthony Pierce's astonished voice marred the performance like a snigger at a funeral.

Sudden as a flash of lightning Aillen's tune twisted, becoming a maddened sound, like a wasp trapped behind glass. In the space of a heartbeat it caught the War Minister's mind and stung it into silence. Pierce froze in position, rigid muscles turning him into a living statue. Although upright, he was oblivious to what was occurring before him, or the stream of urine which the Passenger's vengeful familiar was depositing on his trouser-leg.

In a spiralling flurry of notes, Aillen played his way back to the original theme. Gradually slowing the tempo he smoothed away Rebecca's concern, banishing it to the furthest corners of her mind. Note by delicate note he rebuilt the effect that her husband had unexpectedly disturbed. Stoking her sense of well-being he transformed it into joy, then free flowing desire. Finally, as the melody reached a crescendo, he sheared the last ties of inhibition inside her mind.

Groaning out loud Rebecca shuddered. Peter hadn't even touched her, but the sensation were the same as if they'd been making love for hours, steadily building to an incredible climax. To feel like that with a stranger, someone who wasn't even of the same *species*, was wrong. She knew it, but was powerless to resist, even if she'd wanted to. Sprawled across the bed with one leg dangling lasciviously over the edge, all she wanted now

was to surrender to sensation. But it was not to be. At least not *that* way. Right on the brink of orgasm, the music stopped. Rebecca opened her eyes, just in time to see Peter bending to plant a kiss on her lips.

Making only the lightest contact, Aillen burst the dam he'd filled with his playing. Straightening quickly he watched Rebecca buck and heave, regarding the animalistic grunt she made as a human musician might regard enthusiastic applause. The music of the *Daoine Sidhe* had many uses, and by his skill its velvet tongue had given pleasure which no ordinary lover could hope to match. That accomplished, he could attend to his own amusement.

Placing his pipes on the bedside table, Aillen began unbuttoning his tunic.

In the windowless confinement of a DIS interrogation room, Baz Walker was sweating. Some nosy parker had spotted him dropping off the Great Men at the edge of Hyde Park. He'd only stopped for a few seconds, but that had been long enough for the bastard to take down his licence plate number. Or at least that was what he thought had happened. Because just a few miles down the road, the military had been waiting for him.

They were holding him under the Indigenous Nomads Act, because he didn't have the necessary papers. Of course he didn't, there hadn't been time to register. The breach alone could land him in jail, but that was nothing compared to what he'd get for bringing Sidhe into the city. The Army men said they'd already caught one of them. With his mind spinning so fast, and all their questions, it was hard to work out if they were bullshitting, or for real.

"Want a ciggy, Walker?" Corporal Nial held out an open packet, then snatched it back out of reach. "Well that's too bad, 'cause you can't have one."

"Be reasonable," a voice suggested from somewhere behind the prisoner. Strolling into view the speaker blew smoke in Baz's direction. "That's the only way you'll get out of this one, Mr Walker. It's not as if we're asking you to grass on a friend."

"Or even a human being!" Nial added disgustedly.

"Look," the gypsy tried again. "I don't *know* any more. How many times have I got to say it. I've told you everythin' I can remember. That's God's honest truth."

"Tell us again." Staff-Sergeant Edwards insisted.

"I was just doin' what they told me," Baz sighed. Looking at each of his interrogators in turn he searched their faces for a glimmer of belief. "I dunno why they wanted t' come t' London," he gave an apologetic shrug. "Secretive, they are, an' a wise man don't ask."

"Because they're Fey?" Edwards asked casually, offering the prisoner a cigarette from his own pack, and letting him take it.

"Two of 'em might be." The admission was grudgingly made. "Like I said, I didn't ask. One was just a bloke though, I'll tell y' that. Nothin' special t' mark 'im as a Great Man. Nor the other two, fer that matter," he added quickly. "I just got, a feeling about 'em."

"A *feeling*," Nial snorted. "Do me a favour." Moving in close enough for the prisoner to smell his breath he said, "You must've seen something out of the ordinary. No way did these bastards just walk into your poxy convoy and take over. Not without proving themselves. Come on, Walker, tell us what you saw."

Baz thought hard. By now the Great Men were about their business, even if one

really had been caught. And he really didn't know where they'd gone after he'd dropped them, or what the two who were definitely Fey looked like under their glamour. But there was one scrap of information he'd been holding back. Saving, in case he had to use it. Letting the military have it would look good when the case came to trial, and that could mean a much smaller sentence. Besides, the Fey would never know that he was the one who'd betrayed them.

"Okay," he said, his breath coming out like air from a burst balloon. "I do know something you can use. One of them, the first Great Man who came to us, has a disguise he likes to wear. I seen him, late at night. All got up like a vicar," he motioned a dog-collar. "Well," he looked from man to man, "is that any good?"

"It's a start," Edwards replied. "Now, when was it that you first suspected this individual was of the Fey?"

Standing as the minister was shown into his office, the director offered his hand. Pierce shook a little hesitantly, perhaps uncomfortable that the formality gave away the fact that his palm was coated with perspiration.

"Thank you for coming, Anthony." Wynt said. Tapping a ring-bound file he nudged it across the desk. "This is the interim report you'll need to brief the ODC. Due to the extraordinary new circumstances I'll be seeking the committee's immediate approval."

Taking the minister's silence as a willingness to listen, Wynt quickly brought him up to date concerning Peter Lynch's demise, and the failure of Operation Holy Ghost. Then, in greater detail, he explained the unexpected bonus offered by the Americans, and the revised objectives of Operation Mordor.

"And that is the current state of play," Wynt reiterated. "A small, combined team, will go in armed with Wonderland's gubbins and a Jericho device, which they will prime while still outside of the mountain. The Yanks have been rather clever in that department." He smirked, and pointed to the still unopened file. "It's all in there. Although the Jericho device used over Donegal was electrically powered, they also have a version that works via chemical reaction. The timer is clockwork and made of plastic. Once it starts, the Fey's *magical* protection should be neutralised for as long as it takes to drop in a task force sufficient to round-up the leaders." He smiled broadly. "The DIA representative was insisting on us using Delta Force. Until I asked how the renovation was coming along!" Pierce responded with a blank look. "The Statue of Liberty. Karim Fariq Abdullah," Wynt prompted in reference to an embarrassing incident two years past, when Arabic extremists had succeeded in exploding a small bomb inside the famous monument's torch arm.

"Ah, yes." The Passenger said noncommittally, realising that some response was called for.

"Besides, those gung-ho lunatics could hardly be trusted with the rare fruits a negotiated Fey surrender would bring," Wynt ploughed on, putting the Minister's lapse down to the lateness of the hour. "Or, for that matter, any political prisoners."

"Prisoners. What news of those you already hold."

"Nothing new." The director said, frowning in puzzlement at Pierce's seeming lack of

interest in more urgent matters. Was it an indication that the American involvement had not been such a surprise to him?

"I would like to see them." The Passenger said. It was taking a great deal of concentration to buttress his disguise.

"May I ask why?"

"You may not." The hidden Sidhe snapped with the authority he believed to be possessed by the shape he wore.

"Very well." Wynt agreed, more puzzled than ever. "I'll have Williamson arrange it as soon as our business here is concluded." A possible answer clicked into place. Thinking that he was no longer under the threat of public exposure, Pierce was indulging in a mis-timed power game. If so then he was twice a fool, because nothing had really altered.

Immediately after their last telephone conversation he'd checked the hiding place, and as expected, found that the incriminating videotape had been removed. Naturally, the *original* was safely stored in another location. It was a fact he'd decided to keep to himself, until after the present crisis had passed. Then would be the time to identify and punish the culprit, who was perhaps also the American's source of knowledge. If that was the case, then Pierce's strange behaviour would make some sort of sense.

Pressing a toggle on his desk intercom, Wynt spoke to Traffic Control, "Get me the DIA. Washington number." To the Minister he said, "Shall I tell my counterpart that we have the ODC's provisional approval to incorporate US personnel?"

Having no idea what he was agreeing to, the Passenger nodded assent. The time for open conflict was not yet. Soon though, he would play his part in what the Dreaming had foretold. Then, those who had debased the Sidhe would reap the fruit of their trickery.

All the relevant departments had been notified, and the local civilian forces told in no uncertain terms to keep themselves away from what was essentially a military operation. It was now shortly after dawn on a Monday morning, and so Hyde Park was mercifully empty of all but the most dedicated joggers. Acting on information, Michael Eisner and Nick Senneker went about their business in a deliberately low-key fashion, trying to ensure that any casual observer did not realise the official nature of their presence. Both dressed in track suits, to lend credibility to their pretence, they criss-crossed the area between Rotten Row and the Serpentine; the place where the Sailor and his friends were thought to have been deposited by a Gypsy, who was now in custody. If given no more than a cursory inspection, the device Eisner wore on his wrist looked like a high-tech stopwatch. What it really contained was a miniaturised electromagnetic scanning device, tuned to the specific frequencies associated with the Fey. In addition to the visible reading, the scanner was also broadcasting data back to a central unit installed in a van that was parked nearby.

"Anything new?" Eisner asked, speaking into the microphone pick-up concealed under his track suit's collar.

"No, sir." Des Nial's voice buzzed in his ear-piece. "*They were there. Residual levels confirm it. But the trail is already decaying.*"

"Okay. Stand down. We'll go to plan B."

Senneker was standing still looking out over the Serpentine. As the Englishman jogged up to him he nodded across the water. "Maybe out boys went that-a-way."

"Unlikely," Eisner shook his head. "They're here for a purpose. Something important enough for them to take the risk." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the Thames. "Just about everything and everyone who might be a target is in that direction."

"So what do we do now?"

"Plan B, a street by street search."

"Could take a while, buddy." Senneker said, following the Englishman as he trotted in the general direction of Knightsbridge.

"We don't have much choice," Eisner spoke over his shoulder. "Any high profile stuff will bring the media down on us like vultures."

Cloaked at present in the appearance of a denim-clad teenage boy, Midar sat cross-legged under the sheltering branches of an old oak tree near the edge of the lake in St. James's Park. While The *Ur* and *Pandeus* were about their tasks of shape taking and bond-making, his duty was to be that of ravager. The Lords of *technology* guarded their great city well, and for that reason he had allowed men to see him in his most often used disguise. Braver ones would come to seek him out, and following in the dance, find their way to his trap. Altering the shape of the glamour each time his activities had attracted unwanted attention, he'd located active portions of seventeen separate Leys, and their intersection points. Humankind's carelessness had wrought much damage, but *Gaea* was not yet a whipped dog. Abundant power still flowed freely, and if properly channelled, could be tapped.

The night had been spent tracing the old paths, and probing for they who were untroubled by iron. Deep below the surface at one ancient site he'd sensed many sleepers. Though if the Yldra whose presence he'd felt were aware of him, they chose not to respond. Not yet, though soon, he reminded himself. War among the Fallen was as inevitable as the rising sun, and would be equally fierce.

Dawn had brought a silver pyx, carried to him around the neck of a hunting owl; the king's messenger. The tidings informed him that an alliance had been formed with the Fifth Rank, and briefly of the cost to the Daoine Sidhe. It was a decision taken in his absence, and one that filled him with anger. Though in his heart, he knew that what the Circle had done was necessary. In unexpected ways the power of *technology* had taken the Sixth Rank by surprise. Though in time - which to the Fallen was plentiful - its mysteries would be unravelled like intestines on a spike. Then humankind would pay for the indignities it had force upon the children of *Dana*.

In the present, the defenders of Albion would be treated to an example of Sidhe wrath.

Alone in his office, Nicholas Wynt tried to fathom exactly what it had been about his meeting with the Minister that had left him feeling so uneasy. The most obvious fact was that Pierce had a secret. Deducing its precise nature was not so easy. On reflection it was probably not his acquisition of the videotape. Interlacing hands Wynt made a steeple of his index fingers

and tapped them thoughtfully against his lips. The simple action was what finally gave him the clue he'd been searching for. Hands held palms upwards in front of his face he stared as if the answer was written across them, which in a barely visible way, it was.

All the time that Pierce had been in the office - the cool, dry, fully air-conditioned office - he'd been sweating quite heavily. On both occasions they had shaken hands, the Minister's palms were noticeably damp. *Although he was dry above the neck.* At no time during the meeting had there been a single bead of sweat on Anthony Pierce's forehead. It was a small point, which most men would not have noticed. But then, most men did not become Director of the Defence Intelligence Staff. On this occasion his attention to fine might possibly avert a major catastrophe. Because, if he was right in his suspicions, an agent of the Fey had penetrated Whitehall Central.

Wynt pressed the red toggle on his intercom and spoke into the machine's pick-up. "Security, this is the Director. We may have an intruder. Go to yellow alert, and have an armed team meet me at the entrance to Project Wonderland. On the double."

Holding the pressure-injector by its pistol grip, Kurt Williamson placed its nozzle against a piece of thin card held in his left hand, and pulled the trigger. A spray of fine mist blossoming from a tiny hole forced in the card proved that the device was in working order.

"That's fine," he declared as he turned to face the Minister. "I find it always pays to check these things," he gave a brief, professional smile.

Pierce made no response. Concerned that he might give himself away, he'd stayed mostly silent during his hastily arranged tour of the Project, asking few questions. The one called Williamson had shown him poor Bogan Ap's butchered remains, and then Hoobrie, Urusig and Yallery-Brown, all broken as twigs after a storm. Only Judel seemed undamaged. Saille's friend had recognised who he was, beneath the glamour and borrowed flesh, and given a sign. Now ensconced in what the human whose face the Dreaming had shown called the Main Lab, he'd listened carefully to what was being said concerning the iron-tainted liquid held in the metal and glass thing. A liquid that the man had proudly announced was being tested on a subject, named Saille.

"If you'd like to follow me, Minister." The Doctor said, leading the way down the corridor which led to the holding cells. For safety, he carried the injector at shoulder height, with its nozzle aimed at the ceiling.

Stopping in front of Saille's cell, Williamson motioned the guards who stood to either side to move out of the way. Leaning closer to the Minister he spoke conspiratorially, "I think you'll find this most interesting, sir. All we've really done is add a small amount of ferrite to the concoction. But the effects of tetrodotoxin B on Fey bodies is remarkably similar to the iron-free original version's effect on humans."

Looking between the brightly glowing bars Saille perceived easily what the humans could not. Wrapped in glamour and man-flesh Beith was come. His presence was unexpected, although no great surprise. The Sidhe did not abandon their blood kin. The shock which she felt, though did not show, was due to the deteriorating condition of the form her father wore. The Ur had little time before True Death claimed the body, and that time

would be filled with pain.

"Minister, are you feeling alright?" Williamson asked, concern creasing his brow. Pierce seemed to be having difficulty in breathing. He looked very pale, although was sweating as if in the grip of a fever.

The Passenger saw his daughter bound, by the presence of iron, and by ties made inside her own mind. The human standing at his side had locked the rose of Saille's essence inside an ugly fist, and was squeezing still. Though not for very much longer. Iron caused no pain to the body he wore, yet its proximity was a hindrance. Concentrating, Beith reached deep inside himself for the strength that was needed. The loosing of High Magic here, in man's underground citadel, would surely end the life of Pdraig O'Connell's body. Though by its final destruction, two of the *Daoine Sidhe* might know moments of freedom before they perished. Reaching out through the shell of flesh he quested for a source of power. Any power that could be shaped by his will. Energy was flowing in the lights above his head and humming through metal, buried beneath his feet. Bright as sunlight on a polished blade, the dancing rays fronting his daughter's cage sang loudest of all. Tuned they were to harm only Sidhe flesh. He knew it, but could not discern the working. Human flesh the beams would not burn, though human eyes....

"Look!" The Ur exclaimed, pointing jerkily at his daughter.

As the three human's turned he acted, forcing upon the weakest mind an illusion that the beams were gone. Exhibiting the witless curiosity typical of *Yahweh's* lesser creatures the guard stepped into the beams, and before his companions might stop him, glanced up at their point of emission. Crying out in shock and pain he pitched forward with hands pressed tightly over his light-seared eyes, and lay writhing and whimpering on the floor.

Dropping to his knees the Passenger tore electrical energy from the under floor cables, drawing it up through the concrete and into his rapidly failing body. Power-charged fingers closed around the calf of the second guardsman, holding him for the vital seconds it took to steal consciousness. Overhead the strip-lighting flickered and died, fluorescent tubes exploding behind their shields in a series of soft pops. The dull red glow of emergency lightning replaced them as the stunned guard tumbled backwards, catching his helmeted head against a wall at an awkward angle. The resultant snap announced his exit from this life. Tendrils of smoke rising from smouldering skin, Beith crawled in a half circle and oriented on the last remaining human. Doctor Williamson; the one the Dreaming had shown. Forcing himself to stand, despite the agony movement caused, the Ur pointed at his daughter.

"Free her, human." The order rasped painfully from a half-dead voice box.

Not daring to take his eyes of what was obviously *not* Anthony Pierce, Williamson edged nervously toward the holding cell's control panel. Fumbling with the switches he killed the lasers, and with palms held up in surrender began to back away. Graceful as a cat Saille moved to the intruder's side, and wrapped an arm around him as support. In his hand Williamson still held the pressure-injector pistol, but before he could use it, he needed to re-establish control. A few moments would be enough. Praying that he was out of reach, he started to speak the trigger-word.

"Morph..." The second and third syllables became a scream of pain, as an inch-wide

bolt of electrical lightning leapt up from the ground to stab between his legs. Groaning in agony he keeled over, unable to speak or even think of anything except his electrocuted testicles. Knees drawn up he cupped the damaged area with both hands, as if fingers would stop a second charge.

Smiling in sardonic pleasure Saille helped her father to turn, hope for their freedom blossoming. If Judel's strength could be added to that of the Ur, their captor's might yet be cowed. Humans of the present age were cruel and clever, though not invincible. Hope of freedom died as two more guards arrived and dropped into firing stances.

"Surrender at once." The director barked from behind his men. When neither of the Sidhe moved he added, "The weapons are loaded with iron-bearing bullets. You cannot escape. Surrender is your only option."

Giving Saille a long, meaningful look Beith motioned her to one side, and forced his burned shell to stand upright. Rigid as a mannequin he allowed the glamour to drain away, revealing the true face of the body he wore, and with clothing still smoking from the touch of the power he'd tapped, began one last act of summoning.

"Good Lord. It's Pdraig O'Connell!" Wynt recognised the missing author's face. "He's trying something. Take him alive, if you can," he added, jumping reflexively as two rounds were fired in rapid succession, striking the Irishman in the leg and shoulder.

Beith forced partially burned lips into a smile of victory. The action hurt, but with so much pain to endure a little more did not matter. The body was almost dead, moments from collapse. All that kept it upright was his force of will. Winding up his legs like ivy, blue-white tendrils of electricity spat and crackled eerily in the half-light, causing him to twitch and grunt involuntarily. Gathering the last remnants of his strength he turned the stolen power inwards, using it not to sustain the flesh, but to squeeze out what life remained. When that happened, destruction would rage unfettered throughout the tunnels.

Johnny Halcombe decided it was time to act. Alerted, like everyone else in the complex, by the electronic klaxons, he'd seen the security team accompanied by the director, and purposely headed the other way. By running around Whitehall Central's perimeter corridor he'd been able to approach the scene from the opposite direction, and was now several yards behind the Fey woman, and whatever it was that stood by her side. Inside the Occupied Zone, or even in open space the Sidhe would've detected his presence. But underground, surrounded by iron, their senses were no sharper than anyone else's. Crawling on all fours he closed with the enemy, eyes flicking between them and the one thing he could use as a weapon. A body length away, Saille saw him and shouted something to her charred companion. But the male did not - *or could not* - hear. Lunging the final few feet the soldier grabbed the pressure-injector, touched its nozzle to the intruder's calf, and with more than a little satisfaction, squeezed the trigger.

Biochemistry sent haywire by the sudden infusion of the incredibly potent drug, Pdraig O'Connell's body was *prevented* from dying. The derivatives of Haitian zombie poison acted instantly, slowing down every normal bodily process to the point where death was apparent, though not actual. He stood motionless as a statue, smouldering like someone dragged from the fiery embrace of a crematorium.

"You want some of this?" Johnny brandished the pressure-injector at Saille. The Sidhe's only reply was a passive, oddly disturbing smirk.

