



***THE STONE CROWN***

**Malcolm Walker**

**Submitted as part of the requirement for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Discipline of English  
School of Humanities  
The University of Adelaide  
South Australia**

**March 2007**

## Prologue

*The two waves of horsemen clash, a knot of shrieking, cursing warriors. Here upwards of six hundred perish and the blood of the northern tribes seeps into the frozen earth.*

*I had not foreseen this.*

*Did Nimuë not say—had I not thought—that Arthur would be rendered weak and directionless by our deception? With his power gone he would forget this running feud, this ulcer, and take more interest in his women, his hawking and hunting.*

*We may have stolen from him his magic; taken the power which I placed in him all those years ago. But his strategies, his strength, and his skill with weapons—we have not taken these, nor have we dimmed love of his comrades and their deeds. None of this has withered.*

*How could I not have seen this?*

*And Modred, Arthur's bastard son by his half-sister, he too calls his scattered household to him in twos and threes, and with a grievous cry breaks through the press of men and horses that shield his rival. Here Modred drives his lance deep into Arthur's side.*

# 1

For a moment their faces were sharp in Emlyn's field-glasses. Wedged high in an oak at the edge of the woodland, he was having difficulty keeping the binoculars focussed amid the swaying branches. Some sort of disagreement was taking place—he could sense that much—but the wind, which had been growing and pushing a bank of thunderclouds up behind the hill, carried away their voices.

Lowering the glasses, Emlyn peered out through the yellowing foliage. A low dry-stone wall curved out of sight around the edge of Sleepers Spinney, the neat stonework separating the island of pine, beech, and ash trees from the surrounding pasture. The couple were near the wall on the side of the spinney furthest from the road. The girl was gesticulating, while the heavy-set youth stood hunched, hands in pockets, staring at the ground. A solitary wind-whipped phrase—'really piss-weak'—reached Emlyn and then the youth turned back up towards the woods, the girl watching intently until he disappeared into the trees.

'You're game,' Emlyn muttered, 'I'll give you that.'

He usually gave the spot a wide berth; the spinney gave him the willies. Only once had he been up alongside the dark mass of trees. The urge to run had been overpowering. Instead, he had steeled himself to pace out the distance around the wall.

At several thousand strides he lost count and gave up, disturbed by the heavy sensation of electrical discharge in the air and a feeling that he was being watched.

‘Now who’s doing the watching?’ he murmured, resorting to the binoculars again. At first, he had not recognised her without her school uniform; the girl was completely in black: a clingy long-sleeved dress worn very short, a cheap nylon jacket, black tights and Doc Martens. Yeah, I recognise you now, he thought, endeavouring to recall her name: Maxine. He was pretty sure that was it. Well Max, up here you’re just another newcomer like me, trying to blend in —except we don’t, do we?

Enough, thought Emlyn. He loved photographing the wild life here—it was so different from Australia—but with the light fading fast and the wind shifting around to the north, he could forget the shots he had come for; he would be upwind of the earth shortly and vixen would not show herself.

He watched the girl for a few more seconds to see which direction she was heading. He wanted to get down to the road, and his bike, without being seen. Working his way down through the wood, that would be the smartest move, and she would never know he had been there. Starting down through the branches, one hand protectively holding his telephoto lens, he was feeling for a toehold when the clatter of falling rock made him glance across.

Capstones, and then smaller rocks, tumbled into the spinney. Emlyn braced himself in a fork. She was kicking at the top of the dyke with her foot; demolishing the wall—really going at it—but why?

The girl slowed and then stopped. She was breathing hard. She’s had enough, he thought. And then, without warning, she hopped through the gap into the spinney, placed her boot against the stonework and pushed. A section of the wall bulged, teetered and crashed into the field. A heavy, lichen-encrusted capstone refused to follow. Crouching, she leant into it, pushing jerkily until with a grating noise it toppled



from the wall into the turf. Stepping through into the field, she spat at the rubble and started down towards the road.

Emlyn stared at the girl's receding back and shivered: with the hurrying figure of the girl came a strange shadowy darkness, as if her diminishing form could bleed the light from everything. He no longer wanted to be in the woods alone. A feeling of panic swept over him, and, as he lunged for a branch, his foot slipped and he slithered down the trunk, skinning his wrist on the bark as he tried to protect his telephoto lens. Catching a low branch, he swung out, searching for the top of the wall with his foot, his neck still craned in the girl's direction.

A cold thrill prickled his skin.

A rider materialised in mid-leap through the breach in the spinney wall. Emlyn heard the thud of the hooves as the animal landed; he could see the knotted veins on the man's arms as he reined in his mount, his hair wild beneath a steel cap. Twitching aside the patched and tattered cloak, the rider urged his mount to a canter. A sword gleamed in the evening light. Further down the field the girl walked on, oblivious.

Emlyn's half-cry, half-warning was loose on the air before he could stop himself. In his confusion his foot had turned on a loose capstone and he had crashed backwards into the field, the wind knocked from him. For several seconds he lay where he had fallen in front of the wall, the pungent odour of sheep droppings burning his throat as he struggled to catch his breath. Then groaning and cursing, he scrambled up, instinctively checking his camera with its precious telephoto lens. The horseman flashed into his head and he looked up. The cloaked rider was gone.

Emlyn looked about frantically, expecting to catch a glimpse of the horse and its rider disappearing across the fields. The only movement was the girl working her way back up the slope towards him. Desperately, he struggled to hold the image—the tattered cloak and leggings, the embossed shield, the chain-mail surcoat—trying to make

sense of what he had seen. A thin skein of madness seemed to bind him, paralysing him: it was what he feared most; the same madness that had consumed his father ran in his blood. He *had* glimpsed the horse—seen the divots flying from its hooves. He reached behind him and touched the top of the wall. The stones were rough under his hands. They were real enough, as was the girl, who had stopped a short distance away and was glaring at him.

‘I’ve seen you before,’ she said. ‘School. You’re the new’n, the Australian. Normally sit in trees and snoop on people, do you?’ The girl spoke with a broad Geordie accent.

‘No,’ he croaked.

‘What then?’ She cocked her head slightly. ‘This some pathetic attempt to pick me up?’

‘No, I—’

‘You want to be careful dropping out of trees like that, people might think you’re over-ripe.’ She laughed at her joke and then scanned the field quickly, jerking her head in the direction of the spinney. ‘Say anything about *that* and you’re dead, like.’

‘What’s to say? It’s no skin off my nose.’

But he knew he didn’t sound convincing: he was too rattled. He could hear the hooves still; see the blade cleave the evening air. It was there, he thought. The rider: it was bloody well there.

He was suffocating, falling away into a bottomless space. He reached behind and steadied himself on the wall. It’s okay. Okay. Just because your father’s ill—it doesn’t mean you’re going down that road.

‘Normally talk to yourself, do you?’

‘What? No.’ Had he been talking to himself? ‘Look—’ He waved at the spinney.

‘Really. I’m not interested in what you’re up to.’

‘Who says I was up to anything?’

‘That’s not what I meant—’

‘Mebbe, mebbe not.’ The girl screwed her face into a shrug. ‘But —new school, make an impression, all that guff.’

‘Hey,’ said Emlyn, ‘we’re both new, okay.’

‘There’s new and there’s new.’

The girl’s cockiness made him feel awkward. She was right; he had been spying on her.

‘Why’d’yer yell like that?’ she said. ‘You scared me shitless.’

He felt split: on the one hand it would be so easy to just blurt out what he had seen, on the other —no, no way am I telling you the truth, he thought. You’ll think I’m some sort of dead-set loony. School was tough enough without having that label attached to him.

‘Don’t know. I fell —thought I’d hurt myself, I suppose.’

Somewhere in the valley a woodpecker drilled into the dusk. Emlyn shivered. It was getting chilly now that the sun was down. He looked around, trying to shrug off his uneasiness and the girl’s relentless stare.

‘Over-ripe,’ she chuckled. ‘Or mebbe just a little green.’

She turned away towards the road. ‘Remember—’ She spun around and pointed at him. ‘If the gamie hears about this, you’re dead.’

‘Gamie?’

‘McCrossan,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘The gamekeeper.’

He studied her retreating back. She seemed taller than he remembered, as tall as he was, but slender and with an unruly shock of spiky black hair—but then he had seen her only once, briefly, hovering at the school gates. He shifted his glance across to the ragged tear in the wall. The spinney held him. Time seemed to collapse, its usual broad river diminished to a trickle. He shook his head, breaking free of its spell.

The girl was already down by the road. All around, in a great horseshoe, ran the woods that he had circled up through earlier in the day. The wind had died, thunder rumbled in the hills and the autumn evening hung like a heavy curtain across the valley. Now, the trees seemed to harbour an unseen presence. And the girl's steady retreat was contagious. He wrestled away the sense of panic that rushed at him across the fields.

'Wait up,' he yelled and ran after her.

Maxine pumped the pedals and the bike, old and rusting though it was, flew down the hill.

First Hugh—dragging her up into the middle of nowhere, only to turn up late and then dump her—and then some jerk in a tree spying on her. For sure he'd seen her kick the spinney wall over. And all that camera gear: what if he'd taken a photo; she hadn't thought of that. That was all she needed: a damage to private property report lodged at the local nick—she was in enough strife as it was.

And Hugh, the creep: what the hell was he playing at?

She let the bike coast, allowing her thoughts to unravel with the road.

The ride up from the town had taken longer than she had allowed for, and then there was the walk up through the fields. She was surprised Hugh wasn't waiting already; he was nearly always on time, often early. And why had he wanted to meet at such short notice?

Well, now she knew.

And making her wait like that.

She pedalled furiously for a while and then coasted into a couple of bends.

Making her stand out there like some —some sodding farm animal alongside the wall. And what was all that shite about waiting on the side away from the road? She'd had to clamber over two dykes on her way up; her precious Doc Martens were caked in

muck and sheep shit—who did he think he was? He could have given her the kiss-off in town, but no, he had to drag her out there and leave her standing around in the middle of a field looking like an idiot. And on McCrossan land, land that belonged to Hugh's father, or worse still, his grandfather. God, she hated Ol'man McCrossan. Kicking that wall down had tasted sweet. Yeah, let the old bastard rebuild it. Serve him right for sticking his oar in between her and Hugh.

She was so deep in her thoughts that when 'Binocular-Boy' cruised alongside her on an expensive-looking mountain bike, her front wheel wobbled and she nearly lost control.

'Hey, wait up. What's the hurry?'

Maxine's mouth set in a hard line and she upped the pace, but the bike had languished in her Gran's shed for years and he kept up easily, sometimes cruising ahead and waiting for her. He asked a few questions—the usual crap lads came up with—and then they lapsed into an awkward silence, their front wheels passing and repassing as they coasted down the valley towards the river.

Letting him inch ahead, she studied him, trying to work him out. He was tall and angular, a feature accentuated by the bicycle, which was too small for him, and his dark hair was tied back in a short ponytail over a white scarf. His heavy, army-surplus greatcoat hung off him like a tent, ballooning and flapping heavily as they dropped down the valley. A khaki box held by a webbing strap—army-surplus again, she assumed—kept slipping and he continually wedged it around to his back.

They were coming down onto the river flats near the town. Ahead, the road narrowed to a single lane where it passed over a narrow stone bridge. On the flat Maxine's bicycle slowed considerably and 'Binocular-Boy' pedalled wildly until he reached the bridge, where he leant over the parapet wall, staring down at the water without dismounting. Several minutes later the bridge lifted Maxine and sent her

coursing down the far side. She could hear the river swirling against the cutwaters as she passed him.

‘Wait up!’ The boy pushed himself off the parapet wall and rode down after her. She clenched her teeth and gripped the handlebars tighter. If he said that one more time, he was going to get a knuckle sandwich.

The town sign loomed in the dusk: she was almost level with it—

WELCOME TO  
ROYAL BURGH OF  
**YEAVEBURGH**  
SCOTLAND IN BLOOM  
AWARD WINNER

Flowers, fields, fishing —prison more like it, she thought. Suspended sentence. God, I miss Tyneside.

Hugh McCrossan left the wood and crossed the pasture onto the dirt track. Ahead he could see the lights and the ramshackle spread of farm buildings further up the valley. He was soaked from the storm, tired, miserable, and his head ached. Shoving his hands deeper into his pockets, he hunched forward into the wind.

He knew he was a coward. People thought he was tough because he was big and didn’t say much —well, not much of any account. But Max liked that. Hah! Not any more, boy. Not after that little performance. He had been turning the words over in his mind as he trudged home, but still there seemed no right way to say what had needed to be said.

Maxine had been down by the spinney as he had stepped clear of the trees. He hesitated at the edge of the wood, wondering why he had chosen to meet her out here, the place left him feeling edgy, always had done —but it was too late to turn back. She

had seen him and waved. His mind switched off at that moment. He could see himself, a solitary figure, trudging towards the spinney and the girl in black.

And then he was standing in front of her.

She had smiled and reached out her hand but he kept his in his pockets. Her face had changed then and he felt a deep self-loathing.

‘So —what’s all the secrecy, like?’

‘Can’t see you anymore,’ he muttered, looking at his boots and then away across the fields. There, it was out, he thought. Simple, really: in the end, you just said it.

‘What are you on about?’

‘The old man, well, grandad really, he’s —they’ve said, you know, we canna hang around together.’

‘Youse serious, like? Letting ’em tell you who you can and can’t see?’

‘It’s not like that.’

‘What’s it like, then?’

He looked everywhere but at her. He could find nothing to say.

‘And you dragged me all the way out here to tell me that?’ She was angry now.

‘You’re really piss-weak, Hugh McCrossan, you know that?’

He wanted to say: ‘You know what town’s like —somebody would have seen us.’ That it would have got back to his father, or worse, his grandfather. But he didn’t.

‘And what, now it’s gotta stop, just because your *grandad* says so?’ She squinted at him. ‘What about the bike?’

‘What about it?’

‘I can’t fix it without your help, not the carburettor, anyway.’

‘I’ll see if I can get over.’

‘Don’t do me any favours.’

‘I’ve got to get back,’ said Hugh ‘To help with the pigs.’

He had waited for a response, but Maxine just stared through him until he turned away up the field.

The farm loomed up through the rain and he was at the back door without remembering how he got there. He lifted the latch and the wind ripped the door from his fingers, slamming it against the side of the dresser.

‘Shut it, pronto! It’s cold enough in here without you making it worse.’ His grandfather eyed him from his chair, warming his hands on the Aga. Several empty stout bottles were lined up on the kitchen table. ‘Where’d you take yourself off to, boy?’

‘Been out in the shed.’

‘In the workshop? I didn’a hear you out there.’

‘I wasn’t doing much —just thinking.’

His grandfather snorted. ‘Too much time spent out in that shed, thinking on that engineering guff. You can forget about that, you hear. And that Fraser lass —you given her the push?’

Hugh nodded, smiling weakly.

‘The pigs —you fed ‘em?’

He shook his head.

‘Well, you better get on it then, eh?’

Hugh stepped out into the muddy yard and wrestled the door shut. He should have said something: told his grandad to get stuffed, to mind his own business. But he never did. There was no standing up to him. His grandfather was a hard man and his reputation preceded him. Muttering, ‘You’ll never get this engineering apprenticeship if you carry on like this,’ Hugh headed up across the yard to the piggery.

Emlyn shot past the girl and slewed his bike to a halt in front of her. She braked hard, her blocks squealing on the wheel rims, and the bike shuddered to a halt.



‘So, why did you kick the wall over?’ he said.

‘D’youse ever let up or what? I mean, what is this —twenty questions? Besides, why the hell were you up a tree spying on me?’

‘I take photographs of birds, animals —nature stuff.’

‘Oh my God, a twitcher?’

‘Eff off,’ said Emlyn, thinking she meant he had a tic.

‘A twitcher: a bird-watcher.’ The smile disappeared. ‘You take any photos of me up there?’

‘No, why should I?’

‘Seems the sort of thing you’d go and do. Bit old for that kinda a thing, aren’t you?’

‘What you going on about now?’

‘A bit old for crawling around in the bushes taking pictures?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘We’re in the same year, so, you gotta be seventeen. Try acting it, like?’

‘It’s an interest of mine,’ he said and shrugged. ‘I was trying to get some shots of a fox.’

‘An interest: a man with a *hobby*, eh?’

‘Everybody’s interested in something,’ he said ignoring her sarcasm. ‘Funny place to meet someone, middle of a field?’ The girl opened her mouth to say something caustic but he continued: ‘This is where I live. We’re renting it.’ He pointed at a two-storey cottage set back from the road. Light seeped from behind the heavy curtains. It was the only dwelling between the edge of town and the bridge.

‘From the McCrossans, yeah, I know. Now, move your bike, you’re in my road.’

A horrendous crack and a brilliant flash lit up the darkening fields as the storm broke with unexpected viciousness over the valley. The strike was so close they both jumped. A creaking wail came from down near the river. Lightning had struck an oak. They

watched as the huge bough separated from the main trunk and came to rest against one of the lower branches, leaving a fresh white scar in the gloom.

‘You see that?’ He was yet to move his bike.

‘Aye,’ she said, frowning. ‘Now move it, buster. Go on, go and park your arse in your cosy little holiday cottage—’

‘We’re not on holiday. My mum’s working here.’

‘Yeah, well you’ve the cushy end of the McCrossans. We rent off those bastards, an’ all, ’cept ma Gran’s place is a shite-hole compared to that.’ She nodded at the cottage, then jiggling her front wheel clear of Emlyn’s, cocked her pedal. ‘Remember, mention anything, an you’re a gonner.’

‘I’ve got the message, don’t worry.’

‘The McCrossans give me the creeps but that spinney’s creepier.’

‘Meaning?’ said Emlyn.

‘Bugged if I know. Something weird goes on up there. You’ve seen the state of the dykes. McCrossans dinna give a shit about them. If they fall over, they string a bit of wire across and leave it to rust. But not the spinney. If they spent as much time on ma Gran’s place as they do on that wall, she’d be living in a palace.’

The first fat drops of rain hit the road.

‘It’s comin’ on and I’m outta here,’ said the girl. ‘And dinna worry yourself, them stones’ll be back all nice and neat again tomorrow.’

‘What?’ shouted Emlyn. ‘Hey! What d’you mean *back again*?’

‘Take a look, why don’t you.’ The wind whipped the girl’s voice back at Emlyn as she pedalled furiously towards the Marchbank, the ancient tree-covered earthworks at the foot of Castle-rock.

## 2

*Often I think that is all I am now, a memory. No body to speak of, no breath, just the faint smell of oak flowers carried on the summer dusk or the dark shuttle of a bat against the rising stars.*

*The memories trickle like water over night stone, small bright streaks in the darkness, and I am there. Some I would keep. First love, first born, first light—others, those memories of betrayal and of death, are not so easily entered.*

*It is Arthur's betrayal, both as man and child, that lingers still after all these years; an old wound that although knitted pains me even now.*

*And then, there is my own betrayal—*

*Who is this that speaks, I hear you say?*

*Who indeed?*

*I have been called by many names—Lailoken, Taliesin, Myrddin Wylt, to name a few—but in the Latin translation made by the river-washer, Geoffrey of Monmouth, I became Merlin.*

*And what have they made of me, over the years, these parchment scratchers? At best a mage and kingmaker; at worst a grey-bearded, scatter-brained fool or a snatcher of babes. I was none of these—except perhaps the last, in taking Arthur as a child. They called me an enchanter, a singer of storms and of healing. But I was trained in greater things than this. I was the keeper of the old ways, dwelling in the deep forest and walking the gateway between worlds.*

*The stories move down through the centuries—changed and changing to suit those in power, those who would profit from a claim to Arthur's blood, however slight—until we come to a time when kings and queens are little more than court jesters and scribes can turn them to any path that takes their fancy. So it is with Arthur's tale.*

*But Arthur was no king.*

*Nor could he be turned so easily aside, as one might turn the pages of a book.*

### 3

The surface of the water danced above him as he sank between the massive stone piers of the bridge. The cord around his neck jerked tight and his body swung out into the current. Freezing water filled his lungs and he stopped struggling.

Emlyn jerked awake and fumbled for the bedside lamp. It was the dream again. He sat up, his feet on the cold floorboards, letting the light push the terror away, the taste of river water in his mouth. On the dresser, the digital clock blinked off the minutes. It would be light soon. He rose, pulled on his clothes and crept into the darkened kitchen. Easing the bolt, he stepped out into the garden. The pre-dawn air held the scent of new-mown grass and roses.

A pale tinge was appearing in the eastern sky as Emlyn crossed the bridge on his bike. He did not pause to stare over the parapet at the swirling water as he usually did: not this morning—the dream was still too real.

Twenty minutes of hard uphill pedalling and he was looking across the fields to the spinney. He stood on the road, listening, his bike hidden behind a choke of cow parsley. Out of sight down the valley someone was whistling up a sheepdog. A faint bleating drifted up with the mist. No one was in sight; the road was empty. He clambered over the gate.

Instead of skirting up through the woods as he had the previous day, he cut straight across the fields. Two dykes lay behind him, a third stood in front of him, the last between him and the spinney. Now that he was so close, he hesitated in front of the wall, letting his eye wander along the stonework. The girl had been right; on McCrossan land most of the dry-stone walls were poorly maintained. To his right was a large break. A rusting length of barbed wire had been strung across the gap. Hardly enough keep out livestock, he thought, eyeing other collapsed sections nearby.

The first rays of the sun shouldered the hills across the valley, casting his shadow across the cropped grass: a giant finger reaching towards Sleepers Spinney. He gazed at the close-packed trees, trying to shake away the feelings of the previous evening, and decided against the direct route across the field, instead hopping the wall into the wood and working his way up to where he had first seen the horseman.

From the wood he had a clear view of the damage. If the gap the girl had made was to be repaired, it was yet to happen. He stood behind the wall, close to where he had fallen the previous evening, measuring the distance across the field, willing himself to climb the wall and approach the spinney. A scattering of sheep eyed him curiously.

Come on, he urged silently, yesterday it was just a wood with birds and bracken and beech trees, now look at the state you're in. Get a grip, why don't you. C'mon, you cross the field, hop over the wall and you're there.

A stocky figure rounded the southern end of the spinney. Instinctively, Emlyn ducked down behind the wall and put his eye to a chink in the stonework. It was McCrossan, the landowner.

Emlyn had picked up bits and pieces around the town: the grandfather had been the Marquess of Yeaveburgh's head gamekeeper, but was now retired; they ran the farm and a business renting moorland and woodland from the estate or local farmers and running shoots; they had a big set-up rearing pheasant poults in an isolated valley in the hills.

Emlyn raised his head warily and peered out through a notch where some larger stones had once sat. Yeah, it was McCrossan all right. He had bumped into him a couple of times when the keeper had come to collect the rent on his mother's cottage. Trailing behind the keeper was a curly-haired lad about Emlyn's age, only broader and taller; the same young man who had been talking with the girl the day before. The youth was using a pocket-knife to peel bark from a hazel switch. He looked like he could handle himself; there was an air of toughness about him that Emlyn unconsciously measured and begrudged.

McCrossan's attention was on the wall as he pushed at various stones with the polished stick he always carried. Emlyn had a feeling that the youth had spotted him, but neither figure made any move in his direction: maybe he had not been seen after all.

Hugh McCrossan studied his father—the frayed Driza-Bone jacket, the mud-stained trousers, the polished boots—hating everything he stood for. Why'd he drag me up here, anyway? What's he thinking—I've got better things to do than stand around here. He stared at the jumble of stones. Had to be Maxine, he thought, as the hot guilt of yesterday's meeting washed over him.

He turned away from the gaping rent in the dyke, hoping to catch another glimpse of the Australian boy. He had seen the head duck down behind the wall. Half your luck, he thought, leastways you've not been dragged up here against your will. Though why you'd want to be ducking around in Wistman's Wood at this hour of the morning... Then he remembered he had heard the lad took photographs, nature-type stuff. Maybe that was what he was up to. He couldn't see anyone wanting to be caught traipsing across McCrossan land.

He pitched the stick he had been stripping into the spinney, spat at the sodden ground and watched as his father studied the pile of rubble that spilled onto the sheep-

cropped turf at their feet. Silly old bastard, you've no idea that Australian lad's half a field away, eyeballing you. Jesus, I should just bugger off home while you're not looking.

But Hugh remained where he was. He had learnt early on to be wary of the stick his father carried—his shillelagh, as he called it. His father's quick tongue and even quicker temper was common knowledge in Yeaveburgh and the surrounding villages, although it was his grandfather people feared. The luck's on your side Aussie-boy, thought Hugh: his father's dogs, two heavy-set black Labradors, were in the Land Rover.

A low tuneless song was on his father's lips as he reached at the pile and the first stone clocked in place. Hugh felt himself swallowed. It's like *déjà vu*, he thought, as the slow chanting washed over him.

Memories spun silk-like in the bright morning air.

Not all the memories were his. Faces flickered down through the years.

How many times had he accompanied his father or grandfather to the spinney and stood watching as the wall was inspected and maintained? How many times had he been made to sing the old songs? Why then could he not remember any of this when he was at school, or feeding the pigs or working on his bike? Why was it that he could only remember when he was here, watching his father or grandfather repair the spinney wall? You're in a dream; it's like a dream within a dream and you need to wake up out of it. He struggled with the feeling, looking down at his hands and the pocket-knife he was holding. He had been doing something with it a few minutes before, but he could not remember what. He drew the blade across his hand and watched the blood well up.

But something told him that for all his mental effort he would not wake from whatever was happening to him, nor would he recall it once they walked back up through the woods to the farm, that he would only remember it when he was back here again with his father singing the stones in place. He stared at his hand. He had cut



himself. His blood dripped from his fingers onto the grass and all around the bright air seemed to hold the threat of drowning.

Emlyn crouched lower and squinted through the spidery crack between the stones as the keeper lifted a stone and wedged it into place. A tuneless singing drifted across the field. Whatever the language was, he thought, it wasn't English. He watched as the youth drew the knife across his palm. A vague dizziness overcame Emlyn. He was being pulled up a long tunnel where everything got smaller and smaller and the sounds of the world grew fainter until only the echo of McCrossan's voice remained. He shook his head violently in an attempt to clear the feeling and the sounds of the natural world crept back around him. His leg was cramped; he shifted it and pressed his eye against the crack.

McCrossan had almost completed the repairs. The last of the heavy capstones lay where it had tumbled into the field. The lad—Emlyn assumed he was the keeper's son—stood stock-still. It was as if no time had passed. Emlyn watched, puzzled, as McCrossan propped the stone across the wall, pulled something from his pocket and drew his hand several times across the underside of the stone before easing it into place. What was he doing? Emlyn felt for the binoculars that usually hung around his neck and remembered he had left them under his bed. He pressed his eye to the crack yet again. The son was already walking back the way they had come. The gamekeeper straightened and stood staring across the field to where Emlyn was crouched, before he turned and followed.

Emlyn sat back against the wall. He felt shaky, nauseous. Why was he creeping around after strangers: first the girl and now McCrossan? The man was nothing to him. Everything felt out of kilter, as if he were rushing towards a far distant point. He rested

his head against the cool stone. The girl had been right: the wall was back up, just as she had predicted.

