

THE KNOWING

A Fantasy

by

Kevan Manwaring

(Continued from Section Two: Creative Component)

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Supervisor: Dr Harry Whitehead

Student Number: 129044809

ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-1756-5222

REMINDER TO EXAMINERS

Motifs are included that relate to supplementary narrative voices, which can be viewed via the website (www.thesecondcommonwealth.com). See 'Discover the McEttrick Women' and 'Discover the Characters'. The novel can be read without referring to these, but it may enhance your experience, if you wish to know more.

Additional material is also available on the website: other voices from the world of the novel; audio and video recordings; original artwork; articles (by me as a research-practitioner); photographs of field research; a biographical comic strip about Rev. Robert Kirk; and so on. Collectively, this constitutes the totality of my research project.

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Janey awoke with a jolt. Turbulence again. Felt like they were riding through a storm. Jim Morrison eat your heart out, she groaned to herself. Being cooped up in a soup can in the sky for hours on end felt like the very opposite of rock'n'roll. All but the safety lights were out. Around her, a small village of strangers slept above the clouds, swaddled in cellophane-static blankets, commode cushions and flight socks. She tried to stretch, but there just wasn't enough leg room for someone like her.

The Ohio family were deep into the woods, going by their three bears' snoring.

Why was she the only one who couldn't sleep?

She flipped on the overhead light, and pulled out the journal.

It had been a while. Ten Hail Mary's for the neglectful reader. Sorry, Father.

Did she really want to return to the mad adventures of her ancestor?

Checking the flight status, she saw there were thousands of miles and a confusing time-zone shift still to go. She wasn't entirely sure what time it was *meant* to be. Her body was confused, but it refused to sleep.

Okay, Reverend.

Desperate times, desperate measures.

I awoke in a gloomy cell, my face pressed into rank straw. I moaned in pain as I sat up. Wincing, I gingerly felt my face where a fresh bruise was no doubt forming like a purple-heathered knowe. I was desperate for a slake of water. I hadn't eaten since leaving the Brownies' blackhouse. I called out to guards, my voice lost in the dank, dripping indifference.

I shouted myself raw. What place was this? Was I in Purgatory? This hardly seemed like the enchanting Cockayne of Fayrie Tales. I had forsaken my home, my bed and my darling ... for this? Had my wits abandoned me? What had I been thinking when I stepped into that ring?

Finally, the sobering reality of my folly struck me like a sluice of night soil cast from an open window in Auld Reekie. Reverend, how low have you fallen? Verily, these were the just rewards for my antiks!

Weeping, I fell into a fit of despair and prayed heartily to the Almighty – as well

as I could, anyhow, considering my hands were chained to the wall and my mouth was still gagged with a foul rag. This is where my hubris had led me.

To think: I sought to free my wife from her enchantment when it is I who have ensnared her in my madness. I claimed a noble purpose to my studies, when other desires drove me.

My prayers dried on my tongue. I collapsed in a despondent torpor.

The belly of the whale consumed me as though I was Jonah himself.

As I dreamed, finally, mercifully, I felt I was back in my manse (Beloved Insch-Alladine, O, that I were there now!), but it was made of glass. I felt vulnerable and intruded upon. The whole parish could see into my home, could observe my business. My research into Fayrie folklore was public knowledge, and was being roundly mocked. The faces of my neighbours were grotesque, distorted, with crude make-up on – white face-paint, and rosy cheeks, contrasting their dour clothes and the drear hills. The Bishop threatened the burning death for my Devilish Dabblings. As Minister I should have known better. What kind of example did I set to my flock? I was lower than a witch who gave suck to the Prince of Flies. My notebooks split open and blew across the lawn, into the mud, and I chased after them, fruitlessly snatching at them as a fickle breeze whipped them from my grasp. The cruel laughter of the parishioners became the braying of donkeys, the cawing of crows, the shrill squeal of a sow led to slaughter.

Janey stopped reading. Not exactly lullaby material! She put the journal away, and put on the free ear-phones, plugging the jack into the entertainment. Selecting *LA Woman*, she settled back. Behind the lowered blind lightning flickered. Curious, she raised it.

The sky was split by the sturm-und-drang. Very Wagnerian. She yawned. Then something caught her eye.

In the arc-light of the next lightning flash. There. Silhouetted against the wing.

A jet-black swan.

It went dark again, as though someone had flicked a switch.

Her heart was racing. Impossible! Not at this height. It would freeze to death. Plummet to the ground, a block of black ice.

A quicksilver spike of lightning ripped the heavens.

There it was again.

She noticed it only had one webbed foot. The other ended in a stump.

This time it turned its head.

Eyes of flame stared back at Janey.

The boom of thunder rocked the craft.

She stifled her scream, just.

Fumbling with her seat-belt, she shook her neighbours awake.

'Sorry, washroom.'

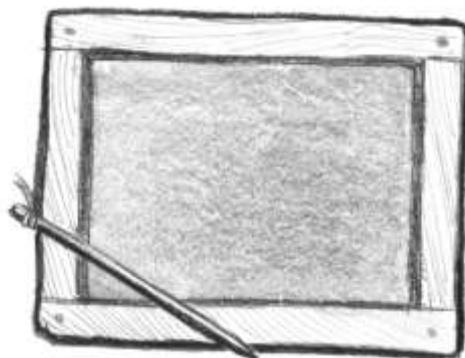
They muttered and mumbled, but eventually let her by. On an impulse, she reached back and grabbed the biscuit-tin and blanket. Pulled the blind down, hard.

Locking herself in the toilet, she wrapped the blanket around her. She couldn't stop shaking. That thing was still alive. Following her. To Scotland.

Hands pushed out against the walls; took deep breaths. She was in the Death Star trash-compactor, being crushed to the death. Drowning in grey water. Junk. Up. To. Her. Eye-balls.

The biscuit-tin. Old and solid on her lap. She held it like it was her life-support. Perhaps it was. *Mom. Dotty. Molly. All of you. Help me. Please.* Hands shaking, she prised it open and grabbed the first thing that came to hand.

The school-slate. Cool and solid, she placed it against her forehead and breathed in the faint ghost of chalk dust.



Janey awoke, stiff-necked inside the cramped toilet, the school-slate still on her lap.

A gentle knock, then the concerned voice of the stewardess: 'Ma'am, are you all right in there?'

Janey tried to orientate herself. 'Yes. Hold on a minute...' She splashed her face.

Flushed the loo. Then, trying to smooth down the wrinkles of the night, she unlocked the door.

The stewardess' relief quickly turned. 'Please return to your seat. We're about to prepare for landing.'

Rubber-necking passengers watched her stagger back to her seat. She smiled at their scowls. 'Sorry, Mile High Club. Gold member.'

She must look at right state. But, hey, worst things happen at sea.

The boy yawned and stirred as the mother fussed over her. 'Had us worried there. You were gone such a long while! We called for the stewardess in the end.' The boy gave her a green-eyed look. 'Here, have some of this before they take it away.'

Thanking her, Janey sipped the coffee and tried to wake up.

The shutters were up, and above the cloud-swaddled Old World the clean light breached the horizon.

Of the black swan there was no sign.

Perhaps all demons of the night had been vanquished. For now.

Putting the school-slate back in the tin, and stowing it in her hand-luggage, she pondered what she knew of her great-grandmother's life, learnt at her knee while she was still alive.

Janey had loved hearing her talk about the old times. She often got more sense out her than her mother – a lucid link to the past.

Molly's promising flower had been thorned by tragedy. She had met her fiancé-to-be just before the sinking of the Lusitania committed her country to the War in Europe, although they weren't engaged until 1917, the day before he signed up. The day after the wedding he was gone. He had returned home once, on leave, to sow a child in her belly. He left not knowing if he had succeeded. Molly waved him off from Redsaddle and never saw him again. When it became apparent that his fervent efforts had not produced the harvest they had hoped for, she had blamed herself. For being barren soil. When she received the telegram she accepted it with a silent stoicism, and with it the typecast role of a lonely spinster.

Widow McEttrick became a schoolmistress in the local town, and settled down to a quiet, but not unsatisfying life. The encounter with Sharp and Karpeles had left a deep impression on her – one that would stay with her for the rest of her days. She took to recording the songs, stories and folklore of her region with scholarly discipline.

And yet the songs in her had died when she had lost her man.

Then, in the heat of the Armistice celebrations, when everyone was whooping it up, even Molly, a dark-eyed stranger had appeared in town. It had been hard seeing the wives embracing their returning war heroes, or girls grabbing the nearest available soldier. She had started walking back up the long, steep path to home, when the stranger called out and fell into walking with her. 'Which way are you headin?' he'd said, chewing on a twig.

She pointed. 'Way up yander.'

'Mind if I walk with you a little, I'm goin that way.'

Molly would've normally been more careful, but she'd had some hard cider and was hurting lonesome – and he had a strange charisma about him, and a banjo on his back. She'd seen him playing earlier on the square, getting everyone leaping about like jackrabbits.

They'd walked amiably along, and talked about the war and what it would be like now it was over. The stranger had a sharp eye for the wild-flowers and he picked her a sweet posy as they strolled. At the pass, they rested up, sitting on a log, and he'd played some tunes to her, which plain melted her heart.

Well, one thing led to another, and, against her better nature, Molly had invited him back to the farm, as it was getting late. After all, custom dictated that she should offer hospitality to a wayfaring stranger.

And that night she offered more besides.

At first light he was gone, leaving Molly some sweet memories and a seed which grew inside of her.

Next summer, in the swoonsome heat of July, Molly had given birth to a daughter – a rosy-cheeked girl her mother called Dorothy, though everyone called her Dotty. The child seemed to contain all the joy that her tragic life had lacked until that point. She was her sunshine.

She never saw that stranger again, but there was another legacy from those strange shell-shocked years.

Molly was sent a neatly-wrapped copy of a book, post-marked from England.

Where that book ended up, Lord knew. Janey's mother had a knack of misplacing things, not least her mind.

But through the box of leaves Marsha had given her, something had been reclaimed.

Fascinated as she was by what songs Molly had shared that day with the visitors – and

she knew they had returned to collect more a year later, Janey now knew there was a song that Molly had not shared.

The lost song.

Well, now that song was Janey's, and she would keep it tight to herself. Without a daughter, she had no-one to pass it onto. Would it, then, die with her: unrecorded; the last of her line?

The biscuit-tin had stirred something up in her. Something she thought was long dead.

Over the tannoy the stewardess asked them to prepare for landing.

When they touched down at Glasgow International, it looked like night outside. Groggy from the red-eye, Janey asked the woman from Ohio what time it was. Her fellow passenger confirmed it was, in fact, the morning.

'The skies. They're so dark though...' she observed, wrinkling her nose at the gloomy prospect.

'Welcome to Scotland,' said a businessman with a Glaswegian accent, who ignored the seatbelt sign, which was still on, to get up and take out his hand-luggage from the overhead locker.

It was winter, and it was Scotland – what did she expect? She was glad she had brought some warm clothing, pulling on her Afghan coat.

The chill in the air as they opened the cabin doors had teeth to it.

Over the water, but not out of dark.

Quatie had told her that running water offered 'psychic protection'. It was a consoling fiction, to think she might have shaken off her pursuers.

But the image of the black swan flashed before her.

She nervously scanned the sky as she descended the steps and crossed the tarmac to board the bus.

Here she had no London, no shotgun, no Quatie, and no Agent Trent.

And somewhere out there was a thing that wanted to kill her.

But beneath her feet was the soil of the Old Country, of her ancestors.

She was not entirely alone.

In a zombie-daze she collected her luggage, found a taxi, checked into the hotel. When she got to her *Alice in Wonderland* sized room she placed a Do Not Disturb sign on the door

and flopped like London after a good stint of bothering chipmunks.

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I awoke to the clang of my dungeon door. The first thing I noticed was the fresh smell of hay. Disorientated, I opened my eyes and saw that the cell had been cleaned out while I had slumbered. Golden straw lay scattered around, and to my delight a jug of water and a beaker had been set down near me. With some difficulty, I edged towards it. I was no longer chained to the wall and the gag had been removed from my mouth. My wrists were sore and I rubbed some life back into them. Pouring some precious water, I drank deeply and splashed my face.

Then I realised I was being observed.

It was a guard. This one looked like a smash-faced bulldog and was squat and as square as a wall. 'Courtesy of Master Neath,' was all he grunted before lumbering off, shoulders first. I called after him but he ignored me, going up some steps and slamming a door shut, the bolt shot like an arrow of ice to the heart.

I reflected upon this turn of events. Who was Master Neath? Why was he showing me apparent kindness? I agonised over the lack of knowledge about my current circumstances. Here I was, literally in the dark. I recollected my journey here and my arrival in the castle. Had I transgressed in some unknown way – broken some invisible taboo? Fayrie seemed to be snared with such trapdoors, murder holes and ha-has to snag the unwary.

I scoured my memory for what I knew – going back over all I had gathered and had related to my cousin Robert Campbell from my fever-bed ere I crossed over (caring for my wife and my parish had taken its toll in those last few weeks) ... which in hindsight looked like an uncanny act of prescience, as though I somehow knew.

My monograph, my epitaph.

Had I stepped into my very own book, imprisoned myself by my own words?

I was weak with hunger and fell asleep once more.

...

I was awoken a second time by the wonderful aroma of food. Before me on a silver tray lay a roast dinner served on exquisite porcelain. I could not give credence to my eyes, but my nostrils did not lie. I found myself drooling like a dog. Yet I checked myself. Would eating this Fayrie food condemn me to eternal imprisonment? Had I not already

partaken of the Brownies' hospitality? Mayhaps the hour of caution had passed. In truth, my befuddled mind could not find clarity in that place of shadows.

'Please, eat. You must be starving.'

A voice of midnight velvet from the dark raised the hairs of my nape. Startled, I looked up. Stepping into the meagre pool of light that illuminated my cell appeared a tall man in dark furs. He had long silver hair braided in a skein over his shoulders. He looked at me with eyes of jet. 'I assure you the repast is perfectly safe. We procure supplies of mortal food for the occasional guest – though the Rift-costs are high. Such exotic fare is considered a rare delicacy amongst our kind.'

What exactly was his kind? His features, his expression, seemed as elusive as smoke – coalescing and shifting. It was hard to hold him in my mind for long. If I did not focus upon him, he seemed to blend into the gloom of the cell.

He looked at me with an inscrutable gaze. 'Excuse me, where are my manners? I am Chamberlain Neath.' He reached out a hand – it glinted in the shadows. I gasped, realizing it was pure silver, exquisitely forged like a glove of moonlight. It moved in clock-work fashion. The sound of tiny cogs clicking and whirring broke the silence of the chamber.

Nervously, I took it and felt his cold, firm grasp – I thought he was going to crush my hand, but the metal fingers slipped from mine like quicksilver.

'I heard of your regrettable conditions and sought to remedy them as soon as I could. I am, alas, a busy man – affairs of the Court ... you know how it is, being in a position of responsibility yourself, Reverend.' A slight distaste in his voice at the word? He gestured once more to the food and this time I could not resist. My hunger had a keen edge. I tried my best not to eat like a slackit beggar. 'Please, go ahead. Wine?' He offered the carafe.

I turned this offer down – I needed to keep my wits about me.

Neath shrugged and poured himself some into a chased goblet, which clinked against his hand.

As I ate, he sipped and talked about the Court. I was a 'guest' of the Queen of Elfhame. Regrettably, the laws of the realm demanded that Superterraneans were put in quarantine upon arrival, for we brought the disease of humanity with us – mortality.

Again, that hint of displeasure.

These were suspicious times and relations between our worlds were 'not at their best.' Was I an Ironblood spy? He examined me with his piercing opaque gaze that seemed to intensify in my mind as though he scoured my very soul: the eyes of a spider glistening in the dark.

I assured Neath I was not. My intentions were altruistic – to free my wife of her fey doom. Yes, I was interested in the lore of his land, but only in as much as it related to my wife's condition.

With the food inside me – to my great relief, it tasted like good honest earthly fare – my energy revived and my purpose became clear. Could he help?

Neath examined his goblet of wine, clasped by his silver hand – a scimitar nail tapping the side. 'I will see what I can do. What's the expression? Pull some strings. You seem a man of good heart and noble purpose. But for now I shall vouchsafe your good treatment here. Is there anything that you require?' He made a magnanimous gesture, his hand a flash of moonlight.

I thought for a moment. Paper, quill and ink. Being unable to write was like having an itch I could not scratch. I had a need to record my experiences in this strange land – a priceless opportunity to further my field-research on the Secret Commonwealth.

Neath said, 'Consider it done,' and summoned a guard with a sharp snap of his metallic digits. 'I know you will not abuse my trust in you by any sudden words that might cause alarm on our gentle elfin ears,' he said with a smile. 'It is so much nicer to be unbound and ungagged, don't you think?' And with that he was let out by the bulldog, who gave me a sour look and an involuntary slap of his tongue across his muzzle, clearly envious of my meal.

I felt like throwing him a bone, but thought better of it.

I sat and digested my encounter with Neath. I had one ally in this place, at least.

...

Later that day, good as his word, my requests arrived. I had been given a finely-tooled leather-bound journal, the paper uncut. I cleaned my knife upon the straw and split open its pages. Charging the tip of my quill, I began to write...

...

For the next couple of days I was engrossed in recording my experiences thus far

– as you see here – and was relatively content in my incarceration. I was brought a meal twice a day by the bulldog, and kept topped up with water and fresh straw. I was given a blanket and cushions, and a steady supply of candles. A bucket in one corner serviced my gross needs – fortunately the cool temperature of the dungeon and the fresh straw offset the smell.

...

On the third morning (announced by a thin gruel of sunlight – the daylight here seems to be strained through a cheese-cloth at the best of times) I awoke to find a fresh change of clothes arrayed before me. It was a vicar's cassock exactly like the one I wore in Aberfoyle. I tried it on and it fitted me perfectly. I felt more myself within it. I took it off and shaved (for hot water and a razor was supplied today, to my astonishment). I then redressed, fixing the starched collar around my smooth neck, and felt comfortable in my physical form for the first time in longer than I can remember. There was something restorative about the ablutions and apparel – however hollow the symbol. Verily, clothes maketh the man. Yet where would this get me? Mere dressing up, if no grounding to the role. I was no itinerant thespian and did not relish any kind of mystery play upon the rickety wagon of my predicament.

To my surprise the guard came, jangling a set of keys made from what I could ascertain to be bronze. He growled at me like his namesake until I stood clear of the door – then he opened it, flinging it wide with a clang. He gestured, angrily grunting. I was clearly meant to follow.

A little unnerved by this sudden change of circumstances, I quickly snatched up my journal – not wanting it to be read by prying eyes – and stepped across the threshold of my prison.

I was led up the stone-carved steps, relieved to be leaving this particular oubliette at last. My body shook with anticipation of it. At the threshold of the gaol I was handed over to four black-and-gold liveried tower guards with pikes.

'I bid you good day, sir,' I said, not without irony, to the Bulldog.

He only growled and slammed the heavy door behind him.

I was led along draughty passages until I came out into a courtyard.

I was dazzled by the daylight.

Although the day was overcast, to my benighted vision it seemed blinding.

Blinking like a mole, I was led across the courtyard, busy with the hustle and bustle of castle life (strange after days alone) to the Keep.

From the stone-lipped well in the centre, a bonnie servant-girl with spun-gold hair down to her bare feet pulled up a pail, singing to herself. Splendid Araby horses clattered into the yard, hooves sparking on the cobbles. As their haughty riders dismounted, a swart farrier and a squint-eyed boy saw to the steeds. My escort halted to allow the three riders, preening cock-a-napes to a man, to saunter up the steps of the Keep. This dazzling basilica seemed to be hewed from solid gold and decorated like some grotesque mockery of a shrine. From starry niches elfin icons looked down in unsaintly fashion and every cornice was ornate with sculptural filigree, a veritable Roslin.

I was marched up the wide steps and into the main hall, arrayed in tapestries of exquisite craftsmanship, depicting tableaux no less magical than what I beheld before me. The light of a thousand candles caught on every feature and made the patterns swirl and dance. The floor was chequered and lined by columns of marble into which were hewn majestic statues of ancient heroes. At the far end there was an empty throne of gold. Courtiers and attendants mingled, clearly awaiting the presence of their Monarch.

And what a court of mountebanks it was!

The first one to catch my eye was an obese, bibulous bishop, cutting across the floor like a scarlet man o' war through the squally seas of heathenism. I was more shocked to see a man of God there, even a Papish one (for that is what he seemed) than anything. He cast a glance at me of deep contempt. He was followed by obsequious lesser clergy, stiff birds in their starched mantles. Next, a shoal of semi-naked sirens, slinking across the floor in what appeared to be fish-scales and little else. I averted my gaze, only to be confronted with what I thought was a cat on hind legs apparelled as a page, running skilfully between the courtiers, muttering: 'meddle and mell...' An androgynous prince preened himself, basking in the admiration of the lower echelons, who commented on his cheekbones, fine couture, turn of phrase, or latest affectation, which was to view everything through opera glasses the wrong way. A foul-mouthed, but richly-clad crone, neck glittering with what looked like beetles, lambasted the uselessness of servants, sending them scattering and terrified before her withering

tongue. Most unnervingly, what appeared to be a mortal child dressed like a doll in a frozen ruffle of lace, served a tray of delicacies. Nearby, a rotund nurse kept an anxious eye on his every move, offering him constant instruction, adjusting his attire, wiping his face with the dab of a spit-moistened kerchief and other humiliating gestures. What I first took for hedgehogs and other beasts of the hedgerows turned out to be cousins of my Brownie friends, serving the guests green liquor from copper jugs as tall as they, or constantly tidying up after them – as soon as a drink or snack was spilled they would be there, briskly cleaning away. Two main groups clustered around central figures I could not glimpse. One figure I immediately recognised, even across the busy hall, was Neath, a shard of shadow amid the gaudy panoply. The chamberlain made a mockshow of being impressed by my appearance. He raised a single silver digit when I went to approach, his eyes flicking to the purple-curtained alcove behind the throne. There was a sudden blast of trumpets and everyone fell quiet, turning to the throne.

And that is when the Queen of Elfland entered.

She was like the Virgin Queen herself, Spenser's Faerie Queen made real stepping from the pages of history and literature. Her beauty was almost terrifying to look upon. She was tall and pale, her skin hewn from alabaster. Her hair was a sculpted wave of red breaking high above her shoulders, the wide lace collar a giant snowflake about a swan neck graced with a web of dark jewels. Her crown was a nest of stars, as though a constellation had been snatched from the sky and placed upon her brow. The Court bowed before her as one, as she looked upon them coolly – with eyes like slithers of emeralds.

With an elegant sweep she sat upon her throne with royal grace and gestured to Neath. He whispered something to her and she laughed with a chandelier's brittle tinkling.

Finally, she spoke: 'My Lord Chamberlain informs me we are graced with a guest from the Iron World. Bring him forth.'

I was ushered forward by the guards, who she waved away as though they were flies. 'It is so nice to have visitors.' The Court laughed automatically. 'By your raiment, a man of the cloth, clearly, although not of the same persuasion as Bellirummer here – yet few men are.'

The scarlet bishop went even redder in the cheeks and grumbled something to his

cohorts, protesting in professional indignation.

The Queen continued: 'Pray tell me, good sir, your name and purpose.'

'Your Majesty, my name is Robert Kirk. I am the Minister for the Parish of Aberfoyle, where I reside with my wife. It is on her behalf that I have come.'

The Queen held up an exquisitely manicured and bejewelled finger. 'My goodness, the bird talks!' More cold laughter. Once more she cast her icy green eyes upon me. 'I did not realise men of your ... faith had hearts, let alone followed them. Please sir, do tell us more.'

I looked nervously around as the eyes of the Court burned into me – scornful smiles upon their lips. 'My wife has been touched by Fey...'

'Lucky her!' jibed a spine-twisted jester to a roar of laughter. 'They touched me and look where I am today!' He leapt onto his hands and started juggling with his feet.

Ignoring him as best I could I continued. 'She dances on the hills, she dances in her sleep. Beyond all sense and reason. I know now that she hears music from under the hills, music that drives her wild...'

'Well, we do have all the best musicians,' the Queen added, to a ripple of mirth. The Minstrel Gallery emphasized the point with a flourish, which the Court hurrahed.

Neath stepped forward and offered the Queen a sheaf of papers upon a cushion.

'What is this you place before me, Silverhand?' She gestured towards it with a slight flick of a signet-ringed index.

'Your Majesty, an illicit essay ...'

The Queen gave it closer look: '...of the nature and actions of the Subterraneans – and for the most part – Invisible people, heretofore going under the names of Elves, Fauns and Fayries.'

I went pale.

The Court gasped.

Emeralds shuttered in their khol-caskets, the Queen shook like a blade struck into a door.

'Your Majesty. If I may?' At her tight-lipped nod, Neath snatched up the manuscript. He held it up so all the Court could see. 'The "Secret Commonwealth", we are labelled.'

A brittle silence filled the hall.

“Of a middle nature betwixt man and angel”

Roars of outrage.

He began to scatter the pages around me as he circled like a predator.

'It details affairs of the realm. Our manners and customs, our travels and travails, feuds and foods. Let me give you an example: "These Subterraneans have controversies, doubts, disputes, feuds, and sidings of parties, there being some ignorance in all creatures, and the vastest created Intelligence not compassing all things."'

The Queen pursed her lips, body taut as a bow-string, and the Court cowered. 'And who is the author of this, this ... sedition?'

Neath gestured with his silver appendage. 'You see him before you, your Majesty. He is clearly identified as the sole progenitor.'

'Your Majesty, please I can explain...'

'Silence!' spat Neath, his voice a stiletto in my ear.

My mind was in a butter-churn of confusion. Had I not just dictated this to my cousin Robert Campbell? I had been in this realm for a mere three days.

'And how was this offending article procured, Chamberlain?'

'Intercepted by my agents, who were engaged in small matters, on the way to the corrupt heart of the Iron World, a place called London.'

I fell to my knees.

'Before the Court, before your Queen, confess. Robert Kirk, Minister of Aberfoyle, are these your words?' Neath thrust the remaining pages in my face.

With trembling hands I took them from him, his metalled grasp tearing the parchment.

Immediately, I could see it was the fair copy made for my Lady. I knew another had been made and I prayed this had not been discovered.

'Yes, these are my words.'

'Speak up!' hissed Neath.

'My words, Your Majesty.'

The Queen smoothed her long skirt. 'Execution would be too kind for such a crime against our State. But are we not a just Court? What say you in your defence, Minister of Aberfoyle?'

Remaining on my knees, I put my hands together in prayer. 'Your Majesty, I

wanted to understand what plagued my wife.' The other reason I dared not confess, even to myself.

'What is the name of this Ironblood?'

'Margaret, of the Campbells of Carterhaugh, Your Majesty.'

There was stunned silence – the atmosphere of the Court chilled to an ice-house. The Queen's whole demeanour changed – purple rose to her cheeks, her knuckles went white, and she stood up, glaring at me. 'You dare to mention that cursed line here!'

I was confused. 'Your Majesty, my wife is a virtuous woman...'

'Silence!' roared Neath, his demeanour changed to that of a cruel Inquisitor.

'The Ettrick clan are anathema to me. Her ancestor stole something ... valuable. A handsome young knight ... He. Was. Mine!' she hissed, sending a glacial blast that shook the glasses on their trays and the Brownies curling like hedgehogs. 'I have made her pay. No one does that to me and gets away. Her line is cursed.'

'No!' I moved forward but was butted down savagely by the guards.

'Mine! Every first child of her blood also! Her descendants are doomed to meet and fall for a handsome wanderer ... and from that union a child will come, and that luve-bairn, belongs to me, like Puppet here.'

I looked in horror at the mortal child dressed like a doll.

'In the name of God...' I tried to speak but found my voice constrained. With horror I found my dog-collar restricting my throat. I clawed at it, struggling for breath.

'Hold your tongue, Superterranean stool,' interjected Neath. 'Do not profane this Court with your Upperworld god! We are not boarish gatekeepers here, Kirk – you will not find us so easily startled!'

The Queen swept towards me, and cast her icy green gaze at my prone form. 'I should have torn out her eyes, let alone his! Instead, her line, mixed with our precious Fayrie blood, has been given the Gift of the An Da Shealladh – little good it will do her or her kin. They will be haunted by two worlds but belong in neither, and so it will be until Doomsday.'

'For the love of Chri—' The collar tightened further, and I croaked for air.

'And then you turn up, along with your treasonous tractate. What a gift from our Superterranean cousins.' She ran a long frost-white fingernail over my face, lingering near my eyes. *'What shall I do with him, Neath?'*

The Chamberlain came forward and tapped his silver hand upon his chin. 'Mm, I concur with Your Majesty. Execution would be too good for him and too quick... He looks like he would only enjoy being martyred.' He snapped his fingers. 'I have it! What greater cruelty, what delicious irony, than to make him your Chaplain?'

Her Majesty seemed to like this, and clapped her hands. 'Oh yes! Most splendid! My very own tame priest. Imagine!' As she pondered this, she cast her amused eyes about the Court, who responded accordingly. 'But will he behave?'

Neath placed his metal hand on my throat, 'While he wears this collar, your Majesty, he will never be able to say anything that offends you, or raise a hand against your Realm – and he can never take it off without self-slaughter, against which the canon of his faith is set.'

'Splendid! Then my Chaplain you shall be, Ironblood.' The Queen rose, and the Court with her. 'Welcome to the Court of Elfhame. We are sure Neath will find you lodgings befitting your rank and ensure you are ... comfortable. You are going to be here for the rest of your pathetically short Ironblood life, after all.'

The dog-collar slackened and I collapsed on the floor amid my papers, ragged for breath. The Court swirled about me, grotesque faces leering down.

The Queen sashayed away, followed by her Syrenes.

Neath knelt down and pressed my face onto the chequered floor. 'Kiss the ground Her Majesty has walked upon, Kirk. You are blessed indeed to be in Her exalted presence.' Then he leaned close. 'Do not put a foot wrong,' he whispered, while pulling back my head by the hair, 'Be my eyes and ears, and your time here will be less of a Hell than it need to be. I look after my friends. And you belong to me now.'

24

As the welcoming applause died down, Janey plugged in her guitar.

The spotlights glared into her eyes, and it was hard to make out the crowd – but she could tell there was a good couple of hundred out there.

Not bad for the new kid on the block.

She was performing in one of the side-rooms of the City Halls venue. Other, bigger, more established acts were playing on the same bill across the city, so she had a lot to compete with. Pulling in any kind of crowd – on a cold night to boot – was a bit of a result. She had spent the day nursing her hangover, reading, and rehearsing like crazy. It was now 9pm and she was on.

This was it!

These folks weren't no roadhouse mob, just here for the booze and the arcade machines. These good people were here to see *her* – Janey McEtrick– as a solo act. Without her band she felt a little naked, but she knew she wasn't really alone.

Mom, Dotty, Molly, Kirk... Kin, ancestors, walk with me.

Her reading earlier had shaken her up: it had all seemed so real, as though it had been happening to her. Its lingering impression made the present moment seem like a gossamer-thin veil that could tear in the blink of an eye.

As the introductions died down and the MC left her to it, Janey felt her mouth dry up, as though it was clogged with dusty manuscripts. She shook her head clear, and took a sip of water.

'Good evening, Glasgow. I think. Jet-lag, huh? Left my brains somewhere over the mid-Atlantic. If anyone finds a black box stamped Asheville let me know.'

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

'I'd like to start with an old song my Mom used to sing me. I believe you have it over here too – well, here's my version, from the Smokys...' and she strummed the opening chords.

Reeling, Janey tumbled out of City Halls. It was a bracingly cold night, even by her standards. A passerby said something about 'brass monkeys' although she could not be sure. Glad that she had brought her Afghan coat, she wrapped it round her as she headed along Sauciehall Street. There were crowds of drunken revellers in high spirits, one inevitably scaling the

Duke of Wellington statue to place a traffic cone there to cheers from onlookers. Homeless bundles of rags sat Buddha-like on cardboard in shop doorways, sniffing at passersby and doling out blessings to the kind-hearted.

There was one particularly deracinated fellow in a black hoody who just stared at the ground. He looked like he was missing a foot.

Janey scooped into her pocket and tossed some coins onto his blanket, which made him scuttle back into the squalid corner.

No pleasing some people!

The odd stalwart busker soldiered on, hoping to catch the late-night crowd. One of them, a young man with a long fringe, shivering in a tight blazer, bravely belted out a Waterboys song. According to one of the young Hebrideans – part of an entourage of fellow performers and crew making their way to the Festival Club Venue – it was 'The Pan Within'. A verse caught her attention, and she stopped to listen. The wild lyrics seemed to sum up the night for her in this strange city of mundane magic, danger and wonder. Janey tossed a couple of pound coins into his case. He gave her a smile and flourish.

The loose band of performers, 'bloodied' with the fox-tails of their passes, barrelled along Sauciehall like it was their Victory Parade, singing snatches of chorus that swelled up to break upon its concrete heart.

'Here we are!' declared the fiddler with a tipsy spin.

By some minor miracle they stood outside the after-show venue. Janey was pleased with herself that she had figured out the way. Evidently, she was one of the soberest among them and clearly had a lot of catching up to do. Hell, she felt like celebrating tonight! Her trip had started real swell. You just know when a show has gone down good – a feeling shared by the Hebrideans who were basking in their own afterglow.

They entered the Festival Club, attached to the bar they hung out in the previous night. Janey flashed her performer's wrist-band with satisfaction. The hall was lively – many groups were grabbing the remaining chairs around the round tables, but Janey headed for the front of the stage.

She had a burning need to dance.

The band on stage seemed to comprise of a raggle-taggle mixture of musicians from different acts performing in the festival: a kind of folk super-group. They appeared to be having a good time, and blasted out classics that made the dancefloor explode in motion.

Janey let herself be caught up in the skirl of music – going down into herself, into her body – at one with the melody. She felt a Dionysian energy surge through her and it felt as though she could take on the world. She was aware of the response of men around her – several came up and tried to dance, but although she smiled and swirled around them, she clearly wasn't for claiming. She was dancing for herself.

There was a joyous rowdiness around her as the crowd ebbed and flowed as one across the dance-floor. She was buffeted by this tempest, but took it in good humour. When an over-enthusiastic dancer bashed into her, another bloke got all manly and protective and shoved him, but she just laughed at them both and spiralled away.

All the time she was aware of an onlooker, nattily-dressed, watching her from the balcony while sipping on what looked like champagne.

Sated, for now, she extricated herself from the sweaty throng and approached the bar.

'You look like you need a drink.'

Janey rolled her eyes, and turned, ready with a brush-off. But she was surprised to see it was the watcher. Various people were staring at him with admiration. A bit of a local star, then – though he wasn't familiar to Janey. He wore a deep red velvet jacket and a black open-necked silk shirt – the glint of silver pendant flashing against his pale skin. His hair was an unruly mop, or perhaps the latest fashion (it was hard to tell these days). His age was hard to pin down. He had boyish features, but an inscrutable gleam in his eyes which suggested a mature reserve. In this light it was hard to tell if they were laughter lines or crow's feet there, but there was something in his expression that suggested he found everything amusing.

'And why would I want to let you do that?' challenged Janey, rounding on him, hands on hips, a little unsteady on her feet. She blew a strand of hair away from her somewhat sticky face.

'So I have an excuse to talk to you.'

'Oh, my. Honesty! Please, I need a chair.'

He laughed and waited.

Janey gave him a wry look. 'Why? To chat me up I suppose.'

'If you like – although I prefer colloquy to chat.'

'Collo...? Excuse me, do I know you?'

'Perhaps, but you don't know it yet.'

Janey shook her head. 'Oo, that's baking my noodle. You're not one of those New Age

cranks are you? All past-lives and karmic crap. All an act to get their grubby mits on my ... kundalini.'

The man considered this with a smile. 'Now there's an image,' he said with a twinkle. 'Actually, I wasn't talking about past-lives. If anything, I'm more interested in future life progression.' He held her gaze, and for a moment there was a lightning-strike of ... something ... between them.

Janey blinked and found herself smiling. She wished she could stop but her lips seemed to have a life of their own. 'Did you say something about a drink...?'

They ensconced themselves in a booth away from the main scrum. Janey had gone for a cocktail; he'd opted for a single malt. They clinked glasses.

'Slainté,' he said.

'Same to you!'

He smiled, and looked at her across the table with those ageless eyes.

Janey let the drink take effect, savouring its flavour, and returned his gaze boldly. She was starting to feel a little warm.

'I don't even know your name,' she finally said.

'Don't you?'

'Should I? Are you some famous bigwig muso?'

He roared at this. 'Well, I haven't been called that before – but, yes, I've cut a few records.'

Janey tried to place him. She pursed her lips, and frowned. 'Wait! I've got it. Aren't you that guy in what are they called – that Celtic rock band. Had a hit in the Nineties?'

The man smiled ruefully at that. 'Yes, singularly correct. 'Star of the Sea' made the top ten of the American Billboard. That was our high-water mark. That was, until we found our niche.'

'The Celtic folk rock circuit?'

'Right.'

They both laughed at this, and took another sip.

'A-ha! Of course! You must be ... Fingal Lewis! The Blue Men! Got there in the end.'

'Well done. My secret identity is revealed. I am unmasked.'

Janey gave him an appraising look. 'Oh, I doubt that. I'm sure the real you is well-

hidden beneath that stage-persona, but you've been living in it for so long, you've forgotten where you put your original self.'

He gave her an admiring look. 'Very perceptive of you.' He took a sip of his whisky. 'It's true. There came a point when my stage-self took over running the show. When things took off, and we were touring non-stop. We were living and breathing our music – playing after the show, on the road, in our hotel rooms, rehearsing, recording, writing new material...' He swirled the ice around the tumbler. 'There was a line crossed. The dream had become reality. I couldn't remember if I was a man who dreamt he was a rock star – or a rock star dreaming he was a man.'

Now it was Janey's turn to smile. 'Poetic. I'm sure by this point your victim drops her knickers and opens her legs.'

Fingal chuckled. 'But you don't fall for that poetic crap, right?'

'Damn right. I'm a mountain girl. I like my man to talk straight.'

'Firm handshake, straight in the eye kind-of-thing?'

'All that.' They held each other's gaze again, until he blinked.

'Hah! Gotcha!' crowed Janey.

'Well, I've clearly met my match then,' conceded Fingal.

'You betcha, buddy!' She slammed down her empty cocktail.

'I better get another round in then.'

'Now you're talking.'

'Same again?'

'Another tossing the caber, or whatever it was?'

'How about champagne?' He made a comic waggle of his eyebrows.

She laughed. 'What the heck – let's celebrate!'

Fingal caught a bar-maid's attention, and ordered for them.

'You have me at a disadvantage...'

'Good, exactly where I like to have my men.'

'You know my name – but I don't know yours.'

'Janey McEttrick, how d'ya do?'

'First time to Scotland.' He gestured around them.

'Yup, and to England...'

'Britain. We're still part of the Union, for now, but we'll never belong to the English.'

'Right. Freedom and all that.' She did her best *Braveheart* impression.

'There are many who take Scottish Independence very seriously.'

'God, I hope you're not one of them.'

Fingal finished his dram. 'I have my views.' He placed the empty glass on the table with a clink.

'Well, be a honey and keep them to yourself, please. I'm fond of Scotland, but I don't want to be force-fed haggis, thank you very much.'

Fingal tried not to react, but his tone was a little clipped. 'Right, 'haggis' is off the menu then.'

'Good. And here's the fizz. Saved by the Bollinger!'

Fingal thanked the bar-maid – placing a tip on her tray – and poured them both a glass. 'A toast. To your haggis-ridden roots.'

'Touché!' They clinked and the plastic flutes gave an unsatisfying dink.

'I presume you've come over to 'connect with your roots'...' he scoffed, looking through the bubbles in the glass at her. 'Not that we're complaining. Scotland does very well out of sentimental Americans, Canadians and Australians wanting to find their clan. They go home with some expensive plaid, a certificate and a few bottles – feeling more authentic, and everyone is happy.'

It was Janey's turn to react. 'Hey, mister! My ancestors come from the Lowlands of your damp neck of the woods. It means a lot to me to go and visit where they came from. I might never come back to this grey little country – but at least I made the effort, and paid my respects! I come from the mountains, and my people originally came from here. It's as simple as that. Stick that up your "authentic" ass!'

Fingal considered this with some amusement. 'Well, that got a rise out of you, anyway.'

Janey went to throw the champagne over him.

'Wait! Don't waste the good stuff!'

She growled.

'It's just nice to see your true colours. I like to see a person's fire.'

'Careful, buddy – or you'll get your fingers burnt!'

'I've got asbestos hands. Playing in a band – you get used to people's egos kicking off.'

Janey laughed at this, thinking of The Jackalopes. 'Hell, you're right there...' She sipped her drink thoughtfully. Where *was* her band going? Here she was, playing her first solo gig –

abroad, to boot, and ... it felt good. She'd got a better buzz off of tonight than any roadhouse set. With all the usual banter and business taken away, she had felt like she was sharing something of her true self up on stage, connecting to her mother, her grandmother and great-grandmother... all of her ancestors, stretching right back ... to this old land. *That* had felt authentic. There was no taking that away from her. She knew he was just winding her up, but boy, how he got under her skin!

'Penny for your thoughts?' Fingal queried.

In the other room, the band launched into an encore to a roar of applause.

'Hey! Do I look cheap? Don't answer that. They'll cost more than that!'

'How much more?'

'More than you could afford?'

Fingal poured some more champagne. 'How about a trip to my castle? Would that be a ... fair exchange?'

I awoke in a flash of pain. My neck was tender and I found it difficult to breathe easily. I still wore my cassock. I tugged at the material, but around my throat it was welded to my very skin. The collar might as well have been made of iron. At first I panicked, and found myself gasping for breath, in fear that I would choke. Yet it was only the spectre of asphyxiation that stole the air from my lungs. The over-heated mind strangles more effectively than any murderer.

Finally, I composed myself and took stock of my situation.

My new cell was a handsomely-furnished chamber with ornate decoration. Across the bay window, heavy velvet curtains were drawn. Daylight, or what passed for it in these lychnobiaous climes, seeped through like pus. There was a wash-stand and a steaming jug of water. I was able to change my under-garments and wash, to my relief – albeit in an awkward fashion with my vestments, trapped by the collar, thrown over my shoulders. I was even able to have a shave, although the strop-razor was like none I had seen before, made out of a finely-honed bone, or shell – with an edge more than sufficient for my barbering.

When I had finished my toilet I gave myself an appraising glance.

I would pass muster, on the surface, at least.

But would my soul?

I have not been entirely honest about the causality of my circumstances, and now I fear I am paying the price.

The last thing I expected to see here was my monograph – and the very copy intended for Lady S———.

I am forced to eat my words.

I pulled open the curtains to be confronted by a concave of mirrors, reflecting back my every aspect.

Who was I? The upright servant of the Lord that parishioners looked to for moral and spiritual guidance? Dignified widower and dutiful husband of my second wife? Or something altogether other?

Within this alcove, my journal lay on an elegant bureau. Beside it, freshly-cut quills, an ink-stand, blotter, and a heavy candle-stick fitted snugly with a fat wick of

unusual tallow. I suspected the journal would have been read, if they had been able to read my minute hand, but I still took solace in its presence and set to updating it. I vowed that I from hence-forward I would commit to its pages a sincere account of my travails here, come what may.

And so I have.

Now, astride time's fleeting arrow, I sit in the near-dark of my chamber, gazing at the black mirrors that surround my bureau. They seem to catch the available light, gradations of black-upon-black, like Dr Dee's scrying glass. I might as well be a necromancer, for do I not dabble with fallen angels, with invisible spirits and occult powers? Within my own parish I would have been burnt as a cunning-man, were such a thing still common. The terrible executions stopped half a century ago in Scotland, but the crime of witchcraft is still a capital offence. I doubt most would look mercifully upon my research into the secret commonwealth. In my defence I would argue that the existence of the Subterraneans, and of esoteric communications between mortals, is proof of the celestial hierarchy and God's glory. All my efforts have been to this one aim in this, in a secular and corrupt age.

My time in the Superterranean world being but a sparrow's flight, I took pains to master those languages and parts of learning that were deemed useful for the rank and station the Lord had designed for me. I applied myself to my studies as a young man in Edinburgh and St. Andrews; and as Clerk of the Presbytery I laboured at the great work, to bring the Light of the Word to the Gaelic North: first in my metrical psalters and later in Bishop Bedel's Bible, translated into the Hibernian tongue.

And it was the printing of the latter which took me to London: three thousand were to be printed and distributed amongst the parishes of the Tramontaines. Surely a Godly endeavour in that English Sodom? And while I oversaw this great labour, marvelling at the infernal engines of the rolling presses, the workers black as devils in the colours of their trade, that I steeped myself in the intoxicating spirit of the age: the Glorious Revolution. I attended churches of every hue and persuasion: Anglican to Roman Catholic to Quaker. In my notebook I recorded sermons and observations, my mind awl at the diverse exegeses. The capital is a veritable Babel of voices, of opinions, and arguments.

I feared that if I remained there much longer I would be as the figure from the

fortune teller's cards, falling from the lightning-struck tower. I wandered those crepuscular streets, horrified at the depravity I beheld: a demi-monde of poverty and disease, harlotry and poppy dens, thievery and barbarism. With every day a deep longing for the uncorrupted hills of my parish, for the untainted mountains and minds of the Highlands, ached in my breast.

In such a precipitous state it was perhaps inevitable I should stumble.

Ah, I fear I go where angels fear to tread. To write it, even in my minute, cramped hand, is to confess all and I am not quite ready for that yet.

Let these pages be for my reflections upon the secret commonwealth.

Why should my research not continue, even in such unusual circumstances? Perhaps even with greater imperative?

My transgression cannot be even greater. I can hardly reveal state secrets when I am their prisoner. To whom would I disclose such intelligences?

I am a voice in the abyss singing back to itself.

