

A Path Amongst The Stars



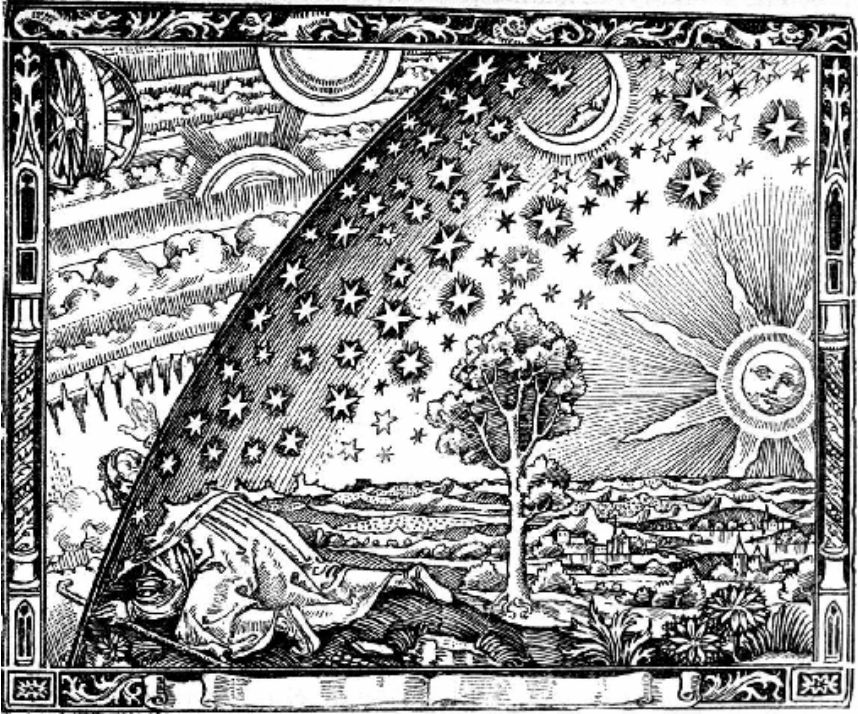
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First Edition.



For Rosalia, Fred & Natalie



rologue

The ancient figure of Isosceles Innocence Kale scabbled up the steep and dusty trail that lurched and twisted up the unforgiving mountainside. As he climbed, his foot, betrayed by a patch of loose shale, slipped sharply and sent out a shower of choking red dirt. He flattened himself back against the rocks, took a deep lungful of air and tried to recover a little of his hastily departing composure.

“Careful there Kale, old boy,” he muttered, his eyes tightly shut, “it would be a little impractical to kill yourself at this juncture. Especially after all that we have survived these last twelve months.”

His clothes, once the finely tailored garments of a gentleman, were now tatty and threadbare and his thin dusty frame was decorated with an odd assortment of scuffed leather bags and satchels. A thick, coiled rope was slung heavily around his upper body and his stocking-clad calves led to a pair of stout black leather shoes, which were wholly unsuitable to the task in hand and would have looked far more at home sitting securely beneath a library desk.

He shook his long red hair, which fell in tangled dusty clumps down his back. As it fell free, he was swiftly consumed in a cloud of pink particles, which made him cough violently and very nearly unseated him from his tenuous foothold.

Kale looked down at the impressive drop beneath him, and moaned softly.

“I really must come up with a preferable way to traverse steep inclines”, he whispered, upon which he brought out a small leather bound book and quickly scrawled a note to his later self inside.

“Now what did the scroll say about the entrance?” he mumbled, leafing back through the dog-eared pages.

The book immediately sprung open to a page that once opened, he held firmly in place with a thin calloused thumb. He quickly scanned the

scribbled passage, and as he did so, he muttered the words to himself under his breath, as though reciting a charm to keep from slipping from the tiny ledge upon which he was unsurely perched.

“The buried texts, the map, every single cryptic scrap of knowledge that I found would seem to point to this very spot. It simply must be around here somewhere - that is, if it ever existed at all.”

Frustration rapidly turned to despair and Kale frantically rubbed his hands along the rocky outcrop to either side, clearing the eons of caked-on red dirt with his rough, bare fingers and peering intently for any small signs of humanity, yet he still found nothing at all.

With a roar of desperation, he picked up the large rock that lay by his foot and hurled it against the blank stone face. He dropped his head and sobbed in exhausted despair as the mid day sun relentlessly beat down on his sweating brow and fragments of rock flowed in a steady red stream down the mountain's side.

At that very moment, there came an ear-splitting rumble. Without any warning, the entire side of the outcrop began to fall inward and threw out a huge cloud of acrid, powdered sandstone, which exploded outwards in an expanding magenta column and swallowed everything that lay in its path.

As the dust cloud finally became opaque and then began to settle, Kale lifted his arms from his head and looked around to gather his bearings, stopping in his tracks when he glanced to his side, to where the sheer rock face had once so resolutely stood.

Shafts of sunlight pierced the gloom of a cavernous new entrance and illuminated particles of swirling dust in its path. For the first time in a thousand years, a column of light struck a flat golden surface within and scattered into a misty golden glow throughout the dark hallway inside.

“My calculations were not wrong! This is it, it simply must be. I have discovered it at last! A lifetime's dream, a lifetime spent searching, and at last I have arrived at the doorway to the most treasured prize of all!”

He picked himself carefully up, and, grasping the broken sides of the entrance, lowered his feet over the other side and dropped softly into the coolness of the chamber inside. What he saw as his eyes slowly adjusted to the low light within the huge hall inside, very nearly knocked him back off his feet.

“Good Lord! It is more magnificent than even my towering intellect could ever have predicted...”

The chamber was impressive enough in itself as it stretched for hundreds of feet in either direction, and was carved from the very insides of the mountain itself. Rising up into an immense ceiling, it was braced by carved wooden ribs; each one supported by an imposing stone gargoyle that stared at the floor far below. In the centre was a single stone table that ran the entire length of the room and at either end stood a pair of towering wooden bookcases, into which were stuffed thousands upon thousands of dusty ancient books and ancient crumbling manuscripts bearing huge wax seals.

What could not fail to catch the eye of Professor Kale was the wall of the chamber itself. It was instantly, and without any doubt, the most impressive sight that he had ever seen.

Entirely covering the plaster from top to bottom was a huge and brightly coloured mural. The paint seemed to shimmer in the half-light: iridescent blues and reds shot through with gold, silver and bronze which sprang into life as the shifting strands of light from the entrance glanced off them and landed in rippling pools on the bare stone floor below.

As he stood, open-mouthed, desperately trying to comprehend the detail and enormity of the scene, Kale suddenly realised that the landscape and all its figures and animals unfolded into one huge, epic story.

“Perhaps it is some ancient fable. A primordial legend lost in the mists of time,” he mumbled to himself as he started to unpack some of the brass instruments from his various bags.

It was just then that he looked up at the wall directly in front of where he had been kneeling down, and saw something that made him stop dead. Ice-cold shivers shot up his back and he dropped everything with a clatter that echoed around the room, bouncing from wall to wall until it slowly faded into silence.

“Oh my goodness gracious...” he whispered softly.

For smiling straight back at him from the unfolding scene was a life sized portrait of someone he knew very well indeed.

It was himself.

Chapter 1



he rain pounded down the cold muddy, cobbled streets like the slap of a Matron's hand across the pink, dangling bottom of a newborn child. It was often wet in autumn, and this was clearly no exception.

In 1366, the city of Ghent, in Flanders, was a particularly boisterous, not to say unruly, place to visit. The shouts and screams of unknown souls echoed down the dirty alleyways, only to be punctuated every so often by fresh peals of drunken laughter from the many snug and smoky lamp-lit taverns that lined the wary traveller's weary path.

Above the ditch surrounding the city walls, the green trees dripped rain onto a duvet of sloppy brown leaves, and a single bell tolled mournfully in the murky distance.

In the night sky, a single bright light, almost twice the size of the waning Moon, outshone all the stars. It had grown larger and brighter in the past week, increasingly turning the night into an eerily moonlit dusk. It sat apparently motionless, a bright silver smear across the stone cold silence of the night sky.

Out from the darkness strode a man, bearded and craggy-faced, long, dark dishevelled hair hanging down past his shoulders, covered on top by a stitched leather hat. Creases, which lined his face, were exaggerated in the moonlight, deep rivulets that served to drain the water from his weather-beaten brow. He wore a jacket, once finely crafted from thick black leather, now scraped and sewn and buttoned up the front and held together by a sturdy leather belt, the buckle a heavy tarnished metal lump in a reclining figure of eight.

He quickly crossed the wide stone bridge towards the city, the River Leie gushing noisily beneath him, and as he passed through the walls of the gatehouse a glint of polished steel, half hidden within his robes, briefly flashed in the moonlight. The rain collecting on his soaked hat dripped past his eyes, shielded from the moonlight by the shadow of the hat's dark brim.

"Hey! Hey you stranger - aye you!"

The man, startled, spun around to be met by the sorry sight of two

bedraggled soldiers standing not far behind him. Both shared one man's kit and each one looked as though it belonged to the other.

The brothers Lesouris, both long-time members of the Town Guard - and founder members of the 'Off Guard' dancing troupe - emerged from the shadows. The first, a short fat man, armed with a bad moustache and a pitchfork, seemed to take command of the situation, whilst the other, a much taller, thinner gentleman, uncertainly held a scythe by his side and stood slightly behind his brother who now haughtily surveyed their quarry.

"So there, my goodly friend, where might thou have come from at such an hour of such a very foul night?"

"Aye, where indeed?" echoed his companion.

"Francois. What did we say before?"

"You said that you would be the one to speak with strangers, Guillaume."

"And?"

"And that I would be quiet."

"And that you would be quiet, Francois. Now please endeavour to do as much whilst I talk with our friend here."

"Yes, milady."

"Will you just... be quiet?" he spluttered indignantly.

Struggling to resume his air of authority, he turned back and smiled at the dark haired foreigner.

"You sir, have the pleasure of addressing the Ghent City Guard, Night Watch, third contingent. And you sir, will be civil enough to state your name and business before we consider the matter of entrance to our fair city!"

The man, half-hidden in the shadows from the imposing city walls, stepped forward into the pale moonlight. His complexion, on first sight old and ruddy, now showed a different side, the face of a comparatively young man, who had felt the weight of the world on his shoulders and too often the sting of the North wind upon his brow. His voice, when at last he replied, was barely a hoarse whisper.

“I come in search of a traveller. A man I have been following for a very long time.”

“Really - and he lives here in Ghent then, does he?”

“No, he does not live here, but I know that he is close.” At this, the stranger seemed to retreat into his thoughts.

“And your name good sir, before we decide exactly what we should do with you?”

The longhaired man looked up, as though he had been asked the question for the very first time.

“Brink sir - Spartacus Brink at your service. I happen to be a wool merchant from Lancashire, England, but I also deal in all manner of... interesting religious artefacts.”

“Ah - so like a Pardoner then eh?”

“Of sorts...” replied Brink, smiling.

With a flash of his teeth and a well-practiced flourish, he opened one side of his leather coat. Stuffed into the pockets, and dangling from the insides were the strangest assortment of carvings, pieces of parchment, precious stone pendants and the most beautiful crystals that they had ever seen, some of which seemed to glow eerily as they dangled, the moonbeams dancing and flickering within them.

The eyes of the two brothers instantly widened and, as quickly as this Aladdin’s cave had arrived with a rush of air and a deft flick of the hand it was gone. All that was left was a small brass ball. It was engraved with some kind of black, archaic language and was encrusted with a number of tiny sparkling green gemstones.

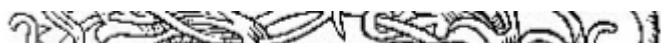
Suspended in the air, unmoving and apparently unsupported by anything at all, it slowly, almost imperceptibly, began to turn.

As they concentrated on the ball, the brothers began to feel more and more relaxed; the cold wind became a warm summer breeze, and the dark thunderclouds melted into the rose pink glow of a long forgotten sunset. As the brass ball spun, the green stones began to become brighter and brighter until with a piercing hiss they simultaneously spat out pencil thin shafts of bright, emerald-green light. Then, as quickly as it had started, the

ball once again came to a halt and hung in the air in front of their faces, the light shifting and shimmering in their gaze, accompanied by the most beautiful sound that either of the brothers had ever heard. It was as though a thousand distant harps were being played in a soft, repeating harmony.

With all thoughts of interrogation now a long forgotten memory, the guards stumbled happily into the next street and broke into hysterical giggles as broad grins spread across their filthy faces.

Brink held his hand beneath the ball and as the glowing stopped, it fell into the palm of his hand, lifeless once more, whereupon he hid it back within his coat and, turning on his heel, quickly headed off towards the dim lights of the taverns in the city's centre. The distant sounds of prayers being chanted within the dark walls of the nearby Benedictine abbey were carried on the night air, rising and falling in volume as the wind swept the cold and empty streets.



Brink opened the door to the 'Fatted Calf', a city centre tavern with less reputation than most, and instantly welcomed the warmth that he found inside. The front room of the tavern was small and badly lit, the floor covered in sawdust and scraps of food, and around the edges of the room were four oblong tables, each bearing a single flickering candle. He walked over to the nearest empty table and called the Landlord over.

The Landlord of the tavern, a small middle-aged man with wiry hair and a cautious smile, sported a large red nose and a number of blackened wine stains all the way down the front of his long leather apron.

"Good Landlord, I need food, drink and a dry bed for the night."

"Yes sir, we have some rooms upstairs that have recently become free. We did have three gentlemen stopping here until yesterday, but I don't think they'll have any need of beds where they are now, sir."

"Then I will take a bed for one night. Tell me, what food do you have, for I have not eaten for a day?"

"Roast Lamb, sir, stuffed with aromatic herbs and roast over an open fire. The freshest bread, sir, baked this very morning from the finest grain. Fine sweet Ale, sir, fresh and cold as a mountain stream and twice as wholesome – it will keep the pox away from your door, will my ale, sir!"

“Then Lamb, Bread and Ale it shall be, Landlord. I take it this will suffice?”

He dropped a silver coin into the gaping Landlord’s open hand, “Yes of course, sir, more than generous, sir, I’ll get you your food right this minute, sir!”

Brink stopped him by holding up his outstretched hand, “And before you go, I need a little information. Have any foreigners been through this tavern in the last few days, apart from myself?”

“Like anyone in particular, sir?” asked the Landlord cautiously.

“Indeed yes, the man I am seeking is a Scotsman. I know that he has been travelling through the area for this past week, and I urgently need to meet with him. I do not know much of his appearance, only that he is very old indeed and, by many accounts, the clothes that he stands up in are even older still”.

“No sir, I have not seen such a man. Although while I think on the subject, it does remind me of something most peculiar that happened this way only yesterday. Wait while I fetch your ale and then I will tell you all I know”.

With this the Landlord scuttled across to the other side of the room, narrowly missing the drunk who had himself just narrowly missed the blonde serving girl who had, unfortunately not missed the table that she was now sprawled uncomfortably over.

“And if you think I’m paying you for lazing around on my tables all night, you’ve got another think coming my girl!” bawled the Landlord to the amusement of the assembled drinkers - or those at least who were still awake.

When he returned to Brink’s table, the Landlord’s voice had returned to its conspiratorial whisper and the surrounding hubbub of the Tavern had settled back down to a low murmur, occasionally punctuated by an asthmatic laugh. The light from the candles at the centre of the table flickered and bounced off the Landlord’s face as he spoke, animating it with a constantly moving glow. As the candle’s flame reflected from his dark brown eyes and drink-lined face it seemed to transform them into darting glass spheres set within an old and crumpled leather cushion.

“I will tell you all that I’ve heard, but I do not know what to make of it and I am not too sure that you will either. You see I had three young fellows staying here yesterday. They had been here before and said they had come for market day and I have no reason to doubt their word. They had spent the day travelling from a town not far from here called Ternous and they were the best kind of customers, as each of the three arrived with a powerful thirst and an open purse with which to quench it.

“Now yesterday morning they were up as the Sun rose, and as soon as they had risen, they shouted me from my bed to fill their tankards and their bellies. I shouted to my lad Bernard to go and make them comfortable and to light the fire that I might warm my bones and ease my aching back. As I gathered myself up and climbed the stairs down to the Tavern to greet my guests, we heard the old funeral bell toll in the street outside, and a sadder sound you are not likely to hear.

“Upon hearing the bell, the three gentlemen were all for sending the boy to see for whom it tolled, but that much I sadly already knew. You see the night before they arrived, an old fellow, a regular to my Tavern and also from Ternous town, had up and died right over there by the fire hearth., His heart had been weak, the ale had been strong and he had, you could say, left without paying his due.”

The landlord shifted uncomfortably on his chair, the memory of the old man’s dying stare still framed in his mind.

“I still cannot help but think that the Moon Star has something to do with it all, as everyone knows that a comet can bring nothing with it but bad luck, disease and pestilence. I do not happen to think that it is any coincidence that the Black Death has spread like wild fire since that blasted thing first began to shine down upon us, and how it gets worse daily as the sky brightens. In fact I said as much to those three gentlemen as they sat here yesterday morning in just that very same spot as you do now.

“We sat and we drank and we talked of how Death was stalking the streets and villages around these parts and of how he had taken so much from so many poor families that fell in his path.”

“This is an interesting tale, Tavern Keeper, and one which I will retell to my friends on occasions such as this... when I too have nothing else worth relating.”

With a dismissive grunt, Brink turned to his tankard. It was filled to the

brim with a sweet cloudy liquid and for a moment he was unsure whether it was meant for his mouth or as a kind of foot balm. With another hearty swig he decided that it was almost certainly the latter.

“But as it turned out the old man from Ternous was not the only person who had an appointment to keep with Death”

“Tasting this ale Innkeeper, I find that uncomfortably easy to believe. But pray continue if you must.”

“This ale sir? ‘Tis a new beer just brought by a merchant over in Leuven. You can taste the hops and no mistake. It may not be fully settled just yet, but I have found that the more you drink - the better it tastes,” the tavern keeper slurped through a beard of bitter white foam.

“Anyway my three young gentlemen guests, so angered by such a misfortune upon so many poor people, made off down the road. They swore to find that miser Death and to put him to the sword so that all this sorrow might at last be brought to an end.”

“They went off to kill Death?”

“Aye my good sir, that much they did.”

“Then perhaps this ale is better than I give you credit for.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And did they return that same morning to slay winter? I know that I for one would be very glad if they had managed to accomplish that.”

“Indeed no, sir, for I was only to see one of them alive ever again: the youngest fellow, who returned last night with three bottles to fill with my wine. He had some loaves with him and told me of a man they had met whilst walking down a lane not far from here. He said that this man was the oldest man they had ever seen and that his face was like a leper’s elbow sir, and that his body was wrapped from head to toe in old rags and shawls.”

Brink looked up from his tankard startled, and quickly turned his head towards the innkeeper.

“An old traveller you say?”

“Aye, sir and with that the young gentleman left. Well it’s a strange business as well I know, sir, but all three were found dead this very

morning not half a mile from this very Inn.”

“All three were dead? But what in Heaven’s name did they die of?”

“Well the youngest one had been stabbed with a knife, sir. It seems that the other two had been poisoned. Tongues all dark and swollen they were, as though they had been painted with black ink. I went over to the copse where they had been found but there was nothing there apart from this coin, which if you don’t mind I took as payment for the ale and lodgings that they relieved me of last night.”

With this the Tavern Keeper, dug deep into his waistcoat and pulled out a single gold coin. It was unlike any that Spartacus Brink had ever seen and bore the face of some long dead emperor on one side and some foreign writing on the other, with both sides worn smooth by years and possibly even centuries of use.

“This was all that was left you say? But how can you be sure that there were no other coins like this that were taken before you arrived?”

“Because there was dew on the grass sir, my dog - Bob - was the first to leave a trail in it. That is how I know. All we found was the three dead bodies, this gold coin and a wooden box full of stones. Very peculiar I call it sir. I mean, it is not like they would kill each other over one gold coin and a box full of stones, is it sir? On my honour sir, it still puts the wind up me to think about the kind of person who might do such a thing.”

“And what of the old man – I take it that you did not see him for yourself?”

“No sir I did not and that’s the last of all I know, my hand on my heart.”

The barman stood up and brushed down his leather apron with his beer-soaked fingers.

“So now if you’ll excuse me sir, I’ll fetch your food. You must be near starved with me whittling on like this. I don’t want blaming for another death in my Tavern now, do I? I’d get myself a bad name, especially after all that business with the turkeys. Still, I don’t suppose any of it will matter much if we all get flattened by that Moon Star up there...” and with that, he hurried off into the smoky murk of the tavern kitchens.

When the landlord returned, his arms were weighed down by a rough wooden tray and upon the tray was a bowl fashioned out of a small hollow

loaf of bread.

Inside the bowl sat a number of thick slices of steaming pink meat that were bathed in a rich gravy sauce and to the side stood a fresh pewter mug, filled to the brim with a cosy amber glow, its foam slouching over the handle in a lazy brown crust.

Once the food had been set down in front of him Spartacus Brink soon discovered just how hungry he was, and ate heartily until he had finished the very last scrap of gravy sodden bread, whereupon he sat down by the fire so that he could dry his damp clothes and drain the last dregs from his tankard.

As he sat by the warm, welcoming glow of the flaming embers, Brink began to feel his body relax from the toils of the day and allowed his mind to wander for a while to more pleasant thoughts of times long since past.

When at last the aches earned from trudging over mile after mile of muddy Flemish countryside gradually began to lift from his weary body, he barely noticed when someone sat down in the shadows close behind him. Then, in a hoarse rasping whisper, the hidden stranger began to speak.

“So what are your thoughts there my inquisitive friend? How might three young men come to meet the one they sought? Were cutthroats to blame for their demise or were they victims of their own deceit?”

The realisation suddenly dawned on Brink that the question was directed towards him, and as it did, he felt a chill creep up his spine until the hairs stood up straight upon the back of his neck. He knew at once who it was, and although he had been searching for him for many weeks he certainly had not been expecting to see him tonight. He slowly turned around, and in the darkness behind he could see a hunched figure supported by an old and withered staff and draped in thick brown and black cotton robes, his head covered by a hood. From inside the hood, all that could be seen was the gnarled end of an ancient nose and a lip curled in distaste as it spat a further question.

“And what business of yours is any of this anyway?”

“My name is Brink sir, Spartacus Brink, at your service.”

“Not at my service, nor my request. Why are you here Mister *Brink*?” he mouthed the name slowly and with disdain.

“I am looking, sir, for a certain Scotsman”

The stranger lifted his head to the light, more of his lined features illuminated by the crackling firelight, and Spartacus Brink saw a glint as the light flashed from a pale blue eye.

“Anyone in particular, or will any of my countrymen do for you?”

“Indeed. I am searching for a very particular Scot and I believe that I may have just found him. You are Michael Scot I take it?”

“I think that you must have me confused with someone else, sir.”

“I know more about you than you might think, Mister Scot. I know that you were a courtier of King Frederick. I know that you are both Physician and Astrologer, but that your powers lie in the darker practices and I also know, Mr Scot, that by rights you should have been cold in your grave for a hundred years or more.”

The newcomer rose suddenly from his seat, but upon turning to leave found that his cloak was snagged. It was caught beneath the outstretched boot of Spartacus Brink.

“You have in your possession something that does not belong to you Mister Scot. It is something very powerful, and in the wrong hands it may be extremely dangerous. My brothers and I would simply like it to be returned to where it belongs so that it can be put back out of harm’s way. I speak of course of the Oracle.”

“The Knights Templar!” The old man spat, “I should have known. Your order has never been famous for its stealth or its subtlety. Well if you want the *Rosarian Oracle*, good sir knight, then you must surely have it!”

As quick as a flash, and far faster than might have been expected for a man of his obvious years, Scot twisted around the Brink’s back and, swinging his staff deftly around, dealt him a searing blow to the back of the head.

Stunned, Brink tried to rise to his feet but was instantly met by a swift punch to his kidneys. He doubled over as a sharp spasm of pain shot up his body, and left him desperately gulping for air.

Seeing the first blows land upon a paying customer the Landlord shouted and ran towards them, a sturdy staff raised high between his hands. Michael

Scot dropped to his haunches as the staff whistled past the top of his head, and a bony leg shot out sideways from the constraints of his robes, striking the Landlord in his stomach and sending him toppling backwards into a table full of people and tankards. The table collapsed and the whole room rose, almost as one, as fistfights broke out and the Tavern became a mass of violent confusion.

Brink clambered to his feet and looked around. While blood dripped slowly from the open gash in his head he desperately tried to find Scot through the writhing mass of fists and feet, suddenly catching just a fleeting glimpse of his billowing robes as he slipped past the fighting rabble, now just a few feet from the open front door.

Knowing that he could not reach the door in time to stop Scot's escape, Brink hurriedly felt inside his billowing jacket and pulled out his dormant brass sphere.

As he muttered hurriedly beneath his breath, the ball began to spin, faster and faster, a low hum emanating from it that grew in volume until it was an all encompassing, high-pitched shriek, which was immediately followed by a deep blue flash.

Suddenly the room was quiet. Faces had frozen in mid-shout and arms and legs were suddenly motionless, as though time itself had been stopped in its tracks. Even the Tavern dog had stopped moving and was stranded, eyebrows raised, in mid air whilst attempting to escape through an open window.

A faint blue light filled the room and a thin, grey mist was beginning to settle and glide over the chairs and tables.

Taking the sphere back in his hand and pushing it back into his inside pocket, Brink began to move through the stationary scene, carefully picking his way under and over the frozen bodies strewn across his path. As he finally reached the other side of the room he saw Scot, now half standing, a defiant look across his face, a malevolent smile spread across his thin grey lips. In his bony fingers he held a small, dark stone disc, the swirling marble on its face polished by years of worshipping, devoted fingers caressing its surface smooth.

When the silver light of the Comet struck the Oracle, the grain of its marble face seemed to move, running like thick, dark treacle and Brink stood for a second, transfixed by its pale reflection. A minor fact that he

had failed to recognise was that the Oracle was not in a position where it could reflect anything more than a few half-melted candles or the flickering orange lamp that hung undisturbed by the Tavern doorway.

As soon as his fingertips made contact with the surface of the stone, Brink realised that something was very wrong indeed.

A huge swirling explosion of light and sound suddenly engulfed Spartacus Brink and he was snatched quickly upwards by what felt like an unstoppable, raging, tumultuous river that bound his arms and legs and dragged him struggling from the floor and up to the beams high above.

His arms flailing wildly, Spartacus Brink tried vainly to catch hold of something in the room, but his hands just seemed to pass straight through everything he tried to touch. Then with a huge jolt, he shot up and through the thatched roof of the Tavern and into the blackness of unconsciousness.

Chapter 2



small sign sat on the hill by the path that read: 'You are well-come to Bimleigh-Heavers! Please minde the Gote!'

Bimleigh-Heavers sat, as indeed it had for many a year, in the valley of Sayge, to the West of the Tray-Rigg mountains. At the bottom of the village lay the river Bim, snaking languidly past the sturdy wooden mooring boards of the quay and down through the valley, where it passed beneath the Tarn Bridge ('See the Bridge - bye the beedes!') and beyond to the many little farms and villages that littered its winding path.

It was spring in Bimleigh-Heavers and, although usually a sleepy little village, it was today a hive of blustering activity as shopkeepers were busy nailing up multi-coloured bunting and feverishly dressing the garish displays in their tidy shop windows.

Mr Ferral Glumpuddle, *'Butchere and Suppllyer of Fowl to Royalty'*, was busily hanging his plumpest, most impressive Turkeys in the window of his shop, while Todley Barnbank, proprietor of the 'Chandlers Trunk', was quickly dusting down and polishing up his finest examples of anchors and brass ships clocks.

Bailey Humblebucket was lanky, blond-haired and uncoordinated in almost equal measures (and almost twelve and two thirds). He clattered down the steps of his home at the very top of the Bimleigh-Heavers and set off towards town. Bailey was closely followed by his dog Cabbage, who had a large pair of floppy white eyebrows and a permanently alarmed expression to match and together they steered their way through the steep bustling streets that led downhill to the quay below.

As he galloped behind his master, Cabbage's cornflower-blue eyes glinted in the sun and his long shaggy coat shook from side to side as though it were loosely tied on by a length of cheap string.

They dodged past Mick 'The Cake', the local baker, carrying a huge steaming tray full of freshly baked buns, and bounded through a crowd of smaller children who were milling round and chatting excitedly to each other.

They ran past the quay, up the cobbled road and past the row upon row of daffodils that lined their way, which bobbed and nodded their deep yellow heads in testament to the warmth of the spring sunshine.

Bailey came to a stop outside a dark and moss-speckled cottage just at the edge of the village and peered through the front door, his eyes wide with excitement.

“Mistress Nutter! Mistress Nutter! Can I come in? Have you found out who they are yet?”

From inside the cottage came a cackle of hideous laughter, followed by an asthmatic cough.

“Come inside, my young fellow-me-lad and we will see what we will see”.

Bailey cautiously walked through the front door and into the darkened front room of the tiny cottage. Shelf after shelf was stuffed with a wild and motley jumble of ornaments, but glinting in the gloom was something that he remembered from even his first visits with his father. A large and handsome Galleon stood in the corner of the room, tucked magically inside a pale blue bottle and resplendent in its finely carved rigging, which took pride of place on the mantel high above the fire.

As his eyes became accustomed to the twilight within, he began to see the old crone, bent over a thick wooden board into which was fixed a pole. Hanging from the pole, by a piece of thin gold chain, was a long and pointed shining purple crystal. The unusual thing about it was, that rather than hanging straight down, as you might expect, the gemstone was suspended at an angle and was pointing to one of a number of cryptic phrases that had been scrawled in black ink onto the face of the wooden panel.

“What do you think to that then, young Tom? I have done it at last! I’ve conquered the muses and forced their hands to tell our fates!” With that, she started cackling again and punching her gnarled fist in the air in triumph.

Bailey looked down at the board, covered in mystical symbols and dark magical signs and read aloud the phrase the crystal was pointing at:

“From far afield they come to stay,

They like the change o' scenerie,

Their merrymaking will prevail,

Theye bring to yew a parable"

Then he read it to himself but it still didn't really seem to make sense – not even when he stared really, really hard.

"So what does that *actually* mean then, Mistress Nutter?" he asked at last.

"Ah well. Yes. I reckon that they must be Farmers what's coming, on account of that they live in fields and I'm sure that I've heard that some of them have parable land or something..." Mistress Nutter narrowed her eyes and nodded sagely. Just then, the single ancient note from a horn was heard echoing down the valley.

Bailey jumped up excitedly upon hearing Denoren's Horn, for it was the sound that heralded the approach of newcomers to the valley.

"They are here already! And just imagine - we're the only ones who know that it's a farm that's coming to the village! Thank you kindly, Mistress, this is the best magic that you have ever done. Now I'd better leave or my mother will wonder what has become of me. Come on Cabbage!" And with that, he ran out of the cottage and back up the lane to the village.

"That or curtain-makers I suppose..." She muttered to herself when he had gone.

When Bailey got home, he ran straight upstairs and into his bedroom and tugged down the white ladder leading up to a small trapdoor hidden inside the sloped ceiling. Climbing the steps of the ladder, he popped up through the trapdoor and onto a narrow walkway leading to a large oak flagpole, which sprang up from the roof of the house.

"I really, really hate this." muttered Bailey under his breath, and began his tentative journey along the confines of the precarious walking boards that led to a rope ladder, which in turn hung down the length of the flagpole.

"If I don't look down it won't be too bad," he hissed through his clenched teeth. But although he didn't look down, he felt his body stiffen up as fear began to take hold. With two final, hurried steps he reached the flagpole and put his arms around it for a second or two until he finally felt ready for the next part of his journey.

“It will be worth it to see the village,” he repeated, chanting the phrase like a mantra to keep himself safe as he climbed the last ten or so wobbling feet up to the bright white crow’s nest and its relative security.

Once inside the rope restraints surrounding the large circular platform, Bailey heaved a huge sigh of relief. Although he really hated heights, his curiosity usually got the better of his fears, and once he reached the top he always thought that it was worth having his heart race a little in exchange for such an excellent view.

Sitting where he was, Bailey could see for miles. In fact by using his new telescope, he could see right along the river as it snaked and twisted its way across the bottom of the Sayge valley, making him the very first person in Bimleigh-Heavers to see new villages whenever they approached.

Every month or so, when a new village arrived there would be great celebrations across the whole village. Because Bimleigh was so far removed from most other villages in the surrounding land, the new arrival of waterborne settlements was not only vital to the traders of the town but just as important to the other citizens of Bimleigh. It supplied a ready source of gossip and brought with it news of people and places that many of the residents could only ever dream that they might see themselves.

As the Horn of Denoren again sounded plaintively from further down the valley, the new village appeared from around a hill, a huge cylindrical wooden structure fixed in its centre, which sported an impressive tower and their very own crows nest. This was surrounded on two sides by small white houses; smoke plainly trailing from their tiny chimneystacks as the miniature village slowly lumbered and lurched its way upriver towards them.

From the main building on the village hung a number of ropes, each covered in ancient flags bearing strange and ancient designs, which trailed down to wooden poles at the sides of the craft.

At the front of the village were a set of wide steps, and along each side were a number of raised torches, burning as brightly as beacons set against the clear blue sky.

“Mother, Mother! They’re here! And it’s a new one, and it’s the biggest water village I’ve ever seen!” cried Bailey as he climbed back down the ladder into his bedroom and raced down the spiral stairs into the kitchen.

Muchleigh House, the imposing whitewashed and ivy-trailed tower of a home where Bailey lived with his Mother, was said to be the oldest house in Bimleigh-Heavers and it certainly looked like it. It would have needed a huge amount of work doing to it before you could even call it ramshackle, but it was warm and it was cosy, and to Bailey Humblebucket it had always been home.

The kitchen was a large round room, oozing steam from a variety of slowly bubbling pans. A huge wooden table sat in the centre entirely covered in heaps of vegetables; carrots here, potatoes there and the biggest onions that anyone had ever seen, all grown in the family vegetable plot around the back of the house. A glorious smell of slowly roasting meat wafted over from the huge iron oven and on its way entwined itself with the aroma from a simmering pan of fresh white dumplings, bobbing plump and bloated like a gaggle of headless geese in a cast iron pond.

Mrs Humblebucket emerged from the cloud of steam, her shiny round red face split from ear to ear by a broad grin.

“Oh Bailey, I do like *Fayre Days*; I reckon I’ve cooked up just about enough to feed the Three Kings of the West and all their families! And I’ve made a big old pan of that Beef Broth that I made last time. And roast red onions and fried silver fish with garlic and ginger toffee cakes and...”

“Well, the village will be here soon, I’ve just seen them from the roof!”

“Oh my goodness Bailey! Well, you must nip through and get those tables and chairs straight in the dining room and make sure that there is a special place set for the Mayor at the end of the biggest table.”

On such occasions, the Humblebucket household, being the most spacious in the village, was often used to provide a reception area where the dignitaries from each village could meet, eat and generally drink far more mulberry wine than could possibly have been good for any of them. Such was the main source of income for Mrs Humblebucket, who was never happier than when she had her smiling face in a huge simmering cauldron of homemade Tomato and Tarragon soup or when basting some enormous roasted fowl. As such, these receptions, or *Fayre Days*, had since become an important staple of Muchleigh House life.

Once he had laid the tables and straightened the chairs, Bailey called to Cabbage and ran out of the door. Together they ran down the dusty track leading to the top of Market Street. The long cobbled street wobbled and

wound its way past the various shops, houses, alleyways and courtyards and led past the walled Town Square.

Very soon, they arrived at the quayside to await the arrival of the new village, which could now be seen quite clearly, as it was already less than half a mile away, and to the townspeople of Bimleigh, who were known for being easily impressed, it was already a quite impressive sight.

By now there was a crowd of over two hundred people waiting on the quayside, and the excitement was visibly mounting as the huge structure lurched and groaned towards its final destination as part of Greater Bimleigh-Heavers. As it came closer, Bailey could make out the name 'The Karno' written across the prow of the vessel as it flashed its gold paint in the sun.

As Bailey sat down on a patch of grass, a group of devout Caninists walked past dressed in the familiar deep blue robes of the ancient Dog-fearing religious order. As they passed they each averted their eyes and muttered to one another about "His most excellent eyebrows" and "The serenity of his fine, wet snout", while briefly allowing themselves snatched glimpses of Cabbage.

Bailey thought that they were all just a bit strange, but Cabbage seemed rather pleased with himself and sat up looking regal (and slightly less alarmed) for a little while after they had gone.

Meanwhile, the village was beginning to dock and as sailors from either side rushed around and threw ropes to each other, it was all that Bailey could do to stand and stare in wonder (although it is true that he was mostly wondering where all Mistress Nutter's cows and sheep were hiding).

Once it had docked, the village looked as though it had always been there. The small white cottages with their tiny rose-filled gardens complemented those by the quayside, and the little cobbled paths that ran back and forth over the deck of the village seemed as though they had been especially designed to carry on off the deck of the village and straight off up the main street to Bailey's front door.

All of a sudden, a number of smartly dressed trumpet players in bright purple and red silk uniforms, of varying sizes, rushed out from a small shabby shed concealed behind the main wooden building at the centre of the new village and formed two lines. As they began to play a fanfare, there was an incredible creaking groaning sound; and to the murmured

satisfaction of all those present, the front of the round fat tower began to be lowered down towards the quay. When the contents of the tower were revealed, the crowd erupted with applause. It was the first time they had ever seen a Theatre, let alone had one as part of the village.

Once the front stage had been lowered down, a jolly middle-aged man with a balding head and unruly white hair emerged from the back of the stage and clapped his hands together twice. He was dressed from top to toe in shades of green velvet, which served to make him look like a rather weighty frog.

“I beg your attention please fair people of Grimly-Heathens!” A nearby trumpeter hastily corrected him.

“My apologies fair people of Bimleigh-Heavers. Whilst it trots across my mind like a fat pig wandering across a dell full of truffles, I thank you from the heart of... ahem... from the bottom of my heart for your magnanimous welcome and hope that we might put upon your most generous hospitality to grant us a short stay in your most wonderful village.

“Let me introduce myself ladies and genteel-men - my name is Jefferson, Bertholde Arthur Augustus Hayseed Jefferson Esquire, very much at your service. And I am proud to present *The Theatre of a Thousand Years!*”

He made a huge theatrical flourish and as he spoke a number of smaller coloured torches burst into flame; and at the back of the stage, a fluttering sheet of material, roughly the size and appearance of a large sail, slipped down until it reached its position on the stage. The strange thing about the backdrop was that, rather than a single painted image, it seemed to be covered by a shifting silver mist, which moved and flowed across the face of the canvas.

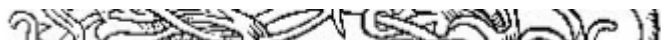
To the delight of the waiting audience, the mists slowly cleared and the scenery now showed a perfectly painted scene of Bimleigh-Heavers Town Square complete with the impressive white columns and dysfunctional clock tower of the Town Hall. With this the audience erupted into applause, Cabbage had a bark (as was only right and proper under the circumstances) and Bertie Jefferson’s mouth burst into the most enormously joyful grin that Bailey Humblebucket could ever remember seeing in his life.

“As my fellow travellers will no doubt testify I am prone to repeating, I may have journeyed a goodly part of this sparkling realm but there is

nothing, nothing I say, that is more gratifying than an appreciative audience!”

With that, he threw his head back, took a deep bow and walked off the stage and into Bimleigh-Heavers as though he had lived there for his entire life.

“And it beats the pants off those sour-faced prunes at Bobbleton-Casket” he muttered with a shudder.



Deep and even deeper into the snow-capped and cloud-covered Ben Byrig Mountains lay an ancient stone monastery, called Thane.

It may not have looked entirely monastic, in fact if most people were stopped in the street and asked to comment they would probably say that it looked like a huge overbearing castle, hewn from the living rock with more turrets than windows, surrounded by the starkest, darkest, dampest grey walls seen this side of a particularly Grimm fairytale.

Not like most monasteries, then. Still, it all depends on what you worship.

Within the walls of the monastery, monks dressed in the black, hooded habits of the order of Thane hurried about their business across a vast stone courtyard and disappeared rat-like through old dark doorways. They scurried up the dozens of separate spiral staircases that riddled the mountainside and upwards, ever upwards into the shadows of the dark, foreboding halls and low beams of the damp wooden ribbed corridors beyond.

Twelve elaborately carved lion’s heads stared blankly out from the rooftops; their mouths pushed open by flaking iron guttering that dripped a steady stream of rainwater down the granite walls and across the cobbled courtyard below.

At the very top of the monastery, jutting out from the rock-face sat the most impressive room in the whole building. Its huge, semicircular window forced its way out from the stone, its clear glass panes glinting like a dozen stone-rimmed teeth in the midday sun. Through the window and pacing around within his office inside was Arch-Brother Taegis. He was not at all a happy Arch-Brother.

“Brother Tallow!” He bellowed, shaking the windows and sending the

assembled rodent population running for cover.

“I am waiting, Brother!” Ruddy faced at the best of times, Brother Taegis was fast becoming a deep crimson, which quite nicely matched the ornately stitched, blood red sash he wore as a mark of his vast importance, but boded no good at all for his blood pressure.

Just as it seemed possible that steam would start to force its way out from his nose and ears, Brother Tallow burst into the room, white-faced and breathless, clutching a huge, leather-bound and very dusty book.

“I have it, Eminence, I have it right here!” he cried.

Even as a child Gilbert Tallow had looked malnourished, but the monastic life, involving early mornings, simple food and more flights of stairs than anyone had ever seen anywhere had transformed him into something approaching a wiry, black-clad stick insect. His white face wore a thin sneering smile as he handed the padlocked volume to his master and hurriedly searched the black leather satchel he wore for the key to open it.

The second it was open Taegis snatched it up and held it aloft in triumph.

“Before this book was rediscovered, deep in the catacombs beneath Thane, it was thought that it was destroyed many millennia ago.

“Written by the greatest Scholars of all time, this book contains magical knowledge and secrets thought forever lost. Banned by our own order long ago when it was governed by ignorant fools who couldn’t see further than the nose on their faces, this book was thought to be too dangerous to be allowed to exist.”

They stood back to survey the thick leather-bound cover of *The Worldes Aparte* as it lay heavily on the oak table. Old, dirty gold stitching covered the edges of the book and dark ringed stains crept around the bottom of its dark and creased cover, giving the book a certain air of dangerous authority.

A large rusty padlock, which looked as though it had lain in place for an extremely long time, adorned a large iron sleeve which neatly served the dual roles of not only preventing access to the book’s pages, but of also making it look very impressive indeed.

“There was a time when men had lost belief in the use of pure dark magic and when they had lost sight of all the great works that had been

accomplished. It was heralded as ‘The Age of Enlightenment’! Hah! ‘The Age of Abject Stupidity’ would be closer to the truth!”

Taegis allowed himself a haughty snort and turned to glare at Tallow, who in turn broke into a short and hysterical series of giggles and then stopped abruptly when he realised that he didn’t really know what *abject* meant.

“Had this tome not been taken and hidden away then it would surely have been destroyed with all the others, and had it not been our good fortune to discover it whilst *researching* our glorious forefathers, then it could never have been used. And use it we most surely must - for the good of Thane and to further the everlasting glory of the Black Sun!”

Here must surely be a point of explanation, for the research to which Taegis referred was in fact little more than robbery. For months the two, torches in hand, had searched the deepest and darkest of the ancient catacombs that lay beneath the monastery and rummaged around the shelves where their more illustrious ex-brothers were entombed upon their demise. While their premise was always the good of the order, in truth their hopes lay more in finding gold rings, coins and jewellery that had been left to accompany their brethren into the afterlife.

“So let us see what we shall see Brother Tallow...”

Taegis fitted the rusted dark brown key into the lock and, with an almighty effort accompanied by an even darker shade of crimson, turned it and forced open the clasp holding it together. Instantly, and with a shower of ancient grime, the book sprang open. As it did, a shaft of dusty light from the window found the gold illuminated lettering within and flashed brightly, momentarily lighting up the whole room and the smiling face of the Arch-Brother with a warm, yellow glow.

Deep beneath the tower, deep down in the deepest depths of the darkest catacombs, the ancient shields which adorned the walls, protecting them against evil forces shuddered and clattered when, as though from nowhere, an icy breeze sprang up and forced its way along the stone-lined passages. The tattered remnants of faded age-old tapestries that covered the maze of doorways into shadowy rooms and tunnels fluttered and were pushed aside.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the chilled wind died down and the ancient calm was once again restored.

“Well my graciousness, what does it say - Anything good?” enquired Tallow impatiently, in his most gut-wrenchingly sycophantic tone of voice.

“I cannot read this!” cried Taegis bitterly, “It seems to have been written in some kind of gibberish. In fact, you would probably have no trouble in understanding it at all! It is in your very nature!” and with that he threw the book in the gawping face of the ill-prepared Tallow, who was thrown backwards and collapsed, sprawled out by the door.

“I want it translating! Do you hear me you blithering idiot? Before tonight! The Darkest Night is our most holy night of the year and this year I propose to show the world how Thane monastery celebrates this most dark of all nights.

“Once I have the secrets of the book at my disposal, I will show the light worshippers of this world that we are the single true believers! The Black Sun shall throw her divine dark shawl across this land and those pitiful disbelieving fools will tremble at our very feet - Starting with those sliding-faced lizards at Bare Barrow!” By now his left eye was twitching quite violently.

“I will use it to call forth the Guardian of the Gate. I will use him to do my...” he hastily corrected himself, “*Our* bidding and once more bring glory to these hallowed walls. He will turn the day into night and will smite our enemies until they are well and truly... smitten!”

Tallow was now even whiter than he had been previously.

“The Guardian sire?” he repeated in a hoarse whisper, “But, begging your eminent pardon sire, do not the Scrolls of Ages forbid raising the Guardian above all other incantations?”

Taegis narrowed his eyes and fixed Tallow with his most piercing look.

“Which is precisely why I mean to do it, you beleaguered, toad-brained simpleton!” He hissed.

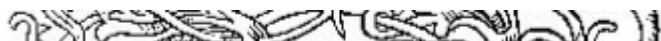
“Yes, your most gracious Eminence. I will go and fetch old Brother Jeffery from the library. He has illuminated manuscripts such as this for these eighty years and more. I will lay my faith on his abilities, my liege.”

“And your life Brother Tallow? Would you be as quick to lay that down, my ferret-faced friend?”

“I will go right away then oh, expansive one...”

As he left, backwards as was the custom, bowing and scraping his obedience to his lord, Tallow could just make out a last spiteful curse spat out at the door as it groaned shut.

“Let us hope that he can, Brother Tallow, for there is a sharpened pole at the gates that was carved with your gormless head in mind...”



The Crimson Sun was now set in a glorious pink and gold sky directly above Bimleigh-Heavens. White herringbone clouds lay scattered across the bronze heavens and flocks of small birds, silhouetted against the soft light, made their ways back to the shelter of the sturdy oak trees and the comfort of their sun-warmed nests.

Coloured lanterns hung down from ropes along every street, their flames flickering, making pools of soft light bounce off the clean, round sides of the shiny cobbles and throwing colours up onto the plain, whitewashed houses. Everywhere stallholders and shopkeepers mixed and mingled with the Theatre folk, who were dressed in their finest, brightest felt robes and tight silk bodices.

Outside the Town Hall a fire-eater was juggling flaming torches and stopping every now and again to project a long strip of flame from his mouth and force another round of gasps from the gaping mouths of the attending audience. It was a spectacle unlike which Bailey had ever seen in the whole of his life, and he was determined not to miss a single sight or sound from his vantage point at the foot of the Town Hall steps. His dog Cabbage, on the other hand, fresh from devouring half a roast chicken for his dinner, was now having serious trouble staying awake, and, as he flopped down beside his master, he opened his large toothy mouth and yawned widely.

Now and then a loud ‘pop’ would resound right around the Town square and a shower of sparks would be issued from the roast nut seller’s huge glowing brazier, scattering small singed children in all directions until they were brave enough to go back, poking it with their sticks to fan the flames higher.

As night fell, the festivities turned to muttered talk about a show that was to be performed from the vast stage that filled the village; and although no

announcement had yet been made, one by one the Theatre folk seemed to drift from the crowds until all that was left was a single group of musicians in the centre of the square.

One of the musicians held a shallow drum, surrounded by a large thin metal hoop which she bent while she played, resulting in a hypnotically shifting pitch that echoed through an ornately etched and highly polished silver horn. The other two members of the group played wooden stringed instruments with long cylindrical bodies, and sprouting two necks each, a short and a long one.

As one of the string players played the shorter neck of their instrument, the other would play the longer of their own; resulting in a much deeper, more resonant sound, then with a nod to each other they would instantly swap over and play the same part the other had just played.

The resulting melody, although seeming quite intricate, somehow combined to form a simple, natural sound. It reminded Bailey of the sound of church bells from far away that had been carried on the wind. It also served to put Cabbage to sleep, and resulted in him snoring so loudly that he actually woke himself up and looked around indignantly, lifting his head long enough to probe the audience with a single beady eye (and matching startled eyebrow), before flopping back down again and drifting off to sleep.

Very soon, the music began to speed up and the villagers clapped along with it. The musicians began slowly to lead them across the cobbles and through the large ceremonial arch of Breamsgate (separating the fish-seller's stalls at the edge of the Market Square from the winding Market Street) and proceeded onwards down the flights of stone stairs to the quayside.

As they entered the lamp-lined gateway, the music began to echo around them and suddenly Bailey heard the strangest sound that had ever entered his ears. It was a deep mournful sound, which slowly rose to a crescendo, gradually becoming louder and louder until it filled the air and threatened to drown out every other sound for miles around. In fact it was so loud that a number of the crowd who had been following the band were looking around to see what was going on, but once they turned around they each began to laugh. It wasn't until he looked down and saw his dog that Bailey realised what the sound actually was: Cabbage was singing. His huge shaggy dog was standing bolt upright; his head turned to one side with the little

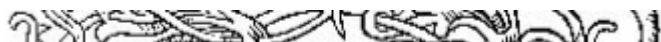
grey hairs that lined his chin each sticking out stiffly and out from his huge jaws came the saddest song that Bailey had ever heard.

Once he realised what the sound was, Bailey erupted into peals of laughter.

“Come on then, you silly old hound,” he laughed and together they set off down to the water’s edge.

Down at the quayside, Bertie Jefferson, resplendent in his best scarlet waistcoat stood on the stage of ‘The Karno’, transfixed as though made from stone. The torches at the front of the stage lit his face and cast a flickering shadow across his eyes and nose that added quite nicely to the rapidly growing sense of occasion.

Before long, a reverent hush fell upon the crowd and then there was silence.



A huge, dark red velvet curtain hung heavily behind the imposing figure of Bertholde Jefferson. It was held aloft by a row of large ornate brass rings and decorated by a pair of huge glittering masks, one frowning and the other smiling, which had been painstakingly stitched with thick gold thread.

“Laydeeeeeees and Genteelmen!” cried a suddenly animated Jefferson.

“What you are about to see has never before been performed in the whole of Ffinche-Bobbyns!”

“Since the last time you done it!” laughed an unruly young member of the audience.

“Why you, sir, have the cheek of a fully grown man! But I still have good reason to believe that what I have to relate is a little more entertaining than any story you might possibly have to share with my good friends and fellow country folk...” Jefferson had handled his fair share of unruly audiences and his well-judged riposte was followed by a loud murmur of approval and a handful of disparaging looks towards the red-faced boy in question.

“And if I may be given leave to resume,” continued Jefferson, unfazed.

“Indeed, what you are about to witness has been gifted to me, Bertholde Arthur Augustus Hayseed Jefferson, by the courtesy of the seven muses

and through the medium of a waking dream! And so I now present to you, the good people of Bimleigh, our latest and most illustrious production of *The Strange and Intricate World of Sebastian Werth!*”

With this, Jefferson threw up his velvet-cloaked arms and promptly disappeared as the trapdoor hidden beneath him briefly snapped open. Although frankly this might have probably been more impressive had it not been directly accompanied by a muffled thud and a very, very naughty word.

What followed had the rapt attention of the audience from the very start.

As soon as Jefferson had vanished from the stage, the big red curtain at the front parted and each half silently swept away. The backdrop that people had talked about all day and which they were sure was to be the main attraction, was once again covered in grey shifting clouds. At the back of the stage, a large golden chair stood on a raised platform surrounded by a number of similar raised platforms and featureless round or square objects, which all littered the entire area, each one seeming covered in the same thin shroud of drifting mist.

All at once, a number of things happened which sent a ripple of excitement throughout the audience. First a brightly dressed Court Jester leapt, shrieking with laughter from behind the box at the very front of the stage, appearing in a shower of multi-coloured paper. At the exact same moment, a flock of small golden birds were released from either side of the stage and flew out and over the audience in a flurry of tiny glinting wings. By the time the eyes of the crowd had returned to look back towards the stage it had been utterly transformed.

The backdrop now featured the bone-white arches and golden rooftops of a magnificent kingdom. Flocks of small yellow birds circled around the taller towers and swooped and dived around the high cliffs surrounding their fantastic idyllic world.

The objects scattered around the stage now each fitted in perfectly, each one featuring a separate part of the scene and lending depth to the beautiful vista. One became a turret sprouting high from the valley floor and another was a beautiful sculpture towards the front of the main stage, which was now a very grand veranda, looking out across the vast expanse of the kingdom.

Newly perched upon an intricately carved ebony stairway, was the large

golden chair, which, given its new surroundings, was now almost definitely a throne. The effect was extraordinary. It was as though a real, moving world was now filling the stage. Where before there had been nothing but grey mist and boxes, now there was a moving, breathing world, which seemed to have forced its way out of the floating village, vibrant and clear and with all its dimensions intact.

The Jester waited for a second and then slowly began to speak.

“Now tale shall I tell of a world filled with mirth,

A king who’s so portly you can’t guess his girth

And a wizard of powers many and great,

Who soon from now shall we learn of his fate... and who’s called... Sebastian Werth!”

With this the Jester gambolled and pranced off into the wings.

One young girl near Bailey whispered to another, “Oh Betsy! That’s the finest leaping I’ve seen for over a twelve-month!”

“Yes and so precise!” replied her friend.

Once the lights on stage had changed, a spotlight focussed on the Throne area and with a very dramatic (and highly trained) theatrical cough, the rotund figure of the King entered and walked around to the front of it before slowly sitting back and reclining.

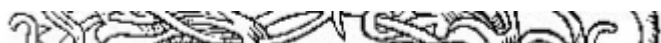
“MR MERRYWEATHER!” shrieked the King.

The Court Jester ran back into the royal Throne room and to the delight of the audience fell flat on his face. He then set about standing up and falling over a number of times, with each attempt to stand accompanied by a peal of tiny Jester bells and a cymbal crash from the musicians assembled in the tiny orchestra pit to one side of the stage front.

After a minute or so of this, and while the King gradually looked more and more impatient, the Jester finally managed to stand up straight and had very nearly regained his composure before, with a loud stretching sound his braces exploded and his trousers fell to the ground.

By now the people of Bimleigh-Heavers, who were generally quite happy and boisterous anyway, had tears of laughter streaming down their red

smiling faces and were all but putty in the actor's skilled hands.



In Thane, on the other hand, all was not going entirely to plan.

Old Brother Jeffery, a grey-haired monk with a nice matching set of simpleton eyes and smile, had been 'doing his best' to translate the text of *The Worldes Aparte*. The fact that this mostly consisted of telling tales about apple theft and youthful indulgences had done absolutely nothing for the Arch-brother's humour, and had it not been for the constant polite intervention of brother Tallow to move proceedings along, they would have not made any progress at all.

"Now then, let's see... I think that it... oh yes. No. Well it could mean that I suppose. Never heard it called that though... Made of wood carved from the *Tree of Hallowed Souls*. It was the least, sorry no... the *most* terrible power... and something about barnacles... ooh I say...," muttered Jeffery to himself.

"So do we know anything yet then, Brother?" whispered Taegis in exasperated mock politeness, tapping his fingers against his sash.

"Well yes. And no." smiled Old Jeffery, "it all depends how you look at it really, do you see?"

This was all too much for the Arch-brother's paper-thin patience.

"What?" he spluttered incredulously, "That's it, Tallow - that's enough - fetch my eye gougers!"

"Brother Jeffery, please" pleaded Tallow, "Tell me that you have learned something, *anything*, about how we might summon up the Guardian of the Gate?"

"Well, not exactly" grinned Jeffery, who was unfortunately a man born without the common sense to grasp the gravity of a situation. He was also someone who liked to drag out any given explanation in order to afford himself an air of mystery. This turned a question as to the whereabouts of someone's socks or a simple enquiry into what he had eaten for breakfast into a tedious question and answer session that had been known, in one extreme case, to last until nightfall and which had left the recipient crying with anger and deeply confused.

“But there is something in there about something else” he said, a twinkle in his eye.

“There is mention of something which it describes as being the Weaver of Thought. It is a device, which seems to act rather like a magnifying glass, but which plucks the very thoughts from the air. It plays quite a significant part in many of the incantations in the book. In fact it really was quite something, going by the descriptions I can understand.”

“It was? What do you mean *it was*?” enquired Taegis quickly.