Tentatively, Emlyn poked his head up. The gap was plugged with stonework so craftily laid that the mend was undetectable. At least from this distance, he thought; time for a closer look. He hopped the wall and loped towards the spinney.

The lichen-covered stones curved away on either side. He moved closer and pulled at one, testing the work, pushing his fingers into a gap in order to get a better purchase. A capstone shifted slightly, trapping his hand. He pulled it free. His fingers were smudged with black. Instinctively, he sniffed them. It was charcoal; he had used it last year in art.

He hauled the stone free and turned it over. Chiselled on the underside, and gone over several times with charcoal, was a strange mark. The crudely drawn shape seemed oddly familiar. He pushed the stone back into place, then bent down, looking for any other loose stones, found two and pulled them free, but their undersides were blank.

A little to the left was another large capstone flanked by two smaller wedges. Emlyn levered it to the edge and ducked down. A triangular y-shaped design, a fork with two slashes across it, stared back at him. He pushed the stone back into place and replaced the wedge-stones. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears; or was it a dull echo of McCrossan's chanting? Around him the woods and fields were strangely silent. A voice echoed in his head—

*'To know, even in the quietest moment, all paths lead to but one point. Knowing that it is not your life any more. Let them wrestle in the bright sunlight with things unseen—'* 'No,' he barked.

Something was both pulling him towards and turning him away from the spinney. 'No, not this time.'

Wrestling down his rising fear of madness, he clambered over the wall. An eerie stillness surrounded him as he picked his way through the trees. The bracken covered

slope rose gently until he emerged in a small clearing, where the ground—a mixture of turf and ferns—rose again in a slight hump.

The grass was cropped short but he saw no sign of the rabbit or sheep droppings that littered the field. For a moment or two, he had an overwhelming sense that time had stopped, that he was trapped in a dream of someone else's making. He could no longer hear the birdsong that had been all around him earlier and he could see no movement among the branches. He cast about, looking for a sign of anything living: a spider's web amid the bracken, a bird's nest in the branches, anything. His eye stopped at a faint line in the turf. He stared at it for a few seconds, letting it register. It would have been unnoticeable but for the early morning sunlight pouring between the trees. There, another shadow running at right angles to the first. He knew what they were immediately: sods. He had helped his father lay turf at their old house. It had been one of the last things they had done together before his father had been hospitalised.

Something was under those carefully placed pieces of grass; he knew it—but what? What would anyone have to hide out here? He was about to crouch down to inspect the grass when an image of the gamekeeper returning flashed into his mind. Without thinking he took off down the slope through the trees and scrambled over the wall.

Birdsong broke all around him and he stood quietly, staring across the fields. Why was he so spooked? Just climb back over and take a look you daft— To his right a threatening growl punctuated the bird song. He turned his head slowly. Stiff-legged, its lips curled back over its teeth, a black Labrador was walking towards him along the curve of the wall. Frantically, he tried to remember everything he had heard or read about dealing with dogs: no sudden movements; do not, under any circumstances, run; avoid eye contact. The muscles in his legs liquefied as an answering growl came from his left.

'I'd keep perfectly still, laddie, if I were you.'

Lawrence McCrossan was striding along the spinney wall towards him, swinging his polished stick.

4

*We ride out from Ynys Avallach, leaving our tracks in the snow, a snell wind at our backs. Wolves call in the hills. The cold has come down early this year. The cavalry campaigns would have been finished long before but for Arthur's hand. He must make one last push to unseat his bastard son.*

*He is unmindful that other plans have been made. His arm is strong, his eye bright and his mind clear —what if the signs are wrong; but he has no need of signs, he is a God no less. He cannot see the webs of deceit woven in the air around him.*

*Still, after so long, my eye jumps ahead. That a memory can cause such pain. Barely a recollection this, more a dream from which I would awake.*

*It is a ruinous field, Camlann ford.*

*Arthur has fallen.*

*And I have no stomach for the bloody press of men and horses near the river. I cannot bear their cries, cannot stomach Arthur's bellow as it carries above the din of battle. It is my name that he calls as I turn my pony in amid the snowy shelter of the trees.*

*Myrddin —Myrddin.'*

*But I do not go to him: cannot.*

*It is my hand that led him as a child, and as a man my hand that has led him here. Camlann—crooked glen—the meaning is not hidden from me. It is a fitting place for betrayal.*

*How is it that it has come to this? How have we, those who have power and position, how have we come to this misfortune? The signs were there, why did I not read them right?*

*He was never a king, although it was in his power to become one. A warrior, a general, yes, and it was I that took him down that road. It was I, Myrddin, who took the child and made him what he became and it is in this shaping that we all came undone.*

## 5

Emlyn skidded to a halt on the gravel at the back of the cottage. He was breathing hard from his ride and still a little nervy from his encounter with the gamekeeper. McCrossan had given him a grilling and made him promise never to set foot in the spinney again. As he reached for the latch the back door opened.

‘Can’t trust you to keep a simple promise, can I?’

His half-sister, Bridget, stood in the doorway, ruffling the hair of the terrier she was nursing in her arms. Digger’s tail jiggled feebly. ‘Mum’s going to hear about this.’

‘Sorry. I forgot.’

His sister pointed to the muddy scar left by his tyre. ‘And can you not do that to the gravel?’

Emlyn shut the door, pulled milk and bread from the fridge and filled the kettle. He had been pestering his mother for years about getting a dog but the answer had always been no, the excuse always that they moved around too much. His mother’s standard response was one word: quarantine. A few days after their arrival he had spotted an advert in the newsagent: “Jack Russell Pup—Good Home Wanted.” He had talked her into it and the terrier had taken to them immediately, quickly learning the new name Emlyn chose for him.

‘You were supposed to hold Digger while I drove. I mean, you’re always going on about animals and the environment and then you go and forget your own dog.’

Bridget laid Digger on his bed under the sink. The pup had taken some poison and had been close to death. Emlyn could see that he was still groggy from the treatment.

‘Sorry, mate.’ Emlyn scratched his neck and Digger’s tail jiggled briefly. ‘What did the vet say?’

‘Took some sort of bait. Something totally unpronounceable that’s used on fruit trees: reduces the core temperature of the animal and they die of hypothermia.’

Digger had disappeared a couple of days before. It had been raining all that day and Emlyn, thinking that Bridget had taken him to work with her, had only realised that the dog was missing when she returned. By that time it was dark. After a two-hour search, Emlyn had found Digger lying on his side under a hedge. It had been complete chance that Emlyn had spotted him.

‘I still think it was Ol’man McCrossan.’ said Bridget. ‘Vermin was the word he used: “I’ll not have vermin bothering my animals.”’

The McCrossan family owned the cottage they were renting and the land that ran down to the river. Ol’man McCrossan had rapped on the door early one Sunday morning with accusations that Digger had been worrying the sheep he grazed at the back of the property. After his run in with the son, Emlyn was beginning to think his sister might be right.

‘Where were you, anyway?’

‘Out,’ he replied. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, I don’t need baby sitting any more.’

‘You better hurry,’ said Bridget. ‘You’ll be late.’

‘There’s no school today. I gave you the note last week.’

‘It’s short notice as far as I’m concerned. Oh, and Mum wanted to know if you made a decision about the subjects you’re going to—’



‘God, and I thought we’d agreed, had the whole thing sorted —I’m not interested in university.’

‘I mean, if you think you’re going to make a living from wildlife photography?’

‘What, and you think you’ll make one from archaeology?’

‘Emlyn, listen, matey, Mum’s got a lot on her plate at the moment. She doesn’t always let on but she stresses about stuff. You know when she rings most evenings and talks, well after, later when you’ve gone to bed or you’re upstairs tinkering, she rings me again? She’s worried, what with this sleepwalking thing starting up again. I mean, we all thought you were well over that.’

‘I am, Bridge. I haven’t had a bout for what ... about a month.’

‘This morning, where’d you go?’ His sister squinted at him, waiting for an answer.

‘You didn’t take your binoculars.’

‘Come on, Bridge, g’is a break, eh?’

‘Okay, okay, I know I’m being nosey. —You know that Mum’s put me in charge down at the dig.’

‘Archaeology, holes in the ground, bits of rubbish,’ said Emlyn, smiling at her, ‘that’s all you two think about.’

Bridget finished drying her hands on a tea towel, wandered out into the hall and came back pulling on her coat. ‘Keep an eye on sparrow brain.’ His sister nodded towards the terrier and then grabbing her breakfast plate, added it to the pile sitting in cold greasy water. ‘Oh, and see if you can get to the washing-up some time today.’

His sister’s car coughed its way out onto the road. Emlyn prised himself from his chair and slid his dish into the sink. The kitchen was gloomy and forbidding. Outside, ragged clouds dumped rain on the hills. The weather seemed to have swept in from nowhere.

It was on days like this, when he couldn't get out, that he missed his father. With his mother it always felt as if they were calling to one another from different rooms, even when she hugged him. Not that he saw much of her lately. Not that he wanted much in the way of hugs any more. It was the physical closeness of his father, his looming bear-like presence that he missed most.

Shaking himself free of his mood, Emlyn wandered into the sitting room, switched on the light and picked up a book, *Birds of the Borders*, that he had been reading.

It was mid-afternoon before Emlyn stirred from the armchair, where he had been absorbed in memorising the flight silhouettes of unfamiliar species. The rain continued to fall. It's just a bit of water, he thought, stretching, and wandered out into the hallway. His mother's furled umbrella sat in the coat stand.

'Digger, me old mate!'

The Jack Russell trotted out into the hall, his eyes on the lead hanging from the hat rack. 'Fully functional? Fancy a trot up the town? Another look at the castle? What you reckon, eh?'

Emlyn paused in the gloom where the arch ran out beneath the twin towers of the barbican and stared out across Castle Green. He and Digger had spent an hour exploring the upper levels of the keep. The shivering terrier was tucked under his arm. He put the dog down and Digger raced away, scattering a straggle of seagulls huddled miserably on the grass.

He let his eye range out across the rooftops and narrow streets that ran from The Green down towards the town square. From the square, Market Street curved down to the largest of the town's three bridges and a glimpse of the Yeave sliding away grey and menacing beneath its curtain of rain. His sister had told him that packhorses had once

used the narrow bridge. A little downstream was Swordsman's Pool where the Yeave changed course yet again as it looped back and joined its sister, the Yarrow, forming an elongated horseshoe of land on which the Old Town stood. Beyond the Marchbank he could see his mother's cottage and the narrow waist of land that separated the two rivers, and he realised suddenly that the town was almost an island: it was only an accident of geology, the looming crag of Castle Rock, that separated the rivers.

A car droned up the hill, its tyres making a bladdering sound over the cobbles, and stopped outside The Castle Tea Rooms. Tucked beneath the battlements, the building's mullioned windows beckoned brightly against the weather. He whistled up Digger and pulled a handful of change from his pocket. 'Just about enough, Digsy.'

He angled the umbrella into the wind and stepped out from the protection of the arch. Would he ever get used to this place? He missed the warmth and light, the beach and the casual friendliness of Australia. He remembered the day they had arrived. It had been raining. There had been an argument, he could not recall what about, and he had left his mother and sister amid an avalanche of boxes and crumpled newspaper. The castle, on its windy height, had seemed part of another world, one that tore away his heated words beneath the scudding clouds, replacing them with the clash of swords and half-remembered tales.

He folded the umbrella and propped it against the porch wall. A puddle of water formed at the tip. He smiled: what had seemed so romantic had quickly become just commonplace, a straggling series of walls and keeps, scaffolding and walkways. 'Stay, Digsy boy.'

He pushed on the door and a bell jangled as he went in.

A young backpacker was flicking through the postcard rack and an older couple sat staring disconsolately out across the green: the place was almost empty. Behind the

counter the manageress, a small middle-aged woman with ratty hair and chipped nail varnish, was wrapping cutlery.

‘Excuse me,’ said Emlyn, ‘but would it be all right to bring my dog inside, he’s a bit shivery out there.’

‘Look like a kennel, do we?’ The woman did not look up from her task.

‘No, but he’s only a Jack—’

‘Dog-grooming parlour, then? Veterinary surgery?’

‘No, I know this is a teashop—’

‘No animals allowed on the premises. Health reasons.’

‘Milkshakes: how much would they be?’

The woman waved at the chalkboard. ‘We don’t do milkshakes.’

‘Scones, then.’ He put the correct money on the counter.

‘We’re closing in twenty minutes: four sharp.’

‘How long does it take to eat a couple of scones?’ said Emlyn.

The manageress looked up at him for the first time. Her eyes were hard and grey like the town’s buildings. She took his money, checked it and dropped it in the till, then went back to wrapping cutlery.

‘Maxine! Devonshire—no tea. When you’re ready!’

The swing doors into the kitchen thumped and the girl from the spinney appeared. They stared at each other for a moment, before she scowled, pulled a plate from the dresser and disappeared back into the kitchen. Emlyn chose a table near a window. Presently the girl reappeared and came across to his table.

‘What’s your game, eh?’ she whispered, placing his order in front of him.

‘Nothing, I was up the castle.’

The girl stared pointedly out of the window at the curtain of rain and then squinted at Emlyn.

‘Look, I came in for a milkshake.’

‘We dinna do milkshakes.’

‘I know that *now*. How was I to know you worked here?’

She slapped his docket on the table and strode back to the kitchen. Emlyn nibbled his scone, determined he would still be sitting eating when the grandfather clock in the corner struck four. You’ll not get rid of me so easily, madam. The rain rattled against the windows and his thoughts drifted.

When the clock chimed four, he was staring at an empty plate. The other customers had long gone and the manageress was clearing the things from his table. The girl came through from the back, pulling on a bomber jacket.

‘Will you be needin’ me tomorrow?’ she asked stiffly.

‘You’ll get a call —if I do.’

‘Not too late mind.’

‘Huh, don’t over-value yourself, girlie. There’s plenty more where you came from.’

The girl shot the manageress a vicious glance and headed for the door. Emlyn paid and hurried after her, only to find her crouched in the porch, patting Digger and staring at the rain. The terrier was up on his hind legs, dancing, his tail wagging furiously at the attention.

‘Down, boy,’ said Emlyn.

‘Oh, he’s yours.’ The girl pushed Digger away and marched out into the rain.

Thinking it was a game, the terrier ran alongside her, jumping at her legs. Emlyn hurried after them, fumbling with the umbrella.

‘Your dog’s muddying ma tights.’

Emlyn snapped his fingers and Digger fell into heel.

‘Got a name, has he?’

‘Digger.’

‘God, that Murcutt woman’s a bitch,’ she said, increasing her pace. ‘I’ve half a mind to tell her to shove it.’

The umbrella opened with a whump. Edging closer, Emlyn thrust it into the wind in front of them.

‘What you playing at?’

‘Trying to keep the rain off us.’

‘Bit of water never hurt anyone.’ Emlyn moved the umbrella higher and a little to the side. ‘She’s never a good word to say about anyone. Hey, I can’t see where I’m going. D’y’know what she said to me last week? *Lazy*, she called me. *Lazy!* I’m the only one who does any work in that place. She just stands around giving orders. Bitch! Hold it down a bit,’ she said, grabbing the shaft of the umbrella and pushing it down, ‘the rain’s coming round the side. Dig a lot, does he?’

‘What?’

‘Your dog—’ She made a scrabbling movement with her hands. ‘Does he dig a lot, like?’

‘Ah —no. Australian servicemen, they’re called Diggers. My great-grandfather was killed in the trenches. We sort of named the dog after him. I inherited this from him as well.’ He fingered the white silk scarf that he always wore. Maxine glanced at it without breaking step. They were off the green and down among the houses.

Maxine pulled the umbrella into line again.

‘I was born here,’ continued Emlyn. ‘We left when I was seven. Eight years in Australia. Last couple in the States. My mother’s Australian. She’s running the dig down by the river. My old man’s from around here, though.’

Maxine shrugged.

‘You were right,’ said Emlyn. ‘The wall was rebuilt first thing this morning.’ They walked on. ‘There was someone with McCrossan, dark curly-haired lad, same one as you

met up at the spinney. I think he might have seen me.’ She shot him a look and increased the pace. Emlyn halted. One last try, he thought. ‘Something’s hidden up there.’

Maxine stopped and turned to face him, and he found himself relating his early morning visit to the spinney, his encounter with McCrossan, and the recently disturbed turf.

She snorted and walked on, shaking her head. ‘Darghh, that doesn’a mean anything. It’s his land. That’s his job.’

‘That’s not what you said yesterday evening,’ said Emlyn.

‘I was pissed off yesterday.’

‘You don’t like the McCrossans, do you?’

She stopped in front of a terraced cottage and pulled a key out.

‘Ma Gran rents this place off Ol’man McCrossan —the grandfather. Look at the paintwork. Out the back, away from the street, the frames are rotten. The toilet doesn’t flush properly half the time.’

‘The McCrossans own the cottage we’re in, too.’

‘Darghh, that’s rented out as a holiday place; tourists and the like.’

Emlyn thought about his mother, the dig and their position as outsiders and found he was nodding. ‘I’ve seen him. He’s come for the rent a couple of times. Mum wanted to pay through the bank but—’

‘Smartly dressed, likes cash —right?’

Emlyn nodded. ‘He threatened to poison Digger.’

‘That’d be right. Think they own the valley, they do. Anyhow, he’s the knob-head ma Gran has to deal with. Spends half her life worrying about the rent, the other half worrying when he’s gonna come hammering on the door. Down here the day before yesterday, he was, shouting and carrying on, with half the street watching, embarrassing

ma Gran. Last week he comes into the Crown—she works at the Crown, right—and starts bad-mouthing her in front of the landlord. It's personal as far as I'm concerned. Are youse getting the picture? Now, is there anything else you want to know about me and ma family?'

'Well, I saw what I saw.'

Maxine rolled her eyes.

'My mother's an archaeologist, and my sister. Well, a wannabe archaeologist.'

Maxine shrugged.

'Some of the stones had marks on them,' he said pointedly. Maxine stared at him, waiting. 'I don't know. Like, strange marks. Runes or something.'

She pulled her key out.

'Anyway, I was thinking of taking another look.'

'Righto,' said Maxine. 'Well, why not tonight, like?'

McCrossan's tuneless singing echoed in Emlyn's head: suddenly he was not so sure.

A cold chill swept around him.

'Tonight?'

'What's the matter? You look like you've nowt better to do.'

It was his turn to shrug.

'Dinna panic, I was just testing. But it's like I thought. When it comes to the McCrossans, you've no more bottle than the rest of 'em around here.'

With her key half-turned in the lock, Maxine gave him a withering look and disappeared inside.

Down towards the town centre, the sun squeezed between the clouds, turning the pavements slick with light and water, and Emlyn thought that perhaps the place was not so bad after all. He crossed the square and went into The Diner, an American style



eatery that was a popular hang out after dark, where he ordered a coke and sat well away from the door.

He wanted to think about their proposed visit to the spinney. He found the prospect of a night expedition more than a little scary. He was turning the idea over in his mind, pretty sure that he was going to let it go, when a familiar figure slid into view.

Walking across the square, flanked by a dark acne-riddled boy and another with greasy ginger hair, was Terry Murcutt, his trademark platinum crew-cut gleaming in the sunshine. Emlyn slipped lower in his seat, hoping the trio was not headed for The Diner. Out on the square, someone whistled. Terry Murcutt stopped and waved and then walked away. Emlyn moved forward a couple of seats to where he could get a better view of the square. The trio had turned off down one of the side streets and disappeared from view. Emlyn slumped in his seat. Terry Murcutt and his crew had been making school miserable. Murcutt, Murcutt— of course, he had to be related to the tearoom woman, her son possibly.

The night trip to the spinney suddenly seemed less daunting. Opening the small ammunition box that he used for his camera gear, he pulled out his field notebook, ripped a blank page from the back and scribbled a note.

*Meet laneway, back  
of St. Andrews Church.  
8pm. Emlyn. Bring a torch.*

He folded it several times, wrote 'Max' boldly across it, and headed up towards Castle Green.

## 6

*Memories—water over night stone and I am there.*

*The boy and his uncle leave the settlement, passing out between the high defensive ditches towards the river. The child carries a few morsels bound tight in a chequered cloth. Splashing through the shallows at the ford, they start up towards the hills.*

*Short and dark, with a strength beyond his years, it would seem that the boy would be to the fore, running on ahead, leading his uncle between the rocky pockets of grain and crops. But it is the uncle who strides on, leaving his nephew looking down towards the settlement. His sword is down there. He wishes he had it strapped about his waist.*

*The men of his uncle's settlement are no strangers to war. Unlike the wild tribes to the west, they are fine horsemen, many of their forefathers having served with the Roman cavalry once stationed in the hill country. It is this skill that holds their old enemies, the Selgovae, and the Painted Men of the North, at bay.*

*The boy has shown great promise with the blade. His first, of metal, not a plaything made from sticks, was placed in his hand when he was three. He is quick and has a keen eye. With a bow, he is second-to-none and can hit a pigeon on the wing from the saddle. He has already taken heads on a raid into the western hills.*

*The uncle calls down to him and he hurries up the slope. I am at the edge of the forest to meet them. It is not the first time he has ventured beneath the trees. He has been many times since he was six or so. But this is different. The lad senses it and is reluctant to go with me.*

*The uncle sits on a rocky outcrop. He tells a familiar story, one his nephew has heard many times, but never here under the broad sky, with the valley laid out below and the wood at their back.*

*Our forefathers, our people, they came with the legions. His uncle says this proudly. They were defeated in a great battle. And, in defeat, they chose to become part of the Empire, to leave their women, their children, and come here with nothing but their weapons and their warhorses. The rolling plains beyond the river Danubius, they were forgotten. These hills became their home. The uncle takes in the moorland with a sweep of his arm.*

*Men of the Draconarius he calls them—the Sarmatae. Their blood runs in us, nephew.*

*The boy squints out across the airy space of the valley and imagines a line of horsemen fording the river.*

*They carried a standard; an open-mouthed dragon made of silk and tied to a lance. A reed, placed in the dragon's mouth, sang in the wind, sending a ghostly wail above the noise of the galloping horses. The men they faced, says the uncle, believed the spirits of the dead—the Wild Hunt—rode with the Draconarius.*

*Only the Legions held them, with their different gods and their disciplined fighters and their shield walls in which the horsemen could find no breach.*

*Their blood also, the blood of the legions, is in you, nephew.*

*It is a story that the youngster has only ever heard told at the hearth when the winter rains hiss upon the thatch.*

## 7

‘You’re late!’ Maxine’s voice came at him out of the darkness. ‘I nearly went without you.’

‘You’ve no idea what to look for.’

‘Is that right?’ she said.

Emlyn felt peeved. If he hadn’t invited her, hadn’t slipped the note under her front door in the first place, then she would not be complaining.

‘Hey, I had to go back for my coat. What’s a few minutes?’

‘Fifteen. And listen,’ said Maxine. ‘Next time you shove a note under the door, stick it in an envelope. I dinna want ma Gran getting the wrong idea.’

Emlyn had suggested they meet at the church for a reason. His intention was to follow the Coffington road as he had done on his previous visit to the spinney. But as he turned to move off Maxine grabbed him by his jacket.

‘We can cut across country.’

‘What about Edderton Water?’

‘There’s a bend, a spot where the stream narrows. There’s a sort of shingly spit. We can jump it.’

Emlyn grunted and clambered over the gate after her.

As they approached Edderton Water Emlyn began to have doubts. The darkness magnified sound and the tranquil murmur of water over gravel became a rushing torrent in his mind. He switched on his torch and shone it out over the stream. Maxine grabbed at it, fumbling for the switch.

‘Are you mad or what? You want to advertise or something: “Two losers —looking for a kick up the arse.”’

The torch twisted from his grip, bounced on the bank and, as they both made to grab it, rolled into the water.

‘It’s one of those waterproof, floating torches,’ Emlyn said, dropping onto his stomach. He had a clear recollection of the word ‘indestructible’ on the packaging. The torch sank, cutting a brilliant green halo through the water, settled on the bottom and went out.

‘Brilliant!’ said Maxine. ‘What now, like?’

‘You’ve brought a torch, haven’t you?’ The dark swallowed his words. ‘I said bring a torch.’

‘Gran doesn’t have one. Leastways, that’s working. And I wasn’t about to go off and buy one.’ Holding onto an alder branch, Maxine leant out over the stream. ‘We can reach it, mebbe?’

‘No point, it’ll have shorted out.’ Emlyn strained his eyes in the darkness. ‘We can’t see to jump now.’

‘The moon’s nearly up.’

Across the stream, the sky above the hills held a milky incandescence. Emlyn straddled a low tree trunk that hung out over the water. Maxine squatted in the long grass. They waited in silence as the moon crept up over the hill.

‘Moon’s on the water,’ she said. ‘You can see the spit now.’

Maxine moved away from the stream, her footprints cutting a dark trail in the wet grass. Emlyn was still staring into the swirling blackness, when she hurtled across the moon-dappled water and landed with a grunt on the shingle. Her hoarse whisper carried across the stream. ‘Come on!’

As soon as he jumped, Emlyn knew he had taken off short of the bank. He landed shin deep in the water, almost losing his footing, and splashed onto the shingle beside her, water dripping from the bottoms of his jeans. The hem of his greatcoat was soaked.

‘Long jump not your strong point then?’

‘Very funny.’ Emlyn did not appreciate the humorous edge to her voice. They clambered up the stream bank between the trees. Emlyn, whose shoes were waterlogged, slipped twice, nearly falling over. Maxine was tittering as he emerged alongside her, when a sudden flurry of wings beat the air above their heads. She ducked instinctively.

‘What the friggin’ hell was that?’

‘Pheasant,’ said Emlyn, turning and plodding up the hill. ‘Nocturnal habits of birds not your strong point then.’

‘Smart-arse,’ Maxine mouthed at the darkness.

The wind souged in the branches above them. McCrossan’s singing echoed in Emlyn’s head. They were in the spinney.

‘Come on.’ Maxine grabbed Emlyn’s arm and pulled him deeper into the wood. The sound of their feet on the leaf litter and sticks pricked at the darkness. A dead branch snapped under Emlyn’s heel.

‘We’re making too much noise.’

‘In case you didn’t notice,’ said Maxine ‘I left ma cape and hover jet-pack in the phone box opposite the church.’

‘If McCrossan’s about we’ll be—’

‘He’s at The Swan, sucking on a pint. I stuck ma head in on the way to meet you.’

‘You could have said!’

‘Don’t go moody on me, okay. We’re here for a purpose: to take a look at that hillock.’

Pausing every twenty or so paces to listen, they worked their way between the trees to the turf mound at the centre of the spinney. Emlyn cast about in the moonlight. After a few minutes he pointed at the ground.

‘There, see?’

‘Not really.’

‘A torch’d be real handy now.’

‘Look, buster, it wasn’t me that dropped the bloody thing in the water.’

‘You knocked it out of my hand.’

‘And you switched it on.’

‘You said McCrossan’s down the pub. What’s your problem?’

Maxine started down the hillock.

‘Okay? Wait! Just wait.’

Emlyn looked around and spotted a hazel brake at the edge of the clearing. Rushing over, he flicked open a small jack-knife and hacked at the base of one of the slender branches. Snapping it off, he sharpened the thick end to a rough point and plunged the stick into the turf at his feet. The stick vibrated, jarring his arms.