In want of an echo, I must be my own.

I closed the curtains –the reflection was unnerving –and tried the door. It was unlocked. I checked beyond. I was at the top of a narrow, winding stair.

No guard seemed to be posted, yet how far would I actually get? Did my dog-collar keep me on a tight leash, their tame priest?

So, I was to be the Chaplain to the Queen of Elfhome. What would that entail precisely? They were clearly heathens. How did their existence fit into God's universe? I thought back to my offending monograph, so recently dictated upon my fever-bed.

Little did I reckon on it being my confession: the kindling to the pyre of the condemned.

Some believe the Sith to have been followers of Lucifer who fell only halfway to Hell and my experience in the Court seemed to confirm that. Neath seemed to be one of Satan's arch-lieutenants, and I must watch him carefully.

I must bide my time, play along, and wait for an opportunity to present itself. Perhaps further study will find a way.

...

And so began my life at Court. And, lo, what a nest of vipers it is!

The first lesson I learnt of this was from that scallywag Pyewacket, as the page is

called. He sidled into my chamber one day, ostensibly to check on my comfort at the behest of Neath. 'I don't like to spread rumours,' he said in a conspiratorial tone, 'but that Lord Rannoch is sowing dissent. The lies infesting the Court of Her Majesty are making my ears weep and I must share them with someone to stop my head exploding! You see Rannoch is the Leader of the Unseelie Court, The Reivers, who believe you mortals have taken more than your fair share. Your sufficiency is our scarcity. While you feast, we famine. And so he merely wishes to take back what is ours. The stolen wealth. The stolen lands. He believes violence is the only way. Fight fire with fire. If he had his way they would ride out and sweep across the land of men, reiving the Borders and expanding our territory. Let the mortals be marginalised. Let them be the minority!'

I was chilled by this 'idle gossip', but I bit my tongue while I let Pyewacket unloose his. When he had finished he did not wait for any kind of response. All he said was: 'Ah, well it's been nice chatting. Can't beat a good gossip. Anyway, must dash!'

In the dark of my chamber I contemplated this news, if that is what it was. Was this Jackanape to be believed? It seemed more than this his usual foolery. Certainly it confirmed the impression I had of Lord Rannoch who cast icy stares towards me whenever our paths crossed. His entourage instilled a similar chilliness to the room. A dark cloud seemed to follow them around.

Out of the whole Faerie Court, Rannoch's circle seemed the most ill-disposed towards me, which is saying something because most seemed to barely tolerate my presence. Some looked through me as though I wasn't there. Others cast me cold disdainful looks, or laughed at my very appearance. They talked about me as though I was some dumb beast. From being the respected pillar of my parish I was now the lowest, the loathed outsider.

The next visit I had was from a young chamber-maid come to tidy my room. Of plain complexion, her hair was cropped short and straight. She too wanted to gossip about Court life. For a while she rattled on about the various affairs and intrigues, of which there were many, especially around Prince Leman who seemed to be courting several of the Syrenes at once. His amorous adventures were the mainstay of courtly gossip— all were scandalized by them and yet none could do without their daily dose. I must admit I found such tittle-tattle tedious and began to wish her gone so I could

resume my journal, but then the young lady began to talk about the political factions, which she found so tedious. When will Lord Rannoch and Schiehallion desist in their nonsense, she whispered? It appears Schiehallion is the leader of the Seelie Court who wish for complete severance and independence from the mortal world. As much as Rannoch wishes to expand, Schiehallion's followers wish to withdraw. Contact with the Mortal world has brought nothing but misery to the people of Elfhame. At one time relations were cordial. Mortal-kind even honoured the Fey with offerings, tales, and songs. Yet those days are gone. Only animosity and suspicion remain. Trade has trickled to virtually nothing. Nothing is to be gained from keeping the Border open. If Schiehallion had his way it would be sealed for good.

And where would that leave me, I wondered? How would alien exiles be treated?

The young lady left, leaving me in deep thought. These revelations cast a whole new light on things.

It was only later that I caught Pyewacket's mischievous gaze, his effeminate gaze so like my second visitor. I should have realized that a page has two sides. I must tread carefully! This Court (and there is not merely one here, as I am discovering) is not what it seems. What seems fair is foul, and foul sometimes fair. The courtiers speak in double-tongues. No one it seems can be trusted. As Chaplain I have no more than a token presence—a toy to be indulged like the changeling child. How can I hold a service without mention of the Lord? Without hymns praising His name? Without the Holy Cross? They come to me to make confession, yet I do not know if it is for the sheer novelty of it—they are certainly not bothered by the matter of absolution. What is God's forgiveness to them when they are already damned, cast out of God's Grace for all eternity? Does this account for the tinge of melancholia which pervades their race? Their constant seeking after novelty? Cursed with their long lives (although not immortality) they counter boredom with ridiculous fashions and petty feuds. Yet there is also a deep schism in the Court which, I glean, threatens not only the peace of the Realm, but the mortal world as well.

Their dread gnomon slides its shadow towards the hour of our doom, and I am helpless to stop it for I am engulfed already.

26

Janey woke up the next day, confused as to exactly where she was. The anonymity of hotel rooms didn't help, but then she noted it wasn't just another flea-bitten motel. It was clean. There was an attempt to make it pleasant, even if the result was a bit kitsch. The ubiquitous 'Athena' style prints, the plastic flowers in a vase, the fake brass curtain rail. Does every hotel get their decor from the same Acme warehouse?

Opening the curtain, her personal Sat-nav finally kicked in. *You're destination has been reached.* Scotland. She was in Scotland.

She quickly showered and dressed and went down to breakfast, queuing up with the sensible, subdued customers: one of the walking dead.

Sitting at a table by herself, the coffee's resurrecting fumes stirred her back to life. She gazed into the swirls of steam and gathered her thoughts. It was all coming back to her.

The gig.

The festival club.

Fingal.

To her relief she realized she had not succumbed to his charms completely and ended up in the sack with him. He was charismatic, no doubt – a successful musician, with a to-die-for Scottish accent – but she had a fella in her life. At least she wanted Allen to be that man. She thought of him lying in his hospital room hooked up to that machine and felt mortified with guilt.

You are a bad girl, Janey!

And yet, what had she done? Talked to a fellow professional. Yes, there had been an element of flirting going on. Harmless fun. Perhaps.

She could be forgiven for letting her hair down after her first international gig, surely? It's not like it was going to lead anywhere, right?

Then she remembered the flash business card she'd accepted from him as they had said goodnight – deep red with his name in a stylish white font; his mobile and email in black. He had ordered them a taxi and had acted a complete gentleman: dropping her off at her hotel and waiving away the notion she should pay anything for the ride. As they said goodbye, a little awkwardly – unsure how to act – he had produced the card like a sleight of hand trick. 'I don't give these to just anyone.'

'Yeah, sure.'

Fingal looked genuinely hurt. 'I value my privacy greatly. You learn to, when you're in this game. People think you belong to them, just because they love your music. You get all kinds of...'

'Cranks?' Janey smiled, giving his hand a little friendly squeeze. 'It's been nice meeting you. G'night.'

Smiling at the memory, Janey opened the journal and continued reading. She was developing a serious habit!

The rumours and snatches of conversation I had eavesdropped upon over the next few days confirmed these unreliable accounts. If Pyewacket had been playing me to see which side of the feud I would fall he was to be frustrated, for I kept a studied neutrality: taking care not to show either side favour or scorn. I placed each word, each gesture, with jurisprudence, for the wrong one could lead to my doom. I bided my time and waited to see if a gap in the defences of the realm appeared. Aware that I was hoping against all hope, and my incarceration might take many years to play itself out I made the time at Court at least useful by continuing my research.

Every day, I learnt a little more about these remarkable people – of which I will relate here.

I may be their puppet priest, but I was determined not to be dumb automaton. Knowledge is the key that will unlock any prison.

I was intrigued by the geography of this strange land and enquired about the existence of maps and atlases. At first my requests were ignored, or mocked – as though I asked for some fantastical object or childish fantasy. Finally, as though to humour me, I was shown to the library. This was an impressive chamber: a rotunda with shelves that continually revolved like orbiting planets – seemingly mirroring the celestial map upon the domed ceiling. This bibliographic orrery was illuminated by lamps fuelled by an unknown source, flickering like stars. A planetarium dominated the centre of this circulating library – yet its orbs corresponded with none I know. The planets numbered nine at one point, then ten, then seemed to treble, then dwindle to three, then one. Spiralling paths of prismatic shades snaked and danced between them. Occult geometries clicked into place, revealed themselves in an arc of blue fire – and then

were gone. I was mesmerised by this little cosmos for some time until I grew dizzy. Nearly falling over I snapped back at the shock.

I studiously avoided looking at it after that; instead I turned to the rows of rotating shelves. It was hard to catch the titles, even to pull one from the shelves, until I stepped upon a ladder, which was attached to the shelves.

Suddenly I found myself spun around at a giddy speed. Pushing the wheeled stairs in the opposite direction to the shelves' orbit achieved finally a reasonable equilibrium, enabling me to view, in flashes, the contents of this formidable revolving library: collections of immrama, märchen, and wonder tales; monographs describing imaginary lands; ephemera of alchemical arcana; codexes of angelic scripts; compendiums of folklore and obscure customs; bestiaries of mythical beasts; lexicons of extinct words; tomes of herb lore musky with aromatic scents exuding the ghosts of hedgerows and gardens. From epicurean encyclopaedias issued tantalising smells, and from exotic dictionaries and grammars a Babel of muffled chatter, which clarified as soon as I opened a page and stopped as soon as it was snapped shut. Every title I came across chartered the remotest corners of knowledge, of the imagination, of mortality and morality. Some I shuddered to even glance upon – yet my curiosity had been piqued.

Quickly, I descended the ladder and waited for the room to stop spinning.

After a light breakfast – her stomach delicate from the night's partying – Janey went and checked her emails in the lobby, taking with her a bottle of mineral water (she'd a thirst like an Egyptian golf course). There was a promising batch from Shelly, filling her in on the latest developments in Trent's career (awarded some service medal), the child murder investigations (strangely quiet), and asking how she was doing, fussing over her like a mama duck.

Janey was desperate for a word about Allen, but all she could glean from Quatie, who'd been checking in on him, was: he was stable. His house was fine. Med bills covered.

The sister from Hell, whatever Janey thought of her, was looking after his affairs diligently. One day she would like to thank her, if they could manage to put their differences aside.

There were a few snide missives from her bandmates, ribbing her about her glamorous

jet-setting life-style. They had been doing the odd gig, with EZ Tyger filling in on vocals, and were 'doin just fine without a certain prima donna to contend with', according to Slim, which was rich coming from him, the most preening stage-queen ever. 'We have more room on stage,' joked EZ, 'without all that hair competing for space!'

Would there be any future for the band when she got back?

Would she want there to be?

The solo gig felt good. Real good.

But was it enough to launch a *career*?

Her eyes flicked back to the screen. Five minutes left to go. Scanning to the latest email in her inbox she saw it was from someone she hadn't heard of called Eliza Thomas. The subject title read: 'Janey McEttrick at City Halls: a review'. Hoping it wasn't spam, or a virus, she clicked on it – her curiosity piqued, and saw a little note attached to the piece:

Hi,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you. I found your email on your band website. I saw you play at City Halls the other night and loved it!!! I wrote up a review for my blog and thought you might like to see it. I've copy and pasted it here, in case you didn't want to follow the link through to my site – you have to be careful of emails from strangers! I'm a research student (folklore/folk music) here at UG (University of Glasgow). Would love to interview you while you're in town (I write for the college newspaper as well). If you could spare an hour or two, drop us a line and we can set something up. I know the best coffee-house in town. Great cakes!

Warm wishes,

Eliza

Janey was encouraged by the tone of the message, and so, sipping her water, read the review.



What a darling! This 'Eliza T' was her new best friend. To get an intelligent

appreciation of her craft like that meant a great deal. It would be ideal for her website. She'd have to ask of course, but Eliza T sounded most obliging.

She'd never been interviewed before: that's what happened to 'proper musicians'. The thought made Janey a little nervous, vulnerable even, but she knew it would be good for her profile. 'Media platform', is that what Feed Me (the computer nerd of the group) called it? But what clinched it was the notion this Eliza was a folklore student. What if she could help out in some way...? It might be a fair exchange. Without Allen available to clarify such matters (the thought made her heart heavy) she was out of her depth here. Besides, on a practical note, Eliza knew Glasgow. Any local knowledge would be a lifeline.

And so Janey replied:

Hi Eliza,

thank you for the great review – made my day!

Would love to meet – that coffee sounds good (and so does the cake :0)

I'm in town until tomorrow midday. Say when and where and I'll be there (zipcode would help, and any landmarks). Text my cell: 401-34-33-289

Warm wishes,

Janey

Feeling a little better already, Janey went back to her room to get ready. Her phone buzzed and she saw the text from Eliza telling her the details.

She left the hotel an hour later.

As she walked through the centre of Glasgow, the cold slap of the rain soon blasting away the last traces of her hangover, she was watched by a black-hoodied junkie.

The Cone

(February edition 'Gaelic Gathering' special)

The Interview: Janey McEttrick

by Eliza Thomas

It was a cold, wet winter day (but it generally is, in this dirty ol' town, isn't it?) when I caught up with American folk

singer Janey McEttrick in the warm snug of my favourite coffee shop (I'm not telling you, or you'll all want to go there and then they'll be nowhere to sit - it's popular enough already!) for a chat over cappuccinos and cake. Janey, from North Carolina, was in town performing as part of the Gaelic Gathering Festival. For those who want a review of her gig at City Halls, check out my blog. But for now, pull up a chair and join us over the aroma of coffee and chocolate, for an informal chat.

ET: So, what do you make of our wee toon?

JM: Glasgow? I've hardly seen any of it - except the hotel, the venue and the festival club - so I can't in all modesty offer any kind of opinion, beyond first impressions. It's lively, it's edgy, it has a buzz about it, and an attitude - which any good city should. Sauciehall Street seems to be a perpetual gallery of characters.

ET: You can say that again! So, how did you hear about Gaelic Gathering?

JM: A friend of mine told me about it - and kindly sent the organisers my publicity material. He got me the booking.

ET: We all need friends like that! (there's an awkward pause here so I change tack, sensing a no-go area). Have you been to Britain before?

JM: Nope. This is my first time to Europe.

ET: Really! What do you make of our damp island?

JM: Well, as I said - hard to say at this early stage. But there's something about the vibe here which reminds me of Asheville, my neck of the woods.

ET: Yes, I hear it has a scene. Quite an arty place by all accounts.

JM: You betcha! It's a funnel for all the music in the Southern Appalachians - which has a long tradition going back centuries. And it's also 'Beer City USA'!

ET: Another thing it has in common with Glasgow! The best of both worlds! (laughter) I was going to ask you about the musical tradition of your area. What's your connection with it?

JM: My Mom sang to me when I was a child - she was a protest singer. Her mom before that was in the music halls - banjo player and clog-dancer. And my great-grandmother, Molly, was a renowned singer of 'love songs' in the area.

ET: Those are what we call ballads? Like the ones Cecil Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell collected?

JM: Yes. And Maud Karpeles.

ET: Sharp's amanuensis.

JM: Right-hand woman by all accounts.

ET: Definitely. She wrote down the lyrics, and accompanied him on all his field-research, enduring the difficult conditions, and Sharp's foibles. Apparently before that he'd never had to wash or cook for himself (we laugh at men).

JM: Well, Great Grandma Molly met them - and was recorded by them.

ET: That's amazing! So those songs must be in their books. There might even be recordings. Lomax probably went there. I know Karpeles returned in the Fifties.

JM: Really, that would be incredible!

ET: I could do some research for you... Cecil Sharp House in London has a lot of stuff on their website, but I could also wangle a visit as a student here (School of Celtic Studies).

JM: That's very kind of you. I'm here on research too.

ET: Really? Tell more!

JM: I'm finding out about my ancestors, who originally came from the Lowlands.

ET: Migrated to Appalachian during the Clearances? So, where did they hail from?

JM: I'm still working that out exactly - but I know our ancestors originally hailed from some place called Aberfoyle.

ET: Really! That's just north of Loch Lomond. There's a lot of folklore associated with that place - it's a bit of a hot-spot.

JM: Interesting... Well, that's where I'm heading.

ET: How exciting! What a quest for you.

JM: A quest, that's a nice way of looking at it.

ET: In your set - which I loved by the way - you draw upon a lot of traditional material. I reckoned that all the songs are in Sharp's Southern Appalachian collection.

JM: They're all songs my Mom used to sing me, and her grandma before that...

ET: How did you choose those particular ballads, or 'love songs'?

JM: Well, you've hit the nail bang on. They all explore the age-old story between a man and a woman. That ancient magic.

ET: Cross-dressing woman woos and wins her sweet-heart. Some things never change...

JM: Right! It's the same old song. Just different clothes. A different neighbourhood.

ET: Some of the songs had magical motifs in them.

JM: Well, I love those too. Kinda romantic, aren't they?

ET: They seem so dark, bloody and, well, Celtic. It's strange to imagine how folks related to them in your ... neck of the woods.

JM: Last time I looked the human imagination has no borders. You don't need a passport. Anyways, many of the people who settled in those mountains were from here originally. They just brought the songs with them.

ET: Mm. I find that fascinating. Apparently some are preserved in earlier, 'purer' versions than we have here.

JM: That's for you scholars to go figure. All I know is mountain folks are nothing if not authentic. There's something good and straight and true about backcountry-dwellers. It's like the air - the higher up you go, the sweeter it gets. The bullshit fades away.

ET: Do you ever write your own songs?

JM: ...I haven't for a long while. The band I'm in back home - The Jackalopes - we mainly do covers. The things folk like to listen to over a cold beer. Nothing too fancy! That's why playing those love-songs here was a real treat.

ET: Well, I hope you find fresh inspiration while you are here. Enjoy your pilgrimage, back to the source!

JM: Thank you. I reckon I will. It's been a real pleasure. Go easy.

As they had parted, Eliza had given Janey her card, and said if she wanted any help with her research, just general travel advice, or someone to chat to, not to hesitate to call her. The offer seemed genuine, and Janey thanked her for it. In a foreign country it meant a great deal.

As she slipped the card into her purse she noticed the other card there: belonging to Fingal.

Walking back through the rain-slick streets, Janey reflected on the meeting.

The interview had gone better than she'd hoped, although it was a bittersweet experience. Got her churned up thinking about Allen. It made her feel ... vulnerable. She'd asked Eliza to send her a copy before going to print, and the sweet girl agreed she would do just that. They continued the conversation after Eliza had turned off the voice recorder on her phone. There seemed to be a warmth between them. Eliza was clearly impressed by her, making Janey see herself in a new way: a folk singer from the Southern Appalachians whose great grand-mother had been collected by Sharp. She was excited more than ever by the Aberfoyle connection. Kirk's name had inevitably come up, but for some reason Janey didn't reveal her that he was her ancestor. She felt protective of that, and also of Eliza – after what had happened to Allen.

To those children.

What had become of that *creature*?

The image of the black swan in the lightning flashed before her mind's eye, making her shudder.

Had it made it to Scotland? Was it still after the journal?

Quatie had said something about water being a psychic barrier. Maybe ghosts don't swim, Janey had joked at the time.

Then a chilling thought crossed her mind: *what if it had followed her to the city?*

Janey shuddered, and wrapped her coat tight.

A mounting panic made her want to leave Glasgow as soon as possible.

Janey spent the rest of the day urgently planning her trip north. Figuring there was safety in numbers, she stayed in public spaces. She visited a bookshop and bought herself a copy of the *Rough Guide to Scotland*. In a café she poured through it, making notes.

She found herself wondering where Fingal's castle was, but put it to the back of her mind. Did he think she was impressed by such obvious flashiness? Well, she'd never met someone who lived in a castle before, and she was intrigued ... *but* she had a quest, as Eliza had said. She recalled the ghostly visage of Kirk with a shudder.

The sooner she laid him to rest the better.

Something in Janey crystallized. She finished off her coffee, gathered her things, and

left a tip. On her cell, she rang the car-rental place Allen had found for her.

'Okay, ancestors – here I come.'

'I hope our map room is to your liking?'

So spake the figure before me, who resembled, prima facie, a mole – yet the fellow was human enough in terms of limbs and so forth; just round, short and myopic, with pince-nez and a moleskin suit, waistcoat struggling to stay buttoned over a belly like, well, a molehill. Blinking, he offered an overly large hand with exceptionally long nails. 'Moudewort at your service.'

Reluctantly I accepted his handshake, which was cold and clammy.

'I'm the librarian here.' He took off his thick, dusty lenses, blew on them and cleaned them vigorously with a voluminous handkerchief produced from one of his pockets. Finding a furry boiled sweet stuck to cloth, he sucked it into his mouth with a vacuum hiss. 'I hear you were, umm, looking for maps...' He laughed to himself, shaking his head. 'O Fortuna!' His pince-nez returned to his wrinkled proboscis. 'Sirrah, you are surrounded by them. Every book here is a map, charting the fantastic. Each time a title is published on Fayrie and related subjects, a copy appears here – a double, if you like. It is not only an Ironblood, sorry mortal, who possesses them. His co-works exist also.' I scanned the shelves in wonder. A library of the fantastic to rival the libraries of St. Andrews, Dublin or Oxford in comprehensiveness. What a gift to my research – and for my sanity! This would perhaps be a benign imprisonment.

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Janey managed to sit down just before the bus chugged off from the stop. It would appear that taking a bus in Scotland wasn't just for the thrift-store shoppers and migrant workers as in the South, she reflected. She didn't stand out particularly. Passengers chatted, checked their phones, read the paper. The atmosphere was not altogether unpleasant. Doing it every day, twice a day, might be a different matter though. She was glad to be picking up her wheels. While she waited for her stop, she read a little more of the journal, smiling at the irony of 'escaping' into a prison-read. For her ancestor, it was the opposite of escapism. For Kirk it was no mere picaresque adventure but a nightmarish plight. The guilty pleasure she felt at reading it was off-set, she hoped, by her efforts to release him: that was why she was here, she kept reminding herself.

A new day.

I decide I needed some air. The atmosphere of the palace is always dense with stifling incense, perfume, feasting and gossip. At times it feels I can hardly breathe – the incessant buzz of chatter and whisper gives me a headache. It is difficult to hear oneself think – to discern one's own opinions and feelings on a subject and not be swept along by the crowd. The palace is a maze of corridors, spiralling stairs, disguised doors, whispering galleries, spy holes and secret passages – their vast extent known to only a select few, no doubt. The servants have their own circuit, parallel to the main chambers – so they can appear when needed, disappear when not. No matter how far I walked I could never seem to leave the confines of the palace – until, that is this morning, when I followed a servant into a service passage just before the door clicked behind her. I kept pace at a discreet distance down many narrow steps until I passed noisy kitchens; I slipped by unnoticed amid the chaos of preparations for yet another feast. Heart beating wildly I came to a door – heavily bolted and braced with iron brackets. Beyond, I saw a chink of light and my nostrils flared at the scent of fresh air.

I quietly undid the bolts – teeth gritted at the slightest sound – and stepped into a loading area, stacked with supplies.

Beyond this was a dazzling semi-circle of light. Daylight, or the closest I had seen to it in many a day – sunlight sifted through a mesh of silver.

Squinting in the light, I walked to the edge of the bay and gasped.

It dropped away suddenly – a precipitous cliff a footstep away. I carefully stepped back. A series of carts were suspended on a taut line of chains leading to a landing bay on the far side of the ravine. A substantial array of winches and pulleys clearly operated the cargo system but were heavily padlocked in bronze.

So, this was how supplies were delivered to the castle. Could it be a possible escape route? But then I fingered my collar nervously – it was already starting to feel a bit tight. I could not attempt anything until I found a way to remove it.

Still the discovery gave me hope.

And the air! It was the sweetest of wines.

I stood there, on the brink, eyes closed – savouring its caress. It was a cold, clear day – and this high up a biting wind blew. How it blasted away the cobwebs of Elfhame!

As my eyes adjusted I drank in the view.

The Castle-Palace of the Queen of Elfhame was situated on a crag at the head of a gorge, surrounded by deep ravines with only a narrow bridge, glimpsed around the curve of the walls, connecting the citadel to a vertiginous mountain track that snaked along the edges. An outer castle, encompassing the town, spread out down the widening gorge, defended by great walls and the gate through which I had first arrived. Yet the inner keep seemed nigh on impregnable. Jagged ice capped peaks surrounded it, the foothills of which were swathed in dark pine forest as far as the eye could see. The dark glen I had come from stretched into the east, its fastness flooded with shafts of light burning off the mist.

My heart reached out in that direction. For home. Will I ever make it back? I have been here a week now, maybe two, yet it feels a lot longer. I think about my darling Margaret: how does she fair? Does she miss me? Does she still sleep-dance? Or does she dance night and day now I am no longer the cruel master of the house? Perhaps her condition has improved, and life goes on as normal in Aberfoyle? The affairs of my Parish seem so absurdly petty, so harmless. Men live their lives unaware of the darker forces at work behind the mechanism of the world. How perilous their existence, how tenuous their hold on terra firma! They believe it is theirs, when others covet it.

A golden eagle circled overhead: it must have its nest in the cliffs. Below, mice,

rabbits, lambs, led their lives in innocence – until one day a shadow blots out their light and doom falls.

Janey picked up the hire car, a dull but decent estate – as, dammit, they were right out of Chevy Camaros – and nervously negotiated the Glasgow traffic. A car-horn trumped behind her. She flipped the bird out of the window. She was still getting used to driving on the wrong side of the road, and the British obsession for roundabouts, when her cell went. Since she was stuck at the lights behind a long-tail of traffic, she put it on hands-free and picked up the call.

It was Eliza.

'Hi, I'm glad I've caught you! Have you left yet?'

Janey looked ahead at the jam and sighed. 'Well, I'm trying to... But you know what the roads are like here better than I. I haven't even got out of the city centre yet!'

'Good! Then pull over! Corner of Sauciehall and Calton...'

'Why?'

'I'm coming with you!'

Janey laughed. 'I see. And why would that be, Miss Thomas?'

'Because you need a guide! I know the roads. I know the sites. I know the best pubs and B & Bs... And I'm the best field researcher in, er, the field.'

'Hold your horses.' She took a breath. 'I'm running on a tight budget here.'

'I'm happy to pay my way and share the petrol; even the driving. We've got to look after those precious hands of yours.'

'Oh, well, young lady – I'm used to hauling myself around. The distances I cover between gigs ... you have no idea. But...' She drummed the empty dash-board. The road promised to be a long and lonely one. 'Heck, why not? It'll be a blast.'

'Great! Give me twenty and I'll meet you there.'

'Sure, I'm not going anywhere!'

Smiling, Janey pulled over and reached for the journal.

A frost gripped the land as I looked out from my eagle's nest, and yet from a crack in the buttress of the bay wall a delicate flower grew, an orchid of exquisite beauty. I examined it, which meant stretching precariously over the lip of the wall. It was like a silver trumpet. Petals of moonlight trembled in the breeze. How could it survive up here?

The seasons in this land were nonsensical: it felt like winter but looked like spring, the frost crystallizing into flowers. As the rays of the rising sun reached it the orchid seemed to thrum – vibrating at a high pitch almost beyond audibility. The sound seemed to epitomize the frail hope I clung to, and a tear leaked from my eye, or was it merely the wind's tithes? Then, to my dismay, the orchid started to melt before my gaze as though it had been made of ice.

Suddenly, I felt a hot breath on the nape of my neck and a cold silver hand upon my shoulder.

'The ice-orchid is such a delicate flower: its grip on life so ... slight.'

I froze. It was Neath. One push from him and I would plummet to my death.

'Relax,' he insisted. 'Enjoy the view. Magnificent, isn't it? Ah, but you must visit the Sunset Gardens, the panorama from there is breath-taking. If you are an admirer of flora you'll be dazzled by the array: blooms like the rarest of gems. Indeed many of them are.'

Neath's silver hand dug into my shoulder, clamping it hard.

I struggled to upright myself, but he kept me locked over the wall.

'Your position in the Court is a vulnerable one, wouldn't you agree? You only survive at my dispensation. Do not forget that fact. Take advantage of your liberties and you will find yourself back in the dungeon, or at the bottom of the ravine. Stay on the path. There's a good priest.'

Eliza was standing on the kerb, waving excitedly. She was warmly and colourfully-dressed and a medium-sized rucksack was at her feet.

Janey, catching her new friend in the rear-view, found herself smiling. She got out and found herself giving Eliza a hug. The feeling of sisterhood was unexpected; but suddenly Janey realized how alone she was feeling in this unfamiliar foreign country. She kind of needed a friend right now.

Janey hoisted Eliza's bag in the boot with a grunt. 'Jeez, what's in here?'

'Oh, books, laptop, wine, walking boots, map, sandwiches, flask, emergency chocolate...'

Janey laughed. 'Were you a Girl Guide?'

'No, but my big brother used to be a Scout. Guess I picked it up off of him.'

They got in the car, and Janey went to pull out, until a taxi parped its horn at them. 'Asshole!' she hollered after him.

'Erm, do you want me to drive – at least until we're out of the city?'

Janey drummed the steering wheel with her long guitar nails. 'Okay.'

They got out and swapped seats.

Eliza started humming, as she nippily pulled out. 'How about some music?'

Janey gave her a look. 'Yes, ma'am!' Then plugged in her iPod and put on some Gillian Welch – which always chilled her out.

'Nice choice!'

'Gee, thanks!' Janey looked at her, shaking her head in disbelief at her bespectacled driver, and they both laughed.

'So, where are we heading?' beamed Eliza.

Janey caught her eyes in the rear view mirror – they looked old this morning, the biting weather had taken its toll on her skin – and for a moment, she thought she could see a flash of her grandmother.

The voices in the box were like whispers in the leaves, each demanding its due; but she was living *now*, these were *her* choices to make. A twenty first century gal, she liked to cut to the chase.

'To Aberfoyle.'

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The drive to Kirk's birth and death place was only twenty six miles away, according to the Sat-nav that Eliza activated on her phone, but getting out of the city took a while.

As Janey watched the streaky slug-trails of traffic from the flyover, she felt her spirits lift. It was hard to believe that within an hour she would be standing at the source: the place it had all started! But a gnawing misgiving ate away at her. After all she had been through, it seemed ... too easy.

She chatted away with her driver amicably enough; but after half an hour, Janey felt like just enjoying the view. Mercifully, Eliza sensed this, and happily hummed away to herself, focusing on the winding road.

As they entered the Trossachs, the mountains loomed darkly above, turned to slick quicksilver in the glint of winter sun. It was a brisk day, with the wind tearing rips in the skeins of cloud.

The stern summits seemed to look down disapprovingly. Away from the Mammon temples of the city, the Kirk held sway here. The Elders, is that what the Presbytery council called themselves, Janey wondered? What would they have made of her? A bold woman, confident in her body, making her own way in the world. Beholden to no man or God... Probably would've burnt her for a witch. She certainly was starting to feel like one, what with her talismans and second sight. She had brought the tin with her of course. They were her allies. So far, she had held three – Marsha, Dotty, Molly – and she was painfully aware of the other stories awaiting her, waiting to be told. Nine women, leading her back... They would be her true guides. Not that Eliza's living, breathing company wasn't welcome. Anything but. She needed some kind of link to the land of the living. Her life was getting too crowded with ghosts to be healthy!

As another track picked up her heart and carried it off over the mountains like an eagle snatching a rabbit, Janey thoughts wandered to the rawest place of pain.

Allen.

Thinking of him, lying there, all tubes and beeping machines, crushed her. She was responsible, and somehow she had to fix it. Searchingly, she gazed out at a waterfall tumbling down from the mist-swaddled heights. She felt a song stirring in her breast. A song of longing and love – from mountain to mountain, across the sea.

But then another signal broke in.

It was full moon and Bishop Bellirummer held a lunar mass in the Great Chapel. Although such pagan mockery of the Holy Church filled me with cold contempt I cannot deny that the temple, hewn from the palest marble, was a poem in light.

Yet was not Lucifer the Lightbringer?

The stark moonlight poured in through the stained glass windows, which depicted scenes of Elfhame's cosmology: the War in Heaven; the Fall; the Four Cities and the Four Hallows; the great kings and queens of the past; the heroes and martyrs. The light filtered through these windows, which range from circular to the thinnest crescents, and was caught and reflected by the burnished silver ornament within. Crystal trees supported the roof, lining its arches with exquisite carbuncles of every hue. Mosaics in the barrelled roof depicted the kingdoms of their world: the sylphs of the air, the undines of the water, the salamanders of fire, and the gnomes of earth. Above the altar, the sun and moon resplendently look on; beyond, constellations are picked out by the brightest of gems. The Chapel, illuminated by a thousand lunar-powered candles glowing brighter in the moonlight, was truly breath-taking but nevertheless a perversion of all that I hold sacred. I was repelled, but the solemnity of the occasion – and the bristling Sentinels – prevented me from acting on my conscience. My collar seemed to tighten at my very indignation, shortening my breath. I was forced to remain a mute witness of their idolatry.

Janey shook her head.

It felt as though the journal's narrative was running *live*, rolling news in her skull. She pulled it out from her bag and stifled a gasp. The ridges of the knotwork cover throbbed like veins, giving her a mild shock.

Composing herself, she tried again.

Carefully opening it, she blinked.

The black marks seemed to writhe on the page, as though deciding on which arrangement to coalesce into. She tried to read the last pages, but the words would not focus. The earlier pages, up to the point she had read, were stable. Beyond that, the writing became increasingly chaotic.

She rubbed her temples.

'Head-ache?' Eliza asked.

'A little car-sick.'

The static of voices grew louder...

All the great and the good of the Court were there: Lords Rannoch and Schiehallion with their respective entourages; Prince Leman and his doe-eyed admirers; Lord Neath clad in richly dark robes – mercurial hand catching the moonlight and strangling it.

The lesser houses were there also, and even minor courtiers like Moudewort and Pyewacket. Nan came in with her mortal child, puffed up in his lunar best, staring goggle-eyed at the church. A pulsating organ played, its pipes ascending through the roof into the night, so that its deep sound could be heard across the glen. The Chapel was high up – we were almost level with the surrounding ridges. There was a murmur of excitement, the briefest of exchanges, comments on outfits and seating arrangements – but all this fell silent as the great wooden doors in the north, the Devil's Door, burst open with a blast of icy air, as into the Chapel swaggered shadow-maned Gwynn ap Nudd, the erstwhile lord, with his Wild Huntsmen following close behind. The pack of flame-eyed hounds was kept at bay, while the Lord sat in the front row, his antlers and fur mantle prominent. Yet you did not need to see those to know he was there – his musky reek carried across the aisles. Mercifully, Bellirummer appeared, swinging his thurible down the main aisle, leading the Queen into the Chapel with her lace-wreathed ladies-in-waiting. All rose as one and the music reached towards its crescendo. Then, with an imperious glance over her subjects, and one of exasperation at the Horned Lord, she sat and the congregation settled.

Bellirummer ascended the pulpit with some assistance from his pixie-faced choristers, who flittered chittering about his feet, and, giving the gathered a stern look from beneath his considerable eyebrows, began his sermon.

Kirk's words, a niggling white noise in the back of her skull, were now like an angry swarm of wasps.

'Don't worry. Nearly there,' Eliza updated, checking the Sat-nav.

Janey dug her fingernails into her thighs as the signal grew stronger.

The liturgy was a perverse echo of the Kirk's, but with the moon as the central motif rather than the sun of Our Lord. Numerous interminable lunar hymns were sung – with haunting melodies and melancholic lyrics that some, no doubt, would find beautiful – but they just served to infuriate me, irritated as I was already by this blasphemous pantomime. If I am honest it was also because Bellirummer was in the place I was used to being – I had been reduced to altar boy, preparing the sacraments (a chased mead horn; a great round of bread, torn into small pieces and placed on a silver tray). I railed at even this minor task, but to disobey would mean a reduction of my privileges and thus chance of escape.

Bellirummer's stentorian tones boomed out across the Chapel – he was clearly in even more of a foul mood than usual. His theme for this moon was the apocalypse. All the telling signs were there, apparently – cataracts of blood; the birth of albino calves; weird lights in the sky. The usual papish hocus pocus. 'There is division in the land,' he declaimed lugubriously, shooting scathing looks at the two lords, who kept their heads held high. 'Divided we fall...' The Cailleach cackled at this – and no one knew why. The Bishop pounded his fist onto the ancient tome known as the Book of the Moon, and dust swirled in the moonbeams. 'Lo, the rivers will rise and the mountains shall fall and the Unbeast shall come!' he thundered, and the congregation grew very still and silent. 'Yea, when Elfkin feud with each other, when the land is torn apart by factions and conflict, then – the Unbeast approacheth! The Unbeast will destroy all – Seelie or Unseelie, it heeds not. Every seven years we must pay a tithe to Hell – and the Unbeast comes to collect it. What will you sacrifice? What are you willing to offer? Whatever you treasure the Unbeast will take, unless you offer freely all that you hold dear. Unless your heart is pure, unless your loyalty to the Realm is absolute, you will pay a heavy price. Heed my words – dark days are coming and all of us will be tested. Root out the evil in your heart, the enemy in your nest. Purge yourself of your corruption. Walk the true path – only the Endymion can lead you to the light. The Eternal Mother's forgiveness is without end. Her embrace awaits...'

The rumbling organ struck up again – to my ears, a jangling wail of pipes – and Bellirummer descended. 'Who among you has broken geasa? Who among you needs to be purged?'

Nervously, figures from the congregation stepped forward – young and old alike, of all rank except, I noted, the aristocracy – forming an orderly queue as they each went to Bellirummer and fell to their knees. They cried out their transgression, as the rest chanted 'Purge them! Purge them!' The Bishop embraced the guilty into the folds of his voluminous cassock – where they disappeared. They seemed to pass through him, emerging thinner, paler.

Afterwards, Bellirummer dabbed his fleshy lips with a silk handkerchief before dropping it to the floor to be scrabbled for by his chittering pixies as though it was Veronica's Veil itself. Others licked his bloody footprints clean from the marble floor.

'Let us pray.'

As the congregation began a perverted version of the Lord's Prayer ('Our Majesty, who art in Elfhame, hallowed be Her name...') I stormed off in disgust.

Neath looked up from his pew, nodded to the Sentinels to let me pass, a scimitar smile upon his lips.

'Oh, you dropped your journal,' observed Eliza, eyes flicking back to the road.

Janey nervously picked it up. This time ... nothing. She flipped through the ragged pages, and the rustling sounded like raven's wings.

'Looks like a nice one. I have several notebooks on the go, scattered around my place and on my person. You never know when inspiration will strike. Anyway, we're here!' Eliza breezily announced.

They had arrived in Aberfoyle.

The sign on the road side whizzed past the passenger window. Ahead was the small town nestled beneath a large craggy peak – sleepily provincial, and clearly not a major tourist destination, going by the threadbare selection of shops and cafés.

Eliza pulled into a car-park next to the visitor centre.

Janey thanked her, relieved that the car had stopped.

Eliza shrugged and said: 'Time to meet your ancestor!'

Janey looked gingerly out at the dreary vista.

The rain was holding off, for now – but it didn't look promising. Yet, Eliza's enthusiasm was undiminished. 'Let's pop into the TIC and get some local knowledge.'

'If you don't mind, I'll stay here.'

'Suit yourself. You'll miss out on all the postcards and fridge magnets.' And with that, she bustled off, leaving her passenger to admire the 'view'.

Janey blew out her cheeks. For some reason, she felt ... nervous. It was like going for an interview – something she hadn't done for a long time! Did she feel she was going to be judged in some way and not pass muster?

The track came to the end. How long she sat in the car in silence she could not say. She put away the journal – burying it at the bottom of her bag – and pulled out the box, hoping to draw strength from its contents.

Grandmothers, I need you now.

A tap-tap on the windscreen made her jump. Rubbing her eyes, she saw it was her guide, jumping into the driver's seat.

'I've got a map of the trail – it doesn't take long, apparently. We can park at the foot of the hill. What say we do it; then find ourselves somewhere nice for lunch?' She unfolded a colour map of Aberfoyle, showing the 'Doon Hill Fairy Walk'. Tracing it with her finger, she indicated the path that led up to the Fairy Knowe. 'That's where Kirk is said to have vanished, wandering the hillside in his nightshirt; but first – want to see his grave?'

'Give me a moment...!' She made herself a roll-up. Cupping her hand, back to the wind, she flicked her zippo and drew in a welcome cloud of warmth.

As they approached the old kirk, the journal's signal kicked in again. Janey sighed. It was less of a strain to simply accept its psychic wifi...

It had now been a full month since I had crossed over. What had been happening back home, I wondered? Alone in my chamber, high within this castle of madness, how I pined for dear Margaret, for simple homely comforts; for those plain green hills! I was rapidly losing my appetite for all things fey. The more I saw, the more I was repelled by them – they know no human morality ... yet how could they? They are no more like I than a bird is to worm. We are mere food, or amusement for them.

So why are we drawn to them so? Why does their cold beauty so enamour us? The music, madden us? Their antics and misdemeanour, entertain us?

We might as well study the mind of a raven, or hope to see reason in a lunatic's ramblings.

I must escape.

Find some way to warn humanity of their expansionist designs.

Yet how?

Neath and his spies watch my every move. I am tolerated – for now. Allowed certain privileges, which I can imagine being revoked in a blink of an eye. I must play the tame priest and bide my time until an opportunity presents itself.

Like a distempered heartbeat, the clock ticks irregularly in this uncertain realm.

I have no firm reckoning of the time.

Alack! I feel my life here is being melted away – a candle whose wick is a cannon fuse.

They contemplated the ruin of the church – the roofless shell of a small chapel, surrounded by lopsided gravestones, epitaphs obscured by lichen and time. The graveyard was overgrown, neglected even.

It seemed less ... romantic ... than Janey was expecting. The biting wind didn't help. Irritable, she flicked the butt on the gravel and ground it out with her shoe, then, pulling the afghan around her tightly, she went to join her guide, who gestured keenly.

'Check this out.'

A couple of iron coffins stood either side of the doorless entrance to the church.

Eliza knocked on one and it rang out dully. 'Fairy-proof burial chic, hey?'

Janey gazed into the empty space. A rectangle of grass; some slabs half-hidden in the weeds.

Taking a breath, Janey walked inside and for a while stood at the altar-place. She held her bag to her breast.

Grandfather, I am here.

She let out a deep sigh.

It felt as though she had spent her whole life getting to this place, even though it had only been within the last few months that he had even been on her radar – a hidden pilgrimage even to herself.

Such effort. Such cost.

She hoped that he – that it all – was worth it.

For a while she just stared at her damp, muddy boots, but then she finally lifted her eyes

to the altar – slowly, nervously, as though expecting some kind of rebuke.

So, this was where he preached, where he delivered sermons, where he led hymns, where his children were baptised. In many ways, this should have been the source of her ancestral stream, but it felt like a spring that had been capped.

For a while she just stood there, trying to feel spiritual – something of a challenge in the cold drizzle. She turned her eyes to the sky.

It looked full of nothing.

Eliza waited for her companion to leave the chapel – respecting her space. She tried to fathom the look on Janey's face, but her body language said it all.

'Any other wonders?'

'Oh my, indeedy! The best is yet to come. Follow me!'

They circumnavigated the ruin, boot-crunch on gravel and grizzle of the wind the only sound.

The path led round the back of the chapel. Her guide grew increasingly animated. 'Wait till you see this! It's one of modern folklore's holy shrines – where academic pilgrims like me trek to. And a plethora of non-specialists as well of course.'

'Reckon I fall in the latter...' Janey said, under her breath.

Eliza, oblivious, continued: 'May I film it?'

Janey pulled a face.

'Maybe not... Of course, a bit of respect. I understand. I'll show you to it, and leave you to ... do whatever you need to.'

Eliza led the way through the age-blurred gravestones. The graveyard backed onto open fields, exposed to the elements. From it you could see the foothills of the Trossachs. One of them was the knowe where Kirk had disappeared.

'Here it is.'

They stood before an ancient recumbent gravestone covered in coins. A Euro bank note was held down with other random denominations.

'Offerings. Strange. Anybody think it was a wishing well.'

Janey could just make out the name of her ancestor, and the year, but not much else. The Latin inscription might as well have been Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Eliza traced the lichened lettering with her finger: '*Here lies the accurate promulgator*

of the Gospels and luminary of the Hibernian tongue, Mr Robert Kirk, pastor of Aberfoyle, who died 14 May 1692, aged forty eight. Well, they got the last bit wrong – his age, but the rest sounds a suitable epitaph.’ She stood up and started taking photographs.

Janey stood and stared at it for a long time.

Finally, she spoke. ‘Tell me about him.’ Allen had told her the bare bones already, but she needed to have the facts of his life re-affirmed.

Eliza related what she knew, wiping through her notes on the tablet: ‘He was a student of theology at St Andrew’s – very bright. He got his Masters at Edinburgh at the age of seventeen. He was the youngest and seventh son of Mr James Kirk, minister here in Aberfoyle – and so, according to the tradition, he had the Gift.’

Janey looked sceptical. ‘Gift?’

‘Well, that’s a debatable point. In Gaelic it’s *an da shealladh* – literally “having two sights” – commonly known as Second Sight.’

Janey shuddered – and it wasn’t just from the wind which rolled in off the mountains, brushing the summit of the Fairy Knowe.

‘Go on.’

She scrolled down. ‘He was commissioned to write an Irish Gaelic translation of the Bible, and published other religious works. He was, for his age, a good scholar. But it wasn’t all work and no play. He married – twice.’

Janey looked impressed. Perhaps he wasn’t a stiff old bird after all.

‘Yes, the first time to Isobel, daughter of Sir Colin Campbell of Mochester, who tragically died on Christmas Day in 1680. Can you imagine? He carved her epitaph *with his own hands*. Wonderfully gothic, don’t you think?’

Janey gave her a glare.