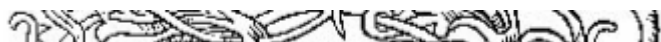
“Well I’ve certainly never heard of such a thing around these parts, and there’s no mention of where you might find such an object. There is quite a nice picture of it though.” He turned the book towards the other two and pointed to a picture of a large round, ornately carved wooden disk, resplendent with exquisitely drawn golden rays shining out from its centre.

“And you really have no idea where one might find such an artefact?” asked Taegis, with an evil, thin grin starting to spread across his face.

“I’m sure we can find it, Eminence!” cried Tallow, fearing for his fellow brother’s life.

“I will personally send out brothers to every corner of the land. They will stop at nothing until they find and bring you this sacred relic!”

“Even though” continued Taegis, ignoring the interruption and now raising a quizzical eyebrow, “you both take breakfast from it each and every morning?”



By the Quay the show was now in full swing.

Once the initial laughter had subsided, the king had raised his regal hand to signal for quietness and the play had begun in earnest. Over the next two hours, the village folk were captivated and utterly enthralled as the tale gradually unfolded.

As the story unravelled it told of a magician called Werth (enthusiastically played by Jefferson) and his amazing magical creation, a tiny little world filled with real people, real rivers and real houses, which all existed inside a tiny but very beautiful magical box.

The king, it transpired, had come to hear about this magical land and so summoned the magician to his court to show it to him. Once the king had seen the world, he was so enchanted by it that he offered the magician anything in his kingdom in return for the box. The magician, however, did not trust the king with the safekeeping of his tiny world, and tried to take it away with him, which led to his banishment to the dark castle dungeons.

A musical scene in the magician's cell ensued, featuring a cat, a rabbit and a full contingent of fluffy white mice.

It was around this time that Cabbage's ears pricked up and he started barking very loudly in an outraged tone (to the annoyance of the other onlookers). In fact they only narrowly avoided being ousted from the Quay when Bailey gave Cabbage a lump of extra sticky toffee that he found while desperately searching his pockets, sticking his furry jaws together so tightly that all he could manage from then on was a muffled 'Uruff'.

The spellbinding story finally concluded with the magician casting a spell that dispatched the enchanted world off into a dream so that it could never be captured by the king (who by now was becoming really quite evil indeed), and then escaping to safety when he was picked up and carried away by a large, and it must be said impressive, white Dove.

"And from there-before and thereafter", continued the Jester, "the world was passed on from one to another sleeper in a never-ending cycle of dreams. As night slid around the world, so did sleep, and while there is someone asleep in the world, the magical kingdom would always be safe".

With this the backdrop and the various pieces of scenery dissolved into grey and the stage lights dimmed and slowly faded to blackness.

The applause was quite deafening.

Most people in Bimleigh were both amazed and delighted by the show. It should however be noted that to many of the assembled throng the epitome of culture had previously been to witness a performance by 'The Travelling Tipplers - A Top Toppling Turne and No Mistayke'.

As the audience showed their hearty appreciation, the stage soon became covered in a fine sheen of assorted brass coins (and the odd dented button), which glittered in the stage lights as they bounced and skipped across its polished white ash planks.

When the lights came back up, Bertholde Arthur Augustus Hayseed Jefferson strode back out onto the centre of the stage as the all-conquering hero - his white hair standing out in dangling sweaty tufts to each side of his head. White greasepaint still lay smeared across much of his face, and though it covered his many warts and wrinkles it could not begin to disguise the huge grin that now spread across his entire face.

As half a dozen of his company ran out onto the stage to fill their hats and anything else available with coins, Jefferson threw out his arms and addressed the cheering audience.

“Tonight you have all made an old man very happy, and I can well see that you hold theatre as close to your hearts as I do myself. I am left humbled by your graciousness. All that I will say is that an ounce of appreciation is worth more than a flagon of ale or a bag of the finest silver coins.”

He eyed the coins still remaining on the stage floor, “So I thank you, and will perhaps see a select few of you up at the Muchleigh House for a little light libation and some much-needed sustenance”. With this he joined his fellow actors on his hands and knees and began scraping up the few coins left remaining.

Once they had assembled back at the house, the party carried on well into the small hours. Berty Jefferson, secure at the head of the biggest table he could find, held court over the assorted throng of well over two hundred Heavrians and Thespians with a delighted twinkle in his eye and a plate which never seemed to be empty, however much he ate. Mrs Humblebucket, always in her element when entertaining a full room of people, tirelessly scurried around the hall, accompanied by a handful of local girls who often doubled as serving maids when the need arose.

The food laid out on the tables was fit for a thousand kings. Even Bailey, who was used to his Mother’s culinary excesses, was impressed by the feast that night, which included a huge steaming pot of freshly made tomato and bacon soup, roast hams and chickens, baked brown buns still warm from the oven and a hearty beef and ale stew (with plenty of huge dumplings). All the remaining spaces on the tables were filled with a dozen spacious white dishes filled with hot buttered potatoes, peas and boiled carrots, which when the lids were lifted off them sent pungent clouds of sweet white steam into the room and up into the rafters.

Following the local customs and traditions, the visiting village had paid for the feast and the hosts had provided the wine, which Bailey supplied from the monstrously huge barrel by the Hall doorway. It seemed that each time he had filled a big pewter jug and taken it to a table, there was another table that was laughing and shouting for more. Before too long he had firmly decided that these entertainers had more than just a taste for the local Mulberry wine and famous Bimleigh Black Bear Beer (or 'Forby' as it was more commonly slurred), and it also seemed to him that the more they drank, the ruder their stories had become.

His mother, who was taking it in equal turns to look disapproving whenever Bailey was close, and to stifle giggles whenever he wasn't, finally reached the point where she had had enough of serving food, and sat down next to Jefferson, whereupon he raised a toast to her fine cuisine, another to his fellow players and to pretty much anything else that sprang to mind.

Once the feast had finished and been cleared away, the merrymaking began in earnest.

The tables were moved back to reveal the large round marble mosaic compass. From its dimpled centre, bone-white pieces stretched out to the wide outer edge. Set against the plain stone flagging that surrounded them, the intricately carved pieces of crystalline marble shone and sparkled as they were picked out by the candlelight.

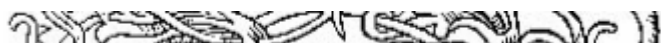
As the dance space was cleared, musicians took their cue and filtered out from each of the tables, taking up whatever instruments they had brought and settling down to play the traditional folk songs that everyone knew.

With the introduction of the musicians, the walls soon resounded with the confused and tangled feet of the various townsfolk, each performing their own unique interpretation of the local dances. In the hands of Berty Jefferson 'The Mudgoblin' and 'Pretty Faerie a' leaping' seemed to more closely resemble 'The Flailing Madman a' drunkenly staggering', but it was generally agreed that his efforts gained him marks for persistence, if not agility.

Finally, after many more hours of dancing, drinking and talking, the hall gradually became quieter as the last few of the remaining villagers began to find their weary ways home. As the long night drew to a close and the last of the guests was safely snoring into a plate of fried potato and leek, Bailey whistled to Cabbage. Picking up a lit candlestick, he drew back the corner

of the tapestry that hung down across the kitchen wall and exposed the thin winding staircase discovered some years before, half-hidden behind a dusty oak bookcase which now stood off to one side.

They crept and creaked their way up the flickering staircase to bed and Cabbage playfully butted the backs of Bailey's legs like a mountain goat whenever he slowed down. As he climbed into bed, Cabbage collapsed like a falling tree and heaved a huge tired, groaning sigh, which parted Bailey's hair and made him laugh aloud. Not so very long afterwards they had both fallen into a deep, deep sleep.



Many miles away across the rugged black mountaintops, life was far from tranquil.

“Be careful with that thing. If anyone damages it I'll have you hung upside down by your toenails over a pit of angry rabbits!” shouted Arch-brother Taegis to the assembled monks, busily puffing and panting their way to the top of a particularly narrow stone staircase.

The burden they were struggling to hard to move was in fact a finely carved (and quite comprehensively stained) table that had surfaced in a darkened corner of the monk's refectory. A wide, deep and very solid piece of wood, it had taken half an hour, twenty -four monks and all the rope that they could lay their hands on, just to move it up the three flights of stairs leading to the most holy place in the whole of the entire monastery; the Whispering Chambers.

The peculiar name of the hall was derived, in part at least, from an uncommon and quite uncanny characteristic. Due to the shape of the highly ornate glass ceiling, there were certain places where, if you stood and whispered, someone standing at the other side of the hall would hear the words as clearly as if you had been standing right by their side. It was most disconcerting, especially if it was the tender tones of Arch-brother Taegis, and he had just caught you nodding off at evening prayers.

In addition to their eerie aural properties, the Chambers, deep as they were in the very heart of Thane Mountain, also lay beneath a small lake. This meant that the strange sounds echoing around the hall accompanied a series of constantly shifting shafts of light. The silver moonlight, dimmed as it filtered through the deep water and between shimmering shoals of fish, lit murky green patches upon the stone-flagged floor. Around the

circular edge of the hall sat rows of dark green leather seats that rose up towards the ceiling and were divided into tiers by tall white candles, and in the very centre of the room lay the ancient Stone of Ascendance.

The roughly cut lump of grey polished stone may well have looked distinctly unremarkable, but was in fact the reason for the long and dangerous construction of the Whispering Chambers themselves. It marked the place where for centuries Arch-Brother upon Arch-brother had been draped in their ceremonial sash and white gloves and then set upon and kicked until they wept (although this tradition was not favoured by the Arch-brothers themselves, for fairly obvious reasons).

Rumour had it that the Stone of Ascendance had strange powers of its own. Whether or not those rumours were true, it was a fact that it had featured in a fondly told story concerning one of the wickedest of all Arch-brothers, Brother Wilton Slake, and his slaying of a dozen wise men upon the stone for the part that they had played in a rather unsatisfactory wine and cheese evening.

Little by little, the Thought Weaver was dragged then rolled through the open doors at the top of the stairs and with a low creaking sound, which echoed around the walls, it finally came to rest at the very centre of the dusty candle-lined chamber and directly upon the great stone itself.

Brother Jeffery scurried up to where it stood, and started examining the markings carved into the wood, twittering and murmuring excitedly to himself as he did so.

“Yes, yes, it is definitely the genuine article. Quite incredible how we never noticed it before, really quite remarkable...” he said, his voice hushed and reverent.

The midnight chimes rang out from the tall bell tower high above Thane monastery, up in the still night air, down through the open doors of the courtyard and onwards through the corridors which burrowed through the mountain until they echoed in a deep sombre tone that enveloped the whole of the Whispering Chambers.

“Then hurry brother Jeffery, for the midnight hour is upon us,” cried Taegis, “The darkest hour of the darkest night. When was there such an omen of the wonders we are to perform?”

Jeffery took ‘The Worldes Aparte’ and began desperately thumbing

through it. The sound of the pages being quickly turned echoed around like the fluttering of tiny, papery wings circling the darkest corners of the room.

“Ah, I have it”, he said at last, “for it seems that a simple charm of empowerment is all that must be used.” With that, he stood back, pushed his sandaled feet far apart and raised the book high above his head.

“*Vulgo Recendentia Somnium Consisto Sententia!*” shouted the old man. There was silence. Somewhere in the chamber a single monk stifled a nervous cough.

“Well then, after that impressive little display, I’d say it was time for a glass of mulled wine, some hot buttered toast and a spot of hideous unrelenting torture,” said Taegis brightly.

“What letter are we up to in the alphabet for likely victims, brother Tallow?”

“I believe it has recently arrived at the letter ‘J’, your divine holiness,” said Tallow with an air of resignation.

Just then, and for brother Jeffery not a moment too soon, the outer edges of the Thought Weaver began to slide imperceptibly over the inner disks and slowly began to gain momentum, rising from its resting place upon the Stone of Ascendance until it was floating freely in the hushed air above. At first it creaked and squeaked in protest, the noise thrown from wall to wall around the room, but as the light from the ceiling flickered and danced upon its curved polished surface, it began slowly to speed up.

Next the middle section began to turn, this time in the opposite direction to the already spinning outer band. Finally, the inner disk of burnished oak began to spin and as it did, each disk suddenly became bright with a shining white beam, separating and then moving outwards to form a twisting, writhing ball of light.

“Oh, actually brothers, I’ve just seen something else here,” said Jeffery, the book still in his hand. He turned to the gaping faces of Taegis and Tallow, “It also says that whosoever shall read aloud the sacred words of darkest wisdom from this foulest of all books shall be...Oh goodness.”

Before anyone realised what was happening, Jeffery had grabbed hold of the hem of his robes and was running out of the Chambers and off down the corridor. There was a blue flash, a shriek and the footsteps stopped dead.

“I would say that that was a fair comment on the late brother’s oratory skills,” said Taegis, without turning from the Thought Weaver.

“Have brother Jeffery mopped up.”

With that, two of the assembled monks left the room.

As he spoke, five or six very faint wisps of smoke started to materialise from the front of the spinning machine. Very soon, more and more threads of smoke had emerged from the spinning ball of light, tracing past each other and intertwining until they began to form a dark shapeless mass.

The woven shape became denser, and as it did it began to assume a vaguely human form. With every passing moment, the form became clearer and still clearer until the smoke had all but disappeared and left behind a man. He wore (amongst other things) a short beard, a thick tarnished leather jacket and a stitched leather hat.

The task now fully accomplished, the light radiating from the Thought Weaver quickly started to recede, and became dimmer as the spinning disks slowed back down. It finally came to an abrupt stop, and fell back down upon the Stone of Ascendance with a dull wooden clunk.

“What is happening? Where in the devil’s name am I?” gasped the bemused newcomer, staggering from the remaining wisps as they clung onto the musty air.

“Guardian!” cried Taegis, gesturing to his fellow brothers to follow him as he fell to his knees, “You are in *Thane!*”

Spartacus Brink looked around the dark hall and shook his head as though to clear the last remaining traces of smoke from his between his ears.

“I wouldn’t be in the least surprised if I were,” he said at last.

Chapter 3



hen Bailey awoke, he felt blissfully happy.

He had met Melissa by chance, wandering over an arched field of golden wheat, swaying in a soft, light breeze and framed by a deep azure sky. As he had walked carefree, the wind blowing into his face and Cabbage by his side, he saw someone else in the far distance. As he walked closer, a huge dragonfly with shimmering blue and green wings circled his head and then spun off into the breeze, and suddenly she was standing right beside him.

Her dark brown hair fell into soft curls which half covered her face and half floated, resting on the air and flowing away into the near distance. She was older than him, perhaps by only two summers but with an air of confidence that far exceeded those years.

As she turned to face him she smiled and he suddenly realised the point of every love ballad he had ever dismissed. Her brown eyes seemed to reach down into his very soul and release a surge of potent emotions that he hadn't ever realised were there.

Inside he felt giddy, his body bursting with joy that he could scarcely contain. He returned her smile and she took him by the hand, leading him further through the field. He didn't know where they were going or if he should even speak, but he didn't care, he simply knew that he wanted to stay in this place and be with this girl forever.

They reached the top of the hill, sitting in a clearing beneath the moss-speckled branches of a big broad oak tree and Cabbage lay down so that Melissa could rub his chest as he stretched out, smiling and content.

"I have been searching for you Bailey; my name is Melissa", she said, her voice soft and calm.

"I know," said Bailey. He didn't know how he knew, but felt that they had spoken before, a long, long time before.

"I need you to take a message to the Outlander, Bailey. It is very important that you get this message to him."

"I know," repeated the awestruck Bailey, "I feel like we have already met.

It is almost as though I already know what I need to do,”

“Good, then tell the Outlander that I can show him the way. Tell him that I can help him find that for which he will search so long.

“Tell him that I am being held against my will, and that if he frees me then I in turn will free him. Will you do that for me Bailey – will you see that my message reaches him?” As she spoke this last part, Bailey could sense a note of unease in her voice and as he nodded she looked around at the rising wind rushing through the oak leaves.

As her deep brown gaze returned to his, he could see the reflection of the clouds speeding over the sky, boiling, pushing and spreading out over the blue and covering the sun, turning the day into a strange purple twilight.

“Please don’t let me down Bailey - you are the only one I can turn to.”

Suddenly he was being pulled and pushed by the winds, snatched up and thrown up higher and higher through the air and into the clouds. He tried to shout, but however hard he tried no sound would come out from his mouth. He felt as though he was being lifted in the palm of some enormous invisible hand and then, as he realised for the first time that he was dreaming, the hand that had been holding him up suddenly let go.

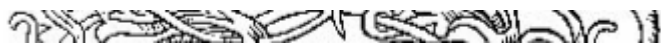
Bailey plummeted, punching a hole in the clouds and toppling headfirst through the rushing air towards the sunlit tranquillity of Bimleigh-Heavers. Although he was initially quite shocked by this turn of events, the fear that he first felt soon dissipated and he began to almost enjoy the experience for what it was.

He could see the Town Hall, the Quay, the Butcher’s shop, the Church and Muchleigh house and as he fell, Bailey stretched out his arms to slow his descent and found that by twisting his body he could actually steer himself, slowing down the rate at which he dropped and gliding past the tops of the green prickly hedgerows gathered far below.

He landed with a solid thud on the hill standing to the back of his house and directly in the centre of the Muchleigh Standing Stones, a circle of fifteen or so huge slabs of rock which had lent their name to his house and which had been standing on the hill for as long as anyone had ever known.

As his feet hit the soft damp grass he awoke, and as he came round he remembered Melissa’s voice, the smell of her hair, the curve of her neck and the colour of her eyes; most of all he remembered her soft brown eyes.

Bailey lay for a few peaceful minutes in silence on his bed in the early morning light, Cabbage softly snoring, transfixed by thoughts of the girl he had met and replaying their meeting over and over again in his mind until he fell backwards into a light and dreamless sleep.



When Bailey finally awoke he climbed straight out of bed and pulled on his baggy cotton shirt and thick, patched trousers. The sunlight poured through the window and struck the polished brass astrolabe by the side of his bed, throwing golden spots of sun around the room. He couldn't remember why he felt so good about life, but he did, and that was all that seemed to matter.

The smells of breakfast cooking had the shiny wet nose of the still sleeping Cabbage twitching and shuddering. As Bailey shook him, he opened first one and then the other eye. Staring down his quivering snout he raised his eyebrows and leaped from the bed, bounding down the steps leading to the kitchen and the glorious smell of fat roast sausages and bacon sizzling in the oven.

"Bailey!" called his mother downstairs, her voice accompanied by the rattle of pots and pans.

"Come down for your breakfast before this dog of yours eats the lot!"

Bailey went to walk down the stairs, but the thought that kept nagging at him slowed him to a stop. He had remembered Melissa and what she had told him, but the more he thought about her, the more distant she became. What had seemed so tangible and real when he had first woken up was now fading like an old picture that had been left for too long in the light of the sun.

"She isn't real. I didn't actually meet her, it was all just some stupid dream," he said softly.

It felt as though each step he took down the stairs his feet and heart became heavier. By the time he had reached the kitchen his shoulders had slumped and he was suddenly feeling really quite depressed.

To make matters worse, he also felt more than a little silly that he had allowed himself to be so affected by a dream, whether it made him happy or sad. But he still could not stop thinking about Melissa. In fact, he was so

wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn't even notice when Cabbage slid stealthily past him with his ears down, a determined look on his face and a big, meaty bone wedged in his mouth.

"Come and have your breakfast, and then you can help me tidy up from last night," chirped his mother, "And tell me if you find that ham bone I put to one side. I was going to use it for a pan of soup this afternoon."

Bailey sat down to breakfast and found that he was hungrier than he had thought. In no time at all he had polished off the steaming heap of crispy grilled bacon, sausages, fried eggs, mushrooms, tomatoes and toast on his plate, which he washed down with a big blue mug of hot, sweet tea.

Breakfast at Muchleigh was always taken very seriously. In fact, some guests that stayed there had been known to have breakfast and then had not needed anything else to eat for the rest of the day.

Following breakfast, Bailey began to clean a path through the carnage and slaughter of the previous night and sighed as he looked around at the work that lay ahead of him. The hall was scattered with stacks of dirty plates and pewter tankards with assorted unsavoury items floating around in them and at the centre of each and every table were the remains of used candles, the wax having melted down and set solid like small white tree stumps.

Suddenly there came a muffled voice.

"Aha, well if it isn't that young fellow-me-lad. Just the man I wanted to see!"

Bailey turned around, but still could not see who was addressing him, as the hall seemed to be as empty as when he had started.

"Hello?" he said looking towards the hall door.

"Down here old boy," came the voice again, apparently from beneath a nearby table

"Dramatic performance does surely sap the body's vital humours. I think that I must have been unexpectedly overtaken by my weariness and retired to some less than conventional sleeping quarters," croaked an expertly hung-over Bertie Jefferson as he crawled out from beneath the table.

As Bailey helped him to his feet, the grey-faced Jefferson dusted himself down and removed the remains of a bread roll from his hair, whereupon

Mavis Humblebucket caught sight of him from the kitchen and began to fluster and fuss around like an old hen. Something he seemed to enjoy.

“You will stay for breakfast won’t you Mr Jefferson? I have some freshly baked buns, warm from the oven and eggs still warm from the chicken? But of course you will. Bailey, go and fetch Mr Jefferson a knife, spoon and plate this instant.”

“Oh my dear, dear lady, you are as generous a hostess as The Empress of The Isle of Ude and far more beautifully upholstered!” boomed Jefferson, to a beaming Mavis Humblebucket, his spirits visibly bolstered by the offer of a free breakfast

As Berty Jefferson sat down and began a serious attempt to double his own bodyweight, Bailey returned to cleaning the hall from the night before, wiping down all the tables and sweeping the floor until it was finally all finished. As usual he found a few coins that had fallen under seats during the merrymaking, but long ago it had been decided that whatever he found he could keep, which always made facing the task a little bit easier.

When he had finished his chores, he walked through the hallway, looking up to see the sun streaming through the small round red, green and blue windows above the front door, and strode off in the direction of Old Mistress Nutter’s house.

Just as he got onto the cobbles outside the house, there was a sudden high-pitched cry of “I’ll kill that dog stone dead – I’ll have his guts for blessed garters!” from the kitchen and he was immediately overtaken by Cabbage, in full gallop, and looking as though he was in fear of his very life.

“Oh dear,” he said, shaking his head, “You are a bad dog. What have you been doing this time?”

Cabbage, whose attempt at an innocent face just made him look even guiltier, averted his gaze and settled down into a feeble attempt at a nonchalant walk.

“Well it was nice knowing you old friend – I think she means it this time,” he said, in an earnest voice.

Cabbage took on a startled guilty expression (with overtones of sincere regret) that made it increasingly hard for Bailey to keep a straight face.

As they reached the riverside they heard a sound echoing down the valley,

a sound that Bailey would not have expected for some time to come, for the slow fixed note of the Horn of Denoren was being blown for the second time in as many days. Puzzled, Bailey turned around and set off down towards the quay to see who was coming down the river.

As he arrived he heard one of the old men by the quay talking to someone from the Theatre.

“Well, I wouldn’t have expected them to come around here again after all that upset last time,” murmured the old man.

“Well we can hardly pack up and move at this short notice and besides we’re booked in here for another week yet,” said the Thespian.

“We wouldn’t let you go, not to be pushed out by that lot. It’s been like a breath of fresh air having your village here. I’ve heard it said that you’re even to be made honorary Bimleigh-Heavens by the Mayor before you leave.”

The Theatre dweller looked suitably reassured by this and the two of them turned to look back towards the unnaturally still river and the unexpected new arrivals.

As Bailey looked out away from the quayside he could see that in the very farthest distance there was a black shape drifting towards them, sheathed in mist. It was as though a grey undulating cloud was slowly but steadily heading down the river.

“Aye that’s a Stranger village alright. I ain’t seen one of them for many a long while, I wonder what that’s doing coming round here?” said the old man, to no-one in particular, “I’d better go an’ get the Mayor, we’ll see what he’s got to say about all this.” And he marched off towards the village square and the Town Hall beyond.

The new ship drifted soundlessly towards the quay, eventually slowing to stop adjacent to where The Karno was moored up.

The contrast between the two boats was striking. The Karno was bright and cheerful, full of grass and houses adorned with coloured lamps, flags and curtains, yet this new village was half its size and looked stark, dank and positively dismal.

It was also almost completely covered by a dark metal shell, which made it look like some breed of fat floating beetle, coughing out puffs of dark grey

smoke from a pair of chimneys positioned towards its back end, smoke that hung heavy and motionless in its wake.

The only part of the vessel that was not covered by the riveted metal hide was a wide strip of decking directly at its centre. Now and then along the sides of the boat were barred windows, but the inside was so poorly lit that Bailey could not make out anything but the faintest of movements behind them.

The name, 'Ire-Clad' was engraved in thick florid letters into the hull of the craft.

When the boat came to a halt, a door opened and a single man walked out onto the deck of the new village and raised his hand. He was dressed in a neat black suit, trousers and shoes, and wore a white shirt, covered by a black waistcoat. His hair and the large pupils of his eyes were also black, shining out from his pallid white face like glistening pools of ink. Other than his lack of colour, everything about the man seemed to be fairly normal until Bailey looked at his face, which somehow didn't look quite right.

It looked as though the man on the deck was wearing some kind of ghastly mask. The features of his face looked exaggerated, as though they had been hastily made of rubber, and his dark eyebrows were furrowed as though he were very deep in thought. Then as the man turned his head and smiled at him, the most peculiar thing happened. His face changed to that of a much younger man.

Bailey had never seen anything like it. He was now looking at a middle-aged man's face. The unreal appearance of the skin was still there, but was now slightly less apparent and the features were now finer, as though they had been smoothed out. The rest of the body, and even the hair, had stayed the same, but the face seemed to have melted and changed as though it was made from warm wax and now wore a slight smile as it turned back to speak through the open door from which he had just appeared.

"That will do for now, Archibald, turn off the smoke maker."

The calico coloured smoke instantly stopped flowing from the holes around the sides of the boat and small metal flaps snapped into place to cover them up.

Almost at once, Cabbage began to issue a deep, low growl and Bailey

pulled him back by his collar as one by one the Strangers crept out from the dark and onto the austere centre deck of the eerie vessel.

As they appeared, it quickly became apparent that each one of them was exactly the same in appearance and every one was dressed in the same black attire. It was all beginning to look rather similar to some kind of floating Undertaker's convention.

Standing watching from the quay, Bailey was fascinated to see that that the Strangers' appearance seemed to drastically change each time one of them changed its expression. As one face changed from a smiling young lady to a fretful older woman, another was sliding from the face of a tired old man to that of an angry youngster.

It was at this point that Bailey realised that the appearance of these new visitors seemed to physically change to match their innermost feelings. As they stood and spoke to each other, their conversations were causing all manner of uncanny twitches and transformations, which after a while he found almost hypnotic.

They continued to whisper to each other for a minute or two, until finally the Stranger who had been first out onto the deck raised his voice and addressed the few people standing nervously by the quay. He certainly didn't stand on ceremony.

"We have come to stock up our supplies. We will stay for one night, possibly two."

"Oh you will, will you?" said a voice from behind Bailey. It was the Mayor of Bimleigh-Heavers, the Fine and Very Honourable Mr Frederick Cruickshank (by title if not by reputation), who was puffed up like a pompous fat penguin and dressed in his finest plum robes and gold chain of office.

"I'm not so sure about that after the last time you were here. I thought that I made it most clear that you were not welcome to return here after your last stay."

The face of the leader momentarily flashed into that of a younger man, his eyes glinting with fire and his nostrils flared, but then just as quickly reverted to an older, calmer face. He nodded slightly to acknowledge Cruickshank and smiled wryly as he continued.

"Mayor, it is very good to meet with you again. I bring with me the most

humble and heartfelt greetings from our people. May I be permitted to say that we hope that any..." he paused, searching for the words, all the time rubbing his gnarled white hands together "...misunderstandings that our villages have suffered might at last be laid to rest in the name of mutual understanding and kinship. Good sir Mayor, could I possibly beg you and your gracious townspeople's indulgence for our brief stay in your fine municipality? We would of course show our utmost appreciation."

He turned and gestured to two sneering deckhands who carried forward a small wooden casket, which they threw open on the deck.

Bailey couldn't believe what he saw. Scattered across the deck of the ship were twenty or so small gems and precious stones, which was twenty more than Bailey had ever seen in his entire life.

The Mayor stood staring at the glittering horde of stones and carefully considered the offer for a good five seconds. When he finally managed to speak, he was obviously struggling to retain an air of dignity, made all the harder by his complete inability to stop grinning as he stared at the spilled gems.

"I... We... The people and persons of Bimleigh-Heavers *have* never and *will* never be known for holding grudges, great or small. Let no man, or woman, or indeed small child ever let it be said that we have not shown hospitality to those in need of... hospitality." His voice tailed off.

"Then we thank you, Mr Mayor and hope that this may lead to the beginning of a fruitful partnership between our two peoples," smiled the leader. His smiling face was only betrayed by his coal dark eyes, darting and flickering around the faces of the townsfolk like the tongue of a snake that was just preparing to strike its prey.

One by one the assembled Strangers disembarked and set off in pairs into the unsuspecting town of Bimleigh-Heavers.

Cabbage barked and Bailey looked to see what was bothering him. He was staring at the front of the Stranger ship and in particular at the figurehead, a stone gargoyle, which jutted out from the very front. The thing that had made Cabbage jump was the fact that it was now staring at them both and was hissing like a large and not too friendly tomcat.

"Come on Cabbage, let's go and see Old Mistress Nutter and see what she has to say about all this," he said as they both moved out of the cold shade

of the ship and back into the welcome warmth of the sun.

Spartacus Brink was deeply confused.

He sat in the generously stuffed chair in the Arch-brother's study and stared out of the window, watching as the morning sun burned through the paper-thin clouds and poured a warm pink glow across the snowy mountain peaks. Outside the door to the room he could hear another bout of frenzied whispering which was every so often punctuated by the deathly silence of intent listening. Still he sat, fingers arched, his index fingers pressed against his lips. He stared out across the dawning day, lost in his thoughts.

The trouble was that the more he thought, the more he realized how little he actually knew.

"Start at the start Brink," he murmured slowly, "Where was I going before I came to this place? Why do I feel so desperate to complete my duties even though my mind can not even begin to fathom what they possibly were?"

He desperately tried to remember the reason behind the compelling urge to keep moving, to keep searching. He knew that it was a matter of very grave importance, but he just couldn't quite remember what it was. Or his trade or where he was. In fact, he thought with a wry smile, to be able to remember *anything at all* would be quite nice.

Other than that, everything seemed to be going incredibly well. That is, apart from the obvious involvement of a crack team of complete fruitcakes who hung around dressed in old curtains and insisted on calling him 'Guardian'.

"Ah Guardian, I see that you are rested from your journey. Can I perhaps bring you something to eat or drink?" Taegis gushed, his lack of patience and curiosity finally beating his fear into submission as he crept gingerly into the room.

"Thank you but I've just eaten... something," replied Brink, catching himself as he realised that he *had* just eaten, but couldn't for the life of him think what he had eaten or where it had been.

"You speak English," he pointed at the flinching Taegis, "I can understand every word that you are saying!"

“Guardian?” Taegis replied, looking even more bemused, his eye starting to twitch frantically.

“I’ve just realised that you are English. I only comment on the fact because I was sure that I was in another country. France perhaps or maybe even Italy...” A brief flicker of thought flashed through the mists in his head but then was gone.

“As you say my lord,” said Taegis, now completely convinced of his new master’s madness.

“If I may be so bold sire,” began Tallow, inspecting his own feet and adopting his best grovel, “my Arch Brother and I were wondering when you were thinking of beginning the awesome reign of terror, sire?”

Seeing Brink’s blank expression he nevertheless ploughed on, determined to make himself clearer, “The *smiting*, my lord? The raining of fire and razing of our enemies cities, sire? Or perhaps sire might prefer to take things easy for a day or so before deigning to bring forth terror and merciless death upon our most unworthy adversaries?”

“And if I may be so bold, your magnificence,” continued Taegis, wringing his fat, pink hands over each other “I have heard it said, on very good authority, that the Slide Faces over in Bare Barrow City have said some very unpleasant things about you, sire.” He raised his eyebrows and looked expectantly over at Tallow, who eventually cottoned-on.

“Yes sire, and far be it from me to repeat such... scandalous allegations in front of your divine reverence, but I heard tell that they had even doubted your very existence!”

“And they also apparently feel that the ways of the black Sun would never be a match for their new fangled technology sire. They actually believe that their machinery and logic are their path to salvation my lord!” butted in Taegis, now really starting to get a feel for the subject matter.

“And... and... they are really, quite *eerie* My Lord!” spluttered Tallow, nodding furiously.

Spartacus Brink felt as though, for no apparent reason, he had been handed the roles of judge and jury and thought it best to treat the situation as such. Narrowing his eyes, he placed his arched fingers back against his lips and nodded sagely while hearing the growing list of charges being

brought against the defendants. Once Tallow had finished speaking, he raised his hands for quiet and slowly stood to his feet.

“I have listened to these most grave allegations and I must take this opportunity to thank you for bringing them to my attention”.

The two brothers beamed at each other in self-satisfaction.

“And after fully considering the gravity of these exceedingly serious matters,” he briefly fixed Tallow with a deeply solemn stare “especially the part about them being *eerie*, I have decided that there is only one reasonable conclusion to draw from this whole sorry state of affairs.”

“Yes, milord?” asked the brothers in unison. Expectation hung heavily in the air like a blood-tarnished sword, gripped in the steamy heat of battle and poised to vanquish a last remaining foe.

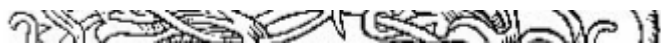
“That the fact that you are here, in the mountains, and well away from all the normal folk is most probably a very, *very* good thing.

“I will bid you gentlemen a hearty good day and a speedy recovery from whatever it is that ails you both.”

With that, Brink turned on his heel and strode across the dusty, oak panelled study, down the stairs, past the gaping mouths of the order of the Black Sun, through the sturdy front gates and out into the abundance of cool fresh mountain air. For during the past few moments, he had suddenly remembered a fragment of something that made him realise he didn’t have another second to waste.

That something was a man called Mister Scot.

Although he was not too sure about anything else, he knew one thing; whatever else he did, he had to find Michael Scot and he had to find him quickly, because time was most surely not on his side.



Bailey walked down the cobbled path and towards the cottage, where Old Mistress Nutter was hanging a selection of washing (all black naturally) on her washing-line to dry in the sun. As she saw him approach, she cackled.

“I didn’t think it would be long afore you returned to consult the muses with me, young Tommy”.

Bailey sighed.

“My name is Bailey - Mistress Nutter - Bailey Humblebucket”

“Are you sure?”

“Well yes - fairly sure,”

“Then you must be making me think of someone else...” her voice trailed off.

“So what can I do for you then, young Tom?”

Bailey pointed over towards the Stranger’s vessel.

“I’ve come to see what you know about these people known as Strangers, Mistress Nutter. It’s just that I had this dream last night and...”

Before he had a chance to finish his sentence, he felt his wrist being gripped in a cold bony hand.

“A dream you say? Often the straightest path to the door of the spirits is through the medium of dreams, my young fellow-me-lad. If you know what to look for that is. It just so happens that you are talking to someone who has a good deal of experience in a great many things, and the telling of dreams is one of the many. Were there any talking pigs at all?”

“No, I don’t think so...”

“Pity - still, come along inside the cottage and you can tell me all about this dream of yours and we’ll see if it reveals anything interesting. Then I will tell you what I know about them *Strangers*.” She spat on the grass as if to get the taste of the word from her mouth.

Bailey sat down and related what had happened in the dream, as best he could remember, to the rapt Mistress Nutter, who remained silent throughout, puffing away on her filthy clay pipe and listening intently. When he had come to the end, she simply lowered the pipe from her mouth and raised her hand for silence.

“Then there is one thing I know, and that is that whoever this young lady is, it is very important for you to find her. I feel that your fates are inextricably linked.”

“So you think that she might actually be real after all?” asked Bailey.

“Have no doubts about that youngster, have no doubts about that at all. The only problem is that we don’t know where she is or where to start looking for her. If I was you, then I’d begin by having a look around the Strangers’ lair before they disappear off again, they’ll take anything not nailed down, so maybe they know more than they’re letting on.”

“Do you think that they might have something to do with all this?”

“Well that’s the thing young master. They have been known for all sorts of funny behaviour in the past, I remember it raining clams one time -that was down to them I swear it! But I have never heard of them ever kidnapping a body. They do get up to some very strange things on account of their inventing though. That’s why we call them Strangers see? Because they are. Very.”

Nutter walked over to the fireplace and muttered something under her breath, upon which a tiny fire spluttered into life, which she tended with a pile of sticks under it was soon roaring away. She shuffled to the water basin, pouring water into an ancient black cast iron kettle and then fixing it in place above the flickering flames.

“Have you seen their faces?” asked Bailey quietly.

“Their faces, oh yes I’ve seen their faces, they only serve to betray their fine words. ‘A honey tongue, a heart of guile’ as Old Mother Wilkman used to say.”

Sensing Bailey’s lack of understanding she clarified her thoughts on the matter.

“They’d promise you the moon on a silver stick if they thought they would profit from it. Yet their faces tell a different tale: their faces tell you what is in their hearts and not just what is on their treacherous minds.” She spat on the floor, now warming to her task of setting the world to rights.

“Yes but surely they weren’t born like that were they? I mean, it’s just not normal is it?” persisted the incredulous Bailey.

“No you’re quite right, young fellow and I can remember a time, many years ago, when they were very nearly as ordinary as you or me. Then no one saw either hide or hair of any of them for almost ten summers. Some

said that they had come up with some new contraption - another said that there had been a huge great explosion. One person said that they were all plotting to turn us all into ducks and harness us up to ride us across the countryside, a-quacking and a-galloping over hill and dale.”

“That sounds a bit far-fetched Mistress Nutter, which fool thought that one up?” he chuckled.

“We won’t go into that. But I might say that it seemed like a perfectly reasonable explanation of events at the time,” Nutter snorted defensively.

“What is clear is that they had been messing about with forces they knew nothing about. They were playing about with things that should be left to those who have a proper respect for them. I have always said that you cannot mix science with magic and I have got a feeling that that is exactly what they were up to on that cursed island of theirs.

She reached over to the kettle which was now starting to spew steam from its ornate curling spout, and proceeded to pour some of the hot water into a old brown teapot, which bore the legend ‘Official Corynation Tea Service: King Tobyn the Unlucky – may his reign be forever less painful’. A picture which accompanied the words showed an elderly man, sporting a crown which was obviously too big for him and bearing an expression of quiet resignation.

“Anyway,” she went on “some infernal device that they had been making did something unexpected and they got stuck with the results. You heard that if you pull a face and the wind changes then you’ll stay like that for the rest of your days?”

Bailey nodded, although he had never really believed that particular old wives tale (following extensive research on a very windy day). Besides which, he didn’t really see what the connection between inventions and wind was supposed to be, but decided that it was far easier just to let the matter drop.

“Well whatever happened,” she carried on “they’ve always been a right devious bunch of rascals so you won’t catch me shedding a brass tear for them.”

Bailey paused for a second or two, and thoughtfully sipped the sweet golden liquid she had poured for him into her least cracked cup.

“So who is this *Outlander* that this Melissa girl wanted me to talk to?” he

said eventually.

“To find that out, I think that we need to consult a higher power than even myself.” Mistress Nutter announced grandly.

Despite a feeling of impending anti-climax and against his own better judgement, Bailey still found himself to be strangely intrigued. He was even more so when she disappeared into her back room for a moment and reappeared proudly holding up a small round object, covered in a dusty green velvet cloth.

Bailey had heard of seers and wise women staring into crystal balls to see the future, but he had never actually seen a crystal ball, let alone stared into one.

“Is it a crystal ball, Mistress Nutter?”

“No. I had one of them but I dropped it and it broke.”

“Oh.”

“And anyway this is much more fun.”

She snatched the cover from the tarnished brass sphere sitting in the palm of her hand. Fine black script surrounded and entirely covered the globe but as Bailey tried to make out what the letters spelled, it was almost as though they seemed to flow into one another. He was almost certain that it was just a trick of the light, but the effect was quite mesmerizing.

Very slowly, the ball began to float up and away from the old woman’s hand. As it came to a stop a couple of inches above her open palm it began to spin, faster and then faster still until it was a blur and as it spun it began to emit a low humming, whining noise.

At this, Cabbage (who had been quite happy curling up by to the fire) shot up and looked around the room, cocking his head to one side and staring at the spinning orb with a look of awestruck fascination.

“Right, let’s see if I can still remember how to do this”, whispered Nutter, deep in thought. As she spoke, she lifted her other hand, and, making a mystical movement with her fingers, spoke some words in a language Bailey did not recognize.

The ball stopped dead and slapped back down into her waiting palm.

“Oh yes - being like that are we? Alright then my pretty, let’s try something more like this...” and as she muttered another strange incantation the ball rose back up and began to spin even faster than before, but this time the sound it made seemed to rise and fall until it sounded like a very softly whistled tune.

Cabbage cocked his head from one side and then to the other, the hairs standing out from his furry chin as he began with a low yodelling sound, deep and mournful, which reverberated around the room.

“Often does that does he?”

“Now and then,”

“Well, prepare to be astounded, young Master,” she cried triumphantly.

As she moved her hands once more, a number of pencil-thin beams of violet light suddenly erupted from a series of crystals embedded around the outside edge of the ball, engulfing it in a shifting blue flame. Slowly, as if building up enough force, the flame undulated and finally gathering itself up, shot out across the room, past the startled Cabbage and exploded out in a cloud of smoke.

Cabbage abruptly stopped singing.

As the smoke cleared, Mistress Nutter chuckled, obviously pleased with her handiwork. Hanging, floating in the air and slowly turning above the flagged stone floor, was the sapphire blue, translucent figure of none other than a certain Spartacus Brink.

“That is who you are looking for. There is your Outlander.”

Mistress Nutter walked over to a sturdy oak cabinet and delivered two hefty thumps to the side. At once, a slim velvet-lined drawer slid out from the side of the cabinet and the bottom fell away, depositing a small and ornately carved wooden box into her waiting hand.

She moved back to the table and, upturning the box, cast a number of rough slate tablets across the table, each one intricately carved with a single strange symbol.

“You see these, young man?” she whispered, her eyes now wide-open to gaze in wonder at the precious collection of stones scattered across the tablecloth, each one polished by years of gnarled, expectant fingers.

“These Runes are the oldest in the whole world. Their very being is a mystery. My Great-grand mammy once told me, and I have no reason to doubt her, that these stones come from a place far, far away. It is hard to believe, I know, but these stones lying in front of us are from another world, *The Sometime Place* she called it, which she reckoned was a land laying far beyond this one. It was a land where magic was created and was ever used for the good of all others...”

Bailey looked at the pebbles, but found it distinctly hard to be impressed while traces of sulphurous smoke from the last dazzling display still lay coiled inside his inner nostrils.

“But how will I know where to find him?” said Bailey, still staring at the ghostly floating figure as it slowly faded back into the darkness.

“I wouldn’t worry about that, Mr Humble-Buckethead,” replied Nutter mysteriously “for I do believe that very soon your questions will be answered in full”.

As she spoke, she moved the Rune stones into pairs around the table and furrowed her eyebrows as she struggled to read the story they told.

“Your two fates are mystically entwined and I can see that you are both destined for a great and arduous journey ahead. All you must do is to stay in Bimleigh until the Outlander arrives, but will you promise me one thing, young man?” she drew towards Bailey and looked earnestly into his eyes.

“Yes of course.” he said, but upon speaking the words he felt a cold shiver slide up his back as he suddenly sensed the fear hidden in her voice.

“Once you have met this man you must promise me that you will leave without delay. If you do not leave immediately, then a great darkness and misfortune will fall upon Bimleigh and upon all those who live here.

“Oh and don’t forget to take a coat because there’s rain coming”.

Chapter 4



Brink walked down the steep, stony track leading away from the imposing facade of Thane Monastery.

The sun sat high in the sky and as he filled his lungs with the crisp cool mountain air, he made his way over the white cobbles, polished smooth by centuries of wear. The cobbles led the way between the high walled rock-faces and stretched off into the distance; small, round and uniform, like eggs waiting to be sliced open by a silver spoon.

As he walked, Spartacus spoke aloud to himself, partly to keep himself company and partly because everything just seemed so confusing that whenever he tried to work through anything inside his head, he couldn't concentrate on one thing for long enough to come to any reasonable conclusion. He knew one thing for sure, and that was that whatever had happened to him had left him more than a little groggy, and not at all himself.

"Thieves - that must be the answer. I must have been robbed and cracked over the head by something, probably a good thick staff. They had left me for dead when some local monks came across me and took me to their monastery, which is where I awoke. They obviously mistook me for someone influential. Not altogether surprising, given my noble disposition. I suppose that I should be flattered that they thought I was their... what was it again? *Guardian* - It is probably quite a senior position."

He checked his pockets, pulling out first a finely carved wooden cross and then all manner of strange bits and pieces; a length of knotted string here, a small crystal container filled with smoke there, eventually retrieving a small polished brass ball which reflected his face and shone brightly in the sunlight.

"Well it might be easier to calculate whether anything has been taken if I could remember actually owning any of these bizarre trinkets in the first place," he sighed.

As he walked down the winding stone path, it began to spread out and the steep mountain walls gradually fell away until Brink found himself walking out into exposed rugged moorland. He filled his chest with a good deep

breath of fresh air and the sweet smells of wood-smoke, pine trees and fragrant wild flowers flooded his senses and made his spirits soar up into the bright morning Sun.

He looked back, and could just see the imposing walls of Thane in the far distance as they finally disappeared from view. After walking for a little while longer, he came to the brow of a hill and a crossroads, and as he approached, a breathtaking sight of the surrounding countryside swung into view and unfolded out in front of him like a vast rolling green carpet.

Far in the distance Brink saw a vast snaking river, rising and falling through the central plains and valleys and finally leading out to the azure blue sea in the West. Just away from the shore lay a small archipelago of islands, jutting up high from the water in grassy stone columns, flocks of birds lazily circling their heights.

To the East, small farming settlements dotted the hills, trails of smoke drifting serenely from their tiny chimneys, their crops laid out in fields of burnished gold and bronze and set in staggered terraces, stepping down the slopes like giant carpeted stairs.

Along the river to the North lay a number of larger towns, some modest, but some that sprawled up the sides of the verdant valleys, lying back and basking in the shimmering heat of the mid-morning sun.

High upon a hill, many miles away, lay a collection of tall standing stones, and it was this sight that once more prompted a torrent of memories to rush and collide through Brink's head.

"The meeting with my Master on the Tor and then the stormy voyage to Flanders - thank the Lord that at last my memories are beginning to return."

More fragments of recollections flashed through Brink's mind, but any relief that he might have initially felt turned very quickly into confusion.

"Which still leaves me with the small matter of where I currently find myself, as this doesn't look like anywhere I can recollect being before. And more to the point, to which corner of the earth has the devious Mr. Scot flown away in my absence?"

Before he had time to ponder this thought a large, and not entirely clean, turnip whistled through the air and struck him fully on the back of the head with a smack. Caught completely by surprise, Brink had no time to recover

his balance and before he knew what had happened, was tumbling face first towards a shallow ditch that ran besides the path.

“A goodly shot, my liege!” cried a voice from behind. This was accompanied by a peal of laughter and before he had time to recover his senses, he felt himself being helped up from the soft earth and dusted down.

He shook himself free of the hands supporting him and feeling his anger quickly rise to the occasion he spun around to face his attackers.

“What is the meaning of this!” cried Brink, his fists already clenched and the blood rushing through his veins in readiness for combat.

The two young men who faced him were now covering their mouths with their hands and giggling uncontrollably. Tears ran in dirty rivulets down their unwashed faces, and their shoulders shook in time with their hoots of unbridled amusement.

At last one of the assailants, a jolly round fellow resplendent in a purple waistcoat and matching trousers and his bright red face topped with a mop of unruly blonde curls, calmed himself down enough to speak.

“This means that you are now Lord Tommy Turnip-head!” he spluttered, before collapsing to his knees completely overcome by mirth.

“Niptur Niptur Niptur” gasped the other, falling backwards and sitting down hard on the grass with a thud, the force of which only served to send him into further fits of hysterical laughter.

Brink looked at them, and shook his head slowly from side to side.

After a moment or three, the younger of the two, badly bearded and dressed in a patchwork of poorly sewn blue cotton jerkin and trousers, brushed back his long dark hair and blinked at Brink, as though examining him in great detail.

Fixing Brink with his most solemn stare he spoke in a hoarse whisper.

“It were the Three-toed Fire Daemons what made him do it sire. He’s been having an uncommon amount of trouble with ‘em lately.”

“That and the Cider,” countered his friend.

“And the Cider,” he agreed, nodding his head gravely, before breaking out

into an enormously wide grin, “Detrimental to sanity that stuff that your brother makes. Or sanitation for deities, I forget which.”

He got back to his feet and hastily wiped his hand on his jacket before thrusting it out into Brink’s general direction.

“I’m Bob and this is my best friend’s sister’s half-brother’s Uncle’s father’s dog’s nephew – once removed - Mitch.”

Mitch stood up and walked across to Brink, also holding out his hand and swaying very gently from side to side.

Brink cautiously put his hand out and had it vigorously shaken by each of them in turn.

“And if what remains of my memory still serves me, I believe that I am Spartacus Brink. It is an unexpected pleasure to meet you gentlemen, but tell me, do you greet all fellow travellers in such a hostile manner?” he asked.

“Only those who are unarmed.” replied Mitch.

“And only then when we are sufficiently far away to effect a speedy retreat if things should turn nasty,” added Bob.

“Like that butcher from County-Stanethorpe.”

They both looked at each other and simultaneously beamed.

“You know Bob, I think we’ve still got his trousers in the back of the hay wain,” said Mitch thoughtfully.

“Then together we shall fashion the finest trouser flag in the land and hang it off the back of the cart and then wherever we shall travel, children will turn to their parents and say *Mummy why have those two men got a pair of pants on a stick?*”

This caused great hilarity between the pair, which lead in turn to another celebratory chorus of ‘Niptur Niptur’ (this time in unison) and some increasingly brutal back slapping which seemed to stop abruptly and for no apparent reason.

“So where are you walking out to on this lovely bright morning?” asked Bob rubbing one of his slapped shoulders and wincing slightly.

"I'm trying to find my way back to Ghent, I have important business there which I am afraid cannot wait. Would either of you gentlemen know which road might be the best to take to get there in the quickest time?"

The two looked at each other blankly.

"Ghent you say?" said Bob at last "Not Gantley or Grint perhaps?"

"Or Greater-Smaller-Glebe?" piped up Mitch unhelpfully.

"No, I am positive it was Ghent. Tell me, and I know that this may sound a strange request, but... what country are we in?" replied Brink uncertainly.

"Methinks that Mr. Spartacus has been savouring a spot of the old tanglefoot himself if he has forgotten that he lives in Ffinche-Bobbys," laughed Bob to a bemused Mitch.

"Well never you mind Sparty me old chum. We'll look after you. You come along with us to Fairport if you like. It's a couple of day's journey away but I'm sure Croaky won't mind another passenger in the cart. As long as you keep your hands off my prize turnips!" snorted Mitch.

"Croaky?" prompted Brink.

"Croaky, my friend, is that finest of all beasts sat down over there, hooked up to the hay barrow. We call him Croaky 'cos..."

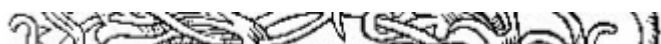
"He's a little horse?" interrupted Brink wearily.

"No," continued Mitch, "we call him Croaky on account of the noise that he makes when he's walking."

"But wouldn't that be *Creaky*?" persisted Brink

"It's more of a croak really."

"Fine," sighed Brink deeply. He had a feeling that he was in for a very long trip indeed.



Melissa opened her eyes and looked around her cabin. Above her, the arched ceiling housed a number of dark wooden beams, each one inlaid with a round shiny brass porthole.

She sat up, blinking, the dusty light from the glinting portholes flooded into the room, illuminating its sparse contents.

In the far corner lay a small washbasin, a porcelain jug of water and a small pile of clean white towels.

Around the sides of the cabin, instead of windows were a number of fading sepia photographs of people dressed in what looked like their finest clothes but with their eyes tightly shut. Melissa had never seen a photograph before, and dismissed them at first sight as tiny colourless paintings. Between the pictures hung a variety of plates, featuring a variety of badly painted fruit and small animals whose eyes had been made too large in an unsuccessful attempt to make them look endearing.

She grimaced.

“They certainly have some strange ideas about what constitutes art around here,” she muttered disdainfully.

The only other remaining objects in the room were the bunk that she sat on, fitted with a fussy patchwork quilt and covered by a bone-white lace sheet, and a single solitary pine rocking chair, also covered with the same statutory lacework.

She saw the door at the far end of the room, and, swinging her legs off the bed, walked over to try the handle.

“Yes, I thought it might be locked,” she murmured, rattling the brass handle one last time just to make sure.

Suddenly, her eyes flashed with anger and making two fists, she pummelled the door, banging the solid wood with all her might.

“Hello!” she shouted, thumping the flat of her hand against the door panel.

“Where are you taking me? You have no right to keep me here against my will! When my parents find me, they will have you all locked up for what you’ve done and that’ll soon wipe the smiles from your stupid smug faces!”

Startled by the rattle of a key in the lock, Melissa stepped quickly backwards and just about managed to recover her poise to stare defiantly back at the tall black suited Stranger as he stooped awkwardly to enter the room. It was the first time that she had had the opportunity to take a close

look at one of them since her capture and she looked him up and down, from his black tricorn hat to his white stockings and highly polished buckled shoes.

When he was inside the room, the Stranger leered ingratiatingly at Melissa, clasping his hands together and wringing them as though washing them in some invisible dish. As he stood there, Melissa began to feel more than a little afraid, although she tried her best to hide the fact from her sneering captor.

“So there we are, all awake at last. This is all very exciting my dear, is it not? I will wager that this is the first time that you have had the opportunity to enjoy the splendour and elegance of one of the *family’s* vessels. You must enjoy the journey as our honoured guest my little one, for it will not be long before we reach the Bare Barrow docks and, for you at least, our journey’s end.” As he spoke, his face changed between that of a kindly old man to that of a slightly younger and markedly more devious gentleman.

“*Guest?* Ha! I suppose you put woolsacks over all of your guest’s heads while they are out collecting wood for their parents, do you? I suppose you bind and gag everyone you invite aboard?”

“It is not usually necessary, I agree.” replied the Stranger wearing a thin white smile.

“Well I don’t know what your little plans were but I demand that you set me free immediately. I will not be made to be stop in this horrible little room for another moment longer!” shouted Melissa, her fear now swiftly turning to anger.

The Stranger roared with laughter.

“I am afraid, little girl, that you have little choice in the matter. Now if that is all...” he turned to go.

“That’s what you think, gravedigger!” shouted Melissa defiantly and shut her eyes, holding her palms to her temples.

The Stranger now had a mock inquisitive look on his face.

“I am also sorry to have to be the bearer of such joyless tidings my dear, but you will come to see that your little... *gift* is of no use against our rather more advanced intelligence. You would doubtless have more luck

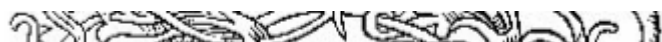
practising your limited powers on some dim-witted pig farmer or milkmaid, but I am very much afraid that your little parlour tricks are next to worthless in our presence.

“I shall be back to look in on you later, little girl.”

He turned, and went to walk through the door but as he did so, the water jug in the corner suddenly rose up and hung for a second as though thinking about what to do next. As Melissa’s eyes snapped back open, the jug hurtled down the length of the cabin, spinning as it flew. In less than a second it found its target, striking the unsuspecting Stranger squarely on the back of the head and sending him careering through the doorway, head-first into the solid oak panels beyond.

He collided with the wall with a dull thud and slid slowly downwards as his three cornered hat rolled off down his back and clattered to the dusty floor below.

Quick as a flash, Melissa stepped over the prone body of the unconscious Stranger and slipped into the shadows which lined the dark, gas lit corridor beyond.



“Arch Brother! Arch Brother come quickly! There is something happening in The Whispering Chambers!” cried the exhausted monk as he burst unceremoniously through the heavy study doors.

“No, no, no, I’m sorry, I really am most dreadfully sorry,” Taegis sighed. He rose up from his desk and strode around to meet the wide-eyed and gasping cleric.

“But in my eyes,” he continued, his eyebrows raised haughtily “a brother who can not even be bothered to knock at the door of the highest office in the land before entering is a brother who does not...?”

“Brother Taegis - no - I beg of you!” exclaimed Tallow fearfully.

“Who does not what, my brother Tallow?” continued Taegis, wearily, now with a firm grip of the trousers and hood of his increasingly concerned victim.

“Deserve to eat... for a week?” winced Tallow hopefully.

“Mmm. No, I think you will find that on reflection, holy brother, the correct answer is that *he does not deserve to draw breath.*”

And with that he ran with the monk, who was now frantically shaking his head and mumbling incoherently; negotiated him through the open stained glass windows and deposited him over the small ornate balcony from where he plummeted with a brief shriek into the waiting courtyard far below.

“That has really quite cheered me up you know!” beamed Taegis, surveying the rather messy scene below.

“What was his name?”

“Timothy my Lord, Brother Timothy,” sighed Tallow.

“Brother Timothy would do well to leave flight to the birds in future. He seems not yet to have mastered its finer intricacies,” he smiled at his own joke and then after taking a last glance at the courtyard, spun around with a graceless flourish.