‘See!’ He was almost shouting.

‘Sssh! Keep your voice down. See what?’

‘Take the stick and shove it into the ground. No, here!’

The hazel rod jarred in Maxine’s hand. ‘What is it?’ she said, dropping to her knees and pulling at the turf.

‘Hang on!’ said Emlyn. ‘They’ll know we’ve been here.’

She sat back on her haunches as Emlyn crouched beside her. Rolling back a section of turf, he picked it up and laid it gently to one side. ‘Feels like —stone?’ he said.

Maxine ferreted in her pack. Emlyn heard the rasp of a match and for a brief moment they were staring at a patch of damp slate.

‘Matches!’ she said. ‘And a candle.’

‘Save the candle for inside.’

‘You think there’s an inside?’ She lit the candle. The flame danced behind her cupped hand. Lifting another turf, Emlyn placed it above the gap he had made. The candle guttered in the wind. Maxine lit another match, cradling the flame to the stub of a candle. The wick caught and she watched Emlyn lift three more sods. The wavering flame showed a brass ring, green with age and verdigris. Emlyn heaved on it. The slate groaned and lifted slowly until he tipped it to one side.

A deeper darkness stared up at the night sky. Emlyn reached for the candle as Maxine handed it to him, and then lay on his stomach and craned forward, his head and shoulders in the opening.

‘Can’t see much.’ Emlyn pushed himself up off the grass. ‘Looks as if a passage runs in that direction.’ He gave a backward nod.

‘Mebbe someone’s buried down there.’ She stood quietly, the candle illuminating her face. ‘You going in then?’

Emlyn shook his head and Maxine sighed.

‘Gi’s it here. And the matches.’

Lowering herself into the hole, Maxine ducked her head and was gone. High above the branches creaked. The wind was picking up and there was the smell of rain on the air. Emlyn shuddered and shrunk further into his greatcoat. He felt relieved he was no



longer holding the light; less exposed now his eyes had adjusted to the moonlight.

Stooped double to avoid banging her head and holding the candle before her, Maxine fumbled her way along the passage with her left hand. Overhead the massive stone slabs compressed the darkness until she could taste it. A joint in the stonework snagged under her fingernail, tearing it, and she cursed under her breath. Several paces later the wall curved away to the left. She froze and held the candle higher. The flame revealed a chamber no more than five or six paces across. Ahead the passage ran on into darkness. On either side were two smaller passages. She tried to visualise what it would look like if the roof was lifted off—a cross imposed over a circle came to mind—but the image made her think of the tons of earth and stone above her. She cowered down against the wall and her foot knocked something hollow sounding, sending it clattering across the slate floor. Just as she leant forward and her fingers closed over wood, Emlyn's harsh whisper echoed along the passage.

'Someone's coming. I'll get you out later.'

Swinging around, she knocked the wall, sending the candle spinning from her hand. The flame flared briefly and guttered. The last thing she heard as she groped for the candle stub was the dull scrape of slate being dragged across the entrance.

The sound of an engine drifted between the trees. Emlyn assumed the vehicle was down on the road, but as the sound grew louder he realised it was coming from the woods further up the valley. He listened intently, uncertain what to do. Whoever it was drove slowly down the slope without any lights. The engine died and Emlyn thought he caught the snick of a car door opening.

Ducking his head into the hole, he whispered: 'Somebody's coming. I'll get you out later.' Quickly he dragged the slate across, laid it carefully in place, and replaced the turf, checking in the moonlight to make sure that nothing looked out of place. Looks

disturbed, he thought, but it'll have to do. He pushed quickly with his foot at some of the lumpier bits. Damn! There was no way they wouldn't know someone had been there.

The first indication that someone was nearing the spinney was a fit of suppressed coughing away to the south. Emlyn listened as if his life depended on it.

A twig cracked and there was a thud as someone landed awkwardly inside the spinney. Emlyn squinted into the darkness. A second figure, silhouetted by the moon, was clambering over the wall.

Emlyn prodded with his shoe at a few raised edges of turf, then dropped to a crouch and hurried across to the other side of the clearing. The night wood closed in around him. He stepped off the turf towards the trees. Dead twigs crackled underfoot. Before he could hide, he would be heard crashing about. Wrestling his panic into a small tight knot, he forced himself to think.

A shallow ditch filled with last winter's leaves ran in a crescent shape at the foot of the mound. It would have to do. He lay down on his back, tucked his scarf away and then covered himself with leaves.

The waiting took hold. He stared up at the stars and wondered if Max was all right.

He could hear voices coming up through the wood.

'Damn your eyes, man,' someone hissed. 'There never *was* anyone here.'

'Down on the road —definitely heard voices, I tell you.'

McCrossan, thought Emlyn.

'Stick to the task, man. Vermin, that's what we're here for —checking your snares. I'll have that dog-fox, nae bother.'

'It's the vixen I'm interested in.'

The two men walked around the far side of the mound and a torch beam flicked on. Now we're screwed, thought Emlyn.

‘What did I tell you,’ said McCrossan. ‘Somebody’s been fossicking.’

Minutes passed, then he heard the familiar grate of slate on rock. Christ, they’re opening the mound, thought Emlyn. Now we’re well and truly bollocksed.

‘I’ll take a look around while you’re down below.’

‘Who said I was going down? You’ve years on me.’

Must be McCrossan’s father, thought Emlyn.

‘I’ll only go in there if I have to,’ said the younger man. ‘You know that.’

‘Pass me the bloody torch.’

There was a clatter as something heavy hit stone and Emlyn jumped. Someone cursed. Snatches of violent shivering gripped Emlyn. He tried to force his body to be still, but his wet clothes seemed to suck down the cold from the night sky.

‘You trying to vex me on purpose? Your lighter—if you can pass that without dropping it?’

They’ve dropped their torch, thought Emlyn. Please God let it be broken. Two torches in one night; the chances weren’t good. He strained his ears, listening. A frantic clicking carried over the mound to where he lay.

‘Globe’s gone.’

‘I’ll make a quick recce.’ McCrossan’s voice again. ‘Check them snares.’

‘Suit yourself.’

Before he knew it, McCrossan’s bulk was towering above the ditch, stock-still, as he stared off into the trees. Trying to keep his breathing shallow, Emlyn felt as if he would suffocate. His cheek was pressed into the leaf mould inches away from McCrossan’s boot. The glassy surface of McCrossan’s toecap held a reflection; the tiny silver coin of the moon. Emlyn stared into its depths aware that at any moment a violent shiver would give him away.

Maxine could have told him about McCrossan's boots. If there was one thing McCrossan liked—he was always going on about being an ex-Para—it was the upkeep of his boots. 'Use these as shaving mirrors, you could,' was a favourite phrase of his when referring to his footwear. The rest—the grubby shirts, the frayed Driza-bone that he wore all year round—could go to the dogs. There was a saying around the town, she had heard it from her Gran, 'One shirt, five pair o' boots.'

Without warning, the gamekeeper grunted and stepped over the ditch, missing the leaf-strewn form by a stride. The wood swallowed McCrossan. A branch cracked in the distance and Emlyn pulled the dank night air deep into his lungs. And, as a bout of shivering passed through him, rustling his leafy covering, the thought came to him how remarkably quiet McCrossan was for such a bulky man.

Maxine's instinct was to scramble from the chamber and run, but the entrance was covered and there was no escape. She tried to light the candle but her fingers would not hold the match steady. Giving up, she settled against the wall to wait. Minutes passed. Time became fluid, an extension of the blackness around her.

A cold draught eddied around her face. It was several seconds before she realised that someone was pulling back the slate. Relief surged through her. Emlyn was getting her out. She shuffled forwards on her hands and knees.

Something heavy clattered onto the stone floor of the chamber and she froze. Ol'man McCrossan's cursing echoed through the chamber, followed by the sound of someone dropping into the tumuli. A series of clicks echoed in the darkness.

'Globe's gone.'

Logic told her that she was separated from the speaker by the distance of the passage, but kneeling in the darkness she felt that if she reached out she would be able

to touch him. She shuddered. There was the insect-like sound of a lighter being struck several times.

Maxine felt her way down the side passage until she could go no further. A slab of stone was blocking her way. She ran her fingers over it, felt it disappear downwards beyond her reach, a cold slash across the passage. One of the great roof stones must have caved in, she thought. Squatting down, she waved her arm blindly into the triangular void beneath the stone and crawled into the space. Squashed beneath the fallen lintel, the cold rock pressed against her cheek, pushing her face back and sideways, forcing her to look back along the passage.

A wavering light leaked into the main chamber, causing huge shadows to swallow the walls and roof. Ol'man McCrossan's silhouette showed clearly as he squatted with his back to her. A sharp, strangled breath sucked at the darkness, making Maxine jump. Sensing the urgency in the voice, she shrank deeper into her hiding place. The flame swung wildly, this way and that, nearly guttering as the old man spun on his heels, checking the shadowy corners.

'Damn and blast! One's gone.'

Somewhere out in the spinney a gun went off. They're shooting at Emlyn, thought Maxine.

'What the—' Ol'man McCrossan launched himself upright. Maxine heard the crack of bone on rock and he sank down again, rubbing his head and rocking on his haunches, and then cursing, he fumbled his way back to the entrance.

She took a breath and let it out slowly. It was hard to believe what she had seen arranged in a circle on the heavy flagstones, hard to trust her memory and the flickering light of the candle. But seen it she had. Ol'man McCrossan's reaction confirmed that.

Her hand went instinctively to her pocket and she felt the small lumpy shape against her thigh.

Emlyn jumped as the report echoed amongst the trees. What the hell was McCrossan shooting at? Then he heard the muffled outbreak of cursing from inside the tumulus and McCrossan came crashing back through the wood. The keeper was standing rifle in hand as his father's head emerged from the opening.

'That old dog-fox,' he said. 'Snared himself good and proper. He won't be causing any more problems.'

'Never mind your bloody dog-fox,' said the older McCrossan. 'One's missing.'

'Gettaway! You're certain of that?'

'Dammit, man, I can count.'

'I dinna see as how it could—?'

'What, disappear? People take what's not theirs to take. You've no been at your job.'

'I canna be everywhere at once. I've said it before and I'll say it again, they should never've been set out in this dammed wood in the first place.'

'They've stood a long time,' said McCrossan Senior quietly. 'Your grandfather, he knew the power of this place. Sleepers Stones. Called that for a reason.'

Sleepers Stones? Emlyn mouthed the name again. The walled wood was marked as 'Sleepers Spinney' on the ordnance survey.

'Give me a hand up,' the older man grunted. McCrossan helped as his father prised himself awkwardly out of the hole and heaved the slate into place.

'Mebbe it was that lad I found up here Monday.'

'The bird-boy?' said the old man. 'You think so? Mind you, it wouldn'a surprise me, him and that damn dog of his.'

Emlyn lay listening as the voices receded. Time moved as slowly as the stars. He had to be sure they were well away before he got Max out. The smell of the wood was all around him as he rolled from the ditch. He sat up, trying to listen over his shivering: nothing—the wood was quiet again.

8

*Turning his back on the trees, the uncle makes a sign against the evil eye and beads back down towards the settlement. But there are things unsaid, untold: secrets that a child cannot fathom, paths that the uncle only guesses at. He is an old man, his first wife long dead and his daughters taken by the scarlet fever. His forefathers wore the Roman purple, and he sees nothing beyond the glory of what this boy will become, that it is his blood that is the chosen.*

*But—to be chosen in these times.*

*The new way has spread through the valleys and the old gods are in retreat. The leaders go down to the river with the monks and are cleansed and stagger out bedraggled and grinning. Their liege-men follow. The people watch; some choose the new way, others hang back. With my guidance the boy is one of these. There will come a time when a greater gain can be made from such a public display.*

*The river-washers say that we will stand next to God if we submit in faith. What would they know of the chaos that is the Gods, the brute strength of their will to life, to birth all things. Let them live everyday with the strength of three raging through their bones. They've never looked out from the eye of the boar or the stag, never knowing if you are sleeping or waking, for the dream, for such it seems, cannot be shaken. To know, even in the quietest moment, all paths lead to but one point. Knowing that it is not your life any more. Let them wrestle in the bright sunlight with things unseen, while others—potter, herdsman, scribe—go about their business and treat you as one apart. Let them be filled by the*



*Old Ones, filled like an empty ewer and kicked aside when they have done, the water trickling into the dust. Their God seems a pale ghost in comparison.*

*Neither have they known the madness of betrayal.*

*My anger, like a lead cavalry horse, has carried me too far. There is order in all things. Other events must be told first.*

*Only now, with his uncle a speck at the valley bottom, do we walk in among the trees. There is a power here in the deepest groves that the priests and the monks cannot know. The westerly wind is driving dark clouds up the valley, blotting out the sunset. It will rain before nightfall.*

## 9

Emlyn hesitated in the doorway, his eyes flickering around Maxine's bedroom. The mirrored door of the wardrobe hung ajar: something was scrawled in lipstick across the glass. Inside Emlyn could see a few clothes, mostly black, and a row of empty hangers. Several bottles of cheap perfume sat on a chest of drawers. Otherwise, the room was neat and tidy. Below, in the hall, he heard a door close and Maxine came rattling up the stairs.

'Shut the door.' She pushed past him and slipped her shoes off, shoved a pillow behind her and sat hunched with a pillow between her knees. Emlyn could see she was shaking. He left the door ajar and perched on the edge of the bed.

'You all right?' he said.

'Yeah, I'm fine. Buried alive —it's all in day's work for me, eh?'

'Look, I'm sorry. I had to think on my feet. What else could I have done?'

'You could've got me out, that's what.'

'They were coming. There wasn't time. We've been through all that.'

'Yeah, well —mebbe.'

Emlyn shrugged. 'You gonna give us a look at what we found, then?'

‘What *who* found? Besides, it was pitch black.’

‘You mean you were in a rush to get back here. There were half-a-dozen street-lights where—’

‘It wasn’t me who was cold, like?’ Maxine started groaning, her trembling overtaken by laughter as she tried to force the sentence out. ‘Man, your teeth, they sounded like something —outta —outta River-Dance.’

‘My jeans were saturated —remember?’

‘Saturated.’ Maxine mimicked him. ‘Not wet, *saturated*.’

The bedroom door opened and a buxom middle-aged woman stood looking him over.

‘I wondered when I was going to meet your new beau?’

Emlyn blushed.

‘Can’t you knock,’ said Maxine, ‘before you come barging in, like?’

‘I’ll press you to remember why you were sent here in the first place, young lady. Now, would you like a cup of tea?’ The woman smiled at Emlyn. Like Maxine’s, the eyes that held his were of the deepest yellowy-green. ‘Kettle’s on. It’s no trouble.’

Emlyn glanced at Maxine but her chin was on her chest, her face immobile.

‘That would be nice,’ said Emlyn. ‘Thank you.’

‘Nae bother. It’s good to see *some* youngsters with manners.’ Maxine’s grandmother retreated, closing the door quietly.

‘You going to give us a look or what?’

The two of them were draped on opposite ends of the bed. Maxine felt in her pocket, pulled out a small wooden horseman and placed it on the counterpane.

Emlyn studied the squat, crudely shaped figure. The wood was riven with age, with deep cracks following the grain, and its surface, smooth under his fingers, still

carried the blade or tool marks of its shaping. With its accentuated height and the crude, almost childish shaping there was no realism about it, rather a stylisation. Whoever had carved it had put their soul into it, he thought. Suddenly, he remembered Max's flight from the spinney the day that he saw the rider.

Maxine turned the figure slowly. 'How old do you think it is?'

'Haven't a clue. I could ask my sister.'

Slowly, Maxine passed him the figure.

'I was *joking*,' he continued. 'But she'd know, for sure. Romano-British artefacts, they're her speciality.'

Maxine stared at him.

'It's like the time when the Roman Empire collapsed and they pulled out of Britain.'

'It's not that old —surely? It would have rotted?'

Maxine thought back to the ring of small figures arranged in a tight circle on the floor of the tumulus. Her well-lit bedroom, with its colourful knick-knacks, seemed a haven against the pressing darkness that had engulfed her when she had been trapped underground.

'And there were more of them?' said Emlyn.

'Couple-a-dozen —arranged in a circle. It had the smell of something, I dunno — something weird —creepy, like.'

They lapsed into silence. Emlyn stared at the wooden horseman and shivered. He was thinking about the hoof-falls that had followed them over the bridge and up into the town. Neither of them had mentioned it: either Max was saying nothing or she never heard it.

Maxine broke the silence. 'Down in that hole, that was something else. I kept thinking of ma Dad. He pissed off before I was born, but m'gran always said he were

terrified of confined spaces. Terror of being buried alive, an' all. Wanted to be cremated at all cost. Down there I just kept thinking on that, I couldn'a shift it outta ma head.'

They looked at one another.

'The place gives me the creeps all right. I couldn't show you in the dark but there's no sign of life up there, no birds' nest, no rabbit scats—'

'Scats?'

'Droppings. Shit.'

'Rabbit droppings an area of expertise, is it?'

'I told you, I photograph animals.'

A heavy tread echoed on the stairs, and Maxine covered the horseman with her thigh as her grandmother entered with a tea tray.

'I thought you might like some scones. Are you not going to introduce me properly, Maxine?'

'Emlyn, this is m'gran.'

'Call me Lindsay. Now, tell me again how you ended up soaked?'

'Some heavies pushed him in.'

'From school,' said Emlyn quickly, but he felt uncomfortable about the lie. 'Max scared them off.'

'If you're being bullied—'

'Nah. It's nothing much—a misunderstanding,' edged in Maxine.

Emlyn glanced at her. Maxine seemed to lie so smoothly.

'Maxine shouldn'a be using her street tactics, nor any of her city language. We're civilised in this wee town. But,' She smiled broadly at her grand-daughter, 'she did well in a hard spot. Are you not going to serve the young man his tea?'

Maxine scooped the figure away behind her as she shifted to the edge of the bed.

'What have you there? You're not hiding anything from me by any chance, milady?'

‘It’s Emlyn’s.’

Mrs Fraser held out her hand and Maxine passed the figure across.

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes. Well, actually —it’s my mother’s actually.’ Emlyn stumbled on. ‘She’s an archaeologist.’

‘Aye, and digging up half the town from what I’ve heard.’

‘I thought Max might be interested —in the wooden figure.’

Maxine poured the tea as casually as she could manage. Her grandmother placed the horseman on the bed and walked to the door. ‘The wee man on his pony —it’s not a child’s thing. Och, I know you’re not bairns any more,’ she said, seeing Maxine’s raised eyebrows. ‘But there’s a glamour on it, that I can all but touch. It’s best put back wherever it came from. Back in the ground.’ She half closed the door and then popped her head back. ‘Your jeans are dry, young man, but that coat of yours is another matter.’

The door closed and they heard her tread on the stairs as she went down.

‘Why d’youse wear that great thing, anyway?’

‘Why d’you wear black?’ said Emlyn.

‘And that box that you carry everywhere?’

‘Good pictures don’t just happen. You have to work at it.’

They sat in silence on the bed.

‘What did she mean by *glamour*?’

‘Superstition: ladders, salt, black cats —you name it. It’s an old Scottish word for magic.’

Emlyn prised himself up off the bed. Maxine sat hunched against her pillows, staring at the carving.

‘I best head off. My sister’ll be having a hernia. Thanks for the loan.’ Emlyn made to curtsy in the dressing gown Maxine had lent him and she clamped her hand across her mouth, cutting short a raucous laugh. ‘My jeans —where—?’

‘Front room. She’ll have ’em ironed by now.’

The tea had grown cold and scummy in the cups.

Emlyn stood in the small front parlour with its upright piano, and antimacassared sofa and armchairs. He tucked his t-shirt in, buckled his belt and crossed to the oak sideboard. Silver-framed photos stood on doilies. The unfamiliar faces gazed back at him.

‘Admiring my display, eh?’

Mrs. Fraser stood in the doorway. He had not heard her come in.

‘Are they all your family?’

‘Aye.’ She closed the door and came and stood behind him.

‘This is you?’ He pointed to a black and white photograph of a woman standing next to a motor scooter. ‘When you were younger?’

‘Will you look at that get-up?’

‘Who’s this?’ He indicated a small, badly taken photograph of a young man standing on a quay. The man was stocky and darkhaired and wore the sweater and heavy boots of a trawlerman.

‘That’s my Douglas, Maxine’s grandfather,’ she said, collapsing the ironing board and propping it by the door.

Emlyn stared at the grainy photo. The man was staring straight back at the camera lens. His eyes were dark and intense and he was smiling. Light glinted off the frame and Emlyn felt himself slipping away into another place. Tight pressed bodies moved to a

deep pulse of music. The dark-haired man was dancing with the scooter-woman from the other photograph. Lights flashed and he could smell beer and sweat and cigarettes.

‘He really liked dancing, didn’t he?’ Emlyn heard his voice drift over the crowd. ‘You both did. But he really loved it.’

Slowly he came back into the dimly lit parlour. It was like sliding down a tunnel away from the dancers and the flashing lights. Maxine’s grandmother was staring at him. Behind her Maxine stood in the open doorway, a puzzled look on her face.

‘Gran? You okay?’ Maxine moved to her grandmother’s side and took her arm, squeezing it. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘A nice cuppa, is what I need. Pop the kettle on, there’s a dear.’

The door closed behind Max.

‘Oh, he was real keen on dancing. Have you been asking around town about me, or Max for that matter?’ Mrs Fraser stared at him and Emlyn shook his head. ‘Are you sure? Don’t lie to me now, laddie.’

‘Why would I —be asking about you?’

‘You tell me.’

Emlyn picked the frame off the sideboard.

‘I’d be obliged if you’d put that back,’ said Mrs Fraser.

The man’s face stared back, a crooked smile and a cigarette dangling from his lip. There was a hissing around Emlyn’s head. He reached for the sideboard: the solid timber was the only contact now—dark water roared in his ears and he was fighting for breath. The dream had come when he was awake. He was going to die. Nothing was more certain. But it was salt not fresh water that filled his throat.

‘Steady, laddie!’ Maxine’s grandmother thrust her arm under his. He could feel her strength as she pushed herself between Emlyn and the sideboard. ‘Hang on a minute.’



‘He drowned.’ Emlyn forced the words up from somewhere cold and heavy. His fingers slipped from the polished timber. A deep silence settled around him; hair drifted seaweed-like across his face.

‘The rigs.’ Mrs Fraser’s voice filtered down through the dark water. ‘He was swept off in a storm. They never found his body.’

‘I’m going mad.’

‘You’re not going mad at all.’

‘You don’t understand,’ he said, trying to focus on the door. ‘My father’s in Huntleighbank Hall. It’s a mental asylum.’ The fact blurted from him before he could stop himself.

‘Ah, Huntleighbank, is it?’

He found himself pressed into the comforting softness of Mrs. Fraser’s embrace.

‘I could see you,’ said Emlyn, ‘It was like watching a movie. You were in some kind of hall. It was a bit run down and there was a band playing.’ He felt sick in the pit of his stomach. Where had he been in those few minutes? Why was he talking to this woman about things he could not possibly know? Again, he felt himself slipping away into the place his father had left them for.

‘I’ve got to go!’ He pulled away towards the door.

‘Whoa! Steady on.’ Mrs Fraser grabbed his shoulders. ‘You’ve the gift, that’s all: blessing and curse. Come into the kitchen and have some tea now and we’ll settle you down before you head off.’

He found himself half-cuddled, half-steered into the bright kitchen, where Maxine was clattering around with the crockery and singing quietly.

‘She’s a proper sweet voice, this one.’

‘Stop embarrassing me, okay, Gran?’

‘There’s no shame in a fine voice.’

‘What happened?’ Maxine asked, glancing at Emlyn as she poured the tea.

‘It’s nothing,’ said her grandmother. ‘Just a wee misunderstanding.’

‘For a moment there, you both looked a bit off with the fairies.’

Emlyn sipped the steaming sugary brew, grateful that Maxine’s grandmother said nothing about his father’s illness or his strange glimpse into her past.

The light from Mrs Fraser’s doorway cut a yellow rectangle across the street. Emlyn and Maxine stood nearby in the shadows.

‘She’ll be out here if I dinna get in.’

‘Can’t you keep it? Bridget, my sister, she can’t keep out of my things.’

‘Ma Gran already thinks I lifted it from some antique shop. You’ll have to take it.’

Maxine handed him the wooden horseman. It felt curiously smooth to his hand despite the chiselled look of it up in Maxine’s bedroom. ‘What you going to do with it?’

‘Don’t know,’ he said and pocketed the figure. ‘Put it in a tin or something, I suppose.’

‘Hang on.’ Maxine ducked back into the house.

Emlyn registered the faint sound of horse’s hooves somewhere down in the town. He shivered and pulled his collar up against the night air that drifted down from the castle. The hoof falls grew louder. The rider was coming at a steady trot up the narrow streets towards the square. Emlyn turned his head to listen.

Maxine reappeared with a tin in her hand. ‘What’s up?’

‘Dunno, it’s just an odd time to be out riding.’

‘Riding?’

‘Down town. Can’t you hear it?’

She cocked her head and then shook it.

‘Here.’ She thrust the tin at Emlyn ‘It’s just the size. I’ve got to go.’ Maxine waved quickly from the doorway and the yellow block of light shrank to pencil thinness and disappeared.

Emlyn opened the tin and the faint smell of butterscotch wafted up at him. He grinned, pressed the lid on and slipped it in his pocket. His grin vanished. Movement: he sensed it rather than saw it. He squinted down the hill to the corner. Shadows folded over shadows in the half-darkness. The unmistakable sound of a horse shifting its weight carried across the cobbles.

‘Anybody there?’ he called.

Then the clip of hoof on stone was gone. A light went off in the house opposite and the eyeless window stared back at him. He turned quickly and walked up the street. He would take the long way home, around by Castle Wall.