Once more a holy man Midar stood in the street, at the bottom of the steps which led to the main entrance of Westminster Abbey; unknowingly built at the convergence of seven major Leys. Like hand-crafted mountains the Gothic towers of Westminster Abbey rose high into the air before him. He paused to look, reminded of the smaller, subterranean structures of those who many ages past had carved stone for the Fallen. Under the site now crowned by the church of man, deeper below ground than any of his delvings, dozens of Yldra had taken their rest. Their life-force pulsed in circular waves, like invisible ripples from a pebble dropped into a tidal pool. Finding so many of the Fourth Rank sleepers was an unexpected bonus. Because the discovery could be twisted to *Sidhe* advantage, if fate permitted the *pandeus* to act on the message which the crow would deliver to him.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon." A male voice said.

"Granted." Midar responded guardedly, turning to regard the individual. Looking down he saw that the object that had tapped the back of his calves was a white stick, belonging to a blind human. So focused had he been on the Leys and what their convergence marked, that he'd neglected to watch the street.

"I'm sorry." The man said. Reaching out uncertainly he connected with a glamour-disguised arm. "This won't happen when I get a guide dog."

"I am sure it won't." The Sidhe spoke kindly, and stepping to one side allowed the man to proceed. One of the many things he found hard to understand about the modern age was humankind's willingness to perpetuate the suffering of crippled kin. It was a form of cruelty which no Rank of the Fallen would ever stoop to.

Only when a voice in his ear-piece told him that he was out of the target's line of sight did Michael Eisner abandon his act. Quickly removing the dark glasses - which combined with the deep shadows around the abbey had made him feel as if he were really blind - he tucked them in a pocket. Then collapsing his white stick he crossed the street and trotted up to the rear of an inconspicuous blue Ford Transit van.

Inside the vehicle he joined his colleagues from the Scientific and Technical Intelligence division of DIS, who were busy checking data relayed from equipment built into the seemingly ordinary white cane.

"It's got to be him." Eisner said as he closed the door. "His clothes were weird," he explained, wriggling the fingers of his right hand as if touching the fabric. "They looked like thin cloth, as far as I could tell. But they *felt* like more lie suede."

"Glamour." Nial commented. "The readings confirm it. He might look like a vicar, but his magnetic field is way too high for him to be human."

"Then he must be Sidhe." Houseman said. Taking a needle-gun down from a shelf he began strapping it in place over his shirt sleeve.

"I agree," Eisner nodded. "Better give the Yanks a call. We're bringing our Sailor into dry dock."

Muscles tensed like steel cables Rebecca Pierce strained against her inhuman lover. Savage, in a non-violent way, he worked her body as no one ever had, making her feel as if she were melting. When he came she held herself rigid against him, eager to accept all that he gave, and in so doing found herself on the verge of yet another orgasm. Burying her mouth in his luxurious mane of hair she let out a stifled yelp, then slowly sank back down on to the sweat-soaked sheets.

"Oh, Peter." She whispered breathlessly. A pleasure bomb, exploding through her nervous system, the sensations were so overwhelming that the pain of the Fey extracting his fingernails from the flesh of her shoulders was all but eliminated.

When the bedside phone began to ring a few moments later, Rebecca answered reflexively. She was both alarmed and surprised to find herself talking to one of the very few men that her husband was wary of.

"Hello. Are you still there, Mrs Pierce?" The voice she'd recognised as belonging to the Director of DIS enquired.

"Uh, yes." Glancing at the clock she saw that it was nearly quarter past four. "I've just stepped out of the shower." Her lover smiled at the lie, but said nothing.

"May I speak with Anthony?" The director asked, showing no hint of concern.

"Uhm, I'm not sure." Rebecca flustered. "I mean I don't know if he's still in. He may have already left." She said, staring at her husband's poker-stiff form.

"Please find out." The director insisted. "This is a matter of great urgency."

"Yes, alright. Hold on." Palming the mouthpiece she said, "He wants to speak to Tony. What should I say?"

Aillen's tongue glided along her shoulder, licking up traces of blood. "Call the golem," he whispered, indicating the Minister. "I will have him play his part." As his lover turned to comply he ran a fingertip down the length of her spine.

"Tony." Rebecca called, feeling as if the name and man who owned it belonged to a different lifetime.

Aillen blew a single note on his *antarra*, a signal that was heard and understood by a dormant part of the War Minister's enraptured mind. Anthony Pierce's eyes flickered open, startling his unfaithful wife with their sudden movement. Focusing on her bare, uptilted breasts, he stared with wholly inappropriate lust. Ignoring his wife completely, he moved like a well-oiled zombie, intent on the single task he knew had to be accomplished. When he reached Rebecca's side of the bed he retrieved the handset and brought it up to his mouth.

"Yes, what is it?" The voice came from a totally expressionless face, but sounded perfectly normal.

"Anthony. Thank the Lord you're alright."

Lips moving synchronously Aillen Midhna spoke with his golem's tongue. "Why should I not be?"

"We've had a problem," the director said hesitantly. "A major problem. One of the opposition paid us a visit, and I'm sorry to say he bore more than a passing resemblance to you."

"Things are hardly ever exactly as they may seem." The *pandeus* taunted, confidence

growing.

"*This was a highly sophisticated disguise, Anthony.*" The director retorted a little crossly. "*If you appreciate my meaning. Besides, you were expected. Obviously, the man who arrived was not you, despite the fact that he was collected from your address.*"

"I saw no one."

"*No one. Are you quite certain?*"

"Nobody called." Aillen paused for effect. "Except for Rebecca."

"*That must have been when he got in.*" The spy master said triumphantly. "*You've had a lucky escape, Anthony. Perhaps it would be best if I sent a team to check the building. Your unannounced guest may have left something behind.*"

"In the morning." The Sidhe made his golem's voice insistent.

"*I'd really prefer...*"

"Morning." Aillen repeated.

For a moment there was no reply. Then the director said, "*Very well. They'll be arriving at seven AM, sharp.*"

The moment the line went dead Anthony Pierce's eyes flickered like guttering candles, then closed. Dropping the handset he shuffled back to his original position at the end of the bed, and became once more a living statue.

"That was incredible." Rebecca said, genuinely impressed. "And a little bit scary." She flashed an uncertain smile. "But how is it going to end, Peter. Tell me that."

"*End, milady?*" Aillen looked the picture of innocence.

"You know what I mean, Peter." Checking to make sure that her husband had not suddenly regained consciousness, she crawled up the middle of the bed. "When Tony *really* wakes up. Won't he spoil our fun?"

"I think not." The Sidhe beamed.

"Why? What've you got planned, you rascal." Quick fingers darting her and there she tickled whichever parts were not being defended.

"Enough. Enough, I say." The musician laughed like a little boy. "I will show you what the golem truly has to say for itself." Retrieving his *antarra* he blew once more into its translucent stems, and this time allowed the cost of working such potent magic to reveal itself.

"Cuckoo!" Pierce said, his face remaining expressionless."



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Chapter Ten

Red Cap

Located at the far end of the Great Hall's leftmost avenue, the grotto was large enough to hold fifty of the Sidhe, and had three entrances. Two were so narrow as to allow passage only in single file, the other was a wide-arched gateway, opening onto a sharply curving bend of an underground river. The quick flowing, magically-charged channel was one of the secret passages along which *garron* riders could enter Pollagoona Mountain. Roughly octagonal in shape and uncluttered by furniture of any kind, the grotto boasted decorative formations of yellow-white straw stalactites which covered the uneven ceiling. Beneath them the floor had been cleared of stalagmites and polished to a glassy smoothness. In it were set nine intricate mosaic sigils, one design for each of the Nine Ranks.

The creature which hovered above the seal of the Seventh Rank was an unexpected and for the most part unwelcome visitor. Its presence as much as the message it brought were a cause of great concern to the king, Ruis Mor, who ever wary of an assassination attempt, had chosen not to deal with it in person. Five of the Circle had come, and as protocol demanded were gathered in a crescent around the *Archai*.

One of only four known survivors of the Seventh Rank it wore a deathly thin humanoid shape, spectral even to Sidhe eyes, and was held aloft by two sets of insect-like wings. Below a cadaverous, triangular-shaped head its naked icy-blue coloured body was androgynous, without the slightest suggestion of gender.

Aware of ferocious battles in ages past, when seemingly unarmed Fallen of the Seventh Rank had drawn weapons from shadow, the Sidhe kept a close watch on the messenger. The new alliance its master's had proposed seemed mutually beneficial, despite the circumstances in which it had been presented. Surely, the *Manitou* were aware of the Sidhe position, and of the threat posed by humankind's new invention. Suspicion, though, was not sufficient cause to warrant dismissal. True, the Fifth Rank had its own agenda, but it also held many of the same beliefs as the Sixth, most important of which was the fate of the High Kingdom. *Manitou* and *Daoine Sidhe* had fought together in the past, without betrayal. Therefore acceptance was, in the main, a formality. Though not before concessions had been won.

On the verge of addressing the messenger, Mamau Ur was interrupted. The water closest to the shore seemed to chatter, tiny pebbles colliding in patterns that were not random. As expected, the *Archai* faded completely from sight, although did not move from its position over the sigil. His motion fluid, Mamau rose from his cross-legged position and oriented on the river entrance.

"A *duergar* comes," he informed the gathering.

A short time later the walls of the grotto echoed with the sounds of the rider's approach. White flecks of energy spat like sparks from beneath his mount's hooves as he came galloping along the centre of the river. In his wake was a fine cloud of churning steam,

which formed half recognisable shapes, faces and symbols, which hung in the air for an instant, then were gone. Reining in at the grotto's entrance the *duergar* nodded deferentially to the Ur, and with one oversized hand lifted what was slung across the neck of his mount.

As his captor dumped him onto the stone floor, Mark Rainbow's newly formed scabs were torn open, shocking him back to full consciousness. Groaning, he propped himself up on one elbow and tried to take in his new surroundings. The sight which greeted his painful return to the land of the living was both fantastic and frightening. The flawless beauty of the beings he saw, and his gut-level reaction to it was something he found very disturbing. All the more so because those assembled were male. Finding members of his own sex *beautiful* was not a feeling he'd ever anticipated experiencing.

"Where?" He croaked a question.

"Speak not until you are asked, human." Mamau ordered sternly.

Fearful of another beating Mark did as he was told. Wide-eyed he looked around the cave, trying to find something he knew, anything that might serve as a connection to the ordinary, normal world. The world outside of the Exclusion Zone. But after a few moments he found his gaze drifting back toward the cave's incredible inhabitants.

"I bring this one for your judgement," Bodachan addressed the High Sidhe from astride his *garron*. *Duergar* rarely dismounted in the presence of others. Especially those who, like himself, had once been members of the ruling Circle.

"And his crime, *duergar*?" True Thomas's flute-like voice questioned.

"Look to his tunic's pocket." Bodachan referred to the dead *hyter*. "The human claims the crime was not his, and may speak true. Yet find him I did as trespasser on our lands." Wheeling his mount away as the last word was spoken, he left in a cloud of sparks and curiously shaped steam.

Taking the human by the collar of his tattered and bloody jacket the tall Sidhe hauled him upright, and ignoring the howl of protest his action elicited, walked him into the middle of the gathering like a bad dog.

Sharp pain from his broken ribs stabbed inside Mark's chest. He cried out, but realised that it would be pointless trying to resist. Even if he'd been in any sort of condition to try, the being that held him was about seven foot tall. Left a few feet from the edge of a dish-shaped pit in which a mixture of wood and coal were burning, he sank to the floor, one arm clutching his chest. The being rejoined his splendid fellows, who were all watching the proceedings with hawk-like attention.

"Why came you to our lands?" True Thomas asked.

Mark cleared his throat, accidentally sending waves of pain through his upper chest. "To see," he moaned. "I came to see what was inside the Exclusion Zone." Looking into his questioner's eyes he added, "Please, could I have a cup of water?"

There was no reply. The eyes of those gathered looked back at him with a haughty disdain, making him feel as if he were a precocious child that had spoken out of turn. Not knowing what else to do he probed inside his jacket pocket and with as much reverence as he could manage, placed it on the bare stone.

"I *didn't* kill it. Someone else did that. You must believe me." Mark beseeched those

who seemed likely to be his judges and jury. "It was the man who brought me here, across the border. Molloney. His name's Sean Molloney."

"True and true." True Thomas nodded.

"Then why, human, did you seek to conceal the evidence of another's crime?" The question came from Tarroo-Ushtey.

"I wanted proof." Even to his own ears it didn't sound like much of an excuse. "You see, I'm a reporter. Nobody would have..."

"What manner of creature is that?" The Ur interrupted. "One who applauds destruction, perhaps?"

"No," Mark shook his head. "A reporter isn't a creature! It's a job," he paused, searching for the right words. "It's a function. What I do for a living." Getting no sign of a favourable response he tried a slightly different tack. "I write," although the movement brought new lances of pain he scribbled on imaginary paper, "and read out the stories." He gasped, lungs feeling as if they were filled with glass fragments every time he took a breath.

"I have it." Tarro-Ushtey said. "The human is claiming to be a bard."

"Yes, that's it." Mark's expression brightened. "I write about things that have happened, and tell other people. They don't know that creatures like this," he indicated the sprite, "even exist. Or about things like the one that brought me here."

"Ha!" True Thomas scoffed. "Next you'll tell how humankind known not of we Sidhe."

"They don't."

"Lie not to us, human," the Tuthsayer warned, his voice sounding hot as the fire pit coals. "Even in this age, tales are told concerning the faerie-folk."

"Faeries!" Mark rasped. Fighting down what he felt sure would be an excruciatingly painful cough, he stared at the speaker. "Is that who you are? My God. *Faeries*." Looking from face to face he shook his head in an automatic expression of denial. "No wonder the government wanted to seal off the Zone."

"The human knows of they who seek to defeat and imprison us." True Thomas spoke like a prosecuting lawyer. "Perhaps it was his kin who humbled your party," he glanced toward the Ur, "at the grave of the Bell. What say you Bard, are you in league with those who ride the round-winged sky-craft?"

"I'm in league with no one." Mark answered truthfully. "And I don't know about anything round-winged," he paused, understanding dawning, "unless you mean some sort of Army helicopter?"

"I say slay him now, as an example." Tarroo-Ushtey said. "Humankind grow ever bolder, and those who dare must be taught the error of their ways."

"Tis so," Mamau agreed, soberly. "Yet slaying is not the artful way. Let us punish this meddler in a fashion that is useful to our cause. He handles dead flesh. So I say let him become for one year a carver of living meat." Glancing around the Circle, he smiled wickedly. "The Halls of Pollagoona have need of a Red Cap's savagery."

"Wait a minute," Mark begged. "You can't just condemn me like that. For pity's sake, I didn't know I was breaking any laws. Molloney. The man I told you about. He *must've*

known what he was getting me into. I shouldn't take the blame." Breathing in a little too deeply he winced in pain. "Please, let me have some water."

One of his captors made a veiled hand gesture in the direction of the river, and a moment later there came a sound like foaming tide. Mark looked, and was astonished to see a completely naked and undeniably stunning woman emerging from the waters. Long green hair plastered to her dripping pale blue body she stood on the bank, with a plain pottery beaker held daintily between her palms.

"Enter, *glai stig*." As guardian of that gateway the Ur gave permission.

Throat burning, Mark gratefully accepted the drink, and after a cautionary sip, gulped down the contents. Cool and incredibly fresh, the water tasted pure. "Thanks. Thanks a lot. Now, if you'll just give me a chance to.....arghhh!" His whole body feeling like it had suddenly been pumped full of red-hot cement, Mark toppled onto his side. "What have you done?" He coughed, producing a gout of saliva and blood. Through agonisingly swelled eyes he saw the faerie folk were watching him, waiting for something to happen. "You bastards," he cursed. Realising that he'd ingested some kind of poison, he forced fingers down his throat in an attempt to empty his stomach. In that he was successful, though vomiting caused more pain than he was able to tolerate. Consciousness spinning away he slumped, and lay still.

The man-shaped creature which stood a few moments later had a slightly stooped posture, its massive upper body thrown forward by a kink in its spine. Not having any concept of time it didn't know that it had once been fully human, or that the blood-stained rags which partially covered its otherwise naked form were the remnants of clothes.

"Take this." A strong voice commanded. "Stalk Pollagoona. You are charged to slay any who do not belong."

Compelled to obey without question, the Red Cap plucked the heavy double-bladed axe from its master's outstretched arms, and hefted it over a muscular shoulder. Then offering the High Sidhe a fang-toothed snarl of salute, it turned and trudged away through the grotto's widest entrance, tattered shoes flapping uselessly about its huge, claw-toed feet.

"It is done," Mamau said matter-of-factly. Then addressing the seemingly empty space above the sigil of the Seventh Rank he restarted the meeting. "*Archai*. We are ready to give you our terms for allegiance."

Following Bernard Goodman into the lift, Caitlin turned and waved good-bye to the Russian's knowing that she would be seeing them again, soon. Willingly so, after all that had been revealed concerning themselves and the group they represented. At first she'd thought it was a trick, something invented to gain her confidence. Eventually though, thanks in the main to Goodman, she'd come to accept that the Network *was* real. More importantly, she trusted its members to do what had been promised with regard to the Fey. As the lift slowly descend it was all she could do to keep from shouting with joy. Because, sooner than she'd ever expected, she was going to see Pdraig. The Fey themselves had agreed to the meeting, which according to Yuri, would take place within the Occupied Zone, possibly *inside* Pollagoona Mountain.

"If there's a joke, I really think you ought to share it, my dear?"

"There isn't. Really." Caitlin responded. "I'm just, over the moon, you know. It's such a wonderful surprise."

Goodman nodded agreement, and exiting the lift led the way to his car and unlocked the passenger door. Appearing in public was a calculated risk, but one which proved good faith. He knew that most of what he'd told the former analyst had been the truth, but she didn't. Trust could hardly be built to the necessary degree by keeping her in the flat. Therefore he had little choice but to allow her the opportunity to run. Slipping behind the rented Audi's wheel he backed out of the underground parking space, and turned toward the exit ramp.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, here and there." Goodman smiled encouragingly. "Nowhere sinister, I can assure you. In fact," he said, remembering what day of the week it was, "if you have no objections, we'll drop in on some four-legged friends?"

"Okay," Caitlin's head bobbed. "If you like."

At first she hadn't believed a word of what they'd told her. But in the end there had been too many facts, too many personal details for the information to be fake. Incredible as it seemed, Paddy had been working for some time as a middle man between the Network alliance, and the Sidhe! Not for any financial incentive or political affiliation, but simply because the Network were the *only* people who were prepared to talk to the Fey on their own terms. They understood a simple fact that British Intelligence never had; that any attempt to subjugate beings once worshipped as gods was doomed to failure. Good old Paddy, Caitlin thought, he'd stuck to his guns and made a real difference. Soon they'd be together again, and she could congratulate him with a great big kiss.

All of Whitehall Central's staff were regularly vetted. Even those who considered themselves to be above such procedure. The final nail in Bernard Goodman's coffin was hammered home when a call placed to his wife revealed that he was out on business. The poor woman obviously did not know that the business had no official connection to DIS. By the time of her unwitting gaff Nicholas Wynt had already narrowed down his list of suspects to three people, with his deputy's name at the top.

Unlocking his desk draw Wynt took out a silenced government-issue Smith & Wesson pistol, and breaking it open, removed the first bullet from its chamber. Snapping the chamber closed he placed the weapon inside the attaché case on his desk, and flipped down its catches. That done he leaned back in his chair and used the outside line to dial a suite located above ground, in the building that contained the executive entrance to Whitehall Central.

"Sidney," the director spoke to his personal driver. "I'll need you in approximately fifteen minutes." One quarter of an hour was the minimum time in which he could pass through security and ascend to street level. "This is an off the record job. So you can expect a suitably generous bonus in your next pay-packet."

Sidney Cummings knew nothing whatsoever about the Occupied Zone, and was of severely limited intellectual capacity. But as a driver come bodyguard he was the best. An intensely loyal individual, Sidney knew which side his bread was buttered, as the expression

said. He obeyed any orders he was given without question. Even if those orders required him to work outside of the law.

