

THE BLOODSONG'S CALLING



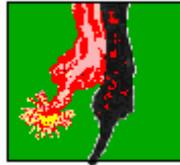
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SAMPLE VERSION

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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' finger's 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. Articulate 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.



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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 Pdraig, 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." Pdraig 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*, Pdraig 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, Pdraig 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 *Shua* 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'Connel 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 the 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 Pdraig," 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, Pdraig 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 over abundance 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, Padraig 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.



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