## 10

*At the foot of a cliff is the cave, a dark slash in the rock. The boy, Arthur—although he is yet to take this name, yet to earn the right—sits on a rock in front of the opening. The sun warms his back as he idly tosses a stone from hand to hand.*

*Tonight, I say.*

*He grunts, relieved.*

*They were talking of your death, the boy says. Down at the settlement, before we left. They say you will die three times.*

*I smile, and nod, well aware of the prophecy.*

*He stares at a small bird that is hopping in the dust near my feet. I bend down and hold out my hand. The chaffinch flutters onto my finger, chirruping and turning its eye beadily into mine.*

*It isn't possible, he says, to die three times?*

*He watches the bird intently. He could kill it with the stone he is holding without doing me any injury.*

*You've heard the stories of the three-fold death, I say. What point is there in my repeating them?*

*The boy looks puzzled; I am his teacher.*

*I hold my hand aloft. The bird is a flashing line among the trees.*

*Sometimes a truth is only as solid as its speaker, I say cautiously. If you had killed the bird, would you have been any wiser?*

*He shakes his head.*

*Truth then is rather like the bird, is it not? It seeks air and light. Its capture is no easy task.*

*I tell him to prepare for the evening, to collect and prepare certain plants that grow on the hillside. When he returns the sacred fire is already lit. I crouch, staring into the flames for what seems an eternity, waiting for the call.*

*Later, the full moon snaring our shadows, we stand near the fire, naked except for the blue markings that cover our bodies. I chant and call out and stamp my feet. He shivers in the moonlight. His feet drum half-heartedly in the dust, as much from cold and boredom as from what he has been instructed to do. Acrid smokes rises from the plants that have been tossed on the fire.*

*I stop. The boy shuffles on for a few moments. The wind is rising in the trees.*

*They are here, I say.*

*There is a great rushing through the forest that is not the wind. He senses it moments before it tears into his body, jerks twice and falls to the dirt, twitching and slobbering. The whites of his eyes gleam wolf-like in the firelight. Stooping low, I sing over the thrashing body, passing my hands repeatedly over his heaving chest. The flailing subsides into tremors, and the tremors into tics and twitches. He lies still, the dust settling softly over us.*

*I continue to sing, rocking slowly on my haunches.*

*The treetops mark the passage of the stars.*

*Then, in a wild-eyed moment, he is on his feet and into the forest. He weaves between the trees, leaping fallen trunks, ducking under branches as the moonlight picks out the gleam of sweat across his muscles. He runs on. He is the hunter and the hunted. The forest god governs his body now.*

*Night shifts around to night. Stars and sun hold the forest pinned in a dream. A great loneliness fills him. It was the same for me when I was sent alone into the forest at a younger age than his.*

*Silence becomes a beast creeping between the trees. All the colour and movement of the forest are swept together in a silent dance that becomes a single note that fills his head.*

*I do not foresee his death. He is young and strong, but nothing is certain. If he returns, then the tribes will have their leader. If not, then all our work will have come to nought.*

*But return he does: bruised, cut, famished, barely able to stand. It has been three nights. I tend his cuts and spoon a broth of herbs and wild greens into him. I watch him carefully; he has dreams in which he calls out, roaring and bellowing. Twice he tries to leave the cave but I wrestle him back onto the skins and press crushed herbs to his nose. The struggles diminish and he falls into a fitful sleep.*

*On a pale dew-soaked morning I return to find him sitting on the rock at the mouth of the cave. He looks much the same as when his uncle first brought him up from the settlement. It is time for us to go down again.*

## 11

Emlyn shuffled around the kitchen, bleary eyed. He had tossed and turned until the small hours, and when sleep had finally crept over him, a horseman had cantered through a series of uneasy dreams.

He was clattering about, pulling crockery from the cupboard, when he heard the crunch of tyres on gravel and a car door slamming. The back door opened.

‘Mum—’ He turned around. ‘Hey, Sis.’ He pulled the cereal from the cupboard.

‘I’ve got us some milk. God, that woman is so rude. Not our usual one, she’s perfectly nice, the one next to the hairdresser. Mum rang when I was down the road. She’s going to ring back in a minute. —You were out late last night. What were you doing?’

‘Friend’s place.’

‘Anyone I know?’

‘Hardly likely.’

‘No? Tall girl—black spiky hair: she the friend in question? I saw you in town the other day.’

The phone rang and Bridget scooted into the hall. It was their mother. He could tell by Bridget’s tone, a sort of thick-as-thieves conspiratorial voice that she reserved for such moments. There was a squeal and then Bridget was in the doorway, waving the

phone at him. ‘She’s got it! Mum’s got the gig with the film people. Here, she wants to speak to you.’

‘What gig?’ mouthed Emlyn, taking the handset from his sister.

The line was bad. A sound shadow dogged his mother’s words. ‘How’s tricks, Em?’

‘All right.’

‘You’re all right?’

‘Fine.’

‘Anymore episodes ...with the dreams and the sleepwalking.’

‘Not lately.’ Why was he lying? It wasn’t something he did often, well no more than his mates and usually over small stuff. But the dreams were getting worse. ‘Can we talk about something else?’

‘Good news about this film thing, because you know what production companies are like, they throw money around like it’s going out of style.’ There was an awkward silence at Emlyn’s end. ‘Aren’t you going to ask me what it’s about?’ said his mother.

‘What’s the go then?’

‘It’s about King Arthur. It’s called *The Thirteenth Battle*. Well, anyway, that’s the working title. You know what these arty film-types are like. Look, Emlyn I’ve got to go. Just checking in. Be good for your sister, eh? She’s got a lot on her plate, what with finishing off her Doctorate.’

‘You’ve already been away a week. What about dad?’

‘We’re doing the best we can. He’s in good hands. We’ll talk about it when I get back.’

‘You are coming back then?’

There was a sigh and a pause. He expected her to comment on his sarcasm but she let it go.

‘Week: ten days ... tops. Emlyn, I can’t just drop it. All this was booked ages ago.’



‘Not the film stuff?’

‘No, not the filming stuff as you say. Anyway, help Bridget out when you can, matey. Got to run. Going into an important meeting any minute. Big kiss, sweetheart, and huge one when I get back.’

Emlyn cradled the phone and wandered back into the kitchen.

‘You’ve been kicking a ball around in the drive again,’ said Bridget. ‘The gravel’s all scuffed up. I told you about that already. Ol’man McCrossan will have a fit if he drives by. You know what he’s like—spotlessly dressed: pristine picture-postcard cottage.’

‘I haven’t been out in the drive.’

‘But—’

‘Bridge —hey, it wasn’t me. My soccer ball’s flat as a pancake.’

Bridget put the milk down and stared at Emlyn’s feet.

‘Your shoes —they’re caked with mud.’

‘You’re starting to sound like Mum.’

‘Really? Then perhaps you can explain this?’ Bridget pointed at the wooden figurine hiding behind the sugar bowl.

For all its stillness, the thing leapt at him like a plunging horse. What was it doing on the kitchen table sandwiched between the sugar bowl and the tomato sauce? He stared at it, his mind a groggy blank, struggling to recall his movements the night before. He had come downstairs at some point early in the morning to make some cocoa. The figurine had been in his hand, he remembered that much.

The whole episode, from Max’s breaching of the wall to the photographs in her grandmother’s parlour, had taken on a dreamlike quality. It was hard to work out where he was, even now, standing in the kitchen. There was ebb and flow happening just out of reach, a racing tide that left him uneasy, fractured. He looked up at the clock on the wall, the faint tick a reassurance that the world was moving in the same old way.

Had he left it, accidentally, on the table last night? No, he was sure he had picked it up with his mug of cocoa. The realisation hit him like a fist; in his sleepy state he had slipped the figurine into his coat hanging in the hall. He knew his sister went through his pockets sometimes.

He lunged for it, but she was too quick, and he only succeeded in knocking over the sugar bowl.

‘Uh-uh,’ said Bridget. ‘Explanation time.’

‘What about going through my pockets? How about explaining *that!*’

‘I didn’t.’ His sister raised her eyebrows. ‘You chucked your coat on the chair. I went to hang it up. That fell out.’ She continued to stare at him. ‘So, what’s the story?’

‘Okay – look – her dad’s a dealer. He’s got an antique shop. She borrowed it to show me.’ Emlyn shoved his unused bowl in the cupboard. ‘I’m giving it back, today, at school, okay?’

‘Is there anything you want to tell me, because your explanation is all that’s separating our mother and this particular piece of news? I’m all ears.’

‘Like I said, her Dad’s an antique dealer. She wanted to show it to me. We were talking. I forgot it was there.’

‘It looks old: valuable. Your friend ought never to have *borrowed* it in the first place.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘You can always *yeah-yeah* Mum.’ Bridget picked up her mobile.

‘Great,’ said Emlyn, backing down, ‘Mum’s not content with being a celebrity archaeologist, now she’s off moonlighting as a film consultant?’

‘Two weeks, she reckoned. Then everything’ll be back to normal.’

‘Haven’t we got family around here? Somebody I could go and stay with. Give you a break, like.’

‘Thinking of your sister. Very noble.’ Bridget held up her fingers. ‘Two weeks. Think

we can make peace for that long?’

Emlyn grinned. ‘I was thinking about my stomach.’

‘There’s always takeaway. Mum left some emergency dosh.’

‘Now you tell me. After a week of your culinary experiments.’

‘Got to have someone to experiment on, I mean, I don’t want to go poisoning any future husbands. So, no need for you to worry about having your stomach pumped at the infirmary.’

‘Excellent,’ said Emlyn. ‘But seriously, don’t we have relatives up here? Mum said we did.’

‘Aunt, I think, on your dad’s side. Bit of a busybody apparently.’ She gave him a measured look. ‘Anyway, you’ve got me.’

‘Great,’ said Emlyn as he headed for the bathroom.

Bridget stood the figure back on the table and picked up her mug of coffee and then promptly put the mug down and picked up the carving again. The cut-marks had been made by a craftsman whose origins and motives she could only guess at. She could see the man’s weathered hands: the dirt encrusted nails, the calloused palms. Then she laughed. ‘Perhaps a woman carved it?’ Something sharp caught her skin: a tiny sliver of wood had come away. She levered it off with her nail, took a small plastic specimen bag from her trouser pocket and popped the splinter into it.

Emlyn clattered out of the bathroom and down the hall. Quickly she replaced the figure on the table and picked up her coat and her bag.

‘I haven’t visited Dad for ages,’ said Emlyn.

‘Talk to Mum. I’ve got to go.’

‘Mum’s not here.’

Bridget pulled a face. ‘There’s always the phone.’

‘She never agrees to anything over the phone,’ he said. ‘And I was thinking of going

today. Besides, she's in a meeting. She'll have it switched off. You know what she's like.'

'Emlyn, Dad's not my problem. Meantime you've got school. And I'm into Edinburgh this morning.'

'Dad's on the way. Couldn't you drop me off?'

'Emlyn. Look, I know it's difficult with Dad. But you've got to see Mum's side of it. She can't just drop everything. I realise it's hard, you know, at your age, but she hasn't forgotten him or anything.'

Emlyn crossed the square quickly and turned into Horse Market. The bus would be another hour and he figured that the library—which was housed in a dilapidated Victorian building called the Institute—was the safest bet; at least he could say he had a free period and was doing homework or research. Besides, he wanted to check the ordnance survey map again. What he had heard that night up at the spinney—Ol'man McCrossan's 'Sleepers Stones'—had been niggling at him.

Inside he went to the rear of the library, found what he was looking for, and unfolded the map on an empty table. He followed the river up the valley with his finger, spotted McCrossan's farm and Wistman's Wood and found the spinney. There was no name next to it. Most, if not all, of the features marked had names, even the smallest. It did not make sense: he was sure he had seen the name, Sleepers Spinney, on the map when he had first looked at it. Again he pored over the contour lines and roads and the unfamiliar names—Dennings Knowe, Gainshaw Rig, Snabbles Lair—and then slid it back into its drawer. This was ridiculous: how the hell did he know the name of the place?

When he emerged from the stacks a belligerent looking man with close-cropped ginger hair was arguing with the librarian.

‘A little civility would be nice,’ said the librarian, a smartly dressed woman in her thirties.

The man gave the librarian the finger and barged past Emlyn. The man’s jacket was stained and his breath reeked of whiskey.

‘God save me from red-headed Celts.’ The librarian suddenly registered Emlyn’s presence. ‘Oh, I didn’t see you there. You’re not a Celt, are you?’

‘Erh, no.’

‘That’s good. What can we do for you then?’

‘The Sleepers Stones?’ said Emlyn tentatively. ‘I wondered if you had any material or information—’

‘Never heard of them, sorry.’ The librarian brushed past him and walked to the photocopier. ‘You can try the catalogue.’

‘Interested in the Sleepers Stones, are you?’

Emlyn turned. A tall, grey-haired woman in tweeds had emerged from between the stacks and was standing behind him. ‘That’s stone spelt with an ‘a’ not an ‘o’. There’s not many know of that name these days. Where did you hear it?’

‘Oh—’ said Emlyn, ‘somebody just mentioned it—’ The woman was watching him intently. ‘At school —now I think about it, it was probably a teacher. Anyway,’ he said quickly changing the subject, ‘what’s the story with them?’

‘Legend has it there was a ring of standing stones, about twenty-odd small ones by all account, that had the habit of moving in the dead of night. Hence the name, presumably. Not that they’ve ever been located. A quaint local superstition, no doubt.’ The woman was studying his face intently again. ‘Do we know one another?’

Emlyn shook his head.

‘It’s just that you remind me of someone. —Oh well, never mind.’

The librarian returned, lifted the flap and ducked behind the counter. ‘Ah, Florence,’ she said, beaming at the grey-haired woman. ‘Just the person I wanted to see. It’s come in,’ She started rummaging through a pile of books. ‘It’s around here somewhere.’

‘Was that McIntyre man causing trouble again?’

‘Ah, Murdo.’ The librarian’s back was still turned towards them. ‘You know he’s known as ‘Red Murdo’, although I’m not quite sure if that is on account of his hair or his political persuasion.’ She turned, brandishing a dilapidated leather-bound volume she had pulled from the shelf, and passed it across the counter to the older woman. ‘Here we are. Thirteen battles: The search for the Scottish Arthur.’

‘I didn’t know King Arthur was from around here?’ said Emlyn.

‘He was no king,’ said the grey-haired woman. ‘He was the *Dux Bellorum*—’

‘You’re looking at our local authority on all things Arthurian,’ said the librarian, and then promptly disappeared between the stacks with an armful of titles.

‘What’s a Dux Bellorum?’

‘*Dux Bellorum*; the leader of battles. A kind of over-lord or over-warlord.’

‘Jousting and feasting and all that stuff,’ said Emlyn.

‘Forget the Round Table and knights on horseback; Norman invention, that. Backed up their dynastic claims to the throne.’

The librarian was back again, loading books onto a trolley. ‘If you want to know what Arthur was really like,’ she said. ‘Go down and watch the local lads in a game of Rugby.’

‘Rugby?’ said Emlyn.

‘Polo,’ continued the librarian. She had stopped loading books onto the trolley and seemed to be developing a growing enthusiasm for her topic. ‘Ever seen it played?’

‘On the telly once.’

‘Okay, well you take the lads from the rugby pitch and whack them on polo ponies, give them the riding skills of course, stick something sharp in their hands and tell them some strangers with foreign sounding names have pack-raped one of their sisters. I’m making a huge generalisation here, one that my politically correct bosses would have me on unemployment for if it ever got back to them. Politically correct, Arthur was not. A unique combination of the right to lead and a sort of head-butting working class obsession with tribalism.’

The tweedy-looking woman was nodding. ‘Best description of Arthur I’ve heard in years.’

‘The red-headed man who nearly flattened you as he went out,’ the librarian said, grinning, ‘probably a direct descendant.’

The older woman gave a great guffaw and then her face became serious. ‘There are too many drinking establishments in this town. I’ve always said so.’

‘One of these days,’ said the librarian, ‘I’ll be forced into doing something primitive to that man. You couldn’t arrange a ritual stoning or something, could you, Florence?’

‘The last stoning around these parts,’ said the tweedy-looking woman, ‘ended up in tears.’

‘What do you mean —the last stoning?’ said Emlyn.

‘She means Merlin, the Enchanter. Shepherds stoned him and he fell into the Yarrow —or was it the Yeave? Anyway, he drowned. Or was he speared? Something about dying three times, a triple death. Anyway, he predicted his own end.’

‘This is *the* Merlin of Arthur and Merlin?’

‘Well, I don’t know of any other,’ said the grey-haired woman. ‘The Borders is littered with folk-memories and superstition.’

‘I thought Merlin was supposed to be Welsh or something?’ said Emlyn.

‘Welsh was spoken right here,’ said the elderly woman. ‘Perhaps not today’s Welsh but a variation. A lot of the local place names have Welsh origins. Myrddin—he was to become known as Merlin later—supposedly wandered the forest in his madness.’

‘Merlin was mad?’

‘Some accounts say that he went mad after he witnessed a battle; a great slaughter of men and horses.’

‘Sort of that post-traumatic stress thingummy,’ said Emlyn.

‘Yes. Precisely. What, in the First World War, they called shell-shock.’ The grey-haired woman turned to the librarian. ‘What do they call it these days, Sandra?’

‘Errrh —Gulf War syndrome?’

Emlyn suddenly remembered his bus and glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes. He looked up. The old woman was still staring at him. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He could wait for the bus in the newsagent.

‘Got to go,’ he said. ‘Thanks for the info.’

He could feel the old woman watching him as he ran down the steps into the narrow street.

‘This is a newsagent’s, not a library.’ The proprietor glowered at Emlyn. ‘Buy something or be on your way.’

The newsagent provided a clear view of the square. If he waited at the bus-shelter the likelihood of his being spotted and it getting back to Bridget rose sharply. Emlyn bought a paper. It would give him something to read on the bus. Besides, his dad had been something of a cryptic crossword buff before his illness.

‘I was waiting for the bus.’

‘Your wait’s over.’ The woman nodded towards the street.



Throwing his change onto the counter, Emlyn rushed into the street and nearly collided with Max.

‘What are you doing here?’ he said.

‘I could ask you the same question. No uniform either. Anyhow, we need to talk. Youse wanna go for a coke?’

‘Can’t.’ He nodded at the bus.

‘Skipping off? Hey, I’ll come with you.’

‘Not —exactly. Look, it’s a bit awkward.’ He was reluctant to mention his father. ‘I’ve an aunt,’ he said quickly. ‘Out past Inneswood.’

‘McCrossan, he was hanging around this morning when I left for school.’

‘We’ll talk —tomorrow at school.’

‘It canna wait,’ said Max.

The bus driver was strolling back from the bakery with his lunch.

‘I’ve got to go,’ said Emlyn.

‘The Castle Tea Rooms.’ She grabbed his arm and then let her hand drop away.

‘Four-thirty. I’ll take a quick break. There’s a bench on the green, okay?’

The bus was indicating to pull out into the traffic. Emlyn nodded, then dodged out across the square and around a car that was reversing into a parking bay, ran up past the big stone cross and across the road in front of the bus. He banged on the doors. Finally the driver looked in his direction. Emlyn made an opening gesture. The driver seemed to take forever to think about it and then the doors hissed open.

Emlyn emerged from the leafy tunnel of plane trees that marked the drive of Huntleighbank House. This was only his second visit and he was still a little awed by the sprawling Victorian mansion: its size and neo-gothic ornateness. The building made him feel oddly self-conscious and a little embarrassed for his father.

According to his mother, Emlyn's paternal great-grandfather had built the house. The family fortune had been made in shipbuilding and no expense had been spared in the lavish architectural detail. As a child, Emlyn's father had run amok through the grounds and the endless passages of the house until his father—Emlyn's grandfather—had squandered the family fortune on a series of slow horses and ill-timed business deals. The irony of his father's current situation was not lost on Emlyn.

He pushed the memory away—seeing his father again after a long break was always difficult—and walked around to the modern annex at the rear of the building. Behind the glass doors, he stood for moment in the air-conditioned fish tank that was the lobby, gathering himself before he rang the buzzer. Everything was a pale rose pink. Calming colours, thought Emlyn. Racks full of mental health leaflets lined one wall. He pushed the button and waited. Already he felt hot in his army-surplus coat. He picked out a pamphlet—*A Guide to Electroconvulsive Therapy: The Latest Evidence*—and started reading.

'Hello.'

Emlyn jumped slightly; he had not heard the nurse enter the lobby.

'You're visiting?'

'My father.' The woman gave a puzzled smile. 'Rory Sylvesterson.'

'Give me a minute and I'll just see where he is.'

The nurse swiped a card and disappeared through the double doors into the wards. Emlyn put the pamphlet back in the rack, sat down and glanced at the crossword on the couch beside him. He had no pen. Emlyn smiled, letting the irony sink in as he remembered the first signs of his father's illness.

His father, a huge avalanche of a man with a greying goatee, had started collecting pens, mostly ballpoints. Emlyn had hardly noticed when or where it had started. He had felt a little embarrassed when his father had taken pens that did not belong to him; one

from the counter of a department store, right in front of the assistant who had given them a cold look of disapproval, the other time pocketing a friend's pen, who had then searched for it and given up, while his father had said nothing.

Bunches of pens bound with elastic bands started to appear around the house. It had seemed just another facet of his father's rather eccentric nature. His father had always been somewhat obsessive about little things—caps on toothpaste, dripping taps—and nobody took much notice. But pens could no longer be found easily around the house. A search was needed to find one and people began to secrete them away in special places to be brought out when needed.

His father had always been territorial about his study up in the attic. From the window the bright gleam of Sydney Harbour could be seen from one of the dormer windows. There was no door, only a cast iron spiral staircase that led up from the top landing. But there was a tacit agreement; no one went up there without first being invited. Not even Emlyn's mother. To enter without invitation; to look for something as prosaic as a pen—his father would have had a fit.

One Saturday morning, when the chipped cup on the kitchen sill had disgorged only toothless pencil stubs, Emlyn rattled up the staircase to look for a sharpener. Pulling open the writing drawer of his father's desk, a chaotic raft of colours, shapes and sizes stared back at him. Slowly he opened the other drawers. Pens filled each of them. Two were full, the remaining four in various stages of completion. He had mentioned nothing to his mother.

One winter's day, when they had driven down to drop a line off the local jetty, he asked his father about it. 'What's with all the pens, Dad?'

'There's never a pen when you need one,' his father had said, his massive frame hunched in the driver's seat as they sat together, eyes screwed against the sun-jangled waters of the harbour. His father's voice had taken on a hushed menace. 'Never trust

people, they'll always take a pen. Pocket it. Pick it up off your desk, off the telephone table, the kitchen table, wherever, and then, when you need it to write down what they're saying, then you don't have one.' Emlyn had assumed that the 'what they are saying' component had been his father's colleagues at work, or the clients who rang, interrupting meal times. Jokingly, Emlyn had said: 'But your writing's so small, it'll take you years to use up all those pens, Dad.' It was true, his father's writing was neat and small, but his father had not responded to the joke.

As the illness progressed he realised his father was talking about the voices inside his head, by which time his mother's concern had already turned to bouts of frantic worrying.

It had been the summer holidays. His mother was at home, working and keeping an eye on Emlyn, when his father's business partner rang to say the police had been called. Unable to find anyone to sit with Emlyn at such short notice, they had rushed into the city, only to find his father had been taken away.

'On a rampage,' his secretary had said, 'smashing computers and bellowing "he was tired of being a prisoner of the cold" and that "when he found out who had switched off the heating he was going to have them hung, drawn and quartered."' The secretary had smiled shakily at Emlyn and handed him a lolly from the jar on her desk, while his mother's hand had clutched at his.

In the police cells, his hair in disarray, spittle flying from his lips, his father had roared at the custody sergeant in a strange language. His mother had chivvied Emlyn back to the front desk. Later, she told him the language had been Latin.

He understood things now that had seemed hard at the time. The term 'mental illness' had suddenly appeared in Emlyn's vocabulary. He had learnt to say that his father was away on business or out of the country, or, most commonly, that his parents were divorced.

Not long after, his mother had been offered a position at a university in North Carolina. His father had been housed at a private nursing home in the Blue Ridge Mountains. That had been five years ago. Then his mother had been offered a teaching post at Durham.

On their first visit to Huntleighbank, he and his father walked around the grounds. His mother had sat on a bench and read. Emlyn had showed his father a few of his most recent wildlife photos and pointed out various birds and recounted the little he knew of their habits. Then it was time to go and the big man shuffled back into the building. Throughout the visit he had not spoken.

In Australia, the drive home after visiting his father had always involved an ice cream at the beach, whatever the weather. In North Carolina the return journeys lapsed into a fragile silence. On the drive back to Yeaaveburgh his mother talked the whole way, remonstrating against everything from pharmaceutical companies and doctors, to dietary factors and gene-splicing.

It had been a month since he had seen his dad.

An electronic door buzzed and a charge-nurse stepped into the foyer. The man was one Emlyn liked from their first visit: a tall, garrulous man with a shock of ginger hair — although Emlyn's father towered over him. Emlyn tried to recall his name —Kenny, that was it: Ken McMurphy.

'Giddyay!' Kenny grinned at his own attempt at an Australian accent. 'Am I there yet? No, I can see by your face I need a wee bit more practice. Come to visit your dad, eh?'

Emlyn followed him into the older part of the building, down a corridor, through the oak-panelled patients' lounge and out onto the side terrace. Across the lawn, his father sat on a dilapidated wooden bench that circled the trunk of an enormous Cedar of Lebanon.

‘Saw your mother on the telly: ‘Digging up the Past’. She was very good. Aren’t they excavating out by the castle?’

Emlyn nodded. He didn’t feel like talking about his mother.

‘Must be interesting. How’s it going?’

‘Acres of mud and the odd bit of something interesting if they’re lucky.’ Emlyn had halted at the top of the steps leading down to the lawn. ‘Mr. McMurphy—’

‘Call me Kenny.’

‘Is he—?’

‘Your father’s pretty subdued today. He’s doing okay. We’re hoping that, maybe in a couple of weeks, he’ll be well enough that we can get him into a residential care unit and then back into the community. Look, I’ll leave you two to it, okay.’

The charge-nurse turned back towards the patients’ lounge.

His father sat hunched in an old black overcoat. Emlyn had never seen him without it since his illness, not even during an Australian summer. His carers were always at him to take it off, always saying how his father complained of the bitter cold.

‘Hello, Dad, I brought you the newspaper.’ His father continued to stare at his shoes. It was always like this at the beginning of a visit—awkward, imprecise. ‘You used to like doing the crossword.’ As far as he knew, his father had not done one for years; he had been particularly good at cryptic puzzles.

‘Crosswords,’ His father’s eyes locked with his. ‘Are crossed words. Misunderstandings are missed understandings.’

A hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. His father’s stubbly face was pressed close to his. Emlyn’s arm hurt and he bit his lip.

‘The wall is breached: the horseman’s loose.’ His father turned his head and stared off into the distance, his grip lessened momentarily. Emlyn’s mind spun. How did his

father know that he had seen the rider clear the wall that day? He had told nobody. It wasn't possible.

'Know about the horsemen, boyo?' said his father. 'Do you? Do you, eh, boyo? You're in it too, with them, aren't you?' His grip tightened again and Emlyn cried out.

'You're hurting me!'

His father was standing now, a fiery stream of Latin drifting across the lawn on the breeze. Dragging Emlyn up off the bench, he began to walk towards the house.

A nursing assistant suddenly appeared at his father's shoulder. The man was a finger's width shorter than his father, but broader, heavier—and younger.

'It's all right,' he said calmly. 'Mr. Sylvesterson, you can let your son go now.'

The nursing assistant's hand closed over his father's wrist as the two men slewed to a halt, their bellies touching. His father's hold tightened. Emlyn's eyes watered.

'It's almost morning tea time.' A friendly hand tousled Emlyn's hair. Kenny, the nurse who had escorted Emlyn into the grounds, was at their side. 'I'm sure both you and your son would like a cuppa. How's that sound, Emlyn?'

Emlyn felt his father's grip relax and his arm go limp.

'Yes. That would be nice,' said Emlyn. He felt foolish. The female nurse who he had seen in the foyer stepped onto the terrace and he found himself separated from his father and drawn away up the steps, Kenny's hand loose on his shoulder.

Just outside the French windows, stood the tall elderly woman from the library. Emlyn stared and Kenny turned, looking between the two of them.

'Of course I know why you reminded me of someone,' she said. 'But you don't remember me, do you, Emlyn?'

Somewhere in his memory her face bobbed out of reach alongside a bright coloured beach ball blown out to sea and spate of tears.