Fifty-five minutes later a Prussian-blue Jaguar rolled smoothly to a halt behind a hedge bordering fields where Wynt fully expected his deputy to be, at some point during the next two hours. Goodman had been clever, probably using his clearance level to regularly review and amend his own file and activities log, erasing anything which might have pointed to foreign involvement. But he remained a man of habit, keeping the same interests and membership of the same societies, year in year out. The initials WAS came a long way down on his list of personal activities, and referred to something so harmless, that a less diligent reader might easily have overlooked it. But not the man who had risen to the highest position in British Intelligence. WAS stood for Waltham Animal Sanctuary; a small charitable concern close to Epping Forest, that Bernard Goodman had been visiting on the first Wednesday of every month for the past two years. Usually between the hours of 10am and noon. The touching association had started when the sanctuary had taken in his daughter's gymkhana pony, after the stupid beast had managed to fracture its leg.

It would have been simple enough to have Goodman picked up. But a personal betrayal warranted personal retribution, Wynt thought. Which was why his treacherous deputy was going to get a lot worse than a broken limb.

Not having been active in the field for over twenty-five years, Goodman had lost the sense which all good agents developed to know when they were under surveillance. Totally unaware of the observation, he locked the car doors and strolled at a leisurely pace past the stables toward an ugly looking green-painted portakabin which served as the Waltham Animal Sanctuary's office and headquarters.

"I have a check for these good people," he explained to Caitlin. "Perhaps you'd like to stretch your legs. The horses are all friendly. Kylie is usually in the back paddock," he pointed at a field to the left of the stables. "Here." Taking a small paper bag from his pocket he handed it over. "You can tempt her with some sugar-lumps."

A few minutes later, the treat was gone and Caitlin was sitting on a wooden fence, with her eyes closed and sunlight on her face. The air was fresh, and it was a good to be alive sort of day, she thought. Until that was she heard the voice, and felt the barrel of what had to be a gun pressing between her shoulder blades.

"My-my, this is a fortunate coincidence." Without pausing for breath the director added, "Don't move and don't turn around, Miss Ash." Caitlin froze. "Understand that if you lie to me I will know, and I will not hesitate to shoot." The threat was delivered with chilling conviction. "Now, where can I find Bernard Goodman?"

"The portakabin." Caitlin answered, feeling like a coward but too scared to take a chance that the man might be bluffing.

"Is he armed?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "You'll have to ask him."

Wynt smiled acidly. "That's the spirit. We'll talk again, Miss Ash. After business has been attended to." Moving quickly to one side he made room for his driver to step in and

spray fluid from an atomiser in front of the ex analyst's nose.

On unofficial lone from the Wonderland labs, the atomiser held a sample of a concoction recently developed from decaying Fey tissue. What else it contained, and how it worked, only Williamson and his team knew. The most important thing as far as the director was concerned was that a single squirt of Daydream, as it had been code named, was potent enough to knock out an adult faster than chloroform. The analyst succumbed instantly, falling backwards off the fence into Sidney's waiting arms. Unceremoniously he draped her over one shoulder in a fireman's carry position.

"Take her to the car," Wynt instructed, expression blank as a newly cleaned blackboard. "I'll return shortly."

"Rightie-oh. I'll see you next month, then." Goodman said amiably as he backed out of the sanctuary's ramshackle office. "Keep up the good work." Tugging the aluminium handle he shut the door behind him and turned on his heel, only to find himself face to face with the very last man he expected to see. A man with a gun.

"Hello, Bernard." Wynt said icily.

One look at the director's face told him that any attempt to bluff would be a waste of time. There was no way to tell just how much his superior had found out, but it was obviously enough to prod him into unilateral, and possibly murderous action. Slowly opening his jacket he displayed the fact that he was unarmed.

"It appears that I've made a mistake, sir."

"A mistake." Wynt huffed. "Is that how you describe betraying your country." He motioned with the gun.

"Actually, sir, I was referring to my visit here." Hands held up at chest height Goodman began walking toward his car.

"A fortuitous visit, from my point of view." The director said, his smirk almost audible. "If truth were told, I'm rather grateful. Thank you for bringing Miss Ash."

Goodman's heart sank. The director was clearly working outside of official guidelines, and if not alone, certainly wouldn't have the manpower to cover every location. He'd hoped that Caitlin had not been spotted.

Making his deputy get in to the Audi's back seat, Wynt slid in beside him and quietly closed the door. Eyes hard as chips of Arctic ice he glared, knowing how events were likely to unfold, but hoping to salvage something prior to the inevitable.

"Why, Bernard?"

"Because it was necessary." The younger man gave a slight shrug of resignation. "The world has never seen anything like the Fey. It is surely a blunder to think we can deal with the problem in wholly conventional terms."

"Good Lord!" Wynt was genuinely surprised. "Are you saying that you'd be prepared to *collaborate* with them?"

"If that's the way forward." Goodman chose his words with care. "All we've shown them thus far is hostility. Perhaps, sir, if we were to make an effort to understand the situation from their perspective..."

"I could take you back to Whitehall Central." Wynt interrupted, too disgusted by what he was hearing to let it continue. "Williamson would doubtless have a way to discover how much you've told your American friends. But then, they are talking to *me* now. So I'd be wasting the good doctor's valuable time." Spotting a hint of a smile he flared angrily. "It isn't in the least bit amusing, Bernard. Damage has been done. My trust has been broken."

"If that's how you see it." Very much aware of the gun, Goodman slowly brought one hand up to brush back a strand of hair, hoping to use the movement to disguise the fact that his other hand was reaching for the door release.

"Fingers, Bernard." Wynt saw through the attempt. "Sit on them. I promise to give you a sporting chance. In fact, I'll even give you odds." Spinning the pistol's chamber he pressed its barrel into his deputy's chest.

"You're quite mad, sir."

"Five to one," Wynt said, squeezing the trigger. The gun coughed and Goodman slumped, an expression of surprise frozen on his face. "You lose, traitor."

Looking first like one and then like another, Midar wove his way through the endless stream of pedestrians crowding the pavements of Oxford Street. With so many humans to chose from, shifting disguises was a simple task. Somewhere behind him men were following, using their science to track his progress. They were Albion's hunting dogs, sniffing in pursuit of a deliberately laid trail. But at its end they would find no frightened quarry.

Approaching him from the opposite direction, Midar caught sight of a muscular young man dressed in warrior's leather. How much of a warrior would soon be known. Angling toward the youth, he flicked out a long-fingered hand, brushing the human's shoulder as they passed each other by. The fleeting touch was enough to twist glamour about his victim, as the screams of those who perceived the result testified.

Lieutenant Houseman heard the commotion but was too far away to see what had started it. Although he knew better than his colleagues could possibly imagine who and what the source might be. Leaping up onto a council rubbish bin he balanced there while he peered over the heads of the milling crowd. What he saw made him smile. Then, in keeping with his disguise, he spoke into his radio.

"Sinbad # 3 to control. I'm in Oxford Street, Tottenham Court Road end. Something weird is happening. It's got to be the Sailor's doing."

Roughly one thousand yards away from his precarious perch, was what appeared to be a man-sized creature, standing in a rapidly expanding space. Like an octopus from the waist up it was flailing sucker-tipped arms, and seemed to be in as great a state of panic as those fleeing to avoid its slimy embrace. Pushing against the tide of humanity he reached the scene in time to see a young woman, stuck between the thing and a shop window. A baby clutched tightly in her arms she was staring in horrified fascination at the creature.

"It's alright." Houseman lied. "Stay where you are." He knew that what she saw was a product of glamour, and effortlessly saw through it. But, as the Will Houseman known to DIS did not have any such ability, he acted accordingly. Drawing his pistol he sank into a firing stance and aimed at the creature's swollen green head.

Seeing slime the octopoid turned at the waist, revealing that the child's pushchair was dangling from one tentacle. Tiny, lidless eyes catching sight of the gun it let go of its prize and began shuffling toward the woman, a peculiar mewling noise issuing from what seemed to be a parrot-like beak.

The agent fired three times in rapid succession, dropping the illusory horror before it had completed even half the distance toward mother and child. Then returning his weapon to its holster he spoke again into his radio, this time calling for a military ambulance. In the time it took to do that, something happened. Attention had only been diverted for a matter of seconds, but that was enough. Now, instead of a monster lying dead on the pavement, there was an ordinary looking young man.

"Andi!" The woman screamed. "Andi, no." Hysteria rising she turned on the agent. "You shot my boyfriend."

Several hundred yards further down Oxford Street Midar stopped, attracted by sounds. Music, after a fashion, was blaring from a many-doored building. Peering up at the gaudy sign above the entrance he read the legend SOUND AS A POUND MEGASTORE. Surely a place where he would find much amusement. Smiling broadly, he ventured inside.

Mouth feeling as if it were stuffed full of rancid cotton wool, Caitlin Ash came too. Not daring to move more than her eyes, she looked around as best she could and found that she was in the back of a car, propped at an angle against the offside door. Wooziness from the drug beginning to wear off she realised that she was alone, and that her arms and legs were free. Obviously the men hadn't expected her to wake up quite so fast, or they would have spared the time to tie her. That she was awake had more to do with pure instinct than any physical resilience. When whatever it was had been sprayed under her nose, she'd held her breath, thus avoiding the full dose.

Praying that nobody was watching Caitlin turned her neck, moving very slowly, until she was able to see through the window. There was a large, dark-haired man dressed in a chauffeur's uniform, less than five feet from the door. Thankfully, he had his back to her. He was holding a pair of binoculars up to his eyes, and clearly watching a distant scene. The gunman, in all probability. Without warning the chauffeur turned toward the car. Caitlin snapped her eyes shut, hoping that he hadn't noticed she was awake. If he had then her slight advantage was gone. Forcing herself to lay still she counted off numbers inside her head, reaching three hundred before she dared to risk another glance. But it was alright, the man had returned to his observation. A plan beginning to form she looked between the seats, and saw that the keys were dangling from the ignition. She'd have to make it first time, but if she could climb into the front seat and use the central locking to keep the big man out, she might get the car moving. If she could do it they wouldn't be able to stop her. Unless the chauffeur was also carrying a gun? The idea of being shot at sent her heart racing, but the chance had to be taken. Besides, whatever the outcome, trying was better than doing nothing.

Courage about as high as it was going to get, Caitlin scrambled forward, wriggling between the Jag's bucket seats, and getting her upper body through before the man outside noticed movement. He lunged for the driver's door, but was a fraction of a second too late.

Central locking kept him out, and bought her another few seconds in which to pull her legs through the gap. Outside the car the man was shouting and banging against the glass with his fists. Too frightened to look, Caitlin twisted the ignition key and jerked the gearstick out of neutral. Events seemed to be moving in slow-motion. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the chauffeur draw a gun, and fire from just inches away. Instinctively, Caitlin screamed, and for a split-second wondered why she wasn't dead. Then the reason became all too apparent; the Jaguar was fitted with bullet-proof glass. The window next to her head was cracked and buckled inwards, but not breached. Boosted by the good fortune she floored the accelerator pedal. The angry chauffeur attempted to leap onto the bonnet, but succeeded only in getting his foot caught under a wheel. Caitlin saw him in the rear-view mirror, hopping around on one leg like the world's best dressed frog! Then she rounded a corner, and gave her concentration to putting as much distance between the men and herself as luck would permit.

The thought of returning for Goodman did cross her mind, but was followed in short order by the knowledge that the men who'd come for him were professionals. Right now they'd be mad as hell, and calling for back-up. If others weren't already closing in. To have any chance at all she had to clear the area before it could be sealed off, then ditch the Jag. Litvinko would surely know what could be done, if that was, she could get to him.

"Paddy." Caitlin thought aloud. "I'm in it right up to my gills."

Fighting against the tide of shoppers who were intent on getting out, Michael Eisner was the first of the DIS team to make it inside. The interior of the SOUND AS A POUND MEGASTORE looked like a scene from a supernatural horror movie. Visually - if not actually - transformed by the Fey agent, half a dozen unsuspecting shoppers had become quasi-mythical monstrosities. Faced with a pair of werewolves, three hobgoblins and a trident-wielding merman, most of the other customers and staff were climbing over each other in their haste to find an exit. Vaulting up onto the nearest check-out counter, he shouted through cupped hands, making sure that those under his command knew the score.

"Don't shoot! Those are people." Moments earlier, Houseman had radioed in the bad news concerning a civilian he'd shot. To the crowd he said, "Keep calm, everybody. There's no real danger."

"Fuck you, man." A tall black man wearing a staff T-shirt replied. "I ain't paid enough for this kinda shit!"

Fearing the effect of hundreds of panicked people emptying onto Oxford Street, Eisner drew his gun and fired once into the ceiling. "Everybody, get down on the floor. Move yourselves," he yelled. This time the majority complied. He looked to the exits and saw that his men were now closing the doors. The situation was contained, for now.

Wearing the shape of a middle-aged woman, Midar lay down with the rest. At present some twenty feet from the entrance, he counted three others like the one who'd taken command. All four were armed with what he knew were called *guns*; weapons which could spit iron faster than even a *duergar* could throw.

Eisner's gaze swept quickly across the store. The merman, all three hobgoblins and one of the werewolves all had their faces pressed into the carpet. They looked very different

to the norm, but were the same inside. The other wolfman remained standing, and from the look on his seemingly furry face, believed his transformation to be genuine.

"Can't hurt me, copper." Starting forward at a lope, Wolfman Tel held his arms out wide from his sides. "Come on. Go for it. Silver bullets, that's the only thing what'll do for me now." An overconfident smile exposed the illusion of long yellow canines. "I know, see. I've watched all the films."

"Listen to me, dick-head" Eisner took aim. "I don't have the time for this crap. So get down on the floor, and shut your mouth."

"Make me." Tel dared. "The Wolfman's comin' t' getcha."

Without hesitation the agent fired, knocking his would-be assailant off his feet. The Werewolf started to rise, then caught sight of the blood oozing from the hole in his shoulder, and promptly fainted. Glancing toward the exits Eisner saw that all the doors were now shut. Senneker had arrived and was standing guard alongside Nial. Houseman was positioned to their left, and was in conversation with a small group of uniformed soldiers, directing them to the emergency exits and lower floor.

"Anyone else want to play silly buggers. No. Then stay where you are. Keep quiet and calm." Eisner holstered the gun. "First off, what you *think* you see *isn't* real. Got that everybody, is *isn't* real. Think of it like a trick. The sort that stage hypnotists do. It'll wear off quite soon, so there's no need to panic." He paused. "Now then, I want those of you who *think* you've changed to come and sit in front of me. Nobody will get hurt if they do what they're told. The rest of you I want in three nice orderly lines, facing the main doors." He clapped his hands together. "Alright, let's go." Thankfully, the crowd began to respond. "That's right. Once you've been checked over, you'll be free to go home. Your co-operation is appreciated." Hearing murmurs of restlessness he added, "Anyone who tries to be a smartarse will find out why my middle name's bastard. It's your choice."

Behind his unmoving disguise, Midar silently applauded the human's boldness. This was a foeman worthy of the battle. Taking care that his motion matched the shape he wore, the Sidhe took his place in line.

Overlooking a patch of simulated Ireland, Kurt Williamson studied his latest subject. The Fey agent lay naked on the grass, in a state which approximated death so closely that medical science was hard pressed to tell the difference. Nothing could be done for or with him for between six and eight hours, which was approximately the time it would take for his body to recover from the debilitating effects of tetrodotoxin B.

Now monitored by more than a dozen remote sensors and recording devices, every minute alteration in the agent's form was being noted and analysed as and when it occurred. Glamour-disguised as the Minister for War when he'd entered Whitehall Central, he had transformed before astonished witnesses into the celebrated Irish author. Extensive tests had already proved that his present shape and features - minus the burns - were the ones that nature had bestowed. Also that he was entirely human, in physiological terms. But his basic humanity had never been in much doubt. The personal magnetic field generated by all members of the Fey race would have tripped detectors long before he'd entered the complex

proper. The real curiosity was how on earth he'd managed to utilise High Magic. Fey glamour could temporarily make something or someone appear to be other than it was, but unless what had occurred was a genuinely new development, human beings could not *themselves* work the bedazzling magic. Let alone call upon the type and intensity of force that O'Connell had.

"Excuse me, Doctor."

"Yes." Williamson spoke to Lynch's replacement without turning. "What is it?"

"Theatre # 2 is prepped, sir." David Woods reported. "Do you want to go ahead with the girl, or should we wait..."

"She is *not* a girl. Or even human." Turning on his heel Williamson fixed his new deputy with a hostile glare. "Saille is of the Fey. It is a mistake to think of her in any other terms. A mistake which might cost lives. Do I make myself clear?" Woods nodded sheepishly. "Very well. In answer to your question, we will proceed."

Claiming unspecified terrorist activity as the reason, Whitehall Central had swiftly organised a total media blackout. Oxford Street was sealed-off for five hundred yards either side of the megastore, with only DIS traffic allowed in or out. Those being held inside the store were being transported in small groups to a commandeered barracks, where a team of psychologist were waiting to convince them that they'd been victims of a mass hallucination, caused not by Fey glamour, but by an experimental narcotic. Supposedly dumped in the megastore's air-conditioning system. By whom and for what reason was not open to discussion.

"Okay, pal." Corporal Nial said, completing his sensor check on the retro-punk who stood impatiently before him. "You're all clear. Stand over there," he nodded toward an assembly area. "You can go with the next van."

Humans of the present age were clever, yet still children in so many ways. Fourth from the front of the line in which he stood, Midar surreptitiously watched the entry of stretcher-bearing soldiers who'd been called to attend to the fool pierced by iron. The men showed warrant badges to the door's guardian, and were duly allowed to proceed. Ahead, the human completed another test. Knowing that he would not pass technology's inspection, Midar took a sly look over his shoulder, and was pleased to see the stretcher-bearers returning. All but shorn of glamour their charge was groaning loudly, no doubt in pain from the wound. Stained dark crimson down one side, his tunic clung wetly to him. Elated by the sight, the Sidhe laughed inside, and reaching out with his mind shaped the lingering traces of glamour which still adhered to his feeble-minded victim.

"He's changing again!" The Midar spoke in a voice befitting his disguise.

"Put him down and stand clear." Nial ordered the puzzled-looking soldiers. "The rest of you, stay put."

Motioning for one of the men to take his place at the door, and the other to keep an eye on those in line, Nial approached the former Wolfman. When he was within ten feet he pushed back the sleeve of his jacket, exposing the barrel of his needle-gun. A wispy red shape was coalescing on top of the man's injured shoulder.

"Oy." Tel moaned in protest. "What the fuck's 'appenin' now? Jesus. I need a

doctor. Come on you bastards." Further abuse was curtailed by a horrified scream as he saw what those around him were staring at.

Sitting squarely over the wound was a red spider, the biggest spider Des Nial had ever seen. Spindly, foot-long legs clinging like a mountaineer, oddly intelligent eyes watching the crowd. Horribly, the thing seemed to be feeding on the clotted blood. Apparently spotting something, the spider suddenly reared up on four legs. Almost faster than the eye could follow the motion sent a wave of arachnophobic fear through those who though they might be within jumping distance.

Taking advantage of the fresh commotion Midar let out a terrified yelp, and wrapped his arms about the soldier at the head of his line. Faking hysteria he allowed himself to be comforted, then malevolently, caused his illusory spider to scuttle forward a few inches. In the moment of confusion and fear which resulted, he worked a greater, more subtle magic.

Lieutenant Houseman saw it, and knew what mischief was being done. But tempted as he was to spoil the glamour-covered Sidhe's plan, he knew that he could not. Revelation would inevitably result in questions, such as how he'd known. The answer to which he was unwilling to give, at the present time. Watching the Sidhe complete his work he suppressed a smile. Stunned as they had been by the rise of humankind, the Fallen of the Sixth Rank had clearly forgotten none of their skills.

"It's okay, folks" Relief evident in his tone, the Corporal gave a thumbs-up to the crowd and his colleagues. "See, it's just another illusion." By the time he'd finished speaking the red horror had faded into nothingness.

"MIDNIGHT!" A plainly dressed middle-aged woman startled everyone with a shout loud enough to wake the dead.