“Come Brother Tallow. Let us see what the late brother was so excited about.”

They walked briskly through the dusty gloom brushing past the monks who flanked the labyrinthine corridors, their heads bowed in solemn reverence and more than a touch of fear. Taking lit torches from the walls they strode further and further into the uttermost depths of the mountain, through the packed storerooms and kitchens and then back up the winding stone staircase, which led to the most hallowed space in the whole monastery – the Whispering Chambers of Thane.

As they reached the door, two monks were desperately trying to hold it shut, whilst a further monk was kneeling in front of the doors and was feverishly reciting words of faith and redemption whilst clutching his carved black Sun to his heaving chest.

“Move aside you cretin!” Taegis bellowed impatiently and lowered his torch to light the kneeling monk’s hood. Suddenly realising that he was on fire, the monk stood bolt upright and set off shrieking down the staircase and into a kitchen where he found a large copper sink into which he gratefully plunged his scorched head with a loud hiss.

As the two remaining guards hurriedly moved aside, the doors that they had been holding flew apart and the scene of chaos and devastation inside was quite unlike anything that any of the assembled group had ever seen in their lives.

It was as though a miniature thunderstorm had gathered in the hall and at its very centre the shredded and splintered remains of the Thought Weaver were being whipped up into the maelstrom and spat out in all directions across the room.

Great grey and purple clouds loomed menacingly across the entire stained glass ceiling, but they were unnaturally still and so lent a stark contrast to the frenzied winds below. Periodically, forks of silver lightning jerked out from the cloud's centre and smashed or sliced through whatever they hit, whether stone, wood or flesh. One by one the huge tapestries that lined the chamber fell in burning tatters from the walls, and the stench of damp electricity hung heavily in the smoke encrusted air.

Taegis quickly pulled the doors back shut, and for the sake of the assembled onlookers fixed an expression on his face that was designed to convey an air of dispassionate authority. In reality it looked more like a schoolboy who had just been caught stealing, had badly wet himself and was just on the verge of tears.

Then, just as the storm within reached a terrifying crescendo with a final terrifying crack of thunder and an enormous flash of light that lined the entire doorframe, the cacophony of sound from the Chambers was gone. It was replaced by nothing more than an eerie stony silence.

Taegis turned around and opened the doors by a fraction and opened his bloated eyelid to the darkness, desperately searched the room for signs of the storm. To his relief it seemed to have completely vanished and all that was left in its place was a smoking patch of floor, which was presumably the place where the last and biggest bolt of lightning had finally struck the ground.

His bulk still safely hidden behind the doors, Taegis could make out some kind of movement in the smoky twilight; in fact it seemed that where the smoke rose from the floor, the flagstones were falling away. As they tumbled downwards into the oblong pit that was formed, he could see a series of stone steps raise up to fashion a staircase and a dim hidden yellow light suddenly snapped on illuminating each step. Next a long, lolloping

tongue of ruby red material shot upwards from the depths of the staircase and collapsed, settling across the steps to form a deep crimson carpet.

Somewhere deep inside a door creaked open and then slammed shut.

A figure slowly started to emerge upwards, dressed in a long red cape, his head covered in a tangled mane of long grey hair, and as he turned to face the door Taegis could see a glimpse of a matching beard.

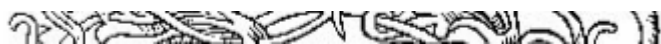
As soon as the stranger had stepped from the staircase, the carpet shot back, as though pulled by unseen hands and four flagstones appeared from the sides of the entrance, slowly sliding together until the entrance was once again sealed.

Looking up, the stranger began walking towards the doors. Upon reaching them he smiled at the quivering Taegis and a plump white maggot twitched and fell from his beard, rolling as it landed silently on the dusty floor below.

His dress and manner were nothing too out of the ordinary, but it was his eyes that Taegis was inexorably drawn to. His eyes were completely devoid of white, like two jet-black marbles or pools of oil that twinkled and shone in the strands of torchlight that escaped from the crack in the door.

As the newcomer approached them, the doors slipped from Taegis' grasp and groaned open, forcing him and the others assembled around to draw backwards against the wall, united into one flinching heap.

"And what can I do for you my fine gentlemen?" he smiled at last.



Bailey wished Mistress Nutter a polite good day, and pulling the creaky, lichen-splattered door shut behind him, stepped back out into the glare of the afternoon sun.

They had soon reached the quayside and the Stranger vessel, and this time the figurehead seemed to be asleep, so they kept quiet and hurried quickly past it, Cabbage dropping his head and minutely sniffing the ground in a determined effort not to notice anything that might betray his cowardice.

As they passed the staircase stretched over the side of the enormous black beetle, Bailey heard a commotion that seemed to be coming from somewhere inside.

“LET - ME - GO!” shrieked a voice from inside the dark doorway. This was followed by a clattering sound, as though a pail of water had been kicked over, and all of a sudden a Stranger woman burst backwards through the doorway, rolled across the open deck and fell with a scream and a splash into the water by the side of the quay.

As she clambered back onto the quayside, the dripping Stranger’s face slid from that of a frightened child into one more like a furious old lady. As a small frog dropped from her hair and hopped briskly away, she rolled up her sleeves, walked back up the staircase and marched back through the darkened doorway.

The commotion stopped abruptly leaving Bailey and Cabbage, his ears and eyebrows now fully raised, alone on the deserted path.

“I’m going to get to the bottom of this right now,” muttered Bailey and before he had time to think of the consequences, he found himself walking up the steps and onto the deck. Just as he reached the top, two Strangers appeared, one from each of the open doorways to either side of him.

“It would seem that we have an uninvited guest Dickens,” said the taller of the two.

“I will escort him off-town at once Mr. Claybourne,” replied his smaller, rather weasel-faced colleague, who then turned to Bailey and glared.

“What are you doing aboard our town deck, boy? Did you think you might sneak aboard and see what you could steal? Speak up laddie!”

“I heard shouting.” was all that Bailey could think of to say. His courage was quickly deserting him and it was now all that he could do to stop himself fleeing.

“We had a small incident below decks with... a chicken.” replied Claybourne hastily, sneering at his colleague, “We thank you for your concern but it is really nothing that should trouble your little head.”

“It didn’t sound much like chickens,” continued Bailey. He tried to take a glimpse through the door but the two Strangers slid together and blocked his view. Just then, an angry voice behind him made him jump.

“Now then Mr Humblebucket, I hope that you are not giving a bad impression of our little town to our most honoured guests. I’ll have you

know that unwelcome trespassing on other people's property is a most grave and serious offence."

Bailey turned around to see Mayor Cruickshank, dressed in his full robes and regalia, standing by the side of the quay. He did not look entirely pleased with the situation.

"It really is no trouble Mr Mayor, I am sure that the child simply wanted to satisfy its *curiosity*. There seems to be no real harm done," offered Claybourne as he approached the Mayor, rubbing his pale palms together as he spoke.

Just as Bailey was gathering his wits together to speak up in his own defence, the other Stranger swung around and he felt the firm edge of a walking cane strike the backs of his knees, sending him stumbling backwards until he landed on the floor with a bump. The Stranger gave him a curt scornful apology and tugged him back to his feet, his fingers fumbling around Bailey's jacket pockets as he did so.

"Well that's very gracious of you, Mr Claybourne," continued Cruickshank, seemingly oblivious to anything but his own pompous rhetoric, "but I'll trouble Mr Humblebucket for an explanation as to how he found himself on board your town without an invitation?" he looked quizzically at Bailey as he spoke.

Bailey felt himself start to go a deep crimson red and to his great surprise he suddenly found himself speaking.

"Well I saw a girl in my dream but I'm sure that she is real. She said that she had been kidnapped and when I heard someone shouting I was sure that I heard her voice..." His voice trailed off as he realised just how ridiculous it all sounded. All that he wanted right at this instant was for the deck to open up so that he could escape their piercing gaze.

"It would seem that our *little* friend has a *big* imagination," sneered Claybourne, stroking his crooked bone walking cane.

"If I live to be one hundred, I doubt that I will ever hear a more pathetic excuse in my life. Get yourself off there this instant - and do not think that I won't be having words with your mother!" shouted the Mayor, waving his fat sausage fingers and shaking his red face from side to side.

Bailey set off towards the steps leading back down to the Quay and had just reached the rim of the wooden walkway when something briefly

hooked itself around his foot. Before he had time to steady himself his foot slipped and the other foot, unprepared to help in any practical way, shot forward, leaving him airborne and flailing headfirst onto the imposing frame of Mr Frederick Cruickshank, who was sadly lacking in the agility necessary to avoid him.

As Bailey and the Mayor landed in an unceremonious heap on the quayside, Cabbage (who it must be said was never slow in seizing an opportunity) gave up his role of an interested onlooker, barked playfully and launched himself headlong into the fray.

In the ensuing commotion, Mr Frederick Cruickshank's braces snapped and his trousers promptly obeyed the laws of gravity and plummeted to the floor. Cabbage, having succeeded in knocking the remaining wind from Bailey's frame then proceeded to slap a length of tripe-like tongue across the Mayor's indignant face when, without warning, a handful of glittering stones tumbled from Bailey's upturned pocket and scattered themselves conspicuously across the white stone path.

At this particular point in time Mayor Cruickshank was really not the happiest pig in the sty. By the time he had picked himself up from the path and recovered his trousers for the third and final time, his face was the brightest purple Bailey believed he had ever seen. Even brighter in fact than a particularly hideous jumper that his grandma had knitted him for the previous winter's solstice.

"I have never been so offended in my entire life!" he exclaimed in an explosion of angry spit.

"And what is this? Is the boy a thief as well as a pugilist?" he cried spotting the stones glinting in the sunlight by Bailey's side.

Bailey looked down and saw the jewels, their flat polished sides flashing blues, greens and reds in the sunlight and painting dapples onto their stark stone surroundings. He stared in disbelief at the mysterious horde.

"But they're not mine!" he shouted, flinching away from them as though they were tiny sparkling droplets of poison.

"Which is precisely the problem my dear boy," intercepted Claybourne, his face slowly sliding into the grave countenance of a judge passing the death sentence, an image that was further enhanced by his black tricorne hat and tumbling white locks.

Suddenly, and to Bailey's eternal relief, there came a defiant shout from behind them which made even Cabbage jump and which woke the figurehead from the Stranger's vessel, which began hissing and spitting like some mortally offended tabby.

"Nonsense!" roared Mistress Nutter vehemently, "I know the youngster and he may be many things but he's no thief."

"Then, madam, how might you explain the presence of these stolen jewels that line his pockets? Did he grow them from seeds? Or does pocket money take the form of treasure these days in Bimleigh Town, if so then I heartily wish that I could be young once again?"

"Don't be so blooming silly, Freddie Cruickshank. You know that isn't the truth, and mind that you don't take that tone with me or I'll put you over my knee just like when I caught you scrumping apples from my back garden all those years ago."

The Mayor seemed suddenly deflated by this threat and cleared his throat whilst concentrating overly hard on fixing his ruptured braces.

"And what light, pray tell, could you possibly throw on this subject old *woman*?" asked Claybourne's assistant patronisingly.

Old Mother Nutter glared boldly up at the Stranger.

"Well I should have thought that you'd have known seeing as you're the one who put them there in the first place."

The Stranger laughed humourlessly but was silenced by Nutter's unrelenting stare and flashed a worried look at Claybourne, who then spoke.

"In the spirit of cordiality, we shall take no further action against the little thief. We leave that to your good self, Mr Mayor. Our only humble wish is that our precious jewel-stones are returned to us and that we are again left in peace to lead our simple lives."

"Of course, of course," bumbled Cruickshank as he scrabbled around on the path picking up the fallen jewels and dropping them into the open hand of the assistant, who looked far from pleased at the outcome of events.

Then the Mayor turned to Bailey and hissed in a low whisper, "Do you hear that boy? You have been lucky this time, but don't you worry, I'll be

telling your poor mother of this whole sorry tale and let her deal with you. And I'll thank you not to make any more of your little *magpie* visits down to the quay - otherwise the only key you'll see will be the one that's already been thrown away when Mr Pike the gaoler has safely locked you up!"

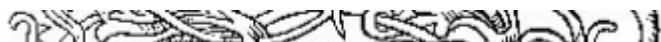
Bailey was becoming increasingly angry at such unjust treatment, especially by his own Mayor and had a sudden rush of blood to the head.

"If the key was thrown away then how would I see it? Anyway I wouldn't want to come down here again. You can keep your stupid gems and your creepy old boat and your pretend chickens. I won't be sorry if I never see any of them ever again!" And with that he ran off up into the town with Cabbage trotting loyally behind, leaving an astonished crowd of onlookers in his wake.

"No good will ever come of that little boy Mr Mayor – you mark my words," mused Claybourne, apparently thinking out loud, "he is quite untrustworthy. I do not suppose that he comes from the mountains of Thane by any chance?"

"Not as far as I know Mr Claybourne, not as far as I know. Although I do have a feeling that without a father's guiding hand I will have to keep a closer eye on him in future."

Mistress Nutter spat on the ground, turned on her heels and strode back down the lane muttering furious profanities until she reached her front door, which she marched through and then slammed shut in disgust.



Mitch was in full flow as they were buffeted along on the hay cart; thrashing and swaying from side to side as it slowly meandered down the steep cobbled path.

"So I said to him, I said, 'That joke was historically funny' and he says 'Don't you mean *hysterically*' and I said..."

"No I meant historically - 'cos it's as old as the hills!" finished Bob.

They both looked expectantly at Brink, their eyebrows raised and their hands outstretched as though waiting for wild applause (or a giggle at the very least).

"So which town do we come to first along this way?" sighed Brink.

“That would be Tiltton-Craddock, my too-sober friend,” replied Mitch, smiling.

“You can see it from here. Look over there to the North West - it’s the big grey tower through those trees.”

Bob stretched his arm out and pointed to the left, across the front of the barrow. The horse stopped and looked around.

“Not you, you fool! You know what it looks like, you only went there last week!” laughed Mitch. Without a sound Croaky lurched back off into his best swaggering saunter.

Brink looked across the ridge of hills and saw a tower sprouting up in the near distance. It was a most peculiar building. It almost looked as though a giant had picked up a couple of streets and used all the houses as building blocks. The outside was roughly cylindrical but here and there chunks of slates or roof thatch jutted out as though to define where one house stopped and another started.

All around the tower were windows of all shapes and sizes, smaller at the bottom and then larger as they climbed towards the top. There were even what looked like steps running between and around some of the outside parts of the structure and the odd chimney, exposed from the drab brick walls and belching out thin trails of smoke, which rose up until they fed into the clouds that billowed above.

The tower was topped off by a large square stone building and covered by a series of staggered roofs, pierced at their peak by an imposing tiled spire, which was itself crowned by a large gold weather vane, rising upwards to spear the clouds that congregated around it.

Every now and then, a tiny window would open and something or other would be cast out into the air, causing flocks of barely perceptible birds to gather and swoop, looking for a tasty morsel to eat.

“So that tower lies in Tiltton does it? It must be quite some place when it houses such a fine building as that,”

“Well now there’s the thing,” said Bob with a chuckle, “That tower you can see actually *is* Tiltton Craddock. And what’s more it’s got everything a self-respecting city could wish for. It’s got shops, stables and even a Cathedral, perched right up there on the top. Look Mister Brink, if you

look closely you can make out the pretty stained glass windows shining in the sunshine from here.”

Right enough, when Brink narrowed his eyes he found that he could just see the coloured glint of red and yellow from the large arched windows at the summit.

“But you cannot have a whole city within a tower. Where would you grow things, keep animals, throw your waste? It must take a mammoth effort to take things to the top, surely?”

“Don’t you worry, all will become as clear as a fresh pint of Black Bear, Sparty me old chum,” chuckled Mitch, “Speaking of which...”

Mitch thrust his hand beneath the layers of hay and retrieved a large brown demijohn, stopped with a fat brown cork. He held it between his teeth and with a well-practiced flick of the jar and a loud ‘pop’ it came away.

While they gently furrowed and lurched and creaked through the countryside, the ale was passed around, and as it was, Mitch and Bob each took turns in steering the horse. As they dropped slowly down from the rocky mountain road to the grassy lowlands, they passed babbling brooks, fields of corn and barley swaying in the mid-afternoon sun and at last descended into the refreshing cool of the woods.

A canopy of boughs let brief bursts of sunlight through, which illuminated a patchwork quilt of shimmering dappled chestnut as it struck the horse’s sturdy back.

Soon they reached a secluded clearing in the woods where a fast-moving ford lay. It was no trouble for such a large healthy horse, and as they passed through it, Mitch and Bob trailed their hot bare feet in the ice-cold water.

“That’ll kill a few fish eh, Bob old lad?”

“Aye, we should have brought a net to catch ‘em as they all float to the surface!” chortled Bob splashing Brink with his foot.

Spartacus smirked and lay back in the hay. He could not remember the last time that he had slept and the beer colluded with the sun to make him ever drowsier with each passing step. Before the cart had emerged from the other side of the stream he was soundly asleep.

Before long the merry band was winding back up into the bright sunshine on a newly cobbled road that led over the remaining hills between them and the city. As they rode along, Bob and Mitch amused themselves by alternatively thinking up amusing names for parts of their anatomy and trying to drop acorns into Brink's sleeping mouth, both of which caused them great hilarity.

By the late afternoon the cart drew up to the foot of the City of Tiltton-Craddock and shuddered to a stop. As Brink awoke, he realised that he had been asleep and opened his eyes. He looked up, yawning, and swiftly came to the conclusion that he was staring directly up the side of the biggest tower that he had ever seen in the whole of his life. His mouth dropped open as he gazed, awestruck at the enormity of the structure towering high above.

He sat up and looked around. At close quarters, the tower was far bigger than it had seemed the first time he had seen it and lay surrounded by a gently sloping valley, which was entirely carpeted in exquisitely tiny purple lavender flowers. The smell would have been quite exquisite had it not been for the tons and tons of animal dung and rotting vegetation which covered the whole of the bottom of the tower, and in fact much of the immediate vicinity.

Bob and Mitch were standing around to the edge of a ditch that surrounded the tower and were shouting up towards a window far above, just to one side of what looked to be a monumental wooden drawbridge.

"Hey! Stan! Wake up old mate - we want to come in!" shouted Mitch, his hands cupped around his mouth.

"I'll bet you a flagon of Forby that I can wake him from his slumbers..." said Bob, smiling slyly.

Without further ado, Bob reached into his pocket and retrieved a small green apple, which he rubbed quickly against the side of his trousers and then launched up and into the heavens with the practiced ease of a true professional. The apple whistled through the air in a perfect semicircle and disappeared through the open window first time, landing somewhere within with a muffled wooden clunk.

A brief cry followed, and a little old man poked his angry face out, rubbing his nose frantically.

“Who did that? I demand to know right now! You could have had my eye out with that, you young scallywags! I’ll send you to Court for it, just you see if I don’t!”

Brink looked back at the solemn pair and caught them both pointing their fingers towards him.

“I thought it might be you. Your eyes are squinty like a pig,” and with that he slammed the little window shut.

Bob and Mitch were both shaking violently and had tears of laughter running down their faces, but little did either know that the tables were about to be dramatically turned.

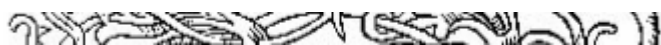
Without any warning a window squeaked open high above them and with a brief shout of *‘Mine-out-below!’* a shower of the foulest smelling muck to ever bless the skies was launched into the air high above their heads. As it transpired, the one and only thing that the warning actually accomplished was to make them look upwards, so that they both took the full force of the blast in their upturned, still smiling faces.

The sight of this rather unexpected gift entirely enveloping the pair from head to foot in stinking green effluent was simply too much for Brink to bear, and he laughed out loud as they slowly turned to face each other and quietly wiped the fresh steaming muck from their open eyes and mouths.

Before anyone had time to comment on the situation, the drawbridge juddered and began its slow ponderous descent towards the cobbled track that wound its way from the tower, and as it fell Spartacus climbed up the front of the cart, dropped onto the seat and took up the reins of the horse. He trotted the cart over to the bridge and the two climbed dolefully into the back.

“Can you smell something?” asked Brink.

For the first time since they had met him, neither Mitch nor Bob had anything to say.



Inside the tower it really was another world. The space inside was split into a labyrinth of winding cobbled *streets*, each containing houses, shops and numerous wooden walkways that connected storerooms and attic flats

in a chaotic spider's web of activity. Sunlight flooded in from all sides through the hundreds of tiny round windows that punctuated the curved outer wall of the tower, and further apart were a number of high wooden hatches, each with a set of broad painted shutters that were thrown wide open to let in the daylight.

The inside of the tower was so spacious that it was impossible to see to the other side, but from the stone courtyard Brink could see a number of stairwells, like a set of inner shafts which seemed as though they might allow movement to the upper reaches of the building. In addition to these was a much wider cobbled street which slowly wound around the inside wall, past the front doors of the many houses that bulged from the sides of the tower and climbed up through the ceiling to the next level, which was hidden entirely from view.

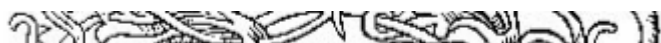
"But why build an entire city within a tower?" said Brink, climbing down from the cart.

"Ah well," replied a voice to the side of him, "that's a bit of a long story, that one. But it's mainly because of the flooding."

Brink looked around but couldn't see anyone. Eventually he thought to look down, and when he did he was surprised to see a small scruffy man wearing a green tunic and bronze chain mail around his neck and a very important-looking floppy black hat.

"These good people have been living right here in the Wenlock Valley for as long as anyone might care to recall or recount," the man continued, smiling upwards,

"And every year without fail, on the thirty-first of November, when the big rains come along, they'd have it all washed away and scattered to the four seasons, with nothing to show for their houses but four muddy walls and a handful of their pots and pans. Well, after this had gone on for a couple of years they began to get sick of always having to rebuild what they had built the year before, and besides which the house insurance was getting way past a joke. Then one day the Prophet at the time, Ignacious I think it was, said that enough was enough and he ordered that a tower be constructed that was so tall that it stretched high up into the heavens. What you now see before you gentlemen is the mighty oak that grew up from the tiny acorn planted by His Divine Holiness on that fateful day," he gestured around the courtyard.



"I think you will agree that it is quite an achievement. It later transpired that Ignacious had been eating some of those funny little mushrooms that grow on cow pats and that he had meant that they should *actually* build it in the clouds - and ride to work on geese - but naturally that bit was hushed up by the Guilds."

"You seem very knowledgeable for one so small," Brink smiled.

"And you seem very patronising for one so tall," countered George haughtily.

"And who are you calling small anyway - I don't call you *lankey crab-faced washervoman* do I?"

"Well if you told me your name sir, I could address you properly, could I not?" responded Brink, somewhat taken aback by the sudden ferocity of the attack.

"Oh don't mind him Spartacus, that's just George," said Bob.

"And he's not the Mayor, never mind what he tells you. So don't go giving him no *special* taxes that he might demand from you," added Bob, leading the horse away by its bridle.

"Or go putting your fingers too near his mouth when he's eating," said Mitch, holding up a tooth-marked hand to illustrate the point.

"Mister George Antioch Spoons, Esquire, at your command my good sir," continued George unabashed "I am sir, what you might call *a man for all seasonings* on account of my extraordinary culinary skills. I am also a man of great mental strength and dexterity, a drawer of plans and an inventor of unparalleled wit and sensibility,"

"So what are you doing around here George? Last time I saw you, you'd been tied to a wild Hog over in Bobbleton-Casket for setting fire to somebody's roof," said Mitch

"A misunderstanding of classic proportions Mitchell my dear boy. I had all but perfected my new thatch tarring process. If that impatient old mule I was working for had just given me one final last chance..."

"You'd probably have set him on fire as well!" Mitch chortled.

“It is not a laughing matter. As it happens I am simply more combustible than the average person and I have the documents to prove it,” he replied, slapping the outsides of his pockets in a cursory search for something hidden somewhere inside.

“But friends, you are tired. Enough talk of my great adventures. I can see that you are,” he looked Bob up and down and grimaced, “much in need of... refreshment and a good bed for the night. Shall I take you to my favourite hostelry, The Black Dog up on Williamson Street?”

“And what’s in it for you?” Brink replied, fixing George with an expectant look.

“Your happiness and well being will be reward enough my friends. Well... that and the small remuneration that I receive from the Inn-keeper, of course!” he chuckled, “But I’ll guarantee you a hot bath, clean beds, fresh ale, and food that doesn’t make you retch. How’s it sounding so far, fellows?”

“Aye, go on then Georgie-boy, you make a convincing case”, said Mitch, who had just begun tentatively smelling himself and hadn’t been too pleased with the outcome, “Anyway me and Bob have never ventured upstairs before so you can be our guide if you like. Lead on Mister Spoons.”

Whilst they had been talking, Bob had led Croaky in the nearby stables and secured the cart for the night.

They set off up a gloomy, winding stair-tower, with George leading the way. Every so often there was a small torch that filled the surrounding stairs with a flickering warm glow and provided almost enough light to see where your feet were. After a couple of minutes of trudging upwards, slipping and tripping into each other, they came to an arched doorway marked with a large white street sign that read, ‘Williamson Street’. George pushed the door and they walked out into the welcome light and fresh air of a brand new set of streets.

Brink was surprised at how markedly different these streets were to the last. The whole place seemed lighter and cleaner than the ground floor (possibly due in part to the lack of horses and fowl that were all too evident downstairs).

At the centre was a market square that bustled with late afternoon

business. It was filled with brightly dressed stalls that seemed to sell just about everything from fruit, vegetables, huge round cheeses and pies to dyed textiles, buttons, finely-tailored jackets and hats. Some stalls sold hot food, and the combination of roasting meats and fresh bread combined to fill the air with a sweet intoxicating aroma that made it hard for any of them to think of anything but his stomach.

Along the outside of this street were shops selling clothes, furniture (they had seen the workshops downstairs), and a strange little ‘Holy-day Shoppe’, newly painted and announcing ‘See the Stone Towers of Milton Barre for less than it costs to feed a gote!’ in its bowed window. Brink noticed that it had declined to say how long the aforementioned ‘gote’ might have eaten for, but given the present company, he quickly decided to let the matter rest.

Around the perimeter stood dozens and dozens of residential houses, some of which had their brightly painted doors standing open so that you could see into their quaint little interiors. Nearby was an old lady in such a house who nodded to Brink while she tended her knitting and rocked slowly back and forth in her small creaking rocking chair, her fire blazing away in the sooty black hearth behind.

The white painted stone fascias wound round and round the inside of the tower, lining the main street as it spiralled its hay-strewn and cobbled way ever upwards.

A dove flapped around the high, white ceiling and disappeared through an open window, dropping a single white feather, which gently spun and tumbled until finally coming to rest on George’s drooping hat.

“And there’s a park and the Cathedral upstairs - isn’t this just the most amazing place that you have ever been?” waved George beaming as he strode ahead up the long winding path around the street’s edge.

“Of course when they originally built the place, the city dignitaries had the bright idea of calling it ‘The Tower of Infinite Destiny’ just so that it sounded impressive to out-of-towners, but needless to say it never really caught on. Not surprising really, I mean, you’d sound a right turnip saying to someone ‘Oh I think I’ll just nip over to The Tower of Infinite Destiny for a couple of sacks of hay and a rooster,’ now wouldn’t you?

“Anyway up, one day I still plan to retire to my own little cottage right here in Tiltton. I would not need much though, just a room to call my own.

It is the cost - that is the only thing stopping me right at the moment. It's just so expensive to live here, because they are always so tight on space."

As he chatted on, George led them through two big black oak doors and into a dark corridor, past a number of doors with tall brass numbers on them and out into a large room that split up into two levels. Along the whole of the side of the room was a bar, complete with several sturdy hand-pumps, and the entire front of the room was made up of a dozen or so large windowpanes, supported in a thick wooden frame.

"The whole of this room was the fore cabins from a real working Galleon once upon a time," said George pointing towards the windows.

"They just chopped it off and slapped it on the tower. Now that's my kind of carpentry, that is. There's a time for thinking and a time for doing. Mine's a flagon of Bear if you're buying?"

On approaching the bar, Mitch and Bob were refused a drink until they had gone and taken a bath, which, after securing their rooms for the night, they promptly left to do.

Brink realised that he had been left to pay the bill. He turned to the dishevelled and painfully thin publican and watched his dark eyes widen as he pulled out his trusty calfskin purse, untied the black leather cord and poured out a couple of battered silver coins into the palm of the fellow's sweaty outstretched hand. He had previously found, much to his amusement, that it did not really matter whose face or language was on a coin as long as it was made of something interesting. Silver and gold, it would seem, spoke a language that even the most dim-witted could understand.

Soon Bob and Mitch had returned from their rooms, each smelling far sweeter than when they had left, and were seated along a large serving table by the window.

Around them were similar groups of travellers. One or two of the bigger rogues eyed them suspiciously, and hunched conspiratorially over their flagons of dark ale, but most seemed quite friendly and Brink soon felt much more at ease, especially after having drunk a mouthful or two of the frothy black beer himself. He looked out of the arched cabin windows and gazed at the spectacular view that unfolded before them. Somewhere high above the tower the sun was transforming itself into a shimmering red fireball, and casting a breathtaking sheet of crimson over the snow-tipped

peaks of the far distant Ben Byrig mountain range.

The food arrived in a cloud of rich pungent steam on a series of large pewter serving platters and was set upon almost before it had properly landed. To start with, each person was given a bowl of piping hot spicy green soup made from peppers and tomatoes with paper-thin slices of cold sausage floating around its surface, which was served with tall silver goblets of warm golden mead.

Next up on the menu were huge great legs of roast beef, rolled and cooked in honey and fresh wild herbs. After these came whole roast Chickens, stuffed with oranges and lemons and glazed with butter and green and black peppercorns. To accompany these gargantuan courses (and to ward off any final traces of hunger in even the most ambitious glutton) were long, warm brown sticks of freshly baked bread and small round blocks of heady blue cheeses.

The feast lasted for well over two hours, and was eventually washed down with even more ale, before those who still had life left in them settled down with their clay pipes by the roaring log fire, and those who didn't departed, belching and laughing, to their long-awaited beds.

As Spartacus Brink fell back onto his bed, his last thought was that he could sleep for a hundred years. In fact he was so tired that he fell unconscious and was snoring loudly before he had even thought about taking off his socks or boots.

Chapter 5



Bailey awoke to the sound of Cabbage chasing yet another pack of dream rabbits. His big paws pushed and twitched the bedclothes into tight-knotted ridges, whilst he snorted and coughed out short, muffled barks into the still night air.

Bailey looked out of his window and up at the moon, which sat fat and full in the starlit sky, draping the world in a silvery soft glow. Outside everything seemed calm after the noise and commotion of the daytime and the only thing moving was a lone hedgehog, which crept across the lane and nibbled on the few scraps of food still left in Cabbage's wooden bowl.

Bailey swung his legs quietly out of bed and quickly pulled on some of his darkest clothes and his hooded jerkin. Cabbage opened a single sleepy eye, looked up at him and then thought better of it, and with a huge sigh, eased back into his sleepy hunt.

The house was silent but for the ticking of the big old clock in the hallway and the creak of the floorboards beneath his bare feet as he slowly, stealthily crept down the stairs. Bailey knew every squeaky floorboard and obstacle in the house and avoided most with a precision gained through years of practice.

Very soon he was easing the big metal bolt across the front door and then twisting and pulling the polished brass handle until the door was open just enough to effect his release.

Once outside in the cool night air, Bailey felt a strange sense of freedom and set off down the lane leading into town. After the events of that afternoon, not to mention the dramatic telling-off that he had received from his Mother, Bailey was determined that this time he would keep a much lower profile. If he was completely honest with himself he would have had to admit that the thought of returning to the Stranger's village was the last thing that he felt like doing, but alongside the danger came an unexpected exhilaration that made his throat dry and his heart begin to race.

If nothing else, Bailey had to know whether Melissa was real. There was only one way that he could think of to find out for sure and that was to go

back to the Stranger's village and take a good look for himself. If she was real, then he would think up a plan for her escape, but first he needed to prove to himself that he was not just pursuing yet another dream rabbit.

As he reached the town he pulled up his black hood and slipped into the shadows, moving between the front doors of the shops and then listening out for any signs of movement, setting off again only when he was positive that he would not be detected.

Just as he was about to run the final open stretch between himself and the quay, Bailey heard footsteps and dodged quickly backwards into the darkened doorway, dropping his head and hiding the white of his hands from the moonlight.

Without daring to look up, he heard their voices as they walked only inches away from him. Trembling, he pushed himself back as far as he could into the door.

"We are almost prepared for a midnight sailing Mr Claybourne,"

"Excellent. Make sure that all the provisions are safely stored away and this time be sure that our guest is not strolling around the place extolling the virtues of free movement."

"It will not happen again Mr Claybourne, sir..."

"It had better not, Mr Foxton. It would be a pity indeed if the last thing that you saw was my Raven's sharp beak feasting on your eyes!"

As soon as they had gone, Bailey looked and looked across the town rooftops until he was looking at the bronze Town Hall clock, shining brightly in the moonlight. It was just after a quarter to midnight, which meant that he was fast running out of time.

Gathering up all his courage, he checked that the coast was clear and then set off in a sprint, running as quickly as his legs would take him until he was safely behind a group of weeping willows, just yards from where the imposing bows of the *Ire-Clad* lay.

As far as he could see there was no one on guard. It seemed that they were all inside making ready to sail, so without a second thought, he bounded across the open ground between him and the vessel and hid beneath the wide boarding steps.

Bailey caught his breath for just a second and then, slipping from the shadows, he sprang aboard the boat and peeped through the crack of the door. He heard footsteps and moved backwards, and turning, quickly covered the small open deck between the two doors. Just as he reached the other door, the handle started to turn. Without thinking, he grabbed the metal ladder behind the door and charged upwards, dropping down soundlessly onto the flat black metal roof.

“Ah there you are. You,” said Claybourne “here are the keys, take these boxes through to the Armoury and do not forget to lock it up again behind you,”

“And you stay here and keep guard. We do not want anyone else prying into our affairs before we leave. Next time I will not be quite as restrained as I was under the watchful eye of that dim-witted fool they made Mayor. Future trespassers may find that they meet with a rather unfortunate... accident. Keep your eyes open and let me know if you see a single thing,”

“Just as you say Mr Claybourne sir,”

Bailey started quietly sliding himself across the expanse of roof and towards the back of the vessel. After a moment or so he came to a large brass porthole, sunk into the black metal. He raised his neck and carefully looked in.

The porthole looked down into a dimly lit corridor where Bailey could see two doors, one on either side. Two small gas lamps with intricate brass stems clung to the walls, from which they sprung like dying ivy. His eyes had almost adjusted to the soft lighting when a female Stranger unexpectedly appeared directly below him and, almost as if she sensed his presence, flicked her head back and glared at the porthole. He only just moved back in time and in doing so, very nearly lost his balance.

By now Bailey was struggling to stay calm and could feel panic welling up in the pit of his stomach. Steeling himself, he closed his eyes tight and whispered quietly to himself.

“Just two more windows now Bailey old chum. Two more of these windows to take a look in and we can get off this wretched old coffin.”

He gingerly raised himself back up and, ignoring his dramatically shaking legs, carried on to the next window. When he reached the next porthole he looked down into the pool of inky blackness and thought that he could

make out what looked like furniture, covered in dusty, calico sheets. Bailey was beginning to become more and more certain that he had been wrong about Melissa and was starting to feel mildly foolish. He nevertheless decided to finish his search and squeezed between the twin chimneys that jutted from the roof and set off towards the third and final patch of glass, which sat like an ice-hole in a frozen black metallic lake.

As he reached the window, he heard a series of engines starting up deep in the bows of the dark, floating town, and with a cough they began to belch out funnels of thick grey smoke from the pipes directly behind him. His heart began to beat faster as he craned his neck and peered downwards into the room far below. What met his eyes was much more than he had ever dreamed of. Candles clustered in flickering crowds and light danced around the confines of the small cabin, letting the shadows grow steadily more daring and then chasing them back into their darkened lairs.

The girl from the dream lay fast asleep upon her bed. Her dark brown hair flowed in soft, shining tresses over the pillows and her skin was as smooth and pale as the finest porcelain, as were her hands, which were folded across the front of her plain white dress.

Melissa was, without doubt, the most beautiful girl that Bailey Humblebucket had ever seen.

She looked so peaceful lying there that for one awful moment an appalling feeling of dread passed through him. But what if she was hurt? She looked too still, as though she was frozen in time or was carved from a tablet of cold white marble.

Thankfully almost as soon as his fears had risen up into his pounding chest they were just as soon abated, when Melissa reached out and absently scratched her nose, her head lolling to one side deep in sleep. He let out a long deep sigh of relief and swallowed, trying to gather his thoughts as they galloped across his mind.

A single squawk, louder than a gunshot, cracked through his head and echoed across the still waters of the river Bim. Bailey looked quickly around, but seeing nothing looked back into the room, transfixed by such a vision of tranquillity that his panic seemed to instantly fade away to nothing.

There was a sudden explosion of feathers next to his ear and as he turned his head Bailey felt a sharp hot pain deep between his shoulder blades. He

cried out involuntarily as a long, razor sharp beak slashed and gouged his neck and shoulders, forcing him forwards onto the roof of the boat. Bailey panicked and frantically flung his arms around behind him, desperately trying to unseat the unseen predator that was so viciously attacking him. As he did so he struck a sturdy feathered leg, dislodging its sharp bloody talon from his back, but the other still clung fiercely on and the pain was fast becoming unbearable.

By now he could feel the warm stickiness of his own blood on his back and could hear shouting from the deck as Strangers poured out to see what the commotion was all about. As the first Strangers began to appear over the rim of the ridged black roof, Bailey's instincts took over and taking one last desperate gasp of air he plunged feet-first into the cold black river below.

The bird, understandably non-too-pleased with the new arrangement, promptly let go of Bailey's aching shoulder and shaking the excess water from its outstretched wings fluttered heavily back to his master's waiting arm.

"Search the water, search the land. Search every last tree and bush. Find that little guttersnipe and bring his lifeless broken corpse to my feet! I cannot afford for our plans to be compromised by the intrusion of a child. What are you waiting for? Go, now!" snapped Claybourne. His face slid into that of a young man, blazing with fury.

One by one, Strangers surged from below decks and scattered out into the night, slicing through bushes with their outstretched walking sticks and drawing long thin daggers, their silver blades and jet encrusted handles sparkling in the moonlight.

Bailey hopped out of the water and headed, half running, half limping through the trees at the edge of town and up to the safety of the darkened Bluebell Wood.

As the cry went up more and more Strangers erupted from the depths of the vessel and joined in the hunt. Many were servants and manual workers, and though dressed in similar black jackets, capes and shoes, these were roughly made from coarse cloth. On their heads they wore flat caps or battered bowler hats, unlike the smart velvet tri-corner or top hats of their masters and mistresses.

Bailey scrambled up the smooth mud banking until he was well away from

the Stranger village and crouched, carefully easing his back into the gnarled bark of a tree and wincing as his wounds made contact. He peered around the edge of the trunk and saw a dozen or so tiny lanterns bobbing around down by the quayside as the Strangers searched the undergrowth, gradually edging further upwards into the woods where he hid.

He cautiously set off again, trying to make sure that there were trees between him and the lights and quickly but carefully picked his way through the undergrowth, trying desperately to avoid any sticks or stones that might betray his position to the pack hunting below.

Finally reaching the brow of the hill, Bailey began to hear the familiar rush of the cascading waterfalls deep inside the woods. As he stood to step over a log that blocked his way, his foot suddenly slipped on a patch of bracken and loose shale sending out a shower of small rocks, which echoed through the night. He heard shouts from the blackness below and the lanterns halted in their tracks and then made straight towards him like a swarm of angry fireflies.

Bailey turned and ran as fast as his aching feet could carry him, springing over logs and through bushes, the sound of fast flowing water mixed with the sound of his own heart banging in his ears. Overhead he could hear the faint flapping of wings as the Raven circled the skies above the wood, its keen eyes trying to catch another glimpse of its lost quarry.

As he reached the Bluebell Gorge, he ran towards the small rope-bridge and took a deep breath.

"I won't look down, it will be fine as long as I don't look down," he moaned softly.

He looked across to the waterfall and his eyes followed it down to the floor of the gorge, and as they did his stomach turned and a giddy feeling swept through his entire body that seemed to freeze him to the spot. In that same instant a crack of broken branches close behind startled him from his daze and prompted him back into action. Clutching the rope handles tightly in his cold wet fingers he propelled his body forward and walked stiffly out on to the swaying bridge.

The old bridge wobbled and creaked its defiance, but Bailey gritted his teeth and spurred himself further and further on with thoughts of the danger close behind until he had finally crossed the gaping leafy chasm. When at last he reached the safety of solid ground, he slipped behind a

nearby tree and took a look behind.

Three lanterns were slowly swinging through the trees, illuminating three white, malevolent faces.

Bailey started up the last, steep hill, his feet slipping and sliding in the mire beneath him. The higher he climbed, the worse it seemed to get. By now a mixture of fear and blind panic gripped him and he pushed himself flat against the earth, desperately trying to get a handhold or foothold that might prevent his capture.

“There! Up there!” shouted one of the Strangers and Bailey could hear them storm across the rope-bridge close behind.

By now he was almost at the top of the steep incline, but sheer exhaustion was beginning to take its toll and as the Strangers rushed towards the hill he could feel himself sliding slowly backwards towards them. He grabbed two hands-full of grass and poured every last drop of strength that he had into pulling himself the last few inches to safety.

Without warning, a thick bladed knife slammed into the earth by his side and Bailey shut his eyes in despair as little by little he began to slowly slide back down the merciless wall of mud.

Just then something gently but firmly took hold of Bailey’s shoulder and steadily dragged him upwards and over the brow of the hill.

“Wait! Look up there! A wolf! Gentlemen, pray retreat this instant!” shouted the closest Stranger and they scrambled hurriedly back down the banking and into the darkened woods.

“Well that’s finished the job for sure, Mister Shawditch sir. There will be little left of him if a wolf’s done for him,” said another

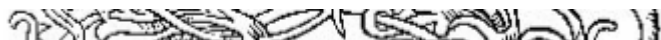
“Yes, Mister Smythe, I concur. I do not think Mr Claybourne will be displeased with the turn of events this night. And we have no corpse on our hands to dispose of. Come, it has been a good night’s work, let us leave now in case there are more wolves around these woods - I have heard it said that they hunt in packs,” said the leader. He looked anxiously around and then hastily led the way across the bridge and back into the darkness from which they had emerged.

Bailey lifted his muddy face from the grass and was instantly slapped in the face by a big friendly dog tongue. At that moment he couldn’t

remember ever seeing anything as comforting as those big blue eyes shining brightly in the moonlight.

“Good lad, Cabbage,” he said stroking the dog’s large floppy ears.

“Now let’s get out of here,” and they quietly made their way through the small copse at the top of Bimleigh-Heavers, through the huge circle of stones standing silently in the moonlight, back down the path and home, at last, to Muchleigh House.



In Thane Monastery the chanting of the choir had risen to a crescendo. The harmonies of three hundred monks intertwined into one gloriously rich sound, which washed around the walls and ran down the smooth gleaming ceiling of the vast cavern to be funnelled, swirling, into the open ears of the spectators below.

The early morning sun filtered through the lake above the dome and bore through the glass in tall, languid shafts, which illuminated shimmering specks of dust as they spun towards the stone cold floor.

The Whispering Chamber was now bedecked in the scarlet ceremonial hangings of the Houses of Ascension, spun from the finest silk and each bearing the golden arms of one of the past Arch Brethren.

In the centre of the hall were two large round rusted shields. Dented through combat, their painted facades were dull and peeling with the march of time. To one side of these shields and hanging from a long suspended pole were the Taegis family arms.

“It isn’t a squirrel you dolt, it’s a Jackal!” hissed Taegis.

“I was simply commenting on the rich pageantry of your coat of arms my Lord, I meant thee no offence,” replied Tallow, bowing his head in reverence whilst allowing himself the tiniest of secret smiles.

“Well. I think that it’s all going terribly well so far,” said Taegis, brightening.

They cast a sideways glance at the Guardian, who was sitting upright in the throne and who, judging by his closed eyes and thin smile, seemed to be having a wonderful time. In fact, since he had arrived, the Guardian had displayed all the traits of a rather forgetful and somewhat kindly old uncle

who had arrived for Christmas but had since forgotten where he lived. He was not at all the vengeful *Stormbringer* as mentioned in the ancient tomes that lined the monastery libraries and in fact might quite easily have been mistaken for Brother Herbert, whose marbles had been widely scattered for well over a decade.

“He doesn’t say very much, does he sire? I mean, he’s been here since last night and all I’ve really seen him do is eat,” Tallow murmured conspiratorially.

“He said that he does not often get the chance to eat mortal food. But that said, I have never before seen anyone devour two whole roast lambs and a full cooked chicken in one sitting. Did you send Brother Milton off to the farmer for fresh supplies?”

“Yes milord and three more bladders of wine. I sent word that if everything was satisfactory we would not kill any of their labourers this year,” simpered Tallow.

Taegis turned and stared straight into his eyes.

“A hard hand - not a good nature – is necessary to gain us the respect that we richly deserve my dear brother Tallow. Show an ounce of weakness to these secular inbreeds and you will reap a pound of treachery. Can you not see that?” whispered Taegis, an almost fatherly warmth creeping into his voice.

“You will personally take all that they have and then burn down their farm. Make sure that their youngest children are still inside,” said Taegis softly, his eyes dull and unemotional.

“And be sure to tell the good farmer and his wife that it is far better to give than to receive.”

“Yes milord.” Tallow stood up, bowed first to Taegis and then to the Guardian, turned and then left.

At long last the music came to an end and faded mournfully back into the ancient chamber walls.

“An excellent service my brother...Taegis. The old chants really are the best aren’t they? The modern ones don’t seem to have any proper tune to them. I remember a chant I once heard... now where was it... The Dordogne I believe – a very grand place, nice gargoyles?” he smiled at

Taegis expectantly who just seemed perplexed.

“Never mind, the name will come to me presently,” he smiled.

Taegis rose from his chair and crossed the hall to kneel uncomfortably at the Guardian’s feet.

“Sire,” he said, trying to broach the subject for the second time in as many days, “my brothers and I summoned you here to ask, most humbly, for your divine help. You see, Lord, the dark horses of war are again rearing their heads and threaten to stampede through even this, our most sacred sanctuary.

“From the Northwest come reports that the Strangers are plotting to strike against us once again, and I know that you will agree that we simply must defend ourselves before the hour becomes too late...”

“The Strangers you say. I thought that they were just a handful of floating inventors. *Strange by name, strange by nature* I seem to remember. I fail to see what harm those funny little people could inflict on this monastic fortress.”

“While you have been away sire they have grown in number and their villages, if combined, could once again form a most worrisome threat.

“During these last months we have received word from our informants of unusual activity within their villages, many of which have been moored in the same place for over ten years. Now it would seem that they are returning to a place as sacred to them as our mountain is to us - *Bare Barrow*.”

“Well Taegis old boy, this really is all fascinating stuff but I don’t know what you expect me to do about it. I really cannot start throwing my weight around and disturbing the natural order of things every time you have some little squabble over land or suchlike. Besides which, my vanquishing days are long behind me. In fact, I’m not sure that I have a good smite left in me,” he chuckled.

Taegis was at rather a loss for what to say. After the Brink debacle, he had really hoped for something a little more positive to come from this meeting but now his last hope seemed to be disappearing off into the sunset in a gradually sinking sieve.

“Brother Herring?” He said wearily.

“Yes Arch Brother?”

“Bring me my horse and crossbow to the main courtyard.”

“You are to go a-hunting Arch Brother?”

“No - I have never shot a horse before and I think it might help me relax.”

He rose from his knees and bowed to the Guardian.

“If you will excuse me sire?”

“Of course Taegis, for you have your youth and your horses to shoot. I shall be leaving you shortly, but before I go I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your hospitality. You know, it warms my heart to think that you are keeping up the old faith and traditions, as taught by your forefathers and theirs before them,”

“Thank you Guardian: it humbles me to bring you pleasure. Will your servant also be returning with you, or will he be staying to keep an eye on things? It’s just that he left yesterday morning and has not been heard of since. He did not seem to care for our hospitality as you do sire.”

“My servant, Taegis?” he smiled, rather puzzled “As you well know the order is my servant and your brothers’ faith my lifeblood. I have little need for any other.”

“Then who was the bearded man who preceded you my Lord?” ventured Taegis uncertainly.

“Hmm? What’s that you say Taegis?” His face dropped as he studied Taegis’ face and realised that he was far too frightened to be joking. He sat bolt upright.

“Are you telling me that someone has used my gate? You must be mistaken. I would have known.” In a split second it was as though the charming old man had transformed into a venomous snake.

“It was when we first brought the Thought Weaver up here sire. Brother Bernard had attempted to summon you by reading from the ancient passages. He read the incantation and then this... other fellow appeared from nowhere. These fools all thought it was you, but of course I wasn’t deceived for a second.” he added hurriedly.

“Then it would seem that I have work to do after all, Arch Brother Taegis. For if there is one thing I really cannot abide, it is uninvited tourism!”

He stood up and strode towards the doors.

“It is imperative that we find this impostor of yours whilst we still can, and that when we do,” He turned and fixed Taegis with a cold, black stare “we *eradicate* him.”

Chapter 6



partacus Brink gently awoke in his huge soft bed, surrounded by what seemed like acres of fresh white linen, which smelt of newly cut grass and wild flowers.

Sunlight streamed in through the open window and a soft breeze made the curtains billow like full sails in a high spring tide. Distant dream images momentarily flashed into focus, but as soon as they had arrived they had gone.

He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the harsh daylight and slowly swung his legs out of bed. He started to pack up his few belongings and was just pulling on his jacket when there was a single knock at the door.

“Sparty? You in there my old mate?”

“Come in Bob.”

“Ah there you are. Look we’re going to grab a bite of breakfast and then there’s a parade through the city starting at nine o’clock so we thought we might hang around and have a quick look at it if that’s alright with you?”

“A parade through the city? Oh, I see what you mean, up the tower,”

“Should be quite a spectacle. It’s St. Meekins Day today. Anyway, I’ll see you downstairs when you’re ready.”

Just then, an image flashed across Brink’s mind.

“Wait a second Bob,” he spoke hesitantly, trying to remember the dream. “You know the standing stones that we could see from the crossroads where we first met up?”

Bob thought for a second and then his face brightened with recognition.

“Bimleigh that’s where you’re on about! Bimleigh-Heavers. Nice little place. Good pub. The Farmers’ Legs if I’m not completely mistaken, they do a cracking good pork and dumplings. We’re off over that way this afternoon as it happens - it’s on the way to Fairport town.”

“Good, I wanted to take a closer look at the stones. I feel as though I could have been over there before, as though I know the place. If I have been, then there may be someone there who knows me. It might even play a part in restoring some of the gaps in my memory.”

“Well it’s up to you Sparty, but I reckon you’re not so bad off how you are. I mean, as my old uncle Tommy used to say *if it’s worth forgetting - it’s worth avoiding!* Mind you I think that he really meant my Auntie Meg when he came out with that one. Anyway get a move on mate, my belly’s starting to think my throat’s been cut!”

When he arrived at the breakfast table Brink was handed a large hammered pewter dish containing his breakfast, along with a cheerful *Happy Day!*

As it turned out a *Full Craddock Breakfast* generally consisted of a chunk of black onion bread, some stupendously thick slabs of cooked bacon (served cold), a lump of white crumbly cheese and a large cup of ale.

George didn’t look at all well, and solemnly pushed his breakfast away when it arrived.

“I think *rigor mortis* has set into this bacon. What’s up with *him?*” Brink asked nodding towards George, whilst gamely banging a stiff strip of bacon against the table. He gave up and turned his attention to the cheese.

“He stayed up drinking last night after we’d all had more sense and gone off to bed.”

“Oh I see. So what was he drinking?” asked Brink, knowing that there was almost certainly a bad joke in the offing.

“Shorts!”

They both burst out laughing and George winced at the volume, covering his ears with his hands to block out the noise.

“Hey you two! Turn it up! A little less volume if you don’t mind fellows! It wasn’t that funny...” he moaned.

Just then, Mitch rushed through the door, covered in string after string of small wooden beads.

“Look what I got for the parade!” he shouted excitedly. George moaned

softly and slowly shook his sore head.

“Everyone is wearing them. Apparently these are very holy indeed.”

“How much were they?” Asked Bob.

“Two Groats for the lot!” grinned Mitch.

“I hope they’re extremely holy. I’d want a pair of angel’s wings for that much. With the angel still attached!” laughed Bob.

They left The Black Dog and stepped onto the rising cobbled road waiting outside and as they did so a host of bugles sounded and a single snare drum began to beat out a rolling pattern somewhere deep beneath them.

“Happy Day!” laughed an old man to Brink’s side.

Brink returned the greeting and looked over the crowd’s heads and down the road as a pair of white stallions emerged from the lower street, covered in coloured ribbons and tiny silver bells. Leading the horses were two beautiful sisters, identical in size and looks and both with long blonde hair that ran all the way down their back and was braided on either side. Their robes didn’t leave very much to the imagination and they caught both Mitch and Bob’s attention almost simultaneously.

“I said the parade would be worth a look, didn’t I fellows? Happy Day!” chortled Bob, to a chorus of *Happy Day’s* from all around.

A low white carriage was attached to the horses, which was covered in scrolls and leaf designs, each painstakingly picked out in gold leaf, which glinted in the sunlight as it shone down through the tower’s elongated windows.

In the carriage was a very old man dressed in thick white sheets and holding an ancient, battered ear trumpet to the side of his head. His robes shone brightly with fine golden thread, which served to surround him in a mystical golden aura. He didn’t look particularly pleased to be there and Brink thought that he looked as though someone had just tipped him out of his bed, which would also have gone some way toward explaining his hair, which stood out in unruly white tufts.

“That’s Prophet Pugnacious VI,” said Mitch reverently averting his eyes as he trundled past them.

“The sixth? It must be a popular name for Prophets,” replied Spartacus, impressed by the pomp and ceremony surrounding the whole affair.

“Sixth what?” asked Bob.

“The sixth Prophet, Bob. That’s what VI means, it is the number six in Roman numerals.”

“Get out of town and ride a goat!” exclaimed Bob “You know, I always thought that *Vye* was a bit of a funny family name! I thought he was just one of these foreigners like you. Prophets usually are foreign you know, it helps make them seem more detached and mystical.”

As the carriage finally passed them, a couple of men walked past, completely dressed in black, but wearing white shirts and both with their fingers plunged firmly into their right ears.

“What are those two doing? Are they guards of some sort?” asked Spartacus curiously.

Mitch tore his eyes away from the maidens leading the procession. “Nah, them? They’re just folk singers.”

Right on cue, they launched into a song that Brink noticed seemed to heavily feature the phrase ‘A-Hey-Nonie-No’ and within which they tried (and comprehensively failed) to find words that would rhyme with ‘Prophet’. Overall, it was quite nice when they had gone.

Next along were a group of banner bearers, each of which seemed to belong to a different cult or another, such as the *Tray-Rigg Caninist Brotherhood* and the *Arbiters of the Golden Clasp*. Another, the clumsily named *Sor-Barrel-Upon-Till Search for Spiritual Enlightenment through Increased Bread Consumption* caused quite a commotion when it became apparent that the lone member of the group was actually a local baker - using the parade to advertise his wares. As soon as things looked as though they might turn ugly, he hopped off the roadside, with breadbasket and banner in hand, and disappeared down a side street laughing.

Following the procession’s end were five bugle players - all dressed in bright red tunics, and a single drummer boy (who seemed to be marching slightly out of time with everyone else).

As the end of the procession drew past, the crowd converged from either

side of the road and was swept along and upwards in the raucous slipstream, clapping along to the music and generally making as much noise as possible.

“Come on!” shouted Bob and they all joined the procession, George tugging on Mitch’s coattails as the crowd closed in around him.

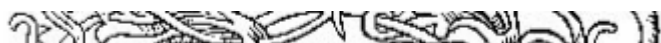
“Alright then Georgie-boy, you climb up here. I’ll give you a lift to the Cathedral but then you’re on your own!” shouted Bob, briefly ducking down. With a yell and a leap George launched himself onto his shoulders where he sat, laughing and waving at the crowds that passed in his most refined and regal manner.

Very soon they had reached the next level up. Brink’s eyes widened at this set of streets that looked like a public park, with trees and huge wooden dragons for children to play inside. A towering marble fountain sat on a carefully manicured lawn at the centre, which featured twenty white elephants blowing water from their trunks into a series of flat plateaux, sending it cascading downwards in shimmering gossamer sheets.

George looked down at Bob.

“You’re going bald on top, you know?”

“And you’ll be walking in a minute.”



The Arch-brother was now quite convinced that his heart was about to burst. He and a handful of the highest monks of the order, had been staggering and wheezing around the staircases and corridors of Thane for well over an hour, all frantically trying to keep up with the Guardian. He was certainly quite sprightly for a man of his advanced age.