'You're—' The memory flooded back and he grinned. 'Great-aunt—'

‘Florence. —A beach-ball is a precious thing when you’re three.’

‘You obviously know each other,’ said Kenny. ‘I’ll put the kettle on in the staff room.’

‘No need,’ said the woman. ‘Florence Sylvesterson: Rory Sylvesterson’s aunt.’ She shook Kenny’s hand vigorously. ‘I was thinking of sitting with my nephew but...’

Emlyn’s gaze followed hers to where his father was sitting slumped on the lawn like a huge child, his back to the steps, surrounded by several staff members. They were trying to get him to stand but he kept shrugging them off. ‘I live just down the road.’ She smiled at Emlyn. ‘I was wondering if you’d like to brighten up my parlour for a while?’

He glanced briefly at his father and nodded.

‘My car’s just out front. Shall we go through or around?’

‘Around,’ said Emlyn.

At the car, Emlyn waited while his great-aunt rummaged through her bag for her keys. He was turning over what his father had said about the wall being breached and the horseman being loose. It was as if his father had been there, seen the rider jump through the gap Max had kicked in the wall. He gazed at the surrounding hills and shivered. Cloud shadows ghosted across their flanks and he wished he were up there being buffeted by the wind, with his binoculars and his bird book and the silence.



## 12

*The year has died twice since he ran beneath the moon, although he remembers little now of what happened in the forest. I have come down off the mountain and taken house temporarily behind the palisade to watch over the youngster.*

*Many times he comes to me in my dreams and I wake to cries others cannot hear. At his bedside I sing away his night fears, to sing quiet the Gods that dwell in him; sing away his memories of fear and pain and power so raw that it would break a lesser spirit.*

*His fevers spin me back into my own dreams and nightmares, back to when I was a child: the knowledge of my parents' death, the faces of the men that I saw long before they came for me, the training I endured, twenty years learning lore and song, bough and leaf. How strange in old age to still feel like an orphan, while those around you avert their eyes and make the sign from fear or reverence. Power orphans us in other ways. The boy will know this soon enough.*

*Has it not already begun? In the settlement, they stare at him. Only in the privacy of his bed or alone on the wild hillsides does he shed their eyes.*

*He has a new name now: Arturus, Arthur—Bear.*

*Not far short of the size he will be as a man, he has filled out into a stocky youth. The scrag ends of a beard have shown themselves on his face. All autumn the women and girls have laughed and whispered amongst themselves as they passed, often stopping to watch and nudge one another.*

*His uncle drives him hard; taunting him, saying there's time enough for a wife when you're a man.*

*Practice, he says, until you drop.*

*And he does. More at my bidding than his uncle's—horse and lance, sword and knife—a fine thread of trust developing between us.*

*His uncle, seeing his need for company and a skilled mentor, has brought a battle hardened warrior from the camp at Traprain Law, a bodyguard to the chieftain, Feinu — the veteran, Cei.*

*His name will change over the centuries as the legend grows: Cei, Cai, Sir Kay. It matters little. A barrel of a man with a black spade of a beard, rumour has it that he cannot be outshot with a bow. The youth pulls a bowstring until his fingers are bloody. But, by degrees, Cei is less demanding — slower to criticise, quicker to praise than the boy's uncle. He is there when I am not. Slowly the bonds of friendship grow between them.*

## 13

Lawrence McCrossan's battered Land Rover was across the street from the school entrance. Maxine stood just inside the heavy glass doors, craning her head to see where he had gone; he was not in the vehicle and she had a nasty feeling he was waiting for her.

Occasionally a student, a late-leaver, would clatter down the stairs and out into the afternoon sunshine. Most of the pupils had long gone. Half an hour previously, as the bell had sounded for dismissal a teacher had grabbed her and told her she was wanted in the Rector's office. She had thought momentarily about ignoring the request but decided that her grandmother's wrath was not worth the trouble. Lawrence McCrossan's Land Rover had not been in the street at that point.

'This won't take long, Maxine,' said the Rector when he finally looked up from his desk. 'Are you finding your feet?'

Maxine nodded.

'No problems —fitting in? Feel free to say if there's anything—'

'No.'

'You can call me Mr Lowry. Now, firstly, you were seen in town today during class time. Do you have any reasonable explanation?'

Maxine quickly disguised her hesitation by rummaging in her bag.

‘We’ve a project on that local charity that collapsed and I thought I better get a newspaper. Check the facts like, not that you’re likely to get the facts from the media but, you know, try and back up what I’m saying.’

‘I see.’

‘I seem to have left the stuff in class.’ Maxine flipped her bag closed. ‘Is that it, Mr Lowry? Can I go?’

‘Secondly, Mrs Beckinsdale drew my attention to your attire. What do you think might be amiss here?’

Maxine shrugged. The Rector moved to the window and leant against the sill. He folded his arms and stared at the carpet for a moment. ‘Nobody’s saying that you can’t be an individual, Maxine. But the school has a dress code. Black shirts and blouses are unacceptable.’

‘Is that all, Mr Lowry?’

‘A week should be enough time to organise the uniform, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, Mr Lowry.’

‘There’s always a guidance teacher...’

Guidance teacher, that was all she needed.

And now she had to deal with McCrossan.

Ducking through the glass doors, she struck out for the corner gate that fronted Scott Street. She was hardly clear of the wrought-iron arch, when the Land Rover started up. McCrossan’s transport, like his clothes, was crumpled and long suffering. As she walked down towards the bridge, she could hear the vehicle idling as he crawled along some distance behind her. She repressed the desire to look and kept walking. This was McCrossan’s little game but she knew the rules, they weren’t too different from the those on the estate where she had lived with her mother: show hesitation or fear and

you were a goner; appear too confident, too cocky, and you were a goner: it was like juggling, if you didn't think about it overly you were all right.

St. Andrew's was across from the old town, part of the newer developments—this meant anything built after seventeen hundred as far as Maxine could determine—and she had to get across the river first. The town's three bridges were old, their medieval arches still spanning the turbulent waters, with the English bridge, the one she must now cross, the narrowest. Traffic was confined to a single lane controlled by traffic lights on either side.

As she hurried across, the lights turned red and the oncoming traffic pulled onto the bridge. McCrossan's Land Rover was wedged in behind a huge tractor and trailer. She slammed her fist into her open palm. A woman stared, then dropped her eyes and scurried past on the narrow pavement. McCrossan would have his work cut out behind that sucker. She would lose him in the narrow streets around Castle Rise or down behind the river where the three-storey terraced houses had narrow passages running between and behind them.

She glanced back to where the Land Rover was still waiting at the lights. She could see McCrossan behind the mud-spattered windscreen. His fingers were drumming on the steering wheel. The last few cars were trickling over the bridge and then she heard the crunch of gears as he gunned the vehicle impatiently, tailgating the tractor as it pulled onto the bridge.

She was not about to run from McCrossan or anybody else.

Lengthening her stride up the hill towards the square, she thought about the gamekeeper. She knew there was no love lost between his family and her Gran. Some old scores still had not been settled there, but what was his interest in her? Why was he following her: and so obviously? If Emlyn had blabbed about the wall, she would make his life a misery.

Certainly, McCrossan must know that she worked up at the Castle Tea Rooms. But would he know her times? Her shifts were irregular and Mrs. Murcutt only let her know the evening, or at worst the morning, before she was needed. There was little chance that he would know she was on this afternoon. Normally she went home to change. Not today. She had a feeling McCrossan's Land Rover would be parked outside her Gran's when she got there.

She had come to the River Stairs. Crammed between the gable ends of the houses on either side, the narrow flight of stone steps climbed away from the river. If she continued on down Bank Street in the direction she had been heading, she would end up at home. On the other hand, if she turned up the steps, she would come out near Castle Green.

Maxine trusted her instincts; they rarely let her down. She turned up between the houses, taking the steps two, three at a time. On one side were the backs or sides of houses, on the other a retaining wall, with wild flowers clinging to the cracks. Above stood a row of neat houses and gardens. She slowed down. A vehicle stopped briefly at the base of the steps but the passage curved and she could no longer see the river. The vehicle continued on its way. It sounded like McCrossan's Land Rover but the steps magnified and distorted sound and it was hard to be sure.

She did not frighten easily, she knew that, but there was something about McCrossan, now that they had taken the figure, which made her uneasy. She glanced up and down the River Stairs, trying to make up her mind whether she should head back the way she had come.

Instinct had deserted her.

It was as if she was in a trap; that the Stairs itself was a trap.

It was impossible for McCrossan to be at both the top and the bottom of the steps at the same time, but she could not shake the feeling that he was. The feeling that

whichever direction she chose, he would be waiting. She closed her eyes. The voice in her head shouted. It was her mother's voice, ugly and strident and full of self-pity. She wanted to yell back. Someone was coming down the steps. Feet thudded on the cobbles. There was no way of knowing if it was McCrossan.

Taking a coin from her pocket, she flipped it in the air. It rolled to a stop by the wall. Heads she would go down, tails she would go up. She walked to where it had rolled. Heads it was.

She racketed back down the steps, leaving the coin like a good luck sign on the cobbles. She certainly was not about to go home now. Ma Murcutt would have to cope with the school uniform whether she approved or not.

At the edge of Castle Green, she hung back between the houses. A number of cars were parked in the bays alongside the grass; tourists mainly, by the look of it. Up by the castle, a driver was ushering a handful of tardy Asians back onto his coach. Faces stared at her from behind the smoked glass of the coach windows. Zoom lenses pointed in her direction. She wondered if she would end up in some photo album, like the pressed flowers that her Gran was so fond of, forever sandwiched. She swept her gaze around the green one final time and strode onto the grass, hoping that McCrossan did not go bothering her Gran.

The bell jangled as she went in. The tea-rooms were busy. She glanced around: several families, a few couples, and a table of Danish or Swedish tourists, she could never tell the difference, talking in their singsong accent.

Mrs. Murcutt butted her way through the swing doors with a tray of cakes.

'You're late. Where's your apron?'

'I didn't have time to pick it up.'

'There's one in the cupboard out back.'

A chill stole over her and she glanced around the tea-rooms again. Sitting at the same window seat as Emlyn had the day he had come in from the rain was McCrossan's elderly father. He winked and waved the menu at her. It seemed impossible that she had not seen him immediately. She walked straight to his table and glared down at him.

'What's your game, eh?'

'Whoa! Steady on. That's no way to treat a customer. You dinna want to get on the wrong side of Mrs. Murcutt.'

'What are you two up to? Following me like that.'

'Smoked salmon sandwich. Now, that would go down a treat.'

'You wriggly piece of—'

'Now why would my lad follow you, lassie?'

'Because he's a sicko? You tell me.'

'Just a wee word is all we want. The scones? Good, are they?'

'I dinna bake 'em, I just serve 'em.'

'I'll take that as a recommendation then. Forget the sandwich. I'll have the scones. What we really want is a wee word with that boyfriend of yours. Seems like a nice enough lad.' Then more to the tablecloth than to Max, he said: 'Pity about his Da though.'

A chill stole up her back.

'What you talking about?'

'Eh? Nothing —of consequence, anyway.'

'You'll be wanting tea with the scones!' Without waiting for McCrossan's answer, she marched back to the kitchen and began banging around with the cups and plates. Mrs. Murcutt bumped through the doors.

'Breakages come out of your wages. You fixing those for Mr McCrossan?'

'Aye. But I'll not be serving him.'



‘You’ll do as you’re directed!’

‘I said, I’ll no serve him. Anybody else in the restaurant, but no him.’

Mrs. Murcutt sighed and eased her tray in among the clutter on the counter.

‘All right, you do the Germans and—’

‘They’re not Germans, they’re Scandinavians.’

‘I don’t rightly care if they’re wee green men. Just serve them. I’ll do himself.’

Two more coaches drew up outside and Maxine was rushed off her feet. Suddenly, McCrossan Senior was at the till, running his eye up and down her. She looked around for Mrs Murcutt but she was in the kitchen.

‘Four-ninety,’ she said thinly.

‘Your wee friend has something—’ Ol’man McCrossan pulled out his wallet. ‘Well, let’s just say that it doesn’a belong to him. We’d like it back. No fuss. No questions. Am I making sense? No? Shame. I thought mebbe you’d know something about it?’

Ol’man McCrossan slapped his money on the counter.

‘You best speak to him then.’

‘His father’s in that private loony bin out on the Edinburgh road.’

Maxine pushed his change back at him.

‘What’s this?’ He nodded at the solitary coin. ‘I gave you a twenty.’

‘You gave me five. An’ you know it.’

‘Twenty, lassie.’

‘You lying piece of—’

‘Max!’ Mrs. Murcutt was at her side. ‘Now, what seems to be the trouble?’

‘He’s saying he gave—’

‘I was asking Mr McCrossan.’

‘A wee mistake, that’s all.’

‘Mistake my arse.’

‘Max! Enough!’

‘I gave her a twenty. She seems to think I gave her five.’

‘He handed me a fiver.’

McCrossan Senior shrugged.

‘Why don’t you ask *him* why I’m late? I had to walk around by the river because—’

She could hear what she sounded like. Mrs Murcutt was looking at her. Customers were staring.

‘That’s it,’ said the manageress. ‘I’ve had enough of your airs and graces. We’ll not be needing you tomorrow, or any other day for that matter.’

Maxine stared at her.

‘As of now —you can go.’

‘Forget it,’ said McCrossan Senior.

‘And ma wages?’ said Max

‘Ha! You can want away, you’ll no be getting any money from me!’

‘Keep your brass then,’ said Maxine, throwing her apron at the open till. She glared at McCrossan. The manageress sucked at her teeth and handed him the change from a twenty, and Maxine stormed towards the door. When she was level with the Scandinavians she stopped.

‘Where are you from?’

‘Copenhagen.’ They smiled nervously.

‘That’s in Denmark, isn’t it?’ They nodded. ‘You see,’ she shouted across the room, ‘They’re not Germans. They’re Denmarkians, you great fat bitch.’

‘No,’ said a dark-haired girl. ‘Danes.’

Maxine stared at the girl. ‘What?’

‘We’re Danes —not Denmarkians.’

‘Great! Danes.’

‘No this is a dog, yes, you are speaking of.’

Maxine shook her head and strode towards the exit. The bell jangled crazily. Last time I’ll hear that, she thought, and slammed the door.

She stood on Castle Green, a shaky feeling in her legs. A lace curtain twitched in one of the houses that fronted the green. Maxine jabbed her finger in the air and the curtain fell back into place. The ruined teeth of the keep gnawed at a brilliant autumn sky. An overwhelming feeling of humiliation flooded through her. She was about to stride down the hill when she remembered Emlyn and looked at her watch. He would be another half an hour —if he bothered to come at all.

## 14

*At Woden Law, the great hill fort to the south, is the gathering of the families: the lords of the Gododdin. There is much drinking, horseplay and wrestling down among the ruins of the old camp. The old-timers sit around the fires and tell tales of their great-grandfathers when the legions were still based in the valleys. Beneath the backslapping and drunken singing is the constant talk of the yellow-heads, the boat people that encroach each season upon the tribal lands.*

*Man and boy, they have an opinion on this. Arguments break out like spot fires in dry summer grass. Everyone has an opinion about how the boat people need to be tackled. Drunk, and nursing family grievances, the warriors fight amongst themselves. A jaw is broken and bloody teeth spat onto the turf. Swords are drawn and a man loses an arm in a scuffle, his life leaking away under the night sky.*

*The dead man is from the boy's settlement. Word spreads across the camp and suddenly Arthur is there in the firelight. I stand deep in the shadows with Ceï, watching.*

*Enough, Arthur says. You want to fight? Then draw your blades against the boat people.*

*No sawn-off stripling speaks for our clan.*

*The man says this quietly, kneeling and cleaning his bloody blade on the turf. His eye never leaves the burly youth standing at the edge of the firelight.*

*We follow none but our own, says another.*

*As sheep do, eh, replies Arthur.*

*The man roars and launches himself at Arthur, who steps casually aside, his blade skewering the man beneath the jaw. Arthur frees his blade and the body falls to the grass. Swords are drawn in number and a man leaps forward into the firelight.*

*The veteran, Cei, steps out of the darkness. The clansmen hesitate.*

*You have no quarrel with us, one of them calls across the fire.*

*No, says Cei, unless—*

*You're of our clan, man. What puts you at the child's side? He has taken one of yours.*

*And you one of his, he replies. A fair enough exchange.*

*The fire crackles and sheds sparks into the night sky: not a soul moves or speaks. Hearts mark the beating of time as the clansmen stand, swords drawn. All have heard of Arthur's reputation: two dead here, four there. One by one swords are sheathed. Muttering and complaining, the men return to their sheepskins and pots of mead.*

*Cloaked in shadow, I see what others cannot; see why men will follow him. He is a child no longer. It is a matter of time before The Isles are in his hands and as the leader of the battle-host he will prove his strength beyond our darkest dreams.*

## 15

‘The family moved here,’ said his great-aunt, ‘after the bankruptcy. A lot of your father’s things are still here.’

Emlyn nodded and followed her up the wood-panelled stairs with their threadbare carpet. At the end of the landing, she pushed open a door and motioned him into a sunny room filled with bookshelves. Model aeroplanes, their tissue stretched drum-like over balsa wood, hung from the ceiling on dusty cotton. A bright quilt lay on the bed. Books lined the shelves. A hint of mothballs stained the air and behind that another smell, hovering at the edge of Emlyn’s memory; the smell of cold and winter and creeping ice.

A great oak desk squatted before the casement windows. Afternoon sun streamed across the blotter. To one side stood an ornate silver frame. Pen lines and bright colours lay intertwined on heavy paper.

‘What does it say?’ He pointed to the calligraphy.

His great-aunt’s voice drifted across the warm sunlit room.

‘*“Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”* Latin. It’s rather beautiful, isn’t it? Calligraphy and illumination: one of your father’s passing interests.’

The frame flashed in the sunlight. The room shifted and grew smaller. He was being sucked along a tunnel. He thought of the birds he watched, how they looked down

upon the world. Voices called to one another, their timbre curiously muffled. Sick and panicky, he closed his eyes, struggling to shut them out.

‘*Who will guard the guards?*’ ‘No, that was his great-aunt speaking about—

Voices skittered through the icy air.

*And yet, I speak of them as if they are happening now, in front of my eyes. I can see them; they are like miniature worlds, bright and busy but small and faraway.*

The same voices that took his father clutched at him with cold fingers.

Snow covered the ground. The cold chewed at his bones.

Two boys ran calling to each other through the wood. A Scots pine lay where it had toppled, its dark web of roots and clay thrust towards the sky. Where it had fallen, two boys stood looking at an opening one of the boughs had punched through the snowy mound.

Emlyn knew this place. It was Sleepers Spinney.

A sky the colour of lead covered the world.

The room was filled with slowly falling snowflakes.

His great-aunt’s voice drifted across the silent fields and between the trees.

‘Never really knew what to do with the models. It seems a pity to throw them away.’

He nodded and heard his reply stop in the air in front of him, the sound deadened by the snow. So, this was what insanity felt like. He wasn’t going to struggle like his father had: the terror and the ugliness were too much. He would just give in. Let it slide over him. He wondered vaguely if his mother would visit. Maybe she would forget him like she had his father.

One of the boys slipped down into the opening and disappeared from sight. The other, ginger haired and freckled, chaffed his hands together and shifted his weight awkwardly, looking over his shoulder now and again.

The snow fell. Huge flakes floating to earth, defeating time.

The boy's head appeared and he scrambled up out of the opening cradling something in his jumper. Emlyn could see the wooden horseman as the boy held it triumphantly out to his friend. Against the brilliant stillness of the snow, the two boys seemed cut from paper.

The room breathed Emlyn back in among the sunlight and the smell of polish.

The boy in the snow was his father.

Images and feelings crowded in around him. Emlyn could sense his father at every turn, in every object. Memories peeled from his skin like an old jacket or a pair of shoes: his father teaching him to ride, holding the saddle and shouting encouragement as he let go; a kite, green and yellow against the sky; his father bent low over his cot staring down at him. He shivered, drifting back towards the whiteness and the silence.

It was easier just to join him.

No more struggle.

It was easy.

Emlyn jumped. The report of a shotgun cracked the bitter air. The boy turned, then ran off across the snow-covered field, his ginger-haired friend calling out to wait as he followed with a crabbing run.

Another, older boy broke from the trees and in a few strides had tackled the ginger-haired lad and brought him down. A man hopped over the wall and walked towards the figures struggling in the snow. A second shot barked out. Rooks flapped away, black echoes amongst the trees. The man had the ginger-haired boy by the collar and was dragging him back towards the spinney. Away across the fields at the edge of the woods stood a small figure. His father's face was pale and drawn as he turned in among the trees.

He was staring into the face of an elderly woman. She was bent over him. Her face seemed vaguely familiar.



‘I thought for a moment you were going to faint.’

He tried to stand up but she pushed him back down into the leather swivel chair. He stared at the huge oak desk and remembered where he was.

‘Feeling a little better now?’

Emlyn nodded and stood. Something crunched under his feet. He looked down. The discoloured silver frame lay at his feet, its glass broken, its calligraphy askew.

‘You picked it up,’ said his great-aunt. ‘Then you went all vague and it slipped out of your grasp.’

He stared down at his father’s calligraphy. “*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*” It meant something but he could not remember what. Who was his father? He realised he had never really known him. His father’s past, his childhood, and the man he had become, were simply stories handed to him by his mother; somebody else’s memories.

How little he remembered —actually remembered.

His father was lost to him.

A small boy running away in the snow; footprints staring back at an empty sky.

There was an ache in his chest and his throat felt thick.

His great-aunt stooped slowly, picked up the frame and ushered him onto the landing. The house was old fashioned, full of antiques and wall hangings, but there was a warmth about the place that seemed to come from his great-aunt.

‘Why has it been left that way?’

‘Your father’s room? My brother, your grandfather, was something of a martinet.’

‘Sounds like something in the army.’ He followed her downstairs.

‘Martinet?’

Emlyn nodded as she ushered him into a room at the front of the house.

‘You’re surprisingly close,’ she continued, gathering her skirt around her knees and sitting in a high-backed armchair. ‘It means a rigid disciplinarian. Your father was

allowed no childhood as such, and I for one will call it what it was —cruel. He was an only child. Cruelty for cruelty's sake.'

Emlyn sat on the edge of his chair. The silver frame was on the low table between them. She smiled at him. He smiled back. Suddenly he was exhausted.

'What about his mother?'

'She was a fragile woman. Highly strung. The house was run like a regimental headquarters. My brother had been a colonel in the Black Watch, you know.'

'I've heard of them,' said Emlyn.

'A bonnie regiment: bonnie fighters. But your father was a dreamer. His mind was on Arthur and Excalibur and the Grail. I sometimes feel more than a little responsible for the path laid out for him. I'm afraid I encouraged him in things Arthurian. It's my area of expertise. He used to scour the countryside, when he was allowed out, that is. Always coming home with something. Always a tale woven around it: "Relics," he'd say.'

'And he did the calligraphy?'

'He was very artistic. Painting, that was the go.'

'I suppose being an architect. It's a bit like painting. Drawing at least.'

'My brother had everything laid out for him. A commission in the Black watch. "Officer material," he'd say. Cannon fodder more like.'

'But he was—' Emlyn trailed off, uncertain. 'Eccentric.'

'So would you be, barricaded up in that house—not here, this was over at Huntleighbank Hall, great rambling, ramshackle warren of a place—when he should have been off across the fields. He hardly ever went out. His favourite hiding place was up in the attic: well, more a sort of loft, really. Needed a ladder to get up there. My brother couldn't reach him up there. No doubt it's all been nailed shut now.'

'Was he sick?' said Emlyn.

‘Your father had, still has the constitution of an ox. No, your father wasn’t sickly— but—if he had a cough, say, then your grandfather expected an essay on the common cold. It was no childhood for a boy. When Theodora, his mother, died —when she — when the debtors closed in, my brother tried to hold the place together —started selling things off, bit by bit. Eventually there was nothing left to sell. He and your father were rattling around in that place like dried peas in a bath. My brother hardly ever went out. Rory, your father, was expected to tow the line. Then, of course, they moved in here with me.’

‘Didn’t he have any friends?’

‘The planes in his room, he didn’t make them. A friend built them for him.’

‘A boy with ginger hair and a limp?’ Emlyn said without thinking.

His great-aunt stared at him.

‘You couldn’t possibly know what William looked like?’

‘Photo —probably,’ he said, realising his gaffe.

‘A limp’s a little hard to detect from a photo. I doubt there were more than one or two photos ever taken of your father as a child. My brother never approved of cameras.’

‘I should get this fixed,’ said Emlyn reaching for the frame.

‘Don’t worry about the frame. Keep it. It’s yours by rights. Look, I’ve an appointment in Yeaveburgh shortly. Can I give you a lift?’

## 16

*For many years Arthur has no need of me and I am left to my forest wanderings. But I cannot forget that his childhood has been snatched from him; that it is me who has stolen it. The same thing happened to me as a child. The gifts of strength and of sight have their price; the Druids are harsh teachers—the Gods even harsher.*

*Long winters fade into spring. Each summer brings fresh waves of boats. The winter storms are no longer a barrier. The painted warriors from the north come too, raiding our settlements, taking cattle and lives. We are assailed on two fronts. Up from the sea and down from the hills they sweep, burning and looting.*

*This winter, and the one that follows, are hard. Birds freeze at their night roosts, wolves raid the bones of the dead, and the herdsmen can drive their kine across the frozen river. Signs fill the sky. The old people say it is the Oak-god refusing to give up his hold to the Holly.*

*Arthur—no longer a youth but a man in his middle years—calls me down to his stronghold on Ynys Avallach, the Isle of Apples. I am woken before dawn, a rough hand shaking my shoulder. It is Cei, Arthur's man. He leads me down from the hall to the settlement smithy.*

*Cei pulls the leather curtain aside and I duck into the warmth. I would like to stand there in the darkness, half-asleep, watching the bellows turn the charcoal white, listening to the ring of the hammer, but Arthur pulls the smith outside before he has finished annealing the axe-head he is working on.*

*Make me a blade, he says, that will split open the belly of the sky.*

*The first pale fingers of dawn settle on the hills as I watch the smith search for the right words.*

*That is hardly possible, my Lord, says the smith at length.*

*You work metal, man, do you not?*

*The smith looks to me for guidance and finding none, nods.*

*Then make me a blade, says Arthur.*

## 17

The figure was like an itch; he needed to look at it again. He pulled a chair across underneath where the ceiling began to slope towards the window and stood on it. Above his head was a small manhole. He stretched, slid the cover to one side and reached into the darkness under the roof. His fingers found the butterscotch tin.

Emlyn sat on his bed. He pulled at the lid. He registered the tape around the rim. He could not remember taping the lid shut. He peeled it away and lifted the lid. The figure lay on its side amid the cottonwool. Some flat river stones had been sandwiched in around the edge. He pulled one out and turned it over. Scrawled in charcoal, a black mark lay hidden on the underside. He pulled the others free. Each had a different sign. Below his window something heavy crunched on the gravel. The hair on his neck rose. He could not remember putting the stones in the tin. He pushed the lid closed and looked at his watch: half-an-hour and he would have to head off to meet Max. He shoved the tin up in the roof space and pulled the cover closed.