A hush fell over the room, nobody quite sure what was happening, or likely to happen. Nial turned and immediately dropped into a firing stance. When nothing further happened he moved in, aim unwavering. Close up the woman's glassy-eyed stare showed that she was in no condition to pose a threat to anyone.

"MIDNIGHT!" Unexpectedly the woman shouted again. "AT THE TOWER OF MANY RAVENS."

As the message was completed Midar's glamour drained away, revealing one very confused soldier.

Saille could never remember the shaping of the word. Only that when certain of the humans spoke it, she was powerless as a dragonfly caught in *Slua de Doininn* winds. Contained at present by iron, and bars of burning light she was looking inward, exploring again the walls built with the magic of *technology*. Cloying grey fog clouded her mind's eye, mysterious and impenetrable as ever, obscuring the word. Able to discern nothing new she turned back, arching toward the lambent physicality of full consciousness. Mere thought away she paused, startled the see drifting twixt flux and form that which the children of Dana knew as the Dreaming. Her sire was of the High Sidhe, and a fraction of what he was sometimes stirred in her own self, affording fleeting glimpses of knowledge. Tumbling now like Autumn leaves the Dreaming honoured her with a vision of what was to come.

Saille perceived the corruption of the flesh her father wore, and his assumption of the form High Sidhe took when their bodies were done. Then, like a blade across her mind, she saw the fashion of her own ending. Finally, the Dreaming showed to her a rain of faces, scattered like motes of dust in a storm.

"It's no use pretending." Williamson said tiredly. "I know you're not asleep. Open your eyes and look at me." Eyes still closed the prisoner showed no sign of complying. "You have been very bad, Saille. Very bad indeed. But that *won't* be happening again. Do you hear me? I know that you do. *Morpheus*." Speaking the trigger-word he stepped through the holding cell's laser bars and picked up the Fey's unresisting body. Outside, doctor Woods wheeled a stretcher into position.

Tingling with anticipation, Williamson escorted his subject to the operating theatre. With both the director and his deputy absent, he was presently the most senior member of staff. Which was a situation he intended to use to maximum advantage. On far too many occasions Project Wonderland's inexorable progress toward complete understanding of the Fey had been stalled by political, or moral considerations. The nagging ache in his balls was a reminder of just how close he'd come to being killed by the intruder. It was a situation that would never have developed, if more was known about the Fey.

Five minutes later all support staff had been ushered out, and Saille was secured to the all-plastic table in theatre # 2, passively awaiting her fate. Lifting a pressure-injector he checked its LCD readout, just to be sure that someone hadn't made a silly mistake. Everything had to be exactly right for this, the probably final opportunity he'd have within the confines of Whitehall Central to extract vital information without restrictions. Oblivious to the cameras recording his every movement, he smiled broadly, thinking of how different things were going to be in the near future. Because, just over two months past, the American government had, in their terms, made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Since that day he'd been pushing hard, conducting as many experiments as he could and secretly passing information to the DIA. Information which had been indispensable to the development of the MIT Jericho device. Now the time for subterfuge was almost at an end. As soon as Operation Mordor was underway the plan was for him to quit Whitehall Central and fly via private jet to a complex under the Mojave desert in Arizona, where no limitations would be placed upon his work.

Breathing shallowly, the Sidhe looked soft and incredibly vulnerable. It was sight which he knew to be sexually tempting where many men, and more than a few women were concerned. But the reaction was based in psychology, *not* physiology as had first been thought. And that was where being a misogynist gave him the advantage. Even if the prisoner had been the most beautiful woman in the world, it wouldn't have made any difference to him. As far as he was concerned, her sex made her inferior, and as he'd discovered during bitter adolescence, not to be trusted with anything that mattered. The dosage he intended to pump into her veins was exactly triple the prescribed safe amount used during the original chemical interrogation sessions. There would only be time for a few questions before her body's reaction to iron reached a level which it could not tolerate. Then the bitch would probably die. But before that happened, he'd get some *answers*.

Placing the nozzle against Saille's bare arm, Williamson squeezed the trigger. Then hurrying through the hypnotically embed opening speech, he launched straight into the first question.

"How do you know the man who tried to rescue you, Saille."

"He is the Ur." Her reply was clearly spoken, though unclear in meaning.

"The Ur. Do you mean your father?" The doctor sought clarification. Saille nodded, prompting him to pose the obvious question. "But, the individual we caught is a human called O'Connell. Your father - the Ur - is of the High Sidhe."

"Same." Saille insisted through gritted teeth.

"Are you saying that what we perceive as O'Connell is really no more than a disguised Sidhe. Hidden by means that science cannot detect?" The thought was a worrying one. Breathing becoming laboured as the iron travelled through her system, Saille shook her head from side to side. Williamson rubbed fingers across his sweating brow. "But, if O'Connell is human, how can he also be you father?"

"Inside." Limp as a soaking dishrag, the word bubbled out over lips set in a thin smile of pride.

"You're talking about his *soul*?" The doctor thought aloud, both horrified and fascinated by the implications. "Are you telling me that the High Sidhe have the ability to *inhabit* human bodies?"

Head lolling to one side a line of yellow spittle dribbled down Saille's cheek, and onto the operating table's shiny white plastic. Williamson glanced nervously at the monitoring equipment he'd bothered to hook up, and saw that her pulse rate was already at a speed that would have killed a human. Temper flaring he grabbed a hank of her lustrous hair and used it to lift her head. The drug was doing its damage must faster than his rough calculations had indicated. It was as is she *wanted* to die.

"Saille. I am the River and I command your attention." Shaking her head from side to side he slapped her hard, not caring that his actions tore loose clumps of hair. "Come on you Fey bitch, stay with me."

Her beautiful pale skin becoming a battleground of dark bruises, Saille's body was collapsing internally, countless cells rupturing under the touch of iron. Now only heartbeats away from True Death the walls that had been built inside her mind crumbled, falling away like night under the rays of a new sun. Freedom had come far too late to enable any possibility of survival, though it did allow her to give a final, personal message to the human who'd chained her mind and destroyed her body. Channelling every iota of her remaining willpower into the effort, Saille forced open eyelids which felt heavy as rocks, so that she might see the face of her persecutor as she told him his fate. Slow moving rivulets oozed from the corners; the contents of tiny veins which had spewed their cargo onto the surface of her eyeballs. Spilling like red tears the trickled down her mottled cheeks, signs of an emotion she did not feel.

"The *Slua* will find you." Saille promised, coughing up black blood. Gore coated lips bent into a strange, satisfied smile, then froze.

Williamson released his hold, letting the silky strands of copper-red hair slip between

his fingers. As his dead prisoner's head smacked down against the table he turned and walked slowly from the room, furious at his failure.

Silent as an owl in flight Aillen Midhna climbed naked from his lover's bed, and walked past the unseeing sentinel that was her husband. Too quiet for human ears, the sound which had disturbed him had emanated from the rear of the house, summoning him to audience with an avian messenger. Entering the darkened bathroom he felt the gentle touch of night wind tousling his hair. The slight breeze came through a small window he'd set ajar to permit the grey lady ease of access. She was elsewhere at present, and a black crow sat in the frame.

"Ho." Voice pitched low the *pandeus* greeted the message-bearer. "What news do you bring, black cousin." Around the bird's neck he could see a single strand of coppery hair, from which dangled a paper-thin square of silver, no bigger than a man's fingernail. Wings flapping briefly the crow flew from its perch and landed on Aillen's outstretched arm. "My thanks," he said, taking the pyx and reading its pictographic message at a glance. "I shall seek them out, and play a lullaby worthy of the First Rank."

With a flick of the wrist he sent the bird winging back to its master.



Red Cap © Martin Chaplin & Adam Webb

Chapter Eleven

The Trojan Faerie

The day ranked as one of the worst Nicholas Wynt could remember. Now back behind his desk at Whitehall Central he wore an expression like Vesuvius on the point of eruption. Attending to Goodman had been the one occasion he was unavailable since the crisis began, and in the space of two and a half hours Williamson had managed to inject Saille with a fatal dose. But the why's and how's surrounding his blunder would have to wait. The prisoner's demise was of minor importance, when compared the Sailor's antics.

Wynt looked again at the emboldened line of the interim report handed to him by Lieutenant Eisner, prior to his departure for Ireland. Not content with wreaking havoc in the West End, the Sailor had challenged those pursuing him to a midnight showdown at the Tower of London. Which, by unfortunate coincidence, was also the time scheduled for the commencement of Operation Mordor.

An added complication came in the form of Goodman, who unbeknown to anyone at Whitehall Central, had made an appointment with Christopher Hall, MI5's Director. It was a meeting which he'd been unable to attend, or cancel as protocol demanded, due to the fact that he was *dead*. Now Hall was suspicious, and asking questions that could not readily be answered. But at least his men would never find the body. Not unless they was prepared to examine the contents of thousands of tins of catfood, currently in the hold of a cargo ship bound for Hong Kong. The traitor was gone, and would not be the cause of any further embarrassment. Caitlin Ash, on the other hand, had vanished once again. But her disappearance was of no great concern. After what had happened, she'd be to frightened to surface for a good while, if at all. The Jaguar had been abandoned in a field near Haringey, which at least gave a starting point, for when there was time to search.

"Do we have any word yet?" Wynt growled into his intercom.

"No, sir." The monosyllabic reply was carefully neutral.

"Very well. Let me know the instant there are any new developments." Releasing the toggle he leaned back in his chair, liver-spotted hands gripping the arms as if they were the necks of doomed chickens.

The single piece of good news that had manifested in his brief absence had been in regard to Sean Molloney. The terrorist, known among the higher echelons of British Intelligence as our *Bog-trotting Associate*, had made contact concerning a message left for him at a dead letter drop in the Irish Republic. SIGINT analysts described him as sounding as if he were in a state of shock. He'd turned down the wet job before it had been properly offered, then laughed in near hysteria when the journalist was mentioned by name. When he'd calmed down enough to make sense, he'd explained that Mark Rainbow was at present alone inside the Occupied Zone, and not likely to come out alive.

Glancing at the clock, Wynt's thoughts turned once more to Operation Mordor. Concerned that Fey activity on the English mainland might - by morning - be impossible to

conceal, he'd taken the decision to authorise a stripped-down version of the mission before it had been rubber-stamped, by the real Anthony Pierce and the Overseas Defence Committee. Providing all was going according to plan Lieutenant Eisner and Agent Senneker would be crossing the border, using Johnny Halcombe as their passport.

It was close to dusk, and the group were secreted in a small copse, near the edge of a recently harvested corn field near Ardamullivan Castle, County Clare. The copse overlooked the site chosen as the entry point for the commencement of Operation Mordor. Unfortunately, the mission's precise aims were known only to a very select few. The location of the entry point had been provided by Goodman, prior to his disappearance, but even he had not been briefed as to what his superior's hoped to accomplish. Updated information concerning timing had come from a high-ranking American recruit, presently attached to the DIA's Strategy and Co-ordination Division. Exactly on schedule an unmarked helicopter had arrived and hovered very close to the ground without setting down, allowing three men to jump out.

The clandestine alliance between factions of British and American Intelligence had come as an unpleasant surprise. Obviously there had been significant developments, but no contact or member of the Network was privy to details. All that was known for certain was that something had spooked the British into action. Which, if judged by their past record, was unlikely to be conciliatory in nature.

"Sergeant Halcombe is carrying a heavy pack, and is armed with an automatic rifle. NATO standard SLR." Yuri Litvinko reported what he was seeing through the American-made 'chip-sight' binoculars. "Two others are crossing with him. One is the DIS agent, Eisner. The other, I don't recognise."

"Let me see." Viktor - Baloo - Ishulin said. Accepting the binoculars he squinted through them. The three men were wading up the middle of a shallow stream which flowed into the Occupied Zone.

"Gotta be American?" Michel DuPellier, the Canadian member of the group voiced the common thought.

"*Da.*" Ishulin rumbled. "The man is Nicholas Renaldo Senneker. Major Senneker, when he flew for the USAF. He later joined the NSA, but is presently attached to the Defence Intelligence Agency."

"Whatever's happened, it must be quite serious for the Yanks to have been brought in so quickly." Caitlin Ash commented. "Maybe we should wait, until we have a better idea of what's going on."

Ishulin shook his great head. "We cannot. They may be under orders to do harm, in which case we must stop them." Half turning he flashed a smile of encouragement. "Three trailblazers are better than one, *da.*"

"I agree," Litvinko nodded. "We'll let them run the gauntlet for us." Taking the binoculars from his countryman he passed them to DuPellier.

"For us." Caitlin repeated. "Why should the Fey want *us* to run a gauntlet?"

"Because they are Fey." Yuri explained as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Mentally, he reprimanded himself for the slip.

"Where do we meet Paddy?"

"He didn't say." Better prepared for that question, the Russian lied expertly. "But I think we will be intercepted, before we reach the mountain. Don't worry." He hoped the guess proved correct.

The truth was that Padraig O'Connell was missing, and had not made contact for the better part of two weeks. Under normal circumstances Network policy would have been to wait until he surfaced again. But waiting was no longer an option. Direct contact had to be established with the Fey leaders, before Operation Mordor wrecked any hope of a peaceful solution. If O'Connell's name and girlfriend were not sufficient to buy safe passage, there was only the slimmest of chances that any of them would live to see the inside of Pollagoona Mountain. The risks had to be taken, because the alternative was to sit back and do nothing while the opposition plunged humanity into the middle of a supernatural war.

Small eyes filled with hate and pain the sank its teeth into the foot of the enormous beast that had crushed its tail. In the course of a few frantic seconds it was through to the bone, intent on winning freedom.

The rat's busy effort meant less than nothing to the Red Cap. Stooping low he plucked the small creature loose and snapped its spine in two. Then, holding the twitching form above his head in one huge fist, began to squeeze. Blood and entrails poured out, landing in his hair and coating its thick strands. Discarding the body the Red Cap worked the pulpy mess into his scalp, murmuring softly to himself.

The hunger gnawed like maggots at his insides, making him snarl with need. Though not for food. Instinctively he knew that he no longer had to eat. Chewing live flesh was a pleasure, not a necessity. What he hungered for was the fulfilment of his purpose. He existed to guard the citadel of the *Daoine Sidhe*, and his reward was the blood of those who did not belong. The blood which he needed in order to dye and re-dye his long red hair, in imitation of those who had made him strong.

Hefting the great axe over his shoulder, the Red cap set off once more to stalk Pollagoona's Halls, pausing every few yards to sniff the air. What he hoped for was the scent of a trespasser, though all he found were juicy black spiders, and rats. Somewhere, deep in the recesses of his mind, he heard a voice. A frail humankind voice. Whispering words he cared not to understand it spoke of another name, another life. It wanted him to remember something. But the voice was weak and easy to ignore. He was a Red Cap, strong as the stone he trod. That was his life and his function.

Leaning against the wall under Traitor's Gate, Corporal Nial was grateful for the lateness of the hour. If the Sailor had chosen twelve noon instead of midnight, the public and ever inquisitive media would've been impossible to exclude. Even as things were, compromises had had to be made. The Yeoman Warders, and other less conspicuous staff had been told nothing until the last member of the public had left the Tower grounds. An hour after that DIS and two units of Special Air Service had moved in. Supposedly there to counter a major terrorist threat to the Crown Jewels, the security force had made a thorough search of the

buildings and grounds, establishing beyond reasonable doubt that the Sailor was not secreted inside. While that was going on, and afterwards, all but three key-holders among the regular personnel were confined to their quarters. Systematically scanning showed that, as had been expected, the Sailor was not among them. When all possible checks were completed, the men stationed themselves at pre-arranged points, and began the long wait.

Cupping a hand over the face, Nial illuminated his watch just long enough to see that the time was five minutes to midnight. Not even the air was moving. Reaching inside his jacket he took out his radio and made the obligatory call to the three other DIS co-ordinators. None of them had anything to report.

Unperceived by the humans who passed him by Midar stood close to the river, on the opposite bank to the Tower of London. Perched on his shoulder the black crow waited impassively, oblivious to the destruction it would soon unleash. Fastened loosely around its neck by a single strand of copper-red hair was a tiny square of silver, upon which had been marked runes known only to the Fallen. Invocations, which if used in a certain way could draw upon the lines of power that flowed under the centre of the city through the Leys. To the humans who waited it would seem as if a legend - old by their measure - had come true. Which was precisely what he wanted them to think. As midnight arrived he whispered a command and launched his familiar on its flight across the Thames.

From his station on the roof of the central keep Houseman heard Big Ben, and in the wake of each knell, the rasping cough of a crow's call. Tracking the sound, which had surely been missed by those with less sensitive hearing, he trained his binoculars on the source. The bird was circling the central keep - possibly attracted by his presence - flying some twenty feet above the battlements. It seemed ordinary enough. Though to one able to see as he could, the small black body was girded with potent magics. Through the lenses he spotted something small, glinting around the crow's neck. He recognised it as a *Sidhe pyx*; a tiny, usually square piece of silver which the Fallen of the Sixth Rank used to send each other messages, or activate willed power. Under certain conditions, a pyx could be made to function like the *Sidhe* equivalent to a bomb, with equally devastating results.

"Sinbad # 3." Houseman identified himself through the radio. "It might be nothing," he lied. "But I think I see something odd."

"The Sailor?" Corporal Nial's anxious voice issued from the ear-piece.

"Negative." Houseman smiled to himself. "It's a bird, a crow, circling above my position. It has something shiny around its neck. Keep a look out, everyone. If it lands, I want it caught alive." The instruction was also a veiled warning. If what he'd guessed was true, disaster would strike when the pyx touched earth.

Disturbed in their nests by the invisible patterns being generated in the air above, the Tower ravens awoke and began calling to one another. Etched into the memory of their species the patterns were at once familiar and alluring. Signs from the distant past which called in the silent tongue, drawing them irresistibly to flight.

Running under trees suddenly alive with avian life, Nial sprinted to the base of the White Tower. Something was obviously stirring the raven's up, but it wasn't necessarily connected with the Sailor.

"Sinbad # 3. Got anything?"

"Only ear-ache from the noise these damn birds are making," Houseman replied, careful to stay true to the perceptions of the character he'd played for twenty-two years. "That crow is still circling. Stay sharp."

Making a final circuit Midar's familiar gained height, then banking sharply dipped its head groundward. The rune-inscribed square slipped from around its neck and tumbled to earth, twinkling like a tiny star, before it landed near the base of the White Tower. As contact was made there came a silent flash, bright as sheet lightning, followed an instant later by the cracking sound of many pairs of wings.

"The ravens!" Houseman's voice came over the ear-piece receivers worn by his subordinates. "They're taking off."

More than that, he could see the Tower birds abandoning their nests and those too young to fly. Wings, clipped to prevent the birds departing, were suddenly restored, by the power of Sidhe magic. A ribbon of black against the starry night they circled the keep once, then headed off toward the west. When the rumbling began it sounded far away, as if something heavy and industrial was grinding to a halt. Until the first of the tremors struck. Answering the call of the Sidhe's unbound runes a tiny section of the planet's magnetosphere rippled, warping gravity and weakening tectonic alignment at the Tower of London's foundations. Strongest of all the third and last tremor was powerful enough to split the ground wide open, creating a four-foot wide gap along one wall of the White Tower's base.

Clinging to the trunk of a medium-sized tree Des Nial watched in horror as cracks ran snake-like up the length of the tower and out along the adjoining walls. Unable to bear the stress ancient masonry crumbled quickly, crashing down like a stone waterfall. In seconds the top third of the building lay in dust-clouded ruin. The shock wave travelled outward, shaking other buildings and toppling the less secure crenellations. When the ground finally stopped moving, Nial made himself let go of the tree. An old legend had come true before his eyes - no glamour illusion - and the shock felt like a physical blow. Looking around he noticed for the first time the total absence of electric light. For what he estimated was a radius of half a mile from the earthquake's epicentre, the lights of London were out. In the stygian darkness he saw the flash or torches, and taking a deep breath, found his radio.

"Sinbad # 3." He called, without response. "Sinbad # 3, are you receiving?" It was hard to tell, but the central keep looked to be quite badly damaged. "Lieutenant, if you can hear me, keep still. We'll get to you." Illuminated by the torch of a soldier who'd come to check him for injury, he said, "The bastard set us up! It was the world's biggest mousetrap, and we walked right in."

"If they can do this without even *being* here," the black-clad man replied. "I'd say we got off lightly, sir."