‘Sorry. Eventually, he remarried – to Margaret, the daughter of another Campbell. She survived him. His wives gave him three children. From his first marriage: Colin Kirk, Writer to the Signet – a society of solicitors with powers to draw up documents. From his second: Robert Kirk, who became minister of Dornoch, Sutherlandshire – carrying on the family trade, as it were; and Marjorie, a daughter, who married John Baillie, a stabler in Edinburgh.’

Eliza let this information sink in. Checking to see Janey was still with her, she continued: ‘Kirk died, if die he did, in 1692, aged forty seven and five months – not forty-eight – although it is disputed whether his bones are beneath this slab at all. Note the support

stone ...' Eliza indicated the base. Hidden beneath the lip of the grave-stone a date was just about visible.

Janey's eyes widened. '1793?'

'It's obviously not contemporary. Seems to have been placed here a century later, perhaps by the Reverend Doctor Patrick Grahame, who stepped into Kirk's shoes as minister here in the late eighteenth century, writing about Kirk's legend in *Sketches of Picturesque Scenery on the Southern Confines of Perthshire*. Catchy title, huh?'

Janey shuddered.

'Someone walk over your grave?' Eliza quipped.

Janey did not look amused.

Eliza adjusted her spectacles and quickly continued: 'In his book, Rev Grahame relates the tale of the shade of Kirk appearing at the Christening of his son – at this very church. Graham of Duchray, his cousin, could have restored him by tossing a dirk over his shoulder, but was so spooked by the dead man's sudden appearance that he failed spectacularly. And so, the story goes, he's still there to this day – a prisoner in Elfland. Imagine! As Andrew Lang, the Scottish scholar said in an introduction to *The Secret Commonwealth*, published a century later still, "this is extremely to be regretted, as he could now add matter of much importance to his treatise." So ... there you go.' Eliza finished. Sensing Janey's discomfiture at her breezy précis, she added: 'He was a remarkable man...'

'Two wives...' Janey shook her head. But neither of them a McEttrick...

'I know what you're thinking; but either of them could have hailed from the Ettrick valley. Campbell might have been the Clan name, but the maternal name might have been different... It wasn't uncommon for widows to buy back their maiden name so their children could carry it. Have you done a trace on your family name yet? I, er, did a little rooting around and discovered it seemed to be a name used for love-children, like Robinson, Jackson, and so on. McEttrick seems to mean, literally, a child of the Ettrick, home of Carterhaugh, where Janet meets Tam Lin, and gets with child by him. It's situated at the confluence of the Yarrow and Ettrick rivers, a place called The Meetings, where Margaret seems to have hailed from originally. Seems to be your ancestral Clapham Junction. We should take a visit.'

Janey stared at the grave-stone, deep in contemplation. On impulse, she took out the biscuit-tin and placed it on top.

Her ancestors would be her stepping stones. From Asheville to Aberfoyle, her thread

stretched back to this very spot, but was it a full stop, or a beginning?

The wind whipped up, and made the trees on the edge of the churchyard howl.

'Come on, let's visit the Knowe.'

Janey looked at her blankly – her mind elsewhere.

'The Fairy Hill where he vanished. Before the rain hits in earnest.'

'In earnest?' She glanced at the sky unenthusiastically and shuddered.

'Oh, this mizzle? It's Scotch mist compared to the real stuff they get up here, believe me.' Eliza started walking off, and, finally, Janey picked up the tin and followed.

The sougning of the trees crystallised into Kirk's voice.

It was midwinter in Elfhame and the feast of Yule was being celebrated with gusto – presided over by the Horned One as the Lord of Misrule. He might as well have been the De'il himself, for this was a winter without Christ's mass. My services were definitely not required and I was left to wander the corridors farthest from the revelries, which seemed – after days of endless merrymaking – distasteful.

I took to haunting the galleries – the nearest thing to cloisters I could find. My way was lit by greasy torches, jittering in the stray gusts. Outside the storm raged in all its fury to no avail against the formidable redoubt of the keep. Great fires roared in the main hall, and their heat was channelled up the breasts of the chimneys to every part of the castle's upper chambers – and yet I still felt a chill. I wrapped my cassock about me, hoping to keep out the infernal cold.

I was deep in contemplation of the Nativity, wondering if the Grace of his Lord could reach this godless netherness, when the torches along the corridor ahead snuffed out one by one. A penetrating chill made me shiver uncontrollably, and the hairs on the nape of my neck stood up. I became aware of a presence, and then a green mist insinuated its way along the dark passage. I thought I heard a ghostly singing – although it could have been a trick of the castle's acoustics – with the wind blending with the revelries, yet still it terrified me, for it was sad and beautiful.

Then, a voice broke the spell.

I cried out in alarm, and then laughed in relief – it was a young courtier I had noticed about the place, his boyish features lit up by a torch.

Janey had had enough of this. The only way to stop the voice coming through was to sing out loud. She picked a medley of Jackalope standards.

Eliza gave her a look. 'Feeling musical?'

Janey just kept straight on singing.

Once they had parked up, they followed the signpost that pointed to the 'Doon Hill Fairy Trail', illustrated with a cartoon Fly Agaric.

'Kitsch and the popular conception of fairy seem to go hand-in-hand...' observed Eliza dryly.

Janey, resting her voice, didn't seem to notice. She was in a bit of a daze. A pressure built behind her eyes. She steadied herself against a mossy trunk.

'You okay?'

'Sure.' She cleared her throat. 'Let's do this.'

The wind was picking up and so they pushed on up the steep forest track. The trunks of gnarled trees were clad in beards of moss – some had tumbled over, exposing their snake-nest of roots. Rocks were similarly festooned in the sodden green carpet that sucked up sound. The limbs of the highest trees creaked in the wind, but at least they were protected from the worst of the rain.

Both of them became silent – and not just because their breath was short as they slogged up the hill. The place seemed to insist on it.

When they reached the summit, a little breathless but pleased with themselves, they found a grove of oaks around a commanding Scots Pine, all covered in differently-coloured rags, dream-catchers, laminated photographs, t-shirts, pendants and mementos, crystals and dolls – fluttering and tinkling in the restless wind. They could feel the cold sting of rain on their faces.

'This is it! Where he stepped into a fairy ring – and the Aberfoyle tourist board have kindly marked it out for us. Want a try?'

Janey shook her head.

'Imagine how you must feel!' Eliza enthused, taking photographs on her phone.

How *did* she feel? She cast about the muddy clearing. If this had once been a portal, the way was long closed now. Had she come half-way across the world for ... a wild ghost chase?

Wandering off, Eliza mused into her voice recorder: 'Doone Knowe, Aberfoyle. Field-

note. Isn't it astonishing to see what credence pilgrims give the legend? Clearly it means a great deal to some. All of them, clutching at straws, at the consoling fiction that the belief in a Fairy Realm offers. Which is..? That there's more to life than all of this, a more subtle realm beyond the one our five limited senses perceived. A denial of cold matter and hard physics being the controlling principle of the universe...'

Her companion's voice faded into the distance, overwritten by the sighing of the trees, a song of absences.

Didn't Janey have enough personal evidence to convince her of this other reality?

What to some was an alluring fantasy had become to her an unpleasant reality.

She reminded herself why she was here. She had suffered too much loss already. She wasn't going to lose Allen as well.

Amid the offerings Janey noticed one that broke open her heart.

Next to a pair of cherubs wrapped in transparent plastic was a lozenge of slate with a touching message written in white: 'Mummy and Daddy's Little Angels – forever in our hearts'.

She found it hard not to break down then and there. She thought of her lost daughter – could almost hear the honey-tangles of her laughter amid the grove – and suddenly it dawned on her the real reason folk clung to such gossamer-fantasies.

All those lost loved ones... *We have to believe that somewhere, somehow, they live on*, she brooded. *That death is not a full stop.*

Janey tried to see, but the knowing could not be forced. Instead, she touched the Scots Pine, and sent Kirk a message, hoping that he would receive it.

I will release you. And then you will release me. My Loved Ones. Forever.

Eliza took some photographs, and tried to make some notes, but gave up as the rain started to lash in, too hard for even the forest canopy to fend off.

'Shall we go down?'

Janey nodded.

The wind blew them off the hill, chasing them down the path.

It was with some relief they made it back to the car.

A bedraggled eagle watched them go.

Too downhearted to muster a song, Janey gave into the audio-book inside her head:

'Oh! I am so sorry to have startled you, Reverend.'

I had not been addressed so respectfully since my arrival here and it cut through my shock. I gave the young man an appraising glance. No, he did not have the look of a court mocker. He had an open, honest face and his clothes were less ostentatious than most. 'It's ... Tyrius, isn't it?'

He nodded.

I recalled where I had noticed him now – paying more attention than others to my attempts at trying to create a sacred atmosphere in the Chapel. He had helped me tidy up after one of the Quarter Masses at which I was expected to preside, leading the abominable hymns.

Unlike the majority of its whimsical congregation he hadn't come to me with ludicrous insincere confessions.

The green mist had disappeared, and as Tyrius relit the torches the chill atmosphere vanished and I felt foolish. 'Did you notice something just now ...?' I fished. 'These torches went out – not all at once, but one at a time. I watched them. Then, a green mist appeared ... and I heard singing.'

Tyrius's face lit up. 'You saw her too! And I thought it was only I who glimpsed the Green Lady – others think me sun-touched. Over the years I've learnt to keep her visitations to myself.'

'Who is she?' Just mentioning the apparition made my skin prickle.

'She is the Glaistig,' Tyrius whispered. 'She haunts this castle. Some say she used to rule here until she was murdered by a usurper, jealous for her power... I will not say her name – for walls have ears.'

I reflected upon this revelation.

'She was kind and gracious and much loved by her people...'

All the things our current monarch is not, I brooded.

'I have read of these ... things ... you talk of. Certain ... texts reach us. I understand that your faith preaches compassion and kindness at this time especially. Peace on Earth and goodwill to all men – this is a message we really could do with hearing.' He straightened up, as though coming to a decision. 'I shall do what I can ... For now, I want to offer you something to ease your suffering. A small gesture.'

As the rain beaded the windscreen Janey sat in the car, hood up, hands deep in her pockets, eyes squeezed shut. She just wish she could shut it all off. *This place is like a fucking satellite dish*, she brooded.

Eliza gently sat down next to her. 'I'm sorry if it's not what you were ... expecting.'

To her surprise, Janey found herself choking back tears. 'It's not that, it's just ... I don't know. Everything.' She raised her head and her voice. 'Why is life always so ... spectacularly crap!' She hit the dashboard.

'Here.' Eliza handed her a tissue from a pack wrapped in cellophane.

Janey dabbed her eyes, and blew her nose. 'Thanks. Sorry. I don't know what came over me. What was I expecting? Nymphs and fairies dancing in a glen? C'mon – let's go and thaw out and grab, what do you call it, a cuppa? That solves everything, right?'

She gritted her teeth.

I was confused – what could he mean?

Tyrius led me to a Chapel which I had not seen before – it was decorated with beautiful stained glass windows, or so I thought...

'Reverend, I understand you were married – you must miss your wife dreadfully...'

The courtier must have read my mind – yet it was a feeling I did not like to dwell on, for it threatened to tear me apart if I did.

'Sit down here. Gaze into this,' he gestured. 'These are no ordinary windows, Reverend, but Mundane Glass: living mirrors through which we can view the Superterranean world. Your world. Think of your heart's desire and it shall appear to you... This is my midwinter gift to you. Merry Yule, Minister of Aberfoyle.'

And with that Tyrius withdrew, leaving me to gaze into the pane.

The glass was patterned with complex geometric forms like snow-flakes, the spiral of a nautilus shell, the jewel of a flower. I was sceptical at first – how could such a window show me my home?

Oh, to be away from all this glamourye – back in Aberfoyle with my beloved wife!

As I was about to turn away when, suddenly, the phantasmagoria cleared. I cried out with joy ... for I beheld my beloved hills!

As though I were a manucodiata, the moving vista took me soaring across the

folds of that familiar landscape. I felt giddy at the height and had to grip the pew. Then the view telescoped in alarmingly to the church tower of my parish – its stout, respectable tower standing proud, the bells ringing out.

How it made me weep with bittersweet longing!

Those bells – I recognised their deep-throated song, blessing the union of some happy couple. It was a beautiful Spring day, the sunlight catching on the May-blossom that quivered in the trees. The congregation – gentlemen of the town, a proud Highland family, vaguely familiar faces of the parish – spilled out into the churchyard and lined the path in anticipation as the newlyweds appeared.

An older woman dabbed a teary cheek as she gazed upon them with love.

My own gaze snagged on her.

I knew her. I could have sworn my life on it, for it was my very own darling wife – aged a generation! She looked as beautiful as ever in my heart, but how I wept to behold her so... All those missed years that we should have shared together as husband and wife.

Oh, Margaret. Did you ever forgive me?

Finally, my eyes were inexorably drawn back to the bride and ... bridegroom. My God! He looked the spitting image of my younger self. Then it dawned upon me – he must be ... my firstborn, Colin! He looked every bit the young gentleman, brimming with love for his comely bride, as lovely as a May morn.

I cried out to my wife and son, but no sound would carry through this vain portal. Oh, to witness such a day! I felt blessed and yet distraught, for how much time had elapsed since my crossing? To me, it had seemed as though no more than a month had passed – but to my family, evidently, a generation!

My second son, Robert, wearing the dark cloth of my profession appeared at the church door. He had always been such a serious child. What he lacked in humour and imagination he made up for in diligence in his studies and prayers. Clearly, he had found his vocation. Joining him at his side ... my daughter, Marjorie, now a bonnie young woman, pulling back a strand of unruly coppery hair from her tear-filled eyes.

Brother and sister linked arms in a touching show of affection.

Oh, sweet pain!

I wept at the years lost – and the pain my wife must have gone through. And yet

the pain had within it consoling qualities. There was a goodness to it.

My time on Earth had not been for naught.

My line continued.

They holed up in a tea-room out of the rain. Called the 'Rainbows End', they hoped it would somehow break the bad spell of weather. It was overly-adorned with 'fairy tat', as Eliza called it – although she still delighted in its tacky aesthetic. 'Phenomenologically-speaking, this is all part of it,' she said, munching on some lemon and poppyseed cake. 'Along with the rags on the tree, the fairy dolls, the Noddy signposts, the coins on the grave...'

Janey stared disconsolately into her tea.

'Come on, cheer up. What were you expecting?'

'Oh, I don't know... Hell, we have our share of corny tourist places back home. If Johnny Appleseed took a dump somewhere, you can guarantee they've turned the place into a museum, with gift shops galore.'

'Don't be disheartened. This is only scraping the surface. There's Balquhiddy up the road, where Kirk also preached. Rob Roy's grave is there. A bell in the church gifted by Kirk himself. And other fairy sites I could take you to...'

'Not today. I want to stay here for a bit. I've come so far. I need to let it ... sink in.'

'Fair enough. Shall I look up some B&Bs? Looks like there are a few cards on the counter. I could check them out on my phone.'

'Sure. Go ahead. On me. For all the driving.'

'Well, I only drove less than an hour today...'

'You said there were other places. We're just starting, ain't we?'

'You're the boss.'

Then I caught a sight of something that chilled my bones. As the wedding party left the churchyard, to repair to the vicarage for what I hoped would be a merry reception, I saw a simply-carved tombstone, freshly-decorated with flowers. My gaze was drawn to it with sickening dread. Looking closer, I could see it bore my name, Robertus Kirk, Minister of Aberfoyle, and coldly stated the year of my death: 1692.

I cried out – 'I am alive!' until my voice was hoarse, until I could speak no more.

And then, I collapsed on the floor, sobbing and the window went dark. I, who had brought light to the Gaelic tongue, robbed of my voice, my love, my life!

Tyrius must have taken my back to my chambers, because I found myself there with a glass of something strong in the hand.

'I'm sorry – I meant well. It must have been a shock to you.'

I shook my head, stunned at what I had seen. 'It's been a generation. Twenty or thirty years I would credit... My blood boiled and I flung the glass – smashing it into the fireplace.

'Of course, the time-displacement – one Ironblood year is but a day for us here.'
He could have been talking about rates at the corn exchange.

I was slack-jawed. I felt time slipping through my fingers like so much chaff.

'It is easy for us to forget.'

'Forget!'

'Your mortal lives happen ... so quickly. You're like mayflies. Yet that is why we find you so fascinating. The cathedral was empty tonight because of the revels, but normally it is filled with my kind. We love to watch your earthly lives. Their trivial details we find ... enthralling – it puts our own lot into perspective.'

Tyrius shook his head. 'It never used to be so popular... but these times – drive us all to the Mundane Glass for comfort.'

Later, in the guest house Janey, glowing from a hot shower and wrapped in a thick bath robe, flopped on the bed and found it reassuringly soft. The room was small and suffocatingly chintzy, but it was warm and dry, and the landlady seemed nice, letting them check-in early, and guaranteeing a hearty breakfast to set them on their way 'at a decent hour'. Janey flicked on the TV and was disappointed by the poor selection of channels, most of them a blur of static. She flicked through an old copy of *Horse and Country* then yawning, tossed it aside. For a while she stared up at the ceiling, trying to figure out what the strange mottled design of the light fitting signified and failing.

Then she rolled onto her stomach and rifled through her bag, open and half unpacked, pulling out her mother's box. She sifted through the objects – three were familiar now: Marsha, Dotty and Molly.

The rest called to her, a static pull to her fingertips.

The telescope virtually leapt into her hand.

She felt its cool solidity. So beautifully-made. Extending it – it was a little stiff at first – she looked through the eye-piece. At first she could see nothing – a shaky blur at best. And then, suddenly: 'Oh.'

29



When Eliza knocked on Janey's room with a bottle of wine, she found Janey weeping, the telescope curled in her lap.

‘What is it? What's wrong?’

Through a veil of tears, Janey looked up and said: 'Just hold me.'

30

Janey's eyes prised open. It was early. Real early. She got up and pulled back the heavy curtains. Outside, the difference between land and sky was negligible. Yet, low in the east, there was a promise of light.

Aberfoyle. She was really here, for what it was worth.

Across the fields the dark mass of the knowe glowered, any secrets it had been privy to held fast to its tangled heart.

Janey tugged on the thick courtesy bath-robe, glad of its warmth in the pre-dawn chill, which she could feel through the glass. She flopped back into bed, wide awake. By her bedside, the journal and the biscuit-tin. For once, the former was silent. Fanny's memory had been such a powerful one: had it cancelled out Kirk's signal somehow? By allowing all of her ancestors to be heard – their spectrum of voices merging into merciful silence – could she finally find peace inside?

For now, for a brief while, she had a taste of that possibility.

In the hallway, a grandfather clock ticked. Piping juddered into life. The house stirred.

Janey savoured the serenity. It felt like an unfamiliar overcoat.

Something was moving in her, waiting to be born.

She scrabbled around for a pen. In the back of the journal there were several blank pages. She silently apologised to Kirk, but figured he wouldn't mind her hitching a ride. She closed her eyes and pictured Fanny looking at the girl in the telescope – but saw herself there as a young girl, eyes wide at the wonder of the world, the evanescent magic of childhood lingering like mist in the holler.

Humming a melody, she started to write.

And outside, the first bird of dawn began to sing.

Eliza walked into the breakfast room and was surprised to see Janey already there, flipping through a magazine, all smiles.

'Good Morning, my night nurse!' Janey called out.

Eliza gave her a puzzled look. 'Er, good morning. Feeling better?'

Janey worked some butter into her toast. 'You betcha! You're a good hugger.' She hummed away to herself.

Eliza poured herself some orange juice, trying to figure it out. She had held Janey until

she'd cried herself dry. Practically put her to bed and tucked her in. It had felt a fine, sisterly thing to do, although the thought of it now, that long body she'd helped undress, made her blush a little.

And here she was, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed? It didn't follow.

Blithely, Janey ignored her friend's scrutiny.

'Good morning ladies, slept well?' The landlady of Burnside B&B, Mrs Gillivray, came in wearing a flowery apron and carrying another rack of toast.

'Yes thank you,' they both responded.

'Now, what can I get you both? We have porridge, kippers, local salmon and fresh eggs.'

'I think you've sold us the latter. I'll have salmon and scrambled please. Eliza?'

'Oh, same please. Sounds delicious!'

'Tea? Coffee?'

'Cup of joe for me, ma'am.'

The landlady looked doubtful.

'That's coffee, in British English. And tea for me, please.'

'Righty-ho. Coming right up!' Their hostess paused at the threshold, eyes twinkling. 'Do you think I could get a job in one of those diners of yours, pouring coffee and serving apple pie to big beefy truckers?'

They laughed. 'I reckon!' beamed Janey.

'Right, I'll go and pack my suitcase! Right after breakfast!'

They watched her return to the kitchen, and they caught each others' eye.

Janey munched on a corner of toast, humming away.

'Okay, I give up. Why the good mood?'

'Oh,' she shrugged, 'because ... it's a right nice day out.'

Eliza looked out at the grey skies, the wind-teased trees and the swathes of mist rolling off the hills, and gave her companion a sceptical look.

'Somehow I don't think the weather's got anything to do with it.'

Janey licked butter from a fingertip.

Eliza tapped her teaspoon impatiently.

'O-kay!' she laughed, holding up her hands. 'I'll tell you. Put you out of your misery. Not keep you in suspenders.'

'Wellll...?'

'I wrote a song.'

Eliza dropped her spoon. 'You mean...?'

'Yes, a new one – inspired by, oh, I don't know – this place, my ancestry,' she waved a hand, '... it all.'

'Hey, that's great. I'd love to hear it!'

'Oh no, not for a while ... it needs work. I hate to present something half-baked.'

'I'm so pleased.'

'You and me both. I haven't written a new song for a lonnnnggg time. And this one feels, I don't know, authentic somehow. Drawing on deep roots.' She gazed out of the window across the bleak fields. 'This place is definitely having an effect on me. Atmosphere like this – you can't get an app for it.'

Eliza poured herself some cereal and joined her. 'You're telling me!'

'There's something about these hills – sleeping amid them. It's as though there's music ... underground. You just have to put your ear to the earth.' She placed her hand lightly over Eliza's. 'I know I was a misery-bags yesterday. I'm sorry. It just seemed so ... underwhelming. But I'm realizing that's the nature of this place. Stern and forbidding on the outside; soft and sentimental inside. And that's just the locals! There's always something else beneath the surface.'

'I know what you mean,' nodded Eliza vigorously. 'Anything immediately apprehensible to the senses is seldom worth having. You have to work at it, meet it half-way, and then, if you're lucky, it will unlock its treasures.'

The kitchen door swung open, releasing a blast of tantalizing smells and the local radio station.

'Here you go, ladies. Tuck in.'

Their hostess presented the steaming plates of scrambled eggs and salmon.

'Mmm, looks yummy!' said Eliza.

'Fab, Mrs G. Compliments to the chef!'

'Och, that'll be me then.'

They tucked in without further ado.

Savouring a mouthful of the salmon, Janey let the first morsel slip down and sighed. 'It feels like I'm tasting inspiration, straight from the source.'

Janey stood huddled in the porch, having a sneaky roll-up before they set off. She was excited by the song she had written that morning, although 'received' would be a better description. Having used his journal, she felt obliged to hear a little more of Kirk before she left. It seemed only respectful. *Wanting* to hear it made a big difference. It was like listening to your own playlist, rather than being forced to listen to someone else's tinny tunes on their headphones.

She reached for it in her pocket. Just holding it was enough to hear its signal.

It is now New Year, although which year exactly I cannot say with any certainty – for this country does not abide by any Christian calendar, Augustine or otherwise. If a generation has elapsed since my departure then I estimate it to be around Anno Domini 1720! A year for each passing day! O, cruel Chronos! If I remain here much longer my wife and my contemporaries will have all shrivelled to dust... I am hawk-eyed for any opportunity that might present itself. I have heard that come Candlemas (or Imbolc, as they call it here, in the old way) the whole court moves to the Spring Quarter – the Flytting being their custom at the turning of the year. It is my fervent hope that I might use this time to slip away, though I doubt it will be as easy as that.

At least I have an ally now – God bless Tyrius (the paper starts to smoulder as I write the Lord's name). He comes to me for succour as much as offer it – and the conversations we have help us both.

My thoughts go back to the visions of home and although part of me dreads to look, another has to. I find myself returning to the Mundane Glass, sitting and staring at my window – side-by-side with the others who flock here. I hate myself for it, but cannot stop. The world I see seems more real than here. I shuffle around the castle, after hours of viewing, a noctambulos. I have let slip my toilet, forgetting to shave or brush my hair – and must make a grim sight. The other day, that two-faced page, Pyewacket, bumped into me in the corridor and said: 'How fairs our Gruagach?' It took me a moment to understand his meaning – but yes, it was apt. I have become the Spirit of the Castle, haunting its draughty corridors.

Is this to be my doom?

Escape, I must! The sands of time cascade away.

After breakfast they bid farewell to their landlady and hit the road.

'Where now, milady?'

Janey drummed the dashboard. She was feeling wild and reckless. 'Second star to the right and...'

'Straight on till morning? Gotcha.' Eliza laughed to herself. 'Did you know the Fairy Minister's father was called James Kirk.'

'Actually I did!'

Eliza shook her head, biting her lip.

Janey broke into laughter. 'Beam me up, Scotty!'

They drove through the misty hills, singing along to the iPod on shuffle – a random selection of Americana, rock'n'roll classics, modern pop, old jazz and blues, providing an ironically contrasting soundtrack to the ancient landscape.

Yet some of the tunes seemed to fit. When the melody and lyrics synchronised with the genius loci and lingering ghosts of the hills the needle of their journey slotted into the grooves of the land.

'So, are you going to tell me about the Muse's visit?'

Janey looked out of the window, seeing her half-reflection mingling with the jagged landscape. 'No, it's too early. I feel ... protective of it.'

'That's fine. I feel the same way about my papers. Until I'm ready to present them at a conference, nobody sees them, even though you know they're going to be for an audience.'

Janey nodded. 'Especially so. For a little while, it's yours, and yours alone.'

For a while they just listened to the music, until Janey broke the companionable silence once more: 'So, where are you taking me, kemosabe?'

'Well, I thought to Balquidder to start with – so you can see the Kirk church, where he was minister before Aberfoyle. There's a nice ruin there. A church bell.'

'Sounds thrilling.'

Eliza gave her a frown.

'I'm joking. Drive on Macduff! But ... could we go to Carterhaugh after that?'

'Down by the banks of the Ettrick and Yarrow? Sure. You hear Tam Lin calling you, do ye? He's hard to resist, I admit. Let's go and pull a rose after lunch, and see what happens.'

Eliza gave her passenger a wicked wink. 'May I?' She quickly searched the iPod and found a

version of Tam Lin – the classic Fairport Convention one – which they sang lustily along to as the car wended its way through the backroads.

They were merrily singing along to the final verses as they swept around a hillside bend.

Janey suddenly screamed: 'Stop!'

Eliza put her foot on the break and the car skidded. The car coming to a screeching halt on the rutted gravel of the passing place.

They both sat there for a minute, catching their breath.

Eliza looked across to Janey through tousled hair, and skew-whiff glasses.

'What...?'

'The horses. Didn't you see the horses?'

Eliza looked out at the empty road. 'Er, no...'

'There was a ... line of them, warriors in plaid, swords and spears glinting, helms low over grim faces – marching to or away from war.'

Eliza pushed her glasses up her nose. 'Ooh. That sounds like phenomena to me. A *vision*. Didn't you say something about being descended from a line of Celtic seers?'

'You mean the knowing? But ... they were real. They were right *there!*' Flabberghasted, she pointed at the empty tarmac. Shaking, she tried to light a cigarette.

'Here, let me.' Eliza lit it for her from the cigarette lighter on the dash. 'I might join you, if that's okay?'

Janey – brittle – nodded.

'I don't normally – but ... it's not every day you have a bona fide folkloric experience!'

Standing in the cold, they shared their cigarette moment.

Eliza coughed. 'They're disgusting. Now I know why I quit!'

'Death-sticks? I'm more of a toker really, but that shook me up. Can't be a saint all the time.'

Cleansing her lungs with the icy air, Eliza produced her mobile. 'If it's okay, could I record what you just saw? Do you mind repeating it to me?'

Janey sighed, rubbing her temple. Shrugged. She flicked the dog-end to the ground and stubbed it out with her heel.

Taking that as a yes, Eliza spoke into the voice recorder of her phone. 'It's 3rd February, 1.33pm. We're on the road to Balquidder – the, um, I'll GPS our location in a mo. Forced to

make an emergency stop due to phenomena experienced by my passenger, Janey McEttrick, Appalachian folk-singer, who will now recount what she saw...'

Eliza directed her phone at Janey, who was just about to speak, when her own phone went off inside her jacket.

'Excuse me, this is so embarrassing.'

'Sure, no problem.' Eliza pressed pause and waited while Janey fished out her phone and looked at who was calling. She raised an eyebrow.

'Who is it?'

'It's ... Fingal.'

'Fingal Lewis? Oh my God! Answer it!'

Janey bit her lip; then decisively pressed answer.

'Oh, hi... Nice to hear from you too.'

Eliza was grinning like an idiot. Janey kicked some gravel her way, and turned to face the vista of rolling hills.

'We're on a road trip ... I'm with Eliza – the one who interviewed me. You read it?' Janey looked impressed.

Eliza let out a muffled squeal.

'Yes, we're visiting some bells and old ruins.' She looked at her fingernails. 'Yeah, uh huh. Tourist stuff... Where? Want to meet us *there*?' She mouthed "Carterhaugh" to Eliza. 'Bring a picnic?'

Eliza gave her a thumbs up, biting back a big smile.

'Okay... How long? We're about ...'

Eliza looked at her watch and mouthed 'Three hours'.

'...Four hours away. Yep, see you there around one. Bye.'

Janey held the mobile to her chin, pondering the call.

'Wow! Fingal Lewis, ringing you up! And wanting to meet up. That's so cool.'

'Hm, I guess. He says he wanted to catch up. He didn't mind you were there – I'm kinda relieved you will be. Said he was happy to drive over with some nibbles. There's a Waitrose on the way.'

'Champagne and caviar at Carterhaugh! C'mon – even you have to admit that's pretty rock'n'roll.'

Janey looked at the grey hills. 'I was hoping for some time there by myself...'

'We'd better get a move on then!

'What about the recording?'

'Later! Carpe diem!'

Eliza got back in the car, and started up the engine. The end of 'Tam Lin' kicked in.

Janey reflected on the incident back along the road. The riders had been *so* vivid – she could have sworn they had been right in front of her.

The knowing ... This place brought it out in her. It had been dormant for a while – it was strange how nothing had happened at Aberfoyle. Perhaps it was like full moon there: slack-tide. Yet, as soon as they left...

It used to frighten her, these visions out of the blue. But they were becoming part of her daily life. Going for groceries. On the road. She had to learn to control them before it led to a serious accident.

Perhaps if she had learnt to control it back then...

The railroad crossing flashed in her mind, but she quickly blocked it out.

That was a box she did *not* want to open.

The shit with the Sight was the epitome of all she needed to sort out in her life – she was constantly fire-fighting, and in fear of being engulfed by it all.

One day she'd get on top of everything...

She looked up at the stern hills, threatening to overwhelm them at every bend.

But wasn't that exactly what she was trying to do? Here she was, in Scotland, for Chrissakes, doing her best to lay to rest her restless ancestor. A wild ghost chase it might be, but at least she was tackling it head-on. And with Marsha, Dotty, Molly, Fanny and the rest at her side she was stronger every day.

No more hiding.

Let Casper and company jangle their chains.

It felt like there was an icicle on the end of my nose. I could not seem to get warm anywhere in this infernal castle, no matter how many logs I placed on the fire (there seemed to be an inexhaustible supply), how many tapestries on the wall kept the draught out, how thick the blanket around my thin shanks. Only I seemed to complain about it. The Fey did not appear to feel the arctic chill. They have pallid complexions

anyway. I wonder sometimes if they truly are of flesh and blood at all? They mirror our customs and garb – but at times it feels like play-acting, as though they could shed them at any minute. It would seem that they are easily bored, prone to extreme mood swings, quickly offended, capricious and vain. They love compliments and like nothing better than to hear about themselves. At times I yearned for mortal company, for a good theological discussion with a colleague, a neighbourly conversation with parishioners, or the warm embrace of my wife. To talk with my newborn son and hear his views on the world. Of his wayward father! After weeks of Elfhame's exotic cuisine I yearned for humbler fare, for the simple pleasures of home.

My only comfort is this journal.

Of the Mundane Glass I dared not dwell – only that my growing addiction to it is far from healthy. I leave it feeling not fulfilled, but depleted in some way. The library was my only other refuge. I poured over the ancient tomes in hope of finding some vital clue, some weakness in my captors that I could exploit. Flattery only makes them stronger – they glow in my presence – and I must bite my tongue about the Word of God.

To shake off my chill I walked with a great robe wrapped around me. Like some invalid, I paced the corridors of the castle. The wind howled outside – a Boreal that has raged for days. The very walls of the Keep seemed to reverberate at times, yet they stood firm in the teeth of the gale. This was clearly an ancient place and had withstood well the ravages of time. Who knows what wars it has weathered, let alone tempests? Ornate suits of armour, ancient swords and moth-eaten banners attest to former glories on the field. When was the last time the Elfinkind had taken up arms, except in tourney?

The stonework seemed to moan and the torches obligingly hissed and danced, casting their restless shadows along the corridors. The small leaded panes of glass rattled in their casements.

Outside, a sudden violent gust dislodged tiles, which clattered and smashed below. Anyone would think that Jack Frost himself was dancing a ceilidh on the rooftops! I took a peek through one of the frosted panes – scraping a spy hole clear with a fingernail.

I pulled back in fright.

Composing myself, I looked again, and yes, there in the blizzard ... a person!

Looking like no more than rags on a stick, with wild white hair, fleece snagged on a fence, I could see the lunatic plain enough – dancing over the icy gables with careless grace! Only someone out of their mind would be out in this. Yet who here was in their right mind? Above the howling wind, I heard a cackling and I realised who it was: the Queen's Mother, the Cailleach! Perhaps she was sleepwalking, unaware of where she was. I had to act, and so, steeling myself, I opened a heavy door which led out onto the turret – nearly blasted back by the ice-storm.

I struggled to the edge of the crenellations and called out at the top of my voice. 'Come in, my lady. It is not safe out here!'

Under the storm's howl, I could hear her singing – an eerie sound in the maelstrom, which seemed to carry with the wind and echo across the jagged peaks. It summed up the malevolent glee of the tempest, its implacability. It was the destroying song of winter, stripping back all, testing every weakness, culling the weak.

There was nothing for it, I would have to go and grab her. I clambered nervously over the edge of the parapet and tried not to look down. My cloak snapped around me, a flag of folly, until a sudden blast whipped it from my shoulders and I nearly lost my grip. Teeth chattering, and not just from the cold, I stepped out onto the narrow ridge of the roof and clutched hold of its central iron-work for dear life.

The old woman was at the far end of what must be the roof to the Great Chapel, standing right on the edge, cats' fur-slipped feet on the brink. She held her scrawny arms aloft, black rags swirling about her like a storm of crows, and capered as though she was at a ceilidh. I reached out a hand and shouted to her to grab it, but she merely pirouetted, nimble as a nymph. Then I caught her glance, and the black light in her eyes was terrifying. To my horror I realised it was not she who was in danger, but I myself!

Perched on this icy precipice, I was at the mercy of the mountain mother.

Panicking I scabbled back, trying to reach safety, but the tiles were icy, the wind threw me off balance, and – I plummeted, as in a dream of falling, one which jolts you awake at the moment of impact, but this was for real.

Down I tumbled with the crazy laughter of the Cailleach ringing in my ears.

In my descent, I felt strangely peaceful.

So, this was to be my conclusion.

I observed it all with a detached curiosity, as though it was another's fate I beheld. It seemed fitting somehow. Had I not damned myself with all my dabblings? With my wayward heart and unconscionable cruelties?

Now I was about to find out.

31

They'd been driving for nearly two hours.

Both of them had managed to calm down, sinking deep into the music and the scenery.

'Thank you.' Janey placed her hand, briefly, on Eliza's. 'But ... why are you doing all this for me?'

The driver shrugged. 'Oh, it's not entirely selfless. I'm getting to do some field-research with a tradition bearer. This is primary source stuff. Priceless! And I get to have a jolly with a cool American lady.' She gave her a coy look. 'What's not to like?'

'Well, the feeling's mutual, sweetheart. You're a gas.'

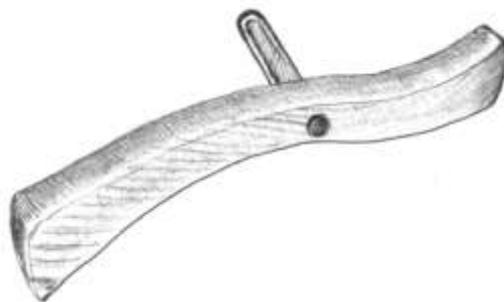
'Talking of which, in your idiom, we need to fill up.'

'Well, I'm paying.'

They stopped at the next petrol station. While Eliza filled up and went in to pay with a crisp fifty-pound note, Janey opened the biscuit-tin.

The tuning key seemed to leap into her hand.

Solid and warm to the touch, she stroked its wooden handle and metal socket, slowly, in rhythm to the music in her head.



A tap at the window.

Eliza stood holding coffees and pastries, grinning.

Janey reached over and opened the door for her.

'Life support.' Eliza placed everything in the holders between the seats. 'Tuck in. And here's your change and receipt, in case you can claim it back.' She noticed the strange object, the old tin. 'Oh, sorry, did I disturb you...?'

'It's okay. Just ... memories.' Janey put the tuning key back in the box, and accepted the offerings. Sipping her black coffee, she thought about the 'dark stranger' and his ilk – the Travellers, always passing through, enriching sedentary lives with their music and tales, tricks and risk. Had one of them been her ancestor? Was that why she had 'ants in her pants' as Shelly would say, living a hobo life in her trailer? Did she have some gypsy in her blood?

Taking a bite out of the cream-cake – Eliza was a wicked temptress! – she pondered the other side. On the female side she was descended from Kirk, and she took great pride in that. Two streams – the respectable and the wild – running through the generations of McEttricks for a long time... The McEttrick women seem to be drawn to dark strangers for some reason. Some, like Elizabeth, tried to break the pattern, by marrying someone practical or decent – and several of the McEttrick men had been salt of the Earth mountain folk – but the allure of the dark stranger kept drawing them back.

The Ettrick snaked through the valley flanked by the sleeping giants of the hills, shoulders wrapped in a kirtle of mist. As soon as they had entered its fastness the travellers both became more subdued, as though in hushed reverence.

'I suspect that you're experiencing the Sublime,' Eliza explained. 'The feelings of terror and awe evoked by wild, untamed nature, which were so beloved by the Romantics.' Her passenger's wry expression would have sufficed at hitting the mute, yet even as she spoke the words Eliza realized how insufficient they were at communicating what they were both experiencing.

The valley rippled away in fading waves – a watercolourist's heaven, always just out of reach.

'A walk on the wild side...' Janey murmured, fingering the grooves of the journal.

Suddenly, there was a baying of hounds and I landed with a thump – which knocked all the breath out of me – on the back of the steed of the Wild Hunter himself, who was soaring through the sky in defiance of Newton's Law and Divine Gravity with his pack of phantom hounds.

'Ahh, a lost soul! And so near to home!' Gwynn roared, as I gripped onto the saddle for dear life. I was balanced in an undignified position across the rump of the

horse. I made the mistake of looking: the steed soared over the rooftops of the castle, spiralling around and around for the sheer joy of it, it seemed.

I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed silently to the Lord.

Mercifully, Gwynn brought his pack down to make a landing upon an upper terrace. The hooves of the steed clattered onto the flagstones and the distinctly unGabriel-ish hounds gambolled around us with excitement.

I landed unceremoniously in a heap – sniffed and licked by the inquisitive pack until their master called them off. With a giant's grasp he pulled me to my feet as I shook like an aspen. 'Come and have something to thaw you out – you look like death warmed up!' Pulling off his riding gloves, the Lord of the Hunt swaggered into the hall where a great fire crackled in the hearth.

Spiky-faced servants handed us goblets of something strong and steaming.

I was offered a seat by the fire and a blanket to wrap around me.

Gwynn roared with laughter at me, 'You look like a tinker hag! Will you read my cards?'

I was in a pitiful state. 'Old woman ... on th–th–the roof. Truh–truh–tried to save her...'

'Ah. You have met the Cailleach! We Silverbloods grow stronger in spirit, in power, with age, and the Mountain Mother is very, very ancient! She loves a great storm! Cooking up a winter broth, she calls it!'

I shuddered uncontrollably.

Gwynn looked at me with a strange glimmer in his fierce raptor eyes.

Up close, I could see how, beneath the antlers he had an aristocratic countenance. His aquiline features and lean physique showed him still to be a force to be reckoned with, despite his great age. Fine lines cross-hatched his face like a cobweb.

'Tsk, you mortals are such fragile creatures! Seeing how you cling onto life is ... touching, but soon tedious.'

He shrugged off his cloak, which dropped like a body. It was caught by his attendants, who spirited it away.

'Bring us food! We have a guest!' he bellowed at the scittering shadows. 'But first, I must attend to my hounds.'

Soon they beheld an iconic looking tower rising from the crest of the wooded hillside.

'Is that Carterhaugh?' gasped Janey.

'No, that's Newark Castle. Scott thought Janet might have lived there, but it was pure speculation. It looks the part though, doesn't it? It's actually associated with James Hogg, the so-called Ettrick Shepherd, a Romantic poet of the mud-on-the-boots variety. Scott, a contemporary, included some of his works in *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Many of the Hogg's songs became popular, especially his Jacobite ballads, but he's best known today for *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.'

Janey smiled to herself at this. 'Sounds a man after my own heart.'

'The tower hosts an exhibition about him, though he lived in a farm below it. It overlooks the real site of Tam Lin. 'Haugh' simply means a meadow.'

'You'd make a good tour-guide,' Janey drily observed.

'I'll take that as a compliment.'

They pulled into the gravel car-park of the Waterwheels Cafe.

'Here we are!' piped up Eliza, her enthusiasm unquenched.

Her passenger looked out sceptically. 'What now? The Tam and Janet Diner?'

It's part of the Philiphaugh Estate. Carterhaugh is a private grange up the road, but the actual site of the famous encounter is just a five minutes upriver – where the Ettrick and Yarrow converge. The locals call it The Meetings. It's not signposted. The first time I came here it took some finding, I can tell you! Fortunately, I asked a waitress who happened to be a local lass.'

Janey stepped out of the car and breathed in the atmosphere of the place.

The Meetings! And here she was, a child of the Ettrick – returned to the source. She shuddered.

'That tombstone tapdancer again?' asked Eliza, pulling on her daysack and zipping up her Goretex jacket.

'Quite possibly,' brooded Janey.

'I'm not surprised you're feeling creeped out. This was the site of a terrible massacre...'

'I can hear more horrible history on its way...'

Ignoring her, Eliza continued. 'The Battle of Philiphaugh. One of the Civil War's darkest hours. When the Royalists were defeated they were first taken to the castle, then shot,

to be buried in a nearby field called ever since Slain Men's Lea. This place is soaked in blood.'

A chill breeze suddenly swept across the fields, making them both shudder.

For a moment, Janey thought she saw the spirit forms of Roundheads and Cavaliers, locked in eternal combat, swirling by.

'Are you okay?'

Janey shook her head. 'Do you have anywhere in this country that *isn't* haunted?' She dug her hands deep into her pockets. 'I can imagine an *unhaunted* house being a novelty and attraction!'

Eliza snorted with laughter at this. 'Check this out!' She pointed at the sign about car-thieves. 'They still have reivers, by the looks of things!'

Janey put her journal and tin in her bag. Checking nothing tempting was on display, they locked the car – and headed through some farm buildings to the river-side, following the footpath that skirted the newly-built salmon weir.

'A nice day for a picnic,' said Eliza.

Janey glanced at the sky suspiciously. Perhaps it had brightened up – there were certainly glimpses of blue through the rags and tatters of the clouds, as raggedy as the sheep munching avidly in the field. One gave them a sour look before resuming its grazing, down on its knees and determined to tear the pitiful crop from the wintered ground.

Back home, picnic weather would have meant bikini tops and barbecues. She was glad she was wearing her Afghan. Pulling the collar up, she dug her hands deep into her pockets.

Eliza bounded ahead. 'Look, snowdrops! Spring has sprung. Lambs are a-leaping. It's positively balmy.'

'You can say that again.' Janey caught up with her, grimacing at the apparent evidence.

'Oh, cheer up – you're going to meet a rock star!'

'I've met him.'

They had reached the river and followed it upstream passed a concrete salmon weir.

'Scuse me! Forgot. You two are like bosom buddies already.'

'Well, I wouldn't put it like that. We had a chat after my gig. He said he liked my set.'

'That old one!'

Janey scowled. 'He meant it, thank you very much! It's nice to meet someone who isn't after me just for my body for once.'

'Ah, what a problem. It would be nice one to have.' Eliza stared into unruly waters, getting livelier by the minute.

'You're welcome to him.'

'Are you sure? Passing up a night with Fingal Lewis! Whoever has your heart is a lucky guy.'

They had reached the end of the path, where the two rivers converged from either side of a small island. The torrent, swollen by the entangled skeins, surged by. The women stood looking at it, as though its incessant swirling movement offered some explanation of things.

Walking down to the water's edge, Eliza busied herself taking photographs.

She should make the most of being here, Janey mentally chided herself. Allen would want that. This was part of her heritage. Her spawning ground.

Sighing, she caught up with her guide, who had been making notes into her phone.

'This is it! The confluence of the Yarrow and Ettrick. The Meetings. The original site of Carterhaugh.'

'Where Harry met Sally?' Janey quipped. She struggled to see anything remarkable about it. If Eliza hadn't pointed it out, she probably would have missed it completely.