He didn't want to think about how the stones had got there, about the markings; he didn't want to think about any of it anymore. He wanted to be off by the river with his camera, his back propped against a tree, waiting— waiting— anywhere but in his bedroom.

He stared at the silver frame propped up on the chest-of-drawers. He would have to buy some glass to replace the broken piece. He reached over and picked the frame up. The back was coming loose too. If he left now he might have time to pop into the hardware shop. He fiddled with it, trying to get it to sit neatly but only succeeded in loosening it further. A folded piece of paper dropped from where it had been sandwiched between the calligraphy and the backing, glided across the floor and disappeared under his bed. He reached down and retrieved it.

Somewhere a cold wind rattled snow-laden branches. He shook his head, struggling to pull himself back into the room. He knew instinctively that what he held in his hand had something to do with the madness that had overcome him in his father's old study. He turned the paper slowly, reluctant to open it.

A jagged edge showed where it had been torn from an exercise book of some sort. The paper was ruled and had yellowed. Carefully he unfolded the sheet. A child's writing ran at an increasing angle, the tiny cramped hand filling the page.

*Willie says I should never have dragged him up there in the first place. He's a scaredy-cat and he never stops following me around and that's only because he hasn't got many friends what with his leg and everything. They never let him play football. Then they don't let me play either.*

*You should be allowed to keep treasure because when it's buried like that it doesn't belong to anyone. That's not what Ol'man McCrossan said though, him with his scummy kid trailing around after him in the snow. Worst winter in living memory they were saying on the radio.*

Emlyn looked up. McCrossan? Was this the same McCrossan? Perhaps it was the gamekeeper's father. Yes, the elder McCrossan. That must be it.

*McCrossan said it belonged to the land, whatever that means. I know I had something in my hand when I came up out of the hole. I can still feel it sort of but as if I dreamt everything. He said he was going to tell our parents which was enough for Willie what with his dad an all and he started shouting and McCrossan shouted back and grabbed whatever I had in my hand and put it in his pocket. It goes back he said. Then he came over all funny, looking at us with his beady eyes, and pushed his lad out of the way behind him. You know this place is haunted. He was trying to scare us. Then he said something that turned me cold. He was talking to me not Willie, you could see that. You've meddled where you shouldn't have and you've got something on your back now. It's following you. You're going to journey in the dark and lose your way and there won't be no coming back for you boy. No way back from that place but one, and that's if someone connected dances with the sickle-man. Ain't got to dance the once only though, they got to dance three times.*

*I didn't understand anything of what he was talking about and I'm pretty hot on riddles. That's why I'm writing it down, so I don't forget what he said.*

*Then he said some words I didn't understand and he started singing like he was in church or something, with a low voice, grumbling sort of. Willie started to cry then. He kept saying dinna tell my dad dinna tell my dad. But McCrossan didn't take any notice, he just kept singing and staring at us like we were from Mars or something and that's when it went funny and I couldn't*



*remember what I'd had in my hand or why I was up there in the first place, though I knew it was because we had seen the big tree go over and wanted to take a look. I remembered that. I remembered McCrossan's words about the dark and being lost but everything about the spinney kind of faded to white like the snow around us. Willie took off and McCrossan let fly with his shotgun. I legged it as well. I was over the wall and past Willie in a flash. I think he'd pissed himself but it was hard to tell, he'd fallen over in the snow already. The McCrossan lad caught him and dragged him back to the spinney. Willie, he said he ain't going back up there. He said they shoved him down inside that hole and was going to leave him there. I said he was exaggerating as usual and he gobbed at me. He said I'd left him for dead. He hasn't talked to me since. None of the other kids go up there, it's like the place doesn't exist, and I'm too scared to go on my own.*

The image of the two boys running away from the spinney across the snow-covered fields crowded at the edge of his memory. He wanted to run after them; question them.

He would talk to Max about what he had found, show her the note, the last remaining trace of the man he had known once. Then he remembered that he had never told Max the truth about his father. Shoving the page in his pocket, he rattled into the hall, grabbed his greatcoat and stopped.

Bugger! You having a problem with your memory or something?

His bike was out in the shed with a puncture.

You'll never make it up to the castle in time. And Max is definitely not the waiting kind. Sweet sister, you're my only chance.

He ducked into the study pulling on his coat. Bridget looked up from the keyboard and grinned.

‘I’m going to burn that. When you eventually remove it, that is.’

‘Over my dead body.’

‘Specific request, is that? To be buried in an army surplus greatcoat?’

‘Yep.’ He smiled to himself. His sister was in one of her rare lighter moods. ‘Any chance of a lift up town?’

‘This report’s got to be couriered by five.’

‘It’s a fifteen minute walk.’

‘I mean, you should’ve fixed that puncture, like I told you.’

‘Come on, Bridget.’

‘The dishes —do them and I’ll run you up. It’s going to take me ten minutes to finish this off anyway.’

Digger stood on Emlyn’s lap, his paws on the window, eyeing the pedestrians as the car swung up Castle Wynd.

Bridget glanced across at her brother. ‘You’ve got tomorrow and Friday off, haven’t you? For in-service days?’

‘Sure have.’

‘Turning out to be a pretty easy week school-wise?’ He nodded and Bridget continued. ‘Tomorrow afternoon then, when it’s calmed down a bit, why don’t you bring your girlfriend down to the dig? I’ll show her around.’

‘She’s not my girlfriend.’

‘Your friend then.’

‘So you can report back?’

‘Pardon?’

‘To Mum. Keep her up to speed.’

‘Come on Em, it’s not like that. Your *friend* might enjoy it, you never know.’

‘*You* might enjoy it.’

‘A tad tetchy today, aren’t we?’

‘Yeah, with Mum. —Is that okay?’

‘More likely Dad.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Well, he’s the one who left you in the lurch.’

‘Now you’re beginning to sound like that shrink Mum forced me to see.’

They drove on in silence for a while. A delivery truck swung out and Bridget leant on the horn. People stared. As the car turned into the square, Emlyn sensed a looming question.

‘Taken that figure back, have you?’

‘Yep.’

‘Thought I’d forgotten about it?’

‘Nope.’

‘Where do you need to be dropped?’

‘Castle Green.’

‘You’re sure it’s gone back.’

‘Yep.’

‘Bring your friend to the dig. I won’t mention anything.’

‘About the horseman or my new *friend*? And is that to Mum or Max? *I mean*, being devious, is that supposed to be a natural sisterly trait? Don’t answer that, I really don’t want to know!’

They were coming up into the high part of the town.

‘I don’t appreciate you calling me devious. God, you are such an ungrateful little – I

mean, some people might actually see it as being protective.'

'I don't need protecting.'

'It would be irresponsible of me not to have—'

'Don't give me that.' He pushed his voice an octave higher, mimicking his sister.

'Bring your friend down to the dig? Show her around?' His anger came in a rush. 'You can drop me here!'

Bridget glanced in the mirror and slowed down.

'I'm only trying to talk to you.'

'No! Dad used to talk to me. Both you and Mum—that is when she's around—you just talk over me!'

He scooped up the terrier and opened the car door.

'For God's sake, Emlyn! The car's still moving!'

Bridget pulled over and reached across to haul the door closed. Someone on the pavement swore. She pulled out from the kerb, watching him weave between a group of tourists and disappear into one of the many passages.

Emlyn leant out over the battlements and looked down on Castle Green.

'I was happy down on the bench,' he said.

Maxine shrugged. She had wanted to get away from the tea rooms and was finding it hard to mention McCrossan's father, fearful that when she did it would all come out in a fiery rush.

'My sister asked if you wanted to come down to the dig,' said Emlyn, feeling for neutral ground. 'Tomorrow afternoon: latish.'

'Try something different every week, that's ma motto.'

'You're actually considering coming?'

'You'll be there, so what's the problem?'

‘You’re not interested in that sort of stuff.’

‘How do you know what I’m interested in? You’ve known me what —all of five minutes?’

They leant on the wall and gazed out over the town without speaking. It was Maxine’s turn to bridge the silence.

‘I was thinking of having it put on ma coat of arms, like.’

‘What —are you talking about?’

‘Ma motto, “Try something different every week.” It’d look good in Greek or Latin or whatever. Anyway, I’ll come. Even if it’s just to annoy this sister of yours.’

‘Half-sister. And I’ve a feeling I’m going to have to apologise to her. God, she’s —I just wish sometimes—’

‘Be careful, man! Especially, what you wish for. I’ve wished —for things —’ She walked slowly away from him; a length of parapet wall separated them. ‘Bad things.’

‘It can’t be that bad a wish.’

‘Ach.’ Maxine leant on the wall. ‘Her down there for a start.’ She jerked her head in the direction of the teashop.

‘She sacked you,’ said Emlyn. ‘People wish for things all the time, don’t they? Mostly it’s harmless, that half-hearted cross-your-fingers-and-hope-to-win-the-lottery kinda stuff: money, cars, jobs —material stuff.’

‘We’re just material stuff, an’ all.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Us. Our bodies. Ma Gran, she goes a bit religious now and again, she says we’re clay. Dirt. Then we die. —That’s what I wished.’

‘What? That you’d die?’

‘People like her,’ she nodded towards the teashop, ‘They dinna keel over at fifty. They live to a hundred-and-seven and terrorise the nursing home they’re shoved in by their bratty bairns. But that’s not what I’m talking about.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘I wished someone else—’

‘Someone dead?’ said Emlyn.

Maxine nodded.

‘I have them all the time,’ he continued. ‘Fantasies, you know, about killing people. Mostly Terry Murcutt, and that ginger kid, what’s his name?’

‘Murray Payne.’ Maxine laughed and leant out over the parapet. ‘Community service, that’d be.’

Emlyn watched her. There was something about the way she was draped over the wall, a particular combination of light and angles, of soft lines and unyielding stonework that would have made a fine shot. He had seen the way the other lads at school looked at her and the town youths; she was different, she stood out and heads turned wherever she went.

Below them, the elder McCrossan emerged from the teashop, rolled a cigarette and sauntered down the hill.

‘Now what’s he up to?’ said Emlyn.

‘Causing trouble.’ Her face was a confused mix of emotions. ‘He’s the one as got me sacked.’

She started down the steps. Emlyn lifted the terrier from the wall and followed. Maxine explained the afternoon’s events. How the gamekeeper had followed her from the school and she had lost him in the town and then the appearance of his father at her work.

‘He lied so that you’d get into trouble?’ said Emlyn.

Maxine nodded. ‘They know,’ she said, ‘about the horseman. Ol’man McCrossan accused you of stealing. Remember I said I’d seen the son this morning? I’d gone to get the paper for Gran and he comes trawling along in his Land Rover. “Tell that friend of yours, he doesn’t know what he’s meddling with!” is what he said. In a sense he’s right, like. We have stolen it. Mebbe it’s best if we put it back. That’s why I baled you up in the square this morning.’

They wandered down to Maxine’s house. The front door stood ajar as usual.

‘Come out the back. I’ve something to show you.’

As they entered the dim hallway Mrs Fraser appeared at the head of the stairs.

‘Hello, young man. I hope you’ve not forgotten what I asked you. Maxine?’

‘Shit.’

‘Language! Just tidy a wee corner of the bench. It’s just that I’ve some stuff that I want to store.’

‘I’m on it, Gran.’

Maxine motioned Emlyn to follow her through the house. They came out into a tiny walled yard. A narrow passage ran alongside a stone shed to the back lane. He followed her down the passage and she opened a side door into the shed, fumbled in the gloom and pulled on a cord. Two dusty bulbs cast a dim light over the floor.

‘Can you get it to run?’ Emlyn said, motioning at the parts strewn across the oil-stained bricks.

‘Mebbe. Belonged to ma grandpa. You’ve your scarf. I’ve this.’ She started to shift the clutter tools, rags and boxes. ‘Besides, shit hits the fan, that’s ma ticket outta here.’

‘Didn’t know you had a licence.’

‘Basic rule of shit and fans —by that time, the paperwork’s irrelevant.’

‘It’s practically a museum piece: how do you know which bit goes where?’

‘There was a lad, back in Newcastle, fancied me. His idea of romance was stripping his bike. I must have a flair for it, ’cause I picked it up right speedy, like. Besides, I’ve ma bit of local expertise on tap. So, Dobbin, I take it you stashed him somewhere safe?’

The penny dropped.

‘Yeah, he’s getting high on butterscotch fumes. You going to come tomorrow?’

‘Yeah. Look, I’d better sort this junk out for ma gran. Be able to find your way out?’

‘No worries,’ said Emlyn, heading for the kitchen door. ‘I’ll see you at the dig tomorrow.’

Emlyn went inside and Mrs Fraser wandered into the hall carrying an empty vase.

‘Just the person I wanted to see. That granddaughter of mine still in the shed?’

Emlyn nodded.

‘It’s her birthday Friday. I’m taking her for a meal down The Fox, although she doesn’t know yet. I was wondering if you might come along— It’s on me, you dinna have to pay anything. Just turn up. I’ll no say anything. Be a bit more of a surprise.’

‘Okay,’ said Emlyn. ‘What time?’

‘Sevenish.’

‘What about presents?’

‘I’ll let you be the judge of that.’



## 18

*Arthur's reputation for impatience has grown steadily. His guard, the camp followers, anticipate his moves as best they can, but for the common people of Ynys Avallach it is best to hope his eye does not settle on you or single you out for a task that is beyond your skill.*

*The smith, a recent convert to the new religion, cannot so easily be swayed. And he does not like the notion of a magical blade. His answer is couched carefully, and none of us, not even I, can see the darkness in his words.*

*My blades are keen and well sought after, yes, but what you ask is beyond my skill. You will need iron blessed by—he faltered here, caught between his new belief and what he knew his Lord wanted to hear—blessed by the gods, and where that is to be found I do not know.*

*The smith shrugs, dips his head in respect and ducks back into the heat of the forge. Arthur scowls, spits into the dirt, and walks away. Cei glances at me and follows.*

## 19

‘Look, I’m sorry I was late, okay?’ said Emlyn. They were outside the Crown. ‘My bike’s got a slow puncture. Took ages to fix it.’

Maxine folded her arms and watched the tail-lights of Bridget’s car disappear around the corner, Emlyn’s bike strapped to the roof-rack. She turned to face Emlyn.

‘And you’re talking bollocks, with this stuff about keeping the figure.’

‘You didn’t have to start on about that down at the dig. Bridget probably heard us. She was only in the site office.’

‘I was in a difficult spot. You came late —remember? Your sister was grilling me about whether I had any relatives who were into antiques.’

‘Look, I’m sorry, okay. Don’t get all cranky on me. I’d been meaning to tell you.’

Maxine glowered at him.

‘She found it in my coat. Hey, I was in a tight spot. Antiquities, that’s her field. I made up a story about an antique dealer that you knew.’

‘I dinna know any antique dealers. And I’ve a shoplifting record as long as your arm. Did you not think?’

‘I told you she found it.’

‘Yeah, and I found it up at the spinney, right! That means I’ve got a say in what happens to it. And I say it should go back in that hole just like ma Gran said.’

‘The only reason you were down there in the first place was me, remember? The turf, all that stuff about nothing being up there.’

‘Jesus, this is going bloody nowhere. Fast.’

‘Because someone,’ said Emlyn, ‘won’t be reasonable.’

‘Play any of them middle-class games with me an’ I’ll clout youse.’

‘It’s my neck the noose is around. You’ve got nothing to lose.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Still arguing, you two,’ said Bridget. ‘I’d have thought you’d be inside by now?’

Maxine and Emlyn glanced at each other and followed Bridget into the pub. The three of them worked their way through the smoke and noise towards a quieter area alongside a low stage; scuffed and splintered, ringed and stained with bottle marks and spilt beer, it jutted belligerently into the crowded bar. A young woman climbed on it, found herself isolated above the conversation, and stepped back down among her friends.

‘What do you fancy?’ said Bridget.

‘Scotch: no ice,’ said Max.

Bridget gaped at her.

‘Joking —tomato juice’ll be fine.’

Maxine and Emlyn slipped quickly in behind the empty table that stood wedged between the performance area and a huge ingle-nook fireplace.

Bridget squeezed up to the table, three glasses pinched between her fingers. She slid them onto the table and pulled her chair in opposite Maxine, her back to the stage.

‘Didn’t know if you wanted Worcestershire Sauce?’

‘Lashings of it —s’lovely.’

‘Well, it’s in, anyway.’

‘Spicy’s how I like it,’ said Maxine, winking at Emlyn.

Bridget glanced between the two of them and took a sip of her drink. ‘So, what did you think of the dig?’

‘Apart from himself being late, like.’ Maxine gave Emlyn a look over the rim of her glass. ‘Yeah —interesting. Especially them skulls you found. That was creepy. So, how did the Druids select their victims? Emlyn came barging up, like, and you never said.’

‘Short answer, we don’t know.’ Bridget stared into her drink for a moment. ‘They might have been either volunteers, although that’s probably the wrong word, selected from their own people, or they might have been slaves or captive warriors, what I suppose we call prisoners-of-war. Either way they ended up dead. Not a lot is known about the Druids.’

‘They certainly didn’t call themselves that,’ said Emlyn.

‘But they believed that lopping off these heads and burying the skulls would frighten their enemies?’ said Max.

‘They didn’t bury them. Not usually, as far as we can tell. It’s thought that they hung them from the fortifications or from poles. Their aim was probably as much in their shock value to attacking troops as the belief, probably on both sides, in the spirits somehow providing a kind of an unseen barrier or a ghost army.’

‘You have to try and put yourself back in their mind-set. The world was alive with their gods. Water was sacred to them: pools, streams, lochs.’ She reached in her bag and extracted a large book. Opening it she passed it across to Maxine. ‘Probably one of, if not the most famous example of what I’m talking about.’

Several large colour plates presented themselves. Maxine read the captions cautiously. ‘Lindow Man. Looks like he’s made of poor quality leather.’

‘So would you if you’d lain in a Cheshire bog for two thousand years.’

Studying the plates, Maxine said, ‘What happened to him?’

‘You going to give us a look or what?’ said Emlyn, reaching across.

‘Or what,’ said Maxine, moving the book out of reach.

‘A sacrifice. The victims were strangled, stabbed, clubbed, had their throats cut, sometimes they were drowned. The important ingredient was the number three. Dying three times.’

‘Like Merlin,’ said Emlyn. ‘The librarian was going on about it. He was stoned, skewered on a stake and drowned.’

‘Merlin’s a legend, a figment of an over-fertile imagination’ said Bridget. ‘That bloke was alive and breathing right up until the moment they led him down to the water’s edge.’

Maxine passed the book across to Emlyn. His eye wandered over the pictures and across to the text on the opposite page. Several phrases “young adult male”, “ruling elite”, “triple death” jumped out at him. He looked at Bridget.

‘The triple death,’ he said. ‘What does it mean?’

‘But you can’t die three times,’ said Maxine. ‘It’s not possible.’

‘Nowadays the meaning is symbolic. At the time —well, it’s impossible to put our heads back in that space. We really can’t do it. The hills and forests and streams were peopled with unseen forces that had to be placated at the appropriate times.’ Bridget turned to Emlyn. ‘By the way, speaking of placatory forces, Mum rang wanting to speak with you. She said, and I quote, “Quit horsing around and answer your phone.”’

Bridget stood. ‘Anyone for another? I’m buying.’

Bridget took their orders and sidled up to the bar. The crowd thinned: a trio of musicians were lugging their gear towards the stage. A channel cleared between the bodies as the band came and went with various items of equipment. Emlyn nudged Max.

‘How long’s he been sitting there?’

Lawrence McCrossan was ensconced in a shadowy corner, watching them.

‘It’s pretty crowded in here tonight,’ said Maxine. ‘He could’ve been there since we came in. What did Bridget mean about *horsing* around?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ said Emlyn. ‘I’m going to have a look around, I want to see if we can slip out another way without ending up on the square. I don’t want him baling us up while Bridget’s around.’

‘I’ll come with you.’

‘And I need to use the toilet?’

‘Great,’ said Max. ‘Leave me all alone with McCrossan and the archaeology police then, why don’t you.’

The toilets were out in the hotel proper. Another world, thought Emlyn, all polished oak, brass and red carpet. As the bar door sucked shut behind him, he looked around. He could see the women’s but where the hell were the men’s? Must be upstairs, he thought. Need to have a look around anyway. He took the stairs at a run.

On the landing one of a pair of heavy double doors stood ajar and he went in. The room was large and set out with chairs and folding tables, each with a chessboard. A door marked ‘Emergency Exit’ stood at the far end of the room. He walked across and opened it. A fire escape ran down into the darkened alley.

He started back between the tables. A low coffee table caught his eye. Situated by the fireplace and flanked by a pair of huge armchairs, the table held a board on which sat a strange looking chess set. Emlyn wandered over. The figures were squat, bullet shaped almost, and he was reminded in some strange way of the wooden horseman.

‘Sort of chess on steroids,’ he said under his breath.

‘Can I help you?’

Emlyn turned around. A thin balding man in a regimental blazer was smiling at him and unlocking a cupboard.

‘You’re a bit early I’m afraid. We don’t start for another hour.’ The man pulled half-a-dozen largish tins from the cupboard and balancing them squeezed between the tables. ‘Admiring the Lewis Chessmen I see. Not the real ones unfortunately. Copies.’

One of the tins slipped from his grasp and crashed to the carpet where it rolled against the wall and spilt its contents along the skirting.

‘Whoops! Butterfingers.’ The man piled the tins on a table and went to retrieve the chessmen. ‘Would you care to wait?’

‘No, it’s okay. I’d better head off. Whereabouts are the toilets?’

‘Skirts or trousers, old chap?’

Extraterrestrials, you old tosser. ‘Gents.’

‘Back of the Saloon Bar.’

Emlyn ducked out onto the landing and charged down the stairs. He could forget the bog: Max would be going spare.

Bridget reached for her drink. A dull ringing came from her bag. She rummaged around, unzipping several compartments before she found her phone.

‘What’s that? Sorry, it’s a bit loud.’ She paused, listening, her free hand pressed to her ear. She looked intently at Max. ‘Look, it’s too noisy and you keep dropping out. Give me five minutes. I’ll call you back.’

Bridget stood up.

‘Something up?’ said Max.

‘I’ll have to walk down the hill. Do us a favour and keep an eye on my bag.’

As the doors swung shut behind Bridget, Maxine spotted Emlyn as he sidled through the crowd.

‘Where’s Bridget?’ he said, indicating the empty seat.

‘Bad reception. She’s gone outside.’

‘What’s McCrossan been up to?’

‘Nowt, ’cept eyeballing our table.’

The gamekeeper continued to stare at them for a few moments longer, then sinking his pint, he made for the door.

‘He’s got something planned,’ said Emlyn. ‘I can sense it.’

Down the hill, on the opposite side of the square, Bridget stood under a street light.

‘You keep telling me this, Geoff, but I’m finding it hard to credit.’

‘Look, I can’t be specific. Sending it off for testing is out of the question.

Everything’s logged, recorded. Look, like I said before you hung up, it could be any age —although I’ll grant it looks like it’s old.’

‘Damned right it looks —looked old. God, what am I telling you for, you know all this.’

‘You’re telling me because you miss me and you can’t wait to get back to Edinburgh and—’

‘Geoff, get a life, eh. I mean, is that all you think about?’

‘Sorry.’

‘I was thinking more maybe early medieval.’

‘Hey, there’s probably an explanation,’ said Geoff.

‘What —explanation?’ Bridget started back up the hill.

‘Oh, one more thing. This’ll really get you going. The sample showed traces of sap.’

‘Resin?’ said Bridget.

‘No. Tree sap. Fresh tree sap. And no jokes, okay.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘Given what you’ve deigned to tell me, yes. Maybe the sample was contaminated?’



‘Rubbish,’ said Bridget. She had reached the corner and turned up towards the square. ‘The point is what was my little brother doing with—’

‘Calm down. You never said what the sample was from anyway.’

‘Didn’t I? God, the little sod’s going to wish he was—’

‘Hey —Bridget.’

‘What?’ She paused, staring mindlessly into a shop window.

‘Give him a chance. He’s an okay kid. I’m sure there’s an explanation.’

‘Oh, there’ll be an explanation all right.’

‘There, in the newsagent’s doorway,’ said Max.

‘Brilliant,’ said Emlyn. ‘What do we do now?’

‘Mebbe he thinks we’ve the figure on us? You haven’t got it, have you?’

‘It’s back home —smelling of butterscotch.’

‘Keep it down,’ said Max. ‘He might be able to hear us. I dinna want to be baled up by him at the moment. Him and his father are starting to give me the willies.’

‘Emlyn!’ Bridget came striding around the corner. Her voice had an edge that carried across the square. ‘You’ve got some explaining to do. Your little toy soldier, it seems that all isn’t quite—’ She suddenly seemed to register Maxine’s presence. ‘Where’s my bag? You’ve bloody left it in the pub haven’t you, you little—’ Bridget cannoned through the doorway.

‘He’s on to us now, for sure,’ said Max.

As McCrossan stepped from the doorway, three cars filled with hooting teenagers turned into the square. The keeper paused at the kerb to let them pass. One of the cars stopped and somebody spoke to him through an open window.

‘You go down by the River Stairs,’ said Max. ‘I’ll takc off up Castle Wynd. Fifty-fifty then, isn’t it?’

McCrossan stepped out from behind the car and started across the square.

Maxine took off towards the Wynd.

Emlyn turned out of the square and headed down the hill with McCrossan following. Damn! It looked like he was it. The River Stairs showed as a dark maw halfway down McIntyre Street. He increased his pace until he reached the steps and turned down them, taking them two at a time. Further down, the streetlights were sparse and poorly spaced. Emlyn halted in the shadows beyond one of the lights. McCrossan's voice echoed along the passage: 'I know you're down there.'

Bridget's bag was not where she had left it. She pushed through the press of bodies to the bar.

'Has a bag been handed in? Brief-casey, shoulder bag kind of thing. Black leather.'

The barman glanced in her direction and motioned for her to wait as he slowly filled several glasses. Her whole life was in that bag. Really, if it had been pinched, then —she was going to disembowel him.

'So,' said the barman, 'what sort of bag was it exactly?'

Bridget sighed and had just launched into a description when the band cranked out the first five chords of their opening number.

The barman pulled the bag from under the bar and held it just out of her reach.

'That's it,' yelled Bridget.

'Any I.D?'

She was about to say something sarcastic about it being all in the bag but she smiled and said he would find a photograph of her inside her purse.

'Nice likeness,' he shouted.

'Can I have my bag?'

He pushed it across the counter but did not let go of it.

‘You doing anything later?’

‘Yeah, torturing my little brother. Why, you want to help?’

The barman raised an eyebrow and let go of the bag, then shrugged and resumed serving.

‘You think I’m weird, pal,’ mumbled Bridget as she pushed her way to the exit, ‘you should meet the rest of the family.’

‘We want it back,’ said McCrossan.

Emlyn could see the keeper silhouetted at the head of the River Stairs. He was speaking quietly, conversationally, but due to some peculiar acoustic anomaly with the steps it sounded as if he was standing next to Emlyn. The keeper drew a packet of tobacco from his pocket, began rolling a cigarette. ‘Bad habit. Gives you cancer.’