Satisfied with his accomplishment Midar turned away from the scene of ruin, and walked quickly in the direction of Tooley Street. In the aftermath of such destruction, those who sought to catch him would spare no effort. Already their allies would be combing the streets and dark places, armed with steel and the will to use it. Though by the time they crossed the river he would be long gone, on his way out of the city. While humankind were

licking their wounds he would travel the country, seeking out new Bloodsong bearers.

Reaching the main road he headed toward London Bridge, thoughts shifting to the progress and pain of Aillen Midhna and Beith Ur. When the time was right, if all had gone well, the *pandeus* would play to the sleeping Yldra, and in so doing force them to comply with laws laid down at the time of the Fall. It would be a decisive triumph for the Sidhe. Unlike the probable fate of Beith Ur, who in his borrowed body had ventured deep into man's place of strength. The Dreaming had clearly shown him making the attempt, and it was therefore the correct choice to make. Even if led him to his doom. The *Daoine Sidhe* knew there was a purpose to all that the Dreaming revealed. While things it offered glimpses of did not always come to pass, attempts to avoid the possibility invariably brought a worse fate.

Senses dulled by the presence of so much iron, and deeply engrossed in thought, Midar failed to recognise the danger until it was almost upon him. Ears assaulted by the sound of a racing engine he looked over his shoulder and saw a car, arrowing toward him. Unable in so shorter time to drawn upon the power necessary to force the iron-laden beast from its path, Midar threw off his concealing glamour and in the split-seconds available to him, transformed his appearance into a figure of human authority.

Suddenly confronted by the sight of a police officer standing right in the middle of the road, the driver stamped down hard on the Porche's brake pedal. "Brace yourself!" He yelled at the chattering girl strapped-in by his side.

Leaving a short trail of rubber on the tarmac the tyres squealed like stuck pigs, as inertial force threw the young couple were violently forward. Saved from more serious injury by her seatbelt the woman's head struck the windscreen, shattering glass and knocking her unconscious. Winded by impact with the steering wheel, the driver gasped for breath, all too aware that the policeman had *not* managed to jump clear. In a state of shock he put the car into reverse and backed up, feeling as he did so the sickening thump of a body going under his wheels for a second time. Pausing to check that his companion was still breathing he slipped free of his seat belt, muttering a prayer that the officer had somehow survived.

The sight which greeted him wasn't at all what he'd expected. Instead of a copper, he found a tramp, dressed in clothes that looked as if they'd come from a turn of the century jumble sale. From mid-chest down he was a caved-in mess, and judging by their awkward angle, both his legs were shattered. Crouching down the driver touched fingers to the tramp's neck, just to make certain that he had no pulse.

"Stupid." He said to himself, slapping a palm against his forehead as he remembered the pill he'd taken back at the club. Obviously he'd been hallucinating. otherwise he'd have *seen* the tramp in the first place, instead of an empty road.

The fact remained that he'd killed a man. Suddenly feeling very sober the driver took a deep breath, knowing that there was only one thing he could do. Under the circumstances he would undoubtedly go to prison if he admitted the crime, so confession was not an option. The man was gone, and no amount of punishment meted out by the law would bring him back. Besides, from the look of him he was a down and out, not someone who would be quickly missed. Or not missed at all, if he turned up several miles away, somewhere down river perhaps. Then it would be reasonable for those who found him to assume that his death

was an accident, which it was. Certainly his death had not been intentional.

Aware that another car might chance upon the scene at any moment, the driver retrieved his keys from the ignition, and heart racing, bundled the body into the Porche's boot. The Thames was only a stone's throw away.

Encased in Sidhe flesh, Padraig O'Connell waited alone in Pollagoona's Great Hall. There was nothing else he could do. His mind or soul or whatever it was that determined self was shut inside the Sidhe lord's body with no way out. Save magic of the calibre which had placed him there, or death. Before leaving the Liannan had told him that it would be death. Smiling inside, Padraig remembered the calmness with which he'd accepted her pronouncement. The thought of death would have terrified him when he was in his original body. Now though, having been assured by the Faerie Queen that, for humankind, there was no True Death, passing from life no longer had the power to frighten him. There was only one thing he wanted before the time came, and that was to see the face of his English Rose. The smile his frozen features would not display was really for her, because the Liannan had made him a promise before she took her leave, and the promise was that his wish would be granted.

Body broken and awash with poison Beith had withdrawn, slowly concentrating that which was his essence into an impenetrable, intangible sphere. One by one he had severed the lines which anchored him within the borrowed body, preparing for the fate he'd known awaited since joining the High Circle. Just as surely as those who brought dishonour were transformed and condemned to wander as *duergar*, so those who honoured the Circle assumed upon the death of their bodies another, more pleasing form.

"Sir, I think you should take a look at these readings." Dr Woods called his superior's attention to the bank of equipment monitoring whatever Sidhe creature was inhabiting the author's body.

"How long has this been going on?" Williamson asked.

"I first noticed it about five minutes ago."

"Five minutes." Williamson reprimanded. "I should have been told at once, you blithering idiot. Look at these readings. Isn't it patently obvious - even to you - that the man is coming back to life!"

Laying face down on a patch of simulated Ireland, Beith Ur contemplated his immanent release and rebirth as a *slua de doinninn*. The last tie was severed, and although he could not feel it, he knew that the body's temperature was climbing. Soon he would be free, and then no human hands or weapons could do him harm. Even cold iron, would pass straight through an elemental form.

Kurt Williamson rushed into the environmental simulation chamber, a worried look twisting his features. Behind him came a three man medical emergency team, pushing an iron-lined coffin-like tank, half filled with bagged ice. In the interests of security, two armed guards stationed themselves just inside the entrance.

"Quickly, lift him in. Carefully, Selvey," he ordered. "Phillpot, make sure that IV is

inserted properly. Woods," he glared at his deputy. "Help me with the ice. We must reduce his temperature."

According to the thermometer jutting at an angle from his mouth, Pdraig O'Connell's temperature was already 101 degrees, and still climbing. Unless it could be cooled, the body would soon exceed its tolerance levels, shortly after which the body, and presumably whatever it contained, would die. Working quickly the team stretched him out on the cushions of ice, and covered him with more ice-cubes, hastily troweled into waiting plastic sacks.

"It isn't working." Woods gave his superior a worried glance.

"I can see that for myself," Williamson said acidically. Incredible as it seemed O'Connell's temperature was *still* rising. "This cannot be correct," he said under his breath. "It's simply impossible." The thermometer now read 126 degrees, which - technically - meant that the body was dead, again.

Approximately the size of a walnut, the essence that had been Beith Ur was now a ball of highly concentrated energy, positioned at the base of Pdraig O'Connell's skull. The essence no longer had access to human senses, but was aware that the physical matter around it was superheating, its fluids expanding toward the point where the body would no longer be able to contain the pressure.

By virtue of the fact that he was standing at the opposite end of the table when the skull split open, Williamson avoided most of the blood and pulped brain-tissue which showered over his team. Hit in the mouth by boiling hot eyeball, Selvey fell to the floor and vomited. Phillpot and Woods were motionless with shock.

Having seen worse sights, Williamson reacted by checking that all O'Connell's vital signs were flat. Already his thoughts were racing ahead of the present, to the autopsy he intended to conduct on what remained of the author turned infiltrator. It was a shame, he thought, that the man had never recovered sufficiently to make a statement. Any statement would have at least provided a reference point from which to work. On the verge of declaring the time of death he paused, suddenly aware of an odd crackling noise. Something like the sound made by sizzling fat it was emanating from the ice-packed corpse. Closer inspection revealed that the residue matter which had been forced through O'Connell's gaping eye sockets was already dry, and beginning to flake away. Not having the appropriate instrument to hand Williamson took a biro from the breast pocket of his lab coat and touched its top against the corpse's reddened cheek. A feeble column of plastic-tainted smoke curled in response.

"This is extraordinary." Williamson said. Probing slightly harder he saw the ball-point sink beneath the skin. The penetration was accompanied by further melting, and the nauseating stink of crisping flesh. Blackening as they fell away beneath the make-shift probe shrivelled flakes revealed steaming, entirely carbonated innards, and calcified bone.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm going to be sick." David Woods comment was the last remark made by any of the men present. No sooner were the words out than digital klaxons sounded emergency stations, indicating that the chamber's multiple sensor array was detecting a new and highly volatile Fey presence.

Rising like an invisible phoenix through literal ashes, the newly formed *Slua Sidhe* took flight. Sucking the very air from the lungs of the human's in its presence it dropped them to their knees, then one after another in rapid succession, slammed their fragile heads down against the concrete with hurricane force. Except for Williamson. Pinning him against the exit, the *Slua* allowed him just enough freedom of movement to encourage the thought that he might yet escape his fate. In mere seconds it was rewarded, as a mixture of fear and hope caused the human to activate the mechanism that opened the chamber's hermetically sealed door.

Falling backwards through the exit Williamson tumbled onto the floor, and spurred on by instinct, crawled a few feet along the corridor. Using the last of his energy to roll over onto his back he sucked in air, relieved beyond words that he was able to breathe again. Until, that was, he tried to exhale.

Alerted the moment the emergency had begun, Nicholas Wynt stared in mute horror at the 'smart' analysis displayed in flashing red letters on the screen of his office terminal. **Slua De Doinin**. If correct, the appellation meant that there was a Fey elemental incarnate in the heart of the complex. Given the destructive potential posed by even one *Slua*, he didn't dare to take the chance that the computer was wrong. Therefore only one course of action remained open. Tapping out a coded sequence he'd hoped never to use, he set in motion the immediate evacuation of Whitehall Central.

Forcing air into the human's lungs the *Slua* inflated them until they burst, then lofted the dying body to roof-height. Keeping its burden pressed tightly against the ceiling it swept down corridors that were in the process of being evacuated, tearing loose anything not securely anchored and using it to batter through any glass or metal which barred the way. Those humans unlucky enough to find themselves in its path it broke without mercy or exception, crushing flesh and bones against harder substances. Williamson's shattered body it continued to bear before it, holding it between ceiling and floor like a flag of terror.

Half the length of the complex away the emergency evacuation was proceeding with typically military precision.

"I could take some men and try for the armoury, sir." Briggs, Whitehall Central's chief of Security offered.

"That would not be appropriate." The director replied, voice wavering only slightly as he supervised the sealing of the perimeter hallway. Flanked by visibly nervous soldiers he walked calmly to the first key junction. "Set the emergency charges, minimum fuses. It is imperative that we contain it." Gripping Briggs' shoulder he stared into the man's eyes. "We cannot allow it to reach the surface."

Acutely aware of the need to appear in control, Wynt stood back and let his men get to work. Despite the speed with which the disaster had occurred, well rehearsed procedure had ensured that the majority of personnel would escape, along with the single healthy Fey prisoner and all but the most recent unduplicated data. From the purely logistical point of view, damage was already limited. Psychologically, there would be far greater repercussions. Whitehall Central was an iron-rich jail from which no Fey prisoner had ever escaped, and now like a bolt from the blue, it was being destroyed by a thing that had come in disguise. A

Trojan Horse of a man, who even when unmasked had not given the slightest hint of his true potential until it was too late. Knowing that the Fey - *a single Fey* - was capable of delivering such a blow was the most disturbing fact he'd ever had to face.

The three chosen to participate in Operation Mordor had all been equipped with a NATO standard SLR and special-issue magazines, plus an Armitage-Shaw Viper, preloaded with standard FeDp-bearing ammunition. In backpacks they carried enough dry rations for three days, helmet-mounted Davy lamps, nylon rope, a coiled alloy ladder, signal flares and sundry caving accessories. Under his combat fatigue each man wore a neoprene foam rubber wet suit, in anticipation of the rigours to come underground. All three had had some experience of mountaineering and caving during their military service, although Johnny Halcombe's training had been the most comprehensive. Therefore it had been agreed that command pass to him from Eisner once they entered Pollagoona Mountain.

The amended plan was to deliver terms of surrender to the Fey hierarchy from the Anglo-American alliance. Neither of the agents was particularly happy about the rush to get them across the border, though both knew that the old maxim was likely to prove true. He who hesitated where the Fey were concerned could lose, big time. Therefore risks had to be taken. The one major factor in favour of the mission succeeding was the Jericho device, which had been set and counting down before the team left British soil. Manual shut down of the clockwork timer and chemically-triggered detonation was not an option, due to the possibility of the Sidhe gaining control over one or more of the team. Once the effect - apparently harmless to humans - had been generated airborne assault squads would go into action. But in the event of failure there would be no repeat of the tragedy that had claimed British paratroops at the beginning of the occupation. No man would be asked to jump if spotter planes registered even one of the *Slua Sidhe*. Instead the paratroops' transports would turn back, and a single jetcopter would fly in low and fast, deploying a mobile Jericho device at the first indication of Fey activity. That was the good news. The bad news was that the range of such devices were limited to a very small area, and the chopper would only be able to remain in the vicinity of Pollagoona Mountain for a maximum of twenty-two minutes. If no pick-up had been made after that, the Operation Mordor team would be considered as missing in action.

Even if the border hadn't been physically marked with CT, Johnny would've known when he'd crossed simply by smell. Territory claimed by the Sidhe was uncannily fresh, as if somehow cleansed of the pollutants mankind pumped daily into the atmosphere. The air was the same as he remembered it. Other things were very different.

"It's too damn quiet." Senneker said in a hushed voice. He adjusted his pack, which in addition to the mission equipment, held the MIT Jericho. Fortunately, its construction included very little metal, and so the added burden was not great.

"Sure is, pardner," Johnny replied. Even though the American's comment had been serious, the phrase reminded him of a bad western. "The good news, it that there ain't no injuns in them thar hills."

"Got any idea why we haven't been challenged?" Eisner asked soberly. Glancing

back toward the border he added, "I'd say we're about four miles in, and..."

"We haven't seen anything that even *looks* Fey." The soldier finished. "I know. It's getting on my wick too. Like, I'm supposed to get through, but you two should've caught some flack."

"Maybe they know we're your buddies." Senneker offered.

"Keep thinking like that, pal," Alex snorted. "And you'll get clobbered. Especially if there's someone listening," he glanced from side to side. "There are Fey who would take you out just for the fun of it."

Passing through thick woodland and between steeply rising hills the group worked their way in a westerly direction, passing the Caher end of Lough Graney. Ahead lay Cappaghabaun Mountain, and a few miles to it's north, their final destination. They travelled quickly but with caution, and following Halcombe's warning, kept conversation to minimum. Aware that Halcombe was the only one with a valid invitation, Senneker and Eisner made sure to take extra care when traversing ground which might conceal faerie rings.

Senneker thought about the effect of the device he was carrying. The technology in use was not entirely new, just the application of it. So even though the Jericho had only been given one valid field test, he was confident that it would work as predicted. The designers said that the local, but extremely potent detonation, would disable the abilities of those who controlled High magic for at least three hours. During which time the whole area around the mountain would be vulnerable to airborne assault, thus keeping the action confined. It was hoped that the demonstration would be enough to convince the High Fey to surrender, or that if conflict resulted, enough of them could be captured to force surrender. Those were the only realistic options, as a protracted guerrilla style conflict was not viable. Those left out by the Anglo-American move would take military action themselves before they allowed that to happen.

The precise location of an entry point to Pollagoona's caverns was something that none of the team knew. Although Johnny Halcombe was *certain* that he'd find one - the right one - easily enough. When the time was right. Cresting a small peak the team found themselves looking down into wide flat valley, at the distant end of which a massive sprawling shape loomed up toward the stars.

"The magic mountain." Johnny said dryly.

"Don't let the Disney Corporation hear you say that." Senneker joked. "Those guys'll sue your ass."

"As long as that's all they do." Johnny said. "Come on. We've got about five miles to yomp." Looking over his shoulder at Senneker, face deadpan, he added, "Mind you don't tread on any Leprechauns."

"He's kiddin' me, ain't he?" The American raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Relocated to the Ministry of Defence building, Whitehall Central's surviving personnel had swiftly taken charge of a floor and facilities previously at the disposal of the Experimental Electronics Division, and were effectively back in business. The director had established himself in the EED Co-ordinator's office. Clear when he'd arrived the desk was already

starting to fill up with small stacks of paperwork and cases full of computer diskettes. The disks were all coded and loaded with information deemed too sensitive for even temporary transfer onto a non DIS mainframe. As it was all the terminals on the floor were physically isolated from those in other parts of the building.

Busily trawling through the latest data, Wynt was relieved to find that personnel watching the two possible escape routes from Whitehall Central had so far detected no signs of *Slua Sidhe* activity. The report was what he expected, given the amount of steel, rock and virtually indestructible plastic sealant used to block the routes. Nevertheless, confirmation was welcome. Other intelligence was not so encouraging. There had been a second disaster which unfortunately could not be hidden from public view. The central keep of the Tower of London was in ruins, and many of the surrounding buildings had been severely damaged, by what those present had described as an earthquake! The story, hastily concocted for the consumption of world media, blamed the incident on subsidence. Few who'd actually seen the damage were prepared to believe such a mundane explanation, although thankfully, the majority of sceptics were happy to listen to whispers of a terrorist bomb. The true cause was thought to have been the Sailor, who although not present in person, had somehow triggered the disaster. Six people had been killed, and thirteen injured. Lieutenant Houseman, who'd been on top of the White Tower shortly before it crumbled, had made a miraculous escape, apparently managing to get himself clear of the building seconds before it came down.

In Ireland Operation Mordor had commenced smoothly enough, with no reported problems. Although radio communication was impossible while they were inside the Occupied Zone - at least until the Jericho device was used - an RAF Nimrod had succeeded in photographing the team, who seemed to be proceeding as planned. However, also to be considered were a steadily increasing number of reports concerning small and medium groups of Fey, apparently moving toward points along the border. It was far too early to say for sure, but the indications were that they were preparing to fight their way out of the zone. As a precaution, all British and American bases in close to the area were on yellow alert.

One of twenty High Sidhe involved in concealing the exodus, Eadah Coll Ur sat cross-legged on the grass, a few feet from the edge of a dark, lilly-covered pond. The place was near Cloonlara, half a league to the south-west of what humankind had declared a border. Her will bent toward the task set by the Ruis Mor, she stared unblinkingly at the reflection of the moon on the pond's calm surface.

Between Eadah Coll Ur and the border was a spectacular circus of what appeared to be thirty of the Sidhe, some mounted on fire-eyed *garron*. All boasted colourful finery and seemed intent on singing and playing as long and loudly as they could. Certainly that was what the watching human soldiers believed. Sidhe eyes and ears knew the magnificent assembly to be nothing more than well-crafted illusion; one of twenty such bright things, wrought on command of the king to fascinate those who plotted to conquer.

Some five leagues to the east, the real group was much larger and glamour-cloaked to blend perfectly with the colours of the night. With them went a *bansidhe*, carrying in her arms a babe in whose veins sang the Bloodsong. Soft as spirits they would pass through

humankind's clumsily woven net, and journey on to safe haven.

Approximately eight miles to the west of Ireland on the bridge of the Exxon Kristianstad, First mate Erik Yannoson was halfway through his shift as lookout. The hour was just past 2am and the Atlantic was about as calm as it ever got. A seeming endless expanse of shifting, boring blackness, broken only by the waves that rolled against the super tanker's bow.

Boredom evaporated as a yellow-white glow appeared off to the south-west. Taking the ship's binoculars from their case, Yannoson focused them on the mysterious object, and saw something indistinct, riding low in the water. Small and bright, he thought at first that it might be a yacht on fire. Or a very well-lit powered vessel. But, not many of those rich enough to own such craft risked taking them so far out on what could be a violent sea. Obscured two-thirds of the time by wave action, the object was still too distant for him to make a positive identification. What was abundantly clear was that if it maintained its present course and speed, there was every likelihood of a collision. A worrying thought sprang to mind; he might be looking at the conning tower of a naval submarine. Finger stabbing at the alarm button Yannoson sounded general quarters, then began to sound the ship's warning hooter. Minutes later the ten man crew had congregated on the bridge and were eagerly taking turns with the binoculars to view the strangest and most fantastic sight that any of them had ever seen.