Janey forced herself to look again. Even she had to admit there was something about the place – a certain atmosphere. She knelt and let her hands brush over the turbid waters so close before her.

'Be careful! That current looks deadly,' cautioned Eliza.

'You're such an old maid,' ribbed Janey.

'Better that than a young dead one. I hope I'm a crone one day – but not before my time.'

The fast-flowing waters hypnotised Janey. Life surged by in all of its vital urgency. So alive, so present. Yet, before you knew it, it was gone, racing inevitably towards its own dissolution. What could stop it?

'Hey.' Eliza's hand on her shoulder pulled her back, startling Janey out of her reverie. 'Looked like you were going to fall in there! I didn't fancy jumping in to rescue you.'

They found a bench and there waited for the 'tryst', as Eliza teasingly called it.

Janey made a roll-up, and Eliza made more audio notes.

The river flowed on.

'What time were we meant to be meeting him here?'

Eliza looked at her watch. 'Um, about fifteen minutes ago...'

'Late! Typical.' She flicked the stub into the river. 'Do you think he's doing it on purpose?'

'Well, give him the benefit of the doubt. Have you checked your phone?'

Irritated, Janey rummaged in her bag. 'Ah. Three messages.' She scrolled down them. "I'll be there in five... I'm here... Where are you...?"

'Strange.' Eliza looked around. 'Unless ... he's at a different location. Text him and ask.'

Janey hammered in the question and fired it off. A couple of beats later her phone vibrated. 'He's at something called ... Tam Lane's Well...'

Eliza grimaced. 'Oops. We're in the wrong place! Easily done! Finding the precise site is tricky. Few agree on it. When we said Carterhaugh, I thought here; he thought there. It's by the grange I mentioned.'

Janey tried not to look cross. 'How long?'

'We can be there in five minutes. Come on.'

They quickly made their way back along the riverside path to the car-park.

'He's gonna think we're complete losers.'

Eliza shrugged. 'When things like this happen, especially at sites like this, I wonder whether there's a reason.'

'What do you mean?'

'There seems to be a prevalence of accidents, lost items, missed connections, and misunderstandings at fairy sites. I have no hard data on it, but anecdotal accounts suggest it's quite common. Is it something about the liminal nature of the site that just makes visitors more accident prone? Or are the Good Folk playing tricks on us?'

'You're kidding, right?'

'Not entirely. There's a saying: never test the crew that never rest. They're tricksters. But perhaps in their japery they're offering you a choice...'

'Okay, I'm curious. Go on.'

'This slip-up has allowed you to reconsider how much you want to meet up with Fingal. The Quantum Fairies are giving you a second chance. Choice pathways. Crossroads of possibilities. Like Janet at Miles Cross.'

They had made it back to the car.

'Well?'

Janey closed her eyes. Eliza's constant explanations were getting a little grating, although she knew there were well-meant. But Janey was screaming for something 'off the grid', out of reach of her companion's verbal foot-notes. Her blood pulled her to the tryst's magnetic north. 'Let's do it.'

Gwynn's beloved hounds yipped and wagged around him, as from his back he pulled off a great leather sack. He opened this up, and swirling lights spiralled out – disincarnate voices whispering amid the preternatural nebulae – which the hounds snapped up, fighting each other for the brightest. There was a feeding frenzy, with the dominant of the pack taking the richest pickings, leaving the lesser to fight over the scraps.

I quailed to ask, but I had to: 'What are they ... devouring?'

Gwynn stood silhouetted against the blaze, drinking from his goblet with relish. 'Lost souls,' he murmured, wiping his mouth with a furry cuff, like a wolf washing himself.

The hounds grew glossier, their colours more vivid. He barked a command and they scampered off, flopping by the hearth and quickly falling asleep.

The shock started to set in at my brush with death, and I could barely hold my goblet.

Gwynn insisted I drink deep and get some food in my belly. I had little appetite, but it was hard to turn him down – he had such a forceful personality.

And so I found myself dining with the Lord of the Wild Hunt. Gwynn wolfed his food – enjoying it with gusto, but I was appalled by his manners and his slathering turned my stomach.

'Not hungry? A man should have a good appetite,' he declared, chewing on a chicken leg which he used to emphasize his point.

I was surprised to see he actually appeared to eat. Out of all the Sith my host seemed to be the most corporeal.

'I suppose you don't get much opportunity to generate one, confined as you are... I cannot abide indolence. Too much comfort softens a man, until he becomes a blade with no edge.' He tossed the remains to his favourite hound and then snatched up an apple which he tossed up into the air, before impaling it on his dirk and taking a hearty bite out of it. 'I, for one, would go mad if I was confined within these walls. As you

might have guessed, I find the atmosphere at Court stifling. I need the open air, the mountains!' He gestured wildly. 'The icy wind against my face – performed only with the North's hard truth. Please, spare me the ridiculous clothes and hairstyles, the gossip, the petty intrigues, the tiresome japery. I am happier with my hounds.' He finished the apple – the core going into the fire, where it sizzled. 'But tell me of your beliefs.'

I grew pale. 'My Lord, you know that would be difficult for me...' I fingered the collar nervously.

'Oh that. Fear not, such trickery will not work so well in my presence. I have a knack of stripping away enchantments.' He gazed at me with his eyes, burning beneath his dark antlered brow – and I felt myself stripped bare. Yet my faith gave me courage. Surely, I had nothing to hide?

'Come, come, man. Amuse me. You owe me your life, after all.' He splashed wine into my goblet. 'Let this loosen your tongue.'

Taking a nervous sip, I began.

Wild roses, their blooms winter-blasted and forlorn, grew around what Eliza pointed out with some satisfaction and relief was the well, though it didn't look much like one to Janey: a stone trough filled with icy water, half-covered by ferns and moss. An inscription carved into the wall of Carterhaugh Farm clearly stated 'Tam Lane's Well'. Eliza added. 'The actual well is two and half metres north, but it's covered over and on private land. This is as close as we get to myth.'

Janey gingerly peered in, and saw her head reflected, a black cut-out against the sky. 'I wonder where his lordship is?'

Eliza had wandered off, and the question apparently went unheard.

Janey looked at the wild roses. She let her fingers linger over one – and pulled back as a thorn pricked her skin.

'Ouch!'

'May I?'

Janey nearly jumped out her skin.

Fingal Lewis stepped out from the shadow of the wall, offering his silk monogrammed handkerchief.

'How long...?'

'Oh, I've just come back. There's a little gate – not used very often. When I arrived and didn't see you here, I gave my friends in the farm a knock to ask if they'd seen two lost maidens wandering about. We got chatting. You know how it is. Then I got the text saying you'd arrived. You looked ... deep in thought. I didn't want to disturb you.'

Janey gave him a hard look, then pulled the thorn from her finger, trying not to wince. Sucking it made it worse. It didn't seem to want to stop bleeding.

'Please.'

'But it's silk.'

'It doesn't matter. Can't have you wasting your precious life blood now, can we?'

Janey accepted the handkerchief, black, with white borders, and dabbed her finger with it.

'Keep it. A memento.'

Eliza huffed back up the path. 'Oh, hullo! I'm Eliza Thomas. I'm so pleased to meet you. Been a huge fan for ages. I promised myself if I ever met you that I wouldn't gush and fawn but sorry, can't help it! Not every day you meet one of your idols.'

Fingal laughed it. 'The pleasure's all mine, and please – no formality, Fingal, or Fin if you prefer. I've read a few of your articles – you do a good interview. Perhaps we can set something up sometime...'

Eliza was slack-jawed. 'Really. That would be awesome!'

Janey smiled. Maybe he was a decent guy after all. He wore what could be called 'casual bohemian' – a pair of tooled leather cowboy boots over a pair of scruffy designer jeans, a deep blue paisley silk shirt, long wine-dark scarf and a black velvet jacket.

'Aren't you cold?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'Never really feel it. Got Irn-bru in my veins.'

Eliza laughed.

Janey raised an eyebrow.

He swayed a wicker hamper in front of him. 'I've been hunting and gathering but this is all I could muster I'm afraid...' He pulled out a bottle of Moët and Chandon, a quiche, grapes, deli cheese, olives, sun-dried tomatoes, a still warm ciabatta, apples, and a slab of dark chocolate. He laid them on a stone-slab catching a brief slither of sun.

'Hey, that's nice of you.'

'With more notice ...'

'This is just swell, really.'

They caught each others' eye as they arranged the picnic.

'I've got a blanket as well...'

He unrolled it onto the grass by the well, and gestured chivalrously.

'Why thank you!' said Eliza.

Janey smiled and sat down next to her companion. Suddenly she was glad the research student was there. Fingal was acting a complete gentleman, but she was feeling ... stirred up. Maybe this place was having an effect on her.

'It's just plastic flutes and paper plates I'm afraid.'

'The champers will still taste good.'

'Shall I?' Fingal unravelled the silver wrapper and twisted the metal with practised ease.

'Looks like a man who knows his fizz!' Eliza bubbled.

The cork popped off – shooting into the air. They watched its arc, and laughed as it dropped into the well.

'Bullseye!' roared Fingal. He quickly poured the volatile contents into the glasses and handed one to each of his guests, before pouring one for himself. He raised it to make a toast. 'To ... new friends.'

'New friends.'

'Clink!' said Eliza, before taking a big sip. She hiccupped and they all laughed. 'Better take it easy, if I'm Des.'

'Des?'

'Designated driver?'

'Enjoy yourself. I could always arrange a taxi. Get a friend to come out and drive your car back. Anyway, one glass won't do any harm. Tuck in!' He ripped the bread into chunks and handed some to his companions.

For a while they picnicked in satisfied silence.

Somewhere a bird sang, and the sun appeared again from behind a cloud and felt almost warm on their skin.

'Ah, idyllic...' sighed Fingal, as he reclined on the blanket, one knee bent up like a mini-mountain summit.

Janey looked sideways at him. He seemed to be enjoying himself far too much. She frowned at him suspiciously, which made him beam even more as he popped a grape into his mouth.

Eliza seemed nervous of the lull in conversation, an academic spotting a gap of knowledge. 'So, Mr Lewis...'

'Fingal, please,' he turned to look at her – giving her his full attention in magnanimous fashion. His dark eyes riveted her to the spot like mouse frozen with fear by a bird of prey's shadow.

'What are you working on?' She fidgeted with her glasses. 'If you don't mind me being so bold.'

'Oh, be bold. I like boldness. A timid interviewer isn't going to get her prey otherwise.'

Eliza looked apologetic. 'I wasn't trying to...'

He waved her fears away. 'It's okay. I've learnt that in my profession your public life does not belong to you. And my art is both my private and public life – so it's part of the deal. Wouldn't you agree, Janey?'

Janey was still sizing him up over a glass of bubbly – though she pretended to be interested in the cloudscape.

'Anyway, to answer your question. This and that – a new song, a video, a recording project. I'm always working on something. Janey knows what it's like. We're addicted to creativity. The Muse is my mistress. My guilty pleasure, written across the sky.' He raised his glass and looked through its bubbles at the scudding clouds, before laughing to himself and taking a sip.

'How about you, Janey? Finding inspiration in our wee country?' He cast a twinkling gaze at her.

Janey ran a finger around the rim of her glass – which, being plastic, failed to make a sound. 'Not really.' Eliza gave her a curious look. 'Nothing personal. It sure is pretty – if a bit chilly for my liking! I've not really had time to—'

'Get into the zone? I know that one. It's hard, when you're on tour. Barely recovered from the gig the night before when you have to start warming up for the next. You exist in a surreal twilight for the duration – wide awake, post-show, a zombie in daylight hours, getting ready for work when everyone else is clocking off.'

'Well, I hardly tour like you do – it's just the odd weekend gig for me.'

'With... what's your band called?'

'The Jackalopes,' interjected Eliza.

'Ah, yes.' Fingal sipped his champagne, an amused expression on his face.

'What's so funny?' Janey fumed.

'Oh, I was just thinking, about my first band – a dodgy goth outfit I was in back in my old home town, called ... don't laugh ... The Dours.'

The women snorted champagne at this.

'We all had to wear black, obviously, pointy shoes, scarves tied to our belts, crimped back-combed hair – the lot. We thought we were Scotland's answer to Jim Morrison and crew. I think we played about one gig, in the local youth club – before we split up, due to 'artistic differences'. I think I was caught snogging the lead-guitarist's girlfriend in the bogs!'

The laughter seemed to break the ice.

Fingal waited for this to subside. 'But seriously, we're setting up a new tour and we have a few possibilities kicking around for a supporting act – but, what about it? Fancy coming with the Blue Men on tour?'

Eliza nearly dropped her neatly prepared sandwich. 'Oh, that would be so cool!'

Fingal held Janey's cool appraising stare. 'Not with ... your band. But as a solo artist. You're good enough. Sometimes you have to let go of the ... dead wood.'

'Deadwood? They're my friends you're talking about!' In her indignant response to Fingal's apparent scorn, Janey chose to forget for a moment about her own band's 'artistic differences'.

He held his hands up defensively. 'Sorry. Forget I mentioned it, it was thoughtless of me. I'm sure you'll go far.'

'We're doing just fine, thank you very much!'

'Really? More champagne?'

Janey refused, so he topped himself up. 'I just think it's a shame that you're wasting your talent playing, what, roadhouses? Over here, we'd call them a pub band – perhaps okay for a cheap night out. A few beers, a bit of a laugh. But they probably don't even listen to the songs over the drunken laughter. They're just a backing track for a piss-up.'

Janey looked at her half-empty glass. She put it down on a rock, and got up, walking off.

Eliza frowned at him.

'Sorry, I have a bad habit of speaking my mind. My tongue just gets carried away sometime. Should I...?'

'Let me. I get the feeling you'd just make matters worse.'

Fingal sighed, leaning back. He put down his shades and pulled out a penny whistle from the pocket of his jacket – cleared the pipe and made a practice trill.

Eliza got up and followed Janey. She caught up with her on the edge of the ruins. She was smoking a roll-up, her coat wrapped around her against the wind.

'Enjoying the picnic?' Eliza speculated ironically, making Janey give her a wry smile and an arched eyebrow. 'I don't think Fingal Lewis is known for his subtlety...'

The strains of the 'Strange Road', one of the Blue Men's top ten hits from the Nineties, drifted over to them intermittently.

Janey snorted scornfully, and picked a piece of imaginary tobacco from her teeth. 'You're telling me!'

'I guess not many rock stars are subtle – part of the job description.' After speaking these words, Eliza put her hand over her mouth. 'Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to.'

Janey waved it away. 'No offense, kid. You're probably right. But I've worked in this business long enough to know you don't *have* to be an asshole – though plenty are, I admit.'

The women listened to the lilting air, torn by the wind, which seemed to suit the wistful, melancholic mood of the place.

'He's not really that bad, is he?' pondered Eliza, to herself.

'No worse than any other egotistical male – preening about like the cock of the heap.'

They laughed at this with womanly understanding.

'That's quite an offer – to tour with the Blue Men... Will you consider it? Not for his sake, but for yours. It would be great to see you performing solo. Such an opportunity may be the break you need. You'll get the exposure, the publicity. You might get noticed by an A&R man, or woman.'

Janey finished her cigarette and flicked it into the air – it trailed tiny sparks like a miniature meteor. 'Sure, I'll consider it. C'mon. Let's go and finish his champagne – he's good for something anyway.'

They hooked arms and walked back through the ruins.

When they got back to the picnic, Fingal was nowhere to be seen. His champagne flute remained half-drunk and still sparkling on the rock – the food still arranged on the blanket.

They looked about but couldn't see him.

'A call of nature?' speculated Eliza.

Janey called out, half-heartedly.

In the distance they heard a car engine start up – it revved twice, then roared off in a spray of gravel.

'So that's that.' Janey wasn't sure what to feel. Had she just blown it? Sometimes she could be too strong-headed for her own good.

'Wait, look!' Eliza bent down and picked up a note, hastily written, on the back of the torn off champagne label:

Dear Ladies,

Sorry - I can be an arse at times. In way of apology, I would like to invite you both to my castle for a weekend's break - no strings attached! You can have your own rooms and the run of the place. I might be doing some recording, so may or may not be around - perhaps we could do dinner on the Saturday night, otherwise you can just enjoy the surroundings. You never know - you might be inspired! Drop us a line anytime.

Yours,

Fingal

X

Janey contemplated the note that Eliza handed her.

'Well, what do you think?' asked her companion, biting her thumbnail.

'Perhaps we misread him. Perhaps not. I get a sense he's a tricky fellow...'

'Seems like a genuine offer. Can you imagine? A weekend at Chateau Fingal!'

'I'm trying not to...'

'Oh, don't be a killjoy. It could be a scream. And you'll be safe with me there – rent-a-
gooseberry.'

Janey looked at the remains of the picnic, then the austere ruins.

'I don't know. I need to remember why I'm here. I have a mission, of sorts. People who rely on me. This isn't meant to be some kind of goofy road-trip. I'm not a tumbleweed teenager anymore. I have a life.'

'Yes, only one – by my reckoning. When would you get a chance like this again?'

Janey looked down the well, and saw the champagne cork bobbing there. It annoyed her, felt almost sacrilegious, but at the same time – made her smile.

A strange road indeed, that had brought them together.

I talked about how the Almighty created Heaven and Earth; about Adam and Eve and the temptation of the Serpent; of the Fall; of this Original Sin washed clean by the blood of the Christ. Of the Lord's teachings, His example, His parables. The Word made flesh, disseminated by His disciples. Of the Desert Fathers and the early Christian Church. The coming of the Cross to the shores of Alba. St Ninian stepping foot on the thin Isle of Whithorn. The great monasteries and the lives of the Saints. The illuminated Gospels. The Kirk of Scotland; the Presbyterian fold. How we do not acknowledge any ruler as the head of the Church except the Lord and his true followers. How no mundane monarch rules over the Free Kirk.

When I had finished I couldn't help noticing Gwynn had nodded off, but he jolted awake at my coughing. 'Sorry, wandered off there a bit – but a good story!'

I raged at this. 'It is not a ... a ... story! It is the history of the one true faith—'

Gwynn pinched his fingers and my collar grew tighter – stopping me dead.

'Here, priest, it is just another tale to pass a winter's night. You must remember where you are. How does Elfame fit into your universe? Where are we in your lonely God's plan? For truly, we exist, as you well know.'

I nervously broached the subject of Elfkind's perilous state between Heaven and Hell... Gwynn glared at me, tapping his chair with a long black fingernail. 'And yet, I fully believe that your existence confirms, rather than contradicts, the celestial hierarchy of angels. What are the Sith, except angels of a lower order?'

I gulped.

Gwynn lifted his goblet, pausing to swirl its dark contents. 'What has drawn you here, if our ways are so anathema? Is it the allure of the forbidden – or something else? Speak, I insist!'

Hands shaking, I took a draught of the heated wine to clear my throat. I did not meet his gaze. 'My wife – I came here for my wife. She became increasingly enchanted by the glamourye of the Fey – she could not stop dancing to the wild music that came from under the hills. It was making her ... distempered. I feared for her mind, her soul.

And so I studied your tribes and ways in the hope I would find a clue. Eventually my field research led me here... where I find myself a prisoner.'

Gwynn clapped loudly. 'Such noble sacrifice! So ... Christian of you! Strange are your ways, Kirkman.' He popped a grape into his grizzled maw. 'But, I admire your tenacity – you could make a good huntsman.' His voice lowered as he gazed into the flames with a kind lust. 'The chase can be long. It takes great patience to stalk your prey – to wait for the optimum conditions to land your killing blow. Miss and your prey will flee. You only have one chance.' He drained his goblet. 'Patience, chaplain, patience. Enjoy your captivity – very few mortals are honoured guests of Her Majesty. You are her latest toy. Be careful when she tires of you. And she will, mark my words. She will. The Queen's heart is the icy pole of this world.' He flung the empty goblet into the flames. 'We live in her perpetual winter.'

32

Eliza drove them to Melrose Abbey – their last stop for the day – gabbling on about its history in an excited fashion: 'Cistercian Order ... Powerful Abbey ... Linchpin of Scottish history ... The wizard Michael Scot is said to be buried there ... Oh! And they found the heart of Robert the Bruce there in 1997, possibly... It was originally intended for the Holy Land.'

Janey made polite noises, but her thoughts were elsewhere. Nose pressed to the window, she gazed out at the three dark masses of the Eildon hills, which according to her driver-guide, had been cleft in twain by said wizard ('or rather his demon').

She felt equally sundered.

Although on the surface Fingal Lewis annoyed her with his cocky manner, there was something about him which deeply stirred her, in a way she found alarming.

She tried to think chastely about Allen back home, plugged in and comatose.

All because of her.

Janey felt a sense of duty towards him. And more. She hadn't fallen head over heels – too many times around the block for that – but did feel relaxed in his company. If it was a slow-burn thing that one day might flare up into love the Hallowe'en attack had snuffed out that hope, it seemed. Or had the flames simply been banked down? A peat-fire, burning underground? She felt safe with him. He was a solid – whileas this Fingal guy was wholly 'other'. Scottish ... mercurial ... There was a frisson of risk about him. He was a dark horse, for sure. Irresistible to some, no doubt. Janey bridled at the thought of being just another notch on his bed-post. She would do all she could to prevent that from happening!

And yet ... the heart was a treacherous beast – like Robert the Bruce's, it had a tendency of ending up in the wrong place.

'Here we are!' Eliza pulled into the Abbey carpark. 'Another romantic ruin!' She zipped up and jumped out. 'Oh, and look, isn't that an eagle? Perfect!'

Janey reluctantly got out of the car and lit up, drawing on the roll-up for warmth. It was yet again a brisk day in the Lowlands. Apparently it was 'spring-like', but she wasn't convinced. She pulled her fleecy collar up around her neck, sympathizing with the bedraggled bird of prey shivering wretchedly in the skeletal branches of a dead oak.

'You should get one of those electronic filter thingies. It'll help you to quit.'

Janey blew a pall of smoke into the air, which was snatched quickly away. 'Maybe I don't want to.'

Eliza screwed her nose up. 'Do you want to get lung cancer?'

'No, I just ... need one now and then.'

'That's the nicotine addiction.' Eliza rifled in her daysac, and pulled out her well-thumbed guidebook.

Janey turned on her heel to her companion. 'Speaks little miss squeaky clean. Jeezus! If I wanted a conscience I would have brought my own, thanks.'

Eliza furrowed her brow, pretending to look up the Melrose Abbey listing.

For a while they stood hunched against the cold wind, facing the empty gothic arches. Finally, Eliza whispered 'Sorry.'

Janey drew upon the butt, crushing it under her heel. 'Never mind. C'mon, show me this ruin – but can we leave out the romance?'

Eliza hazarded a smile. 'You can take the romance out of the ruins...'

'...But not the ruins out of romance?'

They laughed, which broke the ice, and arm-in-arm they walked towards the Abbey entrance.

The attendant offered them the audio guide, but Janey declined. 'I've got my own, thanks.'

Janey dutifully listened as Eliza filled her in on the Abbey's history – pointing out features, such as an eroded carving of angels with musical instruments. 'They could be cousins of the figures in Rosslyn, one of which is shown playing the bag-pipes – the earliest known depiction of...'

'They could be fairies,' Janey mused, scrutinising them with fascination.

'Well, Kirk said of the Good Folk that they were halfway betwixt man and angel. And these look pretty fallen to me.'

Janey started to trace the carving with a finger, until Eliza gave her a look. Plunging her hands in her pockets, they walked on. 'What do you make of Fingal?'

Eliza gave her a look. 'Well, he's handsome, rich, talented, interesting...'

'I can hear the silent 'but'. Go on...'

They had reached the main altar – a lichened slab covered in puddles. 'Mm. Not marriage material?'

Janey rounded on her – 'I wasn't talking about marrying the man – I just wanted your opinion!'

Eliza held up her hands. 'Sure! Sure! All I'm saying is ... you might not want to take him home to your mother...'

Janey rolled her eyes.

'But spend a weekend in a castle? You betcha!' She looked at Janey, who was trying not to bite a fingernail on her strumming hand. 'Unless of course, you have a better offer...?'

Janey hadn't talked about Allen yet, but now she felt she needed to. 'Okay, time to me to 'fess up. Seems like the right place.'

Eliza looked at her with concern. 'I'm all ears.'

As they walked amid the grand ruins, Janey talked low. 'I've got a boyfriend ... we only met in the fall ...'

'That's great!'

She paused to look at the cold stone, hoping to tease a meaning from it. 'He's in a coma.'

Eliza pulled a face, looking suitably mortified. She mulled over the fact. Then piped up: 'That's a Smith's song isn't it?'

Janey gave her a glare.

'Sorry. *Mea culpa*. My family motto. Please, carry on.'

'If it wasn't for Allen – I wouldn't be here. He arranged everything. And if it wasn't for me ... he wouldn't be in the state he's in.'

Eliza started to mouth a question, but checked herself. Instead, she gave Janey's hand a comforting squeeze. 'We all do things we regret. Better than not having acted at all. Sometimes ... I wish I was braver. More like you.' She gave Janey a furtive look, before turning away to hide her blush.

They sat down on a bench.

'Oh, I wouldn't recommend it. You have got your shit together. Look at me, a mess!'

Eliza offered a tissue.

Janey dabbed her eyes, and blew her nose. 'Thank you.' She put on a brave smile. 'Hey, check this out. You're gonna love this!' She pulled out the biscuit-tin from her bag.

'Ooh! I've been dying to ask...What's inside?'

Janey stroked the embossed design, the paint long-since worn away. 'A box of

memories...' She carefully opened it and showed Eliza.

'It's full of leaves!'

'From the mountain...' She sifted through the mulch of memories, indicating the various treasures. 'That one belonged to Mom; that one to *her* mom; and so on. Back through the ages – all the way to ... back here.'

'Oh, how wonderful! May I?'

'I'm not sure – if you don't mind... It sounds kinda crazy, but when I pick them up I hear stories. Their stories. I'm worried if someone else handles them, they'll mix 'em up with their own.' Janey realized she had let the woman from Ohio on the flight handle the bow-tie. After that, she had gone off the idea.

'Psychometry, crikey! I understand. Sounds like you have a gift, Janey.'

Janey bit her lip. 'That's what I'm worried about.'

'Why? Isn't it a blessing?'

They had reached a side-chapel. Janey looked through the empty window arches and came to a decision. 'Seems more like a curse. It's brought nothing but misery to me. All my life I've tried to drown it out...'

'Why?'

'Because it's terrifying!' Janey's eyes shone with fear as she gesticulated wildly. 'You ... see things.'

Eliza gazed through the gothic arch dreamily. 'I'd love to be able to ...'

'No you wouldn't – believe me!' Janey was surprised by the vehemence of her answer. 'Imagine if everything that you experienced seemed ... just plain unreliable. That you could never trust anything. That you could never be sure when you might suddenly be blasted with some freaky CGI shit!'

'A kind of bifocalism. Reminds me of that William Stafford poem...'

'Fuck that. This isn't some academic research project. This is my *life*! Not all of us live in ivory towers, lining our walls and minds with books to protect us from the big bad world.'

Eliza got up. 'I'll leave you and your box in peace. I don't want to pry.' Walking stiffly away, she called back, her voice muffled by the wind: 'I'll be over there if you need me.'

Janey barely noticed her go, absorbed by the whispering from within. She found her hand alighting on the ceramic double-mask depicting tragedy and comedy entwined upon their axis. She flipped it one way, then the other, until she found herself slipping into a trance.



Janey blinked and was suddenly back in the ruins of the Abbey. Sightseers milled about her, gazing at stone-work and empty arches while listening to their audio guides. The mask was still in her hand, feeling cold and lifeless now. She carefully put it back in the tin; the tin back in her bag. Shuddering, she pulled her coat closer around her.

There was no sight of Eliza and Janey felt a sudden twinge of guilt at her brusqueness. Jeez, she was getting crabby!

Eliza was an angel, and she didn't deserve her sisterly friendship.

To be alone here ... like poor Constance. She shuddered.

What a life filled with tragedy. Her mother; her sister; her niece. A husband who bunks off across the ocean.

Ever since arriving in Scotland, the memories had been getting easier to access, to experience. They didn't freak her out at much. Funny what you could get used to...

Each object was a stepping stone, leading back to Kirk. She was close now. So close.

But she felt hemmed in by ghosts. By the demands of the dead.

The grey walls of the Abbey closed around her.

She got up and quickly strode out into the open, beyond the ruins, to the iron-railing surrounding the grounds.

Looking out across the rain-darkening hills, she felt a pang of loneliness.

The image of Fingal Lewis came to mind, his invitation hanging in the air.

She chewed on a bit of skin and scryed the pregnant clouds for an answer.

'Screw it.'

You only have one life, she brooded. When will I get another chance to spend a weekend in a Scottish castle? Besides, she could handle herself – used to countless drunken passes, she was the mistress of the brush-off. Easy conquest, no way? It would be worth it, just to give him a taste of his own medicine.

Just as she pondering what to do about Eliza – whether to have her along or not – she appeared, relief pouring out of her. 'Hey, there you are! I've been looking all over.'

'Born to stray from the path, that's me.'

'Have you, um, finished?'

'Yeah, sorry for being a bit ... sharp back there.'

Eliza adjusted her glasses, and shrugged. 'Doesn't matter. We're all touchy, when it comes to family stuff. One big raw nerve!'

'You're a darling. Hey, let's go and get a drink. Live a little! We don't want to end up like a pair of nuns do we? Do you know any good watering holes?'

Eliza rifled through her bag. 'I'll look in the guidebook.'

'Nope!' She placed her hand upon it. 'This time we're going to follow our noses. Those things take all the fun out of discovering something. A bit of risk is good for you. C'mon!'

I was finally mercifully allowed to return to my chambers, and there, after washing the grime of my brush with death away, I collapsed in a deep slumber – exhausted.

In the middle of the night – I know not what o'clock – I awoke, stiff from my fall but wide awake. The storm, howled outside: hail flinging itself against my casement like the discharge of blunderbusses. The fire was low in the grate and, pulling a robe around me to hold off the chill, I stoked it back into life and sat gazing into its restless flames. Oh, how I yearned for a wee dram then, but the only spirits available here were dangerous absinthe-like concoctions, such as the less salubrious dens of London proffer. The last thing I needed was to acquaint myself with the green fairy. I was developing an aversion to all things Fey. I needed my wits about me in this place to pierce the veil of glamourye that enshrouds it. The discussion with the Lord of the Wild Hunt had been disturbing. His blasphemy niggled me and now, in the dead of night, I thought of a thousand responses. Yet despite his abhorrent opinions and personal hygiene (let alone his horns) he had nonetheless saved my life. And, further, he had given me something precious ... hope!

The fog of the last few days lifted; the miasma of the Mundane Glass blasted away by the encounter with the Cailleach and the Wild Hunt. I had let myself slip these last few days ... nay, years! Gwynn had shaken me awake again. I must not lose focus. I shall remain ever constant and wait for an opportunity to present itself. Patience, he said. Patience! According to him, my escape might be possible, in time. And even if he is not exactly an ally, Gwynn is too disinterested in courtly affairs to be my enemy. Tyrius has made it plain he wishes to help. And there is one other who I would like to think is, if not on my side, at least not against me. Yet while I remain confined within this castle the chances of encountering him, and he being of aid, are minimal. And always Neath's spies are everywhere, ever vigilant, and the Queen's mood as fickle as the weather. Indeed, Gwynn suggests it is, in some way, the actual weather of this world. What froze her heart, I wonder – and will it ever thaw? Will this land of Winterheart ever know Spring?

33

Janey dropped Eliza back in Glasgow city centre. It was already dark and bitterly cold so they didn't linger. 'Thanks for the guiding and company!' she called through the open passenger door.

'No problem. Anytime.' Eliza grabbed her daysac from the back seat. 'I'd better get back now though. Cats to placate. Tutors to feed. The usual stuff.' Her glasses beaded with a thousand versions of the street.

Janey smiled. 'You're one of a kind.'

'Haven't cloned me yet.' She stood hunched against the sudden sleet, collar pulled up around her neck. 'Will you be okay?'

'Sure. Lots to "process", as my workshop-junky friend says. I think a night of pampering back at the hotel is what I need. They have a spa there.'

'I'm jealous! But, really, give me a call if you need anything. I'm not far away.' She shuddered in the sleet.

'Go and get warm! You'll catch your death.'

Her friend waved and, hitching the pack to her shoulder, disappeared into the torrent of shoppers.

Janey watched her go. The fat streaks of sleet caught in the car's headlights. Around her, people were rushing home. Everybody had somewhere familiar to go to – except her.

That evening Janey had a long soak and lounged around in her room, flicking through mediocre channels with her remote control and ordering a pizza from room service. Finally, she found a re-run of the first *Highlander* movie – dumb-ass enough for her tired brain – and settled down to watch it with a mini-bottle of wine.

Fingal's card lay by the phone on her bedside, its sheen catching the flickering light of the movie.

She tried her best not to think about him. If she did she found herself first annoyed at his behaviour at Carterhaugh, then smiling to herself.

She knew she had a ghost to lay to rest. This wasn't meant to be a vacation. She had less than a fortnight left of her trip and seemed no closer to achieving that. Visiting Aberfoyle made her realise how distant she was from doing so. It was as though she was on the other

side of an uncrossable gulf. How on Earth would she ever cross?

And yet, had she not seen the spectral warriors in broad daylight? Her knowing was stronger here in the Old Country – it was close to the surface. But rather than filling her with panic, it felt more refined, more manageable, as though she was acclimatizing to a higher altitude.

By her bedside sat the biscuit-tin and the journal.

Marsha, Dotty, Molly, Fanny, Elizabeth, Clarence and Constance... Only Bethany, Marjorie and Margaret remained.

As the presence of her ancestors became more palpable Janey began to feel more fully herself – like a 'pie with too many apples', as her mother would say. She was a *McEttrick* and was starting to feel real proud of the fact. Descended from a long line of strong women! For all she knew she had her own clan tartan – a proper Highlander (or Lowlander). All she needed now was a claymore! It was hard not to be swept along by the spirit of the movie before her. She'd loved the film in all its Eighties cheesiness: a French man playing a Scot, and a Scot, a Spaniard. Serious men with pony-tails. And a supersonic Queen soundtrack. Ridiculous really, but enjoyable. And with these sudden flashes of ancestral lives, it was as though she was in her own *Highlander* film. The present could smash-cut into the past at any moment. It was amazing she wasn't losing her mind – what with Black Shucks and Men in Black after her, fairy shelf-stackers, ghost riders...

Eliza's friendship had helped.

And Allen's love.

She wondered how he was doing... And what of her wolf? God, how she missed them both! The pang of homesickness made her hit the mute on the remote, pick up her steel-string and start to play a melody into which she poured all her longing, the words of a verse forming in her mind.

Drained by the act of creation, Janey put the guitar back in its case. Her fingers were numb from the effort but it had been worth it.

This place certainly got the juices flowing.

She poured herself another glass of wine, and picked up her cell.

She rang Shelly.

'Janey darling,' crackled the voice from the other end. 'Great to hear from you! I want to

hear all about your adventures.'

'Allen. How is he?'

'Don't you fret, sister! He's stable.'

Janey let out her breath. 'I miss him. So much.'

'I know. It's hard. But just think you're having fun for both of you. It's what he would want. Anyway, tell me about the gig. How did it go?'

Janey took a sip and related an edited version of the concert and experiences of the last week.

When she finished Shelly filled her in on news from back home. Beyond the usual courtroom dramas and local scandals things sounded reassuringly normal.

'It's great to speak, Shel. Sometimes I think I'm losing it over here.'

'Hang on in there, girl. Enjoy your trip – you've earned it. We're holding up just fine. We'll still be here when you get back. Asheville ain't going nowhere in a hurry.'

'Send everyone my love – especially Allen and Mom. Give them a kiss from me.'

'Sure, hon. You look after yourself, you hear? Don't drink too much of that scotch. And watch out for them Scotch men too! I hear they're better on the rocks.'

Janey signed off, beaming. Shelley had been just the tonic she needed. But once more, silence descended.

Her eyes scanned the sterile décor and she sighed.

There is nothing lonelier than a hotel room in a strange city.

The phone sat by her bedside, waiting.

Janey tapped the tin with her finger-nails.

On a whim, she pulled out the rosary.

Only the mouth-piece and dancing shoe remained.

She let her fingers gently caress the beads. She clicked off the light for to see better. 'Bethany,' she whispered.

The walls of the hotel room, illumined only by the flickering screen, became a threadbare veil.



Janey stared at the ceiling, the rosary limp on her palm.

She shuddered.

Janey did not want to end up like that.

And yet ... Bethany was still part of her blood.

Would her ancestor be praying for her soul from beyond the grave?

Let her. I'm the one who is alive and kicking!

While she still had a pulse, Janey wasn't going to live life like it was all a warm-up act for the afterlife.

Outside her hotel room she heard a man and a woman stumble to a door, fumble with the entry card, sniggering. A click. A pause. Then, muffled music.

She found herself wondering what visiting Fingal would be like. She tried to convince herself that it was his lifestyle she was interested in. The romantic allure of a Scottish castle was irresistible – never mind anything else!

Well, there was only one way to find out.

She clicked on the light.

Bleary-eyed, she checked the time. It was 2.34am.

Yawning, she shuffled to the bathroom and splashed her face. Then she went to the mini-bar and helped herself to a whisky miniature. That'd knock her out. She heard Shelly saying 'grape and grain is asking for pain,' but her glass of wine was hours ago. She poured some into a tumbler provide, then flopped back onto the bed and took a sip. Sighing, she stared at the light fitting directly above her.

Then she picked up the phone and dialled Fingal's number.

To her surprise, he picked up the phone.

'Oh, hi! It's Janey. Sorry to ring you so late.'

'Ja– Hold on a midge!' There was the sound of him turning off a loop machine and putting down his guitar. 'No problem. Nice to hear from you.'

'You're up late...'

'So are you! I've been working on a new song. What's your excuse?' She could hear the smile in his voice.

'I ... couldn't sleep. Body clock still hasn't sorted itself out.' They let the lie hang there for a moment. 'I was wondering ...'

She waited for him to reply but he patiently waited.

'Would it be okay to take up your kind offer?'

The sound of him lighting a cigarette, inhaling, then blowing out again. 'Sure, no problem. It'll be nice to show you the place. I think you'll like it.'

'I've never seen inside a Scottish castle before – let alone stayed in one.'

'Well, now's your chance. When do you want to come over?'

'How is the weekend looking...?'

'You mean tomorrow – Friday?'

'Sure; or Saturday if you're busy...'

Sounds of him taking another puff. 'Tomorrow's fine. I'm just noodling about up here – trying stuff out for the next album. Hell, maybe we might even end up writing a song together and getting you on as a guest artist!'

'Wow, that'd be ... But really, I'm just honoured to be allowed into your home.'

'The pleasure will be all mine. I love entertaining. I'll rustle something up. Is your friend coming too?'

Janey held the receiver for a moment. Her heart was racing. 'No. Just me.'

'Cool. What time...?'

'Um, I've no idea how long it'll take...'

'From Glasgow? About an hour and a half. Avoid the rush hour and you'll be fine. Stop off at Rest and Be Thankful and enjoy the view.'

'Oh, thank you! That's so kind. Can I bring anything?'

'Just your good self. I've plenty of wine, bedding, towels – even my bachelor fridge is quite impressively stocked. Any weird dietary needs bring what you require – otherwise, I'll manage. So seeya tomorrow. You've got my mobile in case you get lost – but don't rely on it.'

The signal is patchy round here. Just ask a local if you get stuck. The natives are generally friendly.'

'Great. Seeya.'

'Drive safe. Follow the song.'

There was a click as Fingal put the phone down, leaving the burr of the tone.

Janey's heart raced. She couldn't believe she'd gone and arranged it! She felt an illicit thrill and a pang of guilt – but it was too late to back out now.

She slowly put the phone down. 'In for a penny...' she said to herself, then downed the rest of the whisky and ice. It hit the back of her throat like a ball of fire and snow and her head swirled.

It is Imbolc Eve here. For the Tramontaine, whose customs and manner the Subterraneans most closely resemble, the festival is sacred to St Brigid, whose flame is kept burning in the church at Kildare in Erin, so I am told. Normally it would be the time when the ewes would start to drop their lambs, whose gambolling in the fields brings joy to the heart. It is a festival sacred to women's mysteries, to childbirth. As new life returns in the thawing fields, so does it stir hope in all hearts, even heathen ones. Spring brings with it the renewal of Creation – and in this wintry landscape it is not hard to yearn for that. I see it in the eyes and demeanour of the Court. The endless merriment of Yule pales. Without its frivolous distraction, the Fey become melancholic. Whether it is through an excess of feasting or an imbalance of the humours, or perhaps the sapping pull of the Mundane Glass, who could say? But they wander the draughty castle as gloomy as I. But then, when winter seems the bleakest, nature amazes us all with the first shoots of resurrection: snowdrops. I've heard they've been espied in the woods nearby – though I am of course prevented from making a survey myself. Yet the news gladdens my heart. This evening there is a special service in the great Chapel – the place is illuminated with candles, and I am reminded that to Christian souls it is Candlemas – when the candles of the household are blessed. Every year I would oversee the polishing of the candlesticks – how the church silverware gleamed! Our modest Chapel filled with light, bedighting the dark days of winter.

Here, I kept to my rooms – I couldn't stomach another one of Bellirummer's distasteful sermons. And tomorrow the whole Court moves – as it is their custom every

quarter. The servants are devilishly busy, making ready for the 'flytting', as they call it – supplies are packed, linen, clothing, books, instrument, barrels of mead and wine, salted beeves, great rounds of cheese, games for the children, outlandish ornaments – the place is being stripped in readiness. The Fey are by no means sensible in their selection. Many are in a tizz deciding what to wear – anybody would be forgiven for mistaking it as a fools' pageant, rather than a practical matter, all bladdersticks and buffoonery. Yet the flytt, I am informed, is to 'keep the energy of the land flowing, to beat the bounds of the Realm, to honour the spirit of place. And to blow away the cobwebs.' I must admit the prospect of leaving the castle fills me with delight – this infernal place has been my prison for too long.

And I cannot help wondering – will it provide me with an opportunity? A glimmer of hope has returned. May it not be a false Spring.

34

The castle stood on a fist of granite overlooking the long, narrow loch – a burnished broadsword sheathed by dark hills and the knuckled targe of the ben dominating its head. Janey whistled. It was like some picture postcard or Discovery Channel documentary.

As Janey pulled onto the gravel parking bay she noticed that the 'castle' was really a grandiose Victorian folly with a token turret and redundant crenellations, but this didn't take away from the romantic effect.

She killed the engine and got out, pulling her coat close around her against the chill.

The sun was low in the sky and streaked the sky with a fiery red. The place seemed perfectly positioned for the sunset, which pierced the loch with its final glory, making the old stone glow.

'Shepherd's delight?'

Fingal, dressed comfortably scruffily in an Arran sweater and jeans, gestured to the sky, then held out his arms in greeting. 'Hey, nice to see you.'

They embraced warmly, perhaps lingering a fraction longer than they should.

It was Janey who finally pulled away. 'This place is amazing!'

'Ach, the ancestral pile. Been in our family for generations...'

'Really?'

'No. I bought it with the royalties from our 'Cailleach's Washtub' album when it went platinum. Been abandoned for years – needed a lot of work. Still ongoing, as you can see...'

Half the castle, the half hidden in shadow, was covered in scaffolding.

'These places cost a fortune to maintain. I just hope my Muse keeps bestowing her favours upon me. C'mon, let me show you around.'

Fingal gallantly helped Janey with her bags. A red setter came bounding over, wagging its tail.

'Who's this handsome fellow?'

'That's Fergus, belongs to the housekeeper, Nancy, although anybody think he was the Laird.'

Janey fussed him. 'He's a looker, a ladykiller no doubt.'

'And he knows it – charms everyone who comes. Resistance is futile.'

They went into the entrance hall, Fergus skittering on the stone floor.

'Wow!'

Janey looked around. The entrance hall was dominated by a suit of armour and a grandfather clock. A flight of stairs led to a stained glass window, which caught the dying light. From the ceiling hung a candelabra made of antlers.

'A family heirloom?' Janey pointed at the armour.

'No – antiques fair. The clock is though. Let me show you your room, after a cuppa. Give you the grand tour.'

Fergus went to follow them up. 'He'll have to stay down here I'm afraid.'

'He's probably wanting a tip.' Janey patted him one more time and he gambolled off to the kitchen.

'Does Nancy live in residence?'

'No, she's got a house just along the shore at Mickleton. Comes twice a week to stop the place looking like a complete tip. Friday isn't normally her day, but when I heard you were coming I called for help.'

'Hope I didn't put you to any inconvenience?'

Fingal lugged Janey's luggage up the stairs. 'Not at all – as I said, love having guests. You might have seen this on 'Atlantic Ceilidh'? There's a whole bunch of folk coming here in a couple of days time after the festival wraps up – so this is the calm before the storm. You're welcome to stay and join in – since you're a booked act too – though you may have to fight for the best bathroom in the morning!'

Janey looked at the stained glass window – an image of some clan chieftain defending his land, standing on a rock, raising a sword, as his men looked on. A goddess placed the laurel of victory on his head. 'I thought I recognised this place from somewhere!'

'We've had some quite big names over the years – but Fergus always steals the show.'

Fingal dumped her bags in her room. 'Here you are! Make yourself at home.'

'Thanks.'

'I'll start on the dinner. Holler when it's in the oven and give you a tour if you like?'

'Sounds great.'

He gave her an inscrutable look and left.

It was a pleasant, medium-sized bedroom with a patchwork quilt on the plump single bed, and other homely touches that Janey was sure were not Fingal's. The housekeeper's? Possibly.

She unpacked a few things, then flopped onto the bed with a contented sigh. She gazed up at the ceiling with a big smile on her face.

Well, here we are.

She was filled with a restless energy, but there was nothing to do before dinner, and so she reached for the journal.