Each time it looked as though they might just have reached the end of their quest, their leader would say something along the lines of “I could have sworn that I left them here, oh no, now wait a minute, I know where I put them...” and throw himself off down yet another darkened corridor. It was, however, quite an education for the brothers involved as many of the halls and corridors at the heart of the mountain had been previously lost. Some had lain unused for hundreds of years simply because they had been covered by bookcases or tapestries or been hidden behind long-locked doors. On more than a few occasions Taegis’ eyes had widened as they came across new treasures to plunder, and possessions that he quickly

decided would become his own.

They followed the Guardian up steps and more steps as they climbed higher and higher through the very heart of the mountains themselves. At last they reached daylight, and, coming through a large carved wooden doorframe, they found themselves standing within the octagonal bell tower on the shore of Lake Thane - high on the Mountain's top.

The musty bell ropes, which a younger - and somewhat slimmer - Taegis had once pulled for morning prayers, hung limply from the dark wooden rafters of the belfry and the sharp bouquet of bat dung hung heavily in the air.

"Brothers! Dear brothers! Here they are! Our quest is at an end!" he opened his black eyes wide as he swept his hand across in a grand gesture towards one of the walls.

They all looked at the wall. There was nothing there. They all looked again. Nothing. Not even a spider.

Taegis was now starting to give real credence to the theory that the *Thought Weaver* was actually nothing more than some sort of ancient practical joke, something that spat out a succession of increasingly desperate half-wits in an attempt to drive its owners stark staring mad. If that was indeed the case, he thought, it was already starting to work.

"My apologies gentlemen, wrong wall!"

They turned and looked again. Flat against the wall and lurking in the shadows laid a plain and unremarkable-looking board. The wood was old and filthy and the chiselled edges seemed to almost fade into the shadows where it hung. In the centre of the board was a fan made up of eight mounted, rusty prongs. It looked very much like the head of a rake. Taegis seemed to remember removing one of the prongs in order to dislodge some dog dirt from his shoes in his youth and started to hope that whatever this relic was, it wasn't *too* holy.

"These, my brothers, are the Dragon's Teeth!" pronounced the Guardian.

Someone clapped and then stopped abruptly and looked at his feet when he realised that no one else had joined in.

"Throw open the shutters there brother!" declared the Guardian.

As the tall green shutters banged open against the outside walls of the tower, years of dirt and flakes of paint tumbled away and the pigeons nesting high in the rafters gave up their nests and flapped out into the blue morning sky.

Just below them lay the lake, clear and rippling in the sunlight and deep below the surface they could just make out the stained-glass roof of the Whispering Chamber as light played and danced across its dome.

“Hand me a crossbow,” said the Guardian, taking one of the bolts from its mount on the wall. As the guard passed him his crossbow, Taegis could not help himself from looking to see if the Guardian had anything nasty left on his fingers.

The Guardian loaded the rusty bolt into the crossbow and shot it high into the air. It flashed once in the sunlight as it came down in an arc and slid silently into the water.

Seven more bolts went up and each soundlessly pierced the surface of the lake with no apparent consequence.

They watched and waited for what seemed like an eternity but nothing seemed to happen until at last there was a faint distant rumble which seemed to come from nowhere and yet everywhere all at once.

It was the Arch-Brother’s stomach.

“Shall we perhaps take breakfast whilst we await the outcome?” he ventured at last.

The Guardian raised his hand for silence, and at that precise moment there was a muffled crack of thunder and a flash of purple lightning that forked upwards from the grimy depths of the lake and vanished into the clouds high above. There was another and yet another, each one followed by a pool of bubbles which reached the air and burst, sending ripples across its calm dark surface.

“Arch-brother! Look down there!” shouted Brother Horace.

As they stared down towards the surface of the water, they could make out what looked at first to be eight fat silver fish slowly swimming in formation towards the tower. When they eventually found the shore, however, a group of human forms began to emerge from the surface of the

lake. Very soon, and draped in strands of assorted weeds, the eight Watchmen stood motionless on the shore, their metal faces raised to the tower window.

Their sealed silver helmets, tarnished from eons of silt, once again glinted in the sun. At the front lay an eight-pointed, black glass star. Thick leather straps held long silver staffs across each of their backs. They were dressed in long dark brown habits, drenched and heavy with lake water, which hid their clasped hands from view.

They stood motionless at the lake's edge, the water pouring in a torrent from their garments and running in rivulets down the pebbled shore.

"My Brothers, I have the greatest pleasure in introducing you to the Watchmen of the lake - aren't they just simply wonderful?" cried the Guardian, raising his arms in the air.

"I have never had reason to use them before: quite a shame really. They are quite an impressive pack of dogs, my fighting monks. Their strength, as you will come to realise, is born from their unceasing determination. These Watchmen of mine will not stop fighting until they have completed their task or have been destroyed trying. They are untainted by compassion or mercy in any way, but perform the task they are given until it is finished, and when it is, may return to the lake and to their slumber once more."

He turned to the Watchmen and removed a small but intricately crafted gold mirror from the inside of his robes. A large blue gemstone lay mounted at its centre and as he held it high above his head he raised his voice to address them.

"Watchmen of this land - hear these words. You must find the one who does not belong to this place. Run him from his lair and bring him here - alive or dead - preferably *dead*. It matters not, as long as he is punished for his trespasses.

"I expect you to use extreme force in this task and never to cease until you have brought him to my feet, begging for the mercy of a quick and painless death!" The Guardian was now fully in his stride. His eyes flashed black vengeance as a well-timed crack of thunder rolled overhead.

"Now take this talisman from my hand. Let it be your eyes in the darkness and provide you with clarity in the task that lies ahead. Be gone from this place, and do not return lest my will be done!" As he threw the

mirror, it spun a gold path to the waiting glove of the first Watchman, who snapped his fist shut around its edge and held it firmly to his chest.

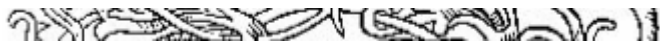
One by one, still without speaking a single word, they began to move. As they trudged up the shore and into the long trail down the side of the mountain, they each pulled their long sleeves apart. Long black crossbows sprang clicking and clunking into place. Each weapon sported two dozen thick steel bolts held in revolving black barrels around their sides and, as they appeared, drew gasps of awe from the assembled monks, who had not seen anything like them before.

Taegis found himself gaping in uneasy awe at the sight of the Watchmen. Only the Guardian's interruption finally brought him back to reality.

"There is really nothing like the thrill of the chase to give one a healthy appetite in the morning. Now did I hear someone mention breakfast?" he smiled.

"Most extraordinary Guardian, quite remarkable." muttered Taegis, as he watched the last of the Watchmen disappear over the mountain pass. "Yes, yes of course, milord. The finest breakfast in the whole of Thane for your mighty reverence."

"Jolly good, my good brother. Pray, be so kind as to lead the way."



"Oh my word! Bailey Samuel Humblebucket! What in heaven's name have you been up to now?" screamed Mrs Humblebucket

Bailey jumped at his mother's voice and looked around, dazed. Cabbage sprang up startled, barked, raised his floppy eyebrows and promptly slid off the bed, landing on the floor with a heavy thump in a tangled heap of muddy bedclothes.

"It looks as though you've had a mud fight in here! I hope you've got a blooming good explanation for this young sir! What the devil has been going on?"

Bailey was just struggling for an explanation that made any kind of sense when his mother's anger took a sudden turn to concern.

"Where's that blood come from? Are you hurt? What have you been doing to your back, Bailey? Oh my good gracious! You wait there and I'll

fetch some soap and hot water!”

Whilst she was in the kitchen running water and clucking round like an over-protective hen, Bailey had a little time to think and decided that he didn't want to frighten her. As she came back upstairs with some hot water and various healing aids, he hastily concocted something that he thought she might believe.

“Cabbage heard some noises outside last night, so we went to have a look and when we got over to the Stones, I slipped in some mud and I ended up in that thick patch of brambles down by the copse.”

“Oh my word! What have I told you about staying indoors at night? There could have been thieves or anything waiting outside for you. And that big sack of stuffing wouldn't have been any help.” She shot a stern look at the anxious-looking hound that had been trying to judge its mother's mood.

Cabbage (who had recently been studying the close relationship between people shouting and the amount of food in his breakfast bowl) sighed and lay back down on the floor. This was definitely starting to look like a one-biscuit morning.

“Well that's where you're wrong! He pulled me out of the brambles. In fact if it hadn't been for him, I'd probably still be lying there,” said Bailey defensively. Well, it was half true at least.

“Which doesn't excuse the fact that you shouldn't have been there in the first place,” she softened, wrapping the damp poultice around Bailey's neck and securing it firmly under his arm.

“Come downstairs when you're dressed, and you can have something to eat,” she looked back at Cabbage.

“What's up with you, dog features, are you not hungry this morning? I find that exceedingly hard to believe. Come on pup - let's see if we can't find you something that you won't turn that big hairy nose up at.”

She left the room with a cheerful Cabbage in tow, his faith in humanity now fully restored.

Bailey took a few moments to reflect, staring into his astrolabe and the spots of golden light it scattered around the room, constantly growing brighter and then dimmer with every cloud that passed over the sun.

He thought about the woods, and being pursued through the darkness by the skull-white faces of the Stranger crew. He thought about the rope-bridge, and the Raven bearing down on him as he struggled to escape. He thought about Melissa. He mostly thought about Melissa, who remained, framed in his thoughts by the flickering candlelight; resting like a sleeping princess in a warm ethereal painting.

“Some rescue party I turned out to be,” he sighed miserably to himself, tentatively feeling his bandaged back until he winced in pain.

Bailey’s frustration had started to grow to the point where his insides felt as though they were all twisting up and knotting together. He knew that he had to do something to help Melissa escape but there was still no sign of the traveller that Mistress Nutter had spoken about. He had no idea of what to do or who to tell and had begun to feel more alone and useless than at any time since the day that his father had left home to fight, all those years ago.

Bailey climbed down the creaking wooden steps and into the kitchen where Cabbage was busy devouring a pile of cooked chicken skins, oat biscuits and gravy that looked as though it would easily have kept a pack of small lions quite happy for a week. As he entered the room, the dog looked up from his banquet, belched and then applied himself with renewed greed and determination.

“That’s a warthog trapped in a dog’s body that is. He’s got hollow legs, you mark my words,” laughed Mrs Humblebucket who, if the truth be told, was just as happy feeding a hungry dog as a hungry human. It was the appreciation of her efforts that she counted, not the money rattling in her apron pocket.

Bailey absently picked at his scrambled eggs and bacon, then pushed the remains away as he made up his mind to take a walk back up to Muchleigh Stones to clear his head and try to decide what he should do next.

Leaving the house, Bailey had soon reached the top of the hill and as he did he turned to look back to the stony path that he had just climbed and through the holes in the leafy treetops to the quay down below. As he had expected, the berth at one end where the Strangers had once been was now quite empty, and even from the top of the hill he could somehow feel that the quay had returned to its lazy tranquillity. He glanced across to the theatre that had been bustling for the past few days with long-needed

repairs to the curtains and stage, which had sprung back into life with a renewed and noisy vigour.

“We might as well go and see what all the fuss is about down there,” said Bailey and set back off down the hill again. Cabbage - who was as full as an egg and had only just reached the top - sighed deeply and then turned to trot loyally behind.

Down by the quay, a one-man band stilt walker was now in serious trouble. He had been halfway through a guitar and harmonica rendition of the well-loved folk classic ‘*The Olde ‘n’ Shiny Shed*’ when his left stilt had become hopelessly lodged between two planks on the quayside. This had left him hopping around on the other leg. Confident that ‘the show must go on’ he was gamely trying to carry on playing, even though the free leg was working the bass drum and cymbals. The resulting cacophony had everyone on the quay shaking and crying with laughter.

“Hello there, young Mr Humblebucket! A warm and hearty welcome to you sir!” boomed Bertie Jefferson grabbing him by the hand and squeezing it until it went very white indeed.

“I heard about your run-in with those funereal phantasms yesterday. By all accounts you stood your ground admirably. It is the sign of a gentleman to remain composed when all about him the cannons are roaring and the bugles sound the retreat. Fine fellow, you are a credit to your family.”

“Thank you sir,” smiled Bailey.

“And may I enquire after you good mother’s health on this fine day young master? Would it be more than reasonable to expect her presence this eve, when we light the lime and reapply the greasepaint? Could you possibly tell her from yours truly that our humble little company of players would be honoured and flattered if she should agree to be our special guest for our grand finale?” beamed Jefferson.

“Well I’ll ask her along, I’m sure that she would be very happy to if she isn’t too busy. I know that she doesn’t go out as much as she used to, she always seems to have too much to do.”

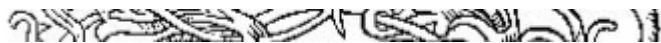
At this point there was a brief shriek, a loud ripping noise and a crash of cymbals as the one-man band tumbled downwards and had his fall broken by a group of dazed clowns who just happened to be standing beneath him, laughing at his predicament.

“You must do your best to persuade her, dear boy. Find the words to ask, nay implore, that for once she gives up her toils and samples our dramatic wares. Tell her that I personally await her decision with bated breath and that she will have the finest seat in the house,” pleaded Jefferson, indicating a pair of battered and badly stuffed settees to one side of the stage, “shared with none other than your esteemed Mayor and his good lady wife.”

Bailey tried to look enthusiastic, but his heart sank at the thought of his mother and the ‘Fine and Very Honourable’ Mr Frederick Cruickshank sitting next to each other. Especially given the words that he and Bailey had exchanged just the day before. Nevertheless he told Berty that he would try his best to bring his mother along and then politely made his excuses and slipped back into the anonymity of the crowd.

“I should have just stayed in bed this morning, dog-face, I really should. Come on let’s go and tell mother the *good news*,” he muttered to Cabbage as they reluctantly meandered back into town.

Cabbage raised his eyebrows. He was not entirely sure what his master was talking about, but he had a fairly good idea from his tone of voice that it concerned lunch and that particular topic was not to be taken at all lightly.



Back at Tiltton-Craddock, Spartacus Brink looked upwards and gasped in reverent awe at the towering stone columns that lined the cathedral’s arched stone entrance. On reflection he decided that even the hugely impressive Minster in York paled in comparison to the monumental size and intricacy of it all.

Along the ceiling were low hanging candelabras, each wrought in twisted black iron and stuffed to bursting point with short, fat beeswax candles. Long silk banners of green and gold hung upon each of the numerous tall columns that divided the Cathedral up and supported its roof, and each proclaimed a different message. ‘Be ye a goode frend to others and to their pets’ read one, ‘Do not borrow your naybors scythe for longer than yo’ need!’ read another and ‘Play not yore mandolin past three bells, for its sound do carry far and yore naybor may be up aer-lie for prayer!’ expressed yet another. On reflection, Brink decided that the complaint in this last message was so precise that it was probably meant for someone specific.

Huge windows depicting tales of good works (and, of course, punishment in equal measures) lined the walls. Some had been paid for by the many city guilds for they portrayed incongruous images of printing presses, bell-making and tailors' shop dummies, which were dressed in the finest cobalt blues and crimson reds. The light from the windows poured in from the window and splashed like paint across the floor.

The rainbow of hues culminated in an enormous Rose window, which stretched out in an incandescent kaleidoscope of colour, towering above the hundred or so choirboys who sat nervously chattering below.

The multicoloured scenes stretched higher and higher until Brink's eyes finally met an expanse of richly painted ceiling that depicted the sky and a large golden sun that burst out from the heavens. Doves occasionally fluttered across the acres of blue to rest and coo to each other, looking down in wonder at the assembled worshippers from their exquisitely carved perches high above.

Strange scenes depicting animals dressed in bizarre clothes and standing upright were carved into the rows of pillars that lined the centre aisle. At the far end of the cathedral lay a huge boulder, untouched on the outside save for some patches of gold leaf, dabbed here and there by disciples, which were picked out by the sun. Further inside the rock lay a dim antechamber, dark but for a few scattered candles which flickered uncertainly in the gloom.

By now the party had been ushered, with the last of the revellers, down a flowing white marble staircase inside the sombre cool of the Cathedral and with a groan that echoed about the walls and up to the sumptuous ceiling, the great oak doors swung shut, sealing them inside.

Brink surveyed the sea of heads each turned forward in eager anticipation. The excited chatter gradually fading into quiet as a dozen choirboys made their way down the central aisle and as they went they lit the long, lean candles that lined their way.

"Oi lanky-shanks! Give me lift up would you, I can't see anything from down here?" said George, pulling on Brink's coattails.

Brink looked down and sighed.

"Very well, but as long as you keep quiet."

“You have my word as a gentleman.”

When all the candles were lit, the choirboys returned to their stalls and ten white-frocked parishioners slid forward and lifted the Prophet up until he was level with the flattened tip of the huge rock. Once he was above the stone, they pushed his seat until it rested precariously on its top, swaying gently as he gingerly stretched out his bejewelled bony hand.

There was a moment's silence and George took the opportunity to fumble in his side bag, pulling out a small brass telescope that he brought to his eye, levelled at the distant Prophet.

“Happy Day!” he croaked at last, whereupon he was instantly greeted with a huge round of applause and a tumultuous “Happy Day” from the congregation.

“It wasn't as good as last year,” shouted George into Brinks' ear. “Now *that* was a blessing!”

While the choir began to sing, each of them took a lit candle in turn and walked into the granite chamber. More and more of them disappeared into the rock cavity and as they did the singing took on an eerie, almost detached quality until the sound seemed to be humming and pulsating through the very walls of the cathedral.

Every brick and carving was alive with a revolving, swirling mass of voices and it grew louder and more intense until the chandeliers rattled and the ornate wooden panels behind them were shuddering as though they were in a ferocious gale.

Just when the music was becoming so loud as to be almost unbearable, there suddenly came the sound of an unseen gong, which crashed through the singing and filled the ears and minds of everyone in the cathedral as it grew to a deafening crescendo. As it slowly shimmered and faded away, it seemed to wash the air clean of the multitude of raised voices. Within seconds, there was complete and utter silence. Even the birds, high in the vaulted ceiling were stunned into an expectant hush.

The choirboys emerged once more in a candlelit procession from the darkness and when they had all finally reappeared, the Prophet muttered a few terse words as a signal for the congregation to shut their eyes and once again a reverential silence fell across the room.

“Well if they’re all going to start praying I think I’ll need a *proper* drink,” chuckled George. Still mounted on Brink’s shoulders, he returned the telescope to the inside of his waistcoat and began to grope around a variety of grubby backpacks and pouches that he had thrown around his person.

“I think that you should show a little more respect for these people’s beliefs,” whispered Brink sternly as George clunked and rattled noisily around the back of his head.

“As long as they show a little respect for mine,” cackled George and, retrieving a large blue bottle from inside his coat, ripped out the cork with his teeth and spat it high above those gathered together in prayer.

“Ah, Apple brandy and just about the best I ever did make, if I say it myself. May the spirits be in me!” he chortled, and gulped down a hearty swig of the foul-smelling concoction.

The chain of events that followed seemed to have an awful inevitability about them. It was almost as though each part had been planned out in the very smallest of unfortunate details.

The key to the whole sorry event was that George, in his haste, had forgotten a rule that will stand any traveller (both large or small) in very good stead, which is that strong liquor is never best enjoyed when *deeply inhaled*.

When George coughed a lungful of the dreadful spirit up, it was ejected in a fine spray that immediately erupted into a fireball as soon as it was even remotely close to the nearest open chandelier. All that Brink, Bob and Mitch could do was to stare up in shocked disbelief as one by one the rich silk hangings exploded into flames and the fire leapt like a pack of startled frogs across the ribbons slung between the pillars and then coursed swiftly upwards towards the bone dry rafters above.

George quickly slapped his hand over his mouth but it was far too late to stop the hideous domino effect from spreading. It simply served to knock George from Brink’s shoulders and send him hurtling backwards, colliding with a flaming torch that exploded into a blistering shower of white-hot sparks.

Bob shot a look to Mitch.

“Good service. Nice place. Fine people - but probably about time we were

moving along?”

“My thoughts entirely, Robert,” replied Mitch calmly, and without another word they each took a firm hold of Brink and ran up the stairs as fast as their feet could carry them.

“It’s all on fire. All of it...” said a dazed Brink to nobody in particular.

“I suppose some people would consider it a talent,” muttered George sullenly.

They prised open the heavy Cathedral doors just as the first of the parishioners, jolted from the depths of her devotion by the stench of smoke, began to raise the alarm (in the form of several high pitched squeals), at which point complete and utter anarchy fast became the order of the day.

Mitch and Bob were good at running, they had had a fair amount of practice from their various careers in sales, but George really was in a league of his own. As they thundered back down the main road, winding around the insides of the cavernous tower, they upset carts (and their owners) and slid and slipped over the treacherous cobbles beneath their feet. When they finally reached the darkest bottom streets and its accompanying stables, George was still a good distance out in front.

“Wait!” shouted Brink from the back.

“What are we doing?” he shook his head in disbelief and looked back. “We cannot just flee away like frightened children. We must stop and help these people. We have just started a fire and it is our responsibility to see it extinguished,” He turned and started back up the road.

“Oh Lord above, that’s all I need, a mate with a conscience,” Bob muttered as he ran back and grabbed Brink by the shoulder.

“Spartacus - please listen to me. If I thought that anyone was in danger then I’d be up there helping right now - but the plain fact of the matter is that there ain’t.

“That little fire will be all but out by now and all that you’ll find if you go back up there, all heroic and suchlike, is a load of religious fruit-cakes that are baying for your blood. Now I admire your motives, believe me I do, but with the uttermost respect, Sparty old chum, you don’t know these people like I do. They might seem all jolly and nice when you’re spending your

money, but if you make a fool's backside out of their Prophet in front of everyone, then they'll make a proper example out of you - and I'm not talking about a nice quick death either. Have you ever seen someone that's been pulled apart by shire horses? It is not a pretty sight - I can tell you that much."

"But we have to do something."

"Look if it bothers you that much then when we get far away from here you can send them some money to pay for any damage. How does that sound?"

"I suppose that might help put some of this right..."

"Or would you rather we were all put to a hideous death? It's your decision Spartacus, but you'd better make it quick 'cos I can hear them coming!"

Brink nodded reluctantly and they rejoined the others.

Back at the stables, George hastily untied his horse Thunderbolt and Bob retrieved an obstinate Croaky while Mitch roused Stan the gateman to let down the drawbridge. As they cast furtive looks behind to the way they had come, the bridge gradually groaned and jerked its way forwards inch by hesitant inch, until crunching to a premature halt only three quarters of its way down.

"Damnation and tarnation. It's stuck fast again. I knew I should have put a glob of bear grease on it this morning, it's with the rainy weather coming," said Stan as he stood back scratching his chin with his calloused fingers and looking at the huge wooden wheel with an air of resignation

"I'm sorry about this but I think you might just have to leave your departure until tomorrow now gentlemen. Old Harry Seddon the carpenter should have it fixed by the morning."

From upstairs the first of the congregation had started to seep down to the lower levels and the general hubbub was soon becoming even more frantic than usual.

"Oh give it here!" said Mitch, the exasperation now quite plain in his voice. He grabbed the wheel and shoved it with all his might, but to no avail.

“Come here Bob, give us a hand here will you!” he spluttered as his face started to turn the colour of an over-ripe apple.

“Give it here you great big girl’s blouse. Hey George, you take the reins whilst I show them how it’s done!” laughed Bob unconvincingly.

With Bob’s grunting assistance the wheel gave another squeak and moved a little, but it was clear that they were now in very deep water.

“What’s all that commotion upstairs?” asked Stan. Spartacus cautiously took a sideways look and could see that Stan was starting to eye Mitch and Bob with an air of mounting suspicion.

“Oh it’s nothing. It’s probably just the parade getting a bit out of hand. You know what they’re like,” Brink interjected. He grabbed the last spare space on the top of the wheel and gave it every last ounce of strength he could muster.

With one great combined heave of desperation, the wheel suddenly jolted forward. Chains rattled through their shackles and with an enormous squeaking groan the full weight of the drawbridge slammed heavily into the muddy ground below.

George clambered up onto his white mare and Spartacus and Bob climbed up onto the cart.

“Happy day Stan!” shouted Mitch, cheekily ruffling the irritated gatekeeper’s hair before running and jumping onto the back of the hastily moving hay wain.

“That’s them!” came a sudden shout and a crowd of angry priests were almost upon them, running down the street towards the gate.

“Fire starters! Desecrators! Stop them. Raise the drawbridge, Stanley! Do not let them escape!” screamed the man at the head of the mob.

Thunderbolt galloped off in one direction and Croaky in another, running faster than Spartacus Brink might ever have believed. They all gripped the sides of the cart and clung on for grim death as it thundered and bumped them across the potholes and furrows of the ploughed surrounding fields. It was a full ten minutes before they finally managed to calm the poor horse down to a less frantic pace.

Brink turned to Bob who was now howling with unrestrained laughter, a

sound that he seemed to spend much of his life practicing.

“What did you say to him to make him run that fast?” said Brink as Croaky started to fall into a leisurely trot.

“I told him there were squirrels coming after him. He’s frightened half to death by them!” snorted Bob with barely enough air left to breathe.

“Squirrels?” repeated Brink incredulously. Croaky gave an upset whinny and shook his head, which Bob had to pat gently to put him back at his ease.

As they pulled off down the road, the faint trail of smoke rising from the top of the tower soon became just another flat landmark squashed between the velvet green of the undulating hills and dales.

Brink and Mitch fell back into the golden hay and made themselves comfortable between the sweet soft bales.

As he drove the cart, Bob began to sing a song about a farmer and his ten faulty wheelbarrows, while Croaky once more wended his ponderous way down the lane that apparently led to a small - but perfectly formed - town lying by the tranquil river Bim.

Of course, had they any small inkling of what lay close behind them, they might well have hurried up.

Chapter 7



hips as black as night swarmed toward Bare Barrow island like a hundred smoking termites returning to their mound. From each of their sides, thick grey smoke belched out to the point where some villages (the ones that were really showing off) could hardly be seen at all, and more to the point were completely unable to see where they were actually going. Unsurprisingly enough, this led to more than a couple of nasty collisions and left a bizarre variety of deeply unhappy figureheads snarling and gnashing their teeth at each other in startled and angry frustration.

Some figureheads were as big as wild dogs, their stone lips drawn back across rows of sharp bared teeth they looked set to use. Some were smaller with more human or rodent-like features but were definitely none the less vicious for their lack of size, and each was seemingly carved from a chunk of living, spitting rock.

Once an uneasy order had finally begun to spring from the smoking chaos, each of the slim gothic vessels turned slowly about, allowing them to back their sterns into the chain lined mooring pits that were sunk into the waiting cliffs.

One-by-one they slotted around the sides of the island and as they fell into place the front canopy of every vessel slowly arched up to bear the coat of arms of that village etched deep into the dark metallic surface beneath.

A single wooden bridge spanned the considerable distance from the mainland to Bare Barrow Island and a pair of huge wrought iron gates, shiny and black, bisected it. They rose more than sixty feet up into the sky and were lined at the top with a string of vicious looking spikes and a single white skull.

Bare Barrow grew steeply from the river Caleb, fed to bursting by the river Bim and a handful of other smaller tributaries that sloped and wandered through the surrounding mountains. A number of dark imposing houses lined its cliff tops, each featuring the same appreciation of spiked ironwork and tall square roofs, their sprouted towers and domes overgrown by years of moss and disrepair.

At the centre of the island was the biggest house of them all. A dense, unkempt garden, punctuated by broken stone flags that once formed paths and patios stretched out around the tall commanding walls and spire. Here and there trails of rusted red ivy climbed and clung to the barren rock, intent on reclaiming it to nature but somehow not quite managing the task.

A thick brass nameplate proclaiming 'Barrow Lodge' sat on the large oak panelled and studded door that barred the entrance to the house. It had recently been cleaned and polished so that it now stood out in stark contrast to the crumbling stone walls and dust-covered windows of the house itself.

The door slowly opened and a large, elderly lady stood in the gloomy hallway, her hair bullied up into a tight bun and her body entirely covered from head to toe in acres of black lace, which culminated in an unfeasibly large bustle around the back. She tottered a little way out of the doorway and looked to where the garden slipped away and toppled down the steep cliffs to where the boats were still assembling below.

"Good," she gurgled, her fat tongue lolling around her mouth in anticipation.

"Mister Spinks!" she shrieked, then turning to the doorway, her face slid from that of a kindly round auntie into something which closer resembled a hyena that had stood on a pin.

"Mister Spinks, will you kindly see to my requirements?" she boomed, shaking the house to its very foundations.

"Coming madam," at last came the shrill and distant reply.

After a moment or two an ashen-faced butler, resplendent in waistcoat and tails, rushed to her side and caught his breath, whilst desperately trying not to be caught by the full force of his mistress' furious glare.

"Where were you Spinks? I was unattended. Anything might have happened to a weak and defenceless noblewoman! What have you to say for yourself?" she spat venomously.

"I was cleaning the bedrooms as you had asked madam. I was in the west wing and could not hear you call. I am very sorry Lady Marchant, I will see to it that it does not happen again and I humbly implore your forgiveness for this most regrettable folly."

A heavy leather handbag launched itself as though from nowhere, and struck Spinks squarely on the chin with a ferocity that was as unexpected as the blow itself. As it connected, it lifted his wrapped-over strands of hair from their greased restraint and sent him toppling sideways into a large and extremely thorny rosebush.

“Get up you silly little man! I simply will not have you lying around in my flowerbeds!” She gave him a couple of firm kicks in the back and he tried to struggle back to his feet.

“Look at the state of you. Call yourself a manservant? Get up from the floor this instant, you grovelling little cretin!”

Spinks pursed his thin lips and smiled unconvincingly, while he painfully stood back up and wiped the soil from his clothes.

“Now go and greet my brothers and sisters. You will gather together the town leaders and bring them up to their rooms. Say I will see them in the dining hall at seven o’clock and that their questions will be answered then in full. Oh, and Spinks?”

“Madam?”

Her fat hand snatched a painful hold of his ear, whilst the other hand delivered a glancing slap across his forehead. She dragged his face uncomfortably close to her own and he flinched as her hot fetid breath blew specks of warm spittle onto his quivering cheek.

“You are not one of us and you never will be, so the sooner you learn your place, the better for all concerned!” She snorted with contempt.

“That will be all *Mister* Spinks,” she cackled, and swaggered back inside the house, leaving a thick trail of rotten fruit perfume in her wake and slamming the big oak door behind her.

Spinks half stumbled and half ran down the weed-strewn paths, and upon reaching the large wooden stile at the garden’s edge, took a second to smooth his hair down and dab his bleeding lip with his shirttails. Once he considered himself more presentable, he hopped over the wooden rail and scabbled down the path to meet his new masters.

Far below, Josiah Claybourne lifted his silver telescope to his eye and waved over his second in command.

“Dickens? It would seem as though we have been sent a welcoming committee of sorts, and not before time.”

“The town is moored securely, Mister Claybourne, sir. Shall I fetch the girl from her cabin?”

“No, she will do where she is for the time being. Make sure that she has provisions and then assemble a small landing party. We may have had an invitation here, but the stench of treachery still lies deep in the soil of this barrow.”

“Aye sir, I will gather my best boys and make sure that they are suitably furnished with arms,”

“Good, but tell them to keep their weapons well hidden. I do not want any trouble if none is planned, understood?” he smiled.

“Aye, aye sir, but what if you do not return from the meet with her ladyship? Should we take the Lodge by force - we have the men to do it?”

“We shall return, have no doubts about that, but if Marchant plans treachery then it will not be before her head has been skewered high upon the spikes of the Barrow Gate Bridge.”

Once Spinks had finished speaking to the inhabitants of the neighbouring vessel, he set off in a stumbling scurry along the narrow path, only slowing to a more reverent walk once he was close enough to cautiously approach Claybourne. He bowed deeply, and at once almost lost balance on the sharp volcanic rocks, which threatened to tip him into the dark, swirling water below. Once he had recovered his poise, he waited for a second and then smiled and nodded politely to each of the assembled Strangers.

“Good afternoon Gentlemen, I hope that I find you well? My mistress, her ladyship the Right Honourable Lady Marchant of Bare Barrow sends her most fond and respectful felicitations on your most joyful return. I am bid to ask that the Town Minister accompany me up to the Lodge, where ample provision has been made for a most comfortable overnight stay. My Ladyship hopes that this arrangement will meet with your agreement and approval...”

Dickens stood forward and grabbed Spinks roughly by the scruff of the collar.

"I do not know what you are up to, you little Weasel, but no Town Minister of this town is going up to that cursed place alone," he said, his hand instinctively reaching for his dagger.

"I am afraid that I have my strict instructions sir," he felt his lip begin to throb.

"Lady Marchant was most emphatic."

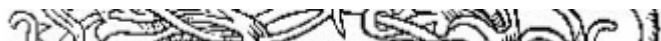
Claybourne strode across the landing planks and up to the cowering manservant.

"Then tell me why after all these years we are called back to this wretched Barrow? The invitation was more than clear about what we bring in terms of cargo, but not so clear as to the reasons why. Why, after such a long time, have we been asked to return when we have found a home and life elsewhere?"

"Sir, I know as little and as much as you, but her Ladyship will address the assembled Town Ministers at seven bells this evening and I have been instructed to show you to your quarters so that you can settle in. Please wait here until I have informed the other Ministers. I will return for you all presently," With that Spinks scuttled off to the next ships that lay scattered along the treacherous footpath that wound around the steep cliffs and had very soon disappeared completely from sight.

"So we still know no more than we did when we arrived. All I know is that I do not trust her, sir. I do not trust any of them up on that God-forsaken hill. I never have and I never will," said Dickens at last.

"I feel sure that it will all become apparent in the fullness of time, Mr Shawditch, of that I have very little doubt," said Claybourne thoughtfully.



"Mister Stan I think you'd better come and take a look at this!" shouted Billy Trinder excitedly, bursting through the door.

"Oh what now? I've had quite enough excitement for one day thank you very much!" sighed Stan.

After all the commotion of the morning Stan, the long-suffering gatekeeper of Tiltton-Craddock, had finally reached his favourite position. His feet were firmly up (and covering the multitude of dark rings that

stretched across his tiny office table) and he was puffing away contentedly at a thin clay pipe stuffed into the corner of his mouth. He looked up from the tiny spectacles perched at the end of his nose and lowered the newspaper that he had been desperately trying to lose himself in all day.

Billy was outside the tower, watching the last of the soot-covered and weary firemen trudging down to the nearby brook to fill their pails with water. The small fire upstairs had, thankfully, been contained almost as soon as it had started by a number of bloated wine bladders, donated by the vintners of the parish and hung around the Cathedral for decoration, which had caught fire and then promptly burst, covering the flames and the faithful alike in a viscose sticky mess.

Suddenly, something caught his eye. Over by the edge of the southernmost tip of woods, eight brown-dressed figures had burst forth from the undergrowth and were fast covering the mile or so of ground between the woods and the tower.

They strode purposefully, their silver helmets flashing shafts of hot white sunlight, a single jet-black star of glass the only visible feature on their faceless heads and at this moment there were eight of them pointed towards the open tower gate.

"I really, really think that you should come and see this Mister Stan," implored Billy.

Stan shook his head and finally stirred from the comfort of his seat, stretching out his arms and yawning as he wandered across the office to his little open window.

He looked outside and his eyebrows furrowed.

"Funny," he said at last, "Those aren't City Guards. In fact I'd say they look more like soldiers, only they don't seem to be armed or nothing."

As they came closer, the leader raised his fist and they reached inside their robes, and with a flurry of glinting metal each pulled out a huge mechanical crossbow, which they raised to eye level as they continued to stride ever nearer.

Stan's intuition was rarely wrong and he suddenly felt as though his stomach had been attached to stone weights and tossed down a cold, dark pit. He ran to the gatehouse wheel and frantically began pulling on it and almost crying in desperation as it firmly refused to budge.

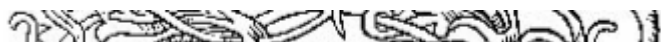
“Get help! Run boy run!” He screeched. His glasses now lay cracked and bent, discarded on the floor. He ran back to the window and squinted, trying to see what was happening outside.

Scattered across the ground were the crumpled bodies of those men and women who had been unfortunate enough to be in the path of the Watchmen as they made their approach to the city. A group of Guards who had initially come out to meet the intruders head-on had quickly realised the danger that they were now in and were hastily beating a fighting retreat back towards the open drawbridge. With a piercing and relentless mechanical squeal, the Watchmen released a second hail of bolts and all but one of the retreating guards fell heavily to the muddy ground.

A flurry of steel bolts burst through the Gatehouse window sending jagged shards of glass in all directions, knocking through the window frame as though it was made of nothing more than damp bread, and thudding deep into the crumbling plaster of the office wall behind.

By the time the surviving City Guards had frantically helped Stan pull up the gate, two Watchmen were already inside the once peaceful City of Tiltton-Craddock.

And that was all that it took to seal the City’s fate.



As the hay cart tripped and stumbled over the shining cobbles towards Bimleigh-Heavers, Brink thought that he briefly heard singing. When they finally left the dank, dark woods and once more burst out into the sunlight, he sat up and looked around.

Mitch was now steering the cart and Bob lay, still fast asleep, but with the addition of a large green apple, pushed between his teeth as he slumbered. He looked just like a stuffed suckling pig, and as Mitch looked up to see Spartacus awake, he giggled.

“I was hoping you’d wake first so that someone else could see him. I’d give my eye-teeth to have an artist paint his picture right now,” he said wistfully. “And perhaps lend him two big fat trotters for feet - that would finish off the joke quite handsomely.”

They rounded the corner where the expansive river Bim swung into view and swept past. Passing a tiny tumbledown cottage, they headed towards

the colourful hustle and bustle of the quay.

Bob, dragged back to consciousness by the mounting noise and smells of town life, sat bolt upright, snapped open his eyes and spat the apple from his mouth. Its clear juice dribbled past his chin and dripped down onto the front of his shirt, forming a cluster of small dark stains. His nose quivered as he savoured the myriad smells produced by the food vendors, which clung to their clothes as they drifted past on the breeze.

“Roast Chicken. Stop the cart.”

Mitch did as he was told and jumped from the front seat, taking the reins and leading Croaky down a tiny side lane and into the backyard of ‘The Farmers’ Legs’, whereupon both Bob and Brink disembarked.

“Roast Chicken must be made a priority,” said Bob, staring earnestly into Mitch’s face.

“Then chicken it is for you, my friend, and some Pork with stuffing for me. Ale House or Chophouse?”

“Chophouse definitely, it saves the pocket and serves the belly.”

“A what house?” asked Brink.

“You never heard of a Chophouse?” smiled Bob in amused wonder.

“You take along your cuts of meat or chicken and for half a groat they’ll cook it to a turn and serve it with spuds. Sitting down or take it out. Of course, we usually sit in on account of the pleasant view,”

“...Of the wenches who work there!” giggled Mitch.

“Then come Lord Robert, let us visit old Mr Glumpuddle - for I believe that to be his name - and purchase the finest victuals for our banquet,” said Mitch grandly. “You coming along, Sparty?”

“You boys carry on without me - I think I’ll walk up to the top of town. I wanted see for myself that the fire is really out in Tiltton-Craddock and it should be possible to spy it from up by those standing stones.

“I also wanted to have a wander around the stones themselves. I have the most peculiar feeling that I should visit them, and I do not know why.”

“Well if it’s a choice between a load of old boulders or food served by

well-turned wenches, I know which I prefer,” smiled Mitch

“Old boulders?” ventured Bob.

“Indeed not Robert, my simple friend.”

“Who are you calling a friend?”

“Then Glumpuddle’s emporium of low-quality produce it is! See you later down by the Quay, Spartacus,” laughed Bob and with a wave they went their separate ways as the narrow alleyway coughed them out into the bustling street ahead.

Brink walked up the winding road and past the bunched up shop fronts, their distended bay windows spilling out into the street and bearing their goods like giant overfilled fruit baskets. Through their round, thick windows he could see mountains of bread, richly coloured dresses made from shimmering silk, paintings of grand-looking people and, in the last tiny shop, dainty little painted hats made exclusively for goats.

He stopped and looked back through the last window, not quite able to believe his eyes. A sign in the shop window proclaimed ‘Buy your hand-made Gote Hats here! Beat the rush! Don’t let thy little Gote get cold! Get yores chepe before they come back into fashyon!’ Inside was a small, rather depressed-looking man who looked up hopefully as he spotted Brink through the window. Spartacus shook his head and carried on up the street.

After a minute or two of striding up the steep hill, he was almost out of the town. He had just walked past an oddly misshapen and hurriedly whitewashed house, when its front door burst open and a large and very wet animal pelted out at full speed, its paws not quite synchronised and seemingly fleeing from some unseen danger.

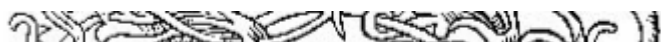
The dog’s terror, combined with the obstruction caused by two soapy and very floppy eyebrows, ensured that by the time he saw Spartacus Brink it was far too late to stop. With a damp thud, Cabbage slapped into the back of Brink’s legs and sent him spinning high into the air. His arms flailing wildly around, Brink made a vain attempt to steady himself before finally coming down headfirst with a painfully heavy bump.

Mavis Humblebucket rushed outside and covered her mouth with her hands in shock and disbelief.

Spartacus Brink’s prone, unmoving body lay sprawled out on the hard,

stony path. His ashen face now had the smallest trickle of fresh blood, which snaked from his nose across his cheek and slowly dripped, drop by drop, into the dry white dust below.

“Oh my good lord, Cabbage! You stupid, stupid dog! What in all the merciful heavens have you been and gone and done now? You’ve only gone and killed someone...” She whispered.



“Here you go my dear, sort these out for us if you would be so kind.” said Bob handing over two large damp brown paper parcels, tied together with string.

“What have you got in here a pair of sheep?” laughed the Head Cook and proprietor of the ‘Lamb Chomp’. She feigned a struggle to lift them up and dropped them dramatically back with a slap onto the counter below.

“Aye, I’m sure we can find somewhere hot to put these. Jug of wine or small beer while you are waiting there, gentlemen?”

“It would be uncommonly rude not to,” replied Mitch. “Will you be joining me, Brother Robert?”

“I would not wish to offend these nice people by refusing their hospitality Brother Mitchell.”

“Then two jugs of your reddest wine it is, thank you my good lady.”

They peered through the smoky darkness and eventually spotted a couple of free seats along the very back wall of the room. After some careful negotiation and a number of polite apologies they finally managed to wedge themselves between a very large lady in a very small hat and a group of horse traders, who were fiercely discussing prices.

“I’m looking forward to this, it seems like a long time since we had breakfast,” said Mitch. “Hey up, I don’t fancy yours much!”

Bob laughed as he saw the serving woman hobble over, well into her seventies and bearing two wine jugs that looked even older and more battered than she did herself.

She slapped them down on the table and seemed to be trying desperately to catch her breath.

“That’ll be a Crown for the drink and half a Groat for the cooking. So that’s...” she paused to think for a second, “A Crown an’ Groat. Spuds are included. It’ll be over as soon as it’s done.”

“It usually is,” said Mitch looking faintly bemused.

She turned to leave.

“And what would we pay if my mate here gives you a lovely big kiss on the cheek?” said Bob to the swift accompaniment of a sharp dig in the ribs.

She looked Mitch up and down dismissively.

“Three crowns,” she said, hobbling back to the kitchen.

After a little while, Bob had almost stopped laughing, and Mitch was looking marginally less grumpy when their food finally arrived, sizzling and spitting its passage through the room on two fiercely hot black skillets.

Bob’s chicken was spit-roasted to a turn and Mitch’s slab of crispy griddled pork and stuffing sat like a small house brick, still cooking as it reclined and slumbered on its piping hot, cast-iron bed. A large plate of steaming buttered potatoes covered in fragrant rosemary and ground black pepper accompanied them.

Between them, the two wasted no time in getting started, much to the amusement of the assembled horse traders and to the utter disdain of the woman in the undersized hat.

“In all my born days, I have never seen such a disgusting display of vulgarity and dreadful ill-manners,” she commented loudly, daintily wiping the corner of her mouth with the corner of a pristine napkin. “Some people behave as though they were the very beasts in the field. I will not be subjected to this disgusting display for one solitary moment longer!” As she got up (nose first) to leave, Bob whispered slyly to his friend.

“The hat. Definitely the hat.”

“Half a crown?”

“Only for a direct hit and you only get one shot. Agreed?”

“One shot will be more than sufficient to slay this particular Dragon.”

By this time the woman was almost halfway across the floor, but had stopped close to the counter to reprimand a meek looking man and his wife who had been foolish enough to move their chairs an inch or two into her corpulent path.

As quick as a flash, Mitch reached into an inside pocket and retrieved his trusty sling shot. Picking up a steaming hot potato in the other hand, he loaded the sling and without further ado, swung it twice around his head before releasing it and dropping straight back down to his seat with a thump.

His aim was as true as his word. The potato, unleashed with a near-legendary ferocity, quickly spanned the fifty or so feet from their table to the hat and whistled as it closed in on its target, striking and then dislodging it in an explosion which was as abrupt as it was sticky.

The lady screamed, the hat landed directly in a cauldron of soup (and sank to where it remained for a good three weeks afterwards, improving the flavour immeasurably), the Head Cook ran out to see what was happening, and the entire house seemed to erupt spontaneously in a wave of unrestrained laughter.

“I do believe that you are improving with that sling shot, me old mate!” cried Bob slapping his friend heartily on the back.

“I always aim to please,” laughed Mitch, returning to his wine.

“Alright then, let’s have some order in here please ladies and gentlemen,” shouted the Head Cook above the din, “Come on please, you’re not in Bobbleton now, you know!”

As the room settled back down to some semblance of order, the Head Cook fussed around and wiped the large lady down until she regained her senses and flounced out in disgust. At this point, the cook finally allowed herself to break into a fit of giggles and walked back into the kitchen, laughing and shaking her head.

It was around this time that a farmer walked purposefully into the room, a black and white sheepdog stealthily circling his feet. He slapped a rabbit down on the counter and then walked over to where the upper class lady had recently vacated her seat. He seemed to know the horse traders, each of whom nodded their recognition as he sat down.

“You heard the latest about old Craddock City?” he asked, clearing his throat.

Mitch and Bob’s ears pricked at the sound of their last port of call. Although to the casual observer they remained quaffing jovially, they were actually listening quite carefully to each word the visitor spoke.

“What’s that then?” came the reply from one of the others

“It’s all afire.”

“Ah, I think I might be in a position to help here,” Mitch interrupted smiling “as I know a couple of people who journeyed from Tiltton this morning. There was a smallish fire that started in the church apparently but to be honest I don’t think that it was anything much to be worried about.”

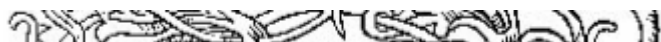
“Well it must have got a devil worse since your friends left there. I rode back over those hills not half an hour ago, and the place had been gutted. It took me a while to take it all in.” He lifted a nearby tankard to his lips and he stared into the flickering fire in the hearth close by.

“I stopped up on the Bluedale hillside and you could see big orange flames leaping through the burned-out windows. To the West there was a procession of covered wagons heading away from the tower. It looked as though they had taken everything with them they could carry. I just thank the Lord that they didn’t all perish.”

“They must have left when they had done all that they could,” he shook his head sadly and stared into the embers in the hearth.

“So I rode back here as fast as I could to get help. I told the Mayor as soon as I arrived but it is just as I said to him - there’s not much you can do with a fire that size but wait for it to burn itself out.

“And the rains will be here tomorrow so that’s a Godsend,” said another.



“So gentlemen,” continued the farmer, turning to the only pair of the group that he did not know, “pray tell us all that you know.” He looked around and then looked around again. One minute they had been right by his side and now they were nowhere to be seen.

Meanwhile, around the back of the chophouse and walking briskly up the

cobbled alleyway leading back to the main street, Mitch and Bob were exchanging frantic whispers.

“It wasn’t that bad when we left, I just know it wasn’t!” said Bob

“Totally gutted he said. Orange flames and gutted, that’s what he said!” replied Mitch in a voice that verged on outright panic.

“Look just calm down. No one’s come looking for us yet so that gives us a head start. We’ll meet up with Spartacus as planned and then get out of here as fast as the cart can carry us all. We’ll be alright as long as we just keep moving.”

They left the alleyway and headed down to the Quayside, fully expecting to find Brink waiting for them as they had agreed. He was nowhere to be found.

“I don’t believe this!” cried Mitch in desperation.

“Come on, we’ll take a walk up to the Standing Stones and see if he’s still up there. He’s probably been wandering around having a good look at the view,” replied Bob, trying to calm him down but feeling anything but calm himself.

They half walked and half ran up the winding lane that led up through Bimleigh-Heavers and up past the large whitewashed house to the hill where the ancient stones stood. When they got there to find that the whole area was empty: the only sight that greeted them was considerably less than comforting. For across the tree-crowned hills and through the valley, to the Southwest sat the black scorched remains of the tower. A thick black wall of smoke engulfed all but the very base of the tower and it drifted and spiralled high up into the clouds, tinting them with a spreading black stain.

“He’s not here! With the best will in the world Bob, both you and I know that we cannot afford to wait around until he decides to turn up. Not with that hanging around our necks!” He pointed towards all that was left of Tiltton-Craddock.

“I don’t like leaving him in the lurch; he’s our friend, and he deserves better.”

“They won’t be looking for one fellow on his own, though, will they? People will have seen a load of us running away, not just one man. Don’t you see it’s for the best that we split up? After all, that’s what George did!”

“Don’t you bring that selfish little devil into this! He was saving his own bacon and if you believe anything else he ever tells you then you’re as daft as you look!” snapped Bob angrily.

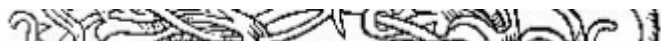
“But do you see what I’m getting at? He’ll be better off by himself until it all simmers down a little bit. He’s not stupid, our Spartacus, I reckon he’ll keep his head down.”

“Well seeing as we can’t find him anyway, it seems like we don’t have a right lot of choice,” Bob grudgingly agreed.

They made their way back down the lane and around the back of *The Farmer’s Legs*. Mitch hurriedly fetched Croaky from the small stable and busied himself with hooking up the cart while Bob had a quick last look inside the bar and up and down the quay, ducking and dodging past entertainers and food vendors of all shapes and sizes as they plied their various trades on and around the decks of the visiting village.

With heavy hearts they quietly climbed up into the front seat of the cart and finally set off down the road that guided them past the quay.

They creaked and swayed onto the wide leafy track, and followed it into the dark secluded woods of the Sayge valley and under the high brick arches of the Tarn Bridge. Very soon, and without a spoken word from either of them, they had left Bimleigh-Heavers and Spartacus Brink far behind. Although, it must be said, both remained in their thoughts for many, many miles to come.



Mister Claybourne removed his hat and then peeled off his black velvet gloves, setting each one down in turn on the heavily ornate mahogany dressing table. A tall, oval mirror sat above it, the silver missing in patches from its back, leaving blotches of darkness in the room’s dim reflection.

An aged four-poster bed stood at the far end of the bedroom, and musty oak panelling lined its walls, lending it the smell, and indeed appearance, of an old drawer, unopened since long ages past.

He drew back the green velvet curtains that hung heavily in front of the high bedroom window and looked through its tiny octagonal panes and out across the once-splendid gardens of the lodge. At the foot of the sheer cliffs, and largely hidden from sight, the flotilla of gathered vessels now

flanked the entire perimeter of the island.

In the afternoon's fading golden light, the last party of Town Ministers made their unsteady way up the tiny coastal track and through the gates of Barrow Lodge, accompanied by the fawning form of Spinks, herding them - as might a sheepdog - safely guiding his mistress' sheep to their pens for the night.

Downstairs the slow resounding crash of a heavy gong rang out, followed by the unmistakable sound of people up and down the corridor beginning to leave their rooms. Claybourne flipped open his silver pocket watch and then let it slide back into his silken waistcoat pocket.

"Then let us see what wonderful notions my good Lady Marchant has to proffer," he muttered, picking up his hat and setting it straight upon his head in the mirror.

Upon leaving his room, Claybourne joined the sombre tide of Ministers who politely nodded to each other as they picked their way back down the sweeping staircase that led to the spacious hallway below. By the time the stairs had emptied, the hall below was full to the brim, and a palpable air of expectation hung heavily over the nervous small talk, passed between half-recognised acquaintances and long-standing rivals alike.

The gong sounded again and the general hubbub quickly settled down until there was silence, at which point the small and nervous voice of Spinks echoed around the bare oak panelled walls.

"Gentlemen and Ladies. I thank you all for your cooperation and I realise that you are all anxious to learn the reason for your being asked back to the Barrow after such a long time, and at such very short notice, but I can assure you that very soon your questions will all be answered in full.

"Very shortly we will be proceeding through to the Great Hall, at which point everybody will be relieved of any dangerous *objects* which they may have mistakenly kept upon their person..."

This announcement caused a stir, which escalated from a murmur into a rising restlessness amongst the gathered throng.

Spinks raised his voice a little to try and exert a little calm over the proceedings.

"I can assure you that this procedure is simply designed as a gesture of

goodwill, and to put you all at your ease. I can also assure you that anything removed will be returned to you before you leave the Lodge tomorrow morning. Now if you could follow me Gentlemen and Ladies, single file if you please.”

The high doors at the far end of the hallway opened up into a darkened room filled with leather-bound chairs, and at the bottom end of the hall stood a tall wooden frame, swathed by a long black sheet that reached all the way down to the floor.

All around the hall, a jumble of various glass canisters and cases stood in the dusty twilight, each holding the silent remains of long-dead birds and reptiles which had been mounted in a variety of wildly unconvincing poses and then denied the right to rot.

Just inside the doorway stood a finely carved but sturdy wooden frame, which held a deep glass tank that almost blocked entrance to the room. Within the tank, a pair of electric eels swam around in a luminous green liquid, which bubbled and popped as the current from their lithe bodies was discharged into it in a series of dull flickering bursts of light.

This alone would have been quite striking had it not been for the most peculiar properties of the liquid itself. Each time the imprisoned eels sent a brief flash of electricity through the liquid, the view of the person standing behind the tank melted and changed. Layers of clothing seemed to simply fall away, revealing all that was secreted inside.

A pair of butlers peered intently through the contraption and frequently signalled to a larger colleague, a thickset man with a beard (and a single fat eyebrow that reached across both eyes in a permanent scowl), who would step out of the shadows and seemed to fill the entire double doorway by himself. He would then politely ask the Minister in question if they could ‘be so kind as to relieve themselves of the long handled dagger (or hammer or cosh) that they had mistakenly left inside their top hat (or trousers or jacket pocket) before entering the Hall?’

Some of the Ministers had to be asked two or three times before they would surrender their arms to the large pewter bowl that sat on the table to their side. Once disarmed, maidservants greeted the Ministers and took them through the gas-lit gloom to their seat.

After a good half-hour, the Strangers were finally all sitting down and the last of the servants withdrew from the room, taking the glowing green tank

with them.

A small wooden side door towards the back of the hall swung slowly open and Lady Marchant strode into the room, her hand raised in the air.

“It has been a very, very long time since we were last here together on Bare Barrow, too long a time by far.

“It is a long time since the troubles which ripped apart our community, since we paid so heavily in our search for enlightenment and progress.

“It is ten long years since we wrote the Declaration of Isolation, since you left to go unto the four corners of this land and set up your homes and farms, to prosper and to grow. It has been a very, very long time indeed.” She paused for effect.

“I am sure that you all heard of the sad departure of my husband Henry, the late Lord Marchant.” There was a grumble of confirmation from the onlookers before the room fell back into expectant silence.

“He always said that the family Stranger would thrive on being apart. He said that while we were together there would always be jealousies and infighting, and for a time, I am sure that you will agree, he was right. He also said that he would not trust a single one of you as far as he could throw you!”

There was a ripple of amused agreement throughout the hall.

“But times have changed, and now the times are ripe for change.”

It was plain to see that Marchant was really starting to get into her stride when she began to strut up and down the front of the hall like an angry cockerel, her arms tightly crossed, occasionally lifting a single finger for effect.

“These past years have been good to us, good to our families and our communities and good to the little people we rule over. But the years have been even more fortunate for our enemies.” This was met by a murmur of approval that rippled through the audience in a wave of thoughtful nodding.

“Thane monastery in particular has grown stronger than we should ever have allowed. Its monks have taken lands that were ours for hundreds of years to make their own, while our once great empire has slowly dwindled

away to the point where we stand at the foothills of oblivion. How long can we afford to stand divided as the vile rats of Thane scurry through our land and houses, taking the food from our children's mouths and defiling all that we once held so precious?"

The room erupted into rapturous applause and at the very front of the hall many Town Ministers collectively rose from their seats to demonstrate the strength of their support.

"Together with the Barrow Council and our very finest inventors, technicians and mystics I have constructed a plan which will bring our enemies to their knees. Once more we will be joined together, side by side, brothers and sisters and this time nothing, *nothing* will stand in our way."

This was greeted by more applause. She raised her arms with a smile and appealed for calm.

"In the past we were too sluggish. We would march overland for days on end, giving our enemies the chance to prepare for the battle ahead.

"We were fine when laying siege to forts in the low counties or striking isolated villages across the Caleb or the Bim, but when it came to the highlands or the mountains to the South, we always fell flat on our faces. We were too slow over land, and our best weapons too big to cross the mountains. Our men were left weak and vulnerable to attack.

"Who can ever forget the assault on that wicked monastery almost eleven years ago, where many of our oldest and finest Ministers were trapped by the enemy hordes and left to perish in the cold mountain snow?