Trailing clouds of spark-flecked steam two yellow-white horses were dancing across the tops of the waves. On their back sat two copper-haired men, dressed in Medieval clothing. Behind the riders came a glowing, enclosed wooden boat that was almost as long as the Exxon Kristianstad, though much lower in the water. Incredibly, the vessel passed *through* the waves without pitching or rolling in any perceivable way. It was as if it were a wheeled vehicle, travelling on a flat road just beneath the surface. Over the sound of the sea a woman's voice could be heard, singing a lament that none of the multi-national crew recognised but all were saddened by, for what reason they could not explain.

As the two vessels converged one of the incredible riders turned and pointed at the super tanker, which moments later found itself heading directly into the teeth of a force nine gale, although the sky above was perfectly clear. The effect was to slow it just enough so that the glowing ship was able to glide across the bow without contact being made. Then, as suddenly as they had arisen, the winds stopped.

"When I get into port..." A man began excitedly.

"You'll say nothing." The captain cut him off in mid speech. "Not if you want to keep your job. That goes for all of you," his gaze swept over the gathered crew. "We *know* we've seen something real, but to anyone else it would seem like a drunkard's tale. And the company doesn't hire drunks. Understand?"

Crossing Pollagoona's foothills the Operation Mordor team veered to the east in order to intersect the Feakle Road, and from there to a bridge over a small river that drained into Lough Atorick. Johnny had insisted on the slight detour, because for the better part of an hour he'd felt inexplicably drawn toward the L-shaped lake. It was feeling which had grown

steadily stronger the closer he came. Now paused for a rest at the middle of the old stone arch they overlooked Lough Atorick's placid waters. At their backs were the foothills of Pollagoona Mountain, which at its highest point rose to eight-hundred feet above sea level.

"Okay. Where now?" Eisner enquired, keeping a cautious eye on the surrounding countryside. In all the time they'd been walking, none of the Fey or their creatures had even come into sight. Once or twice he'd thought there was something on their tail, but nothing had ever materialised.

"Dunno, yet." Johnny frowned. "This is the right place. I'm sure there's a way in, somewhere close. Just give me a few minutes." Turning to face the mountain he leaned back against the bridge wall and waved a finger in front of his chest. "Izzy wizzy let's get busy." When nothing happened he looked at the digit as if it were a dud firework. "Bugger. It always worked for Sooty," he muttered to Eisner.

"Down!" Senneker yelled. Shouldering his rifle he aimed quickly and fired several rounds at something on the lake, then dropped down behind the stonework next to the crouching Englishmen.

"What's out there?" Johnny hissed.

"Somethin' weird, comin' right this way." The American spoke fast. "Ugliest mother I ever seen, man. Don't know if I did any damage."

The answer was not long in coming. With steam belching from beneath his mount's hooves like an old locomotive, the *duergar* galloped under the man-made crossing. Pluming in its wake white clouds folded over the men, obscuring their view for vital seconds as the rider urged his steed up river, toward the mountainside.

First to rise, Johnny Halcombe tracked the Fey's progress through his rifle's night scope, finger tightening on the trigger. Then, before the shot could be taken, the creature vanished, disappearing behind a small waterfall.

"Where did it go?" Eisner asked, having missed the moment.

"Inside," Johnny winked. "That was a *duergar*, and it went inside the mountain. I think someone's showing us the front door."

No more than fifteen minutes behind the Anglo-American team, the Network group had speeded up after hearing the shots. None of them had seen the supposed conflict, or for that matter anything that could be described as Fey. But Ishulin had caught sight of agent Eisner wading up river. Frustratingly, a slope of rock had prevented him from getting much more than a glimpse before the man was out of sight.

Leading his group along the river bank, Yuri Litvinko picked a place, and making as little noise as possible, stepped in. The temperature was cool, though not unpleasantly so, and the water level was knee-height.

"Come, he said, turning to help Caitlin. "It isn't deep."

Wading toward the mountain the Network team hurried to make up lost time. Some three-hundred yards later, water was pouring from a fast-flowing spring, entering the river as a four-foot wide curtain of water. Behind it, virtually invisible until they were close enough for the spray to splash their faces, was a jagged split in the mountainside.

"They must've gone through there." DuPellier stated the obvious. Arms shielding his face he started forward.

The frantic buzzing noise seemed to come from all sides at once. Only a yard or two in front of him, Litvinko saw the Canadian go down, fingers clutching at his throat. To his left Ishulin cried out, both hands peppered by what at first glance looked like splinters. Then his attention was drawn upwards, to the swarm of small iridescent creatures circling directly overhead. Creatures he'd never seen, though heard plenty about.

"*Hyter* swarm!" Litvinko yelled. "Run. Run for your lives." Grabbing Caitlin's hand he splashed his way around the cascading water and into what he hope would be the concealing darkness beyond. There was no time to consider whether the cave might contain something even more deadly than the winged archers.

Even though there was plenty of room for them to fly around the waterfall, the *hyters* did not follow. A fact for which Litvinko thanked a god he didn't believe in. Inside, the cave was broad enough to echo, and black as pitch. Except for the water. The flow was headed into the mountain, and as it passed beneath the waterfall it changed, becoming suffused with hundreds of luminous white pinpoints. Propping Caitlin against a moss-covered wall, Yuri walked as close as he dared to the cave's entrance.

"Ishulin. DuPellier." He shouted between cupped hands. There was no discernible reply, and no sign of either man that he could see.

"They won't answer." Caitlin called. "Paddy told me about the sprites. They tip their arrows with something. A Fey poison, I think. And," her voice trailed off to almost nothing as she saw the sliver projecting from the back of her hand, "I've been hit."

Examining the injury with the beam of his flashlight, Litvinko found a single splinter-arrow embedded in the flesh between the second and third knuckles of Caitlin's left hand. Gripping the flightless dart between index finger and thumb he tugged it free and dropped it into the water.

"You're alright." He attempted to sound reassuring. "This one can't have been poisoned, or you'd already be..." He nodded back toward the waterfall.

"No. I'm not alright." Caitlin fought back the urge to dissolve into tears. "Paddy told me, it isn't the *quantity* that counts. More takes less time to work, but Sidhe poison is always fatal to humans. Oh, God." Tears welled up despite her efforts. "Where *is* Paddy? Why didn't he come to meet us?"

The Russian swallowed hard. "I think it's time you knew the whole truth."

Checking to make sure the top was firmly anchored, Johnny let the electron ladder unroll. Light and flexible alloy rungs, barely wide enough to hold a man's boot, it was just what was needed to make climbing from the bottom of the denehole easier for the others. Following the course of the underground river the group had progressed approximately a quarter of a mile, descending gradually into the bowels of the mountain. In case it became necessary to retreat or backtrack they marked their trail with blazes in the rock. Then he'd spotted - probably not by accident - a vertical shaft, and chimneyed his way up. At the top he'd found a chamber, big enough for several men to stand upright, and two carved passages that both ran parallel to the

watercourse. Either one offered a dryer, perhaps safer way forward.

Helmet lamp illuminating both entrances and rifle held ready to deal with anything that appeared, Johnny called the agents to join him. Excepting the brief appearance of the *duergar*, they'd still seen nothing Fey, but as he knew only too well, that didn't mean they weren't present. In the Occupied Zone where magic was a part of everything, the Fey could hide half an army under a man's nose, if that was their choice. On the other hand, their apparent absence could be a genuine sign that something was wrong. Until there was proof, either way, it was impossible to reach any definite conclusions.

The last man up Eisner boosted his pack over the top, and accepted a helping hand from Nick Senneker.

"Leave the ladder," Johnny said, seeing the agent reaching for it. "Could come in useful if we have to make a fast U-turn."

Taking turns to cover the tunnel entrances the three stripped off their sodden combat fatigues and laid them out to dry on a patch of floor.

"Which one do you recommend, Halcombe?" Eisner asked.

The soldier jerked a thumb at the left-hand tunnel. "I reckon that one's favourite. The air coming from it is a bit warmer. Besides," he smirked sheepishly, "my back says it's the way we ought to go."

Shortly after entering the mountain his scar-tissue had become strangely responsive. He'd said nothing because, at first, proceeding in any direction seemed to cause the fine pattern to glow with warmth. Turing back brought sharp stabs of pain, but nothing he couldn't have endured if he'd needed to. Now, where the junction provided a real choice of which way to move forward, a subtle tingling sensation indicated left.

The team travelled on for about half a mile without incident when Eisner took his turn on point, and soon after became the first casualty. The passage broadened out into a chamber that was wider than the lamp beam could penetrate, presenting them with the choice of staying in a group or spreading out to investigate three directions simultaneously. In the end the decision had been made by time. One of the watches had stopped, and the other two showed that there was fifty-seven minutes left until the Jericho triggered. Senneker went right, Halcombe to the left and Eisner straight ahead. Keeping in voice contact and close enough to see the glow of each other's helmet lamps had seemed a reasonable risk, until the American took a fall. Hearing his cry and automatically assuming that he was under attack, Eisner and Halcombe turned and started back towards his position on the double.

"It's okay, man." Senneker said as Halcombe's rifle preceded its owner out of the darkness. "I just slipped in some kinda goop." Holding up a red-stained palm he added, "Looks like blood. From where, I don't know."

Casting about with his helmet lamp Johnny soon discovered a nearby pile of small, furry bodies. The mangled remains of his least favourite creature. "Rats!" He glanced back at the American. "Something's chewed 'em up, badly."

"Panic over, is it." Eisner's voice and bobbing helmet light came from several yards off. The furthest away when the accident had happened, he'd only covered half the distance back when Senneker had announced that he was okay.

"No problem." Johnny replied. "But watch your step. We're walking around something's pantry."

"What kind of something?" Senneker asked.

"Dunno." Johnny shrugged. "Something big enough to chomp rats."

"Maybe that's why we haven't seen any...." Eisner's speech ended with the fatal suddenness of a guillotine blade. His helmet lamp disappeared, and from the darkness there came a dull thump.



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Chapter Twelve

Blasphemous Joy

It was like Bonfire Night, Christmas Eve and her birthday all rolled into one, Rebecca Pierce thought. For the first time in years she was excited by the life she was living. None of the perks she'd enjoyed as the wife of a top politician could even begin to compare with the thrill of slipping under the noses of the security forces, hidden under a cloak of glamour.

The *real* Tony was back at the house, still and stiff as a plank of wood. Peter had become her husband's identical twin, and together they'd taken a cab to St. Jame's Park, where he'd cast a perfect illusion over the body of a tramp, who oblivious to what had occurred, was fast asleep on a bench. In the wink of an eye the sleeper was gone and in his place, enjoying the evening air, sat the War Minister and his wife. At the same instant, she and Peter had taken on the appearance of another, anonymous couple. The best part of it was that Tony's Special Branch escorts, who as always lurking were following close behind, were completely unaware that anything unusual had happened.

It was literally magic. Even thinking about it sent an almost sexual thrill chasing through her nervous system. Peter hadn't told her where they were going, only that his intention was to untie by music the threads of a great and ancient weaving. The cryptic explanation had meant nothing, until he'd led her to the railings fronting Westminster Abbey.

"Here." Astonished once more, Rebecca stared at her lover. "You're going to work *magic*, here at the Abbey?"

The time was close to 5pm, and the abbey's verger was politely ushering the last of the afternoon's tourists through the gates. Green painted iron, Aillen noted, pleased that the barrier was still open. Iron was beyond the power he directed through his *antarra*. Had they been closed it would have been a simple matter for him to leap over, but his paramour would have had to be lifted, and looking at the tips of the six-foot tall uprights, he was glad that he did not have to chance painful contact.

Blending in with the crowd the Sidhe chose his moment carefully, making certain that he was the last to bid the verger good evening. As Rebecca shook the man's hand he lifted the pipes to his lips and played three rising notes.

"We would venture *inside*, beadle."

"Yes, of course." Glassy-eyed the enchanted churchman led his latest guests through the abbey's old oak doors. "This is out beautiful Gothic nave," he began to ramble. "It's the tallest in Great Britain, and contains the..."

"Enough." Aillen snapped his fingers, bringing instant silence. Drawing lightly on the abundant power coursing beneath his feet the *pandeus* established that he and the two humans were the only living things inside the building. "Bar the doors and ensure that no one passes," he ordered. Wordlessly, the verger moved to comply. "Come, milady." Aillen took his lover's hand. "There is magic to make."

Due to the chaotic events of the past hours, the four man DIS team assigned to search the Pierce home for traces of Fey intrusion were half a day behind schedule. Presenting their credentials to the plain-clothes police officers stationed since morning on guard duty, they were duly informed that the minister and his wife had already left.

Beginning in the entrance hall the men used hand-held metres to electronically sweep every ground floor room from top to bottom, and in most detected residue energy. The highest levels came from a chair in the lounge, where someone or something that was Fey had sat. Other readings were less distinct, indicating that the Fey had moved about, but not lingered long enough to leave an electromagnetic fingerprint on any inanimate object. The general consensus of opinion was that the Fey had been in the house for only a short time, probably concealed from human sight by glamour. Until they encountered the cat, which to the surprise of the man whose legs it darted between, registered almost as high as a living Fey would have. One shot from an en-gun stopped its frantic dash for freedom, and established that - at least physically - it was no more than a cat. Using a large cardboard box intended for samples the man who'd shot it took the injured animal away for treatment, and further study.

Completing their search of the ground floor the remainder of the team moved the investigation upstairs. Inside the master bedroom there was a very strong trace, leading the three to suspect that some form of arcane trap had been set. The strongest trace came from the large, walk-in wardrobe. Having no wish to be killed in the line duty, two of the team carefully attached nylon cords to the wardrobe's sliding doors, and positioned themselves on either side, well out of the firing line of whatever was inside. The third man stood in the hallway, with his gun aimed directly at the wardrobe.

When the cords were pulled the doors slid back, revealing the famous face of the minister for war. Although his eyes were open and he was breathing shallowly, to all other intents and purposes Pierce had about as much life as a statue. Instantly the team's hand-held metres registered a huge jump in Fey associated energy.

"Hands away from your sides, sir." The man in the hall ordered, wary that what he *thought* he saw might be a trick of glamour.

"Cuckoo." The minister responded woodenly. "Cuckoo, cuckoo."

Dispatched from their temporary headquarters minutes after the call concerning the discovery at the Pierce residence had come in, there were thirty men assigned to the task force. More than sufficient to quash whatever the Sailor was hoping to accomplish via his latest incredible deception. Thus far the general public were equally divided about what had really caused the Tower of London to fall. Those with an inborn respect for authority believed that subsidence was the reason, while their more cynical countrymen suspected a terrorist plot. Either belief suited DIS, who were determined that there would be no repeat of the previous night's embarrassing debacle. Every member of the task force was out for revenge. Even Lieutenant Will Houseman, who if the truth were known, held no loyalty to humankind.

Thinking that he was being mugged the tramp did his feeble best to curl up into a defensive ball on the park bench.

"Gerroff, leave me alone." He grumbled at the pair of Special Branch officers who

were attempting to bring him out of his booze induced stupor.

"It's alright. He's harmless." Knowing exactly what had happened, Lieutenant Houseman called off the dogs.

"I don't understand it, sir." The lower-ranking policeman frowned. "A minute ago I would have sworn on oath that Mr & Mrs Pierce were sitting here."

"We'll take it from here." Houseman dismissed the two without explanation. "Thank you for your help." Raising a needlessly bandaged arm he signalled to the plain-clothed soldier stationed at the orange perimeter tapes to let the men pass, and when they were out of ear-shot spoke a code phrase into his radio. The precaution was something which the Director had dreamed-up as a method to combat glamour disguise.

"There's a good trace, sir." Nial informed his superior. "If we're lucky it'll lead us right to our man." Turning slowly he watched the hand-held detector's liquid colour crystal display. "This way's the strongest."

Waving in the men who were nearest and calling the others via radio Houseman directed them back to the small fleet of unmarked vans parked in nearby St. George Street. Capturing the renegade *Exsusiai* was going to be interesting.

"Is he alive?" Nick Senneker asked.

"Hard to tell from here." Johnny shined the light of his helmet lamp down the pit into which Eisner had fallen. "Stay put. I'll go and see."

"You want I should belay?" The American began tugging a length of nylon rope from his backpack.

"No need." Johnny pointed. "See, there are hand-holds." Divesting himself of his pack and rifle he lowered himself over the edge, and making sure that his footing was secure, began to climb down.

Less than four feet across at the top and perhaps twelve feet deep, the pit was roughly oval in shape, with a prominent bulge of rock near the top on one side. Opposite to it was where the hand-carved wedges had been made, precisely the right distance apart for use by human-sized hands and feet. At the bottom was a broader chamber, with no visible exits as far as the helmet-lamp was able to penetrate.

Crouching down to examine the fallen man Johnny was relieved to find him coming around. A quick examination revealed possible concussion, but no broken bones or immediately obvious internal damage. It appeared that the natural kink in the rock had served to slow Eisner's fall, and in so doing prevented a more serious injury.

"Something clipped the back of my head," the agent explained woozily. "It was moving about."

"What," Johnny peered around apprehensively, "down here?"

"No." Eisner pointed. "Up top. I heard a noise, like something breathing, off to the right of where Senneker was."

Hearing the thud of heavy footsteps Senneker whirled around, finger squeezing his rifle's trigger as he turned. But fast as his reaction had been, Sidhe magic made the hunting Red Cap even faster. Avoiding the arc of automatic fire by inches, the creature that had once

been Mark Rainbow brought his axe whistling down in a powerful, two-handed blow. Dead before the scream could leave his lips Senneker was split in two, at an angle from his right shoulder to his left hip, where the blade exited in a shower of blood and tissue. The two uneven halves fell in different directions, blood fountaining from severed arteries.

Going down on its haunches the Red Cap immersed his massive hands in the warm remains, then ran them through his gore-matted mane of hair. Crooning to himself in perverse satisfaction he lowered his fanged mouth, intending to suck the juice from his victims still pulsing heart.

"Senneker, what's happening?" A voice disturbed the blood feast.

Issuing a low, warning growl the Red Cap reached greedily into the fallen human's chest cavity, intent on claiming his prize. Effortlessly he tore the heart free and stuffed it into his mouth as if ravenous. Blood mixed with copious amounts of saliva spilled out over his lips as he chewed, and ran down his chin to form hanging red droplets. Oblivious now to the sounds coming from nearby he continued to feast, not out of hunger, but for the sheer pleasure of crushing raw meat between his teeth. Then the bullets came, flying up out of the hole in the ground to ricochet off the ceiling.

Still at the bottom of the pit, Johnny Halcombe had Eisner's rifle in his hands and was shooting blindly, in the hope of scaring whatever had ambushed Senneker. From the man's failure to reply it was clear that something had put him out of action. Pausing to listen, he heard an angry, bestial snarl, quickly followed by the sounds of something heavy on the move, and metal being pounded against rock.

"Some fucker's smashing our gear." The soldier thought aloud. "See if you can find another way out, Eisner. I'll give 'em something to think about." Without waiting for a reply he slung the rifle's strap over his shoulder and began to climb. "Iron. I've got iron bullets, you Fey bastards," he yelled.

Halfway up he stopped, noticing that the din above had stopped. Listening carefully he tried to detect sounds of movement, but could hear nothing. Perhaps the thought of iron had frightened off the culprit? Or maybe he was simply waiting for a target to appear. Either way there was no real choice but to continue the climb. Placing his fingers inside the next wedge he found that it was coated with something warm and wet. Guessing what took no skill whatsoever. Now a matter of inches from the top he held on with one hand and used the other to unslung the SLR. Using it like a probe he lifted its barrel into the darkness above to see whether anything would bite. When nothing happened he slipped his arm back through the strap and eased his upper body over the lip. Using his elbows to help support his weight he looked around, ready to drop down out of harm's way if necessary. But as far as he could tell, nothing was moving in the upper chamber, especially Agent Senneker.

The American's body was a horrible mess. Choking down the urge to vomit, Johnny again checked the darkness, and again could discern no trace of the perpetrator. The contents of Senneker's pack were strewn in all directions, and close to his remains were two hopelessly mangled rifles. Next to them was the Jericho device, which appeared to in an even worse state than the SLR's. The one ray of hope that Johnny saw was his own pack. Undisturbed, it lay temptingly close. Left as bait, maybe? There was only one way to find out. Hooking one

knee over the lip of the pit Johnny lifted the rifle, and was almost decapitated.