I am slowly thawing out as I write this – wrapped in a thick blanket by a roaring fire. Mercifully, my hands have started to work again. I feared I would have frostbite, but they have wondrous herbs and unguents here. A cool-eyed elf maid rubbed a warming balsam into them – the look she gave me inscrutable. I will say this for them – the Fey have the magic touch when it comes to the healing arts. Their longevity attests to this. From what I can gauge, except for catastrophe, fatal accident, or mortal blow – they can live a long time. Physical sickness does not seem to affect them – only a malaise of the spirit. When they are tired of life they can simply choose to fade away.

After the fiasco of the last couple of days, the atmosphere in the castle seems the lowest it has been. If it were possible to die of disappointment I think the toll would be higher than it already is... Let me recollect while the memory is still fresh.

We set off at the crack of dawn, the Court brimming with reckless energy and high spirits as though it was a St. Stephen's Day hunt. A light snow was falling but that did not dampen the unseemly exuberance. Bedizened in bright furs and cloaks the courtiers played snowball fights and slid about on the frozen puddles, all the world like excited school-pupils. The knights of the realm tried to remain dignified, but even they roared and clapped each other on the back as they toasted the Queen's health with a stirrup cup. Yet they all looked smart when Neath appeared, scowling at the weather. The chamberlain joined Bellirummer in an ornate black carriage. Before pulling down the window, he called out to me: 'I hope you enjoy fresh air, Reverend.' He snapped his silver fingers and the carriage set off, guarded by Neath's own special elite – cloaked in black, skull-faced helmets of chased silver, with deadly Saracen blades at hip, gripped by bone-white gauntlets.

Everyone gave them a wide berth.

With much to do, the procession began to make its way out of the Courtyard – clattering and trundling over the narrow drawbridge in tedious manner. I was given a

seat in a haywain, the driver swaddled in a stinking blanket, wedged in next to servants and livestock.

From my hard, high seat I could see the ravine plummeting far below as we crossed the bridge.

I drank in the fresh air and light – the first time I had been outside the castle walls for a quarter of a year, by my reckoning. By the clock of God's acre? I dread to think. Time freezes and melts at different velocities across the co-hemispheres. On Earth it melts as an icicle in the Spring, the days dripping away with prodigal deliquescence.

As we wended our way along the edge of the ravine it began to snow heavily.

Beyond me I heard shouts of 'The Queen!' and above me soared a dark shape. Straining my neck, I recognised Gwynn and his phantom pack. The servants in the cart looked on with adoration – cheering and waving. 'Look! It's the Wild Hunter with Her Majesty!'

I thought I caught a glimpse of the Horned One, glaring down with his furious gaze.

After this flurry of excitement we settled into the rhythm of the journey. The servants blethered away, sharing all the gossip of the Court – but the tittle-tattle soon faded into the background as I savoured the view, the felicitous feeling of space.

I looked back at the castle – too long had I been held captive within its walls.

I drank down the chill air like the finest vintage. High above a golden eagle circled in the silvery heavens and it seemed to express all the joy in my heart. It cried 'freedom!' I took in the terrain like a thirsty Musselman in the desert drinks from a well.

As we progressed into the forest which stretched into the distance, the snow came down more heavily, each flake a fist of white, and I huddled in my blanket – reflecting on the previous day, when I had visited the library...

...

'I am running low on paper. Could you spare a quire or two?'

The lie was a pale one, but a lie nonetheless. I would pray for forgiveness.

Grumbling, Moudewort shuffled off and eventually returned with a brand new journal, identical in style to the one in my chamber.

'Use it wisely,' the librarian remonstrated, scowling at me over his pince-nez. 'It

is worth more than a year's tithing. Janus parchment, so it is named – whatever is written on it appears in its cousin here in the library, and vice versa. In such manner, when the Court takes to the road for its quarterly flytting you know a version is always safe back here. Our scholars find it most useful in their field research. Some have gone for years exploring obscure arcana in the distant corners of the kingdom. It is fascinating, reading about their latest discoveries...'

I thanked him, and made a nonchalant remark about the location of my journal's reflex.

Ascending the ladder and projecting himself with dizzying speed around the counter-rotating shelves, his nimble fingers quickly located the request.

Returning, he proudly showed me my own doppelganger journal.

There was my hand, and every word I had written for all to read, as I had suspected.

Privacy is one luxury not available – at least to guests of Her Majesty.

We dwell in a Castle of Glass.

Moudewort mounted the ladder once more and slipped the volume back into its niche.

I carefully noted its location, as though memorising the intricate mechanism of a safebox.

'There is one other thing you could help me with. It's for my studies...'

With the tome under my arm, I thanked the librarian, and retreated before he regaled me with further arcane digressions.

In my mind a plan was already formulating...

Back in my room I perused the tome I had borrowed from the library: the Encyclopaedia Fatanica (Volume IX). Here I studied about Janus parchment. The two batches of fibre ('Pan-reed', whatever that is) are prepared side-by-side, one from midwinter to midsummer, the other midsummer to midwinter, one in moonlight and the other in sunlight, until, when deemed ready, they are folded together in a secret fashion. They are made into a single volume, and then carefully separated by a method passed down through the Guild of Bibliomancers. The two edges match precisely – identifying its cousin. What is written in one is faithfully rendered in the other, the shadow copy.

Janey looked at the journal in her hands with fresh eyes, turning it over and inspecting the rough end-papers, smoothing her fingers along the fibres of the paper. Had this been somehow smuggled out ... of *Elfhame*? The leather-bound rectangle suddenly seemed like a doorway into another world – a portal through which she could so easily fall... Every time she read more of Kirk's swirling hand, it felt harder to return. The entries sucked her back in.

I returned in the dead of night – Moudewort's fitful snoring making me stop and start. Lanthorn in hand I navigated the shelves, a perilous endeavour in the semi-darkness. The planetarium gave off much welcome additional illumination, each planet glowing according to its chart. Nevertheless, it was hard to locate my niche amid the spinning volumes. The librarian snorted and turned. I feared he would wake, but Moudewort resumed his dusty dreams. As I pushed the ladder onwards I at last glimpsed that which I sought and lunged out for it, nearly losing my balance. Teetering, I carefully, carefully slipped it out of the shelf, and into my cassock.

Breathing again, I descended.

Returning to my chamber like a thief in the night, I closed the door, my heart beating wildly.

I placed my contraband next to its original – flipping through I could see it was identical in every way, right up to the most recent entry.

I wrapped this twin in a cloth and secreted it beneath a loose stone.

From now on, what I wrote would be for my eyes, and those of my descendants, only.

I shall maintain a fake journal, the twin of which now sat alone in the library – back-filling it with anodyne observations of my meek existence. A couple of nights' work should be sufficient to bring it up to date. I have ever been a keen keeper of notebooks, recording within them my daily thoughts and reflections.

The reflex of the original journal, the one in which I now write, shall be destined for the 'Iron World', if an opportunity presents itself.

My mortal clay is earthbound, but my words, my words can fly.

A gong from downstairs made Janey start. Blinking, she looked about the room, re-acquainting herself with her surroundings. She closed the journal, placed it under her pillow,

and, checking her hair, descended.

'How's your room?'

Janey walked into the kitchen – as impressive as the rest of the 'house' (which seemed too humble a term). She was a little dazed from the journal's latest revelations, but was getting used to having these two realities co-existing within her. 'It's ... lovely. This place rocks!'

'Oh, you haven't seen half of it yet. But thirst things first? Coffee? Tea? Or something stronger?'

'Tea for now would be great.'

She looked at him askance. This 'domestic' Fingal, playing the host, was another side to him. Was it also a performance? When would the mask slip? And what lay beneath? Or was she just being cynical and suspicious? He seemed relaxed and sincere, an unfeigned manner at odds with the man in the club. Janey could see Fingal had been preparing dinner – various piles of chopped vegetables and herbs lay on the work surface. He got out two mugs, dropped in tea-bags, and poured on some steaming water from the kettle on the range. 'I'm making a kale and mushroom lasagne for later – hope that's okay?'

'Sure, that's great.' She accepted the mug, wrapping her hands around it. 'Thanks.' She'd put on an extra sweater and her shawl around her shoulders.

'These old places can be chilly – but the kitchen always warm; and I'll get the big fire place going later. Biscuit?'

'No thanks. This is fine.'

'Want the tour then?'

She looked at him and smiled. He was like an eager puppy.

'Sure, why not?'

And so Fingal got up and gestured in a courtly fashion. 'Step this way, my lady.'

Janey nodded demurely. 'Why, thank you kindly, sir!'

Each of the guest rooms was named and themed after a character from Celtic mythology: Finn, Dagda, Danu, Aengus, Amergin, Grainne, Cuchullain, and so on into unpronouncability. There was a small chapel, now used as a dining hall and entertainment space, with a stage and PA set up, long medieval style drapes, wrought iron candlestands, and carved wooden chairs. 'I call this room Tara, the Hill of Kings – the great gathering space where the tribes

come together. We've had some blinding nights here.'

I can imagine.'

Janey noted the table, this time, was laid just for two. How many other women had been 'entertained' here, she wondered?

He led her up some narrow winding stairs to a minstrel gallery where an impressive selection of instruments was arranged by a mixing desk and various pedal boards. 'My toys... This is where I like to noodle about.'

Janey ogled the equipment enviously.

'Maybe we can have a jam up here later...?'

'That'd be nice.'

'Or, if it's too chilly we can retire to the billiard room...!' He led her through to main upper room on the first floor where there were several comfortable looking chairs, including window-seats, around a billiard table. A large fireplace with an ornately-carved mantel and smoke-darkened inglenooks, laid with logs in readiness, dominated the space. 'I should get this going – so it's nice and cosy for later.'

While Fingal attended to the fire, Janey explored the room, lingering over its antique prints, ancient maps of the area, platinum records in frames, album covers, the promo-shots of famous guests signed and dedicated to Fingal. There was a guest book filled with heart-felt thanks for wonderful sessions.

'We often end up in here... The whisky starts to flow and the instruments come out – y'know how it is.'

Janey smiled, thinking about the sessions back home she'd enjoyed with her boys. 'Oh yeah, sure, but not in such grand surroundings! We sit out on the porch and knock back some moonshine, making some of that old timey mountain music.'

'Really?'

'Not quite. It's normally someone's garage, a tub full of cold ones, and some ear-splintering rock classics. It's quite cathartic – for us, if not the neighbours.'

He held up his hands. 'You got me back. It's a draw.'

The kindling had caught. Fingal put the guard on.

'Something smells good.'

'Back to the kitchen – it should be pretty much done.'

'Great, I'm suddenly starving!'

'Excellent! I like a woman with a good appetite.'

I'm sure you do, thought Janey to herself.

The cork popped and Fingal poured his guest a generous measure, then one for himself. He sat down at a right angle to Janey at one corner of the enormous table. Candles had been lit, limning the darkness.

It seemed terribly decadent to Janey, dining in such a large, grand space by themselves.

Fingal raised a glass, pausing to admire the firelight scintillating in its facets. 'Here's to friendship. Sláinte!'

They clinked glasses and the sound resonated in the hall.

'Tuck in while it's hot.'

Before them was a hearty spread. 'I'll win no awards.'

'Oh, this is real fine. You've gone to such an effort.'

He waved away the compliment. 'It's nae bother.'

In the background Celtic harp played on the surround sound system – some fancy Bang Olufsen affair.

'So how many ladies have you brought back to seduce here?' Janey asked nonchalantly, swilling the wine around her glass.

'Whoa! Where did that one come from? Warn me next time, won't you?'

'C'mon, Mister Lord of the Isle – are you planning on me being another notch on your four-poster?'

Fingal held his hands up in mock surrender. 'I wouldn't presume, jeez!' Shaking his head, he took a sip. 'Besides, I have an iron bedstead.'

Janey threw a scrunched up napkin at him.

Fingal laughed to himself. 'Now I know it's true.'

She frowned, annoyed at his private joke. 'I'm sure you can't resist enlightening me, so go ahead.'

'I read somewhere recently – in one of those glossy, insubstantial life-style magazines, so it must be true – that every woman has a Bluebeard Complex.'

She folded her arms. 'Oh, and what's that meant to be?'

'That you'll find a room with all my previous wives' heads in.'

'Will I? How many did you have?'

Fingal pierced a morsel and inspected it. 'Oh, I lost count after it reached double figures.' He devoured, smacking his lips.

'You're awful! You can see how women start to believe it. You're not exactly giving me peace of mind...'

'What would you like to know? My sexual history? Do you want to see the home movies?'

'Nah, I'll skip those. Just the honest truth will do.'

Fingal refilled his glass. 'More?'

Janey hesitated, then nodded.

'This is a big subject. Needs ... lubrication.' He took a swig, smacked his lips, and scrutinised the reflection of the candles on the goblet. 'Yes, I was married: twice. First time, we realised we wanted ... different things, and parted amicably. The second, less so. I have kid with the latter. Custody battles. Bloody nightmare. I get access every other weekend.'

'Boy or a girl?'

'A lad – although I'm worried he might have gender issues.' He looked downcast.

Janey bit her lip.

'What? It's no laughing matter. I don't want any son of mine ending up ... a daughter! Nancy boy, I could handle. In my line of work – you... get used to it. But a transgender son – c'mon! What would I be expected to call him ... her ... it?'

'With an attitude like that you're probably driving him to it.'

'That's no' fair. More likely, the bloody expensive school I pay for him to go to – that's enough to screw anybody up, going by the boarding-school survivors I know!'

He pulled out his phone and showed her a picture of an awkward looking boy hiding behind a long fringe. 'He's called Jack, or *Jackie* – as he prefers. I do love him to bits, but...'

'What?' Janey folded her arms.

He gazed at the image on the phone. 'I just don't want him to grow up having the piss taking out of him the rest of his life. I grew up in Glasgow on a hard estate – before I passed my eleven plus and got the hell out of there. Anybody who had long hair was due regular beatings. You had to be tough to survive. It's a hard world out there.'

Janey was touched to see this real side of Fingal. This wasn't his stage persona talking.

'Do you still keep in touch with your exs?'

He sighed. Took another swig. 'Only when it's absolutely necessary. I'm kinda mates

now with my first wife; we're like old buddies, y'know? But the second wife: she's pretty spiky. It was a difficult – and expensive – divorce. I'm sure she'd have my head on a spike if she could.'

'And since then...?'

Fingal raised his glass, swirling around its contents before downing the rest. He offered to top them both up. Janey declined. Shrugging, he replenished his. 'Oh, there's been the odd fling. They come and go. Groupies, sure – they're ten a penny on the road – but they just want a trophy shag to boast about to their mates. Another celeb selfie. Haven't met one yet who has actually been interested in the man-behind-the-pop-mask.'

Janey looked at him. He was an interesting fellow, there was no denying that. Such a contrast to the meat-head machismo of the men she knew back home – admittedly most of them encountered in roadhouses where she played.

Allen, of course, was the exception – he was everything Fingal wasn't, the moon to his sun. The former, thoughtful and learned; the latter extrovert, flamboyant, and charmingly uncomplicated. He seemed to live in an instinctive, sensual way – immersing himself in rich experiences, drawing to him interesting characters, anything to stimulate his song-writing. He was surprisingly fey for a lad from the Gorbals – but perhaps that had driven him to the other extreme.

Maybe his son was more like him than he realised, Janey smiled.

Perhaps he protested too much. How genuinely 'red-blooded' was he? She leaned closer, exposing the sly moon of her cleavage – letting her eyes catch the candle-light as she paid him close attention, laughing at his jokes, and tossing her mane of red hair back.

She felt relaxed. Perhaps more relaxed than she should. The wine was excellent, and it was filling her blood with an unquenchable fire. The CD changed and became something livelier – some jigs and reels.

Suddenly, she got up. 'Shall we dance?'

Fingal looked her up and down – she knew she presented an impressive figure. 'Sure, why not?'

They pushed back the chairs and swept across the floor in a dramatic gesture. 'Hold onto your hat, lady. I was born to ceilidh!'

They danced with ever-increasing wildness – ranging across the hall and up the spiralling stairs, until they landed in a laughing heap in the minstrel gallery on a pile of bean-

bags, with Fingal on top of Janey. Their faces were close together; bodies, pressed tight.

They collapsed in hysterics, but when this subsided, they looked at one another in a way they had not been bold enough to do before.

Fingal hesitated, even started to pull away, but Janey pulled him to her and kissed him full upon the lips. This contact sent a hungry fire through their bodies and before they knew it they were pulling each other's clothes off, as if desperate to access some hitherto hidden oasis.

They reached a point of no return as the music ended – breathing heavily and bejewelled with beads of sweat.

'Are you okay with this?' asked Fingal.

'What does it look like?' she smiled, her blouse undone and her skirt riding up around her waist.

'Then come with me. Let's go somewhere more comfortable.' And he led her through the castle – now transformed into something potently magical – to his bedroom, decorated in dark drapes, theatrical, like a stage set awaiting the players.

He lit some candles and put on some Jeff Buckley, and then he led her to the bed.

And here they made love until the small hours, brutally, tenderly – two instruments playing to one melody.

'Are you awake?' Fingal whispered.

'Yes.'

'I can't sleep either. Fancy a night-cap and a bit of a view?'

'Sure.' She slipped her hand in his and he filled two tumblers of good malt. 'Put the blanket around you. We're going up on the roof. You might want to bring your phone to take a pic.'

Fingal led her up a steep wooden set of stairs to a hatch. This led into an attic space, which led onto the roof.

'Wow!'

They looked out from the battlements over the loch, just catching the first light from the east. High above, stars were still visible.

'See those two?' Fingal pointed. 'Venus, the Morning Star, and Mercury. Love, and her messenger. It's where we get the word twilight from: two lights.'

Janey snuggled close, wrapped in her blanket and glad of the fiery warmth of the whisky.

'It's so ... peaceful here. So beautiful.'

It was true – they could hear no sound, no traffic, no planes. It could have been hundreds of years ago.

Then, boldly, the first bird began to sing.

'I love that bird – the pioneer,' murmured Fingal. 'What compels him to sing before any of his feathered friends? I think I understand. Silence is such a precious state – it's like ... virgin territory. You're the explorer. You sing the world into creation.'

As they sipped their malt they listened to the songbird. Slowly, others began to join it, until they was a chorus.

'Wait 'til spring really kicks in – the dawn chorus then, *that's* awesome.'

Janey caressed his cheek with a fingertip, eyes sweeping to the loch. 'This is pretty awesome.'

'I couldn't agree more.' He wrapped his arms around her; breathed her in.

They gazed hungrily at the sky until the first light broke through and they kissed, shivering and huddled together 'like teenagers at a festival' as Fingal put it.

Janey shuddered. 'Well, before we get all Woodstock...'

'Back to bed?' He offered his hand.

'Why not?'

She accepted his hand and they descended.

Overhead, an eagle circled in the morning thermals, the peace of the dawn split by its indignant cry.

Back in her own empty bedroom Janey's cell vibrated to life.

I was jolted from my reverie by the cart, which had become lodged in a deep rut of snow. What had begun as a light flurry had now turned into a blizzard. The merry spirits of earlier had melted away. Men cursed, babies cried, and women scolded. Horses whinnied as their masters tried to cajole them onwards. The procession ground to a halt, the snow starting to pile up against the carriages. At the front of the caravan the Bishop's coach was half-buried already.

Orders were barked and shovels broken out. Every able-bodied person (who was not of the Higher Court) mucked in. Songs were sung to keep the morale up. We managed to get a few carriages free from the rear of the train. These were loaded up with the majority of women, children and elderly – who were sent back to the castle with an armed escort to protect from wolves. The rest of us – about thirty wagons and carriages – accepted our lot and created what shelters we could; scavenging wood and attempting to light fires (the fir trees with their pine cones were surprisingly effective at this). We hunkered down for what was going to be a long night – the mood was still upbeat. Now the decision was made it seemed the menfolk (mostly) were determined to enjoy it – as indeed some clearly were. Strong, warming liquor was passed around and the songs around the campfire got bawdier.

It was around sunset – early, in the small days of winter – that I ventured off to attend to a 'call of nature' as I explained, not that the guards seemed bothered. With the collar and the blizzard to contend with they knew I wasn't going far. There was a weird light casting strange shadows on the snow; disorientating and disconcerting. I tried to relieve myself, but flinched at a movement in the undergrowth. I quickly covered my modesty and froze in my tracks. A feral growl arose out of the whiteness. Then I saw two lambent eyes and a shadowy shape prowling about. My heart was gripped with terror. I was defenceless – all I had was a single satchel which held my journal, pen and ink – and the spare, wrapped in tallowed hide.

Suddenly, the thing leapt and there was a blur of fur and fang.

Before I knew it I was on my back, the wind knocked out of me, and overwhelmed by the most rank odour that assailed my nostrils.

I cried out in alarm, but a sudden deposit of snow – shaken off the thick winter pelt of my attacker – made me cough and splutter.

Was I to be a wolf's supper?

Before I could contemplate this fate further a ragged laughter cut through the silence of the snow. I looked up and to my surprise, recognised my assailant. 'Hamish!'

The Urisg leapt off me, springing to his hooves. 'At your service!' He helped me to my feet and I indignantly brushed off the snow.

He wiped tears from his goatish eyes, waves of mirth racking his frame.

I stared in disbelief. 'How?'

'Bo'ca sniffs the wind. Knows a Flytting is a-happen. The Court makes plenty bash-bang, whoop-whoop.'

I nearly whooped for delight myself in that instant. 'By the Rood, it's so good to see you!'

The faun circled me in amazement, tugging at my cassock, sniffing the damp wool. He wrinkled his nose and spat into the snow. 'So, Reverend – enjoying the castle life by the looks of things...'

'I am trapped – this collar...'

He held up a gnarled hand. 'I know.' He lifted his head and showed me the scar that circled his neck.

'How did you break free of it?'

Hamish paced back and forth, looking nervously across to the direction of the caravan. 'Everything ... a price – if you pay.' He spat on his foul hand and then smacked it as though sealing a bargain.

My heart leapt in hope. 'Could you...?'

'No. I would not you became as I.'

For a while we stared into the gathering dusk.

'I ... cannot stay here long – if they catch me...' My friend turned to go.

'Wait! Could you perchance, do me a favour?'

He looked at me with his goat eyes, tilting his head in mockery. 'Fay your...?'

I pulled out the wrapped journal from my satchel.

'Could you get this ... back home. To any living relative?'

He examined it – nervously pawing over the swirling patterns of the cover. 'Sith-book.'

'It would be a way of me communicating with the outside.'

The Urisg pondered this request. 'Know a wayfarer. He cart it across Rift. Many perils. Sentinels like marsh-flitters. Nobody knows the Low Roads like he. You offer...?'

I thought quickly. The light was going. In the distance, men with torches from the caravan were searching – for me. 'Kirk!' I heard them cry harshly, as though summoning a dog to its master's heel.

I pulled the cross from around my neck – my most cherished possession. 'This.' I held it out to the faun, who looked at it warily. 'A cross for a crossing. Deal?'

The Urisg snatched it quickly and somersaulted away. 'The Road of Spring closed,' he called back, already a voice in the dark. 'The Mountain, pass not. Turn back.' His voice faded, just as the guards appeared – blinding me with their torchlight.

'You! Back to the caravan. Now!'

I happily obliged them.

That night was a cold one – bitterly cold – but a flame of hope flickered in my heart and kept me warm. Seeing Hamish had lifted my spirits. The thought of my journal reaching a living descendant who might be able to find a way to set me free gave me that rarest and most precious of commodities: hope.

When Janey next awoke it was late morning. Of Fingal there was no sign.

Bleary-eyed, she stumbled to the bathroom and stood in the shower until she woke up properly.

Towelling her hair, she gazed at the journal, its dark leather absorbing the light. A book that had crossed worlds – sent to her through the centuries!

An SOS from her own flesh and blood.

The weight of the responsibility was too much. How could she do anything? Saving *herself* from herself would be a start!

A gentle knock at the door made her snap out of her fug.

Fingal came in with a tray. He was dressed in jeans and a tartan shirt. 'Coffee and croissants for starters. There's porridge, juice, poached eggs and salmon, kippers, whatever you fancy, when you're ready. Get some sleep?' He poured and passed her a steaming cup of coffee.

'Yup, but probably not enough. My body is a little confused.'

'Aye, I know what you mean! But ... wasn't it worth it?' Her waggled his eyebrows and she laughed.

They clinked mugs and slumped on the bed, Janey leaning back on him.

Fingal's arm snaked across her chest, and he smiled.

On the morrow the blizzard had ceased. The sky had been scoured to a pristine blue and the sun glinted off the dripping branches. With a concerted group effort we were able to dig out the caravan and make a retreat – for the way ahead was deep in snowdrift as far as the natural gaze could fathom against the glare. In muted spirits, their incessant mirth long since faded, our bedraggled entourage returned to the Castle – solid and dark against the white. The train was abuzz with speculation – what will happen? This turning back was unprecedented. Never, in living memory – which for Elfkind is long indeed – had the quarterly Flytting not been observed. To remain in the same place for more than a season was anathema to them. They loved novelty, but in the manner they expected, on their terms. Scandal they could deal with, indeed they gluttoned on it, but crisis rendered them incapacitated.

Those who shared my crude shelter the previous night had marvelled at my fortitude and stoicism in the face of adversity. Yet, I have my faith, whileas they do not. Compassless, is it no wonder that they become lost?

Once the train was on its way – and the lower roads clearer of snow – the bishop's carriage trundled impatiently past, forcing everyone to the side of the road. An unshaven Neath glared out at me, wrapped in his furs like a bear.

I tried to restrain a smile.

Once all the business of our return was attended to – and what a to-do the swithering bampots made of it – I retired to my chamber with some relief. There, in the blessed warmth, I completed the copy of my journal and brought it up to date. I shall continue my candid dispatches in this journal in the hope they will be read by a living descendant who I beseech: secure my liberty! I do not know how this will be achieved, yet – but I will study the ancient texts. Somewhere there must be a clue. Has there been no prisoner of Elfhome who has escaped?

The answer sprang immediately to mind – Tam Lin.

Mayhaps the genesis of this strange fate might also be its solution.

Spell-bound. That was the right word for it.

At least Janey liked to fool herself that she was being *compelled* by some Celtic juju of her host to act the way she did.

But the truth was, she was having a ball.

All the tension of the last few days, weeks, months ... It had to be released somehow.

And released it was.

They made love off and on for the next couple of days – in different positions; in different parts of the house – honouring the different gods with propitiations of lust. It was just as well they didn't have neighbours, the noise they made 'like a couple of alley cats,' according to Fingal. 'Good job I asked Nancy to give this place a wide berth for a day or two!'

'How thoughtful of you...' Janey looked at him and frowned. She knew he was a dark horse, but couldn't help herself. It was as though they were consumed by a fire that threatened to destroy them if it was not fed with their lust. They ate odd things at odd hours; swanned around the house in gowns or nothing; had pillow fights, and mock jousts with French sticks. The best times of all were when they played music together with instruments, rather than their bodies. Fingal would strum along on a mandolin to a couple of Janey's numbers, and she would reciprocate on some of his. Their voices worked well together, like 'a smoke and a dram in a lonely bar', as Fingal put it. They ended up co-writing three songs – one, a bit of a gag ('Rockin' the Castle', with saucy lyrics and a jaunty rhythm); another, 'Moonlight on the Loch', an atmospheric love ballad; and the third, 'Bridge of Songs' about the meeting of their worlds, both individually and nationally – a Scottish/American romance. They burnt the midnight oil working on these, living off of pizza, pringles and beers. By the end their fingers were sore and their voices were ragged. It was Sunday night and they collapsed in front of the large screen plasma TV watching the latest special FX blockbuster, wrapped in duvets on the extensive couch, wine and chocolate at hand.

Fingal stroked her hair, copper in the firelight. 'If you were cat, you'd be purring right now,' he breathed softly to her and she snuggled even deeper into his arms.

'The guys are arriving tomorrow from the festival – plus film crew and entourage. This place is gonna be busy, but you're welcome to stay... We've been making great music together.'

Janey sighed. 'I know you mean it, and I have had a great time – but ... I should go. I have things to do.' She turned to him. 'But thank you Fingal – for everything. This has been magical. It really has.'

Once more they kissed and it felt like a farewell.

With renewed fire I ransacked the shelves for a copy of the ballad, but found none. Surprising in such a comprehensive collection of all things Fey. It was as though it had been methodically removed. Busts of Elfin worthies watched me, eyes glinting with sentience, making the hair on the back of my neck raise. I would have to attempt to reclaim it by memory. I have read it a few times out of curiosity and for the fragments of Fayrie takes it contains. It is within the chambers of my memory – and could in theory be reclaimed.

Indeed it must.

I had heard it recited from a traveller woman while undertaking field research. Half of it had been in their Gyptian tongue, but the gist of it was carried by her spunky performance. As I sat by the crackle and hiss of the sooty tinker's fire, the words and melody had sent shivers down my spine.

The next few days passed in a blur as I paced the chilly passageways of my prison, trying to jog my memory. I was not missed. The Court had withdrawn into itself in mourning, for they celebrated the death of Spring – that is how it seemed to them. They could not comprehend it, like a winter bird who goes to the pond to drink only to discover it is frozen; or its summer cousin who goes to fly south in the autumn and is prevented in doing so. Its every instinct cries – fly!

The Fey moped about the Court, drowning their sorrows, or consoled themselves with the Mundane Glass. They sat about, slumped on steps – head in hands, or gazing disconsolately over the white vistas. Some took to wearing black to show their grief and the fashion caught on. In satin or velvet, studded with gems or fretted with fine silver mesh, this latest fad became known as 'Mourning the Snowdrop'. With whitened faces and lugubrious manner, they paced the corridors, occasionally pausing to decorously dab a sequin-teared eye, or sniff into a laced handkerchief. In my dour cassock and collar I suddenly didn't feel so out of place! The Upper Court was not to be seen – as though a plague besieged the Castle, they quarantined themselves in their rooms. None sought confession, for there was no gossip to spill. The petty intrigues of the Court faded into irrelevance in the light of this new crisis. I noted, not for the first time, how easily they were crushed by the vicissitudes of life, how easily they gave up.

And so I was left to my own devices – I scoured the library but found no trace of the ballad, even in passing, except by telling absences (pages torn from anthologies; redacted passages). Moudewort was kept busy with enquiries about meteorological precedents and early accounts in the annals of Elfdom of disasters averted or overcome.

The epics of the past gained renewed popularity and days were spent in reciting them.

This inspired them for a while, and young hotspurs boasted about how they would sally forth and slay the White Dragon of Winter. How they would endure the great cold for the good of the people and push through the drifts in search of help. They would bring back Summer, the sun in their pocket. Briefly the excitement would build, and then break, like a small cheap vase.

Some did indeed venture forth, festooned with blessings, ladies' handkerchiefs, and talismans of protection, only to return snowblind, frostbitten, hypothermic, with teeth chattering, muttering about the White Death.

It was like watching a moth bash against the casement, intoxicated with the idea of light – in love with the thing that would destroy it.

Against this sadness I wandered the Castle, wracking my brains for fragments of the verse. I would mutter something half-remembered – then curse under my breath as it slipped away. Rags and tatters ... that's all I had. A head full of Bible and bits of folklore and not much else.

Then one day, in a dank, neglected lower spiral of the Castle, where shrouds of clammy cobwebs and slimy mould under foot may the going unpleasant, I came across a row of narrow casements.

I sensed the blinding snow beyond but only the faintest vestige of light penetrated that stygian place. How apt of my lot, I thought ruefully. I was reminded of Corinthians 13:12 and muttered it to myself: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.'

Then something pale caught my eye. A single detail was visible amid the begrimed pane: a white glove.

Excitedly, I recalled this motif... O, Simonides! The mnemonic was lodged in my brain. It was from the 'Tam Lin' ballad.

In a fever of excitement I wiped clean the vistas with my cassock – it could get no less filthy than it already was.

Slowly, a series of vibrant images delineated by lead were revealed in the stained glass. Before me, the whole arc of the ballad in prismatic detail!

I clapped my hands together. What treasure!

My eyes feasted on the forbidden colours.

It was morning and the mist hung over the loch like a dust-sheet. The mountains, lost in haze, seemed like a fading dream. Janey's bags were packed and deposited in the boot of the car. Fergus nuzzled her thigh, insisting on strokes, sensing her departure. Fingal hugged her for the fifth time.

'When will we see each other again?' Janey wondered.

'Well, the filming should be done in a couple of weeks. Then I need to start preparing for my tour.'

'I'll be heading home by then...'

'I can see you on the American leg. Let's hook up when I'm on the East Coast. I think I'm doing something down your way.'

The thought of seeing Fingal in America made Janey feel queasy. Two continents colliding: she worried it might be hers that would be pushed under.

'Let's ... keep in touch, and see how it goes.'

'Play it by ear?' Fingal winked. 'Sure. It's what we do best. Jeez, it's how we lead our lives, right?'

He gave her a final hug and a kiss on the brow. 'Take care, sweetheart – watch out for them Urisgs!'

And Janey closed the car door and taking a deep breath, started the engine and drove off down the gravelly track. She slotted in the CD Fingal had given her – a compilation of classic Blue Men tracks – and Fingal's voice growled over the opening chords of their big hit, 'Away, Laddie, Away.' She looked back one last time at the castle, Fingal waving at the door, sending a kiss across the air.

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A phone-call in the middle of the night jolted Janey awake. She was a little disorientated at first. Around her was darkness and white noise that she identified as the sterile ambience of a hotel room. But *which*? She'd slept in so many and they all blurred into one after a while. She would fall asleep in Knoxville and wake up in Chattanooga. In a recurring dream she had, Janey would enter a hotel in a random part of the world and end up in the same enormous lobby that connected it with all hotel entrances across the globe. Those revolving doors, she suspected, were portals into another dimension – a parallel hotel universe, an Akashic Record of bell-hops, mini-bars, shower-caps and *Alice-in-Wonderland* toiletries, with the same floral prints on the wall, and the same crap on the lonely channels of the hotel dead. She fumbled for the light; then picked up her cell.

'Mm-hello.' Janey rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Had she spent another night in the hotel bar when she got back from the castle? It was slowly coming back, accompanied by Feed-Me drumming inside her skull.

'At last! We've been trying to contact you for hours! Where the hell have you been? Over the hills and far away?'

'Sorry. Who...?'

'It's Quatie, you dumb-dumb. Can you hear me? The line's not great. Sorry if I've woken you, little bird – these time-zone things confuse the hell out of me – but I thought you'd better to know.'

There was something in Quatie's voice that made Janey's chest tighten. Normally, she'd be thrilled to hear from her friend. She knew how much Quatie disliked using the cell-phone – she'd probably borrowed a friend's on the Rez.

Janey looked at her messages. Nine missed calls, a couple of voice-mails, and a text.

'Oh fuck.'

Her head had been so full of Fingal when she'd left the castle she hadn't noticed. Then there was the driving on the wrong side of the road. Glasgow traffic. Returning the rental. By the time she'd got back to the hotel, she had been in need of a drink. Next thing she knew, she was getting an early morning call.

With shaking hands, she went to roll a cigarette, then remember the no-smoking rule. 'Fuck. Sorry. Not you. What is it?'

'It's Allen.' Sounds of Quatie's cats yowling, and an exasperated 'shushing'. 'He's taken a turn for the worse.'

Janey's heart sank like an elevator whose cable had snapped.

She should have seen this coming. But she'd been too busy enjoying herself.

Being unfaithful.

The room, half in shadow, took on the aspect of a film noir set. The dark rhomboids became more jagged, the bright angles isoscelean. She half-caught her reflection in the ever present hotel room mirror – blur of coppery hair, smudge of a face, white flesh illuminated livid orange by the touch-lamp.

'Oh God! What's wrong?'

'He's just ... fading away. Like he's given up.'

'I'll have to come back early—'

Quatie cut her off. 'There's nothing you can do, little bird. Seriously. I know Allen wouldn't want you to quit your hard-earned trip on his behalf. He'd be wanting you to enjoy it for him – the mountains, music and malt. I just thought you needed to know. Just ... be prepared.'

Janey imagined returning home to find Allen dead, too late to say goodbye.

Outside, a car hissed by in the rain, taking its light with it.

'I feel so ... ' The words coagulated in her throat.

'If you want to do something – go pray.'

'Pray? Where?'

'On a mountain. By a what-do-you-call-it – a loch? Have you found your Lake of the Wounded yet?'

'No... What do you mean?'

Quatie picked up one of her cats. Janey could hear it purring on her lap. The sound was reassuring.

As Quatie began to relate the tale, Janey reached for an emergency roll-up and lighter. Fuck 'em. She needed one bad. The burning tip and curl of smoke became the focus of her attention as her friend's voice took her on a journey.

Quatie finished her tale, leaving only the purring.

'I see.'

'Then what are you waiting for? There's not much time.'

Placing the receiver back in its cradle, Janey curled up into a ball and wept.

What had she done? It felt as though she was responsible in some way – crazy though it might seem. When she had been rutting like a goat with Fingal, Allen had been dying. How she loathed herself then, alone in that hotel room. She imagined the vitriol she would receive from friends and family if they knew.

Now wide awake and jittery – her mind like a bulb filament flickering off and on – Janey reached for her guitar and strummed a few chords. Normally, making music would soothe her, but she couldn't concentrate. Her fingers felt fat and useless, like they belonged to someone else.

Giving up, she opened the fridge and reached for a handful of miniatures. Which one would shrink her, let her slip down the hole in the ground that she wanted to swallow her up? She poured a couple into a glass and took a deep gulp.

Janey sat in the breakfast bar, gazing listlessly out at the grey day, a cup of coffee going cold in front of her, until she knocked it with her arm.

'Fuck.' She mopped up the dark pool spreading across the table as best she could using several napkins. It could have been a piece of concept art ... My Life: The Oil Spill.

Her heart was a black lake that morning.

The phone-call had been a shock. A wake-up call max. Yet amid the guilt-nado, Quatie had given her a straw of hope – to go and find the Lake of the Wounded.

But where? Scotland was full of lochs, lochans and '*alo' o' fuckan watter*', as she'd overheard someone on the bus back from the rental place say, describing the latest weather forecast.

She opened up her driving map of Scotland – and sighed. Needle in a haystack...

And to cap it all she felt awful. It was true she had been hitting the booze again – and needed a few days off after the binge of the weekend. But this was more than a hangover. Shaking, she went to the bathroom and found her bag – taking a couple of cowboy aspirin. She looked in the mirror and didn't like what she saw.

Later that morning, the cell went.

Janey kept it close since Quatie's call.

Checking who the caller was, Janey sighed with relief.

It was Eliza who had found 'something exciting' and wanted to meet up.

Janey was reluctant. She hadn't time for jolly adventures involving obscure Scottish folklore. Then again ... if anyone might know of a Scottish 'lake of the wounded' it would be Eliza.

And so it was arranged – tea and cake in Eliza's favourite café. Fucking tea and cake. The Brits' answer to everything. Janey wanted to scream. *My coma-ridden boyfriend is dying and it's my fault and all I'm doing is shagging my way around Scotland.* She tried to slow her breathing. Let her shaking subside. Eliza meant well. She always meant well. Goody fucking two-shoes. What was it with her? Did she want to get in her knickers or something? *Calm down, Janey.* You have a friend – perhaps you last one left, at the rate you're going. Don't lose her too. Right, coma cake and guilt tea then.

'Hey? How're you doing?' Eliza gave Janey a hug; then saw she wasn't right. 'My God, you look awful!' She blanched. 'Oh, sorry. I didn't mean...'

Janey sat down with a sigh. 'It's okay, I know. I feel rotten this morning. Haven't been sleeping well. I got some bad news in the night.'

Janey told her friend about the latest.

Eliza looked dismayed. 'Oh, that's ... terrible. You must be worried sick.'

They ordered some 'restorative cake', 'This is an emergency situation,' justified Eliza. 'Diet goes out the window.'

Janey bit her tongue; focused on the condiments. Brown. Red. Yellow. White. 'So. I need to find a "lake of the wounded". Any bright ideas...?'

Eliza perked up. 'Well, as a matter of fact...'

The pot of tea and cake came and, as they divided up the spoils, Eliza filled Janey in. 'I've been doing some research about fairy sites – thought it might help – and I came up with a surprising detail. One of your compatriots, from North Carolina, was flying back from Europe towards the end of the Second World War when the plane he was in crashed in the Highlands. It had gone spectacularly off course and, fog-bound, had flown smack bang into the side of a Scottish mountain. The plane ended up in a small lake – get this...' She leaned closer. '... known as the Fairy Loch.'

Janey took this news in.

'Apparently, you can still see the wreckage there. People leave offerings at a makeshift shrine. I thought you might like to...'

Janey suddenly looked animated, a fervour burning in her eyes. 'Let's go.'

'It's quite a way.'

'I'll pay for the petrol. How long will it take?'

'From here? Half a day.'

'Usually I wouldn't blink – gigs can be five hundred mile round trips. But lately ... Not sure if I'm up for it.'

'Well, I don't mind taking my little run-around, if you don't mind the down-sizing. Doesn't guzzle the gas so much. And I know its ... quirks.'

'You're an angel. Thank you. I mean it.'

Eliza played shyly with her fork, not daring to look up. 'Don't mention it.'

'We'll need to pack and plan. Let's set off tomorrow.'

Eliza poured the tea. 'I'd love to, really ... but I have a lecture to attend.'

Janey hit the table with her fist – making the china rattle and the other customers rubber-neck. 'We have to go *first thing* – there's no time to waste. A man's life is in the balance here!'

Eliza held Janey's fist softly. 'Of course. I can ... re-arrange things. Get a friend to record it for me. Let's do it!'

'Oh, you're a doll! I don't deserve such a friend.' She held Eliza's hand, looking earnestly into her eyes.

Eliza blushed. 'Any excuse for field research.' She stabbed her fork into the summit of the cake. 'The high road it is then,' she declared, before taking a wicked mouthful.

Back in her hotel room Janey tried to work on some songs; but found herself ham-fisted and frog-voiced. Instead, she curled up in bed and read some of the journal.

I realised then my stumbling block was in trying to remember the exact words of the ballad rather than the images – which now lay before me like the life of a saint, a visual aide mémoire.

I set to work.

In the first window there is an image of the ruin of Carterhaugh haunted by Tam Lin – a stern sentinel overlooking a stone well, at its base a tangle of roses in which are ensnared gold rings. Ivy and long grass surround the scene in a knotwork.

In the second window a spirited lass with a wild mane of red-gold, identified as Janet, hitches the hem of her kirtle indecently high, revealing legs slender and pale. She looks a competent and comely lass. A shadowy father looks crossly on, but she clearly ignores his bidding.

The third window showed Janet at Carterhaugh boldly pulling a rose. Nearby, Tam Lin's horse stands cropping grass by the well. The knight's shadow slides towards her like a knife.

The fourth window made me blush to look upon, for it showed Janet and Tam Lin coupling amid the roses, their naked limbs entangled. There is a fierce beauty about the image – the wild red roses seem to cry their passion. Gazing upon it, my shame was whelmed by an aching longing for my wife – for in Janet's features I see the prototype of my Margaret's.

How I miss her so!

The fifth window pictured Janet back at her father's hall – head raised in defiance, clutching her belly.

The sixth showed twenty four ladies playing a large game of chess, while Janet kneels to one side, looking queasy. An old grey knight looks on admonishingly.

The seventh depicts her speaking heart to heart with her father, her belly now a half moon.

The eighth limns her returned to Carterhaugh, pulling a scathing rose to summon the knight.

In the ninth, Janet speaks to Tam Lin, who is holding his hands up as if to prevent her. Amid the briars are embryonic forms – unborn child-souls, peering out from the thorns.

The tenth portrays Tam Lin explaining his mortal origins – a young knight sleeping by a well, meeting the Queen of Elfland, and being taken into her 'service'.

The eleventh shows the new life he leads as a Fayrie knight – his double rising into the air like a silver flame.

In the twelfth panel, Tam Lin explains the Fayrie Rade, which proceeds to Miles Cross on the night of Halloween. He is depicted in the procession in the third company (behind the black and the brown) riding a milk-white horse, with his left hand bare.

The thirteenth is a swirl of metamorphoses: Tam Lin is pulled from his horse by Janet hiding by the Cross and he is transformed into an adder, a burning bale, a red hot iron, a toad, an eel, and finally a naked man.

The fourteenth is a blaze of colour – the Fayrie Rade in all its glory, with Janet watching keenly from the shadows...

In the fifteenth, Janet wraps the naked form of Tam Lin in her cloak as the Fayrie Rade writhe about her in fury.

The sixteenth shows the Queen of Elfhame herself casting her baleful glare at Tam Lin – whose eyes, in an inset panel, are turned to wood, and heart to stone. Another depicts Janet and Tam Lin walking free of harm towards the rising sun, the Fayrie Rade banished into the shadows of the fleeing night.

The images branded themselves into my memory – now I had no need of the verses.

I have the tale itself.

And in the tale I see my own life mirrored.

Margaret is my Janet. And I was lured to Elfhame, not by her dancing, but by the call of the Lady. If I am honest it is She who has been my Fayrie Queen. I have been Her servant in all my obsessive research.

And all the while my good wife suffered.

Now I am trapped, by my own folly with no one to release me. My darling Margaret I must accept is long since passed beyond. And if my journal should ever reach a living descendant and they bring themselves to read this far, would they wish to forgive me in my transgression and pride?

Behold, the fallen minister!

In the bowels of the castle, alone in the dark, I weep.

They set off early the next morning. Eliza swung by the hotel and picked up Janey who was waiting in the lobby, hunched over, shades on.

'Good Morning superstar! How are you this morning?'

The look Janey gave her from over her Jackie O shades said it all.

Eliza took her bags and deposited them in the boot, then opened the door for her passenger, 'Your chariot awaits, milady,' she joked in her best Parker-like voice.

Still no response.

Eliza clicked herself in and turned on the ignition – some lively Scottish folk continued its sweeping chorus.

Janey waved a hand, and made a kind of groaning sound, which Eliza took to mean 'off!'