"So we sought more effective weapons to furnish our armoury. Weapons based upon the ancient dark powers that lay long forgotten by our forebears. Powers which we enhanced with our vast scientific knowledge and which allowed us to disrupt the very fabric of reality!"

The hushed silence that fell across the room was dramatically broken.

"And will you have us believe that the weapons which so nearly annihilated us forever should be built again?" shouted Claybourne angrily. "Tell me - is that why we are here? To help you construct even more dangerous and unstable weapons so that you can finish the job off properly this time?" His fellow ministers nodded and murmured their agreement.

Lady Marchant waited for the sounds of dissent to subside and then

continued.

“There was so much that we did not understand about the forces we previously sought to master. Their power was far greater than even we could ever have anticipated. Finally, and after years of painstaking research, our experiments have surpassed all expectations.”

“I will play no part in this madness!” Claybourne rose to his feet, along with many who were sitting close by.

“I was prepared to return here with an open mind and listen to what you had to say, but now I have heard enough. I am reminded of the mistakes that we made each time I look into a mirror and I will not be party to making matters any worse.” He turned and made to leave the hall.

“Even if I told you, my good Mr Claybourne, of a breakthrough that would bring us unimaginable might? Even if I showed you a weapon so powerful, so formidable that it could finally force those dogs in Thane to their very knees?”

Claybourne stopped in his tracks and turned to look her directly in the eyes.

“You have my attention, Lady Marchant,”

“Then, gentlemen and ladies, I will not dally a moment longer.

“For it is my pleasure to present to you the most powerful device that has ever been created. Might I introduce to you all - ‘The Reaper of Wits!’” and with a wave of her hand she tore away the thick sheets hanging behind her.

Amongst gasps of amazement and awe, the sheets fell away and softly landed in shallow black puddles on the floor.

Standing within the confines of the wooden frame was a shining brass pillar that stretched almost up to the ceiling itself and was topped with a black crystal spire. Around the base of the pillar was an octagonal chest, crafted from gleaming burnished chestnut and inlaid with all manner of silver mounted dials and levers.

Surrounding the contraption were sixteen red velvet seats, each one facing outwards, and above every seat was a fat golden hand, curled tight into a fist, easily the size of a grown man’s head.

Set into the back of each hand was a selection of mystic symbols, inlaid with polished black stones. Their facets caught the light and glinted as the entire structure began to slowly slide around the floor, gradually picking up speed until it was revolving around its axis like a grand gothic fairground attraction.

“For your part in this reunion, you were instructed to return here with a most unusual piece of cargo. You were each asked to bring with you a Thoughtthrower and this, my brothers and sisters, is the reason why.

“With the machinery you see here before you, we will harness the forces of their unnatural minds and strike deep at the hearts of our most hated enemies. Look upon it well, my brethren, and look well upon this day, for this is the very moment when first you gazed upon this glorious instrument of our resurrection!”

Chapter 8



he cool sea breeze brushed past the face of Spartacus Brink and the sand held his frame as he settled back into its deep forgiving arms.

As he edged towards consciousness, his lazy mind struggled to nudge past serenity and back to reality but kept relenting, unable to deny itself the warm, deep bath of comfort within which he was immersed.

Four wild stallions trotted close by and inspected his peaceful sleeping form.

He felt their hot breath on his cheek and sensed their hooves stirring the soft white sand at his feet, their noses nudging him impatiently then leaving him to his blissful tranquillity.

Little by little he felt the soft tide touch his face, the salt water lapping at his brow and cheek, leaving the skin damp and cool in the evening air.

Rising as though from a murky seabed, he was dragged wearily towards conscious thought.

Finally surfacing from the ebb and flow of his scattered dreams he began to recognise the soft damp aroma of herbs, which rolled down his forehead and filled his tingling nostrils with the mingled scents of Mint, Burdock, Ginger and Thyme.

As his eyes slowly became aware of light and dark, flickering shapes loomed in front of his face and gradually coalesced into a single, blurred but solid, shape.

Brink's half-open eyes hazily glanced at an old man's staring face. His once dark beard was long and now peppered with patches of grey, and his eyebrows, tangled and matted, hung heavily over his eyes, shielding them from the faint warm glow of candlelight that glimmered in the near distance.

The old man said nothing but stared intently into Brink's eyes as though waiting for a certain unknown sign that might allow him to leave his bedside vigil.

Spartacus blinked and tried to adjust his eyes to the darkness of the room and to the close proximity of his silent observer. He cleared his throat and began to speak, his mouth dry and his voice unsteady.

“It would seem that I again awakened but once more I do not know where. I pray that you tell me where I am, old man. What is this place, and how did I come to be here?”

As the old man reached forward, Brink was reminded of a long forgotten image from his youth, of a young priest leaning towards the cheek of a dying man to offer him some gentle words of solace upon his deathbed.

Such a sombre image only compounded Brink’s surprise when a large (and extremely wet) dog’s tongue slapped heavily against his cheek and was slowly, purposefully, dragged upwards until a good third of his face had been given a good and proper licking.

“Cabbage! Get down from there!” hissed Bailey in a fierce whisper, rushing back into the room.

Cabbage shook his head in embarrassment and leaped from the bed, scurrying beneath it like an oversized rabbit buried in the safety of its burrow.

“I am really so sorry about this, sir, I truly am most dreadfully sorry about everything. I wasn’t expecting things to happen like this and now that you are here, I don’t know where to begin.”

Brink sat himself up and looked over at Bailey.

“Well suppose you start by telling me who you are and why I am lying here in this strange bed?” A damp muslin lump fell from his hair and immediately split wide open, spilling its vivid green guts straight down his shirt. “With some kind of poultice strapped to my head?”

Bailey sat down at the foot of the bed.

“My name is Bailey sir, Bailey Humblebucket, and this is my dog - well my father’s dog - Cabbage. It’s his stupid fault that you are lying in that bed. You see, he ran into you by our house, and you took a tumble and cracked your head open on the path outside.”

Brink slowly shook his head, as though listening for anything that might have come loose in the fall.

"I hit my head? But I was supposed to be meeting someone. Just how long have I been lying here?"

"You had slept for a couple of hours when my mother fetched old Mistress Nutter but she said that you would be alright as long as you were made comfortable and rested. She dressed that bump on your head, being as she knows all the old remedies and suchlike."

Spartacus looked out of the window and saw the black night sky and a handful of stars, scattered like tiny diamonds over a black velvet sheet.

"Then I thank you and your mother for your hospitality but I really must be leaving. My friends will be wondering what has become of me."

He slowly swung his legs from the bed, but winced when he leant down to pull on his boots and the swelling above his eye began to throb fiercely in protest.

"But that is not all sir. You see, I was told that you would come here. You must help me rescue someone who has been captured. She is being held in a Strangers' town, but it left last night and she was taken with it."

"Will you please stop calling me sir, boy? My name is Brink, Spartacus Brink and I am really very sorry Bailey Humblebasket, but I cannot even pretend to have the faintest idea of what you are talking about. All I can say is that where I come from, towns are generally to be found where you last saw them, so you might consider beginning your search there.

"And as far as rescue attempts go, I would dearly love to play the Good Samaritan but I am afraid that I have far more pressing matters to attend to. I bid you a very good evening young man."

With that, Brink collected up his belongings, slung his bags over his shoulder and set off down the darkened staircase, leaving a dumbstruck Bailey in his wake.

Brink was already outside the house before Bailey realised that things were not going entirely to plan, and chased down the stairs after him.

By the time he had caught up, Brink was at the top of the main street and striding purposefully back down the steep cobbled lane.

"My name is Humble*bucket* - Bailey Humblebucket. Please mister Brink. Can I just have a minute of your time? I know that you have come a long

way sir, but you see, I have a message for you.”

Brink stopped in his tracks and turned to the panting Bailey, whilst Cabbage trotted straight past, so interested in the street sounds and smells that he didn’t even notice them stop.

“A message? You should have said, boy. Is it from a couple of scruffy hay traders?”

“No sir, it is from a girl called Melissa,”

“Melissa? I don’t know anybody called Melissa.”

He narrowed his eyes and continued.

“Bob put you up to this didn’t he? Yes – it sounds just like something those two might dream up,” he laughed and continued back down the street.

“No sir. But please, I beg that you listen to me but for a moment,” said Bailey, now beginning to feel really quite exasperated.

“Alright Bailey calm down, I am listening, but I would rather walk and talk at the same time if it is all the same to you? So what did this girl ask you to tell me that she could not say herself?”

“She said that you were the Outlander and that she could help you find your way back to the land from where you came,”

To Bailey’s relief, something in this last statement seemed to strike a chord with Spartacus Brink, because he skidded to an abrupt halt and spun around to face him.

“But why in heavens name didn’t you tell me this earlier? Where is this Melissa girl now? It is imperative that I speak to her!”

“But that’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you for the last ten minutes,” spluttered Bailey defensively.

Just then Mavis Humblebucket rounded the corner, a large wicker basket tucked under her arm with a variety of slender green stalks and wide purple leaves poking out from under its lid.

As soon as she saw the pair of them she let out a shriek and hurried over.

“And what do you think you’re doing out of bed!” she squealed at a startled Brink, who never having actually met this woman in his life, was more than a little taken back to be scolded in such a manner.

“The doctor said that you needed rest, and rest is what you will get. Bailey! What did I tell you? I told you that he was our guest and that he must remain in bed until he had fully recovered. Well, does he look like he has recovered to you? Does he?”

The pair looked at each other sheepishly, and then Brink cleared his throat.

“Madam, I really am most thankful for your hospitality, but I really am quite recovered. You see, two travelling companions and I are stopping at the hostelry near the quay and they said that we should meet...” before he had time to finish she cut him off.

“And would these companions of yours happen to have names?”

“Bob... that is to say, Robert. Robert and... Mitchell,” he felt as though he was rapidly becoming younger than Bailey.

“So going drinking with your pals is more important than getting yourself back in good health is it? Well not in my book it isn’t. I’m sorry, sir, but I really must insist that you stay as our guest tonight - it really is the least we can do after all the trouble we’ve caused you.

“Bailey, you will go down to the Farmer’s Legs and inform this fine gentleman’s friends that he has had the good sense to avail himself of our hospitality for the evening and that they should come up to Muchleigh House themselves to take breakfast with us upon the morrow,”

Brink was now looking quite dumbfounded, but quickly realising that he had little or no choice in the matter, decided that he should at least be gracious in defeat.

“On reflection, I am sure that one night will do me no harm at all. I sincerely thank you for your kind generosity madam.”

“Good, then that’s settled.”

And taking a bemused Spartacus Brink by the arm Mavis Humblebucket gently marched him back up the winding street and back into her house.

George jumped down from Thunderbolt and tried desperately to catch his breath. Sweat clung to his forehead and stung as it seeped into the fresh cuts that covered his face and neck.

His once-clean clothes were now ripped and bloody. Streaks of dirt hung in dry crusts from his sleeves and holes adorned the only trousers that he had to call his own.

He had been riding for over six hours. Up and round the valleys and moorland, through the outlying farms and streams, up through the highlands and down through the lowlands. For six frenzied, breathless hours, grasses, branches and thorns had whipped him until he looked every bit as miserable and desperate as he actually felt.

And still they came.

George looked down at his knapsack, skewered through its centre by a single glinting crossbow bolt and shook his head, softly moaning to himself in tired desperation.

High up on the moonlit hill he had a good view of the misty, winding road that he had so recently travelled. He hastily tied up his trusty horse behind a nearby bush and crept out to the brow of the hill where he dropped down close to a tree and crouched silently in the darkness.

Reaching for his small brass telescope and struggling to control his aching lungs he looked out over the ridge and down into the swirling mist which surrounded the foot of the hill, making it stand out like an island in some mystical grey lagoon.

Nothing.

He drew himself back into the shadows and sat up against the tree, at last allowing himself an extended sigh of relief.

“At last, safe: with the darkness as my shield. They won’t be searching for me at this time of night - eh Thunderbolt?” he whispered hoarsely to his exhausted looking steed.

“I can’t believe the merry dance that these Tiltton soldiers have led us today. I have never seen anybody alive who could cover ground as fast as they have for as long as they have. It’s just not natural. Everywhere I turn, they seemed to be there before me. You’d think that there were a hundred

of them and yet I'd swear an oath on my mother's grave that they are less than ten men strong.

"I thank the lord if I have shaken them off at last. With a night as dark as this one they would have little or no chance of following my tracks and even less of finding me even if they could."

He reached inside a satchel and found a chunk of bread, which he bit into savagely, followed seconds later by a lump of cheese wrapped up in cloth, which had been hiding deep within a waistcoat pocket.

Thunderbolt stirred.

"Quiet girl, we'll find you a stable soon enough and then there will be all the oats that you can feed your face on." He laughed, quite pleased with himself and relieved to have at last outrun the hunters who had seemed to track him for so long.

He took another bite of the cob of bread and took a casual look over his shoulder into the darkness. What he saw made him spit out the bread and dive back into cover.

Deep in the blackness a group of lights had appeared and were bobbing slightly as their owners strode the shifting moorland path that George had so recently crossed himself.

In the tarred black gloom these tiny twinkling dots could easily have been mistaken for stars drifting down from the heavens, but George knew instantly that their paths led from an altogether different and considerably less pleasant origin.

He fumbled for his telescope and once he had found it, brought it trembling to a wide staring eye.

Seven helmeted monks carried flaming torches in their hands. Their orange flames caressing and licking the light evening breeze, sending soft white ash high up into the chilled night sky. An eighth monk led the party, bathing each of them in a deep, undulating blue glow which emanated from something that he held cupped in his hands, high above his head.

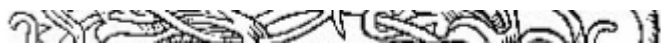
It was not until George had studied them for a second or two that a most uncomfortable thought suddenly dawned on him. He swallowed hard, and slowly shook his head in disbelief.

“They are using some kind of daemon’s magic to search me out. I don’t know how, but it is the only explanation that makes any sense. Wherever I turn they are at my heels like a pack of snapping hounds, and that lantern of theirs is the only possible reason. I have to get out of here quickly or they will be upon me again!”

Slipping and stumbling in the darkness, he fumbled with the rope as his shaking fingers tried to untie Thunderbolt, finally managing to release the tangle of rope from the thick bushes and leading her up the tree-lined path and away from the unrelenting pack.

As soon as he was over the ridge, he set off into a full gallop across the hilltop, only slowing to mount the steep track on the other side of the valley. As he cantered down the narrow pathway, he looked up and ahead in the far distance he saw the warm yellow glow of a village or possibly a town.

“Come on Thunderbolt, I think we may be in luck my old girl. If I can’t lose my hunters in the darkness then we’ll see how I fare in the light!”



“Ladies... and... Gentlemen! Please complete your refreshments and gather to the stage as this evening’s performance will begin in six minutes!” boomed the disembodied and yet unmistakable voice of Bertholde Arthur Augustus Hayseed Jefferson.

In each of the little white houses to the sides of the stage, lamps were extinguished until they were almost invisible but for the pale moonlight, which picked out their craggy stone faces and betrayed the shadowy forms of their inhabitants as they scurried backstage to play their own part in the show.

One by one, flaming torches were blown out around the huge stage area until the closed curtains were left gently billowing in the expectant gloom. Suddenly, with a fizzle and pop, the lights at the front burst into life and threw stark white beams up the flowing velvet partition, picking out the long shadows in the dips and ridges and making the embroidered masks shine out brighter than the darkened sun.

A hushed silence descended on the quay and even the hot food vendors began whispering their wares to avoid the withering looks directed from those members of the audience who sat around in rapt anticipation.

Bailey, his mother and a large dog, which was both ungainly and unkempt in equal measures, made their way through the scattered crowds and down towards the waterfront, where the huge covered grandstand had been opened up to give shelter against the rains which were soon to come.

Cabbage, who had been rudely awoken from the depths of slumber, had the dazed expression of a kindly, if somewhat bedraggled uncle who had drifted off to sleep after a huge Christmas dinner and couldn't quite remember whether he had eaten his pudding or not. Not that this fate could ever befall Cabbage, who could smell jam pudding from over three miles away and custard at four and a half (this being an experiment that Bailey had conducted one day when he was *really* bored). "It's no good my lad, I should be back at home looking after Mister Brink. He was still looked under the weather when I took him a tankard of hot rum punch. Mind you, he drank it right down well enough so he should soon be feeling the good of it. It's a recipe old mother Nutter gave me. It's twice as powerful as her breath and that's saying something."

"Mother, will you please try and enjoy yourself for once? I cannot remember the last time you had a night when you weren't fetching and carrying for some function or other."

"Well you know that things have been hard since we lost your father. I wouldn't have come here at all unless you had been so insistent that that nice Mister Jefferson would be offended if I had not made an appearance. I will stop for ten minutes and not a minute longer. You will simply explain to him that we have a sick visitor at home and that I must return to him presently."

In all the day's excitement, Bailey had completely forgotten that his mother was to be guest of honour at tonight's performance. As soon as he remembered, he smiled to himself because he knew for a fact that it was something that would thrill her to the core. The only problem was that if he told her that, he was certain that she was even more likely to turn tail and flee.

"But why not stay a little longer mother? I can go back and see that our guest is comfortable and does not want for anything. I looked after you alright last winter when you had the fever didn't I? Besides which, I looked in on him before we left the house and he was already fast asleep. I don't know what you put in that punch but it certainly did the trick."

“I will not hear of it. He is a guest in my house and it is my duty to look after him until he is back on his feet. I do not even know what possessed me to come down here tonight when I have obligations elsewhere.” At that moment she looked as though she might turn on her heel and march straight back up the little winding lane to Muchleigh House. Bailey thought quickly for some words that might convince her to stay, but knowing that she would have a selfless answer for anything that he could possibly say, found himself at rather a loss.

Suddenly a fanfare sliced through the damp night air. This was followed by a rather impressive swishing sound, which immediately served to catch the attention of Mavis Humblebucket (who knew the sound of quality drapery when she heard it).

As the heavy curtains were hastily pulled back, Mrs Humblebucket’s eyes stretched wide and her mouth fell open into a cavernous gape.

High on a walkway, slung down on ropes from way up in the theatre’s upper gallery, stood Bertie Jefferson, resplendent in scarlet top hat and tails, brandishing a long silver-tipped walking stick, which he cracked on the bronze handrail to cut through the chattering and bring a respectful silence upon the proceedings.

“My fine and good Ladies and gentlemen, kind patrons of Bimleigh-Heavers, I crave, nay *I demand* your undivided attention for the theatrical epic that I am now pleased to present.”

With another crack of his cane, the dark backdrop shimmered into life and became a painted city street, complete in every tiny detail, which stretched away into the far distance. Row upon row of white houses lined the sunny flat streets, the bustle and movement of the busy traders frozen in a single moment of time, quite oblivious to the audience of Heavrians who now surrounded them in stunned astonishment.

With a splintering creak, the large settee that Bailey had seen earlier shot up from a trapdoor to the right of the stage and landed with a thump with dust flying in all directions from its wallowing seats.

“Mayor Cruickshank if you would so kind as to join our company and enjoy the hospitality of the best seats in the house?” cried Jefferson, shading his eyes from the stage lights and gesturing to the seat. The Mayor puffed himself up and made his solemn way from the audience and up to the stage, accompanied by the polite applause of those who thought that he

might be watching them.

“I thank you, Town Minister, for this honour that you bestow upon my humble personage and if I might, I should just like to say a few short words in appreciation of this moment and what it means to myself and to the citizens of Bimleigh-Heavers...” started Cruickshank, rising from his seat and holding his lapels as though he was sure that they might otherwise fall off.

“A beautiful speech Mayor Cruickshank, short and yet infinitely expressive!” interrupted Jefferson quickly, energetically encouraging a swift round of applause. This had the effect of leaving the Mayor with the distinct impression that he had just said something of worth, and he sat down with a broad contented smile on his face.

“And if I might also have the pleasure of asking a second guest to the stage tonight? It is someone whom I am sure we all consider a pillar of the community. It is someone who, since we arrived in this fair town, has shown us nothing but the warmest hospitality. Mrs Mavis Humblebucket, if you would kindly approach the stage!”

The crowd erupted in applause and Bailey could not help but grin as he saw his mother’s shocked expression and her jaw dropping ever further towards the floor.

“Go on then, don’t keep them waiting!” he laughed, joining in the frenzied clapping which accompanied her as she nervously picked her way through the crowd and up the wide wooden stair onto the stage. As she sat down, she and the Mayor smiled to each other and the stage lights dimmed whilst a spotlight brightly illuminated the wings at the other side of the stage.

“So without further ado, let the show begin!”

Just as he finished talking, what looked like the contents of the entire village fed in from either side and mobbed the stage completely, each and every one of them dressed in different costumes and performing different duties. Some were farm hands, some were shopkeepers; there were milkmaids, barbers and teachers and one was even dressed as a large, and extremely shaggy, mongrel that leaped around on all fours until he jumped into his master’s arms, tipping him over backwards into a bath full of water that had been carefully positioned at the side of the stage.

Out of the centre of this perfectly choreographed chaos, rose Berty Jefferson, perched on a metal swing which was tugged high above the bustling heads of the crowd, revealing that whilst he had been obscured from the eyes of the audience he had done a quick change into full red and gold mayoral robes and regalia.

All at once, coloured lights flooded the stage and the small orchestra, neatly hidden away to one side of the stage, struck up and launched themselves gamely into the start of the song.

“Bim-leigh-Heav-ers is my kind of town!” sang Jefferson with gusto and threw his arms out, only to quickly grab back his hold of the swing as he very nearly unseated himself, “The Stones are up and the river is down! You can feed your face for less than a crown - in Bim-leigh-Heav-ers!”

The chorus-line turned around to the audience and began to sing, reaching a crescendo as they sang the praises of Bimleigh, its pristine streets and its ‘fine, fine’ inhabitants. When it seemed it could rise no more, the volume of the song dramatically dropped and smaller groups of actors began to sing their own particular verses. As they sang, the backdrop shimmered and changed, first showing a freshly ploughed field and then an impressive courtroom, as a white bewigged Judge extolled the many virtues of hanging and banged his oversized gavel merrily in time with the music.

As you might expect, there was little more that the players could have done to guarantee themselves a warm reception from their hosts. As soon as this opening song came to an end, the entire audience stood as one in a standing ovation, which lasted for a good two or three minutes.

Before the clapping had time to die down, the whole area cleared and a troupe of white-faced clowns burst onto the stage, leaping and running around (often into each other) in a frantic whirlwind of movement.

“Come on,” said Bailey to a captivated Cabbage, “We’d better go and see that Mister Brink is alright. Besides which, if he is awake, there are a few things I need to talk to him about.” And with that they slipped away from his mother and the brimming Bimleigh quayside and headed back up the hill to their home. As they walked further up the winding cobbled street, the sounds of the show gradually grew more subdued by the damp night air, until only the thump of the big bass drum and distant cymbal crashes remained.

As the town hall clock struck nine o’clock, a single drop of rain hit

Cabbage on the nose.

“Sire, I did as you bid me. The Crabtree farm is no more. We emptied the farm of all the food and drink we could find and took the sheep grazing in the fields, but there was no sign of the Farmer or his family. I think they had fled before we arrived,” said Tallow. He raised the silver goblet to his lips and took a deep draught of the sweet red wine, slaking his thirst and washing away the taste of the dust from the hard day’s trek.

He looked across the study to Arch-brother Taegis who was staring at the dozing Guardian and seemed to be very deep in thought.

“A Gold Noble piece for your thoughts, Arch Brother?” he ventured.

Taegis suddenly seemed to realise that Tallow was there and swung his head around, staring straight into his eyes with a ferocity that could easily have been misinterpreted as displeasure.

“The Guardian sleeps, yet whilst he slumbers his, what did he call them? Watchmen! His Watchmen carry out his bidding. They need no rest or shelter, they do not leave farmers’ families roaming the countryside, they simply search for his sworn enemies and do not cease in their quest until they have been hunted down and slaughtered. Just think of the possibilities that would exist if I were to have soldiers such as that to do my bidding...”

“I agree Arch Brother, but do you really think the Guardian might allow us to keep them once he has finished with them?”

“I do not see why not. As far as I can comprehend, they are the property of the monastery and ours to do with as we see fit. With - of course - the Guardian’s sacred permission.”

He looked slyly around to where the Guardian sat slumped in his large and ornate chair. When he was at rest, he looked deceptively like a frail and harmless old man. It was quite easy to forget the awesome power that he had at his disposal and Taegis had already found himself having to bite his tongue on more than one occasion. To any sane person, little affectations such as constant throat clearing or beginning every other sentence with the phrase ‘Of course in the old days...’ would probably not have caused any great offence - but to Taegis (a man not widely known for his tolerance in such matters) each and every mannerism was slowly driving him steadily further up the wall.

Ever since, as a small child, he was discovered to have had a birthmark that was remarkably similar in colour and shape to a small dark sun (in a particularly embarrassing place), Arch Brother Taegis had been treated almost like a god himself. He had never had to actually *put up* with anything or anyone for as long as he could remember, and the strain of this latest, novel - and not altogether pleasant - experience was beginning to tell. It had come to the point where his left eye had now begun to twitch very slightly whenever the Guardian so much as even spoke.

Suddenly, the black eyes of the Guardian snapped open and he looked around the room as though not sure for a second where he was.

"I should have heard something by now," he said to the startled couple, "You, Taegis, pass me that flagon of wine from the table, there's a good chap."

Taegis did as he was told and passed the tall curved jug from the far end of the table, where it stood by the scattered remains of the honey-baked piglet his master had greedily demolished earlier.

"Shall I fetch you a fresh cup, Guardian?"

"No thank you, this will suffice," he said simply.

The Guardian felt around in his robe pockets for a moment, before pulling out a small leather pouch, bound up with a length of cord, which he pulled free before emptying its glittering contents into the wine.

"I think it about time we see where my hunting dogs have got to, do you not agree, Brothers?"

Before waiting for a reply, he picked up the jug and flung the contents at the cringing pair who, understandably enough, braced themselves for a good dowsing. The wine however had ideas of its own. It spread, as though hitting an invisible wall and then stopped dead, frozen in a flat uneven disk that hung suspended in mid air.

Tallow laughed in surprise, then fell silent as they stared in wonder at the thin liquid shape. With a twist of the hand, the Guardian muttered a single word and a band of bright light slowly spread from its centre to the outer edges. As the light slowly receded, a scene revealed itself that very soon became as sharp and clear as though they were looking through an old painted wall into the darkness of the night beyond.

The image showed very little at first; a tree here, a bush there but then, as his eyes became accustomed to the light, Taegis began to catch glimpses of a Watchman bobbing around just below his field of view. The more he looked into the vision, the more he felt as though he was actually a part of it, until suddenly, and without any warning, he was dragged headfirst through the portal and into the apparition itself.

His nose filled with the smell of the long damp grass below his face and he felt a giddy, weightless sensation as he floated along just above the heads of the hunting party. He looked to one side and saw the two transparent forms of the Guardian and a thoroughly awestruck Tallow floating along besides him.

A blue aura shone brightly from the gold mirror held in the gloved hand of the leading Watchman. It surrounded the group, lighting their way like a beacon as they trudged across the mist-strewn Tray-Rigg moors, each footstep taking them further down towards the tiny fragile lights of civilization.

As he lifted his head, Taegis could see that they were following a thin silvery trail of smoke that hung motionless in the night air. It appeared to be illuminated by the eerily pulsating light that emanated from the flat silver disc held high above the Watchman's raised fist.

Startled by a sudden swirling sound that echoed around his head, Taegis realised that the distant voice of the Guardian was now addressing him.

"The talisman is of the Gate. Anyone who passes through to this land will leave his mark upon even the air itself. That is why I have not yet ventured outside the monastery walls. To do so would have served to confuse matters even further."

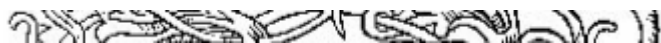
"But we are outside now master. I feel the air on my face and see the lights from the villages across the Sayge valley," said the disembodied voice of the wraithlike Tallow.

"We are here in spirit only, my dear Brother Tallow: our flesh and blood remains where we left it, high in the Ben Byrig Mountains."

"Then we can not be seen by any others but ourselves?" asked the Arch Brother incredulously.

"We can neither be seen nor heard by any but us and the Watchmen. The

only shortcoming is that we are wholly deaf to the world that we see. But look,” the Guardian raised his translucent hand to signal silence, “For even as we approach this town, the trail becomes stronger with each footstep. I feel that we are nearing the end of our hunt. Very soon brothers, you will have the honour to witness firsthand the full might of the Watchmen of Thane!”

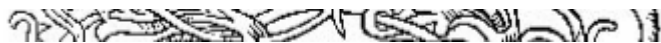


George jumped from Thunderbolt’s back and quickly pulled her into the unlit stable of The Farmer’s Legs.

“Now you be quiet, there’s a good girl, you’ll be safe here. Once I’ve managed to shake that lot off I’ll be back to get you fed and watered,”

He tied her up and covered her with a blanket and then slipped into the courtyard as the misty rain began to wash the dirt from the crooked cobbles. Pulling up his collar, he hurried down the alleyway and looked out onto the largely deserted streets. As he listened out for signs of life he noticed that he could hear the distant sounds of music and what sounded like people laughing and clapping. Looking up and then down the main street, he determined that the noise was coming from the direction of the river.

“Sounds like there’s a party going on down by the quayside and where there’s a party there’s people. If you can lose them in a crowd then you’re as safe as houses, Georgie my boy,” he whispered to himself and hurried off down the rain-splattered streets to the quay below.



Far away from the commotion of the show, Muchleigh House was a haven of tranquillity.

The rain slid down the angular roofs and rushed along the creaking guttering in a gushing torrent.

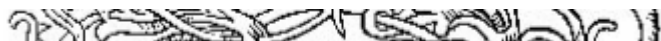
Bailey carefully opened his bedroom door and for the third or fourth time that evening he looked in on Spartacus Brink. He held his candle up to light the room and tried to see if he could detect any movement. Once again he was disappointed.

“Come on rug-face, let’s go and make up the spare bed in the kitchen, you can sleep down there with me tonight. I’ll just have to talk to mister Brink

in the morning,” he sighed.

Cabbage, who to be fair had only really understood the ‘kitchen’ part of his master’s announcement, raised his eyebrows and bounded softly down the stairs, hopeful that he might be in for one last snack before he lay down for a good night’s sleep.

Once they reached the kitchen, Bailey opened up the heavy oak doors to the expansive linen cupboard and cleared some room along the big bottom shelf. Laying a pillow and some bedclothes down on some rugs, he climbed inside his makeshift bunk and blew out his candle. There was a frantic scramble in the darkness, as Cabbage found his way to the foot of the bed, followed by a yawn, a quick scratch and then silence.



As the Watchmen burst through the trees at the edge of Bimleigh, they came to a halt and looked around. For the first time since they had risen from the lake, they seemed almost unsure of themselves, looking first to the right and then the left.

Even though they each wore the same expressionless steel helmet, it was easy to see that they suddenly felt distinctly lost.

Floating above them, Taegis looked across to the Guardian in surprise.

“But why do they stop master? Has something they have heard brought them to a halt? Why do they wait when you say yourself that we are so close to the impostor?”

The Guardian did not look at all happy.

“Look for yourself Arch Brother, just look for yourself,” he replied.

Taegis looked up and gazed at the deserted rain drenched streets.

Stretching out in the moonlight and illuminated by the steady blue glow from the centre of the mirrored disc, the single ethereal thread had been spun into a glittering spider’s web of trails, which crisscrossed up and down the entire street and seemed to lead in almost every conceivable direction.

Fire momentarily flashed in the Guardian’s eyes but was quickly replaced by a calmer, more calculating expression.

“It would seem that our way has become confused by the acquaintance

our elusive friend has made with others he has met along his way. As a result of this the trail has become more than a little tainted. However, it is not much of a problem. The trinket has served its purpose and led us to this place. Now it is the turn of my faithful bloodhounds to sniff him out.

“Watchmen - you will hear my command. Scatter yourselves to every corner of this town, for you must search each and every house, doorway and shop. Leave no stone unturned and no door closed. Let nothing and no-one stand in your way!”

The Watchmen each drew their weapons and set off up through Market Street.

Suddenly Taegis felt as though someone was pulling at his foot. He looked behind himself but apart from his opaque legs floating in the breeze, there was nothing there. Again he felt a tug, this time much sharper and now on both legs. He turned to the Guardian to say something, but before he could utter a word he was dragged backwards at immense speed and dumped unceremoniously with a heavy thump onto the flagged stone floor back in his study.

Startled and disorientated, he shakily rose to his feet, just in time to be caught by Tallow's bony knee as he and the Guardian were simultaneously ejected from the shimmering liquid portal. With a crack, Taegis' head was thrown sideways and he careered backwards, colliding heavily with a table, which instantly splintered and split beneath his immense weight.

The floating wine stain fizzled and quickly boiled away to nothing and the sticky silver amulet used to complete the charm fell away, landing in a neat pile on the floor.

“What in God's Kingdom happened?” spluttered Taegis shaking the pieces of wood from his head.

“Our time was up I'm afraid. I was expecting a little longer from the talisman to be honest but you just can't get the quality you used to. I blame it on all these cheap foreign imports.”

“But master,” ventured Tallow, rubbing his knee thoughtfully, “How can they possibly hope to discover the impostor if they cannot use the mirror to detect his presence?”

The Guardian let out a single joyless laugh, which echoed down the stairs and along the empty stone corridors, sending the monastery rats scurrying

for cover beneath the dust filled bookcases and a cold shiver up the spine of both the brothers.

“The dark forces that gave him access to this world are the same that guide my Watchman’s each thought and deed. Those very forces will attract them like moths to a flickering flame. The *Mirror of Lucidity* was only ever necessary to find out *where* he was, my dear brother, never *who*. Once he is within their sight, not even I would be able to spare him.

“Mark my words - he will be dead within the hour. By the morning my Watchmen will be presenting us with his rather frightened- looking head and I will be bidding you all a fond farewell, which leaves us with the most important task of all, fellow brothers.”

“Task my lord?” asked Taegis tentatively.

“Celebration my dear brothers, we must toast our success!” smiled the Guardian.

Chapter 9



he wind howled and the rain came down in sheets against the windows of Muchleigh House. Bailey came to, and could hear a distant shutter banging against a wall and briefly wondered whether his mother had returned. Absently deciding that she would still be taking cover against the worst of the weather, he covered his ears with the edges of his pillow and began to drift back to sleep.

Cabbage stirred, pushed a single bony leg out and sighed loudly.

The shutter banged again, louder this time and more insistent as though it were gaining confidence with each clattering clunk.

“Cabbage. Go and shut that window will you?”

A lazy eye opened, a glint of blue flashed in the moonlight but was soon covered by a heavy lid and then, as though for good measure, an even heavier paw.

“I suppose I’ll have to get up as usual. The sooner you learn how to close the window shutters, the happier I will be.”

With his eyes still shut, Bailey swung his legs over the side of the bunk and slid down until his bare feet fell flat against the cold terracotta tiles of the kitchen floor.

He shuffled past the winding stairs running upwards to his room and climbed the four steps to the door leading to the dining hall. As the door creaked open, Bailey could hear the wind and rain lashing down on the windows and the unrelenting tap-tap-tapping of the wooden window cover.

He looked around the hallway and at each of the windows in turn, but each one seemed securely shut, leaving only slivers of moonlight through rows of thin slats.

Bailey shook his head and turned to go back to the kitchen when the sound resumed. He turned and looked into the darkness to the back door and started to make his way towards it when, with a start, he heard a hissing whisper in his ear.

“Wait a moment my young friend! I am sorry - I did not mean to startle you.”

Bailey looked around and in the shadows to his side, pressed tightly against the wall, was the barely perceptible form of Spartacus Brink.

“Mister Brink, I did not see you there when I came in. Are you feeling better now sir?”

“Thank you for your concern Bailey, but I have never felt better in my life; and as for not seeing me when you entered the room - that is probably because I was still on the stairs.”

There were two more knocks at the door in quick succession, followed by silence.

“Bailey, tell me, are you expecting anyone, anyone at all?”

“Only my mother. She should have returned a while ago, but with the rain coming down so hard, I thought...”

“Your mother would surely come in through the front door, so I have little faith that it is her. I came downstairs because I have the strangest feeling that there is evil abroad this night, and trust me Bailey, my instincts are very rarely wrong...”

There was another loud knock at the door.

Bailey was desperately trying to take everything in and really not doing very well at all.

“Quickly!” whispered Brink.

“I will conceal myself by the door and you will slowly open it so that we might greet our mysterious visitor. Do not worry - I will be close at hand should I be needed.”

Doing as he was told, Bailey slid the big rusted Iron bolt across the top of the door and lifted the hatch above the handle, drawing the door towards him until it was open just enough to peer out into the rainy night.

But there was no one there at all.

Bailey looked at Brink and shook his head and then looked back through

the gap in the door. It was now filled with a dark, hooded figure.

Bailey - who was already suffering from a bad attack of the jitters - yelled out in surprise and recoiled sharply away from the door. Brink instantly reacted to the look of shock on Bailey's face and flung the door wide open. Drawing a short dagger with one hand, he grabbed the hooded stranger with the other and pulled him through the doorway, spun him around and swept his feet away from him, leaving him held firmly face down on the floor.

"For pity's sake man, unhand me this instant! I will not be manhandled in such a crude manner!" cried the stranger.

"Bailey - light a candle. Let us see what manner of person finds his sport in creeping around other people's houses in the dead of night!"

His hands trembling, Bailey rushed over to the fireplace and picked up the box of long matches. He nervously struck one, and used it to light the blackened lantern that sat above the mantle. Taking it to the doorway, he held it up for illumination, and as he did so Brink released the stranger just enough to allow him to pick himself up from the floor. As he stood up the man's hood dropped to his shoulders in a heap and a thin mane of damp red hair toppled down his back.

Brink spoke quickly and was still holding the stranger by the sodden scruff of his neck, although Bailey noticed that he had now once again placed his knife back into its thick leather scabbard.

"You will explain yourself, visitor. What business do you have creeping around the back of these good people's house at such an hour of such a foul night? Speak up! What is your name, and more importantly, what do you want?"

"My name, sir, is *Professor* Isosceles Innocence Kale. There is absolutely no time to explain, other than the fact that the gravity of the situation will become apparent all too soon. Know, sir, only that I come as your friend, and that I am your most humble servant.

"Now, as they are coming this way, we really must move with all haste!"

"Who is coming?" asked Bailey, but the tone of the old man's voice had sent an icy- cold feeling of dread to the very pit of his stomach.

"Your executioners - my boy - and mine too if we don't get a move on!"

Brink slammed the door shut and slid the bolt across as Cabbage emerged yawning from the kitchen and trotted towards them across the dining room floor.

And then it began.

Without warning, the three leaded windows that lined the front wall of the dining hall exploded in a shower of shattering glass. The wooden frames were sliced and split as a deluge of crossbow bolts decimated anything and everything that stood in their way. The sound was utterly deafening.

“Get down and stay down!” shouted Brink above the sound of the wind and the smashing of glass.

Bailey covered Cabbage’s shaking frame and his own eyes from the continuing onslaught.

More and more bolts smashed the tattered remains of the window and slammed into the back walls, until nothing more than the gnarled web of bent window lead remained, which drooped, twisted and empty in the dim moonlight.

The assault stopped as soon as it had started. All that now remained was the eerie gasp of the air from the room being pulled out through the windowless wall.

“They are coming! Quickly, do you have the Calling Stone? Hand it to me!” shouted Kale urgently.

Brink shook his head in bewilderment.

“What are you talking about? I haven’t got any stones with me. Perhaps a crystal, some charms, my dagger...” He looked through his outer pockets and pulled out all manner of relics and trinkets, but nothing that looked even remotely stone-like. All the time, Kale was shaking his head.

“No, no! I really would urge you to look harder, they are almost upon us!”

Looking through to the hallway, Bailey gasped as a crossbow bolt punched a hole the size of a man’s fist through the solid front door. There was another, then another. Shafts of moonlight illuminated the specks of wood dust that now twisted lazily in the air. Bailey closed his eyes and hugged the terrified Cabbage to his chest.

“A round metal object - think man! It has strange properties? You must have one in your possession or else you could not possibly be here!”

“Do you mean *this* old thing?”

Bailey gasped as Brink brought out an orb from the inside of his jacket. It was similar in size and shape to that of Mistress Nutter’s, although he soon decided that it was also many times cleaner. Small jewels set into the sides of the globe were pulsating a fiery glow, which lit the walls and Brink’s face in a soft crimson light. Kale snatched it eagerly from his outstretched hand and brought it down against the floor.

The shredded remnants of the front door fell inwards and two Watchmen burst into the hall just as a white light flashed around the outline of the marble compass set in the Dining Hall floor. Bailey opened his eyes and looked down in disbelief. The metal sphere was locked into the dimple at the centre of the compass, into which it seemed to fit perfectly, and the entire edge of the compass was now throwing up a sheet of pure white light.

They turned and looked towards the entrance to the hall from the front door and saw a sight which none of them could ever forget.

One at a time the Watchmen stepped through the lumps of wood stacked in the front doorway and strode towards the huddled quartet in the dining hall.

As they came closer, the reflection from the wall of light shimmered and danced across the black glass stars set into the anonymous steel helmets.

Within moments the small cowering band of Brink, Bailey, Kale and Cabbage was completely surrounded.

“Why are they here? What is it that they could possibly want?” shouted Brink.

“It is you that have come for, my dear Outlander. And I do not believe that they intend to take you alive!”

Slowly, inexorably slowly, the multiple barrels of their heavy black crossbows were raised and levelled at each and every one of their heads. One by one the barrels began to spin, slowly at first and then gathering speed until they became blurred, each emitting a high pitched, tortured

squeal.

Melissa opened her eyes and sat up with a start in her darkened room.

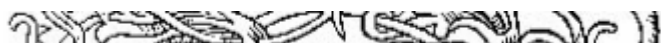
“Oh no - my goodness no!” she gasped. Her heart was thumping in her chest.

In her dream she had seen metal soldiers rising from a lake. Their bodies wreathed in clinging dark scum and their fingers stretched, probing the air between them for the first time in more than a millennium.

She had watched the destruction that they had wreaked upon some quaint little riverside town; witnessed their cold lifeless arms ripping doors from hinges, swinging metal-tipped staffs through shop windows and market stalls, smashing everything and everyone who stood in their path.

But by far the worst aspect of it all was feeling the complete and utter lack of compassion from the soldiers themselves, the mercilessness that drove their hearts and pumped through their veins, like water from a mountain stream.

Melissa had seen Bailey’s face, staring upwards and almost paper-white with fear. Just as she had tried to talk to him, to ask what was happening to him, she had awoken to the cool darkness of her prison and to the sound of the rain as it pounded relentlessly on the metal shell above. And once again she found herself utterly alone.



Bailey winced as the first volley hit their shield of liquid light. All around them dozens of rapid crackles and flashes lit up the room like fireworks as the solid steel bolts struck the wall, but somehow failed to pierce its protective skin. Instead, each bolt that thudded into the cool white fire just seemed to make the rushing flames more intense and their protection more complete.

“Sweet salvation...” whispered Brink.

“I have a feeling that we are not out of the woods just yet my friend,” replied Kale, “If these truly are the Watchmen of which legends speak, I fear that they might be more resolute than you or I could ever imagine,”

One by one the Watchmen stopped firing, looking to one other and then staring back at the quartet huddled at the centre of the circle. Suddenly they raised their arms and began striding into the light, their grasping hands forcing part of the way through the wall and groping blindly around the edges of the circle. As they did so the light that sheltered them flashed and flared angrily at the intrusion, just managing to keep the Watchmen far enough at bay to keep its occupants safe and sound.

“Into the very centre, quickly! They cannot reach us unless we stray to the edge!” shouted Kale.

They shuffled quickly back as far as they could and as they did the black-clad fingers snatched at the air around them, desperate for a touch of an outstretched leg, a misplaced hand or a tuft of hair that was close enough to grasp.

Cabbage suddenly yelped as a Watchman took hold of his straggly tail and yanked it back towards the shield. Before Bailey could stop him, he had jumped up straight through the wall of light and was running at full tilt through the legs of his attacker and off across the length of the hall to the shattered front door beyond. Two of the Watchmen fell back from the light, swung around and raised their crossbows to their helmets to take aim in the direction of the frightened hound.

“Stop them!” shouted Bailey to Kale “Please! Stop them, they’ll kill him!”

As he spoke, Cabbage, who would have been the first to admit that he was not at his most graceful when moving at speed, slipped on the polished dining hall floor and began hurtling straight towards a table and chairs, hitting them full on. A flood of bolts left their crossbows and sliced quickly through the air, charging on a direct course to the head and body of their defenceless victim as he struggled in vain to regain his footing and fell back into a heap on the floor.

Bailey covered his mouth in sickened terror, not wanting to look but unable to look away from the horrific sight that lay stretched out before him.

And then as quickly as the chaos had begun, everything stopped.

Bailey blinked and looked around. The white light that had surrounded them had vanished, leaving the whole of the hallway swathed in a deep blue light, which seemed to hang expectantly in the air.

The Watchmen were standing like eight motionless mannequins, each with hands outstretched and crossbows drawn, but now suddenly stiff as though they had been frozen in blocks of invisible ice where they stood.

“What in the devil’s name...?” whispered Brink, both captivated and astonished.

“Not the devil my friend. This timely deliverance has goodness, not evil behind it. Come quickly, for this window of opportunity may not last forever and we must make good our escape while we still may!”

They slowly rose to their feet; Kale picking up the Calling Stone and passing it to Brink as they slid past the unmoving Watchmen and gingerly made their way towards the remains of the front door.

As they reached Cabbage, who had been stopped mid roll, seven gleaming bolts hung patiently in the air, only inches from his unscathed fur.

“All but one would have certainly hit him,” said Brink in disbelief, “He just wouldn’t have stood any chance at all.”

Brink and Bailey picked Cabbage up and hauled him outside. As soon as they had left the light, Cabbage rolled from their outstretched arms and sprinted off up the muddy road.

“Bailey, oh thank goodness you’re alright!” Mavis Humblebucket ran up the street towards them. Her hair was tangled with the rain and her best dress was hanging shabbily around her, torn and covered with mud.

“Soldiers came - they ransacked half the village before they left! The town hall is in flames and the Town Minister is nowhere to be seen - mind you I don’t mind saying that he was the first to run for cover. The show had just finished and we were all walking up the street when they came out from nowhere. Oh Bailey it was terrible! I managed to hide in the stables around the back of the Farmer’s Legs but there were many who weren’t so lucky. Oh my goodness - whatever happened to the front door...?”

“Mother, you have to go, it isn’t safe. Those soldiers you spoke about, they are inside Muchleigh House and, according to mister Kale here, it mightn’t be too long before they follow us out.”

Mrs Humblebucket took hold of Bailey’s arm.

“Come on then you - get that dog of yours and we’ll go hide in Old

mother Nutter's house. She has been a good friend to this family since your father left and her house is furthest away from here. Your friends must come as well, for it is not safe to stay!"

"Madam, I am thankful for your help but I am afraid that we three must leave, for there is much left that is undone, and precious little time left to do it," said Kale kindly.

Mavis Humblebucket looked from face to face and then stared sternly at her son.

"Bailey Humblebucket, I am not letting you out of my sight. You will come with me this very minute!"

"Mrs Humblebucket - I can promise you that Bailey will be safe with me - but this night has left me with many questions and I know that your son holds many of the answers I seek," Brink turned to Bailey "I leave the decision to you Bailey, but I think that you may need my help as much as I seem to need yours."

"Mother I have already made up my mind, I must go with them. Now will you just please go, before we are all put back in harm's way?"

He gave her one last hug and then, without another word, she hurried off down the track, turning for one last tearful look as she passed the cobbled top of Market Street and was gone.

Kale looked back to the house; inside the blue glow was quickly starting to recede and fade. This was something that Brink had also noticed.

"I trust you have somewhere else in mind, Mister Kale?" he prompted urgently.

"We must reach the Elderspath, quickly, follow me," Kale nodded, and without further explanation or elaboration, he sprang off up the twisting track that led to the standing stones, with Brink and Bailey trying desperately to keep up. For an old gentleman, he was certainly light on his feet. They both looked on in disbelief as his black, silver-buckled shoes hopped and skipped over the dark craggy landscape as sprightly as a young mountain goat.

"So what is this Calling Stone I have and why is it that we were not affected by its powers?" called Brink as they mounted the flat grassy ridge at the top of the track.

Kale walked over to two of the nearest stones, two great monoliths that supported a huge mossy slab on their top. He turned and spoke as they approached.

“For what it is, I am not entirely sure. Although I have a great many sound scientific principles and theories that might account for its seemingly magical properties, I have never managed to find one that was working before. This was my first experience of using the real thing and I must admit to being really rather tickled.”

Brink stopped in disbelief.

“You mean, you didn’t know what it was actually going to do before you employed it back at the house?” said Brink incredulously. “Anything could have happened, we might have been blown apart by that thing if not by those soldiers themselves!”

“Of course, that was always a possibility. As it still is. But you didn’t seem to have any other plans for escaping the Watchmen, so I thought that under the circumstances it was probably worth a try,” Kale smiled absently at them both.

Bailey slid two fingers into his mouth and blew a soft shrill whistle into the dark trees and fields behind them.

“Oh where has that stupid dog got to now? Cabbage come here, good lad!”

There was no sign of him and Kale, seemingly oblivious to the boy’s mounting distress, continued his explanation.

“And as for its lack of effect on ourselves, well that part is obvious even to me. We were all in contact with the object when it started up. It would seem to be a feature to prevent its user from being adversely affected by the wondrous feats it performs. It really is a most amazing piece of equipment you know...”

Kale removed an old and quite ornate glass key from a piece of leather cord that hung around his neck and pushed it into a recess in the standing stone next to him. It fitted exactly into the tiny niche, which looked as though it had been carved from the rock many long years ago, and weathered by the years that had since passed by.

“Which is all most enlightening, Mister Kale, but if you truly do have somewhere we might take refuge, may I suggest that we go there this instant; for we are surely not safe on this hilltop?”

“Safer, sir, than you might think,” said Kale, turning the key in the lock.

Brink blinked his eyes in surprise, for where before there had been nothing more than two standing stones in a field, there now stood a doorway which led down a long dim passageway. To either side of the stones he could see nothing more than the windswept grass and the hills rolling down to the woods, but when he walked back around to the front of the stones the doorway was as real and solid as anything that he had ever seen in his life.

For a second or two, Brink was lost in wonder. He marvelled at a sight that his mind could not believe, but which his eyes assured him was real. It wasn't until Bailey ran over shouting that he remembered where he was.

“They are coming up the lane - I just saw them. They will be upon us in less than a minute!”

As Kale ushered them into the open doorway, he removed the key from the outer stone and, as they stood back from the entrance, the gap began to grow darker. Stone crystallised and spread around the outer edges of the open doorway and slowly but steadily filled in the gap that remained, like a crust of ice forming on a still millpond in winter.

Outside there was a sudden flurry of activity. Bailey knelt down on the floor to see what was going on and from the remaining gap in the doorway he could just see Cabbage burst out of the bushes on the other side of the clearing and head directly towards them.

Crossbow bolts thudded into the earth beneath and behind Cabbage but still he ran; his eyes fixed determinedly on his rapidly disappearing master. All of a sudden, as the dog approached, a bolt found its way through the gap and whistled past Baileys face as Brink tugged him briskly from its path.

With one final, desperate lunge, Cabbage sprung up, his powerful back paws kicking him high into the air, pushing him directly through the last retreating breach in the stone as it finally closed, locking out the dangers of the dark and the awful night beyond.

Bailey was flat on his back with Cabbage squarely on top of him. Overjoyed, he threw his arms around the panting hound.

“Could you leave it a little later next time Cabbage, I’m not sure you cut things as fine as you might have?” sighed Brink patting him on the head and helping the flattened Bailey back to his feet.

Behind them a line of tiny dim gaslights, each covered with a scorched glass mantle, poked out from the wooden panelled walls and threw small puddles of hazy yellow light onto the floor beneath their feet. The stone flags were covered in a threadbare crimson carpet and the whole corridor smelled musty, almost as though they were in a very old, and badly stocked, library.

“Come quickly, we cannot wait around this place,” whispered Kale.

“I do not understand,” whispered Bailey back, although he was not entirely sure why they were whispering, “I thought that you brought us here to be safe.

“Do you mean that they might still enter, even though a wall now separates us?” He looked back towards the solid stone barrier now standing where they had entered only moments before.

“Oh no, we are quite safe from the Watchmen, at least for the time being. No, there are other things that live in these corridors, creatures I have heard but never seen. I promise that I will explain all when we have safely reached our destination,” and with that he was gone, padding quickly off up the gloomy corridor. Brink looked at Bailey, and with Cabbage leading the way, they hurried off after him.

Back at the stones a Watchman stood in silence, sweeping his hand through the empty space that had reappeared between the two largest stones to replace the tunnel that had stood so solidly only moments before.

He turned to the others and without speaking a word they turned away and left.

Chapter 10



elissa awoke to find the first rays of the early morning sun streaming through the porthole in her cabin ceiling, and an intrusive rattle coming from the direction of the door.

A podgy woman with lank greasy hair bustled in and stood glaring at her.

“Get yourself up and dressed, the master wants you up on deck in five minutes!”

As soon as she had arrived she had gone, slamming the door shut behind her and clattering the key in the lock.

“And good morning to you, too!” muttered Melissa indignantly.

She swung her feet out of bed, pulled on her jacket and slid into her boots.

The door opened again just a minute later, and she was escorted through the gloomy corridors and up through the doors that she had so nearly reached in her earlier bid to escape.

Taking her first steps out into the bright daylight, she flinched and quickly shielded her eyes from the painful glare of the sun. All around her Strangers lined the deck of the ship, their dark blurred forms staring at her in contempt and muttering curses to each other, as she stood silently alone in the centre. As her aching eyes gradually readjusted to being outdoors once again, a voice behind her cut through the unrelenting hubbub of the crowd and brought it to an abrupt halt.

“So, our little guest has deigned to join us. I am sure that I speak for us all when I say what a pleasure it is to find ourselves in such *esteemed* company aboard our own town.”

Laughter erupted from the crowd and Melissa spun around defiantly to stare in the direction of the source of the voice.

“You have no right to keep me here and you will let me go at once!”

Her voice trembled slightly, but she somehow managed to keep it under

control. Above everything else, Melissa was determined to sound braver than she actually felt.

“Do you know who my father is? When he finds out where I am he will come for me with the City Guard, and when he does your life will not be worth living!”

“Who your father *was*...” said Claybourne softly.

“What do you mean?”

Melissa suddenly felt a terrible weakness pass through her whole body and, in that instant, she already knew what he was going to say before the words had left his lips.

“Past tense I am afraid, little girl. Your father is, I am sorry to say, as dead as that famous proverbial doornail. You see, he was rather - how should I put this - *unsympathetic* to our searching his home for his only daughter. As you can imagine, that put me in something of a quandary.

I had no alternative than to ask two of my colleagues here to explain the situation in greater... *detail*.”

She turned to see two men that she faintly recognised. They were the two burly thugs who had dragged her biting and screaming into the back of their covered wagon as she had walked home on that fateful day. It all now seemed as though it had just been a very bad dream, but for the fact that she had never woken up.

“Unfortunately Misters Foxton and Shawditch may have been just a little... *over zealous* in that explanation,”

Claybourne smiled a thin wicked smile and his face lifted for a moment, stretching back grotesquely into the appearance of someone around ten years younger.

Suddenly all her other worries seemed to shrink into insignificance and Melissa’s head began swimming with thoughts of her poor father and mother.

Her legs gave way a little and she felt her arms being seized by the cold sausage fingers of Claybourne’s two henchmen, one at each side.

“I don’t believe you, you’re lying - you are all lying!” she hissed defiantly,

turning to stare directly into his cold, grey eyes.

His expression changed, at once spiteful and resentful, but also for a second she could have sworn that she caught the slightest hint of concern flicker across his face.

“Then tell me, my little Thoughtthrower if you would be so kind; how you knew what I was going to say before I had opened my mouth to utter a single word?”

Claybourne nodded to his men and before she had time to react, Melissa’s wrists felt the shock of cold iron as Shawditch snapped a pair of rusted black manacles tightly shut around them.

She cried out in a mixture of surprise and pain. Ignoring her pleas Claybourne produced a long crimson handkerchief from his side pocket and dropped it over her face from the back, snagging it across her mouth and pulling it tight until she was silent once more.

He turned to leave, his long riding cloak clearing a path of dirt in its wake and glancing briefly back across his shoulder as he went.

“Take this delivery up to the Lodge, Lady Marchant is expecting her. Tell her I will join her shortly. And do not let this little mouse out of your sight until you have her under lock and key, lest she find a way to scurry away.”

As Claybourne disappeared back down into the dark bowels of the boat, Shawditch and Foxton roughly grabbed Melissa by her upper arms and half walked, half carried her down the steep wooden planks leading to the shore.

Once ashore, she was pushed and prodded along the stony path that climbed sharply upward towards the flatter grassy summit. All the way up the winding track, her feet slipped and slid across the loose shale chippings.