Instinctively knowing that, if he simply stood still, human eyes would not see him, the Red Cap had waited close to the hole. Corrected his killing strike in mid-swing he'd missed the intended target by a handspan, and instead sheared-off the first six-inches of the rifle the intruder was carrying. The miss had been a deliberate effort, made in order to avoid the wrath of his makers, the *Daoine Sidhe*, whose cast he had recognised upon the one who crawled from the hole. Howling in relief the Red Cap accidentally revealed himself to the marked human, and for a mutually astonished instant, the two stared into each other's eyes.

Fingers hooking around one of the pack's straps, Johnny dropped back down, pulling in after him. Landing on his feet he winced at the tool taken extracted from his ankles, but knew he was fortunate to have so little to complain about.

"Something got Senneker," he announced, tight-lipped. "It looks too big to get down here, but it might have company. We'd better shift our arses."

Eisner responded with a nod, knowing that now was not the time for details. "There's three tunnels branching off. West, north and east."

"West." The soldier said, trusting to the twinge of indication given by the map carved into his back.

Some distance later the pair stopped to catch their breath. They were leaning against the smooth wall of a narrow tunnel, identical in most respects to those they'd traversed above, except for the fact that it was steadily rising.

"What," Eisner gasped. "What the hell was up there?"

"Dunno." Johnny shrugged. "I only got a glimpse." Thinking for a moment he added, "It was about the size and weight of a grizzly. Only man-shaped, and with a bloody great axe in its hand!"

"Christ. That's all we need." The agent said, recognising the basic description from DIS speculative mythology lectures. "It sounds like what some sort of Border Goblin, what the Scotts called a Red Cap."

"Whatever the bastard is, I want to blow its head off." Johnny retorted. "The Yank never knew what hit him." Pushing himself upright he shone his helmet lamp in both directions, checking for signs of silent pursuit. "The doodlebug's knackered. So it's just you and me, pal. The para's won't be able to jump." Unzipping the sleeve of his wet suit he looked at the time. "Damn. My watch is going backwards."

Peering at his own watch Eisner frowned, "Mine too. Must be some kind of local magnetic effect."

"Great. Bloody great." Johnny brushed sweat-soaked hair away from his forehead. catching the agent's eyes he said, "You've got two choices. Try to make it back outside, and hope the rescue chopper spots you before the Fey do. Or you can throw in with me. I'm going to find out what the *fuck* is going on."

"Let's go." Eisner said without hesitation.

Man had always known Thorneye Island, the site upon which Westminster Abbey now stood, and had marked it both in legend and with temporary structures. The oldest known reference

was a document drawn up in the 10th Century BC, which describe Thorneye as a terrible place. But fear, just as all other human emotions, faded with the passage of time, and ground once deemed unapproachable by man eventually became the site of a Pagan circle. In later years the site was home to a Benedictine monastery, and finally a great temple raised by the Church of England. Though whatever structure dominated on the surface, that which was far beneath the ground remained the same.

Where human eyes would have lingered, Aillen Midhna's did not. He had never seen Westminster Abbey before, and at a different time he would have revelled in the beauty of its design, and what by human standards, was clever construction. But such idle pursuits were the province of those without greater purpose. Walking down the centre of the nave, over the memorials to Winston Churchill and the Unknown Soldier, he looked neither left nor right. Through the soles of his feet he could feel the lines of converging force deep underground, and deeper still the sleeping forms of many Yldra. Stopping abruptly some twenty feet from the choir screen, he indicated a visually undistinguished piece of floor.

"Here is where I must call them."

"Call who?" Rebecca bubbled enthusiastically.

"The Fallen of the Fourth Rank," Aillen replied, and seeing that his lover did not understand, added. "During the last age, as we of the Fallen measure such things, 'twas the Yldra who ruled Albion. When the age was done and all the Fallen took their rest, many of the Fourth chose to abide beneath this place."

"Fourth Rank." Rebecca frowned, trying to comprehend. "Do you mean there's more of the Sidhe, here, underground?"

For a moment the musician's features clouded over. "The *Daoine Sidhe* are ranked Sixth among the Fallen." Anger passing quickly he continued, "Those I speak of are properly called *Kyriotetes*, Dominions of the Second Hierarchy. Since the Fall they have been enemies to we of the *Sidhe*." Smiling like a fox who'd found an open chicken coop he added, "Though of higher rank, these Yldra are bound by the same laws as all the Fallen. If called from sleep before the time of their choosing, they shall be bound to accept *our* dominion."

Seating herself in an aisle chair on the left hand side of the nave Rebecca listened with rapt attention as her lover began to play. The tune was unfamiliar, though hauntingly beautiful. Inexplicably, she found herself thinking of the boys and men she'd known in the past, before marrying Tony. In a drawer she still had letters from some of them, kept as mementoes, physical reminders of love shared. The tune was like them, in some strange way, filling her with whistfulness and melancholy.

Aillen looked down at the marble floor. He'd been playing for close to an hour now, using his music to discern the nature of the complex knot of power wound around the hidden entry well beneath his feet. For close to 1500 years it had functioned as a seal to the subterranean chamber where almost one hundred Yldra had taken their rest. He saw the weave, rising with snail-like slowness in response to his melody. Now less than three feet from the surface it strained and pulsed with half-life, it's many-coloured strands writhing in anticipation of unbinding.

"Peter, you're doing it!" Rebecca said. Although not able to see with the depth and

clarity of the Fey she was able to perceive something the effect of his playing. Just a few feet away from where she sat the Purbeck flagstones were slowly cracking, as if pushed from beneath by some irritable force.

As he played the *pandeus* walked in a circle, feeling the stone cracking under his feet with each light step. And blazing from between the cracks was a rainbow of light, its harsh brightness easily outstripping the pale illumination offered by fading daylight. Building the melody to its crescendo, he positioned himself upon what he knew would be the first descending step, and blew a high wavering note.

Propelled by the loosed energies of the weave shattered flagstones were thrown clear of the circle, though not by far. Yelping in alarm Rebecca dived to the floor, but continued to watch between the legs of the chairs. A whirlpool of power, red and green and blue and gold, shimmered momentarily within the limits of human sight, then exploded in a violent, colourless flash. In its place was six-foot-wide smooth-sided hole, containing a spiral staircase made of round, highly polished dark green stones. Roughly one foot in width, depth and height the first step was in the exact centre of the well, and connected only to the stone immediately below it. To stand on it would require a small bridge of some sort, or a bold leap.

Up on her feet now, and more than a little awed, Rebecca Pierce looked from her lover's eyes to the uncovered stairwell and back again. Seeing a gifted, human, magician perform his trickery was amazing enough. Witnessing an act of what she knew without a doubt had been *real* magic left her speechless.

"YOU ARE SURROUNDED." The electronically amplified voice came from outside the main entrance. "YOU CANNOT ESCAPE. SURRENDER NOW, AND YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED."

Following the blaze markers cut into the walls along the route, and taking advantage of equipment left in place, Yuri Litvinko and Caitlin Ash finally found their way to the denehole. Climbing with difficulty they emerged into the place where the Anglo-American team had dumped their soaked fatigues.

"Where now?" Caitlin asked weakly, breaking her silence for the first time since the Russian had admitted that he hadn't seen or heard from Pdraig in almost two weeks.

Litvinko searched and found to his consternation that, be it a deliberate act or simple forgetfulness, there was no blaze mark to indicate which tunnel the Anglo-American group had taken.

"To the right," he guessed. "Take my arm. We must keep going. Those who live in this hive will find us soon."

"They'd better. The poison is starting to get to me, Yuri." Caitlin forced herself to put one foot in front of the other. "I can feel myself getting weaker."

"You'll be alright. The Sidhe will help you." The agent spoke with a confidence he did not truly feel. "When they know who has come to visit, they will help. Everything that Pdraig has told me about them says that they honour their friends."

Deprived of the faint illumination that had been constantly present in the river water,

the only light they had to guide them was Yuri's small torch. Expecting to have encountered the Fey long before reaching Pollagoona Mountain, the Network group had seen no need to equip themselves for underground work. It was an understandable oversight, but one that he was guiltily aware might cost Caitlin Ash her life. When, after approximately a thousand yards, the tunnel brought them back down to the bank of the glowing river, Yuri snapped-off his torch beam, anxious to conserve the batteries.

"Where *are* they?" Leaning against a wall Caitlin rubbed her throbbing eyes. It might have been the general dimness, but her vision seemed to be blurring. Whenever things went slightly out of focus she found herself wondering if that was the moment when faerie poison would claim her. It was a horrible feeling.

"I don't know," Litvinko replied. "They must be here somewhere. No matter how big this mountain is, we will find someone, if we just keep moving."

"Not if they don't want to be found. A Sidhe could be standing right next to us, and we wouldn't know it."

"Maybe there's way we could signal them?" The agent said, knowing he was grasping for a straw, but seeing no other alternative.

Whatever reply Caitlin may have given was interrupted by the wild, unnerving scream of an enraged beast. Not far away, it sounded as if it were coming toward their position from somewhere down-river. Micro-uzi appearing in one hand, Litvinko wrapped an arm around Caitlin's waist and pulled her along with him. Negotiating a long, sweeping bend, they found Eisner and Halcombe, crouched in the entrance to a small tunnel set in the rock face some eight feet above the level of the riverbank. Firing from what Yuri recognised as enguns, the pair were attempting to hit a hulking monstrosity, but having no success. Exhibiting inhuman skill and timing, the creature parried each shot with a lightning fast twist of the axe it carried, deflecting needles as if they were steel bees.

Deciding that, whatever the thing was, it was not one of the Sidhe, Yuri motioned Caitlin to move back out of the line of fire, and taking quick aim sent a spray of bullets straight at the thing's back. All hit the target, knocking it slightly forward. But, if the creature felt pain from the holes in his hide, he didn't show it. Being hit by half a dozen nine millimetre shells seemed to be no more than an irritant.

"Get away." Eisner yelled to the unexpected help. "Unless that fires iron, you've got no chance."

As the Red Cap half turned to confront his new attacker, Caitlin caught her first glimpse of its distorted features. "Mr Rainbow!" She spoke under her breath, recognising the reporter's famous face. "My God, it's Mark Rainbow."

Pulling his knife from its ankle sheath, Johnny used the creature's distraction to good advantage. Before Eisner could even try to stop him launched himself at it, steel blade angled to slash across it's exposed throat.

Seeing movement from the corner of one eye, Pollagoona's Red Cap twisted with speed that belied its bulk, narrowly avoiding the killing stroke. Instead of throat tissue the soldier's blade bit deep into bulging shoulder muscles, and due to its iron content, brought an explosion of white-hot agony. Bellowing like a bull before a Matador, the Red Cap

backhanded his attacker before he could rise, sending him sprawling into the water.

Winded by the blow, Johnny struggled to his feet, knowing that to stay still was death. Barely had he risen when the enraged Red Cap's great axe came whistling down at his unprotected head. Desperately he threw himself to one side, but possessing merely human speed, was not quite fast enough. Missing his upper body by a whisker the big blade made thin contact with his extended left leg, slicing a long strip of flesh from his calf and shearing bone from his kneecap and ankle. Instantly the water around him turned red.

The Red Cap's second, oddly human scream, completely drowned out that of his shocked victim. Tugging the embedded knife from his shoulder he placed the weapon on the ground with great care, as if handling an object of religious significance. The reason was overwhelming fear. Because, in a moment of blind anger, he'd attempted to kill the one who bore the blood of its makers and masters, the *Daoine Sidhe*.

Dropping from his perch Eisner interposed himself between the obviously terrified Red Cap and the river, covering the stranger while he waded into the water and helped Johnny Halcombe to the opposite bank. Quite what the thing was scared about was a mystery, but it clearly had something to do with Halcombe. To his right he saw motion, and suspecting a new attack wheeled in that direction. Only to find himself aiming at a woman he'd never met, but was able to identify as a former GCHQ analyst.

"Mr Rainbow," Caitlin said, walking along the bank toward where the shivering Red Cap stood crying. "Is it really you?" Numb with shock and the effects of the sprite's arrow, she was beyond caring about her own safety. "What's happened to you, Mr Rainbow. Don't you remember me?" The sound of her voice caught the creature's attention, temporarily stifling its sobs. "It's Caitlin Ash."

The name struck a chord inside the Red Cap's dulled brain, giving him something else to consider beyond the terrible certainty of punishment. Thoughts floated up, as if from mud at the bottom of a sea, bringing half understood names, features, places from another life. One such face belonged to the frail woman who stood before him. Another, even stronger image, was the grinning features of the man who'd abandoned him in Sidhe lands.

"MOLL-O-NEY." The Red Cap bellowed as loudly as he could, almost deafening those who stood watching. "MOLL-O-NEY. MOLL-O-NEY. MOLL-O-NEY" Chanting the coward's name like a mantra of vengeance he lumbered down river, fears and former quarry all but forgotten.

Aillen Midhna moved swiftly. Despite the care he'd taken those who hunted the Sidhe had found him, and at the worst possible time. With the well opened but the song of awakening not yet played, the Yldra were vulnerable. He needed more time to complete his intended task, and in order to gain that time there had to be a distraction.

In St. Edwards Chapel the Coronation Chair stood exactly as it had for nearly six hundred years, with the few exceptions of when it was being used in the crowning ceremony of a new sovereign. Time-scarred oak, the chair had been made specifically to enclose the Stone of Scone; a block of reddish-grey sandstone, captured from the Scotts in 1296. Legends shrouded the stone's origins, claiming it to be the rock upon which Jacob laid his

head and dreamed his dream, or that Moses had foretold that victory would always follow it. All that was known for certain was that since the time that records had first been kept the Stone of Scone had been regarded as a sacred, and much prized object.

That was the view of humankind. Any of the Fallen who saw the stone would have known, as the *pandeus* had known from the moment he entered Westminster Abbey, that the tone was simply a repository for eldritch power. One of many such things strewn across the lands of Earth and elsewhere.

The block weighed in at roughly four-hundred pounds, which presented Aillen with only a little difficulty. Working as fast as he could without dropping his burden he carried it out of the chapel, ignoring the twittering concerns of his paramour. Grunting with effort he skirted the well hole and staggered along the nave, until he had covered half the distance toward the western entrance. There, on the memorial plaque dedicated to Sir Winston Churchill, he set down the stone.

Bringing the *antarra* to his lips he blew a hurried triggering chord, and at the same instant used glamour to assume a disguise he knew would cause the most confusion. Seconds after, the western door was forced open, bowling over the unfortunate verger who'd been set to guard it. Armed men poured in through the gap, and were quickly joined by others, entering via the abbey's northern entrance.

Between the groups there were two identical women, two visually indistinguishable versions of Rebecca Pierce. Science could easily determine the real one, but before its scrutiny could be applied green fire exploded from the Stone of Scone. A tight vortex of fierce flame, it reached to within feet of the abbey's vaulted ceiling burning with magnesium brightness, though *without* heat.

Harmless unless directed by sentient intelligence, the balefire's brightness was reflected like a hundred-thousand jewels, sparkling in every polished surface between the nave and the chapels of St Paul and St Nicholas. The magnificent display was almost sufficient to buy Aillen Midhna enough time. Almost, but not quite. Single-mindedly he darted toward the well, illusory skirt flapping about his legs.

"Stop that woman!" Houseman shouted over the cacophonous roar of the flames.

"No. Don't shoot." Seeing what was going to happen, the real Rebecca interposed herself between the nearest of the men and her lover. "He isn't even armed." Advancing on the men she unconsciously clenched her fists. "Please, listen to me. He's only..." Before the sentence could be completed and iron-laced bullet tore through her right shoulder, spinning her around and knocking her to the floor.

Unable to determine by sight alone which version was truly the War Minister's wife, Corporal Nial shot to wound both. Edwards had the same idea, resulting in the running woman being hit from two sides. She fell hard, then clambered to her feet, as unable to believe what had happened. Ignoring shouts to stop she staggered on for a few paces, like a marathon runner who had continued way beyond his endurance, then before anyone could prevent it she toppled into the gaping hole, and was gone.

The fire went out moments later, as if someone had turned off a tap. Among those gathered only Houseman knew why it had burned so ferociously, but done no harm to

anything. Not even the stone. Standing over the unconscious victim of Nial's bullet, he made a show of using his hand-held meter to establish what superior senses had already told him.

"There's traces about her, but this one's definitely Pierce's old lady."

"Poor cow." Nial responded without remorse. "Maybe when she wakes up she'll be able to tell us what the hell was going on in here." Holstering his weapon he joined two other men at the edge of the opening into which the Sailor had fallen. "Looks to be a hell of a depth, sir," he called over his shoulder.

Keeping his distance, Houseman said nothing. Although his senses were much sharper than the human norm, and he could manipulate glamour far better than any of the Sixth Rank, he was not able to match the depth of Sidhe perception. It was one of the prices paid by his own Rank in order to acquire certain advantages. Now though all was clear. Undetected by the men, lost in the general wash of energies, age-old warding markers showed him exactly what was at the bottom of the hole, and what the Sidhe had been attempting. It was knowledge that made him distinctly uncomfortable.

Laughter, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once mocked the Red Cap's flight, and skittering against the flow of the water, blue-green flashes of light exploded light submerged flashbulbs each time his great feet came down.

"It's the Sidhe." Caitlin gasped to Eisner, who was nearest to where she'd collapsed. "They're here."

"True." True Thomas said, startling everyone.

Eisner and Litvinko both oriented on the speaker, needle-gun and machine-pistol ready to fire. But, eerily, there was no form present for them to aim at. A moment later both weapons began to heat up - or at least *seemed* as if they were hot - and in seconds were too hot to handle. Tossing his gun onto the bank Litvinko helped Johnny Halcombe to unstrap his en-gun before his skin was seriously burned.

"Come." The disembodied voice invited cordially. "Bring the Bloodsong's bearer. You have not far to go."

"Where to, Tinkerbell?" Johnny snarled.

Formed out of reddish stone and wide enough to admit four men abreast, a door-shaped patch of wall swung silently inwards, close to where Johnny lay bleeding. With Eisner supporting him and Litvinko helping Caitlin Ash, the four trudged after a small blue sphere of light, Johnny dripping a trail of blood. Their course took them along a straight, smooth-walled corridor, then up a short flight of stone steps that looked as if they'd been freshly carved. The stairway ended at ceiling-height, disappearing into what seemed like solid rock, though when reached proved to be just another illusion. Illuminated by the crackling flames of a great, bowl-shaped pit, the underground hill onto which they emerged was at the centre of a chamber which dwarfed into insignificance any of those which either pair had passed through. On the opposite side of the pit to where they stood two evil-looking *duergar* tended the fire. Slightly above them, on the flattened rim which circled the entire hilltop, were thirteen thrones, each one exquisitely carved and decorated.

"See anything familiar." Eisner said to the injured solider, desperately trying to

overcome the fear that was building inside him. "Like an exit."

Inward-facing for this occasion, nine of the stone seats were occupied by those of the Circle whose attention was not required for the exodus. To the right of the quartz throne sat True Thomas, and to his right Caointeach. Then came Mamau Ur, Tarroo-Ushtey and his sister Sib. Two empty thrones separated the warrior pair from Beith Ur's failing body, beside which sat Yarthkin, the dreaming harpist. Two more empty thrones were between the musician and Maeve, present Queen of the *Daoine Sidhe*.

"Four stand before us." Ruis Mor's resonant voice announced. "Our blood-kinsman. The paramour of our honoured guest. And two who have no place in this chamber, or our lands. What say you, my Circle?"

"Kill them." Yarthkin's words whispered like wind across desert sands.

"For pleasure?" Tarroo-Ushtey bared his teeth. "And need." Deliberately he looked toward his sister.

"Need, warrior." Caointeach shook his head. "I think not. Unless there is a threat I do not perceive."

"Need, meaning desire." Sib smirked. Lasciviously she ran her pale pink tongue over her lips. "Before we journey across the waters, we could hunt." Emerald eyes turning on Litvinko she added, "Or take other pleasures."

"True and true." True Thomas agreed. "Enemies though two may be, I would know why they did chance their fragile bodies in defence of our blood-kin."