Emlyn stood perfectly still under the shadow of the wall. He was already wishing that he had found the pub toilet.

‘Cat got your tongue, laddie?’

The protecting darkness vanished as a light spilled from the window of the house opposite.

‘Da-daahhnn!’ said McCrossan. ‘You see, we’ve friends everywhere. So, what’s it to be, laddie, because, you see, I’ve absolutely no intention of chasing you —not down there anyway. Hand it over and we’ll forget the whole episode. What d’you say?’

Emlyn stood in the light and said nothing.

‘Is it money you’re wanting?’

Again Emlyn remained silent.

‘Suit yourself. But remember, that’s no toy soldier you’re playing with. The horsemen submit to no-one, laddie. Just remember that, eh, when you’re up amongst those peat bogs you’re so fond of.’

The gamekeeper turned and disappeared towards the square.

Emlyn was breathing hard by the time he reached Maxine's street and poked his head around the corner. There were other cars parked in the street, but no Land Rover. Mrs Fraser's place was in darkness. He hung about, waiting, his ear cocked for the sound of an engine, unsure whether Max had got there and was already inside with the lights off, or whether she was wandering around trying to dodge McCrossan. After twenty minutes he gave up and jogged home.

## 20

*Iron blessed by the gods.*

*It is my hope that Arthur will forget the smith's words. The notion of such a sword haunts my night journeys and I wake pale and sweating.*

*A hunting expedition takes him down river with his lads. A morning's ride from the Isle of Apples is a sacred pool, a marshy stretch of water cut off from the main river and surrounded by reeds, where people bring their votive offerings and cast them away to appease the water spirits, the gods of pool and stream, river and loch.*

*Close by stands a bothy; a ramshackle hovel of turf and stone. A couple lived there—father and daughter—but the father is dead now, drowned in a spring spate two seasons back. The girl scrapes a living from the dirt and sells her osier baskets at the settlements.*

*But rumour cannot abide a lone woman. Some say that like her mother before her she turns a coin from fishing offerings from the pool and selling them. Others are nearer the mark, saying that she offers healing to those who can pay. A few unwise or spiteful tongues say that she offers herself. Few are rash enough to make such claim to the woman's face. Her magic is feared. She is, people say, the guardian of the pool—a living goddess. Others that she has faerie blood.*

*For Arthur—dismounted and pulling his spear from the skewered boar kicking its life out beside the pool—the dark cloud-reflected water has a greater significance. He rides back to Ynys Avallach with the seed already sprouting in his mind.*

## 21

‘Where the hell did you disappear to last night?’

‘Max’s.’ Emlyn stood with his hands in his pockets while his sister moved along the fence, watering the flowerbeds.

‘I didn’t even hear you come in. I thought you were out all night. I’m getting that lock taken off your door next week.’

‘What is it with you and my privacy? Get some cameras installed while you’re at it, why don’t you?’

‘There’s talk —about her being light fingered.’

‘You and Mum are always going on about your convict heritage like it was something to be proud of.’

‘That’s hardly going to placate Mum, is it? She suggested —that perhaps you need to see somebody again?’

They both knew exactly what ‘somebody’ meant, and it wasn’t their family doctor. He turned towards the back door.

‘I haven’t finished. I want the truth about this horse thing. Mum said for me to ground you.’

Bridget turned the water off and looped the hose over her arm.

‘Bit old for that sort of treatment, aren’t I?’

‘How about *you* taking some responsibility for a change?’

‘Oh, right —responsibility. That’d be something Mum would know all about. Her husband—’, Emlyn spat the word at Bridget, refusing to use ‘father’ or ‘dad’, ‘is rotting in a glorified loony bin and she can’t get it together to drive twenty minutes to see him because you’re all so dammed obsessed with your broken pots or some bit of leather bloody sandal you’ve dug out of some peat bog. You want to know where I was yesterday? Visiting Dad. And you know who turned up? Dad’s aunt: great-aunt Florrie. That was her fourth visit since he was dumped in that place, dumped in his childhood home for God’s sake —the fourth! How many visits from Mum? One. And that was to put him in there. And then she couldn’t get away quick enough. She is still married to him, you know.’

‘We’re not discussing Mum’s marriage, Emlyn. Besides, she’s entitled to a life—’

‘Yeah, well, Dad’s got a life as well, and it’s shit.’

‘You want to learn about responsibility? Shall I give you a little lesson? Where’s your dog?’

‘What?’

‘Digger —where is he? You want to stand there and lecture me about responsibility. You haven’t got him in your room, have you? No, I didn’t think so —because I haven’t seen him since yesterday afternoon.’

The phone rang inside the cottage.

‘That’ll be Mum,’ said Bridget, elbowing her way past him into the hall. ‘God, Emlyn, you really don’t know when to let it go, do you? Oh, and don’t be going off anywhere because if Digger’s going to be looked for, we’ll do it together, whether you feel like it or not.’

His sister’s voice drifted out to where he stood at the gate.

The next morning, Emlyn headed up through the town. Things were happening too fast and he needed to talk to Max. After the argument with Bridget, she had tapped on his door and suggested they drive around the places they could think of where Digger might have wandered off to, but the terrier had not shown himself. Later she had cajoled him into making some posters with the dog's picture to put up in the town. Listlessly he had knocked some up on the computer and printed them off, but he had no mettle for the task. It was a comment of his sister that had thrown him: 'It wouldn't surprise me if the McCrossans had something to do with this.' She echoed what he knew in his heart.

He had lain for ages fully-clothed on his bed the previous night, staring at the ceiling. The drowning dream had come again just before dawn and he had not been able to go back to sleep for fear that he would feel the same panic washing over him as his lungs filled with water.

As he turned into Maxine's street, Mrs. Fraser was walking towards him, a shopping bag on her arm.

'Chin up, it can't be that bad. You'll be wanting Maxine, no doubt. We'll have to go around. I've locked up.'

They walked down the street and turned the corner.

'She's probably got the doors shut and the radio on full blast.' Mrs Fraser pointed down a cobbled lane at the back of the houses and then strode off towards the centre of town.

The doors were folded back against the wall. An ancient Beezer Bantam motorbike stood propped against one door. The heavy smell of grease and warm metal rose in the sunlight. Maxine's voice came from the back of the shed.

'Look, clean the carburettor, get it working and I'll be out of your hair for good — okay.'



‘Getting something this decrepit running —it’s not that easy. I canna do it in five minutes.’

‘Then don’t.’

‘I didn’a say that.’

Hugh and Maxine were huddled together in the gloom Hugh looked up. Maxine followed his gaze and pushed quickly away from him.

‘What you up to?’ Emlyn realised it was the wrong question too late.

‘Mechanicking,’ said Max. ‘What’s it look like —friggin’ flower arranging? She gathered some spanners and slammed them on the bench. ‘You always sneak up on people like that?’

Hugh and Emlyn nodded at one another. Hugh’s left hand had a large plaster at the base of his thumb.

‘Cut your hand?’ said Emlyn.

‘In the workshop. Dangerous places, farms.’ Hugh stared at him as if he was trying to remember something.

‘You two finished discussing your medical problems?’ said Maxine. ‘Because I’ve a motorbike to fix.’

Hugh shrugged, gave Emlyn a cursory nod and began hanging spanners on the shadow board.

‘Digger’s missing.’

‘You’ve had him barely a month. Mebbe, he’s gone looking for his old owners.’

‘I’ve rung them. Besides he follows me around like a shadow, Maxine —you know that.’

‘*Max!* Nobody calls me Maxine, okay?’

Mrs Fraser appeared outside the doors, rummaging in her bag. ‘Forgot the blasted shopping list.’ She looked up and saw Hugh. ‘What the hell are you doing here? Go on,

take yourself away off out of here and tell that father of yours that I dinna want to see you hanging around here again. You be sure to tell him that from me, eh.'

'Gran!' But Maxine's protest was ignored.

Hugh nodded, grinning sheepishly as he slipped past Emlyn into the laneway.

'Gran! There's only the carbie to do and I'll have it running.'

'If I'd known that rusting heap of junk was going to bring him around here. I see you with—' Lindsay Fraser jabbed her finger at Hugh's receding back. 'It'll be a bus to Tyneside.'

'He were just helping with the bike.'

'Test me, why don't you?' said Mrs Fraser and she disappeared towards the back door in search of her shopping list.

'Shit, shit, shit! I'm never gonna get the carbie fixed now.'

'I think McCrossan's got him.'

'What?' Maxine stared blankly at him. 'Oh, yeah, your dog.'

'McCrossan —I reckon he's taken him.'

'Surely not? I mean taking the dog, that's not his style?'

'No —Ol'man McCrossan.'

Maxine stopped, her face creased in thought. A couple of fifties stools, their vinyl tops split and cracked, their legs dull with rust, were stacked in the corner of the shed. Grabbing them, she set them in the laneway and they sat with their backs against the sun-soaked stone.

'Sorry I went off at you like that,' said Maxine. 'I just wanted the dozy git to fix the carbie and piss off.' She sucked in a breath and sighed. 'Digger? You definitely think he has him?'

Emlyn sat hunched over, staring at the cobbles.

'Even Bridget thinks it was him.'

‘Right then, we give Dobbin back and just ride it out. Whatever them little wooden fellahs are for —they hardly want it publicised. If he’s got Digger, then he’ll give him back. I mean, there’d be no reason to keep him then, would there?’

‘Say nothing,’ said Emlyn. ‘Simply put it back?’

‘Yeah. ’Cept mebbe a note under his windscreen wiper or something.’

Emlyn sighed and slid off the stool. ‘Okay.’

‘Can you gi’s a hand with this bike?’ said Max. ‘Just wheel it inside for me, eh?’

Emlyn held the bike while Maxine wiped her hands on a rag, grabbed the stools and shut the doors. She took the bike and propped it at the back of the shed.

‘Stand’s broken.’

Maxine pushed Emlyn into the passage and locked the shed door. In the yard the television squawked at them through the open kitchen window. Inside, Mrs Fraser was ironing and looking up now and again at the screen.

‘You locked the shed, I take it?’

Maxine said nothing, turning her back and sorting through some clothes on the back of a chair. Emlyn stood awkwardly near the door.

On the television a white reporter was standing in a dusty village street. Emlyn assumed it was Africa. A group of ragged, listless children were watching from behind the presenter.

‘Poor little mites,’ said Mrs Fraser and turned the sound up.

‘—and here in the outlying villages and townships there is the ongoing problem of child soldiers, some as young as six or seven; a problem exacerbated by local cults, and the general belief in animism and the power of tribal witch doctors. Many of the children consider themselves invulnerable to bullets, a notion sadly contradicted by hard facts—’

The program cut to footage of new graves amid a dusty cemetery. The voice-over continued and the picture changed. A child, not much more than twelve, stared back at the camera. He was holding a machine-gun. But it was his face, his eyes that held Emlyn. Flat pools in a dark face, they seemed to teem with stories, a flickering of horror and hatred and cold lust that seemed to swallow Emlyn.

The voices called to him—

*His road was set when he was seven and his uncle came for him and he was taken into the forest.  
He cried but they watched and did nothing.*

Emlyn could see the defensive ditches far below in the valley.

The television droned on, filling his head with the buzzing of voices.

*They wanted a warrior. A child that could be given to the gods.*

*There is a price we pay—*

Another voice cut across the old man's: a child's voice.

*Who pays it, old man?*

*There is always a price for peace, for stability. No-one escapes payment, in some form or other.  
Yours was dearer than most.*

'Looking at these children the price of peace certainly seems high.' The camera left the reporter and panned across to the children. Several had lost an arm or a leg. 'But it is those innocents still wielding the guns and grenade launchers rather than these children, for whom the greatest healing needs to take place.'

'You all right?' Emlyn felt a tug on his sleeve. He stared blankly into Maxine's face. 'For heaven's sake turn it off, Gran!'

'Mind your tone, young lady.' Mrs Fraser had clicked the remote and the set went dead.

Emlyn continued staring at the dull grey surface of the television screen.

'Too many late nights, young man?' said Mrs. Fraser.

‘His dog’s gone missing, if you must know.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.’

Maxine shepherded Emlyn out of the kitchen and down the hall and they stepped into the street. He stood on the pavement staring at a front door across the street. Maxine stepped in front of him.

‘Hey, snap out of it. You’re scaring me with this zombie-land-of-the-dead stuff.’

‘I’m okay. Just, you know, those kids were so young and—’ He shook his head.

‘Hey, some things you can do something about: some things you can’t. So, you’re all right —about putting the figure back?’

‘I don’t —don’t really know what I’m thinking. Max? Do you think I’m —you know —odd or anything?’

‘If you mean are you like all those pillocks at school, then no.’

‘Sometimes, I think I’m—’

‘Hey, ma Gran said she thought you had the sight. Mebbe you should celebrate the difference, not worry about it so much. Buy a few lottery tickets mebbe?’

‘Max? Can I say something —about your Gran?’

She studied his face for a moment: his eyes were bright again.

‘At the moment you can say what you bloody well like about her.’

‘It’s just that I don’t want you to take it the wrong way. I really like her.’

‘You going to tell me what it is or are you putting yourself up for adoption?’

‘There’s something that’s like —I don’t know, a darkness around her. When I was in the kitchen back there, after that stuff on the telly, when I turned to her, it was like I could see her, when she was younger. Not a lot younger. Lots of images, little flashes. There was a baby: your Gran was holding it: cradling it. She was really sad about something.’

‘That’d be ma Mum —her wee’un. She lost the baby ’fore she had me. Still birth.’

‘Oh,’ said Emlyn.

‘Dobbin? When do you want to pop him back in his hole?’

‘Not at night; none of this creeping around in the dark. I want to see what I’m getting into.’

## 22

*When Arthur next journeys to the pool, he drags me with him on some pretext or other. We stand, listening to the ripples lapping at our feet.*

*Steel blessed by the Gods, he says. Those were the smith's words.*

*He speaks uncertainly at first, measuring my reaction, my surprise.*

*Countless blades lie at the bottom of this pool, Myrddin.*

*We would do well to leave undisturbed what has been placed here, I say. There is another world beneath the surface that any man would be loath to disturb.*

*I am not any man, he says. You changed that when you took me into Cat Coit Celidon. The God of the forest—here he taps his chest—is not to be denied. If I am to do what it is you say I am to do, then I need a blade to match what is in me, a blade that will unite the tribes. I doubt The Mothers, or the spirit of the pool, will punish me for disturbing their gifts.*

*With that, he pulls his boots off and wades into the water, searching the muddy bottom with his toes, and any argument I might form sits stillborn on my tongue. He will have his way. I am beginning to see the creature I have made and shudder as the breeze sweeps across the dark water. He calls to me to come and help him but I hold back. There is movement on the far side of the pool.*

*The girl is cutting rushes. Her movements are small and deft, and she is wearing green. Neither Arthur's hunting eye, nor mine, has seen her against the curtain of reeds. But not to have seen her, he*

*who can hit a pigeon on the wing from a galloping horse? And I? At hearthstones across the breadth of the land tales are told of the power of Myrddin's sight. Something is amiss.*

*For all my trepidation, I see that she is a winsome thing, all dark hair and wide sensuous mouth. I doubt she has seen more than fourteen years, although she is tall and willowy for her age. Although I have spied her in the shallows of the farther shore, Arthur has not. He is preoccupied with his search.*

*The sight fails even me at times. There are patterns in the world that we will not see no matter how keen the inner eye. In this place of spirits, we cannot see that far ahead, Arthur and I.*

*The girl circles the lake, watching us as she comes, and then in all her youthful brightness is standing but a few paces from me. I should have known by her silence that something was amiss. It is purposeful and stands like a shadow beside her on the bank.*

*Arthur senses her presence and looks up. It is he who speaks first. It is a net of such open weave that I shake my head that I have not seen it for what it is. By speaking first, it is he who is under her spell. She has been taught well. And I see too late what she has in mind.*



## 23

Emlyn sat astride his bike, staring down at the water.

‘You’ve a thing about this bridge,’ said Max, cycling up. ‘How many times have I seen you hanging out over this wall, staring at the water.’

‘Who’s doing the spying now?’

‘Three times —hardly surveillance, is it? Gonna tell me what you’re looking at?’

‘Down there, between the weed.’

Maxine leant over the parapet wall. Three olive shapes hung in the shallow water, their tails flicking gently against the current.

‘What are they?’

‘Fish.’

‘I know *that*. What sort of fish?’

‘Grayling.’

‘What’s all that camera clobber for? And your binoculars?’

Emlyn pushed off the wall and sat back on his saddle. He nodded at her bicycle. ‘It’ll be tough going on that.’

‘I managed okay before. Stop changing the subject.’

Emlyn sighed. ‘I told you. Good photographs don’t just happen.’

‘No, I suppose not. Anyway, at least I’ve got some wheels. Might have some motorised ones soon.’

Emlyn looked at her.

‘I’ve teed up Hugh to fix the carbie. He’s going to do it up at the garage, that way Gran knows nowt.’ She patted her bike. ‘I dinna think she’s thrown anything out since grandad went in the water.’

Emlyn shivered. The dream seemed to slide out from under the bridge, darkening the water. He felt bitterly cold.

‘You all right?’ said Maxine. ‘You’re doing that zombie thing again.’

‘Yeah —I suppose we better do this then?’

‘Aye,’ said Max.

They rode down off the bridge and up the hill in silence, Emlyn making the pace.

They were labouring up the long straight stretch where Emlyn had first seen Max. Below them, where the road had doubled back on itself, a battered green Renault flashed into sight between the trees. Seconds later McCrossan’s Land Rover droned up the valley.

‘What now?’ said Maxine. ‘They’ll be on us any minute.’

They had drawn level with the gate that led to the spinney. Emlyn nodded at the concrete culvert beneath the entrance to the field, dropped his bike into the ditch and leapt down after it.

‘Toss us your bike.’

Maxine lowered her bicycle, then looked down to where Emlyn was standing ankle deep in water.

‘Great! I just polished these this morning.’ She looked down at her prized Doc Martens and slid into the ditch. Dragging the bikes into the pipe, they squatted, listening

for the sound of the gamekeeper's Land Rover. Brown silty run-off eddied lazily around their feet. 'You know he's only got to look under here and we're history.'

'Why should he look?' said Emlyn. 'He's no idea we're here.'

'I might be wrong,' said Max, 'but I'm pretty sure that's Ol'man McCrossan in the Renault.'

'That's all we need.'

Tyres slithered to a halt on the cattle-caked road above them, followed by the sound of a hand-brake applied heavily and a slamming door. The distinctive throb of a diesel could be heard coming up the straight, then the culvert vibrated as the Land Rover swung in towards the gate and stopped in the gateway.

Lawrence McCrossan opened the window and nodded at the gate. 'Can you get that?'

His father did not budge from where he was standing on the road.

Lawrence McCrossan spat into the ditch and got out. Walking to the gate, he swung it open. 'Why the hell you wanted to come up here today is beyond me.'

'You've your responsibilities,' said Ol'man McCrossan. 'I'm just seeing that you dinna forget them.'

'I told you, everything's as it should be.'

'Well, I've a different notion. Something's out o' kilter and I want to know what.'

Lawrence McCrossan clambered into the cab, stabbed at the gears and spun the Land Rover across the muddy entrance with such ferocity that the back-end swung round and the near-side rear wheel skidded over the edge of the culvert. The springs sat bogged in the mud with the wheel over empty space. Slapping it into four-wheel drive, the gamekeeper revved hard and tyres churned and slipped, spraying mud in an arc across the road. The vehicle remained where it was. Lawrence McCrossan swore and leapt out of the cab.

‘It’ll need the tractor to get this out. I’ll do it later, when we’ve finished what you’ve dragged me up here for.’

The elder McCrossan grunted and shook his head. Leaving his son to close the gate, he picked his way gingerly across the fields towards the spinney. The gamekeeper trudged after him. They were half way when McCrossan’s dogs started up in the back of the Land Rover. The two men turned and looked towards the road.

‘What’s got them going?’ said McCrossan and moved in the direction of the gate.

‘Och, leave it. Probably seen a hare.’

The keeper scanned the hedges either side of the gate, then turned and followed his father.

‘You think they’re gone?’ whispered Maxine.

‘Yeah. Come on, we need to get up there quick.’

‘How are we going to do that without being spotted?’ asked Max.

Emlyn pointed up the ditch. They pushed past the bikes and splashed out of the culvert. With Emlyn in the lead, they splashed along the muddy bottom.

‘McCrossan,’ exclaimed Maxine, ‘I thought for certain he was going to jump into the ditch when he dropped the wheel over the edge.’

‘Keep your voice down,’ said Emlyn.

A cacophony of barking broke out behind them and Maxine collapsed against Emlyn, pulling him to his knees. They scrambled upright, their mud-covered clothes hanging from them, and stared at the Land Rover. One of McCrossan’s Labradors had its snout shoved through a partially open window and was barking at them, while the other whirled in the back.

‘Jesus,’ said Max. ‘They can’t get out, can they?’

Following the ditch as it became drier and stonier underfoot and disappeared under the road, they climbed up onto the verge and Emlyn ducked through the hedge. Maxine followed and they started up the wooded slope, moving further in between the trees where they could not be seen.

Raised voices drifted through the wood. Minutes earlier the two youngsters had sprinted across the field and climbed the dyke. Now, with Emlyn in the lead and Maxine following, they worked their way deeper into the spinney, creeping from trunk to trunk, taking pains to make as little noise as possible.

The green flanks of the tumulus showed through the trees. Emlyn tugged Maxine's sleeve and pointed to the roots of a fallen tree, motioning that they should lie down near the open space the tree's collapse had cleared in the bracken. Emlyn was already squinting through the binoculars as Maxine settled quietly beside him.

Ol'man McCrossan's reedy voice carried clearly to where they were lying.

'You talked to Hugh? Because we're going to need him. Three extra shoots, that's how many've been booked. We'll need every hand, y'ken?'

'He said he'd help out, okay. Now leave lie, will you.'

Out of sight in the bracken, Maxine whispered 'What d'you reckon's going on?'

'Argument, by the look of it,' mouthed Emlyn. He said nothing to Maxine of his overwhelming desire to remove the wooden horseman from its tin. He gripped the field-glasses harder, trying to wipe the image of the tin in his pocket, and re-focussed. The two men stood facing one another on the tumulus.

'Someone's to take over from you. Who's it to be if it's not the boy?'

'Ah, so that's what this is all about. I've told you: I'll not let you bully him.'

'He should be out carousing, not with his nose in some engineering magazine.'

'I'll not let you bully him.'

Ol'man McCrossan glowered at his son. 'Are you soft, man, or what?'

'He'll do it. When he's ready. With your heavy-handed tactics, he'll be on the first bus to Glasgow.'

'What? Like they did you. Crawling back after all those years in the army.'

'The Parachute Regiment,' said McCrossan.

'The *Paras*! You should listen to yourself.' The old man's voice was scorn-laden. 'Harchh! And your rank? You made corporal. And what've you to show for it: your shiny, wee boots? Look at you, man, with your clothes —have you no pride, because since the fire—'

'Leave Lorna out of this.'

'Since the boy's mother passed, you've let yourself go to the dogs.'

'Hah! You're telling me how to dress now?'

'No! But the new keeper's my affair. I've to train him up, remember? And he'll do what he's told.'

'Aye, and it'll be me doing the telling,' said McCrossan.

'An' what if he doesn'a? It all ends here, is that it? Are you mad, man?'

'Mad, oh aye. I'll tell you about mad. There's mad for you, over at Huntleighbank Hall. Ah, I thought so. You thought I didn'a know. That was your doing. And then there's our wee friend, eh? Musgrave. He was there that day. And what's become of him, eh? Smells like a distillery every night. Willie Musgrave, eh? Talk about walking wounded.'

'This is where they're meant to be. I'll not have them moved.'

'You're forgetting I'm keeper now.'

'An' you're forgetting your history.'

'They've been moved before,' said McCrossan.

‘Aye, twice, an’ look at the strife that caused. Oh yeah, you can smile, I know what you’re thinking but—’

‘Your theories about the battle of Flodden Field, if I’ve heard them once I’ve heard them a thousand times.’

‘I know what the history books say but it wasn’t the Sassenachs that started the killing. The horsemen were barely contained and when they were it was too late. Now, are you going to open this damned hole or do I have to do it myself?’

‘And what else? You gonna tell me we’ve faerie blood in our line? You’ve no trotted that one out lately. I’ve not heard that one for a while.’

The old man glared at his son. ‘You’re making fun of what you dinna understand. And in *this* place?’

‘It’s the twenty-first century, not the dark ages. You’ll be asking me to walk three times widdershins around the spinney any minute.’

‘Ach, shut your whining and give me a hand opening her up.’

‘I’ll not go down there unless I have to,’ said the son, ‘and you know that.’

Through the trees Emlyn and Maxine watched McCrossan’s father stoop and remove a turf, then straighten up as his son spoke.

‘Anyway, you’re wasting your time. I’ve moved them.’

‘You what!’ Ol’man McCrossan kicked the loose turf back into place.

‘You heard me.’

‘You tricky bastard. Is that how it’s to be then?’

‘Aye, it is.’

‘They were never yours to remove. Them wee figures were here for a reason and you ken that as well as I do.’

‘You’ve your whys and wherefores, an’ I’ve mine.’

‘Your great great-grandfather, god rest his soul, he used to tell me the story of when they were moved way back and I’m nae talking about Flodden, you hear? This is all but in living memory. The valley, the folk around about, they didn’a know what had hit them. The rivers frozen over, in May, mind, and blood spilled in the fields. You want that?’

‘Are you going blind as well as deaf? Nothing changes the fact that one of them has been stolen. Well —do I need to say anything more?’

Maxine nudged Emlyn and he passed the glasses to her.

‘What’s going on?’ he whispered.

‘McCrossan’s just standing there staring off into the trees. No, here we go.’

The two men stood facing one another.

‘You’ve them safe, then?’ said the older man.

‘I’ve them safe enough, aye.’

‘And the stones?’

‘You want to go and check the wall? Good God, man, I’ve been brainwashed with this since I were thirteen. You know your problem? You still think I’m that skinny kid you could bat from here to hell an’ back. Things change. An’ you best change with ‘em. Best you keep that in your head.’

‘Aye, well, there’s still the Sylvesterson kid and I’ve a mind to fix his little game, you’ll see. There’s that wee animal of his.’

A choking sound rose in Emlyn’s throat and he turned onto his back. Maxine clamped her hand over his mouth and rolled on top of him, folding her body frog-like over his to stop him standing. Her eyes were wide, a silent plea to remain still. She listened intently. Engrossed in their bickering, the two men appeared to hear nothing.

‘Stay out of it, Dad. Okay?’

‘Oh, aye, laddie, you’re the boss now.’



McCrossan, scowling and muttering, stalked down through the trees towards the wall. His father followed at a distance, pausing twice, a distracted look on his face as if he were listening.

‘They’re going,’ said Maxine.

‘You heard him,’ hissed Emlyn. ‘He’s got Digger.’ Maxine still had him pinned to the ground. She was stronger than she looked. He could smell her hair.

‘Yeah, and jumping up, that’s real bright, like. You’ve the thing on you. And we can still put it back. Like as not he’ll hand back Digger once he knows his wee man’s safe.’