And so they rode out of Glasgow in silence – over the fly-over past the big sheds, car showrooms and light industry.

It was a clear, if bracing, morning – and the view over Loch Lomond was stunning, but even this failed to lift Janey's spirits.

She got out her journal instead. It was going to be a long drive.

Seven stagnant weeks pass by ... how many mortal years? Human history races by like a mountain burn while I languish in this foetid backwater. The diurnal life of Court continues like a disease-addled creature's habits. The courtiers go through the motions but you can see their hearts are not really in it. The Mourning of the Snowdrop fashion lasted for a couple of weeks, to be replaced – when it seemed as though Spring would fail to show at all – by the Death of the Daffodil.

The seasons here have gone awry. Everything is out of kilter in this topsy-turvy world.

Yet in the last couple of days things have started to change – the Maiden's Broom, as they call the brisk easterly, gusts around the castle: Nature's spring clean, blowing away the cobwebs of winter. Not only is it palpable in the air, it manifests in the water. The river which snakes around the flanks of the castle, deep within its ravine, has an annual flood. Much is placed by its arrival. It traditionally happens on the 'Day of Equals', which I take to be the Spring Equinox. It is a cheering thought; that from this day onwards the days will get longer than the night – and we'll be that little bit closer to Là Bealltainn. The solar days are clearly not as significant to the Sith as those Cross-Quarter days, but there is an unmistakable festive air, as the Court is prepared

for the Feast of the White Boar, and the battlements are lined with those eager to see the phenomenon. Their folklore says the wonder is caused by the White Boar, which swims upriver every Spring to release the golden youth of Spring from the walls of the castle.

I would that it were I who was released. I look out at the surging waters and wonder what fate has befallen my journal? Whether it ever reached its destination, and if a living descendant, bone of my bone, reads it. I pray that it is so, and my words do not crumble away across the chasm of time and space surely separating us.

Janey blinked. The journal crackled with energy in her hands: the transmission of her ancestor speaking to her directly across worlds. She was vaguely aware of the car, Eliza, the ‘scenery’, but all seemed insubstantial. Kirk’s words drew her back.

It is the morning of the vernal bore – even I, the lowly chaplain, am allowed to view the equinoctial spectacle from the loading bay with the other serfs. Above, the Court line the parapets and crenellations in their festive gold, for it is thought that a sight of the wave brings with it the blessing of the Golden Youth – a quality that the Sith seem to value above all. Growing old here is seen as a ‘sin’ unforgivable, worse than any other crime.

In the cold light of that crisp Spring morning the People of Peace never looked more withered – one could truly believe the great age claimed by some. Beneath the make-up and gaudy clothes can be glimpsed crones and old men.

The winter has taken a heavy toll.

The Subterraneans need constant novelty to maintain their youthfulness. Their minds are like infants in this regard.

Most are anyway.

Neath watches on, inscrutable as ever.

Bellirummer blesses the proceedings in a papish manner.

The Queen, high above, watches from Her royal box; and Gwynn follows the progression of the bore from the air. Here he comes now – heralded by his Gabriel Hounds, their excited yipping ringing out across the Glen, but soon drowned out by the approaching roar.

Everyone looks in anticipation as around the ravine thunders a tremendous white wave, high enough to splash the onlookers – a drubbing is considered the highest blessing. The cheering builds rapturously and a trumpet fanfare rings out. The ancient onlookers stand in bliss, arms wide to receive the renewal of youth – 'Mabon!' they cry, as into the wild water I fling my message in a bottle, a covert gesture hidden by the hullabaloo. With it I send a silent prayer.

Janey looked up, a little dazed. The car had stopped. Eliza was filling up. She waved with her free hand. Finishing up, she replaced the hose. Tapped on the window. Janey pressed the button to lower it and the sharp air hit her. 'Where are we?'

Eliza grinned, looking a little red-eyed and manic. 'Fort William. You were away with the fairies. Want anything?'

'Um. Coffee.'

'Righty-o!'

Janey watched her walk towards the forecourt shop. This world ... The cars, the petrol pumps, the signs, the people. Her gaze took it all in, but another reality super-imposed itself, grew stronger in definition.

By the time Eliza returned with caffeine and snacks Janey was back in Kirk's world. There was no escape.

I am imprisoned in the bottle dungeon where first began my time at Elfhame, once more at Her Majesty's Pleasure. I might as well be in the dungeons of Fort William itself.

In the dank, dripping darkness, I reflect upon this latest turn of Fortuna's wheel.

My act of defiance was spotted, of course.

Neath has his infernal owls everywhere.

They waited until I returned to my quarters, and then seized me. They allowed me to take my journal, quill and ink (for they presume I confess into its reflex – but its twin is somewhere out in the Mundane World, if Hamish managed to get it out).

My message, an urgent warning to mortal kind, I prayed would be intercepted by some shepherd or drover who would pass it on – for reward – to my kin. That is, if my theory was correct, and the rivers of this world flowed into our own.

But what if I am wrong?

I sit here in the gloaming, in both senses. The Bulldog took great pleasure in having me as his guest again. And so I stew in my squalid pit. But my bid for freedom sustains me. I have only to wait until Là Bealltainn – perhaps my situation would have changed by then.

I pray that it may be so!

...

I had been napping – there is very little else to do in a dungeon (I must conserve my strength) when I was stirred by the clink of metal upon metal. I looked up from my filthy bed of straw. A silver hand flashed in the murk of the cell. Then I saw the outline of the chamberlain. He reclined on a chair carried in for his sole usage, and sipped leisurely from a goblet. On a small table sat a jug of wine, and a tray of dainties.

'Dear, oh dear! Such reduced circumstances chaplain! How you have fallen – like a ... bottle cast from the battlement. Please, don't get up on my account.' He tapped the goblet. 'Such a pitiful attempt; it is almost amusing. Do you think your missive will go far? Swept back to the dingy waters of your world? I doubt it will have such an odyssey. I ordered my swiftest riders to intercept it before it leaves these borders.' He took a sip of dark claret. 'Her Majesty will not be pleased. This is not how a pet should behave, especially one treated so well... But those days are gone. The Queen has seen your true colours. And she bores of you. There is good reason why this is called an oubliette. You are yesterday's court gossip.' Neath paused to pop a date, glistening like a cockroach, into his mouth. He savoured it – knowing full well I was famished and thirsty. 'So much is happening... since the blessing of the Bore there is a new energy at Court. Things are a-stir. My word! But ... I cannot linger here to idle the day away in tittle-tattle. I'm, as ever, too busy. I just called by to gloat.' He got up, clicked his fingers. Nearby, there was a grunt and the rattling of keys. He brushed off a strand of straw. 'I warned you.'

...

It was hard to know how much time passed in the cell. I had no way of reckoning night from day. My bodily needs had long since been denied. Food. Sleep. Warmth. Cleanliness. All these things were out of my control. I was like Jonah deep in the belly of the whale. All I had to sustain me was my faith. I prayed fervently – more than I had done for a long time. Of course, I maintained my daily prayers also, but this was different – an earnest plea for deliverance.

I reflected upon my time in Elfhome and all that I had experienced. I tried to see everything as a lesson. What wisdom could I glean from my incarceration? I considered the darkness and what it could teach me. Rather than see it as my enemy I sought to make it my friend. To embrace it. After all the frippery of the Fayrie Court it was, in its way, soothing. Solitude is essential for my study; for contemplation. To be alone with my Maker – in silent conversation with God, listening to what He has to say, what He wants of me – these are sacred moments. Too often we are distracted by the demands of the day, of others. Yes, we must fulfil our duties, our obligations – but beyond this our one true duty is to make peace with the Almighty. Whatever fate awaits me, I will accept it with grace. It is the Lord's will. If my doom bides for me in this strange land, then so be it.

37

The craggy heath stretched into the distance: the high weather-blasted wilds of Wester Ross.

Eliza had walked ahead and stood outlined on a pulpit of rock, trying to get a better view. 'It's around here somewhere,' she called back – her words threadbare in the wind.

Janey barely noticed: she just put one foot in front of the other. There was a little trail – although it might have been nothing more than a deer-run. Yet now and again there was a small green sign pointing the way – easy to miss, and clearly Eliza had.

Janey was more use to finding her way around mountain country.

The long ride up had been increasingly spectacular and the dramatic glens reminded her strangely, of home. Normally, it would have lifted her spirits, but she still felt leaden – the albatross of guilt hanging heavily around her neck.

Before the final hike to the Fairy Lochs, they had stopped for lunch at the nearby hotel – though Janey barely managed a couple of spoonfuls of soup. There, Roger, the ex-Londoner landlord filled them in on the detail of the crash-site, in a polished speech he must have offered to countless tourists: 'It was a USAAF B-24H Liberator – nine crew and six passengers, all Americans – flying home on 13th June 1945. They survived the war only to die on the way back. Bloody ironic, hey? We get a lot of visitors like you – coming to pay their respects. Most of them fall in love with Haggis here.'

A little scruffy Highland Terrier leapt onto the back of the chair and delighted in being fussed. Eliza was won over by his charm offensive, but Janey was nonplussed – compared to her wolf, Haggis was a loo-brush. Maybe if she'd been in a better frame of mind she would have found him cuter; but she had only one thing on her mind. This wasn't a leisure trip – it was a desperate bid to heal both Allen and herself. A year ago she would've thought it crazy – although she might have dug it for that reason alone. Now, it was a matter of life and death. And perhaps the last chance to save her tailspinning soul.

'It looks like they had a catastrophic navigational malfunction,' the landlord continued on auto-pilot, 'ended up flying north, instead of west across the Atlantic. It was a real pea-souper apparently, but even so ... they must have had a compass. Perhaps they were experiencing mechanical difficulties and were searching for somewhere to put down. Still, it's strange they ended up all the way up here. Flew smack bang into the side of the mountain. Poor bastards didn't stand a chance, 'scuse my French.' He cast Janey a nervous glance.

'Weren't relatives of yours...?'

'Well, one hailed from the hollers of Carolina, and the saying is we're all related up there.'

The landlord mumbled an apology and sidled off. Haggis cocked his head and seemed to laugh.

They had set off after lunch – and now, here they were – half-way up a mountain, looking for some obscure wreckage.

A loud crack made them both jump.

'Crikey, what on Earth was that...?'

'A rifle.' The sound was all too familiar after recent weeks. Janey tensed, scanning the surrounding hills. With the echo it was hard to tell the direction.

Somewhere, a bark, then around the corner of the hill came bounding a black gun-dog, the first sight of which Janey made ready to run.

'Oh, look!' grinned Eliza.

'Careful.'

It lolloped over to them and shoved its wet nose in Eliza's palm. 'What a bonnie boy!'

Then a dark figure appeared, a grey-bearded man in a Barbour, cap pulled low over his eyes, a rifle crooked in his arm.

'Stay behind me,' Janey warned, voice low. Instinctively, she cast about for a weapon.

Nothing. Too late.

'Hope Bobby here is not bothering you?' A grizzled face grinned wolfishly up at them, as he bent to grab the dog by the collar. The voice was low and steady with a soft West Coast burr – each word placed like a stone in a wall.

'Oh, he's no trouble,' laughed Eliza, fussing him.

The man noticed Janey staring at the weapon.

'Sorry about the racket. Didn't make you jump, I hope?'

'A little bit!' Eliza chipped in.

Janey looked at him, hard.

'Where are you heading?'

'Oh, we're trying to find the Fairy Lochs...'

Janey nudged her in the ribs, but it was too late.

'Just over the way there. Can't miss it. Well.' He nodded to them both, his grey eyes

locking briefly on Janey's. 'Good day to you both.' He briskly walked off, whistling his dog to his heel.

'Thank you!' Eliza called.

They watched the hunter and hound disappear into the folds of the hillside.

'Seemed like a nice chap.'

Janey frowned. 'Bet that's what Red Riding Hood said.'

'C'mon!' Eliza was brimming with the romance of it all.

Pushing on, they breached the brow of the hill and could see the two lochs below them, gleaming in the clean light like a pair of aviators – two cold mirrors to the sky.

'They're here! The Fairy Lochs!' yelled Eliza, who picked up speed.

Janey felt a shiver run through her. Yes, this was it.

They walked down to the loch-side.

The first thing they noticed was what looked like a quill sticking out of the wind-rippled water of the loch. On closer inspection they realised it was a bent propeller. Other bits of the fuselage were also visible – some scattered up the gravelly shoreline. It was shocking to see in the cold light of day: as though it had only happened recently.

'Oh my...' gasped Eliza. She inspected some of the wreckage close up – touching a bit gingerly with the toe of her boot.

Dominating this end of the loch was a rocky crag.

'It must have run straight into here...' Eliza gestured to the wall of rock.

At the foot of the crag there was a makeshift shrine decorated with Tibetan prayer flags, little offerings, coins, and American flags. A bronze plaque listed the dead.

Janey had gone straight over to it and was staring at the names.

Eliza came and stood gently by her, holding her hand.

Yes, there was the Carolinian, the hard metal of his name.

'Jeez, Janey – I'm so sorry.'

It didn't make sense. Why did she feel so upset? She never knew this fellow Appalachian – but somehow his tragic pointless death summed up all the grief surging up within her like Old Faithful – about Allen, about her mother, about the father she never knew, about her whole fucked up life. Why had she let herself be seduced by Fingal?

No, come on, admit it – you did your share of seducing, gal! You were hardly the

innocent victim! You're a bad 'un, Janey McEttrick... Maybe you deserve all the shit life throws at you.

Death's fatal shadow following her around.

'Leave me.' She pushed Eliza away, barely able to speak. She stumbled to the shoreline. There she gazed into the shivering waters, each biting gust breaking the signal of the empty heavens.

At first she felt nothing. Just cold. Chilled to the bone. The wind whispered its song of nothing.

Then, suddenly, the memory came back to her – as though she had stepped into the icy waters and plummeted to the bottom.

It was a pristine morning. Fall in the mountains was something else. All the colours seemed freshly painted. The sky was clear and as blue as 'blueberry juice', according to her daughter. Eloise was sitting in the passenger seat, in her brand new dress, Power Puff Girls daysac clasped on her lap, favourite pink pony scarf around her neck. Her eyes were shining as she pointed out the blaze of trees. 'Catsup. Mustard. Choc'late sauce.'

Dolly Parton was playing on the radio, and Janey was humming along to it, tapping the big wheel with her many-ringed fingers. It had been hard work to get them both scrubbed, dressed, breakfasted and out of the house. They were running behind, but she was determined to make up time. She didn't want her little girl to be late on her first day at school. She wanted to make the right impression. Janey checked in the rear-view, lifting up her sunnies briefly. Perhaps a little too much make-up to hide the shadows of last night's session. She wore her tight denim jacket, rhinestones glittering from her collar and breast-pockets. Quatie's turquoise choker dangled down towards the crescent of her cleavage. Just because she was a single mom didn't mean she couldn't look good. Hell, it made her *feel* good. And you never knew who you might start yapping to at the school-gates. Maybe a single dad. She sighed. It had been a long time since she'd felt a man's arms around her. Too long.

But today she felt alive. Felt lucky. She just knew things were going to change. With Elly at school she would have more time to get on with her life – to put into her music, into her career. She didn't want to be cooling her heels forever.

She smoothed her daughter's hair – done up nice in plaits. Eloise smiled back at her.

'Soon be there, poppet. A big day. But you're my brave little princess aren't you? You're

gonna like it there. Make new friends. Learn stuff. Soon you'll be smarter than your momma.'

Eloise laughed, wrinkling her nose at the thought.

They pulled up at a railroad crossing and waited for the great Amtrak to thunder by – the long tail of trucks a herd of stampeding metal buffalos. Janey continued to sing along with Dolly, hypnotised by the freight cars, wondering what they must be carrying, where they were heading, where they had come from. Just more junk people didn't need. They didn't have much, but they got by. She kept on giggling. And one day she might get that lucky break. An A&R man would stroll up to her after a gig and offer her a million bucks to press a record. The wheels on the train became discs being cut in a factory – and fired off to her eager fans. She indulged in the fantasy as a counter-charm to the juggernaut's trembling anger: the implacable inexorability of its trajectory as it railroaded over the fragile dreams of those in its way.

The banshee wail of its siren, then a vacuum of sound in its wake, as though it had taken all the world's noise with it.

There was a pause, like the one before a movie started. The curtains swishing closed for dramatic effect. The barriers lifted. The lights stopped flashing.

There was a queue of traffic both ways.

Some impatient fool in a hotrod pulled out from behind her and roared over the crossing in front of everything, playing chicken with the oncoming traffic.

Someone ahead had decided to do the same – a driver in a blacked-up Ford transit.

Both drivers tried to swerve at the last minute.

The black van clipped the front fender of the hotrod and was thrust onto its side.

Janey watched in horror as the black mass slid towards her, sending up a shower of sparks as it grated and screeched over the crossing. She could see the direction of the impact and there was nothing she could do about it.

Absolutely jackshit.

She turned to her child – who pointed at the approaching vehicle, cried 'Mummy', as though she could somehow stop it, then hid her face behind her hands.

Janey screamed. Tried to reach out.

Her child was torn from her as the colliding van piled into their estate wagon, ripping off the passenger side of the vehicle, with Eloise in it.

Janey was left with her hand reaching out across the jagged rip – gripping her

daughter's scarf, the cartoon ponies grinning hatefully at her.

The impact knocked Janey out, but had left her 'miraculously' (as eye-witnesses commented later) unhurt, albeit for minor lacerations and whiplash.

She was *damn lucky*, apparently.

When they pulled her from the wreckage, Janey kept muttering 'Shuddaseenitcomin. Shuddaseenitcomin' – the brittle words clattering in her mouth like wheels on tracks.

Quietly at first, she wept. Then, the storm broke and she howled her pain and her rage into the loch.

For what seemed like an age – she sat there, raw, scooped out, nothing left to give.

She stared hard at the metallic serrations of the water. The rippling of the wind stirred the waters in a mesmeric way, and the incessant wind buffeting the rocks sounded like distant singing.

Then she heard, faintly at first, then stronger, Quatie's voice – telling her the story – the story of the Lake of the Wounded...

Deep within the Smoky Mountains, west of the headwaters of the Ocanaluftee River, there is a special lake called Ataga'hi. No hunter has ever seen this lake, for it is a place the animals go to heal themselves when they are wounded. Some men say they have been near that place. As they walked through the mists across what seemed to be a barren flat, they began to hear the wings of water birds and the sound of water falling. But could they find Ataga'hi? No, sirree!

'Some of those who have lived as friends of the animals have been granted a vision of the lake. After praying and fasting all through the night, they have seen the springs flowing down from the high cliffs of the mountains into the stream that feeds Ataga'hi. Then, just at dawn, they have caught a glimpse of wide purple waters and the birds and the animals bathing in those waters and growing well again. But as soon as they have seen it, that vision has faded away, for the animals keep the lake invisible to all hunters.

It is said that there are bear tracks everywhere around Ataga'hi, for the bear is a great healer. One of those who saw Ataga'hi in the old days said that she saw a wounded bear with a great spear wound in its side plunge into the purple water and come out whole and strong on the other shore.

'It is hard today to see Ataga'hi, and some think that its sacred waters have dried. But it is still there, the Cherokee elders say, hidden deep in the mountains and guarded by the animals. If you treat all the animals with respect, live well and pray, it may be that some day you will see the purple waters of Ataga'hi, too.'

Quatie's story seemed to help – seemed to make sense of past and present traumas, in a weird, mythic sort of way. Janey realised she had been so selfish – dwelling on her pain. She gazed into the waters and thought of Allen, laying there in his hospital room, dying.

Silently, she prayed to the gods of the loch, to the spirits of this place, for his healing. She didn't deserve life – but *he* did. 'Take me if you have to, but let him live. Please, goddess. Take me. Let him live.'

Janey imagined Allen, his brawny tattooed body, limping to the lake, like the wounded bear, and plunging in – diving deep and long until the waters settled – then bursting out, naked and restored.

Eliza came over and put her arms around her friend. 'Hey. How are you doing...?'

Janey wasn't able to articulate a response.

'Here.' Eliza handed her a tissue.

Janey dabbed her eyes, and blew her nose. 'I must look a fright.' They tried to summon a laugh. 'Thanks.'

They pondered the wreckage.

The world seemed right out of miracles.

'Oh, Eliza ... what am I going to do?'

Just then, a cry like a Jurassic recording released from the ancient rock split the air.

Janey looked up, shielding her eyes from the sharp glare of the winter sun.

'Oh, look. An eagle!' Eliza pointed. 'It's so close. Seems to be diving...'

'Down!' Janey grabbed Eliza's sleeve and tugged her out of the way just in time as the demonic bird of prey screeched by, talon extended.

'Its eyes ...' White as a sheet, Eliza fumbled with her askew glasses.

The black eagle banked into a slow, leisurely arc in the cold sky.

'Run!'

Eliza needed no further persuading.

They scrambled up the pathway that led along the loch-side and back the way they had

come. It snaked between the rocks, which gave them some cover, but as it rose over the ridge they became increasingly exposed. All the while they felt the primal terror of a predator at their backs. Its shriek all but reduced their legs to jelly, but they kept running.

Hearts pounding, legs pumping, they crested the ridge. Silhouetted against the naked sky they were perfect targets.

Eliza cried out.

Janey turned to see her friend stumble.

The eagle was almost upon them. She couldn't save them both.

Burning eyes of hate. A single terrible taloned foot.

'Down!'

Janey instinctively ducked at the commanding voice.

The report of the rifle echoed across the crags.

The next thing she knew, a rough, strong hand pulled her up. 'Are you alright, lass?'

Shaking, Janey nodded.

'See to your friend. She's in a blether.' He scanned the sky with grey eyes. 'Not sure if I hit it, but sent it packing sure enough. For now anyway. Best we get down the hill, I'm thinking.'

Janey and the hunter clinked tumblers.

'Thank you. You saved our hides up there.'

The man, who the landlord greeted as Callum, took a sip of the single malt and shrugged. He gestured to Eliza. 'Will your pal be alright?'

Janey looked over at her friend, who was curled up on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket with a hot water bottle. Haggis sat on her lap.

The gun-dog, who had been in a filthy state, had been sent to the back of the house. The landlord didn't seem to mind him, but didn't want him messing up his furniture or guests.

'Bit of a shock, but she's unharmed. Thanks to you.'

Callum shrugged. His hard grey eyes scanned the bay for meaning. 'I've never seen a bird like that. And I've been hunting on these hills for years. Is that not so, landlord?'

Roger appeared around the corner with a tray of tea things. 'Aye. He's a proper Bear Grylls is this one. Something sweet for your friend, thought it might help...?'

'Thank you so much. I'll pour it for her,' said Janey.

The hunter took another sip, considering the American as he swooshed the malt around his mouth. 'Where were you two planning to stay, if you don't mind me asking?'

Janey looked out of the window and bit her lip. 'I'm not sure exactly. It was all so spontaneous. A hotel, probably.'

Callum put down his glass. 'I've got a wee place in Gairloch Bay. Not far from here. A croft. Tend to use it as my summer shieling. Might need a bit of airing, but you're welcome to stay there as long as you need to. It's well-hidden. Whatever's after you, and there's no denying it, lass—' there was a strange gleam in his eye as he fixed her with his stare, '—that beastie had murder in its eyes, it won't find you there easy. But if it does ...' He clenched a fist '... it'll have me to deal with.' Sensing Janey's misgivings, he raised his gnarled hands placatingly. 'Don't worry. I'll let you bide in peace. I can keep an eye on things though.'

Janey looked at him. Really looked. The Highlander was in his fifties. Weathered like the land. She sensed a loneliness in him, but nothing more. There was an inner reserve there, a stoic centredness – one that had endured many winters.

Could she trust him? She looked over at Eliza, who was lost in herself.

They had little choice.

'Okay.' She met his gaze. 'But bear in mind I'm a mountain gal. I can handle myself.'

'Ach, I can see that clear enough,' Callum snorted. 'You've got nothing to worry about with an old fella like me. Me and Bobby mind our own. Stay here the night while I go and sort the place out.' He got up, whistled. 'Here, take the gun. You look like you know how to use one.'

That evening, Janey ate alone. Lacking appetite her friend had gone to bed early. A full belly and a roaring fire helped to drive away some of the chill of the day, but the traumatic memory had drained her. For many years she had blocked it. Something about that eerie, thin, place had unlocked it. There was no escaping it, this shadow inside her, like the creature that had followed them all the way here.

She stared into the flames. The only way to deal with something is head-on.

A sigh escaped her lips. She was exhausted.

Eloise. Allen. Now, Eliza. She couldn't stay strong forever.

From her bag she pulled the journal, its spiral catching in the flickering light. She could toss it in the flames and be done with it all.

But what then? Would the ghost of Kirk leave her in peace? Would the visions stop? Somehow, she doubted it.

The only way out is *through*.

Opening the journal, she stared at the writing until it stabilised and Kirk's voice spoke to her, once more, from the shadows.

In my squalid oubliette I sit: alone in the dripping darkness – a fitting conclusion for one who has strayed as far from God's light as I.

For too long I have denied the truth of it. I have made a masque of my intentions with my noble sentiments and decorous lies. The altruism that drove me here was selfish.

O, misery! From what proud heights I plummeted!

I remember precisely the fateful day that my tower fell.

It was the 6th October, 1689, and at the handsome church of St Andrews, Holborn, I attended the valedictory sermon of the Reverend Edward Stillingfleet, who had just been appointed the new Bishop of Worcester. Stillingfleet spoke out most vehemently against miracles and apparitions – a sermon that left me quietly fuming. And so I was somewhat wrong-footed when the new Bishop invited me to sup with him and his wife that evening.

I did not wish to appear ungracious, but I confess I hesitated. An evening of further sermonising against my native Highlanders' beliefs – for surely all that he railed against were the very singularities peculiar to my beloved nation – did not hold much allure.

Perhaps my prevarication was discernible, because Lady Stillingfleet stepped forward to persuade me. My first impression was of a tall, seemly woman, with a fine swan-like neck and darkly glittering, intelligent eyes. She placed a kid-gloved hand upon my cassock. 'Oh, do come, Reverend ... Kirk, isn't it? I heard you have some most interesting ideas on the supernatural.'

And so I was persuaded and, if I had but known it, my fate was sealed that led me to this very chamber.

Oh, the dinner was predictably splendid for a man of Stillingfleet's status and stature. I made the right noises of appreciation, although I suspect they would have

wanted more surprise, as though we eat only raw turnips up in the savage Highlands and had never tasted a good Burgundy. I dutifully listened to the Bishop fire off his sallies against the heathenism and idolatry so endemic to our times, especially in 'the more unenlightened reaches of the Kingdom'.

I bit my tongue, for Stillingfleet was my host and his Lady was present. To her credit, Elizabeth, as she insisted on being called, did her best to salve the evening with balsams of blandishments and graciousness. Her conversation was cultivated, indeed demonstrated an art-form well-studied, but she demurred always to her husband, guiding him deftly like a Man o' War led safely to shore by a narwhale.

'So, you're in town to consign to the printer's devil the Bedel's?'

I nodded, dabbing the corner of my mouth with a napkin of the softest Irish linen.

'I hear it is a tad ... Episcopalian.'

'That is indeed my faith, Lord Stillingfleet.'

'The Good Book in Gaelic! Gads! Whatever next? Will we be translating it into the tongue of savages?'

I carefully placed the napkin down. 'I do indeed concede that that the beauty of God's word should be for all.'

'Beauty? That won't save any souls. It is truth they need, man. Truth. Naked and untarnished.'

'Surely the Word of our Lord is beauty incarnate? And this world is an articulation of that beauty? We must praise His works. And by creating works of beauty in His name, we praise him further.'

Stillingfleet inspected the veined cheese with a wrinkled nose. 'Mm, sounds papish to me. We've done away with that kind of thing down here. Pulled the offending carbuncles down. Most of them, anyhow. If it was left to me, I'd topple the lot of them and start again.' He pulled at the grapes, popping one in his capacious mouth. 'The herd only need biers. Anything else is wasted on them.'

I coloured. 'Every art, specifically every religious art we go about, is a step to Heaven.'

Lady Stillingfleet listened in, seemingly enraptured. Her face, in the candle-glow, somewhat arrested my train of thought in that moment. I could not muster my

arguments in my distraction, but allowed myself to be shot down with impunity by the Bishop, as though he was quelling a charge of insurgent colonists.

It was only after his huffing and puffing had led him to expire on the lounge – his Vesuvius doused by one too many brandies – that I was able to converse at ease with the Lady, who was keen to interrogate me on matters pertaining to the Second Sight. She had just given birth to her seventh child, although you would not know it from her shapely frame, cossetted within its elaborate and elegant exoskeleton of silk, satin and chiffon. 'Is it true, Reverend...?' Again, the light touch on my forearm. This time the glove was as thin as a silk-worm's shadow. '...that a seventh child can touch against the King's Evil?'

I swallowed a little too loudly. I am a seventh son, but I did not divulge the fact. I did not want to fan the flames.

'Yes, it is believed so,' I answered carefully.

Her eyes lit up. 'That thrills me not a little, I cannot hide it, for what mother would not wish her child to be special?' Her gaze enflamed me as though I was but kindling. 'But why, Reverend, pray tell? What secret planting grows such seeds? And what Mason Word unlocks them? Reverend, you are well-versed in such matters. You cannot hide it. Instruct me in this lost knowledge, which is instinctive to your flock, but rarer than a gorgon's miniature in the city.'

I weakened at her appeal, for in my humble parish I groaned for lack of devout and rousing society. My darling Margaret has a good heart, and is a fine mother, but lacks ... a certain sophistication. I have had no-one to converse with upon such mysteries.

And here, before me, was a beautiful, interested woman.

She poured me a little of the brandy, and I found myself relaxing for the first time in years.

*As the Bishop slumbered gustily upon the *chez longue*, his snorts and rumblings making us shake with suppressed laughter, we talked of the Subterraneans and their hidden world. I realised that, to clarify the bewildering complexity of their chthonic universe I had to outline the cosmology and metaphysics of their perilous state. Upon a napkin I fashioned a crude diagram: seven circles, one inside the next. In centre I placed Hell, in the next layer, the realm of the Sith; then otters, badgers, fishes and*

worms; men and beasts; common birds, flies and insects; manucodiata in the penultimate realm; and, then, ultimately, Heaven.

Lady Stillingfleet traced the circles with a long, slender finger, the motion hypnotising. As she lent closer, the half-orbs of her bosom were exposed and invitingly close.

I do not know what might have happened next, but the Bishop chundered awake. The Lady was immediately at his side, smoothing his brow with a kiss, and offering him his brandy, as though he were a bairn stirring in his brief sleep in need of feeding.

I made my departure before I slipped further into her circle. Already I a-feared she had me spell-bound with her legerdemain.

The Bishop crushed my hand, but did not, could not, rise.

The Lady saw me to the bottom of the main stairs, acting once more with professional decorum. As I kissed her lightly upon the cheek good-night she whispered hot into my ear: 'You must write to me of these wonders. I am your pupil.'

And so I was doomed.

I returned to my quarters but could not sleep.

With renewed diligence I plunged myself into the task at hand, driving on the presses with a feverish urgency. I ate modestly, slept with the window full open, took cold baths, and maintained my holy observances like an Anchorite. Yet in the pockets of the day I found myself making detailed notes about that evening at Stillingfleet's, about the conversation, and the ideas which the Lady wished me to elucidate.

I began to plan a great work in which I would chart the secret nation with a cool scholarly rigour, reporting upon its inhabitants and qualities as in the manner of the popular descriptions of the Indies and Antipodes brought back by travellers and explorers.

When the printing was completed in the Spring of 1690 I returned home to my humble parish, relieved to see its friendly hills once more. And, yes, my darling wife and sons. A weary April pilgrim, bedusted and tearful, I showered them with affection, and for a while, all seemed well. Indeed, it was in this period that Margaret conceived our first daughter, Marjorie. Joy brought her into the world. That summer, as I composed my monograph, it seemed the very meadows shimmered with the Sith. I worked feverishly upon it, obsessed with charting every particular of that chthonic

race. I took to wandering the Knowe near the manse, all the better to commune with its secret commonwealth.

Margaret grew concerned, yet she could not reach me. I would roar at her if she disturbed me in my study, surrounded by tomes of arcane lore, my endless exhaustive field-notes, discarded and ink-stained drafts. I was building a castle of words.

And it was all for her.

My Lady.

That is when, now I realise it, my wife started dancing at strange hours. At first I did not even notice, but soon, the slightest sound or movement during my hours of study, which were long, drove me into paroxysms of rage.

I became, ashamed as I am to admit it, a tyrannical ogre. I hated myself for it, but could not cease the role I had cast myself in: a wicked conjurer in an alchemical masque. I was destined for Hell. Tormented between the flesh and the Word, I prayed for my soul's salvation.

I took to bed with a fever, and throughout that winter of sleep-dancing and hidden worlds, I weakened. Fearful that my research would die with me, I dictated my essay to my cousin, Robert Campbell. He took it down as though taking confession in the Catholic style.

Yet, my soul could not be shriven.

By the May of the following year, two and a half years after meeting the Lady – from whom I had not seen or heard anything since that day of our meeting, but who had possessed my every waking moment – I stepped into the Fayrie-ring. I fooled myself into thinking it was to save my wife. Yet it was I who had become beglamoured. And it was I who danced to a different Queen's tune, a tune which has lured me to this pit of despair.

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Janey looked out over the windswept sea-loch. You could just make out the tiny houses of Badachro on the opposing shore above the white caps. The names expressed it all. They were staying in an isolated hamlet called Lonemore, with a dramatic view over the bay towards the serrated peaks of the Torridons in the south. Towards the southwest the Cuillins of Skye could be seen on a clear day – a rare occurrence up here, as she was finding.

A wild, wind-scoured place, the bleak vista suited her mood. Here, on the craggy coast of Wester Ross the land ran out – defeated by the relentless attrition of the Atlantic. Beyond, lay her lover. She started to strum a melancholic melody, riffing around the name of the ocean that separated them.

Her companion, reviving finally from the shock of the attack at the Fairy Loch, was quick to correct this category error: it was technically *The Minch* that lay between them and the Western Isles – but the surly sea and constant sou'westerlies seemed very Atlantic to Janey.

'Not so easy to rhyme with...' she joked, relieved to see her friend up and about. 'Welcome back to the land of the living,' Janey put down the guitar and gave her a hug. 'Thought you'd gone all Rip Van Winkle on us!'

Eliza looked a bit dishevelled, but none the worse. 'I was dog-tired.'

They laughed at this.

'Where's our saviour by the way, Aragorn and Lassie?'

'Callum guided me here in his Landrover. Made sure we had all that we needed. He said he would swing by every morning to check on us. Toot at the top of the lane. We are to ring the bell if everything's fine. If he doesn't hear anything, he'll come up.'

'What a hero! He saved our bacon up there!' Eliza gave the lenses of her glasses a good wipe. 'From what I'm not exactly sure.'

Janey looked out over the bay. 'One bad crow...'

'Phenomena! I wish I had my books here. I could look it up. Still I do have my laptop. Might be able to make some notes...'

Janey had other things to worry about.

The impact of the recent phone-call was still settling in.

After Callum had made sure they were comfortable he had left them in peace, as good as his word. And peace it was. She had never known such utter silence or isolation. Even in the hollers, there were the crickets. There was London.

That first day Eliza had remained in bed with her laptop.

Lonemore was living up to its name.

On a whim, Janey had decided to call Fingal. After the experience at the Fairy Lochs she was feeling raw, vulnerable and in need of reassurance.

Discovering about Kirk's infidelity made her feel a little bit better about her own. If a

strait-laced minister could stray from his marital bed – in his imagination at least – then Janey's Lowland fling seemed forgivable, an inherited trait even.

The conversation still made her wince.

'Hi. How are you doing?'

A pause. 'Who's this?'

'It's Janey. I hadn't heard from you and...'

'Oh, Janey. Right. Um, hello.' Sound of fumbling for a lighter. The click and flare of a flame; inhaling, and first puff of smoke.

'So, superstar... How's it going?'

'Well, well, thanks. Listen, it's really manic right now. We've got a dozen egos all under one roof. A TV crew traipsing in and out. Fergus is getting lots of attention, but Nancy is not happy. The place is a proper state. We're up to the wee hours every night, jamming out. Having a right old ceilidh.'

'Sounds awful. My heart bleeds for you. C'mon... Mister Rock'n'roll. You must be loving it!'

'Yeah, sure. But...'

'I've missed you. Been thinking about you a lot...'

He drew upon his smoke. 'Me too.'

There was a giggle in the background. Sounds of shushing.

'Fingal, who's that with you...?'

'Oh, y'know. Just one of the ... gang. Like I say, there are a lot of great musos here. Mighty folk. The talent gathered under this roof – it's amazing that we all fit in.' Laughter.

'I imagine. It must be a ... squeeze.' Janey's throat tightened. 'What happened ... at the weekend. I thought... '

Fingal took another toke. He sounded like he was drifting away. 'What did you think, darling?'

'Something special happened. Didn't it?'

'Sure. It was a great craic. The earth positively vibrated. Richter-scale stuff.' More laughter. A distinct female voice.

The cold realisation hit Janey like a squall, rolling in across the bay. 'It's true, isn't it?'

'What's that darling?'

'That you're a fucking ass-hole!'

'Wow! It's been a gas, catching up, but I really must be going. I've ... got my hands full.'

'I'm sure you have. You muvvafuckinscumba—'

The phone line went dead.

For the rest of the day Janey silently fumed about the croft. If not for Eliza resting and Callum's hospitality she would have smashed a few things. Instead, she tried to calm herself by reading a little more. Perhaps Kirk's misadventures would put hers in a better light.

What special providence! I've had a felicitous visit from my friend Tyrius, who managed to negotiate access – 'pulling a few favours'. He brought a pitcher of water and a clean rag, which allowed me to wash. My cassock is filthy. I did my best to tidy myself up. Once refreshed, Tyrius filled me in on Court news – I was hungry for information as much as the rations I devoured, a leg of roast chicken, some potatoes, bread and cheese (I saved some for later, as one never knows when food will come again here). Since the White Boar things have been moving fast indeed. The Unseelie Court are gaining dominance. Lord Rannoch is rallying fighting men to him – to ride out against the Ironbloods. Too long have they suffered under their yoke, he cries. Elfhome must claim back the Debatable Lands, which once were theirs. Already border-raids have taken place to great success. Cocksure elfin-knights return with cattle, with insight. Bonnie mortal women, maid servants and men, even wee bairns to raise as elfkin. War-talk heats the air – it is often the way here in the bluebell months, apparently. The long winter has sharpened men's restlessness and the rising sap stirs the blood of the Fey. Many want to ride out with Rannoch. Weapons are being honed. All the tack of conflict is being made ready. The Queen is not happy; Schiehallion even less so – but what can they do? After the calamity of Imbolc the majority want it. It is an unstoppable wave. Rannoch will ride out come Là Bealltainn and make war on human kind – the first between our races for millennia.

Janey put the journal down. Shivered, and not just from the ominous turn of events. She couldn't seem to get warm in this place. Putting her coat on she braved the wind to go and collect some fuel from the stack piled up against the leeward side of the croft.

The nearby pine trees, presumably planted as a wind-break, sifted the sou-westerly into

ribbons of sound.

Janey looked up at the angry sky, half-expecting any moment for it to fall on her.

'C'mon, Chicken Little,' she chided herself.

For now, it seemed, they were safe.

Gathering an armful of logs, she went back inside to feed the burner. The journal awaited to fill the silence.

I hear the drums of war; horns blowing; the clatter of hooves; the trundling of heavily-laden wagons over cobbles; the hue and cry of men summoned to the fight – carrying even to me down here in the depths. This great commotion does not bode well. Outside my cell today I heard briefly a sweet birdsong – a blackbird, I think – and it filled me with such joy. It sang of the joys of Spring. It must be April now, in this world at least. And although I know in my mind that whatever it is here in my world it is the opposite, and yet I cannot but think of my beloved walking the green meadows, in the warm sun, or climbing to the fairy knowe, collecting bluebells. I imagine her singing an air to herself then pausing to listen to a bird's reply. Perhaps she stops at the clearing and thinks of me. How many years has it been now? Is she an old woman – a bent-backed crone? Is she even still alive? It is hard to contemplate – all that I have known and loved, crumbled to dust. Perhaps my line lives on. Perhaps it does not. It is too unbearable to imagine. Separated from my life. My Parish. What must they have thought of me? The foolish minister who wandered the fairy hills! Did they mock me behind my back? Do they laugh still?

Janey rang the bell. A seagull shrieked its outrage to the waves, which flung back their bitter replies. In the distance she heard another quick toot, then the grunt of a diesel engine driving off.

In the simple conservatory, Janey stamped her feet – glad to be out of the wind that continually battered the headland. The cottage was one of two nestled in the cove at the end of a long and hair-raising rough track that cut across the moor. It had no electricity or hot-water, but it did have its own spring and a gas-powered range, plus a substantial stack of logs cut by Callum, who kept the place 'provisioned for a zombie apocalypse' as Eliza put it. The store cupboards were full of canned goods; there were sacks of oats, rice and flour, carefully

stored. There were plenty of matches and candles, even some whisky and beer. It had two downstairs rooms – a 'living room' and the kitchen, but it was more efficient to keep the kitchen warm than heat both – and two bedrooms with an assortment of sleeping options. Callum had, impressively, built it himself. Everything was functional, practical, but solid and well-made. There was a lean selection of paperbacks – mostly SAS-type thrillers – and a pack of cards and dog-eared puzzle books, for rainy days. In the outhouse, which also served as a WC and shed there was a wet-suit, fishing tackle and a sea-kayak. It might have been the perfect place for a summer adventure. But in mid-February it was less than inviting. The weather was harsh and one felt at its mercy – only there under special dispensation.

And the Cailleach – the ever-present Mountain Mother – could change her mind.

Eliza, now revived, did her best to make it snug – busily baking away, keeping the range going continually. Yet Janey could never quite get warm – despite being wrapped in a thick jumper of Callum's she had found, smelling not unpleasantly (to her at least) of seaweed and pipesmoke; a granny blanket and hot water bottle, woolly hat and mittens, hands curled around a steaming mug of 'builder's tea'.

Eliza had made some hasty phone-calls and had managed to wangle a week's research leave. She wanted to work on a paper provisionally called 'Mer(wo)men and Transgender politics in Scottish Folklore.' The fisherman's cottage was the perfect spot for it – it had plenty of 'affect' apparently, and the view over the Minch was ideal.

On the first night, as they nursed the log-burner into life, Eliza had told Janey about the Blue Men of the Minch – mermen who loved to ask riddles to unwary sailors. If the seafarers could not answer, they were dragged to the bottom of the cold sea.

'I suspect Fingal Lewis had them in mind when he named his band.'

Janey blew on the whisky-laced hot chocolate in her mug. 'No shitting me.' She took a fortifying sip.

The one ray of hope came from Shelly, when Janey had been able to get a signal from the headland. Looking out over the epic sea vista of the Minch and the phantom islands of Skye, it was strange to imagine her friend sitting in downtown Asheville on her lunch-break.

'Good news. He's out of the woods.'

Janey clasped her hand to her mouth. 'You mean...?'

'He hasn't woken up or anything, so don't get your hopes up too much. But he's stopped

deteriorating. Doctors say he's bottomed out. No better, but no worse.'

Janey let out her breath.

A shard of sunlight pierced through the gloomy sky, a searchlight upon the dark surly waters.

I have been freed from my cell, and all is changed.

There has been a massacre. Rannoch's army met with devastating defeat. The survivors have returned and the castle has been transformed into a kind of military hospital. My services have been called upon to tend to the wounded and dying. Not to hear their last confession or to administer grace of course, but to offer what secular succour I can.

All usual rules have been suspended in the crisis.

Elfhame has never known anything like it, the wounded and the dying carried in on carts, or hobbling, supporting one another. They were met with mortal iron, with cold steel, on the battlefield. They fought alongside the old Clans – true Tramontaines – many of which had long relations with the Fairy Kin. The Uprising was mercilessly crushed. It would appear, from what I can gather, that the Sassenach massacred many of the war-chiefs that day, upon the 'Field of Iron', as they are calling it, and in doing so, any hope of an expansion of Elfhame has been crushed. The hope of the Subterraneans is in ashes. The Unseelie Court is now decimated; Lord Rannoch languishes in despair. Many of his greatest knights were slain upon that cruel field. The amortal Sith, who are used to longevity, have never known such slaughter. With a tendency to vain-glorious acts of bravado, they were no match for a disciplined army and military tactics, or the cold brutality of the Ironblood generals seeking to quell a rebellion once and for all.

As much as Kirk's account stirred the rebel heart in her, Janey had her own war to fight – the oldest: between man and woman.

Perhaps she should not have expected anything less from Fingal. He was living in his own rock star movie after all. But for a while at the castle, something magical *had* happened. For a moment her heart had sparked to life.

Over the next few days Janey found herself singing an old ballad again and again:

Young Donal, if you cross the ocean,
take me with you – don't forget!
You'll have a keepsake on a fair-day and market,
and the daughter of a Greek king for a bed-mate.

You promised me, but you lied to me,
that you'd meet me at the sheep-fold;
I whistled and called a thousand times for you,
but all I got was the lambs bleating.

I gave you my love when I was little,
and even more when I got bigger –
and not the love that a lamb gives its mother,
but everlasting, secure love that can't be broken.

First time I saw you 'twas a Sunday evening
'Twas at the Easter as I was kneeling
'Twas on Christ's passion that I was reading
But my mind, it was on you, and my own heart bleeding...

She would never manage to get to the last verse before breaking down, yet she would begin again until her voice was hoarse.

Her misery seemed justified and she wore it like a hair-shirt.

Janey chewed the skin on her finger. Allen was the one decent thing in her life. And what do you know – good ol' Janey had managed to screw it up once again! Perhaps it was unrealistic to hope Allen's love would save her – but hey, she wasn't waving, but drowning here.