"Aye." Mamau conceded with a nod. "The lesser of the two I have spied before, at *Gruagach Derg*." Mention of St. Patrick's lake brought a hiss of understanding from the High Sidhe.

"Then know we shall." Ruis Mor decided. Deep-set eyes turning on Eisner he said, "You have kept company with our enemies, human. Though now you aid out blood-kin. Think carefully on what you shall say when your turn comes to speak. Your earthly existence will be determined by it." Switching attention to the other agent he said, "Trespassing is your crime, though you are not yet judged to be our enemy."

"I am Major Yuri Litvinko." Litvinko introduced himself nervously. "I represent a group of like minds from many countries. We are called the Network, and we seek peaceful co-existence with the *Daoine Sidhe*. Attempting to keep your people penned inside this area is something we regard as futile, and dishonourable. Pdraig O'Connell is my contact. Ask him, if you doubt me, and he will confirm that I speak the truth."

"Litvinko." The King said, giving no indication as to whether he recognised the name, or that O'Connell was present. "Tell us why you risked losing your short life to our Red Cap's blade?"

"Because these people needed help," Litvinko indicated Halcombe and Eisner. "They were under attack. Under the same circumstances, I would have tried to help anyone. It was the right thing to do."

"And was ending the life of Pdraig O'Connell's paramour also *the right thing* to do?" The king asked.

"Ending?" The Russian frowned. "I don't understand. She has been hurt,

accidentally, by a *hyter* arrow. Surely you can help?"

"The flesh of humankind cannot withstand *hyter* poison." Ruis Mor stared hard, eyes boring into the Russian. "The injury would not have occurred, had she but stayed in her proper place. You enticed her into our lands," he pointed an accusatory finger, but used no magic. "Her death will be your responsibility, human."

"Death." Yuri repeated, as if he'd somehow misunderstood. Taking gentle hold of Caitlin's injured hand he held it up for view. "This was where the arrow struck. The wound was not fatal."

"Not yet." Yarthkin hissed.

Guilt piling higher by the second, Litvinko turned toward the harpist. "Are you saying that you *won't* help her?"

"Her life will end." The King said matter-of-factly.

"Aren't you even going to try?" Abruptly reminded that he was dealing with a virtually alien species, Yuri turned in a slow circle, eyes imploring those who sat in judgement. "O'Connell would want you to make an attempt."

"Our honoured guest knows the ways of the Sidhe." The tiny silver bells woven into Sib's hair jingled as she shifted position to indicated Beith Ur's motionless body. "Fate has placed him in a prison of flesh, which the Dreaming has shown will fail soon."

"As surely as his paramour." Tarroo-Ushtey smiled cruelly.

Even though it was no less than she'd expected, actually hearing someone proclaiming that she was doomed to die was more than Caitlin could bare. Already numb from head to toe she felt nothing as her legs gave way. Litvinko caught her before she was halfway to the floor, and cradled her in his arms. He had no words, there were no words that could make any difference now, and both of them knew it.

"Her time approaches." Maeve took up the thread. "Yet, while she lingers, there is one honour we may grant. Her essence, that which you deem to be the soul, need not spend its final moments in such a poor shell." Glancing at the king she received a nod of approval. "This much can we offer."

"Where's Paddy." Caitlin protested weakly. "If I'm going to die, I want to see him. Please, let me see him."

A cold smile flickered across the Sidhe queen's face. "Your attention wanders as your life ebbs away, child. We have already told where our honoured guest is to be found." Inclining her head toward Beith's unmoving body, she explained, "O'Connell dwells *within* Sidhe flesh. Though he lacks the power to make it his own."

"No. You're lying." Caitlin accused, unwilling to believe. "If that were really my Paddy, he would've spoken to me by now."

"He lacks the power." Maeve repeated patiently. "Even together in that form, you would not be equal to the task. Though you may not live, it is in our power to allow that you *die* together." Glancing around the Circle she saw that all who were capable of giving a reaction approved of her subtly unmerciful suggestion. "If you love him true, accept, while time yet remains."

Trapped within the vessel of flesh Padraig O'Connell raged in silence, incapable of

any physical expression. The Sidhe had told him that he would die, and he'd accepted it. Because the Liannan had *promised* that before he passed away, he would see Caitlin. But no mention had been made of her death. It simply wasn't fair. The Sidhe were lying about their inability to save her. He was sure of it, but could do nothing.

Caitlin looked up at Yuri, then with great effort, at the still body which the Sidhe maintained was Paddy inside.

"Swiftly, now." Maeve pressed, enjoying the game. "Do you wish to die alone, or with your love? Choose now."

"Wait, you can't..." Litvinko started to protest but was silenced, quite literally, by a wave of the king's hand.

Uncertain of the boundaries between truth and lies, but feeling that life was slipping away, Caitlin knew only that she was afraid. The Sidhe were offering her a way to be with Paddy, if he were truly present. What had been said was fantastic, unlikely in the extreme. Though as she knew only too well, Sidhe magic *could* work miracles. On the other hand, their offer might be no more than an elaborate, perverse lie. Wrought for the purpose of entertainment. And there wasn't the time to decide which.

Gathering her courage Caitlin turned her head toward the king. "Alright. Do it, if you really can't help me. I want to die with Paddy"

Like a child opening a present on Christmas morning, Maeve's face lit up with undisguised glee. Glancing at Yarthkin she said, "At your pleasure, harpist."

The musician ran fingers across the strings of his instrument producing a simple, though oddly compelling melody. To the listening humans it was like a timeless daydream, during which none of them were quite sure what had occurred. How long it went on, or when the magic was made, none could tell. One moment the battered little group were listening, enraptured, and the next the playing had stopped. Emerging from what seemed like an instant's sleep, they all saw that the light was gone from the motionless Sidhe's eyes, and still cradled in the Russian's arms, Caitlin Ash was dead.

Eisner saw the look of grief on Litvinko's face, and wondered if the Network he'd claimed to represent was real, or just a fabrication. There were always rumours about secret cabals within the international intelligence community, but most were pure fiction, intended to waste time and manpower. However, it was abundantly clear that Litvinko, whoever he represented, had been privy to some of the most secret information concerning the Occupied Zone, and Operation Mordor. There were a lot of questions to be answered, if an opportunity ever presented itself. Which, under the present circumstance, did not look very likely. Glancing down he saw that Johnny Halcombe was propped-up on one elbow, and shivering. More serious than it had at first appeared, his leg wound was still bleeding profusely. Something needed to be done, and quickly. Taking a deep breath he looked up at the being he guessed was ruler of the Sidhe.

"Sir. This man - *your blood-kin* - needs treatment, or he will bleed to death."

"The Bloodsong bearer shall determine his own fate," Ruis Mor replied, tone casually indifferent. Gesturing he used magic to temporarily staunch the soldier's wounds, and counter the effects of blood loss. "Now, trespasser, you will tell us for what purpose you have entered

lands claimed by the *Daoine Sidhe*."

Looking into eyes he knew were centuries, perhaps thousands of years old, Eisner felt more frightened than he'd ever felt in his entire life. He knew without a doubt that the Sidhe could extract whatever information they wished from him, and that attempting to give them nothing more than his name rank and serial number would be a wasted effort. Already a failure, the mission was now on the verge of becoming a personal disaster. When the Fey knew why he'd ventured into the Occupied Zone, they'd surely kill him. Therefore, all he could hope for now was to make it as fast and painless as possible.

"I'm Michael Eisner." He said, trying hard to keep the fear out of his voice. "Lieutenant Eisner. My purpose in coming to Pollagoona Mountain was to demonstrate a newly developed weapon, against which you *cannot* win. If your Red Cap hadn't destroyed it, we would now be negotiating surrender."

"Simple-minded fool," Tarroo-Ushtey railed, half rising from his throne. "Think you that we know not of Humankind's power. Think you that we of the Ranks, who for age upon age have been your masters, would *ever* stand helpless while you slay us."

"Enough, warrior." The king snapped. "This human is no more foolish than all his kin. We shall use him, as a messenger of free will. By his words, they who cause us to withdraw from this land may learn that we do so unbowed. And, that when War Among The Fallen is declared, we shall return."

A few yards back from the edge of the perfectly symmetrical hole in the floor of Westminster Abbey, Nicholas Wynt stood waiting for a five-man SAS team to complete their last-minute equipment checks, prior to exploring the open spiral stairwell. Beside him were Lieutenant Houseman and Corporal Nial.

"I can't promise you any medals," the director almost managed a smile. "Though rewards are clearly deserved. My only criticism," he glanced at Nial, "is that the Sailor wasn't taken alive. I don't suppose there's any chance...?"

"Unlikely, sir." The Corporal answered. "There's no sign of him on the steps, so he probably fell all the way down."

"Then let us hope we find what's left of him at the bottom. It would be very disappointing to find that he had made fools of us." Expression turning acidic, Wynt peered at the hole. "Again."

Walking to the middle of the steel panel that was being used as a makeshift bridge, the first member of the exploration team placed one foot on the stairway. When he was sure that it would take his weight he nodded to the next man in line, to whom he was roped, and began his decent. Due to the spiral nature of the steps individual safety harnesses were not practical, so the team had to rely on each other, mountaineering fashion. Calculated via plumb line the bottom was a few inches short of two-hundred and forty feet down. Mounted on his shoulder the third man carried a small ENG type video camera, the images from which would be seen on monitoring equipment set up in the nave.

The sides were incredibly smooth, Wynt noted, and just far enough away from the free standing step column to be useless as a brace. Bearing no visible trace of dust or wear,

the steps themselves were some form of green rock, and appeared to have been carved - with greater than human skill - from a *single* pillar.

At the bottom of the spiral a fantastic sight was waiting. The small camera could show only a part of the whole, but that was sufficient to leave every one of the watchers at a loss for words. Some fifteen feet out from where the exploration team stood was a perfect circle of five, waist-high slabs. Beyond them was another, larger circle. Then a third and fourth huge concentric ring, which was at the edge of the distance portable lighting was able to penetrate. All were composed of the same green stone as the stairway, and on every slab there rested a naked, hairless, grey-skinned figure.

"Dear God preserve us!" Wynt said, the shock evident in his tone. Without taking his eyes off the screen he quietly issued orders. "I want the team to return to the surface, at once. We cannot risk disturbing those things until we have the means to neutralise them. Lieutenant, get me a link to Washington. Then have the members of the JIC and ODC informed that I'm calling an emergency meeting."

With a glance Ruis Mor rooted the British agent to the spot and stole from him the power of speech. Other senses he left intact, that the man might learn what had occurred in the minutes before the last of the High *Sidhe* departed from Erin.

"There have always been humankind champions." The king said, eyes locking on Johnny Halcombe. "When last we held sway in Albion, the leader of men had at his side a warrior no other man could best."

"What," Johnny coughed. "You mean Lance-a-lot?" He deliberately mispronounced the name of the Round Table's most famous knight. "What the hell have I got to do with him. You're not going to tell me he's a long-lost relative, are you."

He spoke assertively, but felt as though he'd been run over by a truck. Despite the healing magic he could not move his damaged leg. At first he'd thought the miraculous repair work was just another cruel illusion, until he'd touched the wound and found it to be dry. There was obviously no chance of making a break for it, but at least he was no longer leaking like a used teabag.

"*Ceelo*, he was called," the king corrected. "Ceelo of the lake. He was born to a *glaistig* named *Nimue*, by your ancestors, and remembered as the Lady. His sire was Artoor, the Pendragon."

"So Guinevere was his step-mother." Johnny started to laugh at sordid images conjured by his own imagination, then as pain returned with a vengeance, wished that he hadn't. "Alright," he held up a palm. "I'm sorry." Abruptly the pain stopped.

"There abides in you, Johnny Halcombe, a strong trace of Sidhe blood. Enough for us to make of you a champion, in the manner of Ceelo. A warrior-mage, with no equal among humankind. In return for this gift you would act as our emissary, and as defender to the other Bloodsong bearers, chosen to grow among us."

"The kids!" Johnny snorted. "You mean the kids that you snatched. Well you can stuff it, pal. I don't want to know." He saw a chance to throw a spanner in the Fey's works. "I'd rather pop my clogs than help you bastards."

"That choice is not yours to make." The king smiled slyly. "You may accept the role of Champion, or amuse my Circle as crippled Jester. For three lifetimes, Johnny Halcombe, you shall stand tall, or crawl at our feet."

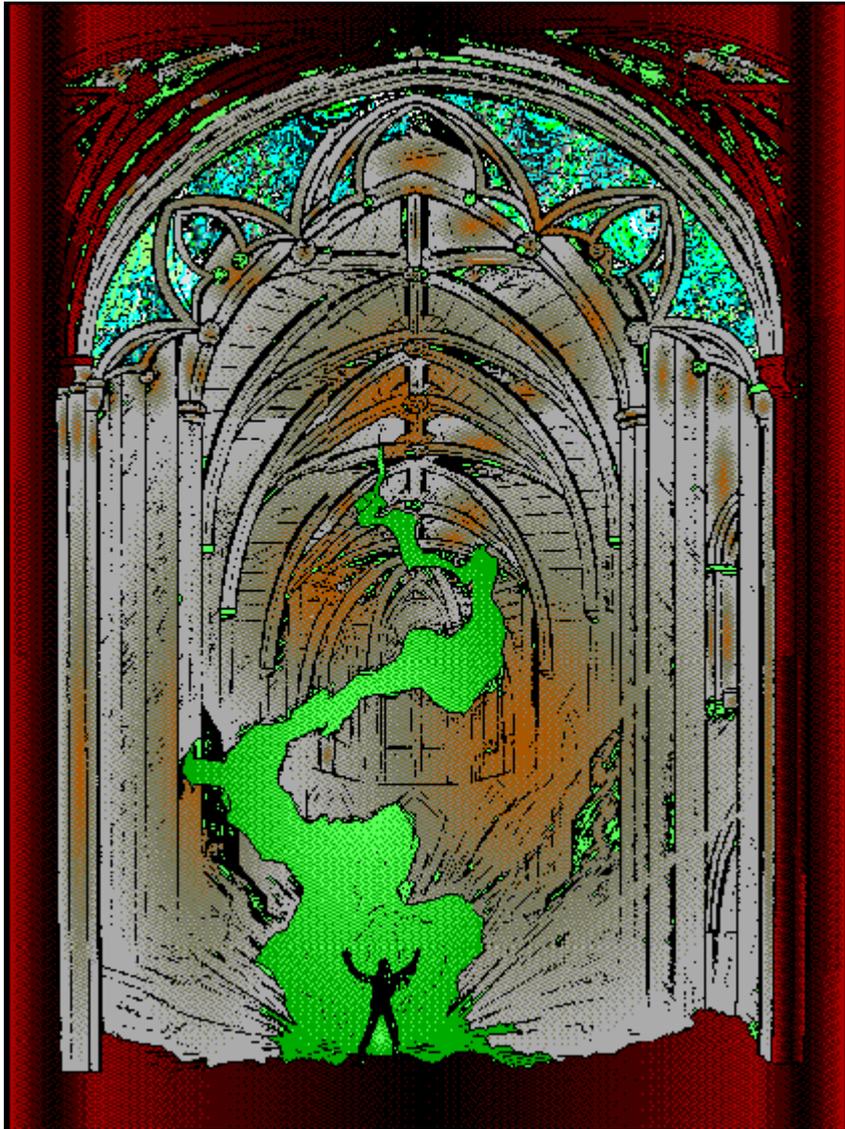
"Yeah?" The soldier shook his head defiantly. "I don't think so. In fact, I reckon it'd screw you up good an' proper if I won't fall in line. That's why you made damn sure I'd come back, right."

"If you are to be Jester, another will be chosen as Champion." Ruis Mor said with absolute conviction. "There are many candidates. You were simply the first we encountered in this age."

"Bollocks!" Johnny hawked and spat at the king's feet, missing by several yards. "You're on the run. Retreating. The Fey have already lost Ireland, so why don't you quit acting like God with piles."

"*Yahweh* is dead." The king's whole face lit-up with a smile of blasphemous joy. "And you have made your choice. Jester you shall be." Standing suddenly he brought his palms crashing together.

At that instant a thunderhead exploded between Michael Eisner's ears, and a paint factory in front of his eyes. For dizzying seconds his world lurched violently to one side then back again, making him feel as if he were riding on the world's biggest, out of control roller coaster. Then, just as things seemed to be stabilising, darkness blossomed from the sensory confusion and swallowed him whole.



Westminster Abbey © Martin Chaplin & Adam Webb

Epilogue

Nodding to the guards stationed just inside the abbey's western entrance, Nicholas Wynt left the building and strolled at a leisurely pace toward his waiting car. Thanks to clear heads in control and crisp efficiency by those on the ground, a major domestic crisis had been narrowly averted. Thus proving that for all their 'supernatural' power, the Irish Fey had met their match in modern technology.

The dead - and very much Fey - body of the Sailor had been found a few yards out from the bottom of the spiral staircase. There were traces of blood on some of the lower steps, presumably where he'd struck his head, and the fall had broken almost every bone. Though, strangely, he'd managed to protect a delicate-looking set of pan pipes, which had been found in perfect condition, sitting on top of his fractured sternum.

Video footage of the extraordinary subterranean chamber and its inhabitants had been shown to the Fey prisoner named Judel, who without recourse to iron-laced drugs, had named them the Yldra. Another species, or sub-species of Fey, the large eyed, child-sized creatures were currently in some sort of hibernation, and showed no signs an imminent return to life. However, Jericho devices were at present in transit from the US, and would be used to arrest any waking process the moment it commenced. Though unless their use was unavoidable, the safest policy for the time being was clearly to let sleeping Yldra lie.

In the Occupied Zone the groups of Fey who'd earlier been reported as massing close to the border had all dispersed peacefully, and long-range scanning had detected no trace of *Slua* activity. Communication had yet to be established with the Operation Mordor team, but the mission had clearly met with at least partial success. Men had parachuted over Pollagoona Mountain exactly on schedule, and at the time the last report had been dispatched, suffered no casualties. In point of fact the troops had yet to encounter Fey resistance in *any* form. Which suggested that the power of the High Sidhe had been neutralised.

Pausing to take a breath of cool air Wynt looked up into the cloudless sky, and concluded that God still smiled on England.

It was then that the small, grey-feathered bird launched itself from its lofty perch atop the abbey's roof. Banking sharply it dropped like a missile, curving down toward the oblivious human at breakneck speed. Wings flapping furiously it drove itself on, intent on performing one last service for its dead master.

Hearing a fluttering noise Wynt angled his head to look, and a split-second later experienced the agonising pain of the nightingale's beak as it was driven, like a tiny knife, into the pupil of his right eye. Yelling in shock he grabbed for the clinging bird and with adrenalin-fuelled rage, crushed the life from its body.

"The damn thing tried to blind me!" He said to those who came to his aid, holding up the nightingale's corpse as if it were a murder weapon. "Here, take it." He handed over the body to an agent. "Find something to carry it in. I want a full analysis." Briefly removing his right hand from his wound he inspected the bloody streaks coating his palm. "This was probably a parting shot," he grimaced. "But we *cannot* afford to assume as much. If there are

Fey in the area, I want them found. Now!"

When Eisner regained consciousness his first thought was that the visual onslaught of Fey energies that he'd witnessed had robbed him of sight. But before panic could set in, a torch-lit face appeared right next to where he lay.

"Litvinko." Rubbing sore eyes he peered around in the gloom and saw that he was in the middle of the fire-pit. Now stone-cold, and unattended as far as he could tell. Cobwebs leaving his mind he propped himself upright and looked around. "Halcombe," he said, realising that the soldier was not present. "Where is he?"

"Close, I hope." Yuri said. "I haven't been awake much longer than you. If you feel up to it, we'll take a look?"

Eisner clambered to his feet and followed the Network's man through ankle-deep charred embers, which threw up clouds of choking grey debris with every step. Helping each other over the rim the pair searched the area bordered by the now empty thrones, but could find no sign of the missing man. Or of the Fey.

"Johnny." Eisner called through cupped hands. His voice echoed back from the empty darkness. "Halcombe, if you can hear me, make a noise." He waited, and heard nothing but the sound of Litvinko's breathing.

"He's gone." The Russian said, beginning to understand just how alone they were in the vast chamber. "They've *all* gone."

The Story Continues in

**WAR
AMONG THE FALLEN**

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