As she neared the wooden stile at the top, she suddenly lost her footing completely. Before she had time to do anything she found herself sliding uncontrollably towards the verge at the top of the steep cliff face, only to be stopped from toppling over the very edge when Foxton’s outstretched hand grabbed hold of her foot. A dozen small rocks and twigs, dislodged by her shoulders, plunged headlong into the abyss and fell twisting and tumbling down the cliff face, eventually landing with a distant splash into the depths of the River Caleb below.

All at once the fright from the fall and the news of her father became too much. When Melissa got back to her feet, tears welled up in her weary eyes and flowed in warm wet streaks across her dusty face.

Spinks stood by the stile and lent a pair of hands as she was shepherded over its creaking frame. He rubbed his hands and sneered triumphantly as she was finally delivered into his care.

“If you would care to accompany me gentlemen, then we can make sure that arrangements are made for this last one’s safekeeping and then there is a breakfast awaiting you in the kitchens.”

As she approached the house, Melissa could see a number of people, mostly small children, huddled together in the courtyard outside the house, manacled together like criminals awaiting a trial.

Her own cuffs were briefly unlocked before being wrapped around the young boy’s in front of her and then jammed back shut. As she looked up defiantly, her gag was roughly untied and tossed to the dusty ground below.

“You can tell her Ladyship that Mister Claybourne will be along at mid-day as arranged,” said Shawditch as he tested Melissa’s chains to make sure of their strength. Satisfied, he nodded to Foxton and they left in search of the kitchens.

“Thank you gentlemen, we are most humbly grateful for your assistance,” called Spinks after them. Then as he turned to the waiting group his demeanour changed completely.

“Right you filthy freaks, you shift yourselves! I want you all across that hallway and through the doorway on your right. There won’t be any trouble or you’ll quickly feel this riding crop against your sides!”

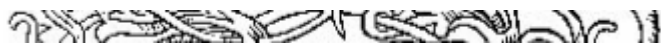
The motley collection did as they were bid, slowly shuffling through the antique splendour of the house and through a doorway onto a set of white stairs, which spiralled tightly upwards. Eventually they arrived at the doorway of a small round room with a high glass skylight, and were herded inwards, whereupon the door slammed shut and a key was rattled around in its lock.

As soon as the door was closed, the young prisoners began to quietly sob or whisper quickly amongst themselves.

The door burst back open.

“And no blimmin’ whispering!”

The door was pulled violently shut and a stunned silence instantly fell upon the room.



“Where the devil is he?” whispered Brink staring into the cobwebbed half-light of the corridors ahead.

In the past hour, Bailey, Cabbage and Brink had seen nothing but fleeting glimpses of the elusive Kale and they were now beginning to consider themselves all but lost in the labyrinth of corridors and stairs that stretched out endlessly into the gloom.

Each corridor was studded with doors; some tiny, others that stretched up the wall until they almost reached the roof, which rose and fell, as the mood seemed to take it. And this was not where the unusual décor ended. Now and again, as they tracked Kale’s scurrying path, they tripped and fell over the handles of doors set into the floor and saw others that sat high in the ceiling, with no conceivable way that they could possibly be reached.

Once or twice Bailey had tried a handle or two to see if he could find one that might open, but it was always without success.

As they carried on up some particularly steep stairs, with Cabbage still determinedly scrabbling in the lead, they finally reached a large round chamber that sat high above over a dozen similar sets of stairs, each falling away into the menacing blackness.

A single silver lampshade hung down from the cracked dome ceiling, casting a dancing pool of light around their heads and a single, solitary door rested in the only part of the curved stone wall from which stairs didn’t appear.

The air in the room tasted dry and dusty and the absence of carpet beneath their feet or wood on the walls meant that an eerie echo now accompanied even their smallest movements.

“I’ve never seen a place like this in my life - it just seems to go on forever. Where do you think we are?” asked Bailey, looking at Brink.

“I don’t know, Bailey, but judging by the way that we came in, this is no ordinary set of passages.”

Cabbage was sniffing anxiously at the stairs down to another of the corridors, and as he did so, a low growl began to grow in his throat.

“What do you think that mister Kale meant when he said that there were *other things* living in these corridors?” asked Bailey thoughtfully as Cabbage’s growl became louder and more insistent.

Brink’s hand flashed towards his knife and, hearing a noise behind them, he quickly spun around.

The handle of the door, only feet away from where they stood, was slowly turning, and the door began to open.

Before Brink had time to react, Cabbage had pounced, throwing himself through the open doorway and straight into the path of the wildly struggling Kale, who was instantly pushed backwards and struck the floor with a heavy thud.

“Will you please get your animal off me - this instant?” he screeched indignantly.

Bailey intervened, pulling Cabbage gently away as Brink helped Kale back onto his feet.

“I happen to have an allergy to beasts with hair, and I suffer greatly from a rash about my person,” spluttered Kale as he tried to recover from a second loss of dignity and failed comprehensively.

“I’m sorry Professor Kale, but he thought he heard something down one of those stairways. He didn’t mean you any harm, I think that he was just trying to protect us,” said Bailey, who was having a serious problem in keeping himself from laughing.

“And if you will run off and then creep back up on us unexpectedly, then being knocked over is the very least that you can expect,” muttered Brink sharply, sheathing his dagger, and briskly covering it with the leather flap of his jacket.

Before Kale had time to reply, a crash of splintering wood echoed down one of the corridors and rang around their ears, prompting him into action.

“Come, quickly, they know that we are here. Everyone inside, where we can be safe.” And with that, he ushered them through the small doorway and into a tiny dark corridor, which smelled of old books and sealing wax.

As soon as they were inside, he shut the door behind them and slid two heavy black bolts across to lock it.

“Go through to the end. Mind the step.”

As they walked through the hallway, Bailey suddenly thought how much the parlour reminded him of an elderly aunt that he used to visit. On each wall, about three quarters up, was a thin wooden rail and scattered along this was a vast collection of antique plates. On each wall were framed maps, mostly of places that Bailey had never seen before, and a ragtag collection of pottery fragments and strange rocks containing variously coloured crystals, which sat in small glass cases and glittered as the pale yellow gaslight struck their flat dusty facets.

As they reached the end, Brink lifted a heavy tapestry from their path and they walked out into the huge room and onto an ornate wrought-iron staircase, which twisted and swept away to the floor far below.

“This is incredible!” gasped Bailey in rapt astonishment.

Even Brink was impressed, although he would never have admitted as much.

“Welcome to my humble abode”

Kale led the way down a creaking spiral staircase, and as they arrived at the bottom they found themselves walking out into the full expanse of a huge barrel-shaped room, complete with acres of plush green carpet.

The room had a very high ceiling, and on first sight was not at all dissimilar to a large baronial banqueting hall, and indeed was not so very different to Muchleigh House, but was many times larger and decorated in a much grander style. Furthest from the stairway was a wide stone fireplace, from which hung a large black pot of something that bubbled and spat over the roaring fire. To either side of the cauldron were two large piles of logs, and above the fireplace were a pair of crossed wooden pikes, each tipped with a gleaming and ferocious looking black metal spike.

What made the room so unusual was the fact that set into its walls were

many smaller darkened rooms. Around each of these open rooms were dozens upon dozens of drawers and cupboards, which were set back from the main hall and seemed to have been placed at random around its walls.

As he looked around Bailey saw a tiny bedroom toward the ceiling, a set of bookshelves beneath it and what looked like a Study, complete with table and chairs, off to one side of that. In all, there seemed to be over twenty rooms, large and small, and the overall effect was very similar to that of a dolls house once its front had been opened up, for every room in Kale's home was instantly displayed for all to see. Even the toilet.

Clinging to the wall was a polished brass ladder that rose all the way up to the ceiling, and was mounted on rails that spanned the entire circumference of the room, with the exception of the fire.

Kale pulled three large and well-padded chairs across to the heavy oak table that sat in the centre of the room, throwing Cabbage a thick cotton blanket, which landed in a soft puddle by the fire and onto which he gently collapsed. Almost as soon as his head was on the blanket he began to snore contentedly.

"Please be seated gentlemen. I know that you must have many questions, as have I, but first we shall eat. It has been a testing night and we must keep our strength up. As it happens I have just the very thing."

He walked over to the fireplace and lifted a big heavy lid from the pot sitting above the fire. As he did so a wonderful thick aroma rose from the bubbling surface, which drifted across the room and up into the dormant dusty nose of Cabbage, instantly sending it into a quivering convulsion.

"As it is not often - indeed ever - that I entertain, I feel that a certain sense of decorum must be observed. I shall fetch my best Bone China!"

Kale trotted off into the shadows and nimbly hopped onto the towering ladder. With one foot on the bottom rung he slowly propelled himself through the flickering gloom and Brink and Bailey watched in silent amusement as the ladder drifted soundlessly around the edges of the room, finally coming to a gentle stop alongside a set of bookcases. As soon as the ladder ceased moving Kale darted upwards like an over-zealous lizard and came to a stop at a small cupboard resting just above the tall leather tomes.

Opening the drawer, he reached in and scooped out an armful of plates and spoons and steadying himself on the ladder he pushed himself off,

climbing down as he swept back around the room from whence he had come. With a much-practiced ease he reached the bottom of the ladder just as it stopped and he almost seemed to step off at the exact point from where he had begun.

Laying the plates on a small table by the fireside, he took a long metal ladle from the mantle above the fireplace and pushed it deep into the steaming stew, lifting thick chunks of carrot, potato and chicken out and resting them in dark glistening pools on each of the deep dishes in turn.

"I feed you, beast, only so that you are not tempted by human flesh," he muttered and laid down the first plate in front of Cabbage, who instantly began gobbling the food as though he had not eaten for weeks.

Brink, who had spent the past few moments reflecting on the past day's events, turned to Kale and looked him in the eyes.

"So tell me mister Kale - how came you to live in a place as grand as this? I have never in my life seen so many tunnels. It seemed as though we were walking for hours. And who commanded those soldiers who attacked us at Bailey's house? You said that they were my executioners - but sent by whom?"

Kale momentarily stopped what he was doing and seemed to be plunged deep into thought.

Presently he passed the remaining plates around the room and creaked slowly back into the comfort of his fireside chair. When he finally spoke, the firelight glanced off his balding head and threw dappled shadows across the crags and creases that lined his tired face.

"To understand what has happened this evening I must first tell you my own tale and the part that I play in all of this. Only then might you understand the full gravity of the roles that you performed and those you are yet to fulfil..."

Kale sat back into his chair and as he did, the fire crackled and flickered as though to accompany the story he began to tell.

"I have been many things in my life, but my one true love and undying passion has always been for the written word and that is how you find me now, as an archivist of our past, present and the future."

"Mister Kale?" interrupted Bailey, more than a little confused "What do

you mean by archivist?"

"An archivist, my dear boy is someone who collects and keeps knowledge of events, both written and spoken, safely stored away so that generations to come might benefit from it in perpetuity."

"Well stop me if I am missing the point," continued Brink, "But didn't you mention archiving knowledge from the *future*? How could anyone possibly collect information about events which have not yet even unfolded?"

"All this will make perfect sense, I assure you.

"Many years ago, mister Humblebucket, when I was still but a young man, not unlike yourself, I attended the court of King Tobyn," he nodded at Bailey who smiled, unable to imagine Kale as anything but the rambling old gentleman who sat in front of them now.

"Don't you mean Edward, King Edward?" corrected Brink, catching himself as he realised that his memory was steadily starting to return to the point where he could recall the name of his king.

"All in good time mister Brink - if I might take your leave to continue?" Kale raised his eyebrows in expectation, at which Spartacus Brink shrugged, and settled back into his extremely comfortable seat.

"You see I had for many years studied under Professor Deuteronomy Gilchrist, Chairman of Scriptural History and Model-making at St. Barnabas College, a shining jewel in that world famous crown of learning, the Fairport Omniversity.

"Of course, in those days, the art of making models was still regarded as being the bedrock of sound scientific learning. Any person who put forward a new idea without a well-crafted representation of the principles to illustrate it would be made a laughing stock. They would most probably have to mind pigs or teach drama for the rest of their lives. This was all the doing of the City Guilds of course. In fact had it not been for that unfortunate incident when the Professor had attempted to explain to the Queen how lightning worked, things might still have been the same to this day.

"I seem to remember that the poor woman's hair stood on end until the very day she died. The very next day, as it happened - still, I digress.

"I left Omniversity with a spring in my step and a letter of recommendation from my tutors, and I travelled directly to the court of the newly-crowned Tobyn. He was, in those days still Tobyn the *Wise*, this being before he suffered that run-in with a family of Otters at the Royal Picnic.

"King Tobyn, being a wise and studious king, had been studying the written works of Gilchrist and in particular his treatise on the subject of elementary visualisation, that is the reinterpretation of knowledge into a form which both pleases the eye and informs the brain."

"I am not at all sure that I understand where all this is leading," interrupted Brink, not at all convinced that it would be anywhere remotely relevant.

"The King, you see, had a great love of fly-fishing and had commissioned a large reservoir to be built within sight of the great royal palace at Gaunt. This was all well and good, but each month, as the rains arrived, it began to cause the most devastating and torrential floods. In fact, one month it was so bad that the King, Queen and Courtiers all but abandoned the lower rooms of the palace. This left no one remaining but the servants below them in the flooded kitchens, circling around in tiny rowing boats and fetching and carrying as though nothing was amiss. The head butler had already been drowned fetching bottles of wine from the castle cellars. But no one would dare say anything to the King,"

"Because it was all caused by the dam which was the King's doing?" ventured Bailey sleepily.

"That is correct my lad. So, on the evening of my twenty-first birthday, I was sent for by the Lord Chancellor of the Court and given the opportunity of joining the Royal Court of King Tobyn the Wise, with a view to solving their little problem. Of course, once I was there I seized upon the solution almost at once!"

"To open the dam and let some water drain out before the next rains arrived?" asked Brink.

"A rather short term and simplistic view of events, I am afraid Mr Brink, not at all the scientific way, I am glad to say. No, I took the role of visionary fully upon my shoulders and immediately went to work. I swiftly employed a network of channels to various devices, which might give an advance warning of impending flooding. Thereby allowing the timely

intervention of drainage before disaster ensued,”

“I’m still not quite sure that I understand - what kind of devices?” said Brink as he stifled a yawn. The combination of food and the warmth of the fire had finally begun to make his body relax and yearn for a much-needed sleep.

“Well to keep up with the natural theme, I modelled dozens of farmyard animals to represent the different states of the dam. In fact it was so precise that I could tell to the nearest gallon how full the dam was by the way the animals moved around the field.”

All this had been too much for Bailey, who had now fully succumbed to the rigours of the day and began to snore contentedly alongside his canine companion.

“It does sound like rather an intriguing invention - but wasn’t it just a little hard to understand?”

“Well I didn’t think so at the time, but after a couple of months of being woken up by servants banging on my door at all hours of the night, asking me ‘What do two white ferrets mean Professor?’ or ‘What is meant by a sly red fox jumping over a fence Professor?’ it became more than a little wearing.”

“I can imagine.” said Brink.

“I wouldn’t have minded but there had never been a fox in the first place. He was as real as you or I.

“So eventually I had to simplify matters somewhat.”

“So how did you do that? Less animals?”

“I actually ended up replacing the lot with a rather large bell that I found in a tower in the castle. It wasn’t quite as elegant a solution but what it did mean was that I wasn’t being disturbed every two minutes by over-enthusiastic courtiers.”

“So what did the King make of this final solution?”

“He was quite simply delighted. He was so pleased that he showered me in all manner of prizes and - greatest of all - he awarded me the freedom of the royal library!”

“But how did you come to be here? Presumably you didn’t know of the existence of these tunnels back then?”

Kale stood up and walked over to the fire, lifting a tall crystal decanter from the table and pouring an equal quantity of ruby red liquid into two tiny glasses, one of which he passed to Brink. He stood staring into the fire as he continued his tale.

“I knew of the mythical Elderspath. It was said to be a system of hidden pathways that stretched far and wide throughout this great land of ours. I had always thought them to be nothing more than the stuff of legend and folklore and had happily dismissed them as such. That is until I came to visit the Library of the Royal Court of King Tobyn.

“The King and his forebears had no great love for books and the entire building had fallen into the most terrible disrepair many years before I arrived. I have always put great store in the power of the written word, and I can tell you that it almost broke my heart to see the state that the once great treasure house was then in.

“Once there I set to the restoration immediately and for weeks and weeks I cleaned shelves and stacked books - refurbishing, mending, rebinding and polishing them as I went. The work was hard and it often took me deep into the night, but as fortune would have it, it was not long before my toil was rewarded many times over.

“Deep in one dark corner of the library was a vast pile of wooden crates and chests. All but one of which were empty. As I came to the bottommost chest I found a dream come true - score upon score of ancient books that had laid unread for many tens, perhaps even hundreds of years! Those that survived were quite incredible. Each packed to bursting with the finest calligraphy I have ever seen. The pages shone with blues and burnished gold and each page was full of people and places and creatures that defied imagination. The illustrations leapt from the pages with such clarity - it was as though they had been drawn that very day - they were utterly breathtaking.

“Many were so old that their pages had turned to dust but over the coming days and weeks I continued to work steadfastly to do what I could, so that they did not fall into worse disrepair. One night I found something quite peculiar.”

“A new type of mould?” muttered Brink, unable to resist a tiny smile.

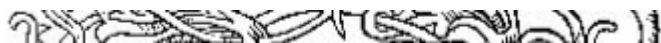
Kale did not seem to hear Brink's comment, but just stared deeper into the flames in the fireplace.

"As a large leather-bound tome slid from the last few at the bottom of the pile, it sprang open to reveal that its inner pages had been cut hollow by a knife, forming a small hidden recess within. The book as I recall was entitled *A Guide to Locale Lochs and Quays*, a pun that had altogether passed me by, I am afraid. When it struck the floor it spilled its contents and revealed one particular secret that might have otherwise lain forgotten there for eternity.

"For lying there on the floor was a small piece of parchment, tied up tightly by a single red silk ribbon, to the end of which was attached... this."

Isosceles Kale groped around inside the pocket of his threadbare waistcoat and held up the battered glass key Brink had seen him use earlier that evening, which instantly filled with the orange glow of the firelight that shifted as the flames grew and died.

"This, my dear mister Brink, is The Key of Nostradamus. For me it was quite literally, the key to a whole new world."



"Will you please stop feeling sorry for yourselves and all just listen to me for one single moment!" hissed Melissa.

At last the room fell silent.

"Thank the lord. Thank you. Now, as I was trying to say before you all decided to start whispering at once - as it seems that no one else is coming to help us I think that it is about time that we did something to stand up and help ourselves."

The whispering started again, this time louder than before.

"But what can we do to escape?" asked a tall wiry boy with red hair. He looked slightly older than the others, and Melissa guessed that he was probably the next oldest in the group after herself.

"I mean, there must be more than a hundred of them, and they are all bigger than us. What can *we* do?"

"And they have weapons. I've seen them shoot fire from sticks and kill

birds for sport as they fly through the sky!” said a pretty blonde girl who was crouching in the corner.

“But we do have something that they do not. Our gift,” whispered Melissa as she desperately tried to rekindle a faint flame of hope in their hearts.

“Fat lot of good that did me when I tried it on them. I didn’t get anywhere at all,” said the tall boy again, “In fact I think it just made them angry. I got a right good whipping that night, I can tell you.”

“But that was on the Strangers! Don’t you see? That servant who locked us in here wasn’t like the rest of them. His face seemed to stay the same for the whole time he was guarding us – didn’t you see? Not younger or older, fatter or thinner, it was just the same for the whole time that he stood watch over us.”

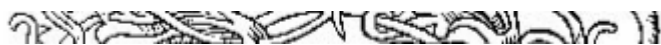
“So what?” replied the tall boy.

“So if he isn’t a Stranger then perhaps there is something that we can do to help ourselves after all.”

“That nasty old woman was hitting him with her walking stick before you arrived. I think she called him Spinks. Either that or she said that he stinks,” offered the smallest boy in the assortment.

“Spinks eh? Then let us see if we cannot think of a way to convince *Mister* Spinks that he would be better off if we were allowed to go free, shall we?”

As she looked around the room, one by one the young faces that had looked so dejected and hopeless began slowly to light up with the tiniest of smiles.



“Finding the key to the Elderspath changed my life. The parchment that was attached to the key led me to a tiny keyhole hidden in the centre of the library floor. When I inserted the key, the floor opened up beneath me and I fell into these corridors below.

“That very first time, I seemed to explore for days before finally finding my way back to where I had started - I was running around like a small child in a sweet shop. The second time I came here, I was more methodical and I began my mapping project, which was how I found my beautiful home, deep in the heart of the Tray-Rigg Mountains.”

Brink stood up and stretched his legs. He walked over to the roaring fire and refilled his glass from the heavy decanter that lay beside it.

“And a most impressive home it is too, Professor. Tell me, who built this place, the same people who built the rest of the Elderspath?”

“I think that it is more than likely. From what I can deduce, this hall lies at the very heart of the network. It was just a hollow shell when I found it, of course. It had been left abandoned for a long, long time, but I gradually furnished it with the things I found lying around. You really wouldn’t believe some of the things that I have found down here - suits of armour, stuffed animal heads, most of it completely useless of course. Mind you I was fortunate enough to find a complete Bone China dinner service, complete with silver cutlery. Quite a find, I can tell you.

“And as for the people that built it, or what happened to drive them away, I am at a complete loss to say. Years upon years of research have yielded next to nothing. I have little to show for my troubles but their name; they called themselves the Sage, from which I believe the nearby Sayge Valley to be named.”

“But there is still something I do not understand.”

“I am more than happy to answer your questions mister Brink. As I said when we first met, I am your most humble servant.”

“Well that is rather the point I was about to make. How exactly did you know that those *Watchmen* of yours were going to lay siege to Bailey’s house when they did? It was as though you had prior warning of what was to happen.”

Kale walked back to the ladder and walked it further toward the fire, whereupon, he quickly scaled it to the very top and pulled open a wide wooden drawer that sat high over the fireplace. He briefly rattled around in it and then scrambled back down with a collection of yellowing scrolls tucked under his arms.

“They must be very old,” said Brink.

“These? No, these are but my own copies. They are a bit brown because I spilled tea over them a week last Tuesday.”

He opened them out on the dining table, snatching anything that came to

hand to use as paperweights, which he scattered liberally over the curling corners of the huge paper sheets. Once the paper had been tamed (with a motley collection of glasses, pieces of cutlery and geological specimens) he lit three tall candles - which had been unceremoniously stuffed into a set of undersized candlesticks - and ushered Brink over to take a closer look.

What Brink saw when he first reached the table did not seem to make an awful lot of sense. The scrolls that lay curling on the table seemed to be a collection of drawings, large and small; some sketched in the most minute detail and others as simple outlines, but all of people and places.

At first sight it reminded Spartacus Brink of a beautiful tapestry that he had once seen whilst passing through a quaint little town called Bayeux. They both seemed to be telling a story in pictures, although this version seemed to be drawn in much finer detail. It also seemed a little less concerned with heads being lopped off and with sharp pointy things going into people's eyes.

"So what does all this mean?" he said, after studying the parchment for a few moments, "Is it some kind of extravagant story... but one told in pictures rather than words?"

"Not quite, but you travel along the right track. Let me enlighten you a little about the tale it tells.

"Many years passed since I had found my beautiful sanctuary. I had cleaned it, and furnished it, and filled it with a lifetime's passions and the possessions that I held most dear.

"I had mapped out much of the surrounding Elderspath," he looked up towards the sturdy door, "those parts that were decently lit, at least.

"I had restored the Royal Library at Castle Gaunt to its former glory and saved many hundreds of priceless books from being lost. I saved books that were written in tongues not spoken for a thousand years. Books filled with creatures long dead, and brimming with knowledge that would have been lost with the deaths of their authors many years before. But still there was a gap in my life, a hunger that would only be sated by a task that was equal to my supreme and towering intellect.

"A search for humility perhaps?" asked Brink evenly.

Kale smiled and ran his palms across the flat sheets of parchment as though lovingly stroking a favourite pet.

“A search, thank you Mister Brink, for ultimate knowledge. A quest for a prize that is as elusive as a twinkle in the eye - or a puff of smoke on the summer’s breeze. I took it upon myself to search for the long lost Wall of Charms.”

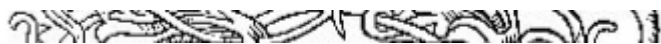
Brink felt as though a cold draught had crept up his spine and tickled the top of his head, making each and every hair on the back of his neck bristle into life. He sat up and looked into Kale’s eyes, studying them for a second before laughing out loud.

“A fairytale! A wild ridiculous fantasy concocted years ago to entertain those who are too gullible to know any better! How could a man with your knowledge and background ever come to believe some old wives tale about a long lost mural of King Solomon, which can somehow predict the future?”

“Really, Professor, you disappoint me. I think that anyone would have to be a crow short of a nest to believe that you could fit the entire story of mankind from beginning to end onto a length of carved stone and a bit of painted plaster. I sincerely hope that you abandoned your search for that particular feat of mystical masonry?”

“One thing that the past seventy years have taught me, Spartacus, is that there are more things in heaven and earth than can be explained by the reason of mortal men. And the answer to your last question lies beneath our very noses - for yes, after many years of painstaking research and travelling, I did eventually end my search for The Wall of Charms, for the fount of all knowledge.

“Well it would have been a bit silly to have continued looking once I’d actually found it, don’t you think, Mister Brink?”



The Guardian yawned and slowly opened his eyes, blinking as the sun reflected off an empty tankard and bounced into his squinting face.

He stared around King Herod’s hall for a moment, glancing up at the gold leaf, which peeled from the round smiling cheeks of the cherubs lining the archways and ceilings. As he gazed idly towards the ornate plasterwork, a tiny fleck broke off and began a leisurely descent through a shaft of bright sunlight, flaring with a yellow flame as it twisted through the spotlight and then flickering into pale obscurity as it slipped out of the other side.

Once he had slowly regained his bearings, his gaze turned back down to where his face still remained flat against the table.

Empty goblets lay overturned amongst half-consumed roast chicken, rabbit and lamb carcasses that littered the entire surface of the table. It was really quite a grisly sight.

Flagons of wine lay huddled at the centre of the table, each drained hollow and then discarded as yet another casual victim of the night's excesses.

At eye level, the debris rose up like a city; split by a river of spilt red wine that once flowed through its centre, now reduced to a streak of tar by the warmth of the morning sun.

He lifted his head and smiled as the remains of a Chicken leg fell from his tangled hair.

"Taegis?"

"Yes, my lord?" came the feeble answer, somewhere from the direction of the floor behind his chair.

"...Breakfast Taegis! Eggs and bacon fresh from the farm, thank you very much!"

Taegis groaned softly.

"Sire, I fear that my head may implode if I were to move but an inch in any given direction. I am sure however that my good brother Tallow will be more than happy to look after your every need. Is that not correct, brother?"

Tallow coughed and raised his voice in a hoarse whisper.

"I fear, brother, that I too am temporarily incapacitated as regards moving any part of my body. Indeed, at this moment I seem to be incapable of opening my eyes without being gripped by a most uncommon giddiness, which has its origins in my head but then manifests itself deep within the pit of my stomach. If I were to stand, I am not altogether sure that it would be for the best, either for myself or for anybody nearby.

"The most important part of any celebration is the breakfast which follows in its wake. Have I taught you nothing?"

There was a knock at the door and brother Basil; a desperately thin and wretched-looking monk gingerly poked his head around the door.

“Enter!” cried Taegis in the most authoritative voice that he could muster.

“Our brother Watchmen return from their travels my Lord,” he bowed to each in turn, “and brothers. They await you in the courtyard and I felt that you should be informed.”

The eyes of the Guardian lit up immediately and he strode smiling across to the window to look down upon the throng crowded around the eight solitary figures in the courtyard below.

“Yes, well done. We will be down presently. That will be all for now brother.”

“Yes Arch Brother!” Basil smiled and pulled the door shut hard as he left. The bang shuddered around the walls of the hall and made the two monks wince with pain.

“Do you think that thirty lashes of the whip would be too extreme a punishment for someone simply slamming a door, Arch Brother?” enquired Tallow thoughtfully.

“A little lenient, I fear, Brother Tallow, better to make it a nice round fifty.”

“Oh dear, you really do not know how to drink, do you gentlemen? Or if you do, then you have not yet mastered the fine art of recovery. I must say that I am quite disappointed with the pair of you. Still, it is pointless to stand around dwelling on your inadequacies when there is more important work to be done.”

The Guardian felt around in his pockets and brought out a small silver flask, which he uncorked and passed to the sprawled form of Taegis.

“Oh I couldn’t possibly touch another drop master, really.”

“It will make you feel much better Taegis I promise.”

As he took a tiny sip, Taegis felt sparks of energy flash through his aching limbs and out through his fingers and toes, and as soon as it had finished, he felt as though his sickness was floating away, as though on a pair of tiny bilious wings. He slowly rose to his feet and blinked as the warm sunlight

bathed his face.

“That was remarkable. I feel like an eighteen year old!”

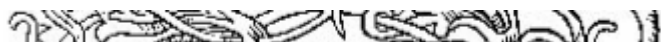
“There will be plenty of time for that kind of thing later,” smiled the Guardian and administered a similar amount of the magical elixir to the prone and somewhat crumpled form of Brother Tallow.

Tallow jumped up as though he had been scalded by a hot poker and looked around the room with a startled look upon his face.

“My lord, if I might be so bold I should like to enquire just what is in that magical potion?” he asked at last, slowly shaking his head just to check that he could still do so without it coming free.

“Just a little concoction of my own devising. I am glad that it was so effective; I have never tried it on humans before.

“Now gentlemen, if you please, I think that we have been keeping our devoted servants waiting for as long as we might without seeming rude. Shall we go to greet them upon their glorious homecoming, gentlemen?”



“Hang on will you, I heard the first time. I am not made of legs you know!” bellowed Spinks as he stamped and cursed his way up the winding staircase.

His key rattled back into the lock and the door opened into the room.

Inside the room he was greeted by a line of sweetly smiling faces, and for a moment was rather taken aback.

“What’s going on in here? What was all that blimmin’ racket about? It sounded as though all hell had broken loose up here.”

“We were banging our chains on the floorboards. We did it as hard as we could!” said Jonathon Tree, who was still the smallest boy in the room.

“Well stop it this instant or you will all get a sound horsewhipping!” said Spinks, although it was clear from his voice that he wasn’t altogether used to this amount of honesty when dealing with prisoners.

He was just turning to leave the room when Melissa spoke.

“We think that you should stop where you are, Mr Spinks.”

Spinks stopped in his tracks and felt his temper rising to the occasion. Blood rushed to his temples and his face instantly flushed red with undisguised rage.

He turned on his heel and reached down, tugging his riding crop from his boot and slicing the air as he swung it in an arc high above his head.

“I do not know many things, but what I do know is that I will not stand by and take insolence from the likes of you dirty, thieving little freaks!”

Some of the younger children gasped and moved backwards out of his reach but Melissa stayed her ground and stared straight into his eyes. Her voice was low and calm, almost as though she gently reassured him as she spoke.

“You are a clever man, Mister Spinks. A clever man who has a very important job. That makes you a very important man, and an important man deserves respect. Now I know that a man such as you shouldn’t have to run around after silly children all day. It just doesn’t make any sense. You would be much better off if you didn’t have to bother about the likes of these children now wouldn’t you? Well wouldn’t you, Mister Spinks?”

Spinks looked at her and then looked again. The strangest thing had started to happen. The small cramped room was growing bigger and sunlight was beginning to pour through the corners as they stretched wider and wider apart. The skylight too was lifting off and rising further and further above his head. The floorboards beneath them had become rough and green and as he looked down, grass shot up around their feet, followed by flowers, thistles and thick clumps of bracken.

He looked back up and they were all standing in a field, but not just any field. He instantly recognised it as the field above his mother’s home, where he had hunted rabbits as a child, and then laid panting amongst the golden ears of corn waving in the summer’s breeze.

He was utterly dumbfounded, and just stood with his mouth hanging wide open.

“In fact,” continued Melissa, “if you unchained us now, then you would be just in time for tea.”

Just then he heard his mother's voice faintly calling to him.

"Silas? Silas? Will you not come and have some fruitcake, it is freshly baked and still hot from the oven?"

Spinks smiled as a trickle of drool left his mouth, and he looked vacantly at the children as though seeing them all for the very first time. He shook his head as though some part of him was trying to regain control but then simply reached to his pocket and pulled out his keys. Within moments, all of the children had been set free.

"Now then boys and girls, let us leave the nice Mister Spinks to have his tea and cake. And everybody be as quiet as mice as we go, we wouldn't want to disturb anybody else now would we?"

One by one the children quickly slipped past Melissa, until only she and Spinks were left in the room, whereupon she gently tugged the keys from his hand and hurried past him and out through the open door. As soon as she was outside she pulled it tightly shut and, as soon as her shaking fingers could finally locate the keyhole, twisted the key in the keyhole to lock the door shut.

Chapter 11



Every monk in Thane seemed to be gathered in the sprawling cobbled courtyard and many of them were perched on window ledges, sitting atop doorways or hanging from drainpipes just to get a better view of the legendary Watchmen of the Lake. Hundreds of black hoods bobbed excitedly as their wearers exchanged excited whispers or bowed their heads in hushed reverence, only to look up almost instantly to steal another cherished glance.

At the centre of the huddled mass stood the silent, impassive Watchmen, their eight silver helmets glinting in the mid day sun as they stood impassively waiting for their master to return.

“Brothers, brothers pray move aside and let us pass,” shouted Tallow politely, desperately trying to squeeze out of the doorway and move past the tightly packed brothers who had assembled to witness the Watchmen’s return.

“You will move from our path this very instant or there will be a toll to pay, you have my word upon that!” shouted Taegis a little less formally, but to no noticeably greater effect.

“May I?” offered the Guardian from the gloom behind.

Taegis shrugged and stood aside to let the deceptively frail figure pass him and walk toward the seemingly impenetrable wall of black cloth that was presented in front of him.

The Guardian stood for a moment, drawing in a deep breath, holding it for a second and then holding out his arms he pursed his tight white lips and uttered a single whispered word.

“Move,”

As soon as the Guardian spoke, the floor began to tremble and shake. A terrible rumbling began to in the deepest recesses of the mountain and it felt as though an earthquake might tear through the very heart of the mountain, reducing the monastery and all its contents to rubble. The ominous rumble grew and grew until the ground beneath their feet was

shaking uncontrollably and all but the Guardian were grasping anything within their reach, just to try to stay upright.

Then as abruptly as it had started, the noise stopped and was replaced by an eerie calm. The birds stopped chattering in their mountainside nests and a palpable sense of expectation hung heavily in the air.

Suddenly a miniature green whirlwind burst out of the corridor directly behind them and punched into the crowd ahead. As it slammed into the wall of bewildered monks, the spinning, whirling vortex pushed them apart and spun through them with a ferocity that left nothing and no-one standing in its wake.

The effect was completely devastating. It was as though a ferocious herd of invisible bulls had stampeded through the monastery halls and were ploughing mercilessly through the crowd, cutting a clear path towards the centre of the square.

Many of the throng unlucky enough to be in the cyclone's chosen route were thrown headlong out of the way, their arms flailing wildly as they were scattered, bloodied and helpless in its path. Worse still, Tallow could see a handful of less fortunate brothers who were sucked, vainly struggling, into its centre and crushed lifeless by its awesome, unstoppable might.

Within seconds, a trail of brutal devastation had been cleared that led directly to the Watchmen. At this point there was a deafening crash and the whirlwind exploded outwards, releasing its dark, grisly contents upon the heads and habits of the quivering monks below.

The Watchmen turned to face their master and as they did, each slowly dipped their heads as a sign of deferential respect.

A deathly silence again fell upon the entire monastery, broken only by the soft moans of brothers lying scattered randomly across the rough stone floor.

"Shall we then, gentlemen?" smiled the Guardian, his jet- black eyes glinting in the sunlight as a thin smile appeared on his lips.

Taegis made a conscious decision to stop gaping and nodded in rapt astonishment. Together the three strode out into the bright sunlight, and climbed down the half-dozen steps to the courtyard below.

The Guardian led the way as they picked through the prostrated Brothers

who were now much more concerned with them than the Watchmen, a fact that made Brother Taegis even more self-satisfied than usual and was therefore quite an achievement in itself.

Very soon the three had approached the group of fighting monks and as he once more stared into their cold, unforgiving countenances, Tallow felt a tight knot of fear bury itself deep into the pit of his stomach.

The Guardian began smiling, and because the Guardian was smiling, Taegis began to grin from ear to ear. Tallow felt sick, but decided that for appearances sake he should make an effort to look slightly less terrified. He summoned up every ounce of his courage and glanced around the faces of his fellow monks with a well-practised sneer of quiet superiority.

“Watchmen of the Lake, you return from your quest. Show me, what proof do you bring that you have succeeded in your task? What trophy do you bring to prove your loyalty to me on this momentous occasion?” boomed the Guardian.

The Watchmen stood still and looked at each other and then for a moment, *just a single fleeting moment*, Taegis was sure that he detected a slight sense of unease in the leading Watchman. In fact he was certain that he had seen him shift very slightly from one foot to the other. He vaguely remembered making the exact same move himself as a child one snowy Christmas night many, many years ago, when a large Pork and Apple pie had gone missing from the family larder. He had been questioned by his thunderous father, who was almost apoplectic with rage, but the sweet tasting pie, like his conscience, had never been seen again.

“I am sure that something must still remain,” the Guardian continued, a look of quiet amusement flickering across his face, “Or is it conceivable that my fighting monks are so efficient as to have utterly destroyed the task that I set them upon?”

The lead Watchman stood still for a moment and then slowly shook his head. At this, his fellow Watchmen bowed their heads and seemed, to all intents and purposes to be examining their armoured boots in the finest of detail.

“Then is it possible that he might have come to some sticky end that defied all efforts to bring him here?”

“Could it be that he was tossed from a burning bridge into the mouth of

an unfathomable abyss? Was he dragged screaming into the mouth of a sea creature most foul - destined for digestion in the deepest darkest depths?"

The Watchman shook his helmet once again, this time looking even less sure of himself than he had before.

"Then could it be that he was flattened by an avalanche – run down and then entombed by a torrent of sliding dirt and rubble?"

A Watchman at the back of the group stood forward and tentatively tried to hand the golden mirror back to the Guardian.

"I gave you that!" he screamed, "Don't try and palm me off with some penny trinket that I gave you in the first place! Is this the sum total that you have to offer after two days of relentless searching, a trinket that I threw you at the start?"

"Are you seriously trying to tell me that after lying at the bottom of that God- forsaken pond for over a thousand years, the only thing that the *Watchmen Of Thane*, the *Eight Warrior Knights of the Eternal Abyss* could come up with - following their one and only quest - is a bit of shiny glass on a stick?"

The eyes of the Guardian flashed with malevolence and he kicked the first Watchman on his shins, roaring with anger and pounding on his chest with his bony little knuckles until he was almost incandescent with rage.

"You are all a complete and utter waste of time! The lot of you! I would have done better by sending these two halfwits," he screeched, pointing back towards Taegis and Tallow, "and they make sheep look clever!"

Just then something made him glance down and his eyes were drawn to a thin band of burnt chain mail stretching up and around the forearm of the Watchman closest to him. In less than the blink of an eye his manner had changed dramatically. As he studied the sleeve, his eyes narrowed and he hastily motioned for the other Watchman to come forward.

"This was not burned in a commonplace flame. This bears the mark of something much more... *intriguing*."

He unceremoniously grabbed the Watchman by the arm and began sniffing at the burn across his arm like some over-enthusiastic beagle, moving his flared nostrils up and down it, as he savoured each and every inch.

“White Magic! If that is not the stench of Magic upon this sleeve then I am an Otter’s Grandmother! I’ll wager that it is this that shielded our prey from his hunter’s grasp.

“It seems that I may have underestimated our little trespasser if he knows the White Arts well enough to stop the mighty Watchmen of the Monastery of Thane.”

The Guardian looked thoughtful for a moment or two.

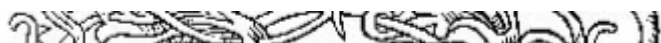
“So what do we next then, Guardian?” said Taegis hopefully.

“Our little friend may have gone to ground for the moment, but the next time that he uses this type of magic he might as well be lighting a beacon from the cliff tops for all to see!

“Now that I know how to find him, the Outlander will not stay far from my reach for long, brother Taegis, of that you may be assured. And as for what we do next, my fair brother, we can do no more than to wait for the fox to leave his lair.”

He broke into a broad smile and looked towards the Arch Brother, an expectant look upon his face.

“But now on to a much more gratifying note brother Taegis, do I recall an earlier discourse upon the subject of... *breakfast?*”



“There are far too many of them out the front. We must see if we can find a room with an open window or a corridor that leads to the back gardens. Now remember, whatever you do, make sure that you keep quiet and each of you must be sure to keep to the shadows.”

Melissa kept smiling for the benefit of the smaller children, but nevertheless she had the distinctly unpleasant feeling of a shepherd who was herding her flock directly through a large pack of very hungry wolves.

She moved past the ragged line, and when she had reached the front they began carefully to start their descent of the ancient and rickety staircase that led from the room they had just escaped from. Each footstep seemed to be accompanied by a tortuous creak or groan from the wooden stairs that threatened to give them away.

With every agonising step downward, Melissa stopped and the children immediately stopped behind her, each one listening intently for signs that they might have been discovered. Each time they could hear nothing but the silence of empty corridors and the faint sound of their own heartbeats thumping softly in their chests.

After what seemed like an awful eternity, Melissa finally reached the very bottom step. She slowly grasped the cold metal handle and opened the door leading back through into the vast hallway by the very smallest of cracks, so that she could look out to see whether it was safe for them to proceed.

Suddenly, just behind Melissa was a minor explosion. Little Jonathon Tree, who was highly allergic to almost every kind of dust available (and some that hadn't yet been invented) had been desperately struggling not to sneeze all the way down the stairs. As they rounded the final bend of the stairs, a particularly cruel draught surged over the top of the badly fitting door and transported a handful of grime straight up into his open nostrils.

Everybody jumped at once, and the effect on the collection of tightly packed children was not vastly different to a line of human dominoes toppling towards the doorway, with nothing but Melissa in their way to stop them.

With a crash, the door slammed wide open and Melissa was propelled, headfirst into the cavernous hallway and straight into the outstretched arms of Lady Cacophony Abigail Marchant, who was entirely unfazed by such an unconventional entrance, and who very nearly managed to make it seem that this kind of thing happened every day.

"Well, well my dear, we are so glad that you could finally join us. You did take your time though. We were beginning to think that you did not have it in you, but it would have been a sad, sad day if the strongest Thoughtthrowers in the whole world could not defeat a man with the brain of a sickly polecat!"

Marchant amused herself with this description of Spinks and threw her head back in a long wheezing rasp of hilarity. As soon as she had finished laughing, twenty burly Strangers fanned out from behind Lady Marchant and roughly grabbed the arms of the children as they struggled to untangle themselves from a heap at the foot of the stairs, pushing them backwards onto the hard wooden pew that lined the hallway wall.

“It would seem that I win our little wager Mr Claybourne.”

Claybourne stepped forward from the shadows and smiled menacingly at Melissa.

“It would clearly seem that they are in fact more devious than I would give them credit, especially *this one*,” he sneered, as he ran his long bony fingers through her hair. Melissa recoiled from his outstretched hand in disgust and slid backwards to be with the children, now huddled together on the wooden bench.

“No matter Claybourne, no matter at all. I can safely promise you that they will not still be capable of such deceptions by this time tomorrow. After their ride in our little merry-go-round, those who are still alive will barely be able to tie their own bootlaces.”

“Really? I did not realise that the machine was so rigorous. It may yet prove to be an entertaining evening after all. Some may not survive at all, you say?”

“It is altogether possible that none shall live, Mister Claybourne. The Reaper is so called because it harvests every living spark of energy from their malformed minds and channels it up through the apparatus at the top of the centrepiece. I am afraid that, without exception, each of our previous experiments with animals have proved to be a little... how should I put this? Messy!”

“Then, if you would be so kind, might I have one of the smaller carcasses for my village figurehead? It is a while since she had fresh human meat to feed upon. Lord knows, I ran out of cabin boys simply weeks ago.”

“It is my pleasure, Mister Claybourne.”

Melissa could bear this no longer and sprang from her seat with her arms outstretched and stretching towards his throat.

“Let these children go! You are nothing more than animals!”

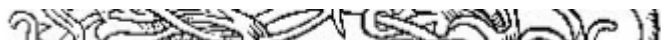
Claybourne’s face instantly slid into an older version of himself, his steely eyes devoid of all mercy, and his lips locked together into a cold, hard grimace.

Before her fingers had reached their goal, his arms swung down and she felt the full force of his studded leather glove strike the side of her head,

knocking her off balance and sending her into an uncontrollable downward spiral.

The last thing that Melissa remembered was the ashen face of Jonathon Tree, his hands covering his mouth in helpless horror as he saw her collapse like a puppet whose strings had just been cut. Then her head collided with the unforgiving hardness of the cold marble floor.

And everything went dark.



“So... these paintings and words follow the river, the River Bim, which isn’t a river but is actually time which flows like a river and carries us through our destiny, which is symbolised by all these scattered stars?”

“Yes, yes!” cried Kale.

Brink furrowed his eyebrows and slowly rubbed the back of his neck, as he pondered what Kale had been saying.

“And then, depending on how important the outcome of these moments of destiny, they may affect the course of history?”

“That’s right, that’s exactly right, and one knows where past and future events lie, by...?” Kale raised his eyebrows and stared at Brink expectantly.

“By waiting for events that you saw on the wall to actually happen, such as your discovery of the wall itself or the Great Fire of Tiltton-Craddock. This allows you to find out the timescales involved. And then by measuring the position of the painted stars you can tell the various geographical locations?”

“Yes, yes, yes! So now do you finally understand how I knew your whereabouts and of the terrible perils that lay ahead?”

“Well, no. Not entirely.”

Kale shook his head in sheer exasperation.

“Then I really must endeavour to be more concise and eloquent in my elucidations.”

“Pardon me?”

“I must speak more clearly, Spartacus my dear boy.”

“Indeed you must. But tell me, Professor, if you have seen this charmed wall with your very own eyes then you must surely know all our fates?”

“Mmm, well, if only it was quite that easy. You see, as I have been endeavouring to explain, it is all there, but, without knowing the exact meaning of each and every symbol, it can sometimes be a little difficult to unravel...”

Bailey suddenly sat up with a start and dislodged the startled Cabbage who rolled onto his feet and let out a bark of surprise at the flickering embers settling in the grate.

“Where am I, what time is it?” said Bailey, as he blinked and rubbed his eyes wearily.

“There is no way of telling the time by the sun while we are in the Professor’s home, it is much too dark for that,” replied Brink, looking to Kale.

“Utter nonsense, Mister Brink. Why you must think that we live in the Dark Ages. Give me a moment and I shall consult my Chronographic Engine!”

Kale scuttled across the room and jumped aboard his librarian’s ladder, propelling himself in an arc around the circular hall until he reached the first of a set of darkened rooms, each one perched high above another. He drew to a sudden halt and propelled himself up the ladder until he reached the topmost room, whereupon he disappeared inside.

What followed were the unmistakable sounds of someone being unable to find something.

“We’re in the house of Professor Kale, Bailey - do you not remember the journey here last night?”

“I do, but I had the strangest dream, and when I awoke just now, I wasn’t sure what was real and what I had dreamt. It all seemed to make perfect sense whilst I was asleep, but now that I am awake it is fading from my mind.”

“Then tell me, Mister Humblebucket. What is this message that you were so keen to give me earlier about me finding my way home? Didn’t you say

that it came from some old friend of yours?”

Bailey turned his head and stared back at Brink with a mixture of shock and confusion.

“The dream! She was in the dream I just had, I am certain of it. It was just like the last one, when she told me that I must find you. That’s the message that I have for you, Mister Brink – she told me in the cornfield - she said that she could help you on your way.”

Brink smiled at Bailey, and slowly shook his head.

“Then it is about time, Mister Bailey Humblebucket, that you learned the difference between real life and an overactive imagination. If I had known that your message was little more than a flight of fancy then I might have thought twice about you joining us tonight, rather than staying back at Bimleigh in the care of your mother and her friends. Or was that your plan, to keep me in suspense long enough to join our little adventure?”

Bailey jumped up indignantly, throwing the blanket from his legs.

“But it wasn’t just a dream! I saw where she was being held just the other night, that was how I got all these!” He turned around and lifted the back of his shirt, baring the half-healed talon marks that lined the length of his back.

“She told me that if you helped her then she would help you in return. She said she would show you the path to take, but that she could only free you if you freed her first.”

“Although it’s an exceedingly gracious offer, Mister Humblebucket, I find it a little odd that this apparition of yours should offer to free me whilst I don’t seem to be in any way imprisoned,” replied Brink, while the slightest hint of a smile still played across his lips.

“Ah – well I think that perhaps I may be able to assist,” said Professor Kale, clearing his throat from the shadows behind Brink’s chair and stepping back out into the firelight, “You see, Spartacus, this all rather brings me onto the subject of your current situation as regards... well, your *current situation*.”

He coughed nervously and lowered his eyes as Brink looked back into them.

"I was really trying to tell you sooner, but I wasn't really sure how I would broach the whole... subject."

"You know that you have nothing to fear from me, Professor, so pray continue," replied Brink in his most reassuring tone.

"Well I had rather hoped that you might have made things a little easier by asking where you were, but so far it is one of the few questions you have not enquired of me, although it might easily seem the most relevant considering your current predicament."

"I know exactly where I am," laughed Brink, "I am in your home, deep in some hidden labyrinth of passages, set somewhere towards the North, possibly, North West of England.

"During the last ten years I have been fortunate to have travelled through enough countries, with their own peculiar tongues and climates, to know when I have returned to my birthplace, even if I am not altogether sure how I came to be here."

"And if I were to tell you that you were not in this... *England* of which you speak Spartacus, what then?"

Brink narrowed his eyes and studied Kale's face. After a second or two he decided that this was just another attempt at one-upmanship by the wily old man, and his face instantly broke into a wide smile.

"Then I would wonder just how hard I was beaten when I was set upon and robbed, my good Professor; for if this is Spain or Germany then it has never been so full of my fellow countrymen!"

Brink turned from Kale's concerned expression to Bailey, who now stood with a puzzled look upon his face.

"But this isn't England, Mister Brink: this great land of ours is Arcadia, surely everyone knows that?"

"Arcadia? I have never heard such nonsense," chuckled Brink.

Bailey shook his head and continued.

"And I don't think I've ever heard of any of those places that you just mentioned, and I was top of the class in *Geography and River Navigation* last year. So where is this land you call England, Spartacus? Is it far from

here?”

Brink looked from one face to the other and then back again, but all the time the smile was slowly draining from his face. Kale saw his bemused expression and quickly intervened.

“When I was studying the Wall of Charms, I became increasingly aware that it often referred to another land, one that was far, far away from this. In this *Sometimes World* as it was called, the sun marked the passage of time by rising up through the heavens in the daytime and sinking back past the edge of the world at night, carried through its celestial journey as though by some huge unseen hand.

“That is the world of the Outlander, Mister Brink. That is the world where I believe you come from. You see, although they are intrinsically connected, and from what you have said I do not doubt that are very similar to look at, in reality that world and this are two *very* different places.”

As Kale spoke, Brink suddenly realised that in the days that had passed since awakening in that chamber deep in the heart of the Thane Mountains he had *not once* seen the sun either rise or set, but that it had always simply remained just where it was, sitting high in the heavens above. What was more, he suddenly understood the feeling that had been nagging away in the pit of his stomach ever since the first moment he had arrived - that something, somewhere was not quite right.

A flood of memories quickly flashed through Brink’s mind, and as the gravity of the situation finally fully hit home, his legs suddenly began to buckle and shake. He promptly stumbled backwards and collapsed, wide-eyed and shaken, into Kale’s high leather chair by the fireplace.

“My Lord above! At last my memory returns! I voyaged from England to Flanders on false papers and was posing as a Pardoner. I sold pardons to those who could afford them, to absolve them from sin and to pay for my keep at the taverns along the way.

“I sought a Scotsman named Michael Scot, that much I already knew, but now I can at last remember the reasons why. I had been sent to recover an artefact, once belonging to a brotherhood known as the Rosicrucians, which had not been heard of for many long years and was presumed to have been lost or destroyed in the Crusades a long time before I was even born.”

As Brink spoke, images of the brief fight within the Flemish tavern flashed through his mind, as did Scot's evil smile as he had tried to pull the Rosarian Oracle free from his elderly but determined grasp.

"My brothers knew that the stone of which I speak had extraordinary natural powers. It seemed, from what we had learned, that Scot was trying somehow to use its powers to affect the path of a comet. It seemed implausible, but from what we learned he seemed to be trying to draw it closer to the Earth. I doubted this even possible until I saw the comet grow closer with each passing day with my very own eyes. We still do not know what insane purpose lies behind this scheme, but I am one of a handful of Knights Templar who have vowed to seek out this madman, and to stop him by whatever means possible.

"It was when I finally tracked down Scot that I was struck by an inexplicable force. I was hit by a pulse of energy so immense that it picked me up and tossed me as though I were made of nothing but straw.

"The next thing I remember, I was in some monastery high up in the mountains, where two fools were calling me their *Guardian* and treating me as though I were royalty, although I swear I had never seen them before in my entire life," his voice trailed off and Brink fell silent.

"The Guardian, the *real* Guardian is the one who sent those eight Watchmen to find us. He is the only one with knowledge enough to make them rise from their eternal resting place deep in the Lake that sits upon Thane. That much I learned from my time spent studying the charmed Wall and the library at Gaunt. And this much I also know : if the Guardian of the Gate is one tenth as powerful as the tales of him have it, then you are really in the most terrible hot water."

"Then, Professor, my only choice remains the same as it has always been. I must find my way back to Ghent as quickly as possible. Bailey, where can I find this Melissa friend of yours?"

"Well, that is where there might be the very tiniest of problems," Bailey replied a little sheepishly.

"You did say that you had seen her, didn't you boy?" asked Kale.

"Yes but she had been held captive on the Stranger's river village and it left Bimleigh very soon after. That was over two days ago : they could be almost anywhere by now," he replied, his heart sinking as he spoke.

“Not necessarily gentlemen,” replied Kale excitedly, and he leapt over to the table, searching through sheet after sheet of manuscripts until he pulled one out and held it up to a candle, to give himself more light.

“Here we are. As soon as you mentioned their name I was sure that I had seen it close to where our meeting was depicted. Now let me see...

‘Thee Barrow o’ Bare, All Strangers Bind; Thy Reaper Fill’d,
Thoughtthrowers Ensnared: - as thee Wild Flaymes Climbed, Let Byrig Be-
ware!’

“Whatever its meaning, *The Barrow o’ Bare* seems to lead us quite conclusively to Bare Barrow Island - that much is certain. And by its proximity to the illustrations of the Watchmen by the Standing Stones of Bimleigh and these symbols for hours passed,” he pointed to a number of reeds, growing up from the sides of the river Bim, “I would say that whatever is going to happen must happen today, in fact just around teatime!”

He looked up at the bemused face of Spartacus Brink and added, “It’s all a simple matter of interpretation. It really is quite straightforward once you become used to the symbols, the ones that I know at any rate.”

Brink rose to his feet

“Then I must go to Bare Barrow, and quickly, before anything happens to Melissa. Tell me Kale, can you show me the route I must take through The Elderspath? It would seem that in here I am at least safe from the reaches of your Guardian and his little friends.”

“The route west is not mapped and these passages are so widespread that if you became lost we might never see you again. I really must insist that I travel with you to secure your safe journey, for even if I do not know the route exactly I still have years of experience of these tunnels that you do not.”

“Very well, I thank you for your assistance, Mister Kale, I am forever in your debt.

“Bailey? You will stay here until the Professor returns and can safely escort you back to your village. The road ahead is far too dangerous for me to consider allowing you to join us.”

“But, Mister Brink...?”

“I am sorry Bailey - I will not hear of it and that is my final word.”

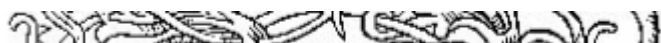
“But you don’t know what she looks like. I am the only one who knows whom we are looking for.”

“The young fellow does have a rather valid point,” said Kale. A twinkle of light flashed across his blue eyes, and Bailey was sure that he gave him the tiniest of winks.

Brink thought for a second or two, “This is against my better judgement, but you do indeed have a point, Mister Humblebucket. Alright then, you may come along, but only so long as you keep your head down, and do exactly as you are told at all times, agreed?”

“Agreed!”

“Then we should tarry no longer gentlemen,” said Kale, “as according to my Time-teller we have reached almost one o’clock in the afternoon and have a good distance to travel if we wish to reach the Bare Barrow before the next *significant moment* is due to arrive.”



One by one, the children were pushed, blinking and squinting, through the back door and out into the bright sunlit garden to the rear of Barrow Lodge.

At the back of the small party, Foxton and Shawditch carried the unmoving body of Melissa. Leading the way, ahead of the huddled black forms of fifty or so grinning Strangers, were the triumphant figures of Lady Cacophony Marchant and Josiah Ebenezer Claybourne.

As they picked their way down the cracked, mossy flagstones that made up the garden path, they walked past a large stone sundial, at which Lady Marchant spat as she passed.

“I am not altogether sure how that useless lump of granite should be able to tell the time, but at least it is correct once a day!”

