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Also by Frank P. Ryan

The Snowmelt River

The Tower of Bones

The Sword of Feimhin

FRANK P. RYAN

The
Return
of the
Arinn



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

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

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

Ussha De Danaan, the last High Architect of Ossierel

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A Dragon's Regret

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

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

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

‘I’ll still miss them terribly.’

<The heart is a poor guide to reason.>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Thank you.’

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

‘I promise.’

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

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

‘Permission to speak?’

<Would that you were incapable!>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘How can there be so many different truths?’

<Kate girl-thing has much to learn.>

‘Then explain – enlighten me, please?’

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

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

<Perhaps some destinies are better not explained.>

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

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

‘Try me.’

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

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

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

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

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

‘What are we, then?’

<A confusion of purpose. A conundrum.>

‘Why a conundrum?’

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

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

<Thus would she correct a Dragon King!>

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

<Immensely.>

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

<Even though I caution you against it?>

‘All the more so.’

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

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

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

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

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

‘I never realised . . . I can’t believe I’m experiencing it.’
<You wish the experience to end?>

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

<HARRRUUMMMPPPPHHHH!>

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

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

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

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

<Kindness is no armour within a dragon tale.>

A dragon tale! It certainly felt different from the fairy

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

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

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

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

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

'What are you suggesting?'

<The inevitable fall that accompanies unseemly pride.>

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

Why was it wrong to delight in such bliss?

Queen Nimue glanced around the moonlit bedroom. She

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

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

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

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

<Your ring!>

‘My ring?’

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

<You have somehow managed to lose it.>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<Did I not warn you?>

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

<I warned you most specifically.>

‘You did.’

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

‘Yes – we talked.’

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

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

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

‘What is it?’

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

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

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

‘Yes. I—’

<Even in that void I warned you afresh.>

‘Yes.’

<Do you now recall my warning?>

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

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

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

<You must understand how dangerous this might be?>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ring . . .

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

Kate froze with terror.

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

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

I let Alan down.

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

‘Please – please let me go to him.’

<Have you forgotten the ring?>

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

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

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

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

'I'm feeling breathless!'

Driftwood did not speak.

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

<Go on!>

Whose voice . . . ?

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

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

<Go on!>

‘Who are you?’

<Don’t stop – don’t stop now!>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<Sleep!>

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

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

‘Where are we?’

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

The Wastelands into which Alan had taken his Shee

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

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

Silence other than the wailing of the wind.

'I did wake you from the dead.'

Still no answer.

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

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

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

A Threat in the Dark

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

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

'A plane, sounds like an airliner.'

'What's it doing?'

'Circling, maybe. Looking for an airport?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

A palimpsest!

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

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

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

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

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

'How's Padraig?' Mark asked.

'The same.'

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

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

'Let's hope so.'

He kissed her lightly on the lips.

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

'Yeah.'

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

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

'Mark?' Cal said.

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

'You see it?'

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

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

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

*

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

'What's going on, mate?'

'An evacuation.'

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

'Hey mate – Good to see you!'

‘Thought my friends had abandoned me.’

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

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

‘So, there’s some new plan?’

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

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

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

‘Oh, Mark – Sharkey! Thank goodness!’

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

‘I doubt there are many left.’

‘What’s happening to the farm?’

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

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

‘Who? One of the crew?’

‘Padraig.’

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

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

'What's that?' Mark had asked.

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

'Is there anything more you can do?'

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

'Anything that might help.'

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

'There you go – one subclavian line.'

'Thanks.'

'You understand what it does?'

‘No.’

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

‘What’s it for?’

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

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

‘If you make it, that is.’

‘Yeah. If we make it.’

‘Well, good luck!’

‘Thanks, Doc.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Jo, you sure you can’t take him?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Something like that, yeah.’

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

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

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

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

‘What good will that do?’

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

Nan added: ‘And I can fight.’

‘Makes sense to me,’ Tajh spoke.

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

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

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

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

‘Okay – everybody ready?’

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

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

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

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

‘Step on it, Cogwheel.’

‘I have no foot to put down, boss!’

‘Take off, then!’

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

‘Here come the Molotovs!’

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Was that us back there – screaming?’

Mark met her eyes, shrugged his shoulders.

‘Dear god!’

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

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

Mark put his arm around Tajh’s shoulders.

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

‘I think we fluked it between us.’

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

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

‘We did.’

‘Something scary.’

‘Could be.’

‘But you don’t know what?’

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

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

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

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