A seagull shrieked – its harsh cry even carrying across the wind and waves and through the glass of the conservatory.

Callum had checked in with them, mid-week to see if they needed provisions. He was clearly stirred up about something, fussing around the place, double-checking everything. It

was Eliza who got it out of him. Mug of tea in hand he told them about a terrible tragedy in the bay. In their isolation they hadn't heard, although the Sea-King scouring the coastline certainly had got their attention one night. A father had been taking his children out sea-kayaking: when one had capsized the others had gone to the rescue, and all had drowned.

The women sat there, taking this in.

'The currents here are strong. Deceitful. They'll pull you under in an instant. Make no bones about it. Show weak, and the Cailleach will take you, daftie or no.'

A wave crashed against the clutter of rocks, sending up a spume of spray. She had been forced to come here on some crazy quest – swept along by a tide in a boat out of her control.

Janey thought of the mother of the children who had been lost. How had she coped? Was she receiving counselling? On medication? Or did she draw her strength from some spiritual source? She wished she could talk with her and find out what, if anything, kept her going.

Instead, she found herself after Callum had left telling Eliza about the loss of her daughter. It felt strangely good to finally talk about it with someone. Someone who wouldn't judge her as the 'Cruel Mother'. For so long she had felt it was her fault that it had become accepted as the truth – but, as Eliza reflected afterwards, it depended how you looked at it.

'There's no way you could have known about the impending accident. You weren't the one jumping the queue. You were just taking your little girl to school. Sometimes we can blame ourselves because there's no one else to blame. Our self-recrimination becomes part of our grievance narrative.'

'Hey, I didn't ask for psycho-fucking-analysis.'

Eliza looked mortified. 'I am so sorry. It must be a painful memory. Thank you. Thank you for sharing.'

Janey got up. 'I need some air.' She walked to the headland, drawing in the hot smoke, trying to calm herself.

Eliza tried – but she was young. What did she know of heartbreak, of the deep grief of a mother? She needed a sign, a guide.

Janey scanned the stormy coastline, the vaulting cloud that trapped the fleeting light. No hope was going to come from *there* – only more bad news.

She turned back to the croft and to the journal, hoping for some clue, some wisdom.

I wash the wound in saline solution as they hold the warrior down – a young elfin foot-soldier. Trying to still my shaking hand, I do my best to stitch up the long laceration in his shoulder, swallowing down the bile.

All talk is of the Sundering. It sounds like a wound that would never heal.

After, I sluice the gore from my hands and step onto the balcony to cleanse the stench of death from my lungs.

The suffering has been terrible to see, even amongst my captors – maimed bodies, broken heads, hideous scars, damaged minds – the usual pointless waste and horror of war. An insult to Creation when any argument can surely be resolved through reason, compassion and compromise? And yet I am sucked into it all – offering what solace I can – and although it gives me no pleasure there is a degree of satisfaction in using my talents and playing my appointed role properly for once. No restrictions here – it is all hands on deck. The castle is in disarray. What is usually the time of the Là Bealltainn Flytting, when the Court moves to its summer palace (down by the shores of an endless loch from what I can reckon) instead Elfhame licks its wounds. They are easily knocked back, I've noticed – and have a tendency to melodrama and melancholy, as though they are tragedians in a play about a war rather than experiencing it for real.

They are in want of not a mickle grit.

Yet I do what I can – for ultimately even they are God's creatures. As I tended to a wounded warrior, Gwynn passed amongst the men, offering what words of comfort he could. He is greatly admired by the men for his courage and leadership in battle. When he paused by me he whispered: 'Your message was caught – by one of my riders,' he waited for my reaction, but I kept tight-lipped, tending to my charge. As he parted, he added, 'But it was taken to the Borders and cast into one of your rivers.'

Surprised, thrilled, I wanted to ask more but Gwynn was swept along by his entourage.

So, thanks to an unlikely ally, my plan is back on! Yet I cannot assume they would be ready for me – and the chances of reaching a crossing place at this time, the so-called merry months of May, are minimal. There is talk of the Borders being sealed altogether and trade ceasing. Not even Wayfarers may pass. My message got out just in time, it seems, but how will I ever crossover if all movement is banned, the ways blocked? Like the strange ethereal blood of the Sith, things used to flow between the

worlds. But no longer. It is a broken metabolism. People. Trade. Ideas. Energy. All shall cease to flow. Both worlds will become impoverished. Both will suffer the loss. I have realised in my time here that, essentially, the Sluagh Saoghallta and the Sluagh Sith – the People of the World and ironically-named People of Peace – need each other.

But this Rift seems final.

What will become of them now?

They had been at the croft for a week and both of them were sensing it was time to be on their way. Janey's air-ticket was due to expire in a couple of days, and Eliza had to get back to the university before her supervisor had her 'guts for garters'.

While her companion scrupulously checked everything was left as they'd been instructed, Janey sat in the conservatory amid their packed bags, nursing a mug of tea, watching the light return to the bay. Just then a movement caught her eye – and Janey reached for the binoculars kept on the window ledge. She fiddled with them clumsily but eventually was able to bring into focus the source of the movement, her heart beating wildly.

It was an otter.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she delighted in seeing it as it swam in the cove – a mini-Nessie – then emerged, warily from the water, standing on its hind legs to sniff the air with its wet whiskers twitching, before hopping fluidly across the large pebbles of the beach.

It seemed to epitomise pure freedom – living on its own terms, following its instincts. Was it out hunting? For its young? Janey didn't know enough about their life cycles – it seemed too early in the year for it to be nursing, but she could be wrong. What did she know? They were adapted to this environment, unlike herself.

She needed to follow her instincts too.

For life. For love. For renewal.

Every winter gave birth to spring, did it not?

Feeling something stir inside of her, Janey picked up her guitar.

There was always time for a song. Perhaps her music was all there was between frail life and the Cailleach's cold embrace.

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A metal sign stating 'Passing Place' rattled in the wind. The sun tried to show its face through the fast-moving clouds. Two vehicles – an old landrover and a small city car – were parked in opposite directions on the gravel. Awkwardly, the three of them stood at the end of the lane.

Janey handed over the shotgun.

He accepted it, and placed it carefully behind his seat.

'We bought you a little gift. To say thank you for all that you've done for us. Hope it's one you like.' Janey offered the hunter a bottle of malt.

Callum accepted it with a 'thank you' snatched by the wind. His cap hid his eyes.

'And here's something for Bobby too, if that's alright?' Eliza produced a bag of chews, and a rubber toy with a bell in it.

Callum nodded slightly, still not catching their eye. Bobby barked, wagging his tail. The women made a fuss of him.

Then there was nothing left to do, except leave.

Eliza shyly shook the man's hand. Janey gave him a hug, and added a peck on the cheek.

Finally he looked up, his steel-grey eyes glistening. 'Watch yourself. Both of you. There's evil in the world. The sky is not always friendly.'

They got in their respective vehicles.

Tooting their horn and waving, Janey and Eliza drove off; then, after a pause, the landrover made its way up the steep lane to the croft.

Humming tunelessly, Eliza drove them away. 'Right, back to civilisation then.'

Janey groaned and buried her head in the journal.

Since midsummer there has been a lengthening shadow cast over the land in more ways than one. The 'Massacre of the Field of Iron', as they are calling it (court minstrels have composed doleful airs already) has devastated the morale of the Sith, particularly the Unseelie Court, whose expansionist cause has been destroyed. Their imperial dream is over. Elfhome is curling in its horns. Its Borders are sealed and they tend to their wounded and dying and dead. The funeral games of Lugh, which usually take place at the end of July, will be held over the whole summer, with daily rites of mourning alongside contests of strength, skill and agility to raise the morale and

restore the bruised pride of a people. Mean the while, Lord Schiehallion's cause grows in popularity – his Seelie Court campaign for complete severance from the Mundane World and a deeper withdrawal into the inner fastnesses of Elfhame. The next flytting is to be an exodus from these ancestral lands to the Mountain-behind-the-Mountain. The Castle is to be abandoned. My fate is uncertain. Will they still need a token chaplain? The Court is being instructed to jettison all but essentials for the long journey. The Inward Road is hard, by all accounts. Many perils await. The Giant's Pass must be traversed. I am hoping that a crossing place will present itself in transit. I can only pray my message has gotten across and has been received by a descendant willing to act.

Janey and Eliza headed south along the coastal road, opting for the 'scenic route', a hairy cliff-top itinerary via Applecross that overlooked the dark fastness of Skye. Their time at the croft had mellowed them both – taking the edge off of the attack. The encouraging news from back home had lifted Janey's mood as well. There was a hopefulness in her that she dare not articulate, unwilling to tempt fate. The sky may yet still fall down. They listened to some ethereal Scottish folk – Eliza explained it was Julie Fowlis, who sang in Gaelic. Her exquisite lilting voice fitted the sharply beautiful landscape perfectly.

The music unlocked something in Janey and she began to speak. 'You might have guessed, but I'm going to tell you anyway. You don't have to say anything. In fact, don't say anything.'

Eliza nodded, trying to focus on the driving.

'Yes, I did go to the castle. Yes, I did sleep with Fingal. And enjoyed it. And now I feel shit, alright!'

Eliza went to speak, but got a glare from her passenger, so bit her lip; focused on the road.

'Allen nose-dived afterwards. He's apparently levelled out now. But I feel I was being somehow punished. It doesn't make sense, but that is how it felt. Now I don't know what to do. There. I've said it.'

Eliza drove on, chewing her lip.

'Aren't you going to say anything?'

'If I'm allowed...?'

Janey nodded. 'Sorry, go ahead.'

'Have you tried to ... y'know ... talk with anyone about it?'

'Well, I've kept in touch with my friend Shelly, but I don't want to 'fess up to her. As far as she knows I'm only guilty because I'm over here apparently having a good time, while my boyfriend is in a coma.'

'What about Fingal? Have you spoken to him?'

Janey let out a hiss of exasperation. 'Tried to ring him. Sounded like he had his hands full, in more ways than one if you know what I mean... He's a grade-A jerk; and I feel such a fool.'

They were on a high stretch of road overlooking the white-capped swathe of the Inner Sound.

Eliza allowed for a respectful pause, then piped up: 'Okay, this might sound tangential, but go with it, okay?'

Janey shrugged.

'Fingal's band is called the Blue Men, right?'

'Should've seen it coming. Never trust a pop star.'

'The 'blue men' are folkloric figures, mermen who haunted the Minch: the hazardous stretch of water which runs between this coast and the Hebrides. They would challenge sailors in a battle of wits, and if the humans lost, they were dragged to their doom. They're classic trickster figures, perhaps a personification of the chancy tidal races hereabouts.'

'So are you saying it was a bit of a giveaway, Fingal calling his band after them?'

'Nominative determinism? Perhaps... I've been doing some research into our rock god.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?' Janey smiling at her friend's canniness.

'He's as mercurial as they come: two marriages; several affairs; questionable financial dealings; the shedding of names, addresses, and friends. Hard to pin down. He shines on stage; but, behind the scenes, he's decidedly ... murky. Certainly not husband material.'

Janey snorted at the last observation. 'No shit, Sherlock.'

Knowing all this didn't exactly make things easier for her though. The heart was a poor servant. Despite the revelations, the folkloric warnings, the common sense, she still found herself ... stirred up by the man. And, at the same time, she felt a deep and dutiful love to Allen.

And as she walked this tightrope, she had to bear the weight of Kirk and her ancestors.

Her situation ... so precarious – like this high coastal route they were on, the sheer cliff to their right: one badly judged turn and they would plunge to their deaths. Life and death in the balance. On the edge... She could feel a song stirring within her, evoking this time, this place, this feeling.

She asked Eliza if she could turn down the music, and then she hummed a tune to herself, murmuring lyrics that started to coalesce around the melody:

Riding the razor road,
Trying to find my way
Back to you...

When she had finished running through it– recording it rough on her phone, she felt ... a little more on top of things. She had given the chaos shape; the void, a voice.

'I'm honoured to be in the presence of new art. Razor Road – mm, I like it.'

Janey squirmed a little, not wanting her new-born to be handled so quickly. But the sense of creative relief made her let it go.

Ahead, the road curved out of sight. Beyond, the Minch glittered as a sudden break in the clouds sent searchlights of pale sunbeams across it.

Eliza's eyes lit up. 'Did you know Cuchullain, the legendary Hound of Ulster, when he went to train with Scathach, a warrior queen on the Isle of Skye, he had to cross a bridge of swords? This was how Scathach tested the mettle of her would-be warriors. Only the bravest passed muster. Perhaps when we really want something we have to risk all – even being destroyed.'

Janey pondered this in silence, gazing to the jagged line of peaks across the bay.

'Allen might reject you, but he deserves to know the truth if he ever recovers. Put yourself at his mercy. If he's a real gentleman, if he really loves you, he will shine through. If he doesn't – then he's not worth worrying about, but at least you would have done the right thing. And as for this bloody Fingal ... well, there are plenty more mermen in the sea.'

While they stopped for petrol and the loo at an old-fashioned petrol station at the head of Glen Shiels ('Not a place to run out of gas', Eliza warned) Janey read some more of the journal as she sat in the car. It provided a sanctuary from the mess of her life – even as she

felt vicariously the perils and travails of her ancestor. Her attention was somehow helping their plot-lines to converge. Maybe in their meeting she would find an escape route for them both.

From the battlements I watch on helplessly as lines of hungry refugees await entry. Most have travelled many days from the blighted provinces where it has hit worst. All are turned away, sometimes with violence. Like beaten curs awaiting the favour of their master, they camp outside the walls – a festering shanty town designed to breed further infection it seems.

And what does Her Majesty do all of this time? She idles in her chambers being entertained by masques and minstrelsy.

The harsher the reality knocking at their door, the more they retreat into fantasy.

And all the while, Schiehallion's campaign grows in popularity. He sells them yet another dream of a promised land of mead and ambrosia, over the hills and far away. Stirred up by his pipe-dreams, the Court prepares to depart into the Hollow Hills.

It seems Bishop Bellirummer's prophecy has come true.

The Unbeast is abroad. It is a beast of many heads, many ravening mouths, yet it cannot be seen, cannot be bested in battle. It arrives stealthily, yet leaves in broad daylight.

The crops wither in the field; cattle lie bloated and dying; the streams are corrupted by a foul-smelling algae – even the very air seems tainted with this hypochondriak. We should be celebrating the fecundity of first harvest, the crops should be high in the fields, ready for the scythe, but the reaper comes for the Sith instead. Cap-a-pie with the threat of famine, a pestilence of unknown origin sweeps the land. It seems to have affected the common folk, so far. The Higher Court seal themselves in their chambers; courtiers have taken to wearing embroidered masks. Of course, at such time it is the poorest and weakest who suffer the most. The rich cushion themselves from adversity with their wealth, buying in provisions at high cost; while the starving fight in the gutters for scraps of bread. The atmosphere within the castle-town grows ugly.

I feel compelled to do what I can for those suffering. I recall a spell to banish the Unbeast from my monograph. I shall prepare it as best I can in these heathen

circumstances.

They drove through the steep-sided glen. On either side horse-tail waterfalls cascaded out of the mist, making Janey feel like she was jaywalking in the realm of the gods.

The music had stopped and the atmosphere in the car became tense. The heater was on full, yet they still shivered in the winter coats. Eliza's student run-around felt like such a flimsy shell to protect them from the elemental vista they journeyed through.

The lucky gonk on her dashboard wobbled its eyes as the car bumped over the cattle-grid.

'Is this ... fucking landscape ever gonna end?' asked Janey.

It was cold and she was getting crabby.

'You know they call it the Five Sisters. Don't ask me why. Maybe the waterfalls are siblings?'

Her passenger didn't look impressed.

'I guess you're spoiled with the mountains back home? But, hey, I will show you a place along the road near Glen Coe I think you'll really like.'

Janey looked out at the grey view. 'Can't wait.'

'It does seem to be going on a particularly long time. I'm glad I filled up. I always feel like I'm trespassing when passing through such places. As though a big angry giant is going to appear and tell me off!'

'Well,' Janey yawned. 'That'd be something.'

'This mist is getting Scotchier.' Eliza wiped the windscreen with her cuff and frowned.

They peered through the swirling shroud – it transformed the road into something unpredictable, as though it was still being formed as they went along. 'It's like Second Life,' Eliza suddenly spoke, making Janey start. 'Each vista is being rendered in increasing detail before your eyes, the speed depending on your bandwidth...'

'If you say so...'

Eliza shook her head, 'This is classic Faerie stuff. A threshold place. Water. Mist. Don't be surprised if we see a will o' the wisp.'

'A what?' Rolling down the window a tad, Janey lit up, and her roll-up flared red in the gloaming.

'Just like that – an *ignus faatus*, a fairy light, leading unsuspecting travellers astray. Anyone foolish enough to cross the moor. Some believe they are simply the product of marsh gas. Yet they often are depicted as having a malevolent intelligence.'

'Nice. What should we do if we see one?'

'Film it. Oh, and turn our coats inside out to baffle it.'

'Gotcha. Both bases covered. You're a practical gal.'

'The way you can take screaming death-birds in your stride?' Eliza gave her a look. 'Kettle. Pot. Black.'

They both laughed at this witchy sounding analogy, and ended up cackling like hags, which might have sounded eerie in the mist if it was not muffled by the damp air.

'Hubble bubble, toil and trouble...'

'Hey, I know that! Where's that from again?'

'The Scottish play.'

'Um, could you be more specific? Presumably there's more than one.'

Eliza laughed at this. '*Macbeth*. Will Shakespeare. Y'know – over-ambitious wife drives her husband to murder most foul. Walking forests. The Thane of Cawdor. Is this a dagger I see before me?'

Janey nodded, a little uncertainly. 'U-huh. Sounds a bit *Lord of the Rings*.'

More laughter. 'Well Sean Bean's been in both,' Eliza added.

'You mean the Brit guy who always dies nastily?'

'I guess he has made a career out of spectacularly gruesome exits...'

But Janey was lost in her own thoughts. Allen – hanging by a thread.

Eliza tried to change tack, sensing it was a sensitive subject. 'Talking of the Weird Sisters – we're in good witch country around here.'

'Oh great. And that is meant to reassure me?'

'Listen up. They ain't all bad, as you might say. Take Isabel Gowdie for instance – one of the most famous. She lived in Lochloy, about twenty miles east of Inverness. Gowdie was accused of witchcraft in 1662. In her so-called confession she details an incredibly complex relationship to the spirit world – a world that intersects with the ballads. This is why I thought it might interest you. The songs seem to provide a kind of map, or way of placating, or harnessing these forces. The Good Neighbours, as they're known somewhat euphemistically, and The Dame of the Fine Green Kirtle...'

'Who...? You've lost me.'

'The Queen of Elfhome, she of 'Tam Lin' fame; and probably the same as the one who absconds Thomas the Rhymer from the Eildon Hills.'

'Oh right. Sounds like quite a dame.'

'I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of her, anyway. Plucking out eyes, and so forth. Brrr.'

'So, what's your point?'

Eliza frowned. 'I guess – you have a Gift. It came from this land. Perhaps it's time to accept it. Even use it.'

'You're not the first to say that...'

'Really? Time to start listening then.'

Janey finished her roll-up and stubbed it out in the dashboard ashtray, exhaling the remaining smoke from her nostrils. If she had used the knowing on that black day...

All her life she'd spent running from it.

If she could use it ... to help her ... Allen ...

She scryed the mist – trying to pierce it through will alone, until her head started to ache. It was like chasing ghosts. Grab too hard, and they melt through your hand.

Suddenly a flash of a collision shot into her mind's eye.

'Swerve, now!'

Janey pushed the steering wheel away, just as a large shaggy shape appeared out of the mist. The car screeched around it.

'Jeezus! What was that?'

Janey looked over her shoulder. 'A cow I think!'

'Watch out!'

Eliza braked quickly as more dark shapes appeared on the road. 'Oh!'

The car skidded to a halt just in time.

The road was filled with a herd of great shaggy-headed, horned Highland cattle that pressed boisterously around the car.

'Looks like it's got some friends...'

For a moment they just sat there, breathing heavily.

'That was a close shave!'

'Brazilian!' gasped Janey, and they burst out laughing, a little hysterical.

'But, nothing broken...?'

'I'm fine – shaken, not stirred. But I might need a cigarette...'

Janey fumbled for her tobacco – pulling it from the sun-blind – and noticed her hands were shaking.

'Adrenalin,' said Eliza, 'mine are the same.'

The herd were surly, vocal, nostrils flaring. They started butting the car.

'Guess they don't like being passive smokers!' Eliza parped the horn -- its sound muffled in the mist.

A horn pierced the gap on Janey's side. She grabbed hold of it and pushed it out. 'Scram!'

Eliza scrambled for her phone. 'They're not acting like normal cattle... I need to film this.'

'Eliza, just drive, for fuck's sake!'

'Macbeth's loch ... Haunted by a faerie bull, which lured passers-by ... To their doom ...' Another butt. Eliza's phone fell from her grip into the footwell. 'Blast!'

'Drive!'

Eliza tried to edge through the herd. The engine strained, and the bonnet pushed against the mist-sodden, massive bodies; but the cattle made a solid, immutable wall. 'They're not budging! Any ideas would be good right now!'

Janey tried to think – hard with the lowing of the wild herd, and their jostling of the vehicle. Their warm dung reek penetrated the vehicle. She tried to focus – it was just like performing to a bunch of drunken louts in a roadhouse. She'd done so countless times. She could handle cowboys. Why not cows?

And so she began to sing. A humming to start with. Then louder, as a song came to her.

Eliza recognised it. 'The Twa Sisters...?' she breathed.

It was working. The cattle seemed to grow less agitated and finally stopped. They stood in bovine placidness, staring with their large dark eyes, snorting steam.

When the song was finished, they shuffled off, allowing the car to pass.

They drove on and the mist eventually thinned. Neither of them wanted to speak – to risk breaking the spell.

Janey pulled out the journal.

Kirk, what would you have made of such enchantments?

I decided that the battlements were the best place to perform the incantation. No one now prevented my wanderings. The Court was pre-occupied with its own departure. Treasures were hastily bundled into crates; tapestries ripped from the walls. The enchantment was stripped away, leaving bare walls black with mould. The actors looked dissolute without their lines, their cues: they sat gazing into space, or wandered the corridors, muttering garbled soliloquies to the shadows.

Amid this pandæmonium, I made my way to the roof of the tower, and there I did my best to recall the wording of the banishment. Lacking the Order of Saint Bennett and a neck to place it around, I improvised: casting salt from the abandoned kitchens around me in a circle.

'Come out thou piercing worm as my King appointed, either die or flit thy lodging as Jesus Christ commanded!'

Mercifully, my throat remained unchoked – it would seem Her Majesty's magick flytts with the Court – and my voice boomed out over the gorge: 'God and the King omnipotent either chase you out alive or slay you wither!'

As I spoke this I raised my two thumbs to my lip and spat in the four cardinal directions, repeating the incantation each time.

All the vexation of my incarceration poured out. I fervently prayed for the Unbeast's exile, not only from this land, but from my life.

'May the power of the Almighty scour my soul clean also! Let all be untainted! Let suffering be at an end! Amen!'

My words echoed off the rocks as the stern crags watched on. My chest rose and fell as I gulped down the icy, clean air.

Stillness, and near silence, descend.

I prayed it had the desired effect.

Then below, I noticed movement.

They stopped at Fort William to thaw out with some thick soup in a café. Both of them were a little shaken, but put a brave face on it.

'That was exciting!' Eliza piped. 'Talk about field-research!'

Janey gave her a look.

Eliza shrugged, but couldn't stop grinning. She pulled out her tablet and made some notes.

Janey blew over her soup, banishing the swirls of steam. The truth was – she *had* used the sight, and it *had* saved them from what could have been a nasty accident. And the song ... worked its magic.

Maybe she wasn't without resources to draw upon – just like her ancestor.

I stood on the roof of the tower, salt circle incrementally snatched away by wind-devils, watching the Court process out in a long line over the draw-bridge: the Royal Carriage, as gaudy as a papish shrine, pulled by six unicorns (the Queen had insisted 'riding with her people' in a mock-show of solidarity). The Royal Guard rode in strict order in front and behind her, commanded with clear pride by Lord Schiehallion, be-peacocked in his ceremonial uniform. Lord Rannoch rode in disgrace behind with his own crestfallen entourage: as different as dusk to dawn. There followed the White Company, the Brown, and the Black, banners held before each. In the latter, Neath's silver skulls waited at the drawbridge by his private carriage. I espied Bishop Bellirummer, but not the Chamberlain. Lesser Court trotted by on their groomed steeds, outdoing each other in the stoles of mink and fox, leather gauntlets and jerkins, and capes of sylvan splendour. Many retainers followed, some in carts, some on foot. Guards, Brownies, commoners and minions of the nether-castle. Wagon-loads of recherché possessions: tapestries, silverplate, stuffed animals, portraits, furniture, costumes, toys and trinkets, brought up the rear along with several carts laden with provisions, great barrels of wine and brandy, small beer, and water from the spring. A couple of carts carried what looked like ovens, another a smithy. One contained many tomes and scrolls stuffed into boxes and I thought I spotted Moudewort squatting protectively amongst them. The procession made its slow, steady progress along the narrow road which edged the ravine – a dream-like sight in the Autumnal glory, the very Fayrie Rade I had heard many accounts of from the Tramontaines.

Here I was, bearing it witness from their very castle heights, left behind like a jester fallen out of favour, an unloved pet.

I felt both relieved, and a little melancholik at the departure of so much beauty. Farewell, the mercurial race who had haunted my dreams and waking hours, for whom

I had sacrificed everything: my home and parish, my wife and children, my reputation, and, it seems, my life. Stepping into that ring on Doon Knowe, I had stepped out of the world. Excommunicated from my God's grace, I was forever anathema.

And now even the Subterraneans shun me – their scapegoat in the wilderness.

'Your flock abandons you, Chaplain.'

Startled, I turned. It was Neath, wrapped in a long black riding cloak. His silver-hand rested on a horn cane. In the other he held a stirrup-cup.

'This is what happens when you abandon your duties. The world unravels. Everyone should know their place.' He walked over to the battlements, a little unsteadily I think. 'That place is here.' He struck the ground with his staff. 'But Her Majesty knows best of course. Schiehallion and his weaklings lead us in his ship of fools into oblivion.'

'You would have preferred Rannoch's reivings? Look where they lead you?' I had lost my patience and my fear of this spider. Without his web, he was nothing.

'I would have stayed here. Where we belong! The middle-way. The smarter way. The Bonnie Road is always best, don't you think?' He drained his cup and tossed it over the battlements.

We watched it spiral downwards, the echo of it clattering into the gorge below faint.

'Humility and repentance are better.'

Neath grabbed me by the throat with his metal claw and lifted me over the edge. 'I fear you need a new collar, Chaplain. Does this silver one suit you?'

I gasped for breath, my legs flailing for purchase on the slippery edge.

'The Crown has supported your stay here with us, but what happens when that support is taken away?'

I struggled to be free, but his grip was like an armourer's vice. And if I slipped, I would fall to my doom. I started to become dizzy, the ravine and castle swirling about me, the vertiginous drop beneath me telescoping into infinity. 'Please,' I whispered hoarsely.

'Did you think I would just let go? I know what games you have been playing.' With his spare hand he pulled the journal from his robe. 'From the library. What pretty lies you spin. How pleasant your stay amongst us.' He let the journal drop, its Janus

paper fluttering in the breeze as it fell down into the churning waters below. 'I know you smuggled the real journal out. Your Secret Commonwealth might have contained educated guesses, but your indiscreet blatherings revealed the truth of us. And I could not let that slip out into the world. I sent my agents to retrieve it. And to kill the descendant it was intended for.'

I cried out with my last breath in horror. I was blacking out. The strength seeped from my limbs.

'Your seed is doomed. Your words will never be read. Your story ends here.'

Neath went to release his grip.

Just then, a great gust of wind blasted us back onto the roof. I was sent tumbling away from the chamberlain, coming to a painful stop against a crenellation.

I gasped for breath, my lungs burning. Air! I could breathe again. I gulped down lungfuls, blood pounding in my skull.

When I recovered from the fall, I looked up to see Gwynn's chariot skid to a halt on the roof. In it with him was the Cailleach, hair wild. The Wild Hunter leapt out. His Hounds spiralled above us, yowling in the air.

'Lord Chamberlain, I grow weary of your games.'

Neath staggered to his feet. 'What is the meaning of this outrage? To attack a member of the Queen's Privy Council is an act of treason!'

'Fetch the Maiden! Off with their heads!' the Cailleach cackled.

The Wild Hunter towered over Neath, a musky swirl of leather, tine and fur. 'Look about you, Silverhand. The Court is not in session. This realm is no longer governable. Our people retreat in shame. What power you had is no more. Your spies mean nothing in the wild. What use, your cloak and shadow on the Sunset Sea?'

'I warn you, Gwynn ap Nudd. Your behaviour has long been a thorn in Her Majesty's side. She may tolerate you, but I do not. I shall personally see to your downfall. You are ruined. By the time I am fin...'

Neath looked down in horror at the bleeding stump where his silver hand used to be.

The Wild Hunter held his long sword in his mailed hand, its silver blade dripping blood.

I scrambled to the edge to see the silver-hand spin downwards, clattering on the

rocks below before being lost in the white waters.

The Chamberlain fell to his knees. 'You ...'

'No more of your tedious talk. No more of your poisonous lies. It is you who is finished, Neath. Behold, your end!' With a single deft motion, Nudd flicked the blood from his blade and returned it to its scabbard.

The Cailleach shrieked with laughter, her mouth a blackened maw.

40

After lunch, they pushed on, wanting to put as much weirdness behind them as possible. Driving for an hour in better spirits, Eliza pulled in at a layby on the approach to Glen Coe.

'Why are we stopping?' asked Janey.

'Just for a tick. You'll love this,' Eliza explained.

There were only a few die-hard tourists quickly taking selfies before returning to their heated coaches and people-carriers.

'It's freezing!' complained Janey, pulling her coat around her.

'C'mon – it'll be worth it! I'll buy you a coffee after.'

And so Janey was dragged out into the chilly air until they stood at the edge of the car-park overlooking the glen.

'Great. More ... greyness.'

'Sshhh! Wait...'

The grey wall slowly thinned before them – revealing three dramatic peaks.

'Wow!' breathed Janey.

'They're called the Three Sisters. I thought you might like to see them. I find ... strength in them.' Eliza's eyes fixed on them with a hunger.

Janey gazed upon their mighty presence and was humbled before them. They were so incredibly ancient and enduring.

'I like to think of them as the triple-aspect Goddess – Maiden, Mother and Crone.'

Eliza could see her companion was impressed, and she allowed her to have her own 'moment' with them.

Janey found herself communing with them in her own way. She saw her Shelly as the 'Maiden', full of ardent fire, driving ambition, and wild joy for life; Marsha as the 'Mother', confused at times, yes, but central to her life – her song-source; and Quatie as the 'Crone' – though she could hear her old friend laughing at the idea.

Standing there in the Highland mist, with thousands of miles separating them, Janey felt their presence, their support, in her life. She was not alone. Somehow she would get through this, with their help.

As tears of gratitude trickled down her face – hot against the damp, chill air – she began to sing a mountain lullaby, which arose naturally, unbidden.

Eliza stood discreetly by, spell-bound. Their eyes briefly met and a deep understanding and appreciation passed between them.

The song faded, absorbed by the mist.

What strange road had brought her to this place? Janey couldn't stop shuddering.

'One tick.' Her companion slipped off and returned, unnoticed.

'Here, drink this.' Eliza handed her a steaming cup of coffee, purchased from a small caravan.

'Thanks.' Janey cradled it like it was the Grail.

'Hey, come here,' Eliza offered her arms and they embraced. 'Mm, that's good. Let me steal your body warmth!'

They both laughed, and looked at each other through teary eyes.

'We'll get through this together, okay?'

Her friend beamed. 'Sisters are doin' it for themselves, right?'

Janey sipped her coffee, trembling at the rush of warmth. 'Right!'

I sit in an empty castle like a mad king, ruling over nothing but ghosts and shadows. I can daunder where I please – there is no one left to curtail my curiosity. Like gaudy stage sets, the ornate chambers lie abandoned. I wander amongst the scattered props: a goblet rolled on its side; an overturned chair; a torn drape. The illusion has been dispelled and the glamourye fades. Now the Court has left and with it the smothering train of the Queen's magick, I can see what crude mummerly the whole thing really was. The castle interior crumbles away: tattered arras furred with fungi flap in the draughts from cold grates, ceilings blister and flake. I splash through puddles as though on a sinking ship, the captain of decay.

It has been a week since the Fayrie Rade departed; the high tide of enchantment withdrawn from their former demesne.

Lord Schiehallion has led the Court into the Hollow Hills, to secret realms into which I may not gain ingress. Yet I would have chosen to stay regardless, and not just for advantageous reasons, although my chances of liberty are greater now than they have ever been. I yet remain for compassionate reasons: for the sick, wounded and dying have been left behind. The Court does not like to be reminded of such things. Only empty beauty fulfils them. They prefer to perfume the garde-robe and powder the

pox, than deal with unpleasant truth. Truth dies of starvation on their doorstep.

And so I choose to remain. Christian mercy demands I help these people – a new tide that breaks against the bulwarks.

They headed on their way, the atmosphere in the car muted. The encounter with the Three Sisters had left them feeling curled in upon themselves. The mist congealed around the vehicle as Eliza drove them up the winding pass into Glen Coe.

It was a vast and eerie place.

Eliza filled her passenger in on the usual stuff about the betrayal of the English and the massacre of the MacDonalds, yet the commentary seemed strangely at odds with the austere beauty and deep peace.

Janey sensed the sadness in the land, but it had been softened by centuries of rain and erosion.

'Pretty epic, huh? Landscape turned up to eleven,' Eliza needlessly added.

Janey suddenly keeled forward, clutching her head.

'What is it? Are you okay?'

Janey gasped for breath. 'Drive! Drive fast!'

Eliza put her foot down as much as possible, but the mist and twilight didn't exactly make ideal driving conditions. 'What is it?'

Janey spasmed, gripping the dashboard for support. Strands of crimson hair stuck to her face. She let out a cry like an eagle. 'So much hate... And grief.' Sobs wracked her chest. Her eyes rolled in their sockets, and a trickle of dark blood dripped from her nose. 'So lonely ... So close. It's *here!*'

A thud. Something heavy ... on the roof.

'What the?' Eliza instinctively swerved at the impact, and narrowly missed sending the car plummeting down the burn that ran parallel to the road.

Janey snapped out of her trance. 'Keep ... driving!'

Above them they heard long scratching sounds: something very sharp was being dragged across metal.

'What the Hell is *that*? A terror-fucking-dactyl?' Eliza shouted.

Through the sunroof they glimpsed the dark silhouette of a large bird of prey.

A sudden jab of beak cracked the glass and eyes burning with rage glared down at them.

Eliza screamed like a horror movie heroine.

'It's our death unless you can shake it off!' Janey cursed herself for not bringing any kind of weapon. She held the sunroof in place with her leather bag, praying that it wouldn't implode over them.

Eliza accelerated, swerving the car from left to right. The glaring lights of oncoming traffic nearly blinded them. A blast of car-horn as they nearly clipped. 'Jeezus!'

The beak jabbed suddenly at the passenger window. Crack; a flap of black wings; a furious screech. Another jab and the glass shattered, scattering its shards over Janey. 'Ah!'

Eliza swung the car again, but the beast clung on with its one good claw, wings flapping like a dark angel against the grey mist – its eyes, twin furnaces of hate.

It lunged, and would have struck, but a sudden impact nearly knocked it flying from the roof. It howled in pain and rage and nearly split in two. For a moment it flickered between states, writhing in its skin, until it stabilised – taking the form of the Black Shuck, an iron bolt sticking from its side.

It disappeared out of sight as Eliza swung the car the other way. They heard it slide across the roof, its claws skittering for purchase on the metal.

Refracted through the sunroof, eyes glowed red in the mist. Fangs bared, a long slathering snout, hissing drool dripped onto the cracked screen. An alarmingly elongated tongue curled out, slapping wet against it.

Then, the sound of a strong gush, and a hot steaming stream of yellow cascaded down the windows.

'What is it doing...?' Eliza cried.

'Marking its territory. Its kill.'

Eliza started to rock back and forth, muttering a garbled prayer. 'Oh Three Sisters save us...'

Janey breathed, 'I wish I had my shotgun and my wolf.' She hit the roof. 'C'mon then, you bastard! Give us what you've got!'

The beast plunged its maw through the sunroof, showering them with glass. They screamed, and the car skid to a halt, inches from the edge of the road.

The airbags inflated, trapping them in their seats.

The beast, clamped still to the car by the steel-grip of its jaws, attempted to squeeze through the rectangle of sunroof, lashing out at Janey in a furious anger.

She turned her head as a claw raked the air where her face had been.

A thunk. A howl of pain. And the beast dropped onto the road, scrabbling away from the pain, but the pain was in its side – another bolt sticking out from its flank.

Caught in the car's headlights, now they could see it in full.

It was like a child's drawing of a wolf, all out of proportion, dark and jagged, with mad burning eyes scrawled into the gloom with a bright red felt tip.

'Oh my God!' gasped Eliza.

As they watched the beast tried to shake the bolts free, to no avail. With each shudder, its form lost integrity, and one by one its limbs rippled and contorted. Howling in pain, its head became that of the eagle again, its front half remained the massive shoulders and forelegs of the hound, and its bottom half stretched into a man's legs but with only one foot. A tail grew from its spine which became a hissing spitting snake.

It twisted in rage, and lashed out at its attacker – who kept just out of range – a dark, swift figure on the edge of the mist.

As the figure went to reload some kind of antiquated crossbow, the beast lunged.

It landed heavily on the bonnet, twice the size of its previous incarnations, as though all the lives it had lived were being released at once. With its heavy paws it cracked the windscreen. Another blow would shatter it.

Janey and Eliza were helpless beneath it, wedged in by the airbags.

'Eliza. Get out. It only wants me!' Janey reached over and was able to release her friend's seat-belt. The smaller of the pair, Eliza was able to slide out and stumbled to the tarmac on her side.

The beast lifted up its aquiline head to the sunroof, tensing its body to administer the coup-de-grâce.

'No!' Eliza screamed.

At the last moment the beast paused, and sniffed the air in front of Janey's face, a low growl emanating from it.

She could feel its hot, rancid breath on her face and strained out of reach, choking down the nausea and terror.

It howled in rage, its cry carrying across the glen.

Another thunk.

The monster spasmed, shrieking in agony.

Its eagle face turned to that of a small boy.

'Oh no...'

It was the one Janey had seen in photographs at the shrine in Allen's neighbourhood. It looked grotesque on the body of the hound-man-snake. But the expression on its face was one of innocence and ... release.

One word rang out in Janey's mind.

Beloved.

As though suddenly doused, the fire in its eyes faded, and the bulk collapsed onto the bonnet, sliding onto the roadside in a black heap.

Janey tried to breathe. She was smothered by the airbag, so she took a shard of window and pierced it. The thing deflated and she gasped for air.

'Janey? Are you...?'

'I'm ... fine. I think. And you?'

Eliza pulled herself to her feet. 'I'll let you know.' She straightened her glasses. Her face was pale, her eyes wide – as she looked down in disgust and horror at the thing before them.

'What the Folk Horror was *that* ...?'

'The Xævæx.' A voice from the mist. 'Something that does not belong here.' An Irish-American accent from a different century.

They looked up.

A figure appeared – a man of indeterminate years, lean and wiry. He wielded the heavy, mechanical, anachronistic weapon. In one swift action he reloaded with a bolt from a leather holder at his thigh, and, cranking it back into position, pointed at the fallen beast. He gave it a jab with one of a particularly fine pair of boots as he passed.

The monstrous hybrid seemed to shudder into life.

The women stared in horror, and the figure stepped back, crossbow levelled, ready to enter the fray once more.

But the black tangle of limbs bubbled and hissed, emitting a smell that made them gag as it melted away into the burn in a gasp of shadow.

Three bolts clanged to the ground.

The man gathered them up, plunging their points in the verge to clean them before sliding them back into their slots.

Stepping close to the car Janey could see he had horse-brasses wrapped around his

chest like a bandolier glinting haloes in the headlights. He was smaller than at first he had appeared. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he hawked black spittle in the beast's direction. 'Well, *that* was a botheration.'

A backwash of peace filled the glen.

The stranger stood before them, catching his breath. Hitching his deadly ordnance over his shoulder, he produced a bone pipe from his hat and then some tobacco from a pouch at his hip. He filled the bowl as though bidding his time waiting for a mail-coach. 'Skin-turners ... on this side... Not good, not good at all,' he ruminated, taking a deep lung of the sweet smoke.

Janey brushed the shards of glass carefully away and stepped towards him, glad of her height. 'Hey ... thanks for saving us.' Much to her annoyance, she trembled all over.

The man nodded, lifting the pipe stem in response. Somewhere nearby a snort of indignation. He whistled, and there was the clip-clop of hooves. Out of the last of the mist came a cart pulled by two mules. The stranger stroked their manes, whispering into their ears. He fitted the brasses back on, muttering to himself. 'I'm not meant to meddle. Never have – in all my years. But ... things are changing. Who knows what the rules of the game are anymore? Still, a man has to choose his side. And I don't have mercury in my veins.'

'What was it...?'

'Mm?' He finished up and looked at her as though for the first time, then at the fouled patch of tarmac and grass. 'Oh, one of the Sluagh Sith.'

'Oh, I know! I know!' Eliza, for a moment, forgot the horror. 'The People of Peace.'

The man gave the younger one an appraising look, raising a sceptical eyebrow. 'That's being unduly polite. Neath's agents aren't known for their peaceful temperaments and good intentions. Mean sons of bitches. Usually work in pairs, so I guess its partner has already been dealt with.' Blowing a hoop, he pondered this mystery.

'Don't I know it!' Janey blew a strand of hair from her face.

'Really?' The stranger's gaze fixed on her: pupils of two different changing colours. Otherworldly ... although the rest of him seemed human enough to Janey – bad teeth; bad skin; clothes that looked like they hadn't seen a washboard in days. 'But not altogether surprising, considering your blood.'

Janey wanted to ask him what he meant, but then he added.

'They were after the Reverend's journal.'

'You know about it...?'

A hoop of smoke. 'I'm the one who crossed the Rift to bring it to you, lady.'

'You?' Janey looked at him with deepening fascination. He was just a strange old-young man ... and yet he had slain that ... beast. 'What? How? Who?'

He chuckled, then coughed, waving away the smoke. 'One question at a time, please!' He hooked a thumb in a waistcoat pocket, and gave Janey an appraising squint.

Janey frowned in puzzlement.

The stranger pointed with his thumb, back into the mist. 'Your blood gave it to me – via a ... mutual acquaintance – to pass onto a living descendant.'

Janey's eyes widened. 'You mean...?'

'Yes. Man of the cloth, I believe? Queen's Chaplain, the last I heard.'

'Kirk!' Eliza gasped.

'Where..?'

The stranger leaned closer, looked about to check they weren't being listened to, then whispered behind a cupped hand. 'He's trapped in Elfhome. He's hoping you'll spring him from his silver-lined calaboose.' He straightened up, sniffed, and jabbed with his pipe in the direction of her belly. 'And looks like you're in just the right condition to make it happen.'

She stared at him, slack-jawed.

'Janey, what ... what does he mean?' asked Eliza.

The man turned to go. 'Why else do you think the Xævæx didn't tear you to pieces? Why it tarried some? Not for theatrical effect, that's for sure!' He took the reins of his mules and hoisted himself up onto the cart. 'You're carrying royal seed, lady! Those critters are trained from birth to be loyal to the Crown.'

Dumb-founded, Janey stood there.

Eliza turned to her, wide-eyed.

'Anyway, time yanks his reins. Must skedaddle. I'm feeling a mortal chill. There's just too much *history* in this place to be healthy for a man's constitution.' The stranger looked exhausted. Like the glacial striations in the rock, countless lines criss-crossed his face. 'Go steady in that ... conveyance, won't you?' He raised his pipe in salute, then clucked his tongue and flicked the reins.

'Hey, wait! What's your name?' Janey called.

He pondered whether to reply for a beat, then shrugged. 'Sideways Brannelly. If anyone asks after me ... say I'm retired.' Clamping his pipe resolutely between his teeth, he snapped

the reins and his cart trundled off.

Janey watched him vanish into the mist. The sound of the mules and the wheels faded, until only the vast silence of the glen and the wild beating of her heart remained. She closed her eyes and placed her hands on her stomach. Faintly, deep inside her...

There.

41

I have tended the sick as best I can, but I am no natural bone-setter and physik – and there are simply too many of them.

As I toiled up to my arms in the filth of the hospice, I heard a gentle cough behind me and to my surprise I beheld young Tyrius.

It seems one of their ilk at least had a beating heart.

There was no time for pleasantries. I set him to work straight away: to bring me fresh water, clean linen, bowls of broth, and balsams from the apothecary to ease the suffering of the afflicted.

The days passed in a nauseating cavalcade of misery. We could do little to stem the tide of neglect. Many of the Sith simply chose to fade away, shrivelling into homunculi before our eyes. We buried them as best we could – the only soft ground in the pet cemetery.

Exhausted we would collapse, with barely enough strength left to feed and wash ourselves.

We could not go on.

That night I racked my brains for a practical situation.

In the small hours inspiration came.

Chanticleer proclaimed the new day, though little evidence of it was there in the sky, as we made our way down to the guard-house.

Tyrius was full of questions, but I was silent in my resolve. I directed him to the opposing lever and at my signal, we released.

The chains clattered in their brackets, and the drawbridge slammed into place with a great doom.

It did not take those outside long to stir from their squalor.

Pitiful figures started to tentatively cross the drawbridge. In the thin gruel of dawn they were little more than hollow-eyed shadows. As though a herd sensing fodder, their ranks were soon swelled and it was not long before a rancid horde pressed against the portcullis. Skeletal arms reached out from rags through the bars, blackened claws held out in need.