Further down the garden they entered a large domed enclosure, its walls consisting of tall stone statues of leaders and dignitaries, each one sporting a three cornered hat and holding onto each of their neighbours proudly by

the lapels as they gazed impassively outwards.

“How pleased our founding fathers would be if they knew of the scientific advances we had made since their time,” said Claybourne, looking around briefly as the group crossed the dark marbled centre of the circular monument.

“And how much prouder still if they could see us crush our most bitter enemies in the palms of our hands!”

“I hope for all our sakes, Lady Marchant, that this machine of yours does as you say,”

“You will be able to see for yourself soon enough, Mister Claybourne, have no worries about that.

“Once the Thoughtthrowers are set in place – the jewels around my crown - our scientists will make their final checks and then everything will be ready. Within the next few hours the last of our brothers and sisters will arrive on the island and then the attack may begin. This is a historical day Mister Claybourne, history in the making!”

As they left the cool marble confines of the monument and walked back out into the sun, the glinting form of the Reaper rose into view. Somehow, now that it was outside and resting upon the flagged terrace high above the sheer cliffs, the machine looked even bigger and even more menacing than it ever had before.

The sixteen metal fists flashed a blinding gold, the Reaper’s seats burned a fiery scarlet in the sun’s harsh rays as the procession slowly approached across the lichen- stained flagstones from the Lodge.

Melissa was lain, still unconscious, down on the terrace, while the rest of the children were unshackled and led one-by-one to a separate seat around the outside of the vast machine. Meanwhile, dozens of Strangers in filthy white coats scuttled and scurried back and forth around the centre of the device, shielding meters and dials from the glare of the sun and making scribbled notes in tiny notebooks as they squinted at the results.

As each of the children was made to sit down, black mechanical hands slid silently out from each seat’s arm rests and snapped shut over their wrists, locking them tightly in place. Each child struggled but to no avail and very soon there was only one seat that was still unfilled.

Claybourne lifted his bone stick with a look of disdain on his shifting face and with a dramatic swish he pointed first to the unmoving body of Melissa and then to the remaining empty space.

“Mister Shawditch? Will you please see to it that *that* is placed over *there*?”

Shawditch and Foxton unceremoniously grabbed hold of Melissa and pulled her limp body up from the ground. Suddenly her eyes blinked open and she twisted her body away. They desperately tried to regain their grasp, but she slid nimbly beneath them both and sent them toppling headfirst toward each other. As their heads cracked together with a resounding thud, Melissa set off running. Dodging through her captors as their grasping white fingers strained out towards her, she mustered up every ounce of energy from her tired bruised body, and shot across the hard stone flags.

Within moments and to the cheers and encouragement of the children, at least those in a position to see, she had covered almost half the distance between the Strangers and the low garden wall and reached up her arms as she readied herself to jump.

“Stop her you imbeciles! Do not let her escape! Josiah - quickly do something!” shouted Lady Marchant desperately, but Claybourne held up his hand for calm.

“She is mine!” he smiled and raised his long stick as though it were a gleaming white javelin. When she was mere yards from the wall, he drew it back and released it with all the precision of a finely tuned athlete.

It burrowed swiftly through the air and with a terrible clattering sound, fell straight between her ankles, tripping her instantly and sending her crashing headlong into the waiting wall.

Claybourne kicked Foxton in the ribs as he clambered to his feet.

“You. Bring her back and do not fumble it this time, or I will see you hung by your sorry neck until you twitch,” he sneered, his eyes briefly lighting up with barely concealed rage.

Foxton scuttled over to Melissa, tears of rage and fear in his eyes and grabbing fistfuls of her soft dark hair he dragged her to her feet.

Melissa half walked and was half dragged back to the assembled group but still managed to stare defiantly into their faces whilst a dribble of blood ran

from her split lip and through the dirt smeared on her chin.

“This isn’t over yet.”

“I think you will find that it is, little girl!” Foxton hissed.

As he spoke he pushed her heavily backwards into the waiting seat and the arm locks slid into place to hold her fast. Like each of the others she fought briefly to break free, but soon realised that her shackles were unyielding and that her efforts were in vain.

The Head Technician approached Lady Marchant and rubbed his hands together ingratiatingly. His long black hair fell in matted, greasy lumps onto his shoulders and his white grinning face glistened with the sweat of the day’s exertions.

“I think that we are ready to warm up the Reaper unit your most Honourable Graciousness. Might I be so bold as to propose a small trial run, just to be sure that each of the pistons and wheel bearings are lubricated and that the *Rational Transmogrified* is behaving within expected parameters?”

“Is it strictly necessary Professor Periwinkle?” said Marchant, who had been looking forward to an indecently large brandy with a select few within the shade of her comfortable study.

“It might be wise to have a trial run, Lady Marchant,” interrupted Claybourne, “if only to ensure that we are not later embarrassed, when the collected eyes of our brothers and sisters alight upon us for this *Grand Display* of yours.”

“Do not play the diplomat with me, Josiah Claybourne, it does not sit well with you. Your only wish is to see whether this thing actually works or if it was all just some wild fantasy dreamt up by a senile old woman!”

“Madam, I assure you that I have only your best interests at heart. I am genuinely shocked that you would even suggest such a thing!”

“Your face reveals more than your tongue Josiah, it always has. But no matter. I have decided that a small trial may be in order after all. Professor Periwinkle?”

“Yes, Graciousness?”

“You will start the machine. Wind it up to half power and we shall see what we shall see.”

“Yes Milady, but what shall we target when the Reaper is sufficiently charged?”

“That small island just to the Southeast. It is quite close and there seem to be animals upon it, birds and suchlike, to make the experiment a little more... *interesting*. Let them be the first to taste the might of the family Stranger!”

Periwinkle hopped gleefully back to his beloved machine and squeezed past two children to reach the control panel. He manically rattled levers and turned small brass wheels until, with a brief hiss of steam, the dials all shone out with an eerie yellow glow and the machine slowly juddered into life.

One by one, and with an enormous creaking sound, each of the golden fists hanging above each child’s head began to slowly expand and their fingers stretched languidly outwards. Little by little, the spindly golden fingertips dropped ever downwards, until each gilded digit rested lightly on the head of the fidgeting child beneath. Next the seats began to shudder and shake as the whole contraption began to grind and lumber around its axis, gradually gathering speed until the lamps and dials around the centre were twitching and flashing into the excited faces of the technicians still huddled closely around inside.

“Raise up the ancillary arm!” shouted Periwinkle eagerly, and one of the scientists climbed a small ladder fixed to the side of the control panel and started pulling feverishly on a length of rope suspended from a pulley, which disappeared into the side of the wooden casing. As he pulled on the rope, the crystal at the uppermost tip of the tower moved steadily out of its housing and emerged, supported by a cylindrical wrought iron arm. As the crystal moved upwards, its peak swung down and another technician began to spin what looked remarkably like a ship’s wheel, casting brief glances behind him until the top was directly facing towards the tiny, unsuspecting island that lay far across the river.

By now the seats were revolving with a steady whooshing sound and the whole structure was buzzing with an increasing intensity. This steadily reached a high-pitched crescendo and purple sparks began to leap and roll around the crystalline finger jutting out from its blackened metal fist.

“Let it discharge, Mister Periwinkle!” shouted Lady Marchant, and as he pulled down on the last remaining raised lever, a bright purple fork of energy flashed out from the centre of the crystal and whipped out across the water, landing heavily in the midst of the distant island with an almighty splintering crash. Birds scattered in all directions and a small puff of bluish-purple smoke appeared from the burnt clearing cut by the blast.

As soon as the charge was released, the machine began to decrease in both speed and noise and the scientists and Lady Marchant alike hurriedly unsheathed a wide variety of optical instruments so that they could each examine the damage that had been wreaked in closer detail.

When the machine finally slowed to a stop, Melissa carefully opened her eyes and looked out across the glinting water of the river Caleb. As her eyes began to focus on the tiny tree-lined island, the strangest things began to occur. To her utmost astonishment, a number of trees and bushes that were closest to the point of impact suddenly started to tremble and shake. She shut her eyes, thinking it at first to be an after- effect of spinning around for so long, but as she blinked them back open and looked again, the trees shook even more violently than before.

As bark splintered and flew from their trunks, legs, complete with tiny feet, eased their way out of the trees and pushed down into the earth as though trying to burrow back into the soil.

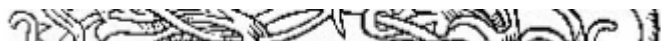
One by one each of the trees stood up, briefly shook the soil from their exposed roots (which somehow reminded Melissa of a duck shaking its tail feathers) and with a small pitiful cry, jumped leaves-first over the island’s edge and plunged into the water below, making the most colossal splash.

Next came the bushes, which tore themselves away from their roots and hopped blindly around the waters edge, squawking like demented parrots, before they too suddenly threw themselves into the deep river and were pulled into the dark swirling eddies below.

Within less than a minute, each and every one of the trees and bushes that were affected by the blast had plummeted off the islands edge and sunk without a trace, leaving nothing more than a few drifting bubbles to mark their watery grave.

“I would say that our list test was fairly conclusive!” chuckled Lady Marchant as she swept smugly past Josiah Claybourne and his awestruck cronies.

“You might say that, Lady Marchant, you might indeed say that,” he eventually replied.



The Guardian stood up.

“There! I knew I would not have long to wait.”

Tallow rushed over.

“Lord?”

“Can you not smell it brother, drifting softly on the breeze? Rather like freshly made clogs... or Camembert perhaps, but a modicum sweeter?”

Tallow looked bewildered.

“Shall I fetch the Arch-brother, Guardian? He did ask me to inform him as soon as anything was to happen?”

The jet-black eyes of the Guardian darted around the room as though trying to focus on some invisible moth as it flitted back and forth. All the time his nose quivered, examining the air in microscopic detail for the slightest clue as to the origins of the smell.

“By all means brother Tallow. Wake the corpulent brother Taegis and tell him to meet me at the top of the Bell Tower. If memory serves, that should afford us an excellent view.”

“A view, Guardian? But what does my Lord wish us to observe?”

The Guardian was already through the door and striding up the stone stairs.

“A shift in *reality*, my dear brother, which can mean only one thing: our little fox has left his lair.”

Chapter 12



flash of bright red tore across the sunlit grass and up the trunk of the lofty oak tree, scampering from branch to branch until he finally poked his small squirrel head from the top canopy of rounded leaves and blinked as he caught his breath.

With no more warning than a sudden loud creak, a door appeared from the empty space just above his head and swung down towards the squirrel's head, sweeping him from his perch and sending him tumbling downwards into the latticework of branches below.

A dark hole now remained as the door hung down, gently swinging in the afternoon breeze. After a moment or two, a mop of disembodied red hair fell through the hole and was quickly accompanied by the upturned face of Isosceles Innocence Kale, which looked this way and that and then shook its head dismissively.

"Honestly, some of these portals are in the most ridiculous of places. I mean, I ask you. You could break every bone in your body trying to climb down there. Absolutely no common sense at all."

The head then disappeared and an arm shot out, grabbed hold of a tatty piece of rope that hung down to the door handle and pulled it shut, whereupon all traces of the trapdoor instantly vanished.

Inside the gloom of the Elderspath, Kale brushed the dust from his jacket and scrambled back to his feet.

"Well we're not there just yet, and by the looks of things there might be a mile or so still to go, but we are definitely pointing in the right direction."

He retrieved a dusty and chipped glass key from his waistcoat pocket and turned it in the lock, mumbling to himself as he did so.

"Better safe than sorry, Kale. We don't want to drop through that on the way home now do we?"

Brink looked down at the door and nodded his head thoughtfully.

"I have seen many strange things in my life but I have never seen a tunnel

rise up from the ground and climb higher than the swaying treetops.”

“And that is just one of the many reasons I find living here so fascinating, Mister Brink. It will take a mind such as mine to unravel the true workings of a construction like this. I have been here ten years already and despite my most rigorous efforts, I still do not know who built it, let alone why. I would even be happy if I could discover the means by which it supports itself above the ground, but sadly I am still at a loss to explain even that...”

“Then perhaps it is magic,” said Bailey.

“That would certainly be the easiest explanation, my boy, but it has long been my belief that one man’s magic is simply another man’s science. I still hope that this Elderspath will be my empirical proof of that fact for once and for all.”

“I know an old lady who might not agree with you...” began Bailey, but before he had time to utter another syllable there was a loud echoing bang from the shadowy tunnel far behind them that made them all stop in their tracks.

“Come quickly!” said Kale, “I do not know these tunnels and it would seem we have company.”

“You lead the way professor. Bailey, you and the fearless hound will travel next and I will follow behind just in case those creatures on our heels come any closer!”

They moved off and hurried further up the wood-panelled passageway, turning one corner, then another, and stealing down a flight of spiralled granite steps.

Here the Elderspath somehow seemed older and the thick oak panelling on the walls soon gave way to bare damp stone. The lights too, were fewer and farther between and the further they crept downwards, the darker and more airless it seemed to become.

Just as they were nearing the bottom, Bailey tripped and tumbled into a pile of dusty white crockery that lay abandoned at the foot of the stairs. Before he could stop himself he had landed flat on his back, sending plates and bowls toppling noisily in every direction.

As the last plate flew into the wall and cracked in two, there was a muffled trumpeting roar from some way behind them, followed by a sound like

distant thunder.

“That’s torn it, now they know exactly where we are. We have to get out of here and quick!” said Kale pushing Bailey towards the only existing door.

Kale’s fingers shook as the rumbling steadily grew louder and foiled each successive attempt he made to find the key in his waistcoat pockets. Even when he eventually managed that task, he found it harder still to guide it into the keyhole in the door.

“Please don’t think that I’m putting pressure on you, but do you think it might be remotely possible to open the door before we meet whatever that thing is face-to-face?” said Brink.

With a timely clunk, the key turned and the door swung outwards from the thick trunk of a tree, thirty or so feet from the woodland floor.

“What about Cabbage, he can’t jump down there or he’ll break his legs?” said Bailey.

“Well I can’t be expected to think of everything you know. You should thank your lucky stars there is a tree for you to climb down, at least.”

“Can I take it that you will not be joining us, Professor?” said Brink, eyeing up the route down from the doorway.

“I really cannot and for a very good reason. You saw my figure on the parchments of the Charmed Wall didn’t you? It was as plain as the nose on my face that I do not take part in the events at Bare Barrow. Besides which, Mister Brink I am a historian. I find it infinitely preferable to read about battles than to take part in them.”

The rumbling sound from further down the passageway stopped and was ominously quiet. All three of them stared back up the gloomy stairs until Kale turned back with a whisper.

“Anyway, I think the creature may have stopped at the top of those stairs, they usually seem to prefer the flat - it is probably easier on their hooves.”

“Then come with us, Mister Kale, it must be safer in the woods than up here with whatever beasts are roaming around,” whispered Bailey.

“Thank you for your concern, Mister Humblebucket but I assure you that

I will be perfectly safe, I have survived in these passages for many a long year.”

“But I’m not sure that I really understand your reasons for staying,” said Brink.

“I have seen glimpses of the immediate path that you must take and there were no signs of me at all. I have thought long and hard about that fact, Mister Brink, and I have come to the unavoidable conclusion that the reasons for my absence can only be unpleasant. That is why I intend to keep out of history’s way and to take my chances up here, where I am on familiar territory at least.

“I really do wish you every success in your exploits, my young friends and I dearly wish that I could come with you further but I am afraid that it simply isn’t meant to be.”

“Then I will simply thank you for your help and hospitality. I am in your debt, Professor,” said Brink as they shook hands in a last farewell. As they did, Kale reached around and silently dropped a small flat object into Brink’s open pocket before turning to address Bailey.

“Look after yourself, young Master Humblebucket. All of our futures may yet depend upon the deeds of this very day.”

“I will, Professor, I promise.”

Kale lifted a coil of rope from around his neck and after tying a length of it around his waist he rolled it through the open door and sat down, his buckled shoes braced against the sturdy doorframe.

“You first, Spartacus then we can fetch the animal down, once you are there to catch him.”

Brink backed out of the doorway and took a tight hold of the rope before slowly lowering himself downwards, half walking and half scrabbling down the rough bark as he made his way towards the bottom.

Just as he had almost reached the ground, one boot lost its footing on a patch of wet moss and he slipped, twisting and tumbling backwards into a pair of large leafy bushes below.

Bailey popped his head through the open doorway and felt his stomach churn as he surveyed the drop, but try as he might he couldn’t see any signs

of Spartacus Brink; it was as though he had vanished into thin air.

“Mister Brink? Mister Brink are you alright?” he called in his loudest whisper.

Presently there was a groan and some rustling, whereupon Brink’s disembodied head appeared from the dense foliage and shook itself from side to side

“I’m fine,” he said looking up, “but I don’t think that this thing faired as well, I think that it must have helped break my fall.”

He lifted the dented Calling Stone from the bag around his neck and gave it a brief shake. It rattled ominously.

“And looking at the drop, I think that Mister Humblebucket was right to be concerned about his dog, I’m not altogether sure how we’re going to get him safely down here without the aid of wings...”

Just as he spoke, the unmistakable sound of hooves drifted through the trees, rising and falling as it floated past them on the afternoon breeze.

Brink looked quickly around but couldn’t see where the noise was coming from. He looked back up to the doorway above.

“Bailey, I think someone may be coming this way. Can you see anything from up there?”

Bailey looked through the awning of treetops and saw a dark cobbled path that cleaved the forest into two. His eyes traced its path as it ran past their tree, before twisting back upon itself and heading out into the bright daylight where it passed a small wooden gateway and carried on out into a field of waving yellow corn. As he followed its route back through the shaded trees he spied an old cart, stacked up high with rolled hay bales and pulled by an old chestnut-brown horse, which heaved and swayed as it headed ponderously along the path towards them.

As it came closer, Bailey began to hear a noise, which was not completely unlike two people singing, but was altogether less tuneful.

Whilst still trying to catch a glimpse of the owners through the dense foliage, he could just make out the last refrain of the tortured verse;

“...With a rabbit and a chicken and a dog named Spot, in a cot, with a

pig, in a dress and I confess... t'was the very best beer that I ever did sup!"

On the very last note there was a cheer and a peal of laughter, which ended in a double coughing fit, and then silence.

Brink threw himself from his hiding place and staggered into the path of the horse who, now only feet away, neighed in startled surprise and then drew to a halt

"Isn't it about time you two found a song that rhymes?" he shouted.

"Spartacus - Is that you?" shouted Mitch, and leapt over the side of the cart, straight down a small banking and into a large clump of dark stinging nettles.

"Ouch! Ow! God's sacred trousers! Will someone get me out of here?" he wailed.

Brink slid part of the way down and grabbing hold of Mitch by his outstretched arms, pulled him up the banking and free of the painful foliage.

Bob helped them both scramble back up to the cart and held Brink by the shoulders, shaking him as though to prove to himself that he was really there in his grasp.

"Spartacus Brink - as I live and breathe! If you only knew how bloody good it was to see you again!"

"Bob, calm down for goodness sake. You look as though you have seen a ghost."

"Oh Spartacus, I am so sorry that I let this fool talk me into abandoning you like that, but we searched and searched and you were nowhere to be seen and what with all the trouble with the fire that we caused at Tiltton Tower and all that..." his voice trailed off into a guilty silence.

"I really do not think that you can blame yourselves for the Great Fire of Tiltton-Craddock, my ignorant young friend," came Kale's lofty tones.

Mitch and Bob spun around but he was nowhere to be seen. Mitch eyed Spartacus suspiciously.

"How did you do that?" he said at last.

“I think that it might be time to introduce you to some other good friends I have made since I have been here,” he raised his hand towards the tree, “May I introduce to you gentlemen: Professor Isosceles Kale and Master Bailey Humblebucket. Oh, and not forgetting of course his loyal companion, young Master Cabbage Humblebucket, his ever faithful hound.”

Cabbage barked at the sound of his name and Mitch and Bob simultaneously looked up to where an old man, a young man and a dog’s head all peered at them from a small doorway set into the trunk of an old oak tree.

“Well I’ll be a goat’s bridesmaid...” said Bob.

“Bailey, Professor? These two scallywags are Bob and Mitch, travelling purveyors of the finest quality hay and the very lowest quality jokes.”

“Hello,” said Bailey “I’d shake your hands but we seem to be having a little difficulty in getting down from here.”

“I can imagine how it might be a problem, what with the lack of stairs and it being a tree and everything. But tell me, that being the case, how did you all manage to get up there in the first place?” asked Mitch, scratching his head.

“It is a story that I would love to relate to you but at this moment we have an urgent appointment with someone over on Bare Barrow Island,” said Brink, “so tell me boys, how might we best go about retrieving a young lad and his dog from a height such as you see above us?”

They looked at each other and raised their eyebrows in thought. After a few seconds, Mitch cut the silence short.

“The Fox and Three Hounds!” he cried in delight.

“Really?” said Bob.

“Yes indeed Robert my old friend. It’s not much higher than the back window and I reckon that with the promise of a fresh carrot, we might be able to persuade Lord Croakington of Meive-Starriot to participate in the proceedings!”

“Well it is possible I suppose, but it’s definitely a fair bit higher....”

“Brink? What are the hay traders talking about? Can you explain to them that we are *all* a little pressed for time?” said Kale.

“Boys, as the Professor says, both he and I are in something of a hurry so if you do have an idea about how to get Bailey down, do you think that you could share it with us?”

“Well you see, there was this one time, you see, when Mitch and I were stopping at an inn in the Shire of Frimley.”

“Frimley Gable,” added Bob.

“Well we’d gone there on the way to Mother Wilbur’s house to collect payment for a couple of bales of hay we’d sold her for her pigs just the week before. Now it wasn’t until I’d gone down to wash my face in the well the next morning that I found out that they’d gone and raised their prices without us knowing.”

“And we barely had enough to start off with,” said Bob.

“Who’s telling this story you or me?”

“I was only saying...”

“Gentlemen please, if this story has any bearing at all on our current predicament then can we at least try to get to the point sometime today?” said Brink.

“Well to cut a long story short, in order to *delay* payment on what we owed for the rooms...”

“And the rather hefty bar bill.”

“...I pulled Old Croaky here over to under Bob’s window around the back of the Fox and Three Hounds and once I’d finally managed to wake Bob up, he threw down our clothes and then jumped down himself.”

“It’s the hay you see? We’ve only just got a new load on so it’s all still nice and springy. It’ll break your fall a treat!”

“So what do you reckon then Sparty? Do you think that a plan like that could work again, right here and now?”

Spartacus looked thoughtfully up to where the Professor, Bailey and

Cabbage stood looking down at them and then down to the foot of the tree.

There was no denying that it was really quite a drop.

“Well I heartily wish that there was an alternative, boys but there seem to be scant few options open to us at present.”

“Alright then, Bob? You lead Croaky around to the tree and you and me, Spartacus, can be flattening these bushes down to bring the cart in nice and close to the trunk.”

Very soon (and with only limited use of bribery) Croaky had been coaxed and manoeuvred so that the cart, piled high with fresh hay, was tucked in as close as they could to the mighty oak tree and directly below the doorway.

“Alright then Bailey, we’ll get your dog down first and then you can jump down once he’s safely out of the way.” said Brink, “Come on Cabbage down you come good boy!”

Cabbage looked down at the cart, looked over at Brink and shook his head.

“Go on Cabbage, there you go, there’s a good boy,” whispered Bailey into his big floppy ear.

He shook his head again and Mitch turned to Brink and sighed deeply.

“Well I don’t really see what we can do if he’s not up for jumping. I mean to say, you can lead a horse to water...”

Just then there was a startled yelp and a briefly airborne canine plunged heavily into the hay.

“You kicked him!” shouted Bailey.

“I did not,” said Kale indignantly, “it just so happens that my foot slipped. It must be something that was on my shoe. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if it were a little package left by that animal of yours!”

Just then Cabbage’s shaggy head emerged from the hay and shook itself free.

“He’s fine Bailey, honestly, look for yourself,” shouted Brink towards the

bickering pair, "Now you saw how easy that was, if you jump down next then we can be off to the Barrow to help Melissa."

Bailey peered back over the edge of the doorway and felt the cold trickle of fear slide slowly up his back. He stood back and caught his breath.

"Come on boy, do not tarry. I fear for us both if we wait around this place for very much longer!"

"I am just getting myself steady. I will jump in a moment when I am ready."

Bailey moved back to the doorway and looked back down. The ground seemed as though it shot up to meet him and then fell spinning back downwards, like a penny piece tossed down a well. He shuffled back again and squeezed his eyes shut. He could hear the Professor mumbling something behind him and Brink and the others shouting words of encouragement from below, but although he desperately wanted to jump, he felt as though his feet were nailed to the spot where he stood. As the seconds dragged past, he felt his knees start to buckle and shake and his cheeks began to burn a deep crimson red.

"Oh come on lad, this week!"

And then, without warning and still with his eyes tight shut, he saw the smiling face of Melissa.

It was as though a wave of cool, still water had washed through his mind, and had instantly swept away all of his fears and uncertainty.

A newfound confidence swelled in his chest and it suddenly all seemed so incredibly simple. Without opening his eyes, he crossed his arms across his chest and before he had time for another doubting thought, he strolled through the doorway and stepped out into the empty void below.

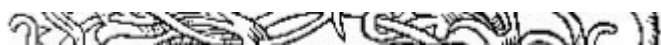
As he stood alone high in the treetops, Kale looked down to the ground and then slowly pulled the door shut with a resounding creak. It closed and the darkness fell back around him. He reached inside his jacket and after a brief fumble, pulled out a piece of parchment holding it to the flame of a nearby torch, which flickered in the gloom.

"He is a fine young fellow that Outlander, it was a pleasure to help him on his way but perhaps I should have gone with them after all. Perhaps I might have been able to play another part in this tale than as it was told."

He glanced at the yellow dusty manuscript and shook his head slowly from side to side.

“He is a fine, fine fellow and of that there is no doubt, but the Wall of Charms has never lied and I cannot believe that it lies to me now. If only it was somehow less clear I could at least let myself believe that I had misunderstood its meaning - but it is as plain as the nose on my face - as real as rhubarb and custard.

“The Guardian has returned and before this day is out he will demand retribution. When that time comes my friend the Outlander will pay with all that he holds most dear...” he breathed heavily through flared nostrils, his old eyes blinking away the tears, “he must pay with his life.”



“Over there to the North West, my brothers. I am blessed with eyes that are keen and bright enough to pick out a fieldmouse in a meadow, but you may wish to use your spyglasses.”

To a man, each of the six assembled brothers lifted their telescopes and looked out across the misty panorama of white tipped mountain tops, towards the rolling lilac hills and green valleys in the far distance.

The late afternoon sun brought some warmth to the brothers' faces but high upon the very top of the Bell Tower, the chilled eastern wind seemed to find its way through even the most tightly woven habits, and left all but the Guardian with teeth chattering uncontrollably in the cold.

As they desperately searched around for some sign of where the Guardian was looking, the brothers began to hear a noise. At first, it sounded like the wings of a large bird beating heavily against the wind, but as it approached, it began to sound more like an animal, something heavy like a bear, that was struggling against the tide of a strong river and fighting desperately to gasp in lungs full of precious air.

The closer the noise came, the more unsettling it became. The huge sleek bell which hung high above them seemed to reverberate and echo with the sound and all at once it seemed to be coming from everywhere around them.

As the other brothers glanced nervously around the tower's snowy top, Brother Neville opened his mouth, and fighting to control the rattling of

his teeth, looked nervously towards the apparently unconcerned Guardian as he tried to think how best to broach the subject without sounding quite as frightened as he actually was.

Suddenly, the rasping, growling noise reached a crescendo just as the trapdoor behind them slammed heavily open, sending a shower of snow and ice into the air, through which appeared the beetroot coloured visage of Arch Brother Taegis.

“By the Kings and Queens of Arcadia! What foolish notion so beset our ancestors that they might think such a flight of stairs to be accessible by mortal man? I am sure that I feel the beginnings of a seizure grip my fragile frame.”

“Then perhaps you might consider taking a little more care of your body, my dear brother Taegis, for your fellow brothers managed the task in a far shorter time, and with far less fuss.”

Many brothers stifled a laugh, quickly turning away from the red sweating face poking above the ground and hurriedly covering their mouths with their sleeves so that they would not later face his wrath.

“But may I respectfully remind you, Guardian that I have tens of years on my younger brothers assembled here?”

“And I would remind you that I have many hundreds upon yours, my Arch Brother, but that I was still the first to reach the top of this tower. Is that not true, brother Neville?”

“Yes, Guardian.”

Neville could feel the eyes of his Arch Brother burning into his back so he stared fixedly down at his telescope and busied himself by earnestly cleaning it with his sleeve.

Taegis went to lift himself up through the trapdoor but then came to an abrupt stop.

“Tallow. Are you still down there?”

“...Yes Arch Brother?” came the somewhat hesitant reply.

“I may be in need of your assistance. This doorway seems a little *smaller* than one might reasonably expect it to be. Would it be within your powers

to extend a helping hand to a brother in his hour of need?"

Although there were no sounds to be heard but the icy breeze pushing past them, occasionally punctuated by the flap of a bird's wings overhead, Brother Neville was sure that, for an instant, he could hear the cogs of Tallow's mind frantically turning in an attempt to save him from having to make contact with his master's inflated posterior. It was, however, to no avail.

"Without further ado, if you please, Brother Tallow?"

By now each of the assembled brothers had turned away from the sight of their master and were shaking quite violently as they tried to contain their laughter. Even the Guardian had the tiniest hint of a wry smile upon his thin, white lips.

There followed the briefest of tussles, whereupon Arch Brother Taegis simultaneously lurched upwards and forwards, erupting from the trapdoor and spilling out into the snow. He landed face first, and spluttered indignations as he brushed crushed ice from his flared red nostrils.

"Now then, brother," said the Guardian as he swept back to the tower wall, "there is no need for language like that. Come, join us and behold a sight that will draw songbirds to your heart!"

Tallow sprang nimbly up through the trapdoor and tried to help Taegis to his feet, but was rewarded only by a swift cuff across the mouth.

"*You* have done *enough!*" he hissed, and staggered up to join the Guardian at the battlements.

When they had reached the huddled group, Taegis snatched a telescope offered by the other brothers and looked out across the land.

"But Guardian," he said as he finally seemed to regain his composure, "what exactly are we looking at?"

The Guardian stretched out his long bony finger and pointed, far over the misty mountaintops, on down the twisting hills and valleys and down further still, to where the rivers flowed and met at the far distant mouth of the dark brooding Caleb. Though the looming craggy tops of the Thane Mountains hid the rest of the river and the Bare Barrow from view, there was, it seemed to Taegis' eye, the slightest hint of purple clinging to the air across the whole valley. It was as though the Sun was already setting high

above, its rays being cast up from the river's black mirrored surface, but glancing towards the heavens the Arch brother confirmed that this was not the case and looked back, perplexed, to seek another explanation for the mysterious amethyst haze.

"No Arch Brother it is not the light from the sun which throws that peculiar hue across the water, it is something far more significant. That particular miasma is quite unique, it will only ever occur when the *real* clashes with the *surreal*."

"So what you are saying is that enchantments are afoot!"

"That is indeed what I am saying my dear brother. What is more, I can think of only one individual who has employed such forces since my timely return."

"It seems to be at its strongest over Bare Barrow way, Guardian. Do you think that those Strangers might be playing a part in this affair?"

The Guardian thought for a moment and then raised a single eyebrow.

"It is not altogether impossible that they are in league, brother Taegis, I will grant you that."

Taegis drew himself up to the Guardian and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Then, presuming the Strangers *are* in some way involved in shielding this impostor, might it not be appropriate for your supreme holiness to show them the... *error of their ways*?"

"If that did happen to be the case, Brother Taegis, be in no doubt that a fair punishment would surely be meted out. But know this much brother, I will not be influenced in such matters. You have made it abundantly clear that there is no love lost between you and those funny little freaks at Bare Barrow."

"Of course my Guardian, I would never presume to be so irreverent," smiled Taegis bowing his head in reverence.

"And then of course is the little matter of how I might best travel."

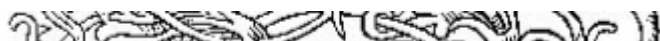
"But sire," said Tallow a little uncertainly, "surely someone of your great and mighty powers could simply fly over there?"

Taegis spun around, and, flicking his telescope, caught Tallow squarely on the head with a resounding clank.

“Does he look like a bird, you blazing idiot? Guardian I am so sorry about brother Tallow, if his stupidity bothers you I could easily have him taken below and hung - or perhaps merely tortured?”

“That will not be necessary brother. In fact, brother Tallow has a point - it would seem to be the swiftest form of travel, given the terrain that is involved.

“Taegis, send somebody to fetch those two great shields I saw hanging in the hall when I first arrived. And tell them to hurry. I think that I may have thought of a rather amusing alternative use for them.”



“Where am I – what’s going on?”

Bailey tried to lift his head through the tide of fresh hay washing over his forehead, but found it pushed straight back down by a large hand resting on the top of his head.

“Be quiet, we’re nearly there!” hissed Brink’s disembodied voice, somewhere through the warm soft wall of woven yellow stalks.

Very soon he was fully revived and realised that he must be travelling in the back of the hay traders’ cart, but as hard as he tried, he found that he could not remember landing, which he decided was probably all for the best.

Bailey did as he was told, and silently listened to the wheels of the cart churn and bump over the uneven track, sending sticks and pebbles scuttling from their path as they went.

After a little while, the sound changed, and Bailey realised that the cart had slowed down and was now moving over an entirely different surface. The sound of the wheels on stone had now been replaced by a rumbling, groaning sound, which he instantly recognised as being a bridge and a wooden one at that. There was now only one place they could possibly be and that was upon the bridge leading to Bare Barrow Island.

The cart came to a halt and cold shivers tumbled down Bailey’s back as he heard the unmistakable tones of a Stranger for the first time since his lucky

escape on the quay at Bimleigh Heavers.

“What do you two want?” the voice sneered.

“Hay delivery me old mate,” said Bob cheerfully.

“Go away from here quickly you dirty little man.”

“Well that’s not very nice is it Robert? Not after we’ve come all this way. Especially not after we’d brought the finest hay in the whole of Arcadia to this noble gentleman’s doorstep.”

“I would say not Mitchell, I would say not. And especially seeing as it was ordered for that great big house over there on that hill. I don’t suppose the owner will be particularly pleased when they run out of hay and start looking for someone to blame.”

“All too true Master Robert. Still, we have many more deliveries to make so I reckon we had better be off and on our merry way.”

Bailey felt the cart begin to slowly turn around and fear began to rise in his chest.

“Wait!” snapped the guard, “You say that this hay is bound for the Barrow Lodge? Where are your documents to prove it?”

“That’s not how it works in the hay business mate. Listen, if you lot don’t want it then we’ll be off, we’re very busy men,” said Bob haughtily.

“Then tell us who ordered it, little man,” came another, equally disdainful, voice, “but let me warn you that if this is some kind of trick, we will burn you and your cart to the ground where you stand.”

There was a deathly silence.

“*Mister Claybourne!*” hissed Bailey, trying desperately to whisper at just the right volume so to be heard by his friends but not the guards.

“Why it was a gentleman, I believe, who goes by the name of Mister Frogspawn, yes that was it, Frogspawn,” said Mitch happily.

Beneath the stack of hay, Bailey winced.

“Mister Smythe?” said the more senior voice.

“Yes, Mister Shawditch sir?”

“Set that contraption alight. If they stop you, kill them!”

“*Clay-bourne!*” whispered Bailey again, louder this time.

“Or it might have been Claybourne!” said Mitch.

There was another ponderous silence. Bailey shut his eyes tight and hoped that the name that he had remembered from his last terrifying encounter would be enough to persuade these guards to let them pass.

As it happened, Bailey had no need to worry, for without another word there came the sound of first one and then the other gate being dragged rattling back across the wooden planks and coming to a shuddering stop.

“Straight up to the house and then straight back down again - do you hear? If I have to send someone to find you then you will not find them quite as pleasant to deal with. Do you understand? Good, now get yourselves out of my sight and stop wasting my life.”

Bailey felt the cart turn a little and then roll forwards across the bridge, this was then followed by the sound of gates being closed up behind them.

“So what’s the plan now then, Spartacus?” said Bob as soon as they had put some space between themselves and the guards.

“Head up the lane to the big house as you said, otherwise they might suspect that something is wrong. Once you get close to the house you can drop us off and then head back on your way.”

“Well I’m not sure that we should. From what you told us back in the woods, there could be hundreds of them around here. What if you need a hand?” said Mitch, sounding more than a little concerned.

“We’ll be fine honestly. You’ve done more than I could ever have asked of you already, and if you don’t get back down to the gates then there will be all sorts of trouble.”

“Well, whatever you say Sparty my old mate, you seem to know what you’re doing. But once we get over the other side we will wait for you out of sight of those guards on the bridge,” said Bob firmly.

After trundling along up the cobbled lane for a few minutes more, Bailey

felt the cart lurch to one side and go under the shade of some leafy branches. He tentatively stood up and lifted his head through the quilt of warm hay. As his head burst out into the fresh island air he was immediately spotted by Cabbage, who until now had been sitting patiently between Mitch and Bob, and Bailey's face quickly came into contact with a large and very wet tongue.

Spartacus and Bailey climbed over the edge of the cart and dropped quietly to the ground. They hastily bade the boys a grateful farewell and then, once Cabbage had scrambled over to join them, they slipped through a tall revolving gate and into the shelter of the woods at the foot of the big house itself.

"So far so good," said Brink, "I don't suppose your visions told us where we might find her did they?"

"I'm really sorry, Spartacus, but I don't know if I can remember anything else. That last dream I had is so hazy that I'm not sure about anything at all, only that Melissa was in danger, and that she desperately needed our help."

"Then let us pray that we in still in time to be of some use. Come, if we stay in the shade of the trees and keep low we may just be able to sneak up to the house without being spotted. Take care to stay behind me, and if you see anyone come out of the house, then drop to the floor and stay still until I give the word. The bushes should keep us nicely sheltered from view. Are you nervous?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, Mister Brink, but I'm afraid I am a little."

"I'd be worried if you weren't, Bailey. Come on, let's be away."

Far around the other side of Barrow Lodge, the servants milled to and fro, and busied themselves in preparation for the show that was almost set to begin.

Some plumped up cushions and made final final additions to the banks of raised seats that now surrounded the Reaper of Wits, whilst others fetched tall glasses of iced tea on fancy silver trays for the many expectant guests that had already been seated.

Josiah Claybourne sat surrounded by a group of his cronies on the front row at the very centre of the raised seating, and stared out across the river. His face slowly slipped into a much younger version of himself as his thoughts strayed to hazy carefree days long since gone by, when he had

played along the same rivers edge with his friends. As the other Town Ministers arrived and nodded their greetings, his features swiftly became more lined and contemptuous as his mind settled back into the present once again.

Secreted behind the seats sat a small group of female musicians, each dressed impeccably in their finest formal evening wear and frowning in concentration as they played a selection of ethereal chamber music on a battered collection of violins, flutes and harps to the unappreciative throng.

Around the front of the seats the main attraction was draped, along with its hot and fidgeting inhabitants, in a thick purple satin sheet, across which was emblazoned the golden crest of the house of Marchant. Coloured paper streamers hung down around ropes from its top and were held in place by stout brass pegs around the paved edges of the terrace. This gave the whole occasion a calculated air of mystery and meant that even those Ministers who had earlier glimpsed the machine were allowed to let their imaginations run riot concerning the spectacle yet to unfold.

The late afternoon sun had lost much of its heat but lay stubbornly shimmering above them all, biding its time until it could slip quietly away and once again adopt the guise of the silver moon.

Very soon, when the last of the guests had been accommodated in the semicircular seating, almost a thousand shifting faces stared out across the stone flagged terrace and towards the wide-open river far below.

Small pockets of dignitaries from each town talked amongst themselves in low whispers; studying each other suspiciously from beneath their best black hats and suits, but still nodded and smiled towards each other from time to time in gestures of polite acknowledgement.

As yet, there had been no sign of when the proceedings might begin. All around the terrace was an almost palpable air of hushed expectation, when suddenly the music came to an abrupt stop and into the centre of the arena strode Cacophony Abigail Marchant, her hand raised in the air, followed by a bewildering gaggle of white-coated technicians.

“Gentlemen and ladies!”

She waited, with her eyebrows raised like a patient schoolteacher, until the babble of voices had died down before proceeding.

“You are no doubt aware of the reason for our gathering here this

afternoon. Today, my brothers and sisters, we stand on a threshold, the threshold of our own liberation and of the final destruction of the monastery of Thane!”

As she spoke, a spindly technician knelt down upon the grass to one edge of the terrace and briefly held a taper to a hollow silver rod set into the ground before diving for cover into a nearby bush. There was a short fizzle and a pop followed by a puff of smoke and a disappointing silence.

After a moment or two, during which Marchant stared furiously at the cowering lackey, he slipped back out from the foliage and made towards the mortar. Just as he had reached it, there was a huge popping sound and a with a flash and a huge plume of smoke, a bright green flare shot straight past his face, singed his hair and sent him careering backwards and back into the bushes.

The flare flew higher and higher into the air until it exploded into a shower of emerald green sparks which still burned until they dropped with a hiss into the water far below. The remaining ball of green smoke twisted and turned high above the river’s surface, and there was a sudden flurry of movement all along the steep rock faces that led off into the depths of Sayge valley.

On both sides of the steep valley walls, a series of grey shrouds that had blended almost invisibly into the craggy rocks and fissures were swiftly ripped aside and dropped away, to reveal a series of tall mirrors that blinked and shone in the bright sunlight. A hotchpotch of glinting quadrangles now lined the entire gorge, stretching off for as far as the eye could see until finally disappearing around a turn many miles away in the far distance.

Before the veils even had time to fall to the river below, tiny black-clad figures scurried away like termites from their mound, hurrying to find shelter from the onslaught they knew was to come.

Once again Marchant raised her hand and at that very instant the remaining technicians each gathered up one of the ropes left lying on the floor and gave a tug. All at once the draped satin cloak fell away and the onlookers gasped as the Reaper, its seats crammed full of uncomfortable children, was revealed to one and all.

“Let us proceed, Mister Periwinkle!” cried Lady Marchant, to which

Periwinkle once again climbed through the outer structure of the machine and nodded to his fellow technicians as they fiddled and prodded the controls at its hub.

As the Reaper began to hum, the golden fists stretched and spread out, their stiff metal fingers forming a dome that slowly fell lower and lower until, once again, it sat firmly on each of the Thoughtthrowers heads.

“You will not get away with this!” shouted Melissa.

There was a split second’s silence and then a ripple of youthful amusement washed over the faces in the audience as a chorus of pitiless laughter filled the air. Even Josiah Claybourne laughed out loud and smacked the bottom of his cane on the flagged floor in appreciation as his fellow villagers jeered and mocked the helpless youngster.

Marchant raised her hand for silence, her lips twisted in a mirthless grin.

“And who would you have come to stop us little girl? Jack O’Lantern? The Dancing Horse Faeries? Or perhaps you have summoned Canuus, God of all Dogkind?”

This was all too much for many members of the audience who were now politely dabbing the tears of laughter away from their streaming eyes.

Melissa stared down at her restraints, hoping against hope that she might somehow summon the strength to make them open, but however hard she concentrated, they simply refused to move.

“Carry on, Mister Periwinkle,” waved Marchant nonchalantly and she went to sit down in the last remaining seat, next to an amused Josiah Claybourne.

“Strike a deep blow into Thane’s poisonous heart. Today we shall remind them of the brothers and sisters that we lost. Today we show *them* the meaning of pain!”

“Yes milady! You heard her gentlemen, start it up!”

The seats juddered sideways and then began to slide off on their inexorable journey around the technicians who all huddled around the console and fiddled feverishly as the dials pulsed with light.

Melissa shut her eyes and gripped the armrests until her fingers turned

white. Around her, she could hear the shouts of the other children struggling in frightened confusion, knowing that she was utterly powerless to help.

She had never felt so helpless in her life and as the machine spun faster and faster she felt a painful combination of panic and dread welling up in the pit of her stomach. She braced herself back against her seat and sobbed softly to herself.

“I didn’t think that it would end like this. Oh Bailey – where were you when I really needed you?”

Chapter 13



he red breathless face of brother Neville popped up and contorted with strain as he slowly pulled the first of the two heavy shields through the open trapdoor. Once up, he carefully laid it to rest beside him on the stone flagged floor and began on the second, his face changing to an even deeper purple as he finally dragged it out into the fading daylight above.

“Ah! At last I have the items that you requested, your Holiness!” said Taegis.

As he swept down to pick the shields up, Taegis turned, aimed the heel of his foot and, with a spiteful sneer, delivered a blow directly into the centre of the unsuspecting face of brother Neville which sent him hurtling back down the steep granite staircase that he had only just managed to climb.

“Splendid!” said the Guardian and began to search frantically through his robes.

After a moment or two of pulling out all manner of trinkets and ornaments, (some of which seemed far too big to fit in anything less than a wardrobe) the Guardian stopped moving and smiled. As quick as a flash and rather like a magician playing to his audience, he whipped out a small brass ball engraved with a slowly moving black script and encrusted with a number of shining green stones.

“This really is the only way to travel you know”

He flipped over one of the shields and placed it between two upright stone battlements. Grasping it with both hands he gave it an almighty heave and set it spinning around like an enormous gothic spinning top.

“Next, add your Calling Stone!” he cried, tossing the brass sphere into the centre, where it landed with a skidding clank.

The shield continued to spin lazily around, and as the brothers huddled together, the strangest thing began to happen. The sphere in the middle slowly began to spin as well, but *not in the same direction*. As it gathered momentum and ground against the shield, green sparks exploded from the

surface of the Calling Stone, which sizzled as they fell into the habits of the rapidly retreating brothers and lit up the Guardian's broadly smiling face.

"And finally, finish off with a large dash of shield!" he shouted, heaving the other shield over the top of the two, which just seemed to sit there, gently rolling from side to side, like a boat on a near-perfect sea.

"But what does it do now, Your Holiness?" said Taegis, still desperately trying to work out what the contraption was meant to do.

"Now - my dear Brother Taegis - I sort out this mess for once and for all - as I should have done when I first arrived."

With a helping hand from Tallow, the Guardian climbed gingerly up onto the battlements and stepped upon the platform, sending out a fresh shower of emerald sparks that traced smouldering lines down Tallow's robes before falling softly to the floor.

The Guardian slowly raised his palms, and as he did, the whole contrivance lifted as one and sat perched in mid air as though held up by invisible wings.

"Look after my beautiful Fortress of Thane, Arch Brother. I will not be best pleased if any harm should come to this place."

"Yes of course Guardian, you have my word!"

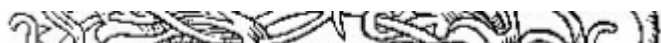
The Guardian looked out towards the stretched late afternoon skyline and the growing band of purple shone back from the deep, black pools of his eyes.

"Then I shall take my leave and hunt my fox. It does always seem that if I want something doing properly then I must always do it myself."

Without another word the Guardian leaned forwards, stroked the straight grey strands of his beard, and with a flash of green light he tipped off the battlements and dropped like a stone, his scarlet robes billowing on the breeze as he fell.

Just when it looked as though he might be dashed upon the mountainside he rose back up, twisted off to one side and then skimmed across the white-tipped mountaintops, scattering vast clouds of snow in his wake. Seconds later he had passed over the cold, rugged mountains, and dropped like a bird of prey, vanishing with a crimson flash as he was swallowed up

by the lush foliage of the valley down below.



Brink and Bailey crept slowly through the dusty emptiness of the reception hall of Bare Barrow Lodge. The air was musty and smelt of stale pipe smoke, and each footstep creaked and groaned across the treacherous ancient floorboards.

Brink suddenly stopped in his tracks and signalled to Bailey to do the same. In the endless seconds that followed, Bailey could hear nothing save the ponderous tick-tock of a distant grandfather clock echoing down the corridor. Then, as he almost turned to speak to Brink, Bailey's ears began to register the faint excited cackle of far away voices drifting from a half-open doorway further down the hall.

Spartacus Brink turned his head to Bailey and raised his finger to his lips for silence, then motioned to him that they both should carry on.

Following their ears they found a route through the Lodge's lengthy tiled kitchens and turned past a stone larder stuffed full of recently dead grouse, hanging by lengths of twine wrapped tightly around their scaly red feet.

As the pair rounded the corner they found themselves walking straight up to the open back door and the path to the garden beyond. Their progress, however, was soon halted when they both realised that a burly pair of Strangers were standing guard on either side of the doorstep like a couple of overenthusiastically stuffed ravens. Without even flinching, Brink calmly signalled to Bailey to retreat, and the two of them slowly slid back into the safety of the shadows. As they came to a stop, Bailey only just managed to catch Cabbage by the collar as sauntered nonchalantly through their legs and towards the fading daylight ahead.

They turned quickly back around the corner and slipped quietly back into the kitchen. As soon as they had all safely regrouped, Brink fiddled around in his inside pockets and once again drew out his small metal orb.

"Stand back Bailey and whatever you do, don't look directly at the sphere. I think I have remembered a little trick that might just get us past our two large friends out there."

Without another word, Spartacus Brink strode out into the daylight and smiled confidently at the two Strangers, who in turned, looked at each other and instantly clenched their powerful fists.

“Good day, Gentlemen. I should like to take this opportunity, if I may, to show you something which I think you will find most intriguing.”

As Brink tossed the Calling Stone into the air it began to hum softly and the ink-black script that covered it writhed and shifted across the sleek metal, like knots of seaweed slowly being dragged up a beach by the tide. Tiny points of light shimmered and flickered from its bejewelled surface and as the ball rose into the air it slowly began to revolve,

Brink’s eyes flicked from their faces back to the hovering ball and suddenly realised that all was not as it should be. There was a faint grinding sound and the emerald light that usually shone so brightly seemed weak and feeble. To add to these rather unsettling symptoms, Brink also noticed that the usual buoyant rotation of the sphere had now become jerky and hesitant, as though it didn’t know quite whether it could really be bothered.

With one last piercing flash, the Calling Stone became dull and lifeless and then stopped dead, dropping heavily back into Brink’s outstretched palm with an ominous clunk.

Two sets of fat sweating hands slammed down on Brink’s shoulders and their long bony fingers grabbed a tight hold of his upper arms with a force that he thought might rip him in two.

“You are coming with us little man. Let us see what Lady M. has to say about an outsider strolling around her kitchen,” said the larger of the two.

“Gentlemen, if you simply release me then I will be able to explain absolutely everything.”

“Why do we have to release you first? You must think we are stupid,” said the other in a deep and ponderous voice.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” said Brink, his voice soothing and far more relaxed than he felt, “I am sorry for my entrance but I tried simply to amuse you both. I am but a simple man, a jester by trade, brought in to add levity to the proceedings by way of a song and a jape,”

“Are you trying to say that Lady Marchant hired you for the Grand Display?”

“Yes, so if I could just be on my way?”

The Stranger’s grip loosened a little as he eyed him up and down

suspiciously.

“You do not look very funny to me.”

“I am heartily assured that the more one drinks, the better I get!”

“Well that may be a problem little man,” continued the guard, “in that the Family Stranger do not partake of the daemon drink. We are pure of both heart and mind, unlike outsider scum.”

The Stranger’s grip tightened again, draining the blood from Brink’s arms and pressing fat hairy knuckles deep into the muscles in his shoulder.

“Ah.”

Just then there was a commotion behind them and Brink felt both Strangers simultaneously lose their grip as they turned to see what had happened.

With an almighty crash of saucepans and spoons, Cabbage bolted out from the kitchens, a plump Grouse wedged between his teeth, and galloped through their legs, knocking one guard straight into a bush and the other to his hands and knees on the path.

A tiny chef, dressed in an oversized hat that covered most of his head, and a large stained apron, ran from the kitchen brandishing a rolling pin in one hand and a sharpening iron in the other, which he shook at the rapidly disappearing hound.

“Don’t just stand there you idiots, get after him, that Grouse is meant for Mister Claybourne! Have you got any idea of what he’s going to do when he finds out that you two let a dog run off with his tea?”

A look of pure fear crossed their faces and it was all that Brink could do to stop himself laughing out loud as the Strangers hastily scrambled to their feet and started to give chase. The larger one pointing back at Spartacus as he ran and bellowed “You, jester, just you stop where you are!” before dashing off down the garden path and disappearing into the dark stone dome at the bottom.

“Well, when you persuaded me that you should come along on this venture, I didn’t think that it might be *you* that ended up saving *my* skin. I thank you, Master Humblebucket, your help in that matter was most gratefully received.”

"I could see that your plan wasn't really working so Cabbage thought that a little diversion might be called for."

"Aye and it was. It would seem as though this *Calling Stone* of mine is somewhat out of sorts. I think that I must have done something to it as I fell from that tree. Still, your wits got us out of that tight spot and if nothing else at least we now know that we are at the right place."

"To find Melissa? But how can you tell?"

"That guard mentioned something about the Strangers arranging a *Grand Display* and I'll bet a horse to a half penny that it somehow involves your friend."

Outside on the terrace the Strangers looked on in awe as the hellish merry-go-round swept and swirled around its base and purple sparks buzzed and flashed from its crystal tipped spire.

"Unleash the first barrage Mister Periwinkle!" screamed Marchant above the deafening noise.

Periwinkle nodded, his hair plastered across his smirking face by the fast spinning machine. His bony hand gripped the control and with a look of unconstrained malice, he slowly pushed the lever down.

Bailey and Brink made their way quickly but quietly down the garden path and into the cool echoing stillness of the imposing monument that now rose up before them. Slipping into the eerie stillness, Bailey tried not to let his eyes wander to the tall stone figures that surrounded them, but instead focussed his gaze upon Brink's silhouette as it merged with the shadows ahead. Bailey heaved a sigh of relief when they presently re-emerged into the fading twilight. They were, however, no sooner reacquainted with the faint glow of the sun, than there was what sounded like the most deafening roll of thunder. A mere second later, a glistening ribbon of purple lightning erupted from the earth and split the dark blue sky in two.

As the two looked on in rapt astonishment, the glowing violet beam swept up the course of the valley and was bidden farewell by a boisterous round of applause from the hidden Stranger audience congregated in the stands towering up ahead.

Just as the streaking bolt looked as though it might collide with the rugged valley walls, it struck a direct hit upon the first Stranger mirror and

ricocheted off toward the other side, striking one and then another mirror as it crisscrossed the surface of the twisting river Bim.

All eyes were glued to the proceedings and even the guards (who had scattered to try and catch a large scruffy mongrel with a face full of plucked Grouse) were now standing awestruck at the sight of the fast disappearing streak.

High in the heart of Sayge valley, the speeding Guardian dropped quickly to his knees. Despite his instant reaction, the sizzling bolt of pure unreality brushed so closely past that the silver amulet that hung around his neck started to warble in a tiny high voice. Looking down in disgust, he tore it from his throat and sped off, leaving it to be swallowed (with a brief shriek) by the dark expanse of the swirling River Bim.

Rounding the edge of the stalls, Bailey saw the fast revolving machine and gasped in horror.

“She’s in there isn’t she Spartacus? And there’s a whole load of children in there with her too! We have to do something Spartacus, we simply must stop it before they are all killed!”

As he spoke another huge purple flash lit up the skyline, framing the Thane Mountains in a hazy lilac glow and then disappearing from view. A huge cheer shook the terrace, and among the crowded seats there was a standing ovation as Lady Marchant strutted around, her gleeful fat face lifted to receive the adoration that she craved so very much. It was a moment that she had anticipated for the whole of her life.

In Thane, the monks raised their hooded heads in disbelief as, with an ear-splitting shriek, the first bolt seared the air and slammed into the orange rooftops high above their proud monastery. As the walls and floor shook, masonry fell from the sky and the brothers fled for cover, many clutching their robes above their feet as they quickly sought sanctuary in the dark doorways and stairwells lining the tall monastic walls.

Suddenly the rumbling stopped, but was immediately replaced by a far stranger sound than those that had preceded it. High in the rooftops, a chorus of howls bellowed out into the dusk sky and bounced around the cold grey Monastery stone. Then, one by one, twelve dark shapes burst from the rooftops and fell heavily into the yard below.

The monastery immediately erupted into utter and complete chaos as

twelve enormous stone lions dropped directly into its centre of the yard and began roaring with the most deafening ferocity. Before they had even realised what was happening, those monks unlucky enough to be standing in the open courtyard found themselves subjected to the most fearsome assault. It was an attack so ferocious that none of them could have foreseen anything like it in even their most sweat-drenched nightmares.

Almost to a man, the monks panicked and scattered across the open spaces, desperate to find cover, but as they ran the lions gathered up their huge granite muscles and in a flurry of movement, leapt out in every direction, tearing through robes with razor sharp talons and ripping mercilessly at flesh with their perfectly carved stone teeth.

“Another salvo I think, Mister Periwinkle, let us show them that we mean business!” cried Lady Marchant.

Periwinkle did as his mistress bid him. As the lever slammed down for a third time, another bolt boasting twice the intensity of the others, slashed through the twilight sky and headed straight towards Thane Mountain.

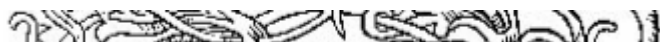
The Guardian swept down Sayge valley, past Bimleigh Heavers and under the Tarn Bridge, his shield leaving a frothing wake in the dark water close below.

Just as he came around the next corner, yet another ball of purple light flashed past him, this time much closer than the first, very nearly dislodging him and making the shield shudder and wobble as the two passed.

“Is that the best you can do, Outlander?” he shrieked, as a look of sheer fury spread across his cracked thin lips, “You will pay handsomely for this outrage, I promise you that!”

Once again the sky lit up with a purple sheen as the energy thudded into the Bell Tower. Brothers Tallow and Taegis looked down the wall to where the bolt had struck, with a mixture of horror and disbelief across their faces, when suddenly the snow upon the roof where they stood, sizzled and melted away. As they watched, blobs of red-hot lava forced their way up from somewhere deep beneath the flagstones and bubbled and spat at their barely sandaled feet.

“Oh dear,” said Taegis.



Before he had time to stop himself, or even formulate a proper plan, Spartacus Brink launched himself across the ornamental stone terrace. As it happened, luck was most definitely on his side. The few guards who were close enough to actually stop him were standing with their mouths wide open in awe as they watched the momentous assault on the Monastery far away. One of them, sensing a brief flash of movement, quickly spun around but he was no match for the mercurial Brink as he darted and weaved through their lumbering ranks to the prize that he knew he must seize.

Within scant seconds, Spartacus Brink had reached his target and came to a dramatic stop. As he did, he pulled out his longest knife and rested it lightly on the white trembling throat of Cacophony Abigail Marchant, while his other arm snaked quickly around her waist to hold her securely against the sharp steel blade.

Claybourne stood up, his face flickering with rage and pointed towards Brink.

“Seize him you fools!”

Brink turned around to the closest guards, his teeth bared and the long blade glinting in the last amber rays from the dying sun.

“One step closer and I kill her where she stands!”

“Do as he says,” croaked Marchant, “Give him anything that he desires. Sir I beg of you to have pity on me. I am nothing but a weak and feeble old woman.”

“Then you shall stop that murderous contraption this very instant,” hissed Brink, nodding towards the machine.

“Or what will you do?” said Claybourne, still on his feet, but now allowing himself the smuggest of smiles.

“I told you, I will kill her!”

“I would have thought that you might have brought a larger knife to skin a leathery old gasbag of that size. But no matter, by all means carry on,”

and with a wry smile Josiah Claybourne sat back down.

This was not at all the reaction that he had expected, and Brink felt the wind in his sails drop away to little more than a light breeze.

Sensing their moment, the guards bellowed and charged towards him, slapping their huge shovel hands roughly down on him and dragged him roughly away from Marchant. His arms and feet were forced roughly apart and he felt as though they were trying to tear him limb from limb.

“Teach him a lesson that he will never forget!” shrieked Lady Marchant.

Before she had even finished speaking, searing hot spikes of pain shot down Brink’s outstretched arms as brutal blows began to rain down upon his body from every angle. He heard Bailey cry out for them to stop but, powerless even to turn his head to look, was stunned by a sudden massive blow across his chin that made his head ring like a bell and his knees instantly turn to soft warm treacle.

As he twisted slowly towards the floor, the last remaining shreds of consciousness gradually ebbed away from Spartacus Brink’s aching body, and the promise of sleep began to pull him into its soft embrace. However much he fought its grasp, the waves of nothingness began to wash over him and drain away his strength as he slipped further and further into its dark inviting grasp.

Just then, a large mossy rock whistled through the air directly above Brink’s head and struck the top of the Reaper with a resounding crash. Without warning, the ancillary arm at the summit of the machine swung around and lurched forwards. At once a stream of magenta sparks leaked out across its metal struts and showered down like a waterfall on the rippling stone flagging below.

Brink forced open his eyes and caught a brief glimpse of Mitch’s grinning face as his sling shot unleashed yet another rock toward the tip of the awesome machine.

This time his aim was even more true, and the effect much more dramatic. As the stone collided with the top of the machine, there was a blinding white flash, promptly followed by the most tremendous explosion, which threw everyone standing nearby to the floor and sent Brink tumbling forwards, released from his captors’ grasp.

Brink felt a firm but gentle grip under each of his elbows and as he

opened his eyes he saw the faces of Bob and Mitch as they dragged him back behind into the darkness of a tall weeping willow and laid him carefully back against the garden wall behind.

Bob looked at him and whistled slowly.

“Just look at the state of you Spartacus Brink. It’s a good job that we came back to nursemaid you when we did. I’m not sure that you could have taken much more of that kind of punishment and still been alive to tell the tale.”

“I’ve made a right old mess of that machine of theirs, Bob,” said Mitch,

“Let’s get the boy and get out of here - double quick time!”

“We must free those poor children,” said Brink, desperately trying to focus his eyes, “These people are ruthless. I must help those children before they come to further harm.” He struggled to stand, but his knees buckled and he landed heavily back against the wall

“You’re not going anywhere my old mate,” said Mitch, “Not for a little while at any rate. You’re lucky to still be with us after the hammering those guards just gave you. No – you’ll stay here until your strength returns my friend. In the meantime we’ll nip over there and see what we can do.”

With that Bob and Mitch slid back through the white blossom canopy and were gone.

Back on the garden terrace, disorder had swiftly turned to chaos.

The patch of ground where the sparks from the damaged machine had first fallen had grown a huge stone mouth, which had taken to wailing a loud and mournful lament in some long-forgotten tongue.

Showers of purple embers erupted in all directions from the damaged machine and bolts of forked energy jumped from the top, stabbing randomly into the panicking crowd and sending terrified Strangers climbing over each other on the wooden stands in their frantic efforts to escape.

The Reaper itself had all but stopped rotating and as it eventually drew to a halt, Bailey could see the white faces of the motionless children trapped inside. He looked towards the stalls where Lady Marchant had her hands raised in the air, desperately trying to calm the frightened multitude. Then just behind her he saw Josiah Claybourne. As Bailey watched in horror,

Claybourne raised his long bone walking stick high above his head, and with brought it down in a single vicious blow. As the club struck her neck Cacophony Abigail Marchant jerked forwards. For the briefest of moments her face changed into that of a pretty young woman, her features unlined and fresh, her cheeks flushed and pink, as though in the full blossom of youth. Then she fell back into the jostling black tide and was gone.

Bailey seized his chance and darted through the crowd to the Reaper. As he reached it he was passed by Periwinkle, who was busy running in the opposite direction just as fast as his thin spindly legs could carry him.

“May the heavens preserve us! Flee for your lives! I cannot contain it any longer - she is going to blow!”

While the words were still being uttered, an ear splitting explosion followed and the entire centrepiece of the Reaper, panel and all, spewed up high into the night sky. As it burst upwards, a column of blue flame followed, lighting up the ground for miles around like a beacon before erupting into a shower of burning debris, that scattered and fell across the whole of the Barrow.

Fiery blue lumps of metal tore through the roof of Bare Barrow Lodge and into the surrounding streets and houses. Within seconds the burning fragments had dropped upon the hundreds of floating villages moored precariously around the foot of the island, and as the flaming debris began to bombard the vessels it punched holes through their beetle-black shells and forced searing cobalt flames from the portholes lining their sides. Strangers of all descriptions scrambled for cover along the smashed burning landing stages to which their homes and towns were still moored.

A small handful of villages managed to cut their ropes, desperate to escape the oncoming blaze, but the remaining Stranger vessels were not quite so lucky. One, and then another of the village fuel tanks caught fire and exploded in a bright orange sheet of flame that ripped through their armoured sides and lit up the cliff face above. Almost as soon as the flames had erupted they were extinguished, as ton upon ton of freezing cold water burst in through their decimated hulls. And then, as each village filled with water, they began sinking. As Strangers poured out from every doorway and hatch, each of the villages in turn slipped away, charred and twisted, into the black depths of the icy black Caleb below.

Hiding beneath the relative safety of an ornamental fountain, Bailey looked back towards the Reaper’s seats (which were now all that remained

of the once impressive structure) and saw that the golden hands that once gripped the heads and hands of the children inside were now hanging lifeless and limp. He ran to the first child and shook him gently by the shoulders, and to Bailey's utmost relief the boy opened his eyes and stared blearily back at him.

All at once, a deafening roar came from overhead, but before Bailey had time to look around the sound of splintering wood filled their ears. As he spun around, Bailey was astonished to find that something very fast and very hard had collided with the central viewing stand, and had left a very big hole indeed.

As the rows of stacked wooden seating recoiled from the blow, they juddered and then lurched forwards, crumpling inwards like a wet paper bag.

The tumbling pandemonium that surrounded the wreckage instantly halted, and the assembled Strangers gathered around the chasm in an awestruck hush. A monumental cloud of dust was coughed out from deep inside the expectant darkness but left nothing but silence in its wake.

Josiah Claybourne tried his level best to look unimpressed and strolled nonchalantly towards the debris and poked his walking stick playfully into the smoking black void beyond. With a thin smile, he turned back to the onlookers assembled around.

"It would appear that we have termites," he snorted and the image of a naughty schoolboy flickered hesitantly across his face.

"Now that I seem to have your attention, I should like to point out the fact that we are no longer in danger, and may now revert to behaving a little more like the gentlefolk that we truly are."

He looked disapprovingly towards the crowd and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"You run around like a band of frightened gibbons at the very first sign of trouble. How you ever came to call yourself by the family name of Stranger I shall never, ever know."

At this, many of the men straightened their waistcoats and drew themselves up to their full size. A handful of guards fell in by his side and nodded in agreement.

Claybourne pointed his stick to the carcass of Cacophony Marchant and an audible gasp of shock rose from the crowd.

“Our wise and gracious Lady of the Barrow lies dead. Her glorious dream - like her frail noble body - now lies broken upon the ground.

“This is sabotage my brothers and sisters. It strikes deep at our heart and at the hearts of those,” he sniffed theatrically, “whom we hold most dear.”

“But know this too, my brethren, I will not cease until I have found and punished the perpetrators of these foul crimes. I will not rest until the Lady Marchant’s death has been avenged. I swear this to her and to all those gathered around!”

There was a smattering of polite applause. As it petered out, the slightly smoking form of the Guardian emerged from the hole struck deep in the seating and walked up behind Claybourne.

“Hello,” he said softly, “I have come to speak with the Outlander. Are you the Outlander?”

Claybourne turned around and looked down at the peculiar little old man who stared back up.

“And what do we have here?”

“I, sir, am the Guardian of Thane’s Gate and, as I believe I have already said, I come in search of the Outlander.”

A murmur ran around the crowd and as it did, the face of Josiah Claybourne slowly melted into a vision of pure, ancient malevolence; his skin suddenly sunken and worn, his eyes sinking back to his cheekbones, which jutted out and formed shadows in the blue light of the now swollen moon.

His eyes burned with a passionate hatred as he reached out and pointed his long quivering finger, until its tip almost touched the Guardian’s nose.

“You will pay for this damage, you silly little man, you may have no fear of that!”

As he spoke his hands shot forwards and he grabbed a sudden hold of the scarlet cape, dragging both it and the startled intruder towards him. As he came closer he saw his own reflection in the black shining eyeballs that

were fixed on his own, and saw that the intruder was muttering quietly to himself.

“Prayers can not save your skin, you old weasel!” he spat, and turned towards the restless crowd as they eased forward to allow themselves a better view.

“Tell me my brethren, how shall we best make an example of this Thanish cur? Shall I finish him quickly with fire or let him die a slower death strung high from a gallows pole? The decision rests with you!”

He looked around the faces of the crowd but as he did the looks of hatred dropped from their faces, and one by one their expressions became more akin to fear.

As he turned to look back at the funny little man, a series of short, stabbing pains suddenly rushed up both of Claybourne’s arms. He let go of the Guardian and fell back in shocked surprise as a thousand jagged wasp stings seemed to plunge deep into him. From his shoulders to his fingertips, his entire arms felt as though they had been set alight, and the excruciating pain that coursed through his body made him instinctively shout out loud in anguish and fear.

Looking down Claybourne was so very astonished by what he saw, that for a split second he could almost forget the searing pain that was spreading from his arms and now filled every aching inch of his upper torso. For, as he stood and stared in abject horror, tiny sparks of bottle green lightning began creeping up from his fingertips. As they flickered and spread, they were somehow transforming the flesh and bone beneath into something entirely different.

As he watched the ghastly sight unravel before his eyes, he became unable to move his hands or arms at all, and could only stare transfixed as his limbs became first opaque, and then completely transparent. He turned his head to the Guardian, a vision of juvenile loathing sliding across his face, and as he opened his snarling mouth there was a sudden surge of green energy as his head and body were engulfed.

Almost as soon as it had started, the process was complete. Where only seconds before Josiah Claybourne had stood, proud and defiant, there was now a green crystal statue, perfect in even the tiniest of details.

“Are you the Outlander?” asked the Guardian again. Foxton looked back

at him, shook his head in the most respectful manner he could muster and then turned on his heels and fled.

The Guardian walked over to the very edge of the stone terrace and held up his arms, lifting his Calling Stone high into the air and muttering incantations into the starlit night sky. While he spoke, green tendrils of light shot high into the clouds and then dropped back down with a series of splashes, deep into the river Caleb.

Before the dark ripples below had the chance to disperse, eight dark shapes began to rise through the water at the foot of the cliffs. The tips of their hard steel helmets glinted as they slowly emerged from the surface of the water and pushed upwards into the pale blue moonlight.

Eight black stars turned upwards to the face of the waiting Guardian, and sixteen gloved hands dug deep into the soft chalk of the cliff face. As they began to climb, river water rained from their soaked dark robes and billowed in the cool night breeze.

Chapter 14



round the tattered wreckage of the Reaper, Bailey had been busy. Whilst the attention of the Strangers was devoted to more pressing matters, he had crept around each of the captive children in turn, starting with the smallest first, and gently shaken them until they had returned from their lifeless state. As each one became conscious, he helped them from their seats and led them quickly through the trees by the edge of the garden wall. Once there he lifted them up on his shoulders, allowing them to clamber over the top and drop down into the lush tall grass on the other side.

Finally, as the last child disappeared over the top of the wall, Bailey realised that Melissa was the only one still remaining. He slipped back through the shadows and spied through a gap between the dark columns of seating to check what the Strangers were doing.

What he saw as he stared out across the moonlit stone terrace made his heart skip a beat and an icy-cold finger of terror trace its way down the length of his spine. For, as he looked on, a row of unmistakable silver helmets bobbed up along the line of the cliff face.

Bailey watched in mounting terror as each of the Watchmen pulled itself up onto the flagstones and stood up straight; their black stars sweeping menacingly from side to side as they surveyed their new surroundings. Within moments the deathly cold gaze moved towards Bailey and although he knew that he needed to do something, he realized to his horror that his feet were now rooted to the spot. Panic drew itself up into a knot in the pit of his stomach, but however loud his brain screamed at them to run, his legs refused to budge a single inch.

Every muscle in Bailey Humblebucket's body tensed. He knew that any second he would surely be discovered, and began to feel dizzy with fear. Suddenly there was a brief rustling sound from the bushes to his side and to Bailey's eternal relief Mitch's voice softly called out.

"There you are boy! We've been looking for you for ten minutes or more. Get over here quick before you're discovered."

A hand gently took hold of his arm and pulled him off to one side, where Bob, Mitch and Cabbage were crouched down behind some barrels.

Once in the darkness, Bailey let out a huge sigh of relief and Cabbage threw his paws onto his shoulders to make sure that his face was properly licked.

“Good job we found you when we did, there’s a load of soldiers or some-such just appeared over those cliffs and they look like they mean business,” said Bob.

“I know Bob, Mister Brink and I have seen them before. They are called Watchmen and I do not know if they are alive or dead, but I do know that it’s not wise to cross them. They came to my house and we only just escaped with our lives.”

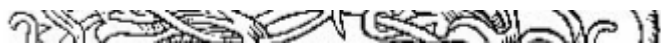
“Then come,” said Mitch, “We must get back to Spartacus and get out of this place while there’s still time.”

“No! I won’t go without Melissa. I have travelled this far and I cannot just leave her here, now that we’ve come so close. Can’t you see that she needs my help now more than ever?” He looked back to Bob and Mitch who both looked at each other and nodded.

“Alright then Mister Humblebucket, there’s five or six of those *Watchmen* characters wandering around that thing with the spinning seats on it and a few dozen Strangers still sneaking around as though they own the place - which as a matter of fact they do. *Not to mention* some old nutcase who just turned up with the handy trick of being able to turn people into cut glass ornaments,”

“I thought you said *not* to mention him?”

“Figure of speech, Mitch. So then Mister Bailey, bearing all that in mind you must have some fairly amazing god-given plan to make you think that you can just square-dance right past them all and rescue the fair maiden in the middle. Do you think that you might care to share it with us - because we’re all ears?”



Bob walked unsteadily out into the moonlit yard and instantly felt eight shining black stars point lock him in their gaze.

He coughed nervously and then turning towards the Guardian he looked him steadily in the pitch-black of his eyes and swallowed deeply. His throat

was as desperate for a flagon of Black Bear Ale as it could ever remember.

“I am the Outlander,” he said.

The Guardian chuckled and smiled, then held his head to one side and studied the dishevelled figure in front of him as the smile slid from his thin white lips.

Behind the back of two Watchmen, a dark figure silently dashed across the open terrace and hid behind the wooden frame of the hot sausage stand. A hand shot up and briefly felt around before grabbing a fist full of sausages and dropping back out of sight below.

“Then by deciding to confront me in this manner you have proven yourself to be either very clever or very stupid, and, given your appearance, I would guess the latter.”

The Watchmen moved towards Bob, arming themselves as they walked. Some gripped huge staffs, whilst others uncovered sturdy crossbows. One other pulled two long handled knives from beneath his garments and drew their blades quickly across each other, throwing tiny orange sparks into the night air as he advanced.

As they closed in, another voice echoed out from the shadows.

“No! I am the Outlander!”

The Guardian smiled again turned his shaking head until his eyes rested on the sight of Mitch standing smiling confidently back at him.

“Melissa?” whispered Bailey, “Are you awake? Please wake up, it isn’t safe to stay here and we don’t have much time.”

Slowly, Melissa opened her soft brown eyes and looked groggily around.

“Bailey! Where are the children? What has happened to the machine? What has happened to the children?”

As he stood staring into her eyes, Bailey realised that he felt as though everyone and everything in the world had just blinked momentarily out of existence.

“Bailey?”

He realised with a shock that for first time her voice wasn’t echoing

around his head but that she was actually speaking to him.

“We must go,” he spluttered, gently helping her from the confines of the seat.

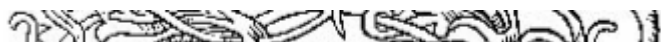
He took her by the hand and together they crept around the back of the Reaper and into the shadows. Once there, Bailey remembered something and reached inside the pocket of his jerkin.

“Here - I thought that you might be hungry – this is all that I could find.”

As he carefully undid the sausages from his clean linen handkerchief, Cabbage burst from a neighbouring bush and launched himself into the air. Before Bailey knew what was happening, the scruffy hound had snatched the sausages from his grasp and left him with nothing but an empty napkin and a hand full of drool.

“Did I introduce my dog, Cabbage?” he stared directly into the dog’s eyes. Cabbage looked away sheepishly and greedily gulped down the last morsels of food.

“I was thinking of having him stuffed.”



Silver clouds wandered across the bloated face of the silver moon high above.

“Allow me to disagree with these two courageous, selfless young men,” said Brink as he marched into the centre of the terrace, causing the Guardian to turn once more.

“You see - whatever these men told you is false. I know because *I* am the Outlander.

“I am Spartacus, Spartacus Brink... at your service.”

The Guardian looked at each of them in turn, studying them from head to foot with his deep black eyes before turning his back on them and walking to the foot of the wall overhanging the cliffs and the dark river Caleb below.

“I find myself at rather a loss. So much raw sorcery has been expended in this place that you might each be as mighty as Merlin or as helpless as newborn scabies, but it matters little in the final analysis because I have as

little time as I have patience.

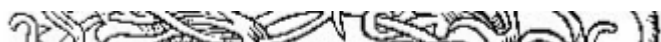
“Brother Watchmen, you will please see to it that these three gentlemen each meet a quick but extremely painful end.”

As he spoke, he spun swiftly around to face his captives, only to find that none but the Watchmen remained.

“Where have they gone? You didn’t just let them go did you?” he screamed.

“I should have left you in that cursed lake, you blithering idiots! And don’t just stand about staring at me – get after them!”

With that the Watchmen turned and thundered off across the gardens with the Guardian marching close behind. As he strode he angrily slapped the Calling Stone he was carrying into the palm of his hand and scattered an effervescent trail of shining green sparks in his wake.



Bailey, Melissa and Cabbage weaved through the darkness, narrowly avoiding the branches that loomed and lurched at them out from the darkest confines of the garden wall. Without a word they ran along the wall’s edge and followed its winding path around the perimeter of the grounds.

As they came to a stretch of open grass around the front of the house, they saw a dozen huddled groups of Strangers milling around. Half-hidden by their black capes and hats, they could only see their pallid white faces, shifting and dancing in the moonlight, like pans of gently simmering milk. Knives and swords had been drawn and they looked quite ready to put them to use.

“Bailey, I don’t think that I can run a step further. My legs feel as though they will buckle beneath me, I really have to rest!”

There was a note of urgency in Melissa’s voice, which served to bring Bailey to an immediate halt. They waited for a moment and he anxiously glanced around the clump of tiny apple trees that surrounded them while they tried to catch their breath.

“Not much further now Melissa – just over there is our way out of here.”

He pointed to the leafy corner of the garden wall and although it was well within reach, to Melissa it seemed like an eternity away. She heaved a deep sigh of exhaustion and felt the last remaining ounces of strength ebb from her body. At that very moment there was a gigantic crash, quickly joined by the creak of old wood splitting apart. As Bailey and Melissa watched, five Watchmen poured out of the great front doors of the Lodge and another three smashed their way through windows in a hail of shattered glass. As they emerged from the moonlit entrance they found themselves faced by a mob of angry Strangers.

With a ferocious roar the Strangers struck deep into the ranks of Watchmen and the frenzied battle was instantly joined, as crossbow bolts were unleashed and thudded into Stranger flesh, and knife blades sliced and slashed their vicious retaliation.

All weariness now forgotten, Melissa picked up the corners of her dress and started running for her life, whereupon Cabbage leapt up and followed gamely behind. Bailey suddenly realised that he had been completely left behind and struggled back to his feet to give chase. Within seconds they burst out from the dark canopy of trees and the black wrought-iron gate rose up from the undergrowth to meet them, growing ever larger as they ran headlong towards it.

Finally reaching the towering front wall, they quickly squeezed through the squeaking gate and were spat out into the empty lane below. Before they had moved a muscle, Mitch, Bob and Croaky thundered around the corner and skidded to a stop. Melissa instinctively drew back and looked for another route of escape.

“It’s okay, Melissa, these are my friends; in fact they brought me here to help you,” said Bailey.

“Your carriage awaits, madam,” said Mitch.

“Come on you three, what are you waiting for? There’s no time to stand around gawping!” cried Brink from his straw hideaway at the back of the cart.

As they jumped into the back, Croaky set off at a most uncharacteristic gallop down the winding cobbled street that led back to the bridge down below.

While they bounced and rocked down the road, shedding the contents of

the wagon from all sides, Bailey and Melissa burrowed down into the hay and covered themselves until all that remained were just three small eyeholes, poking out from the back.

“Look, up there!” whispered Brink.

Bailey looked up and saw the main gates leading up to the Lodge burst open and a Watchman appear. Although they were now some distance away he seemed to be looking directly at them and with a slow determined movement, he raised his automatic crossbow to the black star to the face of his helmet and pulled the trigger.

“Bob, Mitch - get down!” shouted Brink.

They pressed their faces flat against the covered wagon floor, and each held their breath.

Suddenly, four bolts in quick succession ripped through the straw and thudded into the wooden boards at the front of the wagon. Croaky neighed indignantly and carried on down the street, turning a corner to take them out of the line of the Watchman’s sights, but just as they turned another crossbow bolt hissed through the air overhead and Bailey heard a shriek as it sliced into something far less solid.

“Mitch!” screamed Bob, “Mitch has been hit!”

Brink burst out through the canopy of hay and looked up towards his friend who lay slumped over on the front seat. A tarnished silver bolt stuck out at right angles from his shoulder blade and a dark wet stain slowly crept across his back.

Just then, they rounded another corner, and as the bridge to the mainland finally came into sight the scene was one of complete and utter chaos. Female Strangers dressed in their finery jostled each other along the length and breadth of the packed bridge each trying to flee the Barrow, and making no bones about using their elbows or anything else that came to hand in order to do so. Many were accompanied by their servants who struggled under mountains of bulging personal belongings, and who seemed to be having enough trouble simply staying upright.

Before Bob had time to react, Croaky and the entire wagon had piled straight into them, carving out a path across the bridge and throwing Strangers this way and that. The further they pushed through the crowds the more indignant cries were heard and for each one there followed the

sounds of bodies and property being plunged into the dark swirling waters below.

This time, however, the guards were powerless to act as the wagon rattled past them and straight through the Barrow gates, already forced wide open by the deluge of desperate Strangers fleeing the island.

Melissa and Bailey emerged from the hay, first taking a look back towards the scene of devastation scattered along the length of the bridge, and then to the stricken figure of Mitch. They carried on along the dark winding road until the bridge and its inhabitants were safely out of sight, when Bob let out a wail of despair.

“What should we do Spartacus? He looks pretty bad and I don’t know what to do. If we don’t stop the bleeding soon he’s going to die – I know it in my heart!” He pulled the reins, and the wagon came to an abrupt stop.

“Bob is your name isn’t it?” said Melissa kindly.

“Yes, milady,”

“Well I think that we should be able to help your friend, Bob, but first we must carry on a little way up this road. Do you see old Holly Hill, just over the way?” she pointed to the silhouette of a hill in the near-distance, crowned by the ancient remains of a tumbledown shack.

Bob sniffed wetly and nodded.

“We must lay your friend down in the back so I can tend to his wounds. Then you must see to it that we take that track and travel over the field until we reach the old building that you can see on the horizon. Can you do that for us, Bob?”

Bob looked at Brink, who nodded his approval, and they immediately set about ferrying the unmoving body over the sturdy wooden back of the wagon and carefully laying him back down on the bed of straw below. When Mitch was safely laid out, Bob took up the reins and pulled them briskly towards him, as close behind the first snarling faces of Stranger guards began to emerge out of the shadows.

Melissa ripped Mitch’s blood-soaked shirt away at the arm and grasped the arrow with both hands while shutting her eyes tight with concentration.

For a long moment or two nothing at all seemed to happen. The wagon

bumped and heaved along the lane, carrying them high above the Barrow.

Higher they travelled and higher still, up through the great stone piles that marked a gateway into the fields and to the wild twisting moorland beyond.

They mounted the shale track that rose and snaked across a grassy ridge. In the near distance, Bailey could see the remains of an old wrecked building, and he clung to the side of the cart as Croaky crunched and slid over the new and unfamiliar terrain. It was not until he looked back to where Mitch lay unconscious, that Bailey saw something most peculiar.

At first he thought that the moonlight was playing tricks with his eyes but the closer Bailey looked, the less of what he saw seemed to make any sense.

It was not until Spartacus Brink spoke that Bailey's thoughts were finally confirmed.

"Bailey, look at the bolt! It is starting to glow bright red! And look at the flesh around it! It is almost as though the metal had been placed into a furnace. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I would scarcely have believed it".

Just as Brink finished speaking, Melissa gripped both hands around the searing bolt and pulled it, hissing and spitting from Mitch's shoulder. In one short movement it left his body and was spinning a crimson arc across the starlit sky, finally falling with a distant thud to the ground down below.

"She has stopped the bleeding Bob; the heat from the bolt has cleaned and sealed the wound," said Brink, "I think he might be alright after all!"

"Thank you young miss," said Bob, tears welling up in his eyes, "If there is anything I can ever do for you, anything at all?"

"We need to get to the old temple. Just get us there before it is too late," said Melissa and fell exhausted back against the side of the wagon.

"But where are we going?" asked Brink.

"To a place my grandfather once took me," said Melissa quietly.

As she spoke the hay cart came to a standstill besides an old and crumbling building, set into the hillside. So decrepit were its walls, that unless they had been so close, it might have easily seemed less a structure and more a landslide.

The tiny windows that lined the walls were empty of frames, and two studded and heavily pockmarked oak doors stood unsurely at the entrance.

Brink and Bailey helped Melissa from the back of the wagon, and she walked around to meet Bob as he jumped from the front seat.

“Thank you for all that you have done, but now you must go. Your friend needs to be taken to somewhere he can recover in safety. Carry on along this track until you find the woods, and then follow the stream until you reach the village beyond. They are good people and you will be safe there for the night. It is us that they want.”

“But what will you do?” said Bob.

“We’ll be fine, Bob,” said Brink, “Make sure that once you get away from here you get yourselves into a nice tavern for a week or two until that rascal gets himself back on his feet again,”

Brink took Bob by the wrist and dropped a handful of silver coins into the palm of his hand.

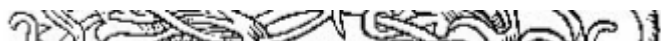
Once they had said the briefest of goodbyes, Bob climbed back up to the front of the wagon, took up the reins, and with a last wave farewell he drove the creaking structure off down the ridge of the hill and blended into the depths of the night. As they disappeared they could hear Mitch’s voice pipe up.

“I feel better already you know. As soon as we get to that tavern you can get me a bushel of Thyme to put on this wound.”

“Aye - that I will, old friend, that I will. So is it good for crossbow wounds then, Thyme?”

“Oh aye. You know what they say - Thyme’s a great healer.”

“Any more like that, and you can walk.”



“They are coming,” said Melissa quietly.

Bailey and Brink looked down the hill and couldn’t see a thing, but each noticed Cabbage prick up his ears and drop his tail as his nose unravelled the myriad scents that travelled and flowed upon the cool night’s breeze.

They climbed over some fallen masonry that lay scattered across the doorway, and walked through a short dark passageway into the heart of the temple, where a hushed calm hung expectantly in the air around them.

Bailey brought out the box of long wooden matches that he kept for just such emergencies in a thin inner pocket of his jacket. As a match flashed brightly into life, the inside walls of the surrounding room lit up in a burst of faded blues and reds, and even, dull spots of gold still remained on the wide crumbling ceiling, which rose to a point high up above their heads.

"I don't understand," said Brink, looking around.

"Why bring us here? Would we not have been better off escaping with Bob? At least we could have kept some distance between us and them."

"It is you that they seek, Mr Brink."

"And Bailey said that you knew how I could return to my home. Forgive me if I am wrong, but was that not the message that you sent him?"

"And you shall, Outlander, you shall. I can not tell you how, but I know that you are closer to the path home than you realise."

"Well at the risk of sounding melodramatic, I don't think you realise the trouble that we are in if those Watchmen catch up with us, so if you know some way of escape, now might be just the time to share it with us."

Just then Cabbage began growling deep in his throat and the hairs stood up straight along the back of his neck as he stared back towards the door. Bailey ran to the doorway and looked down the undulating black hills to where a group of silver helmets bobbed up and down, slowly but resolutely climbing the slopes to where they were.

"Spartacus! A group of Watchmen are heading this way!"

"This is madness, we must go before it is too late," said Brink.

"No. The nearest village is miles away. If we try to find our way in the dark they will hunt us down and kill us all. Our only real chance lies in the shelter of this temple."

"But how do you know, Melissa?" said Bailey, still waiting by the door.

"You know I trust you, and I'm sure that you are right, but you should

have seen the Watchmen in my house, they tore our Dining Hall to pieces!”

“My grandmother was born not far from here, and used to play on the Barrow before the Strangers were ever heard of. The people from her village would often tell tales about this temple. It is a place where sanctuary must be granted, whether it is to a deer escaping the hunt or to the lowest of thieves. None has ever been removed that did not wish to leave.

“Furthermore, I can not tell you how I know this, Mister Brink, for I do not know myself, but my heart and head both tell me that somehow this place will lead you home.”

Brink let out a sigh and shook his head, crossing to the doorway.

“I’m not so sure that those Watchmen will be convinced by the sanctity of this place or by your instincts, Melissa - but it looks as though we are out of options; so shall we at least get inside and see if we can secure these doors?”

Spurred into action, the three of them immediately started work on the task at hand. Without another word they began dragging, carrying and kicking the splintered wood and rubble from the doorway in an effort to allow the doors to be barred against the terrors of the night. Very soon, one door could nearly be closed, but the other stayed resolutely open, its frame still blocked by years of trapped stonework and its wrought-iron hinges almost solid lumps of flaking rust. It was not until all three of them combined their efforts and were wrenching at it in near desperation that it began to move by even the tiniest, most insignificant fraction.

Brink looked through the remaining gap and saw the unmistakable sight of eight silver helmets no more than a few hundred yards away and closing in quickly.

With a final excruciating squeal, the second door began to shudder reluctantly towards its frame. As soon as the doors met, Spartacus dragged a thick oak beam from the latticed floor and dropped it snugly between four stout metal clasps that rose from each side, holding them fast together.

“Now what do we do?” asked Bailey after a moment’s silence.

“We wait,” said Melissa. “Please, Bailey, do you have the Lucifers?”

Bailey passed her the matches and she lit one, pushing back the blackness and lighting the melted remains of candles that were housed in a line of

recesses along the corridor and into the chamber within. As she lit each stub of wax, light poured through a network of hidden tunnels and re-emerged as hundreds of small faint clusters around the ceiling above them.

Bailey stared upwards, astounded by the display of flickering stars floating in the sky above their heads. For a second or two he forgot entirely where he was, and the danger they were in, and stood transfixed by the celestial display that filled the ceiling. When Bailey did speak, it was in the hushed tones of someone who is profoundly impressed.

“They are all there. It is as though someone lifted off the roof and allowed us to see the skies above. This is unbelievable. I have been studying the stars all my life and have never seen anything written that comes close to the accuracy of the lights on this old ceiling!”

Cabbage began to growl again, but this time he looked distinctly less confident, until he finally gave up any pretence at bravery and trotted behind them into the candlelit confines of the inner chamber.

“Come on Bailey, I think he’s got the right idea,” said Brink.

As he spoke there was a knock at the door, followed by silence.

“Hello? Who’s there?” said Bailey.

“I am your nemesis, little boy. Now come on out like a good little band of recidivists and I promise with my hand on my heart that I will kill you with the very least amount of fuss and bother,” said the Guardian coldly.

“Go away,” said Bailey and immediately regretted the fact that he had not thought about it until he had found something wittier to say.

“I do so hate being forced to turn people slowly inside out and then cover them in salt, but needs must when the devil wears his purple pantaloons...”

A blinding white flash threw long shafts of light through the gaps in the door, capturing the twisting grains of dust as they hung suspended in the glare.

Bailey opened his mouth, but this time pure fear stole the breath from his lungs and left him gaping in horrified awe, as some unseen force began slowly but determinedly to tear pieces from the doors, as simply as though they were made nothing more than wet paper. As the doors exploded outwards he was only dragged from his shocked daze by a pair of stout

hands which had suddenly grabbed him fully on both shoulders and were pulling him swiftly backwards down the flickering corridor behind.

“Quickly, my young friend, I do not think it wise to stand around!”

As they reached Melissa and the cowering Cabbage at the back of the sparsely decorated chamber, they saw the distinctive silhouette of the Guardian kick the remaining tattered shards of wood from the doorframe and stride purposefully into the smoke filled antechamber. As he surveyed his surroundings, sparks of green energy still rolled and fell from the tips of his bony outstretched fingers and a strange afterglow still filled the doorway with an eerie white light.

Without another thought Brink tore open his jacket and retrieved the scuffed bronze globe that sat snugly inside.

“This is our last chance - let us pray that it still works!”

He whispered a single word into the ball sitting in his palm, and rolled it in a perfectly straight line down the dusty corridor. As it spun and slid over the ancient tiles, pin pricks of blue light shot out from its shell, and engulfed it in a shimmering ball of light that surrounded it and brought it to a halt at the entrance to the hallway. The light promptly fluttered hesitantly, like a candle in the breeze, before fading back into darkness.

“So what does it do now?” said Melissa, as they stood staring at the motionless trinket.

Brink thought for a moment.

“I have a dreadful feeling that that may have been its swansong.”

“Seize them!” cried the Guardian, lifting his bony white finger to lead the way through the swirling dust and smoke that filled the tunnel between them.

As one, Bailey, Melissa and Cabbage backed away into the furthest wall, to leave Brink standing resolutely in the centre of the room, his dagger slowly drawn from the inside of his tunic as he steadied himself to fight.

First one, and then three dark figures loomed out of the wall of gloom and lumbered towards the inner chamber. Bailey looked around the room, desperately seeking a door or window, indeed anything through which they might possibly escape but could see nothing but a solid stone disc. The disc

was set into the wall by his side and bore the carved profile of a howling wolf's head. Instinctively, he tried pushing and pulling at the chiselled stone edges, but succeeded in doing nothing more than dislodging a crust of caked on dirt and revealing the ancient blue paint that lay below.

Suddenly a flash illuminated the entire chamber and Bailey swung around to see what was happening.

A sheet of white light now once again surrounded Brink's Calling Stone, but this time the three Watchmen who were the first to venture down the tunnel, seemed to be trapped inside it. As they struggled to free themselves, bolts of forked lightening were discharging from the shell of the small metal globe and striking the Watchmen where they stood, sending showers of sparks in all directions. With a series of bright flashes each of them was thrown backward to the tunnel wall, where they were pinned back by the surging white energy.

At first, the Guardian looked incredulous, but within the passing of a second his expression had turned to one of sheer, unadulterated fury. He reached inside his robes and as he pulled out his own Calling Stone, he spat four mystical words.

“Hunta - ofslean – gebrecan - ACWELLAN!”

The Guardian then hurled his Calling Stone which bounced down the corridor until it came to a stop mere inches from the other.

A shaft of piercing green light shot out from the new arrival, and swung around in an arc until it struck Brink's Calling Stone and seemed to take hold of it, like an arm extending out to reach and grab a ball. The wall of light surrounding both still remained, but now there were accompanying surges of green energy that shot from the centre of the second Calling Stone and struck anything close by. This included striking the other device and three trapped Watchmen in equal measure.

Forks of green energy shot out from the Guardian's Calling Stone and slammed into the side of Brink's Stone, sending it spinning back towards where they stood. More and more searing bolts of green light stabbed into the battered globe until it was forced back towards them, grey smoke belching thickly from its sides as it was fiercely repelled.

As the relentless attack continued, the retreating globe began to exude a high whistling hum, which grew louder and louder until Brink, Melissa and

Bailey could do nothing but cover their ears and shield themselves from the all-encompassing noise.

The deafening sound filled the entire chamber and Cabbage, who until now had been trying his level best to shrink his form to the size of a small doughnut, pricked up his ears and succumbed to one of his most ancient instincts. Lifting his bristling chin, he opened his fearsome jaws and began to sing the sweetest yet most melancholy tune that anyone could have ever heard.

Bailey stole a sideways glance at Cabbage and, as he did, his eyes suddenly registered a flash of blue movement close by his side. As he turned his head to see what was happening, the stone Wolf's nose slowly ground around towards him, until the entire face was exposed, its open muzzle raised to the ceiling above.

With a last powerful flash, the Guardian's Calling Stone sent a crackling surge of energy into the globe that had valiantly defended them, sending it hurtling back into the chamber from whence it had come. It landed with a heavy thump against the unforgiving wall, which instantly greeted it with a spray of fragmented plaster. The light from its sides briefly grew stronger and then dimmed away into nothing, and as the light died, so did the whine from within. Now Cabbage's croaky song was the only sound to echo around the thick chamber walls.

"Seize them!" the Guardian bellowed, and at once the trio of Watchmen, until now frozen where they stood, began to break their statuesque poses and move slowly down the corridor towards them.

Just as they reached the very entrance to the chamber, there was a rumble of what sounded like thunder and before any of them had had time to blink, a thick stone door emerged from the ceiling and slid quickly down to seal the doorway.

The Watchmen stopped dead in their tracks and there was a shriek of utter horror from the Guardian, which was loud enough to pierce the solid stone wall.

Then there was no sound at all.

"What the...?" muttered Brink.

His knuckles were slowly turning white around the handle of his dagger, its tip still pointing resolutely towards the solid stone wall where there had

recently stood an open doorway. Whatever else Brink might have had to say would certainly have been drowned out by the low choir of voices that now seeped from the walls and flooded the entire room. As Cabbage continued to sing, more and more unseen voices joined his in a harmony, until the most beautiful chorus filled the air, and the ears of the three astonished onlookers.

As the song reached a crescendo, the floor began to tremble. It was only a little at first, but within moments the tremble had turned into a judder. As the movement increased further, the entire chamber began to shudder as though gripped by the enormous hand of some enraged giant, shaking them up and down like dice in a huge stone tumbler. As the floor and ceiling trembled and heaved, all but Cabbage were thrown to the floor, and plaster was scattered in bulging clouds, whilst the candlelight that had filled the room first flickered and then was lost.

Brink reached out in the darkness and found Melissa and Bailey's hands and gripped them firmly.

"Do not be fearful. These stone walls are strong enough to withstand even the Guardian's attempts to demolish them!"

"But it is not him, Mister Brink!" said Melissa, desperate to be heard over the disembodied voices that still filled the room, "There is another with us now. I can feel it in my heart. In the Guardian I sensed nothing but the coldness of death and hatred - but now I can feel the warmth of friendship. It is all around us. I cannot fully explain it but I know that it means us no harm,"

As Melissa spoke the room shuddered slightly, lurched upwards and then came to an abrupt stop as though it was a dog reaching the end of its tether.

"Hang on we are off again!" said Brink and reached towards the cold lattice floor to help steady his feet.

Before the echo of Brink's words even had the chance to fade, the room shook violently and there was a monumental groan as it finally tore itself away from the foundations where it had rested for so long.

As the chamber rose, plaster rained down through the diamond shaped holes in the latticework floor to the flattened soil below. Cabbage promptly stopped singing and rushed over to cower at his master's side, at which

point the room once again came to a halt. The chorus of voices surrounding them had now become a slow and rhythmic chant with an almost tangible air of purpose.

“It was Cabbage all along!” laughed Brink incredulously. “It was his wonderful singing voice that set this all off! Well I’ll bless my soul – this is the first time I have been rescued by a dog.”

“Then this temple must belong to those mad old Caninists! Good lad Cabbage – there’s a big old bone waiting for you when we get home!” shouted Bailey and gave the cringing hound a grateful hug.

The room continued to hang uncertainly in the air for a moment and then there was a tremendous rumbling sound, whereupon four pieces of the ceiling quickly slid away and fell from the sides of the chamber, revealing four large, clear windows and the face of the Moon shining brightly up above.

Suddenly and with an ear-splitting crash, a thick black beam of energy surged from the stone plinth perched on the roof of the chamber and shot upwards into the night sky.

“What is that?” said Bailey.

“It looks as though this sanctuary of yours may still have some surprises in store,” said Brink. He stared upwards at the jet-black flow that pushed higher and higher through the clouds, twisting like an eel through a moonlit pond. Higher and higher it snaked and climbed until they could see it framed against the moonlight.

Then, just as it seemed to pierce the centre of the moon, the line stopped thrashing around and became taut as though it was a skipping rope that had its farthest end pulled up tight. As it did, the chanting that permeated the entire chamber rose in volume and the room, complete with three people and one very surprised canine, was catapulted at a ferocious speed straight through the clouds and high up into the night sky.

“I can’t move!” shouted Melissa, her back pinned against the floor. She looked towards the moon, which had already doubled in size and realised that she had started to see the craters and valleys that covered its whole surface.

“Don’t try to move - everything will be fine – trust me!” Brink shouted back. He too was unable to move, but could plainly see the rapidly

approaching Moon. He was also quite sure that things would be anything but fine but had decided that it was not helpful to frighten people - especially those who were younger than himself (or female).

“It’s incredible, just incredible!” shouted Bailey.

Bailey Humblebucket was definitely having quite a moment.

It was a similar experience that had visited countless great scholars and philosophers before him. In fact it was nothing short of a revelation.

As he lay facedown, the bronze latticework forming patterns on his face, Bailey had watched the remains of the small temple fall away into the distance. A second later the fires covering Bare Barrow and the burning Barrow Lodge swung into view, as did the lights from surrounding villages on the land and rivers alike. The higher the chamber rose, the smaller the lights became until they were nothing more than tiny clusters of twinkling stars, set against the tranquil blackness of the night.

“I didn’t understand it - no one did! But now I can see it Spartacus. I can see it all and it is all so very beautiful. I just never realised - but now I’ve seen it with my very own eyes!”

“What is it Bailey - what can you see?” said Melissa. As she spoke her eyes opened wider and the Moon rushed ever closer.

“Don’t you see? The stars are not above us at all. They are just where they have always been – cast around us – so close that we couldn’t see the truth. All this time I’ve been desperate to see the stars up close and it turns out that I was surrounded by them all along! Constellations of cities and towns cover the hillsides and mountain peaks. The lights from a hundred thousand fires, lanterns and candles are flickering and glittering above our heads. It is simply... incredible.”

“Then it is just as I was starting to suspect,” whispered Brink, as the pieces of the puzzle finally seemed to fall into place, “We were never above land at all - but in a world within a world. Since first coming here I have been trying to guess at Scot’s reasons for drawing a Comet closer to Earth.

“Until now, it did not seem to make any sense at all. Many of my brothers thought him mad, left deranged by year upon year of dabbling with the occult, but what you have just said makes perfect sense. From what you say there is only one reasonable explanation; that the Comet passing high above the Earth is actually quite hollow. It would seem that this entire

world of Arcadia is stretched out around its insides like some colossal goatskin and at the centre hangs its very own Sun and Moon.

“Scot knew that the Knights Templar were close at hand, but he had been lucky and his trail was almost lost when I chanced upon him that night in Ghent.”

“So you are saying that this Scot character knew of our land and he thought that if he could find his way here - as you did?” said Bailey

“That is exactly right – for then his escape would have been complete. After months that I spent trying to track him down and regain what he had stolen - I somehow ended up with the prize that he coveted most. It is quite amusing when you think about it.”

“Spartacus?” replied Melissa, her eyelids now as tightly closed as her solidly clenched teeth and her fingers bunched up into a knuckle-white fist.

The once-distant moonbeams now filled the hurtling stone capsule with a stark white light, which bleached the floor and exposed every feature of the smooth crumbling walls in relief.

“I think that it is an inescapable fundamental fact that in a very short time indeed we are going to hit the side of the moon.”

“Yes Melissa, I believe that you have a very good point.”

“We are going to what, sorry?” asked Bailey, as he desperately tried to crane his neck around to see for himself.

“We seem to be set on a collision course with the Moon, Mister Humblebucket and I do not think that it will be too long before we are thrown headlong into the side of that thing. I believe that we should all begin to brace ourselves for an imminent impact!”

Just as Spartacus Brink spoke, the sound of air gushing past them suddenly stopped and the light turned abruptly to the most impenetrable black: even Bailey’s view through the underside of the vessel slid out of view and into darkness. The second that the blackness engulfed them, the chamber began to decelerate at a dramatic rate. As it did, all four of them suddenly became weightless, and were left floating momentarily above the floor. Then the chamber came to a complete stop and each returned with a bump to the unforgiving floor below.

Bailey turned over onto his back and looked around but could still see nothing. Then slowly, as his eyes readjusted to the small amount of light still shining through the ceiling, he began to make out the silhouettes of Brink, Melissa and Cabbage lying scattered around him. One by one they began to sit up and dust themselves down. Brink reached over and retrieved the dented remains of his Calling Stone from the floor by his feet.

As they sat in astonished silence there first came a faint grinding sound and then a stream of plaster began to fall steadily toward them. The entire ceiling then began to turn on its axis, as though being unscrewed from above like the top on a giant ceramic pot of homemade jam.

Cabbage dragged himself up, and began to pad tentatively across the latticework towards his master. Upon reaching him he delivered a particularly wet lick right across Bailey's dazed face and then, as the ceiling slowly spun away from them and twisted off into the black void beyond, Cabbage's paws once again lifted from the floor. His eyebrows rose in surprise and Cabbage let out a slight whimper as he floated gently upwards towards the hole left by the recently departed ceiling.

Bailey instinctively stretched out his hands to try and stop his dog from floating any further, but to his dismay found himself dislodged from the floor and also floating headlong towards the waiting chasm.

"Spartacus - help me!"

Brink and Melissa both jumped up in dismay, but in doing so they also found themselves dislodged from the floor and beginning to drift silently upwards towards the top of the chamber.

"What fresh devilry is this? Where are we Melissa? What has happened to us?" said Brink, desperately trying to hang on to the side of the wall, his nails scraping up the bare stonework.

"I know nothing of this place, Mister Brink - my instincts alone led us to the temple. I swear upon my life that I had no knowledge of this place or of any plans to bring us here!"

"Spartacus. Take a look out here!" called Bailey.

Cabbage and Bailey were now outside the confines of the room and had found themselves in a cavernous round chamber, entirely covered in an odd assortment of riveted iron plates, each one at least the size of a field

and others many times bigger.

"I am not sure how, but I think that we have somehow come to find ourselves on the inside of the moon," replied Melissa as she and Brink gradually followed Bailey out.

"And the Sun too I'll wager," joined Brink, "For in this land of yours the two are never seen to part. Which leaves but one question poised upon my lips."

"Which is?" asked Bailey, looking back towards Melissa and Brink.

"What is that large black sphere that we are all gradually drifting towards?" replied Melissa,

"Exactly,"

Set at the very centre of the Moon's interior was a large black mass that writhed and boiled as though it was a blob of molten tar. It seemed to be of the same consistency as the black beam that had brought them to their present destination, but was gathered together in a single twisting mass.

"What should we do? Cabbage and I are heading straight towards that blooming thing, and I'm not sure I like the look of it!" said Bailey.

Brink briefly tried struggling against the pull of the pitch black shape at the centre of the void, but however hard he turned and stretched, his progress was not impeded by even the smallest fraction. It was almost as though they were caught in quicksand, as the harder they struggled, the quicker they were drawn towards its bubbling, churning mass. Cabbage, however, no longer seemed scared. On the contrary; he had now quite happily stretched out both paws and was actually paddling through the open space towards the centre.

"I think I may know what it is, Mister Brink," said Melissa hesitantly.

"What is it?"

"It would seem that we have somehow found ourselves at the very centre of this world we call Arcadia. If that really is the truth then there can be only one explanation. The object before us must be something more powerful than any mere magic - it is the *Heart of the Sun*."

"Then let us hope that it means us no harm," replied Brink.

“But don’t you see, Mister Brink? This is the very source of the Sun and the Moon. It makes the clouds that sit high across the sky and the rains to fall to the ground below. This is the presence that offered us safety when we were in danger but - most importantly - it could mean that this is our way home!”

Cabbage swam straight into the surface of the jet-black mass and in the blink of an eye and to the astonishment of the other three, was completely swallowed up.

“I don’t understand Melissa – please there isn’t much time - tell us what you know!” said Brink.

He tried not to sound alarmed at what they had just witnessed, but felt a tingle of fear race up his spine as the same unseen force gently tugged his feet towards the writhing mass.

“Legends have it that the Heart of the Sun is a doorway, through which you might travel to any place at any time that you may wish. We have only to wish it to be true and so it shall be.”

“Then this may be my path home at last? I can only hope that your instincts are true, Melissa. The only thought that brings me sadness is that our little band must go their separate ways, but if that is what fate decrees then so be it. I have work to be finished, and you two have homes to which you must return. If this is where we must part, then good fortune and good travelling go with you. I wish you both a safe journey home, and to find happiness in the lives that you lead.”

“You too Spartacus,” shouted Bailey from the very edge of the black pulsating ball, “it’s been an adventure and a half and no mistake. And Melissa...I hope that I might see you again so that we might become firmer friends.”

“I am sure that our paths will cross again Bailey, and as for friendship, you gained that when at first we spoke.”

As Bailey smiled he sank backwards into the amorphous dark sphere, and was gone.

“I think that boy rather likes you,” smiled Brink.

“And I rather like him...”

Then, quicker than a flash of summer lightning, Melissa too had vanished.

“And then there was one...”

And then there were none.

Chapter 15



he bitterly cold rain poured in thin streams down the worn cobbled streets, washing them clean and leaving them shining, like row upon row of shells left behind by the evening tide. A hooded figure crept slowly from a darkened doorway and looked nervously up and down the length of the empty lanes beyond, filled by the relentless rain, which twitched and flickered in the twilight of the comet far above. Seeing nothing, he seized his chance. Clutching a small dark stone to his chest and gathering up his robes, he set off into the rain and fell into a brisk stride.

Darting eyes cast glances, this way and that, seeking out a hidden adversary in each gloom-filled alleyway passed, and yet finding none.

His sandals slipped and slid on the water drenched cobbles, but he dropped his head and carried on regardless, muttering damnations and curses against the foul, drenching night.

He crossed a small square and turned a corner into a side street, when, without warning, his leg became caught in a hidden snare that lurked in the shadows within. Before he knew what had happened he felt his balance desert him and toppled helplessly towards the ground.

As he fell, his arms stretched out instinctively, his fingers letting go of the cold round slab that he had gripped so tightly mere seconds before, snatching it from his fingers and sending it skipping down the cobbled lane beyond.

As Michael Scot scrabbled back to his aching feet, a strange blue light flickered into being. As it did it illuminated the shape of the unseen obstacle that he had collided with, the outstretched foot of Spartacus Brink.

Feeling panic well up in his chest, Scot turned to flee, but as he did he realised that moving his legs was becoming harder by the second. Everything, even the thoughts scurrying across his brain, seemed to be slowing down to a standstill until even the raindrops rolling from his brow had reached the point where they hung uncertainly from his face, like small icicles, waiting for the warm Spring thaw.

“I am so glad that you decided to stay and have a chat with me after all.”

Brink stepped out from the shadows and surveyed the unmoving figure of Scot, poised as though waiting for the starting whistle in a race, his face set in a frozen grimace of raw determination.

Brink walked over to the hunched ancient figure and slowly shook his head.

“Let us put an end to this game, Mister Scot, for once and for all. For if it is the Comet that you truly desire most, then you shall surely have it.”

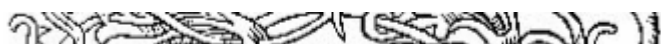
Brink carefully wedged the glowing brass orb fast within the insides of Scot’s rain-sodden robes. Turning up the street he bent down and groped around in the shadows until he heard the familiar grating rattle of stone against stone. He gently picked up the Rosarian Oracle and walked back to where Scot waited, still frozen to the spot.

“Let us just hope that I am right about this. If my theory is correct then it will be you this time, not I, who is taken for a pleasant little jaunt. Oh - and when you get up there – please be sure to convey my best regards to those rascals in Bimleigh Heavers, especially to a certain Master Humblebucket!”

As he touched the smooth black face of the Rosarian Oracle to Scot’s outstretched fingers a blinding white flash filled the street, turning the night briefly into day and then receding to wherever it had come, and with it a certain Mister Scot.

Brink stood staring for a second at the spot where his adversary had stood and then, pushing the Rosarian Oracle into his own jacket, turned on his heels and set back off up through the square, retracing the path that Scot had so recently trodden.

“Now, if I remember rightly and today is somehow still the day I left this ungodly place, I should still have a bed around here that is bought and paid for. Goodness knows I could make use of one, I feel as though I have not slept for a month...”



Michael Scot blinked and came to an abrupt stop. He blinked again and his mouth dropped open into an astonished gasp.

The dark, filthy streets of Ghent were no more. They had fallen away like a bundle of dusty papers thrown into a furnace, flashing with a bright

intense glare, before being consumed in total by the hot glow within. And now Michael Scot was standing on a grassy banking, beside an expanse of water, glittering and undulating in the bright warm sunlight.

Scot lifted his hood and looked up, before realising with an increasing welling fear that the prize he had been holding was gone. He looked around the patch of grass he was standing upon and feverishly rubbed the palms of his hands through the cool green blades until the soil was ground into them but to no avail. It was only then that he felt something hard and cold within his robes and reached inside to pull the foreign object out. As he did so, a voice close behind him quietly spoke.

“My dear Outlander - how very good of you to finally join us.”

Scot spun around; the Calling Stone outstretched in his bony hand, and found he was looking at twin black reflections of himself, set deep in a cruel and pitiless countenance. As he looked into the Guardian’s eyes, Scot felt the blood drain from his face, but failed to notice the Calling Stone as it slipped from his open hand and fell softly to the ground.

With a flourish of his crimson robe, the Guardian turned, his long grey hair lifting as he did so and drifting back across his shoulders. Behind him stood eight silver helmeted soldiers, each dressed in dark brown habits and their black gauntlets gripping an array of fearsome weapons.

“Your task is now fulfilled my Watchmen of the Waters. At last I grant you leave to return to the solitude of Lake Thane where you may once more sleep the sleep of ages. I make only one parting request - take *that* with you!”

Two Watchmen stepped forward and followed the stiff bony finger that stretched back towards Scot. Gripping the protesting old man firmly by the sleeves, they were joined by the other Watchmen as they slowly proceeded towards the calm dark waters lapping at the rocky shore. Little by little, their cloaks and habits slid into the icy water, and the further they walked the more Michael Scot spluttered and struggled, trying in vain to break free from their hard, unyielding grasp.

One last howl faded, turned into a gurgle, and very soon all that remained were nine sets of silver-black ripples, expanding and drifting across the dark but tranquil surface of Lake Thane.

As the ripples slowly flattened into the water and were gone, so too were the last remaining traces of Michael Scot.