'What now?' Tyrius questioned, holding a nose-gay to his delicate features.

'Open it!' I commanded. 'They are no less than you, and they starve. Would you not help your fellow creature?'

Tyrius looked suitably chastened, although the blood drained from his face as he bent to the task. The release mechanism was stiff, and it took both of us to free the counter-weight, which sent the portcullis sliding upwards into its slot with a tremendous clatter and clang.

They swarmed past us into the town and I feared it would be torn down in their frenzy, but like a wave breaking the force of the insatiable tide was soon arrested by the hard stone streets.

Not paved with gold; the buildings not of gingerbread.

The mood could have easily turned to rage.

Tyrius wisely hid himself within a guard-room.

I could not lose my nerve now. Spotting a butcher's block, I leapt upon it like a Wesleyan preacher.

'Good people, pray hear me!'

The mob turned as one as my clear sermon voice cut through the mutterings.

A thousand hungry eyes stared, blue murder in the air.

'I am not one of the Court. Until recently I have been their prisoner. See you not the marks upon my throat, my wrists? They left me here to rot like yourselves. But I could not abandon you! It was I who opened the gates. Most of the supplies have been taken, but some remain. Make the most of what you can find.'

Murmurs of approval and astonishment broke through the discontent.

'Why do you help us, stranger?' rumbled a gruff ogre of a man.

'My Faith demands it of me. And it is charity I ask of you. I need help to tend the wounded. Many here suffer as you do.'

This triggered waves of contempt, scorn and rotten fruit.

'Why should we help them?' a black-toothed harridan spat. 'They abandoned us in our need!'

'The hospice is for all those who need care. Bring your sick, your infirm, your elderly – they shall all be tended.'

The murmurs became more positive.

'Anyone who wishes to help, please come forth as well. Any who are willing to

wash, clean, tend, cook, or porter will be given a bed and food also.'

The crowd looked at me with, it seemed, scorn. I felt at any moment I would be torn to pieces.

But then a young flax-haired woman stepped forward. She was gaunt-cheeked and shadow-eyed, but there was a light in her. 'I will help. I have lost my family. I have no one. But perhaps I can prevent others suffering as I have done.'

Another stepped forward, a bark-skinned dwarf. 'I will help.'

Then another.

Soon I had dozens. Many hundreds remained still, but they did not prevent the others from going.

Most seemed content to make themselves at home amid the stalls and detritus of the abandoned market, but about fifty followed me back to the castle, bringing their bundles of sorrow.

We made a pitiful procession, but there is room for all in God's heart.

Perhaps all is not lost. Even here, far from His Grace, there is Love yet to be found.

The car went over a pot-hole, jolting her spine. 'Fuck!' Janey's cry fell on deaf ears. She knew she wasn't going to get a response out of the driver for a while.

Eliza, thin-lipped and pale, gripped the wheel as she drove the battered vehicle across the lonely moor road. It was freezing with the sunroof and passenger window smashed, even with the heating was on full blast.

A cigarette would give her some internal heating ... but Janey thought better of it. The rattling vehicle was making her car-sick as it was. And now she had another to consider, though she could hardly get her head around it.

That creature. That man. Both had confirmed it. Confirmed what she had, deep down, *known*.

Deaths and entrances... Man! Sometimes being alive was a lot of 'botheration', as that stranger had said.

Wrapping her Afghan tight around her, collar pulled high, Janey returned to the journal. She flicked to the end. Only a few pages of Kirk's writing left before the final silence of the blank page descended. Usually, the writing only came into focus as she gazed upon it, but the

later entries remained illegibly unstable, only coalescing as she neared her ‘place’ (marked by a Raven Books bookmark). There was no chance of cheating and reading the last page! Whatever fate was in store for Kirk – and herself – was as yet unwritten.

It is strange that fate can befall us. None can know what the Almighty has in mind. One may as well try and fathom the will of a mountain. Who would have thought that the day I left Aberfoyle parish I would find myself tending for another flock – here in Elfhome? Whether their Subterranean souls are beyond salvation I reckon not, but I pray for them none the less. Ultimately they are all God's creatures. Suffering is suffering – I do what I can to ease it, with the help of my bedraggled troupe of recruits. Given purpose, given leadership, they have shone through. We do our best to maintain strict standards of cleanliness – hard in this crumbling, damp, castle. Braziers have been lit and doors opened to channel warm, dry air through the corridors, purging it of corruption. The Chapel of the Moon has become one of God's light and many join me in true prayer there – turning to it in extremis, yes, but it seems to stir a forgotten memory in some, a dim light of recollection; a dream of dawn. No longer am I choked at mention of the Lord's name. I have been able to remove my cassock to wash it and my neck properly – bliss! – but replaced it with a renewed sense of purpose. I am freed from the Queen's service – but now serve Her people.

The dilapidated vehicle skidded to a halt in front of the old vicarage. Eliza killed the engine, and barely managed to open her door before she threw up.

Janey reached over and placed her hand on the driver's back, waiting until the vomiting had subsided.

‘Here, drink some of this.’ She handed Eliza a half-drunk bottle of water.

Slumping back in her seat, her companion accepted it weakly. Managing a sip, she swilled her mouth and spat it out of the window, screwing her face up at the taste of bile. Then she took another sip. Held it down.

‘Good. Take it easy. You're in shock.’

Eliza opened her watering eyes and gave Janey a look. ‘No shu-shu-shit.’ She started to laugh, winced and held her ribs.

‘Whu-what about you?’ she was finally able to ask.

Janey held out her guitar hand. It trembled, but she felt clear-headed. 'Well, that was an adrenalin-rush, for sure. But I've had a few close scrapes lately. Same shit, different day...' She shook her head. 'I'm sorry about your car...'

'Well, Aunt Petunia got us here. Poor old gal!' The driver fondly patted the dashboard.

'I can't wait to see what you tell the garage. Sorry, but we bumped into Black Shuck and his band, and were flashmobbed by fairy cattle!'

They both laughed and it felt good.

'And I think we look in the same sorry state.' Janey checked her appearance in the overhead mirror, and groaned.

'Dragged through a moor backwards.'

Janey went to grab her tobacco pouch. Tightened her shaking hand into a fist instead. 'No need to roll down the window for fresh air, hey?' The car-door opened with an unpleasant sounding creak. She pulled the scarf away from the frame, scattering fragments of glass on the gravel. 'I guess the veil is thin here, huh?' The wind snatched the shredded scarf from her hand. 'Brr! It's a nice day out!'

She scanned the Vicarage, set back in its own prim garden. 'Insch-Alladine.' Electrified with a sense of the imminent end-game, her senses soaked it all in. *Kirk was all around her.*

Opposite the manse brooded the dark knowe of Doon Hill.

Eliza followed her gaze. 'A Sith-Bhruaich, I think Kirk called them. Fairy mounds.' She looked askance at her companion, anxiously checking her expression. 'The hollow hills.'

Janey placed her hand on her belly and sighed. Looking up, she locked eyes with Eliza. 'There's something I need to talk to you about...'

'The elephant in the room?' Eliza smiled. 'Don't worry. I figured.'

They stared at each other, the shared secret enormous between them.

'Erm, congratulations? Or, if you prefer: Happy Saint Valentine's Day!'

They hugged, laughed, wept.

'Oh, Eliza. I don't know what I feel about it. Fingal's such a... And Allen ...'

Eliza gave her a straight look. 'One life-crisis at a time, please. At least you're fit for purpose, according to Katherine Briggs. Time for some Applied Folklore.'

'Listen, I don't think I'm ready for this yet. I'm freezing and in need of a hot drink.'

Eliza chewed a fingernail. 'Okay, let's go to the pub and thaw out a bit. Come up with a plan.'

'A plan would be good.'

They sat in the snug of the local, cradling steaming mugs of coffee by the inglenook. The landlord, a large man with a droll face, put some more logs on the fire. They thanked him. It was 'slow', with only a couple of regulars in – who gave the two women surreptitious looks over their pints.

'Right,' said Janey.

'Right,' Eliza agreed.

'A plan.'

'Mm, yes, it's a toughie.' Wrinkling her brow, she wiped her glasses.

'So, let's get this straight. All we have to do is knock on the door and say, 'Excuse me, I'm a descendant of Robert Kirk and I need to go to the study and stick a dirk in his desk.'

'That's about the long and the short of it, yes.'

'For a start, what the fuck is a dirk?'

'A Highlander's bottle-opener. Once was at a wedding and the best man, a Scot, opened a stoppered phial of sacred water with one at the altar.'

Janey gave her a look.

Eliza put her glasses back on. 'Oh, look. There's one!' She pointed to the wall above the fireplace. A pair of thin, short swords hung there. Getting up, she gave them a closer inspection. 'Yes, it's a real one – not tourist tat.'

The landlord coughed behind the bar.

Eliza called to him. 'Oh, hullo. I know this might sound like a strange request ...'

The regulars gave each other sideways looks. They folded their arms at the same time. A bit of entertainment.

The landlord dried his hands on a bar-towel and leaned over the dark, warped wood.

'Do you mind if we borrow this...?'

A doubtful look.

'We only need it for an hour or two – it's for a ... photo shoot.' Eliza produced her *Cone* press-pass, flashing it quickly.

'Well...' the landlord frowned. 'Y'see, miss...'

'Here.' Janey dropped the car-keys on the counter. 'It's the estate outside.'

One of the regulars twitched the curtain aside and snorted in contempt. 'A right state,

more like!

The landlord folded his arms.

'We'll buy lunch in here afterwards and ... give the place a good write-up,' Eliza added.

Picking up the keys, the landlord twirled them around his finger. 'Okay, but bring back the cutlery. And mind yourself. That thing is sharp!'

'Of course, many thanks.'

They settled back down and continued their hushed conversation.

'Great, we have our McGuffin!' Eliza beamed, presenting the dirk to Janey.

'So, how are we gaining entry to this study, Lex Luthor?' asked Janey, a little sharply. She rubbed her temples. The flames were looking more garish by the minute.

Eliza pondered this. 'Mm... Ah, got it!'

The regulars glanced over. The landlord gave them a dubious look.

Leaning closer, she whispered to Janey, 'It's simple. I say I'm a research student – show her my credentials. Tell her I'm working on a biography of Kirk. Take pictures. You're a famous American author, visiting the University who wanted to come along for the trip, as you work in the same field. When we get a mo – I could distract the host with questions and photographs – you do the deed. Bob's your uncle.'

'Bob's your uncle?' Janey looked at her sceptically. 'Sounds like it's so ridiculous it might just work.'

'That's been my life's motto to date.'

Janey shrugged. Tried to finish her coffee, but grimaced at the taste. 'Bleh. Does this taste funny to you?'

Eliza shook her head. 'Not exactly gourmet blend, but it's hot, it's caffeine.'

Janey got up, a little unsteadily.

'Are you okay?'

'Headache. Let me ... freshen up for the big final scene. I'll be right back.'

She passed the men who gave her appreciative glances, until she scowled back.

Sighing, Janey checked her face in the mirror: bloodshot eyes; shadows; hair a mess. And now a blinding headache. She splashed her face, redid her makeup and brushed her hair. As she did so, she started to hum the melody for the 'Three Sisters' she'd come up with in the night.

A cubicle banged shut behind her and someone fumbled about inside.

'Eliza, is that you?'

No reply.

Janey put her make-up and brush away, and clicked her bag shut. Just then the cubicle door swung open. She gasped.

A young woman in Seventies fashion hung from the overhead pipe, suspended by the neck by her wide belt. Her legs twitched, feet bare. Her eyes bulged, rivulets of mascara down her blue cheeks. A pair of platform shoes were placed neatly at the foot of the loo.

Janey screamed.

The next thing she knew, Eliza had burst in. 'What's up? Are you alright?'

Janey was pale from shock. 'In ... In there...' she pointed over her shoulder.

Eliza, puzzled, pushed open the door. 'What do you mean? Look, there's nothing there.'

Janey forced herself to look.

The cubicle was empty.

She went over to it and inspected it in disbelief. Then she tried the others. All empty.

'I don't ... A minute ago I swore I saw...' she shook her head.

The landlord's voice through the door: 'Everything all right in there?'

'Just ... stage-fright,' Eliza called back. 'Come on, let's go, before the landlord changes his mind, and calls the police.'

Composing herself, Janey let her friend lead her out.

'Are you ready for this?'

Janey took a deep breath. 'I'm done with skeletons in the cupboards.'

Autumn tints the landscape in deeper hues – purples and reds, gold and rust. The famine of summer has been broken by a late, unexpectedly bountiful, harvest – the hedgerows are brimming. What could not be reaped can now, at least, be gathered. Such fruit here in Elfhome! The most delicious apples, pears and plums – their taste clean and sharp. The folk need no instruction in how to make the most of this good fortune – gathering in berries, nuts, mushrooms, and making chutneys, preserves and wine.

Not only the famine, but the pestilence has ended.

The Unbeast has been vanquished.

It would seem my banishing worked, although I cannot in truth claim the credit. Some higher force guides the providence of this place.

I am its lightning-rod at most.

Patients, both from within and without the walls, have recovered. Unlike the pedigree aristocracy though, the common folk have a natural resilience. They bounce back from adversity. Those we could not save we bury with dignity. Where their souls would be bound, I cannot fathom.

Any certainty I held about God's universe I have had to forsake.

It is a time of letting go. The shadows lengthen and the nights grow cooler and longer as summer slowly ends. Folk work hard to prepare for winter, chopping and stacking firewood, repairing roofs, mending clothes. The stores have been opened and many neglected treasures have been found – bolts of cloth, farm-tools, crocks, and linen, great sacks of fleece awaiting to be spun. It's as though the castle has been under a spell of indolence.

The Court lived off the fat of the land and the sweat of others. But no more!

Through this quiet revolution the kingdom has been restored to its people. It appears they are self-governing – an autochthonous anarchy.

Yet does not a woodland know how to grow without the woodsman? Good timber might spoil, but should everything on Earth, or under it, be for the exploitation of others?

Am I guilty of such, in my plundering of Elfhame's treasures? So many baubles to present to my erstwhile muse, for a Society Lady's passing distraction?

I hope now, finally, I have paid for my folly.

Perhaps I have even gleaned a little wisdom along the way.

I feel my time here is nearly done.

The Castle is in safe hands.

I have shown the people the Light; left them the Good Word of the Lord (the toil of Bedel's Bible translation helped) and I can do little more.

I hear the road calling.

I must prepare to leave.

'So, Reverend.'

It was odd to hear the respectful address.

I stood beneath the guard-house.

Tyrius clasped my hand. 'Thank you for what you have done for my people. After the way you were treated ...'

I waved the thought away. 'Perhaps not entirely undeserved. But your friendship has been a salve to such ills. The light of goodness shines in many of you. As the Queen's lunacy fades, your natural light arises. Perhaps mine does too. We all of us have been beglamoured in one way or another.' I looked out at the gorge – a shaft of sunlight breaking through its gloom. 'But every enchantment must end.' I embraced my friend. 'Farewell.'

'Farewell, Robert Kirk.'

It was a strange feeling to walk through the gates of Castle-town, a free man. Some lined the walls to watch me go. I had become their patriarch here these last few weeks – but it was time – my departure long overdue. It has been a year here but I dread to think how much time has expired on Earth.

It was Summer's End. That evening the Red Feast of Samhuinn would be in full swing. What kine could be gathered from the high meadows would be driven between the fires to their winter pastures. There would be much culling and putting away of flesh. The storytellers and musicians would do a roaring trade, no doubt. Families would remember their loved ones; the ancestors, honoured. If the skulls of the long-gone are not brought out, I would be surprised. Divination and dans macabres!

All a bit too heathen for my palate, so I was not a mickle glad to be leave-taking.

I have dwelled among the Lychnobia for too long.

Time to step into the Light.

I was all too aware that the Veil was thin and it was the optimum time to cross. I would make my way to the place I first appeared in this world, and hope that my descendant will be remembering their ancestor. That my message and instructions

had got to someone of my flesh and blood and that they had done their duty. I suspected I could not cross over by myself, not with the Borders being closed.

Only the strength of blood will grant me passage and succeed in opening the way.

As I left the ravine, I turned to look back on the crest of the hill, one last time casting a glance at the castle that had been my prison this last year. The pale light of the last day of the year (according to the Old Calendar) caught the turrets and parapets, and for a moment it was gilded in glory.

...

I walked back along the Glen of Shadows, this time taking the Queen's Road – the high road along the valley bottom. In truth it was little more than the old drovers' roads you sometimes see crossing the Highlands and Lowlands painstakingly-made with large cobbles: the result of hard, exhausting labour. I had no need to fear discovery or reprimand now.

As I made my steady progress, spurred on by the end of my journey being possibly only a day or two away, I thought about the personalities who had dominated my time here in Elfhome... Neath. Gwynn. The Queen, of course. Bellirummer. Tyrius. Pyewacket. Moudewort. The Cailleach. It was surprising how, after the defeat in the Field of Iron, the Court crumbled like a house of cards. When the Unbeast came it was more than famine and pestilence. It was the snuffing out of their self-belief, their pride, their arrogance. They could not sustain their conceit of superiority any longer. The universe was not Sith-centric. It had moved on. The Age of Reason has dusted away the cobwebs of enchantment from the world. Science is now our new Lord. Where that will lead us, I dreaded to think.

Without the one true faith where is Man, except floundering in the dark?

I could not help but feel a whit of pity for the Court as it left for the Hollow Hills – for was it not the end of a dream? They took their beautiful lies with them, leaving life naked; reality, a drabber place. The Sundering had snuffed out the candle of magick. Both worlds are ... lesser. The inviolable Rift leaves Ironbloods and Sith bereft.

I shuddered. A chill was in the air – the first breath of winter.

I imagined an extra layer, another log on the fire, a warming glass of uisge-beatha to hand, and a Book of Hours to reflect on the dragonfly dreams of summer.

But my reverie was interrupted by a rude arrival.

Eliza pressed the bell. They stood nervously shuffling on the porch of the Vicarage.

A fierce wind howled around the manse. Great armies of light and shadow fought over the dark mass of Doon Hill, stark against the sky.

Janey was doing her best not to look like some wild-eyed fanatic who happened to have a dirk hidden under her coat. The short walk from the pub to the house had done little to clear her head. The landscape of Aberfoyle seemed to shift around her as though it was a gigantic beast slowly stirring awake. The hills no longer looked stable, as though at any moment something would burst through.

She had to fight down the urge to scream. There was a pounding – drums beneath the earth – which Janey finally realised was her own heartbeat. She gripped the edge of the porch, shaking off the writhing shapes at the edge of her vision. The sight arose within her like a bad migraine – nearly blotting out her usual vision, until all she could see was phantoms and demons. The very air was alive with them – they swirled in the trees, tearing at the branches, a hungry urgency in the wind. The day had grown preternaturally dark – and bitterly cold, as though at any moment it was going to snow. She couldn't stop shaking and gulped air into her lungs.

There was still no reply, so Eliza was just about to rap the knocker – a grinning hag – when the chain on the door went and it creaked open a fraction. In the gap they could see an old lady, small, frail, paper-skinned, but clear-eyed.

'Yes, can I help?'

'Hello, sorry to trouble you. My name is Eliza Thomas. I'm a research student for the University of Glasgow's School of Celtic Studies, and this is my colleague ... Janet McIn ... tosh, an author from the States.'

'Hello...' The old lady looked at them in curiosity, then at the card Eliza was holding out.

'We're working on a biography of Robert Kirk...'

The old lady brightened up at this. 'Oh, really? The Reverend. Fancy that!'

'And wondered if we could come and have a look, take some photographs, and make some notes. Sorry to just call on you like this. We did write and ring a few times...'

'Oh I'm so forgetful. We have so many enquiries from you folk.' The old lady muttered to herself.

Eliza had her fingers crossed behind her back.

Janey tried to stay upright.

Then the chain was lifted and door was opened fully. 'Better come in then.' And she shuffled down the passageway. 'I'll put the kettle on. There's a leaflet on the side all about the house... Biscuits... Have we any biscuits...?'

They stepped over the threshold. 'So far, so good,' Eliza whispered to her friend.

'Don't trouble yourself on our account,' Eliza called down the passageway. 'We'll just take a few snaps and be on our way...'

Eliza nodded to Janey towards the stairs.

'Go on. I'll keep her occupied. God, listen to me!'

Janey grabbed the stair rail.

'You can do it,' her friend whispered.

The stairs loomed before her like Ben Nevis. Janey took a deep breath, and began to ascend.

A clatter of rocks announced I was no longer alone and, before I knew it, that hairy wassock of an Urisg, Hamish, burst out in front of me. In his delight, he bowled me over, taking the wind from my lungs.

In no uncertain terms I told him to get off. Mustering what dignity I could, I brushed myself down, but a broad smile soon broke out on my face, for in truth, I was as pleased to see him as he was evidently to see me.

In his excitement he blathered away in Gaelic until I made him slow down and I was finally able to understand his gabblings.

'They've let you go! They're leaving! You're leaving! Everyone leaves, leaves poor Hamish alone...'

I scoffed at this. 'How can you be alone when you have all of this?' I made a sweep of my arms. 'And where would you be going now? I can hardly take you back to Aberfoyle now, can I? What would the parishioners think? You're unlikely the kind of company a gentleman should have in polite society, let alone a member of the Kirk. Use your noddle, man!'

His bony shoulders drooped, beastly hands lay limp on his hairy haunches – it was comical to see him so crestfallen. But I had to be kind. After all, he has been

perhaps my one true friend in all my time here – foul of face, but good of heart. 'It is good to see you, friend. It is no little thanks to you I am leaving at all. With your help I got the message across. The Mundane Glass informs me that my plan is working – although in a most unusual way! Times are strange indeed, and I am not sure if I will belong any more than you...'

This was a bleak thought and for a moment it felt as though Hamish was the only soul on Earth (or elsewhere) who I could identify with. Would I be a stranger in my own land? From what I had glimpsed on the Mundane Glass before the signal was lost, post-flytting, the world I had known had changed beyond all recognition. Did I really want to go back there so much? Hundreds of years had passed. All I had known and loved had turned to dust. Was I fooling myself into thinking any kind of return was sensible, let alone viable?

I looked out across the Glen – both bright and dark as clouds skirled across it, herding shadows.

Then a strange melody arose – at first I wondered from where – then I realised that it was from the Urisg. He crouched upon a rock and lifted his shaggy head to the sky like a wolf howling at the moon, and yet the song that came out of his mouth was a song of heartbreak and longing. The cianalas was not one I knew, but I shall transcribe it from the Tramontaine tongue as best I can:

*Bringing to mind all the things I did,
So many that I can't recount them all in this tale:
Going in winter to waulkings and weddings
With no lantern-light but the lit end of a peat;
The beautiful young folk would be singing and dancing,
But that time is past, and the glen is now gloomy:
What remains of Andrew's house, now full of nettles,
Brings to mind when I was young.*

Listening to it in that desolate place brought tears stinging to my eyes. I could tell that Hamish pined for home (his former human home, that is) with all his being, and that if he had a chance to return home, however slim, he would take it.

I realised I had no choice. My heart cried out for my native soil, for the hills that know me. If my loved ones were dust then they would be one with the soil, with the trees, with the wind and the water ... and I must be united with them, whatever the outcome.

This instinct to return home is so strong, so utterly undeniable.

I thanked my friend for his gift and we walked on together – or rather I ambled and he gambolled. He had intuited his company would be appreciated. He could be my guide one last time.

Together we followed the drovers' road, climbing out of the Glen into the foothills – a slow, steady traverse. My legs, unaccustomed to the exercise – the distances involved – after a year's captivity – found it hard going. Heavy with stolen time, how I felt the weight of my mortality.

Far below I could see the cluster of blackhouses where I first had stopped and received hospitality. That first night in Elfhame seemed so long ago. I was a different man then. Foolish and headstrong.

I had come here to save my wife. I realise now that it was not her who needed saving, it was I: from my arrogance and pride and a mundane life. For too long I had hidden away in books, in dusty libraries, afraid of life, of flesh and blood. My darling wife had restored me – the mournful widower. She had given me such ... gifts. Music. Dancing. Laughter. Song. A second son and a daughter. And such sweet kisses.

O, to hold her in my arms one last time!

How I missed her and all my loved ones, my mother and father, my grandparents, my friends.

I heard them calling to me.

The pounding grew louder, and it felt as though the very floor was shaking beneath Janey – so she had to grip hold of the banister for dear life; her body, leaden.

Far below, she could hear Eliza making small talk with the old lady who had brought a tray of tea things. A glimpse of her through the banisters: so dodderly. At any moment surely she would drop the whole lot and the world would explode in a blizzard of crashing crockery. Liver-spotted hands seemed to be the only thing holding the world up. She suddenly looked at Janey – and for a second her rheumy eyes flashed with a fire of recognition.

Then the world tilted.

The old woman grew in stature – her pastel-coloured clothes darkening to a cloak of shadow, her tidy white bun of hair, extending into an iron-grey skein, tasselled and beaded with bones.

The house split open and the crone towered above her.

Janey felt her legs turn to water, and she stumbled on the stairs.

The Cailleach glared down at the intruder.

'Beware, child! You enter the realm of the Sith!' an ancient voice hissed inside her mind. 'What is your name? Your intention?'

Janey tried to think clearly – but the world was roaring around her. At the top of her voice, she shouted: 'I am Janey McEttrick, and I come to free my ancestor, Robert Kirk.'

'You dare defy the Queen of Elfhome? My daughter would not take kindly to you stealing her pet priest... She may have tired of him, but she never gives up her toys easily.'

'She has taken my daughter ... my dear sweet Eloise ... and the seed of my line, for generations. Enough! I say. *Enough!*' Janey felt the anger rise within her, giving her strength. The Cailleach towered over her, but Janey stood defiantly before her, bathed in the blue fire that crackled between them. 'The McEttrick's have paid their tithe. Old wounds must be allowed to heal. Let my ancestor go – he has been your prisoner for long enough. Please ... I ... beg you.'

The Mountain Mother pondered this with a thin smile. The roof was no more – and clouds broiled around her like a tornado, lightning crackling amid her braids like synapses firing across a vast brain.

'And what do you offer in exchange, Janey McEttrick?'

Janey felt stripped bare. What could she give? Not the child growing within her. No! She would defend that unborn life tooth and claw if she had to.

What else could she offer? What was the most precious thing she possessed?

Suddenly, the idea came to her – like a ray of sunlight breaking through the bruised sky.

'My songs. I will give you my songs.'

As soon as she spoke it she knew this was right. She had felt them stirring within her ever since she had landed in Scotland. 'I will record an album dedicated to the Secret Commonwealth – so that all may know of your glory!'

The Cailleach pondered this as the lightning crackled around her. Her eyes were like black holes sucking in the light.

'Secrets ...' the Cailleach hissed. 'My daughter, how she loved them. But ... her time has passed. They have gone. Only I alone chose to remain. Ironbloods ... amuse me. Perhaps they need a little enchantment...' Thunder shook the house. 'Very well! Janey McEtrick, you have given your word. We shall await your fruits ... with interest. You may pass.'

The Cailleach reverted back into the form of the old lady – like a genie going back in a bottle. There was a slight rattle of china and a tremble of milk. She gave a little cough, and then carried on as though nothing had happened. 'I'll take these through to the parlour. When you're finished come through and we'll have a natter. Don't let your tea go cold though.'

The old lady shuffled off.

Janey gasped with relief.

Eliza looked up with concern.

Janey waved feebly to her. 'I'm okay. I can do this.' She pulled herself up, took a deep breath, and continued up the stairs.

Suddenly, the effort got easier. And she made the landing. There were several doors before her, but Janey felt a strong intuitive pull towards one of them. She pushed open the heavy door, and she knew she'd made the right choice.

Before her was Kirk's study. Just as she had imagined it – books lined the walls. A beautiful carved desk faced a bay window. Upon it some simple effects. A blank sheet of paper, a quill-pen in a holder, some ink, ink-dust and a blotter. Before it, a handsome chair with a curved back rest and a leather-quilted cushion.

The view from the window showed the Doon Hill. The skies were still overcast, but were no longer stormy.

A stillness descended.

Janey pulled the dirk from her coat. Her heart beat wildly. The handle was slippery in her palm and she gripped it tighter.

Now she could hear whisperings – a thousand tiny voices – calling to her. And out the corner of her eye – bright forms swirled, emerging from the carvings of the oak-panelling, peering from behind the books, leering from the plasterwork on the ceiling, the patterns on the carpet: elves... fauns... fairies...

The Secret Commonwealth.

Here in this room Kirk had brought them alive.

He had created a portal with his words – and he had stepped through.

For over three hundred years he had been trapped on the other side – a prisoner of Elfhame. But now, she, Janey McEttrick, descended from his seed, would free him.

The cold iron of the dirk grew heavy in her hand.

Passing through the cave of gems and out through the crack into the cold light we finally reached the crest of the Glen where I had first arrived. The place was marked by small piles of rocks (I had clearly not been the only traveller passing here, at this crossing place) I suddenly knew the truth of it.

I would not be returning to Aberfoyle.

There I would be over three centuries old and would no doubt crumble to dust as soon as I set foot on my own land: an Oisín without a silver branch to guide me back to Tir nan Og.

I had outlived my mortal span.

It was time for me to return to the bosom of my Maker. I prayed my soul was not too tainted by my experiences here to be granted salvation.

I bid farewell to my trusty guide – we embraced, and his musky stench did not bother me. I could see the man he once was looking out from that mask of pain. 'Thank you, my friend. May you find your way home also! Fare ye well.'

Shaking away the tears, he left, bounding away. In the gathering gloom echo across the glen, I heard his feral howl.

Then silence descended.

Only the wind on the hilltops, and the beating of my heart.

I took one last glisk around me.

Then I knelt and prayed. Asking for forgiveness for all my transgressions, I prayed for the acceptance of my soul by Saint Peter at the Gates. To return to the true Light. I prayed for my descendants – for their safety and prosperity. I prayed that my errant soul finally find rest in the bosom of Heaven. I had travelled so far. Further than most men, if not all. Enough for me. Enough for a lifetime.

Now, it was finally time to stop. Let the gyring world continue without me.

Out of the wind I sat down and finished this account of my last day.

I leafed through the densely-written pages in the remaining light – each experience translated into sentences, shaped into paragraphs – hoping the shadow-

words will be read in its twin.

My story, finished.

Now, here, amid the wildering light and whispering air, it ends.

I will close my journal, fasten it with its leather thong, and slip it into my cassock pocket.

Then I shall lift up this quill and let the Elfin wind take it.

She lifted the dirk and plunged it into the chair seat.

Janey stared at the cold iron jutting out of the leather cushion.

And kept staring.

Her heart dropped like a bucket down a well.

Who had she been fooling? How could this fr—

From the slit in the chair seat issued an auroræal light. It was like a rip in the soft daylight of the study, a wound in reality from which seeped a swirling, pulsing effulgence. And, as the tear grew bigger, with it came a wind icy with the tang of distant mountains.

The wound was nearly Janey's height now and through it she could glimpse a shadowy glen. And standing on a crag was a figure in black, a man: tall and thin with wild dark hair, streaked with white. His arms were raised as he released a white feather.

The figure turned.

And Janey looked into the eyes of her ancestor.

She had never seen images of him – as far as she knew none existed – but the blood in her recognised her blood.

Bone of my bone.

The voice – unmistakable. Chiselled from the Trossachs, but softened by the hard centuries. By the sound of a heart breaking open.

Janey raised a hand.

The Reverend went to respond, but the gesture seemed to catch in a loop as though she watched some antique footage.

Something wasn't working.

Janey desperately wracked her brains.

Surely she had met all the necessary conditions for the exorcism?

A living descendant.

The dirk in the chair.

The pregnancy.

What was she missing?

Then, like a cog clicking into place, Allen's explanation from the Boogerman Trail came back to her: 'When Katherine Briggs, the great English folk tale collector, visited in 1943, she found evidence of a more recent tradition. She met a woman who had been expecting a baby, and was anxious to get it to Kirk's mansion and christen it there, for it was locally believed that if a baby was born there, and a dirk thrust into his chair, the erstwhile reverend could still be freed.'

'Oh, fuck!'

She had only just found out she was with child...

Nine. Months. Too. Early.

Janey fell to her knees. 'No!'

The image of Kirk started to falter, a broken signal.

She had come so far, endured so much ... when would such a window present itself ever again?

A cry of frustration from the core of her being.

She clenched her fists.

One thing these last few months had taught her was: to fight.

Fight for what she believed in. Fight for her loved ones.

For Allen. For Kirk. For the child within her. She. Could. Not. Fail.

The rip started to congeal shut, the light, the wind, abate.

There must be something...?

What was her most precious possession? The one thing that would re-establish the link to Kirk. That would hold open to portal long enough for him to be released?

What was inside of her, waiting to be born?

No, not that.

Amid the howling of the wind from the otherworldly glen she thought she heard the rags and tatters of a yearnful melody.

Then it came to her.

The Lost Song.

Passed down by the McEttrick Women across the generations: kept secret, kept powerful.

When faced with the abyss, her one gift in defiance of oblivion.

She began to sing it, falteringly at first, her voice cracked, raw.

But as the closing paused, and began to reverse – the light, the wind, returning – her voice grew in confidence.

She stood up and, facing the widening fissure, sang with all the fire in her veins.

She was Janey McEttrick. Descended from a long-line of singer-seers.

She knew who she was.

No more denying. No more hiding.

She sang into the light. Into the darkness beyond the light. To her ancestor. To carry him across.

He heard.

He fully turned.

And he stepped through.

The universe skipped a beat.

Kirk looked at her in wonder and gratitude.

Janey and Kirk embraced – the singer from Asheville and the Episcopalian minister, three hundred years dissolving in the meeting of blood and blood.

Janey beheld her ancestor. His face was gaunt, but the severity was ameliorated by the love and astonishment in his eyes. He heard, and he understood.

Whatever worlds divided them, the song healed that rift.

Janey finished the song, the last note fading into silence.

Kirk kissed her on the brow. And his blessing suffused her body with light.

Behind him the rip congealed shut.

‘Margaret...’

There was a gasp of wind, and, in an instant, the figure of Kirk desiccated into a pillar of dust which collapsed through Janey's hands onto the carpet.

‘No!’ Janey dropped, weeping.

She sank her hands into the dust.

She knew he was free. She had done it. The song had worked.

But she still felt an utter loss.

'Farewell...!' She traced her fingers through the grey particles, dislodged into the fibres of the carpet, the moment absorbed into the warp and weft of things.

The room became just a room again. Books lay scattered around the study. The dirk stood reverberating in the chair. Dust motes swirled in a sun beam.

Eliza burst into the room. 'Oh fucksticks!' She scanned the chaos. 'Did I miss it? You know what old ladies are like when they get talking...' Fumbling with her smart-phone, she started to film the scene. Then, as if remembering something, she asked: 'Are you okay?'

Sighing, Janey got to her feet. 'I ... I think so.'

'Did you...?'

They looked at the dirk in the chair. 'Yes.'

Janey hugged her companion, sobbing with relief. Finally, she pulled away and dabbed her face with the tissue Eliza gave her. 'Thanks.'

'Hey, look at this.'

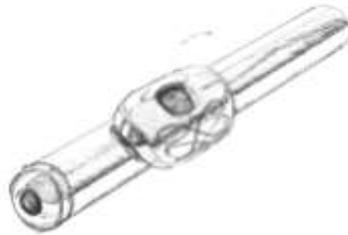
On the desk there was a piece of paper. On it was written in a copper-plate hand:

The Secret Commonwealth

Songs of Elfhame

by Janey McEttrick

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Janey put the mouth-piece back in the tin and closed the lid.

Marjorie's free spirit filled her with a lust for life.

Marsha. Dotty. Molly. Fanny. Elizabeth. Clarence and Constance. Bethany... From each of them she had learnt wisdom. Knowing them made her feel stronger somehow, filled in.

On top of the box she placed Kirk's journal – its spiral pattern catching the frail February morning light seeping in through the sash windows of Eliza's place.

No other words had appeared since Aberfoyle. Since she had met and released Kirk. She took the silence as a good sign.

There were many pages left. Perhaps one day she would fill them.

Or let her child.

She had freed Kirk and lifted the Queen's curse upon her blood. Janey still couldn't quite grasp the fact she had accomplished these things. Good old messed up Janey McEtrick! Perhaps not such a lost cause after all. She was from nine generations of gifted, extraordinary women stretching back over three hundred years. Mountain women. McEtrick Women.

And inside her, the next in line waited to enter, centre stage.

She whispered a silent prayer of thanks to her ancestors – their voices muffled within the box of leaves to a faint murmur, a breeze in a forest.

'Ready?' her friend called, popping her head around the door.

'As I'll ever be.'

Eliza dropped her bags on the trolley. The bus service to the airport was pretty good, but it still felt a bit of a last minute scramble. Her friend had insisted on seeing her off. 'Are you sure you'll be alright with all this stuff?'

'I'll be fine. There are always guys to help you.'

'Ah yes, you can play the pregnant card now.' She blanched. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to say...'

'Oh, Eliza, you're adorable. Get yourself a fella, if you want one.'

Eliza adjusted her spectacles; looked at the floor. 'I have one.'

'Cecil, your cat? A handsome fella, for sure. Good for cuddles.' Janey watched her friend shuffle her rainbow-laced DMs awkwardly, avoiding her gaze.

Staying at Eliza's flat, it became all too clear 'fellas' were the last thing she was interested in. Janey had wondered at her friend's motivation for helping her, for enduring all that she had. *Some* of it was purely academic, at least. But the lingering glances and nervous moments of physical contact made it all too clear what else was going on. She didn't need to be psychic to work that one out.

'Hey, come here you!'

Janey held out her arms and they embraced. Eliza was stiff at first, but then held her with an almost desperate fervour.

Finally, they separated. Eliza brushed the tears away with an embarrassed swipe.

Janey caught her gaze and held it. 'Thank you. You've given me so much. Without you ... I just wouldn't have made it. Hope Aunt Petunia feels better. I could organise a fundraiser if you like...?'

Eliza waved the suggestion away. 'You've given me so much too. It's been a ... wild adventure. And priceless for my research. Don't worry, I won't mention anything directly, but it's given me plenty of leads to follow. It'll keep me busy for a few years probably.'

'Let's keep in touch. And you must come over once ... the dust has settled.'

'Love to! Now, *that*'ll be an adventure!'

They hugged again.

'Seeya around, sister! Go easy.'

'You too. Safe flight. Love from Alba. Blessings of the Sith upon your unborn.'

Janey smiled. 'Yes, to the best of both worlds.'

Janey sank into her window seat with a sigh.

She looked out at the grey tarmac beneath the grey sky – the opposite of what she was feeling inside. She had *done* it! And she was finally heading home.

Not wanting a repeat of her departure, she had put her mother's tin in her hold luggage

– but had extracted Margaret’s dancing shoe first, slipping it into her bag. If asked, she’d say it was a sentimental souvenir, which in many ways it was. She took it out now and held it in her hands – so fragile, yet it had survived so long; so elegant, yet it hid sorrow and loss.

As her fellow passengers edged in beside her, she slid off her boots and slipped the shoe onto her right foot.

The man next to her – an American businessman – raised an eyebrow, but she smiled and shrugged. ‘Flight sock.’



44

As she exited the shuttle bus service from Charlotte, Janey breathed in the familiar musk of North Carolina with relief. Inhaling a lungful of non-recycled fresh spring air, she let out a whistle.

Home.

She extended the handle of her flight-case to drag it along, balancing her guitar case in her other hand. Ballast, helping her to land. This world. This place.

'Want a hand with those, lady?'

A short, portly man, face like a baseball mit, sporting a Charlotte 49ers cap and a badge showing his license, gestured to her luggage. Next to him, a yellow cab stood with its doors open.

'Sure,' she smiled, too tired to object from a feminist standpoint as she was sure Eliza would have done on principle.

The cabbie hefted her case into the waiting vehicle, but she held onto the guitar case out of instinct.

'You're the boss,' he shrugged, holding up his palms.

As Janey folded in her long legs he closed her door and, giving the finger to the impatient vehicle behind him, got behind the wheel and turned on the clock. 'Where to?'

Janey pondered this question. To her trailer in the backcountry? That would be too bleak. To Quatie's? She didn't feel like the twenty questions yet. Shelly's? Likewise. 'To the hospital, please.'

'No rush, I hope...' The cabbie looked anxiously in his rear-view.

Janey bit her lip, hand gently on her belly. There was nothing to see. Yet. But she knew a life stirred within her. Her sense of urgency to get to Allen was over-ridden by an instinctual protectiveness.

'Not too fast ... but not too slow either, if you get my drift.'

'Sure thing, lady. Enjoy the ride.'

Janey sat back into the leather upholstery with a sigh and watched the familiar world flow by. It was a new day in North Carolina. The local station was burbling away.

'Nice trip?'

Janey pondered this, as she looked out over the freeway to the mountains beyond.

'It was, I think.'

The cabbie sensed he wasn't going to get much more out of her, so he turned up the radio. Springsteen kicked in, singing: 'Land o' Hope and Dreams.'

Janey started humming along... God, it was good to be back.

The edgelands of the freeway rolled by like a crankie – one giant billboard after another advertising a *lifestyle*, an *experience*, a *clique* that you simply must be part of. Oversized cars rumbled or spookily swished by, effortlessly switching lanes between the fretboard of traffic – a perpetual twelve-bar chord played by the ultimate bluesman, unacknowledged but ubiquitous, on the blacktop soundtrack of America.

The difference with the rough-around-the-edges grumbling dysfunctionality of Britain made Janey smile. 'Service with a sneer,' Eliza had called it. She had texted her friend upon arrival, letting her know she had touch-down safely. Bless her. A true friend. If Eliza was sweet on her, well ... that was fine, but her heart belonged to someone else.

The cab dropped her off at the hospital reception. The cabbie helped her with her bags and she tipped him a few dollars, delighting in the way they fitted her hand.

'Have a good day!'

'You too.'

Collecting a visitor badge (more security!), she found a trolley for her bag and guitar. Gripping its cold handlebar as though it was the only thing holding on Earth she made her way to Allen's ward.

The corridor telescoped before her, but she shook off the *Inception* FX, driven on by the ominous feeling that rose in her like a storm surge, the toxic floodwaters of guilt, the terror of arriving too late, threatening to overwhelm.

Finally, she was at the threshold of his ward.

She tried to compose herself but knew it was pointless. She was a jangling bundle of nerves, spaced out from her red eye and running on empty.

Lord knows what she looked like.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door.

The place had not changed beyond a few more cards and flowers. The same sterile atmosphere and bleep of the life-support machines. And – *look, dammit!* – there he was. Pale and thin. The victim of her love, her black widow touch.

Janey sat down by his side and gently placed her hand over his, inwardly reeling at the shock of the contact. It was like plugging into the national grid: everything that needed to be expressed, transferred right in that moment, as their lives *synched*.

Feeling the molten tears surge within her, she swallowed them down.

'I'm back.'

The nurse must have found her there, head tipped forward, in an exhausted snooze. It felt like the first time she had been still in a very long time. Half-asleep she was led to a spare bedroom where she was allowed to lie down. Almost immediately, she fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.

When Janey awoke she was disorientated at first. Her body and brain were arguing between themselves about which country and time-zone they were in. Finally, Janey realised where she was.

She stretched, and then shuffled to the washroom to freshen up. After that, and a cup of joe from the vending machine, she felt a lot better.

Thanking the nurse on duty, she went back to Allen's room.

She sat next to him, cupping her hot coffee in her hands, and softly said, 'Hi. Good morning, wordsmith. It's Janey.'

No response – just the beep of the life-support; the ticking of the clock.

She made herself gaze unflinchingly at his drawn features. She stroked his unruly beard; then, the hairs on his forearm; the knots and ridges of his veins and knuckles. She held his limp hand in hers – his writing hand. When was the last time it had used a pen? Typed at a keyboard? Composed a poem or an article? All the months, wasted. While she had been ... how would he put it? *Gallivanting*.

Slowly, shyly at first, she began to tell him about her trip – starting with the obvious things: the dreadful weather; the deep-fried food; driving on the wrong side of the road. Then about Glasgow. The festival. Her gig. The interview with Eliza. Oh, Eliza! Her voice came alive then, describing her new found friend. She laughed as she related some of their early adventures.

Once started, it was hard to stop the flow. She found herself relating everything that had happened. The visions of her ancestors – a sense of them guiding her. The first trip to Aberfoyle ... Carterhaugh ...

Fingal.

She stopped. Licked her lips, her mouth suddenly dry. Looked around the room for inspiration, a sign. A way to hide. But the cold light of the room left her nowhere.

There she was, distorted in the clock face, along with the whole room like one of those trippy Escher drawing.

Tick, tick, tick.

Clearing her throat, she continued: the failed picnic; the invitation and journey to the castle; and that wild night... Speaking it out loud made it sound sordid, not magical. The words were ashes in her mouth.

She forced herself to continue, describing the regret that followed. The lake of the wounded and the refuge of the croft. The three sisters. The attack of the Xævæx. Sideways Brannelly. It all came tumbling out – a mountain burn – unburdening her heart.

It all flowed before her, unstoppable, a river now in spate. Aberfoyle ... The Cailleach ... The release of Kirk.

Finally, in a whisper, she spoke of her fears and concerns about the unborn child and what he might think. How different she felt. The knowing that the knowing was part of her – that she had finally embraced it, accepting who and what she was.

And then she stopped and her coffee was cold. The room was sterile, dormant, and stifled with white noise, the clock's incessant memento mori.

Allen lay there, recumbent, breathing shallow, with a steady pulse.

Then he opened his eyes and looked straight at her.

'Oh.' Her voice caught. She felt exposed in the spotlights of his gaze.

Allen tried to speak, but only managed a cough, his mouth blocked by a tube. Then his voice, in her mind, like a black butterfly hatching: *I know you.*



THE END