Emlyn stopped struggling and shook his head. ‘You going to get off me or what?’ he croaked.

Moving off him, Maxine pushed her head above the bracken. The McCrossans had crossed the furthest wall into the field that bordered the road. Maxine stood up and prodded Emlyn with her foot. He lay still, gazing up through the branches.

‘Come on, let’s do what we came for,’ said Max.

Emlyn climbed wearily to his feet. He shook his head again. ‘No.’

‘It’s our best chance. You know that. They won’t have seen us replace it so they can’t prove we took it.’

‘They know we took it.’ Maxine moved away through the bracken towards the blind side of the spinney. ‘That’s what all this has been about.’

‘He’s got Digger.’ He watched Maxine’s face intently.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Yes —probably —this whole mess has scrambled ma brains. One thing though, the son has a caravan out behind that burnt out cottage on the Coffington road. Lives in it from time to time, so I’m told. Real dump. Mebbe he’s Digger out there. It’s got to be worth a look.’

They were approaching the dyke.

‘Anyway,’ continued Maxine, ‘It doesn't look like we'll be putting Dobbin back in his hole. If he's got your wee animal—and even I'm beginning to think he has—you're gonna need a bargaining chip.’

Without warning Emlyn pitched sideways and cursed, clutching his shin.

‘What's up now?’ said Max.

‘I tripped over this.’ Emlyn pointed at a lichen-covered rock hidden in the bracken.

‘Oh, a rock. Yeah, well, that's what you find out in the countryside.’

‘No, it's a standing stone. I've seen them up on the moors.’

‘So?’ said Max.

‘Something somebody said down at the library —about there being a legend: a bunch of standing stones that would move during the night: the Sleepers Stones.’

‘Yeah, yeah, you'll be telling me there's fairies up here and all, like.’

‘Didn't you hear what they were saying back there?’

‘No —what? I spaced out for a bit.’ Emlyn shot her a look. ‘*What?*’ said Maxine.

‘Nothing.’

They reached the dyke and climbed over. As they crossed the field towards the wood Emlyn looked back at the spinney. ‘Those two were up there for a reason. It's no coincidence that we couldn't whack it back in its hole. I think, for the moment at least —I'm meant to have it.’

‘Oh, Jesus, he's gone all religious on me.’

‘No. There's something I've got to do.’

‘Now you really are losing it, pal.’

‘Something to do with —with my Dad.’

‘I wondered when we were gonna get to that. McCrossan said as much.’

‘Said what?’

‘That your old man's—’

‘And you think I’m a screw loose as well. Go on, say it, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

‘I never said that. A little paranoid, mebbe? But then this whole thing’s dead bent, an’ all.’

Emlyn pulled his father’s note from his shirt and held it out. Maxine looked at it but did not take it from him.

‘I found it in my Dad’s things. Read it.’

She unfolded the paper and began reading slowly. ‘I’m having trouble with the handwriting,’ she said. Emlyn ignored her comment, letting her labour on. She read several passages aloud, then folded the note and handed it back. ‘The boy, he was your dad, is that what you think?’

He nodded.

‘And he’s up at that private loony bin, your dad, isn’t he?’ Emlyn nodded again. ‘And what? He’s a raving nutter?’

There was no edge to the way she said it. The words washed over him and he shrugged and looked away.

‘You miss him, don’t you?’

Emlyn nodded.

‘The treasure thing, then? You think that’s the horseman?’

He patted his pocket, rattling the tin.

‘McCossan wants this back. All that stuff, with him following you, and bailing me up. It’s real important to him. I mean *real* important. That day up at the spinney, in the snow, all those years back, something happened between Ol’man McCossan and my father. I want to know what happened.’

## 24

*The girl, Nimuë, who some call Vivienne—it is later that we learn her name—stands at the pool's edge with her braided hair and her gown green as spring moss. She is forward and knows her mind. She knows his mind also.*

*You've no right here, she says.*

*You know who I am, girl? Arthur smiles and flexes his muscles. He cannot see that she is no more a girl than I am a witless stripling.*

*You could be the Green One, Myrddin himself, she says, and still have no right to disturb the waters. What is it that you are doing, anyway?*

*Ah, a potent mix of innocence and guile this one.*

*Searching for a blade, he says. But he is searching no longer. He is gaping like a stricken youth.*

*Arthur does not know it but she is to become more than a passing interest. He already has two wives—although 'wife' is not a word the river-washers use for his second love—and he has wooed a third, Gwenhwyfar, who has been his bed favourite since she came from the south last winter.*

*The man beds any woman whose eye grazes his and neither age, nor looks, nor status dull his appetite; his lust is a full-bellied sail that carries him where the wind blows. His reputation only glazes the apple. His skill at arms is second-to-none. Aggrieved husbands hide their shame in mead: the two who refuse end up with their guts amid the rushes.*

*This blade, says the girl Nimuë, what is it that you will do with it?*

*Forge another, stronger blade from it.*

*The offerings are to be left where they lie. They have been thrown to Y Mamau.*

*I make a sign of power and protection over us. She has invoked The Mothers.*

*Perhaps, he says, I should make plain who you address.*

*I know well enough who you are. The girl stares at him from beneath her tresses. You still need my blessing, she says.*

*Your blessing? I think not.*

*What belongs to The Mothers is not yours to take. Are you stupid or simply so arrogant that you would risk being swallowed up by her? She has three faces. You could meet her at any time and might not know her.*

*Nothing will swallow me, girl.*

*The dark waters, she says unburiedly, swallow us all eventually.*

*She looks at me. I am watching Arthur's face. I see the doubt there. He has but one response to doubt: action. And so he stoops again, reaching into the water. His hand comes up dark and sticky with mud, clutching a broken blade; a propitiation some lesser soul had tossed into the water.*

*A rider gallops down the slope and reins in at the water's edge.*

*The child, calls the man —the child has come early.*

*Arthur stares at the blade in his hand and then at the girl.*

*Go back, says Arthur, Tell them I'll be there.*

*The man hesitates, although his horse is eager to be away.*

*Away! bellows Arthur, I'll come when I'm ready.*

*The rider swings his mount towards the trees and Arthur mutters: Probably a girl, knowing Gwenhwyfar.*

*But the seed is sown. Already he is questioning his right to what he holds. Has the child come early because he has crossed into the other world without a guide? What if it isn't a baby girl, what if it is a boy and—*

*My thoughts run not far from his in the same dark valley. He has bastard offspring aplenty and no clear successor. Away to the north, Modred is like a gangrenous limb that he would sever. Has this girl in green read the rider's arrival? Is there some small thing that I have missed?*

*But I keep such things to myself.*

*I will find what you look for, she says, and then you'll not be troubled by The Mothers.*

*Arthur makes the sign against the evil eye as the girl hitches her gown above her girdle, enters the water and wades out to stand close beside him. He stands, quiet and subdued. The girl's eyes are closed. The breeze has died and the riffled surface of the lake has become a mirror. She takes the rotten iron from his hands and lets it slip back into the water. The ripples move out, and I watch from the shore, more witness than mediator to the spirit world, as she moves away from him into deeper water. It is only later that I hear the rumour that she has faerie blood.*

## 25

Maxine and Emlyn stood on the weed-choked area that had once been a lawn, staring at the smoke-blackened ruin. The roof had caved in and soot sprang shadow-like above the windows and the doorways, giving the place an air of menace. On three sides a sombre pine plantation crowded the plot of land.

‘Mind, it happened years ago, according to gran. Hugh would’ve been a bairn.’

‘And McCrossan’s wife died in the fire?’

Maxine nodded. ‘Better keep an ear on the road.’

‘Where’s the caravan?’

Maxine waved towards the rear of the gutted building. They picked their way between unkempt rose bushes and past a rusting water tank. The battered caravan, its paint pitted and flaking, sat wedged at the end of a fire track. The tyres were flat and the body had been chocked up on blocks.

‘McCrossan lives *in that?*’ said Emlyn. ‘Where’s he shower?’

‘He’s got a room above The Swan. Some deal with the landlord. He doesn’t come here that often.’

‘Where’s Hugh live then?’

‘In town with that bastard of a grandfather of his.’

Emlyn poked around the caravan and wandered down the fire track a short distance. 'Digger,' he shouted. 'Digsy boy.'

'We've looked,' said Maxine. 'He's not here, Em.'

'He's got him stowed somewhere.'

He turned away from the van and disappeared inside the burnt-out building. Maxine trailed after him.

'What now?' she said.

Emlyn kicked listlessly at a mound of blackened dirt, pocked with broken bricks and glass. An image pushed to the fore: a woman, pale and worn down, a scarf tied around her head; she was arguing with someone. The argument seemed strung out over a great sweep of time.

'Best be getting back,' said Maxine quietly. 'It'll be dark soon.'

'Maybe a big dog-fox took him? They do that sometimes.'

Maxine's phone rang and they both jumped. She talked briefly and hung up.

'That was ma Gran. I've gotta go. She's taking me out tonight. I completely forgot about it with all of this stuff with Digsy. Shite, *and* I've nothing ironed.'

The dining room at The Fox was crowded. Emlyn scanned the tables, looking for Mrs Fraser, but they had not arrived yet. He wandered out into the lobby and studied the prints of hunting scenes. He was on his second tour, when he heard raucous laughter out in the street. Tucking Max's present under his arm, he stood as casually as he could manage. The doors swung open and Maxine was staring at him.

'What's going on?' she said.

'An extra surprise,' said Mrs Fraser. 'Seeing how you two are thick as thieves. Someone your own age. Let's go through to the dining room.' She led the way and Emlyn sensed several pairs of eyes on them.



‘Have a seat, young man.’ Lindsay Fraser pushed a chair out for him.

Maxine sat, staring at Emlyn. ‘I’ve never seen you out of that coat of yours. You look totally different —in that clobber, I mean.’

‘Work experience suit,’ said Emlyn. ‘Happy birthday.’

‘Is that it?’

‘Sorry?’

‘What you’ve got tucked under your arm —that’s for the bar-maid, then?’

‘Oh —yes.’ Emlyn handed Maxine the present and sat down. ‘Happy birthday.’

‘You’ve said that already.’ Maxine flexed the thin package and then shook it. ‘Ribbon. Whoa! Who said boys were hopeless? Let me guess —a wildlife calendar?’

‘Dinna tease the lad,’ said Mrs Fraser.

Maxine pulled the ribbon off and ripped off the wrapping paper.

‘Post mark Sydney.’ She was holding a large used envelope.

‘It was all I could find that was big enough,’ said Emlyn. ‘I was worried about the corners getting damaged.’

Maxine emptied out the contents. Several black-and-white enlargements slid onto the tablecloth; close-ups of herself. She stared at the photographs.

‘Maxine told me you were a dab hand with a camera,’ said Mrs Fraser. ‘He’s really caught you in that one.’

‘There’s not one where I’m looking at the camera.’

‘The best shots are always spontaneous.’

Maxine’s face tightened. ‘I don’t appreciate you sneaking pictures of me —like some sort of perv.’

‘They’re just photographs, that’s all.’

‘Hey!’ She fixed him with a glare. ‘I’m not one of them little furry creatures that get you so excited.’

‘I never said you were, I—’

‘Ask next time, okay?’

Emlyn straightened his cutlery.

‘Well, I think they’re very nice,’ said Lindsay Fraser awkwardly.

‘Yeah, you would, wouldn’t you, Gran?’

‘Perhaps I better go,’ said Emlyn.

‘If you’re heading for one of your moods, madam, then perhaps we’d better call the evening off.’

‘I’m not heading for anything, okay. I just don’t like being taken for granted.’

‘Will you keep your voice down? This is a hotel.’

Several of the guests were looking in their direction.

‘I better go,’ repeated Emlyn, standing up.

‘Oh, for God’s sake sit down will you,’ said Maxine, half jokingly. ‘And while you’re there, pick something from the menu before you totally shit me right off.’

‘Yes: food,’ said Mrs Fraser, covering her embarrassment by picking up the menu.

‘They do a good Beef Wellington here I’m told.’

## 26

*Arthur is well aware of the power of this place. Before he ever saw the girl, he brought me here to witness his theft of steel from the pool. Amongst other things I am a teller of tales, and he knows the story will spread. The girl simply becomes part of the greater tale: The Lady of the Lake. No matter that he casts her aside as he did all his women, and that all her life—a long life full of power and hardship—she will hold hard to his ruin.*

*Wading out into the boggy mess, he reminds me of the child I had grown so fond of. How far away from that he is now. No resemblance does he bear to any child: neither the child we carry with us to the grave and who berates us for our callous forgetfulness of youth, nor any living child that plays in the dust or cries for his mother. He is apart. He is a man possessed and he will have his sword.*

## 27

Emlyn turned the corner just as Maxine stepped into the street carrying an overnight bag. A taxi was parked outside the house. Her grandmother came out, pulled the front door shut and glanced down the street.

‘Whatever it is, laddie,’ she called, ‘it’ll have to wait.’

Maxine looked in his direction, her hand on the rear door, as Mrs Fraser climbed in beside the driver.

Emlyn heard her say, ‘Two minutes, okay?’ and then she walked towards him, stopping a distance away. ‘It’s me mam.’ Her face was stony but Emlyn sensed a knot of emotion working it like an unseen hand. ‘She’s overdosed. Gran says there’ll be an inquest.’

Emlyn nodded, not trusting himself to say anything. He was remembering their talk on the castle battlements the day she’d been fired from the tea rooms.

*I wished someone else—*

*Someone dead?*

Standing in the street under the bright sky and the scudding clouds, he thought back, remembering how casually he had filled in the line.

Had that someone been her mother, he wondered.

‘Do us a favour?’ Max’s voice brought Emlyn back into the present. ‘Hugh’s my bike down the garage. He’s waiting for me to pick it up. Tell him to put it in the yard.’

‘Max.’ Mrs Fraser’s head was out of the taxi window.

‘I’ve got to go. I’m sorry about last night.’ Maxine stared at the pavement. ‘Me mam never had nothing. Nothing nice, anyway. Just a shit life.’

‘Max-ine?’

Emlyn watched the taxi turn the corner. He had wanted to scoop her up, to hug her. He stood for some time before he climbed on his bike.

Hugh McCrossan emerged from the gloom at the back of the workshop holding a spanner.

‘They’re off to Tyneside,’ said Emlyn.

‘Who —Maxie?’

‘And her Gran. Her Mum’s —something’s happened to her. Taxi’s running them down to Newcastle.’ Emlyn scuffed the dusty concrete with his boot. ‘She said to put the bike in the yard at the back of her place.’

Hugh wiped his hands on an oily rag and stuffed it in the back pocket of his overalls.

‘Like messing about with engines —mechanical stuff?’ said Emlyn.

Hugh shrugged and nodded. ‘It’s something to do. Isn’t a much in a place like this.’

‘Keep you off the streets sort of thing.’

‘Mebbe being on the street’s a problem for you, but it’s no a problem for me. I’m ma own man —y’ken?’

‘Your grandfather doesn’t seem to think so.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Hugh took a step forward.

‘—Engineering. Seems your grandad’s not too keen on that particular avenue.’

‘What would they know? They’re farmers, gamies. Besides, who you been talking to?’

‘Nah: no one: something I overheard, s’all.’

‘You should keep your nose out of other people’s business.’

‘Yeah, well, there’s my dog unaccounted for. Are you suggesting I just forget him?’

Hugh’s face softened slightly. ‘Look, I know there isn’t any love lost between Max and my grandad, and hey, there’s not a lot lost between me and him—but I canna see that he’s got your dog.’

‘He’s been taken because we’ve—’ Emlyn stopped, weighed down by the sheer inexplicability of events.

‘Because you’ve what?’

‘I’d show you but—’

‘But what?’

‘It’s back at the cottage.’

‘What is?’ said Hugh.

‘What your grandad’s after.’

‘I’ve got to take this for a test run.’ Hugh patted the ancient motorbike. ‘I can run you down. It’s nae bother, like.’

Hugh wheeled the bike into the lane at the rear of the filling station. ‘Fingers crossed.’ He grinned and attacked the kick-start. A cloud of blue smoke drifted between the buildings. ‘Not bad for a piece of engineering older than my father.’ He climbed on and patted the pillion seat.

Emlyn stared at the motorbike.

For all that had happened with McCrossan and his father, Emlyn’s feelings towards Hugh were confused; the face framed with dark curls was nothing like the father’s. The easygoing attitude, the smile seemed genuine. Emlyn thought of Max; how close the two of them had been standing that day. He knew she still liked him under all her bravado. Futility and rage whispered in equal measure.

‘No helmets,’ said Hugh. ‘We’ll have to take our chances. Old Crozier’ll be up to his armpits in paperwork anyway. Long as we keep away from the square and the Wynd we should be all right.’

Emlyn climbed on and, as the bike lurched down the alley, he grabbed at Hugh’s waist.

The driveway was empty. Bridget was at the dig. The doorless gloom of the shed beckoned. He knew he was taking a chance showing Hugh the figure. Emlyn tapped Hugh on the shoulder, indicating that he should take the bike down the driveway. He scrambled off and ran to the rear of the dilapidated structure and pulled the figure from its hiding place under the bench. Hugh, who had killed the engine, watched intently from astride the bike as Emlyn emerged holding the tin.

‘You don’t remember cutting yourself, do you?’ Emlyn nodded at the plaster on Hugh’s hand. ‘When Mrs Fraser bailed you up, I mentioned your hand. You don’t remember —when you cut it up at the spinney?’

‘I cut it at the workshop. What are you talking about?’

‘—No —you didn’t.’ Emlyn clutched the tin to his gut and levered at the lid. He looked up.

Hugh was pale, trembling. ‘I feel weird,’ he said. ‘Like déjà vu.’

‘Yeah, well, my entire bloody time here in Yeaveburgh’s been like that,’ said Emlyn, prising off the lid. Behind Hugh the horseman shimmered at the end of the driveway.

‘I can remember stuff,’ he said quietly. ‘As a wee’un, there were the old songs — anyway they called them the old songs. I think I’m going to be sick.’ He staggered away from the bike, letting it crash onto the gravel, and vomited in the flowerbed.

‘You can sense it too?’ said Emlyn.

Hugh coughed and spat and then straightened. 'It's like there's a singing in ma head. All mixed up with images. Images I dinna understand. Old stuff. Like out of history books, 'cept real: real and bloody. All mixed up with the singing. I remember being terrified as a little kid. Not because ma old man used to hit me, or ma grandad. You get used to that. Because there was always something out there and only the singing would keep it away. That was why we sung the old songs. That's what they told me: learn the songs, sing them and you'll keep them away. I never understood what it was they meant. That—' Hugh pointed at the figure in its tin. 'That's like everything I was ever scared of.'

Emlyn started to pull the horseman free of the cottonwool.

'Dinna take it out!'

Emlyn let the figure slip back.

'And the wee stones?' said Hugh.

Emlyn held one out bottom up. Hugh stared at the markings.

'It's like a dream. I can remember being up at the spinney fixing the wall with ma Dad. But the memory, it's like an island. I canna remember it when I'm not there, not on the island.'

'I saw you,' said Emlyn, 'up at the spinney that day. You cut your hand purposely.'

'Aye,' said Hugh, 'you hid behind the wall. And I did this to my hand —to remember.'

'It's to do with the singing, the old songs.' Emlyn watched Hugh's face intently.

'Your father was singing as he rebuilt the wall.'

'—Something's been eating at them, all right. I thought it was because I told them I was off, leaving, as soon as I got ma act together.'

Emlyn nodded. 'Your grandad said as much about your dad going into the army. Something's handed down from father to son and—'



‘Aye, well, there’s—there *was* the keeper’s job—head-keeper for the Marquess. Grandad’s always on about it. The old man didn’t want to take it on. He did it for a few years when he came out of the Paras and then chucked it in. I dinna mention it any more, it gets ‘em that excited.’

‘No, it’s to do with the wooden horsemen,’ said Emlyn.

‘But what does it do, this carving?’

‘If you’d have asked me a week ago —now, I just want Digger back.’

‘But you’ve an idea?’

‘—It’s to do with Arthur.’

‘Arthur who?’

‘King Arthur.’

‘Get away with you. You’re having me on, right?’

‘There’s some power up at that spinney, something the wall holds back.’

‘Aye, the dyke. The stones —no, man, you’re out of your tree. I mean, King Arthur?’

‘Have you told Maxie?’

‘She already pretty much thinks I’ve lost the plot. Then there’s my old man.’

‘Your father?’ said Hugh. ‘Aye, I heard about him. He’s up at Huntleighbank, right?’

‘Is there anyone in Yeaveburgh who doesn’t know?’

‘Probably not: small town: word travels fast. Look, I’m sorry about what I said—’

Emlyn gave a wan smile.

‘You’re not out of your tree,’ Hugh continued. ‘Something’s definitely going on.’

‘The horsemen hold some sort of power or—’

‘Horsemen?’ said Hugh blinking. ‘There’s more of them?’

‘Max reckoned about twenty or so.’

‘Max reckoned? What’s Max got to do with this? You just said you never told her anything.’

‘They were in an underground chamber up at the spinney: sort of tumulus thing or something. Max found them: stuck one in her pocket. Your lot nearly sprung us. Since then it’s been down hill all the way. —They really want this back, Hugh.’

‘The spinney: that place really creeps me out —but it kind of fits. They were always dragging me out there as a kid. When you pulled the lid off just then, it all rushed back. Like that thing people talk about with your life happening before your eyes when you’re drowning.’

Emlyn felt the waters closing over his head and pushed aside the memory of his recurring dream. ‘—I’ve got this really weird feeling,’ he said, squashing a rising sense of panic, ‘that it’s something to do with Arthur and his Knights.’

‘I’m having enough problems with this without you talking about some dead king.’ Hugh grabbed the handlebars, heaved the bike upright and stood holding it. When things start to slide out under you, thought Emlyn, you grab the first piece of reality you can and cling to it: Hugh, engineering, engines; me, wildlife photography; and Max — what did Max have? He tried to picture her down in Newcastle but any images melted away. Emlyn tried to imagine how he would react if his mother had died.

‘But why there?’ said Hugh. ‘And why so many of ’em?’

‘I don’t know. I’d show you but they’re not there any more. Your old man moved them.’

‘Moved them? Why?’

‘No idea: your grandfather got really pissed off when he found out. I can’t explain it but it’s like something that’s come down over time, over a long line.’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘We went up to the spinney to put it back. They were there. It’s like they’re always turning up—’ Emlyn knew what he sounded like and stopped. It had suddenly become important to get Hugh on side. ‘Your grandad mentioned Digger: like he was going to

do something to him. The little fellah had already been missing a couple of days. We'd taken him to the vet once before because he'd taken some sort of bait.'

'When's Maxie back?'

'Couple of days, I guess. She's—' He paused, uncertain whether to say anything.

'She's gone down for a funeral.'

'Great.'

'—Her mother's. It's her mum who died.' Hugh stared at him blankly. 'But you didn't hear that from me.'

Hugh looked away over the fields. Emlyn could sense a distancing taking place: he had said too much; exposed too much and lost an ally. He cursed mentally.

'I better get up to the garage.' Hugh patted the fuel tank, his face expressionless. 'Got to take the bike back to Max's place first.'

'Can you drop me up in the square?'

'Sure, if you want.'

Hugh kick-started the bike and Emlyn climbed on behind. There was a spray of gravel and they were onto the road. Dark clouds were massing over the hills to the west and the first drops of rain were falling as they headed up through the town.

28

*The girl, now waist-deep, has drawn a long shape, muddy and covered in waterweed, from the bottom. Every muscle tenses in me. I sense that this is something from the other world—a gift. But how is it to be used and at what price has it been given?*

*She wades slowly towards Arthur, pulling a sword from the sticky mess. She closes the gap and tosses it to him. Catching it by the blade, he lets out a gasp. The iron is still sharp. His blood mingles with the dark waters and a cry echoes over their ruffled surface—Arthur's, as he takes the blade by the hilt and holds it aloft.*

*Here is what we came for, he bellows. He is ecstatic, grinning.*

*I draw closer, the water lapping at my feet, as they wade together from the pool, remembering of a sudden that other darker offerings have been made here not long past. It is not only blades that lie in the ooze.*

*The wooden hilt has long rotted away. The blade, although pitted here and there with rust, is smeared so thick with animal fat that in places it still gleams. Curious designs, seemingly made of bronze or some alloy that I do not recognise, lace their way across its surface: animals, a hunt, a flying worm. How long the sword has lain in the pool I cannot say when he asks me, but I guess it has been many lives.*

*You must come to Ynys Avallach, he says, turning to Nimuë, and see the new sword born from the old.*

*She says nothing but as he hands her the reins of my horse, she takes them, smiling secretly. Has she the sight also? Does she know already that Arthur's men will fight over the right to be her escort whenever she leaves the stronghold? Does she know that their eyes are drawn to her as they are to a fine horse or a dagger inlaid with mother-of-pearl? If she does, no hint of it passes across her face. His hands around her waist, Arthur hoists her upon my beast and she rides away from her old life never to return. It is for me to trudge back. It matters little. I have time to think.*

## 29

A knot of women huddled in the newsagent's waiting for the rain to ease. Their conversation stopped as Emlyn came in. He recognised one of them: Mrs Murcutt. Glaring at him, she started up a pointed conversation with the woman next to her.

'The Fraser girl ... hang around together ... that's the one, her with the hair—'

Emlyn caught fragments of the conversation. He had decided to visit his father. Max's news about her mother had left a swirling void somewhere inside him and he needed the bulk, the comfort of his father's presence.

'I've heard she's none too choosy, that one, y'ken,' said the thin woman with the headscarf. 'Been in trouble's what I heard.'

'Runs in the family,' said Mrs Murcutt. 'The Fraser woman's no angel, believe me. Put herself about as a youngster, did that one. And later, after her husband died, poor man.'

They were staring at Emlyn. He looked back at Mrs Murcutt coldly until she looked away. Bitch, he thought. But as he pocketed his change, he sensed her eyes on him again. She and her friends were still bunched near the door. Pushing past them on his way out, he caught the last snatch of their conversation.

'Two abortions is what I heard.'

'I heard that she had another one. Later. After she'd planted *her Douglas*.'

‘And that granddaughter of hers. Regular little enchantress that one, with half the town’s men with their tongues hanging out—’

Emlyn shot across the square to the bus shelter. Was that how everybody saw Max: an enchantress? The rain hammered against the shopfronts. Dead twigs and leaves sailed by in the gutter. He was going to get soaked on the way home. He pulled the collar of his greatcoat up, thrust his hands into his pockets and stared out at the rain. Maybe he could duck into the library. What had the librarian called Merlin —The Enchanter? En-chant-er! Of course! To be an enchanter had to mean that you called up spells, sung them or something. Wasn’t that what magicians did, chanted the words of power? What else could McCrossan’s ‘chanting’ be but some sort of spell—and the markings on the stones—the whole lot designed to hold something or somebody inside the spinney. Yes that had to be it. He was itching to tell someone but nobody, not even Max, was going to believe that kind of drivel.

Emlyn’s father sat hunched by the window, staring out at the rain. The charge-nurse, Kenny, picked up some discarded clothes from the carpet and tossed them on the bed and then bent, hands on knees, in front of the big man. ‘Mr Sylvesterson, your son’s here. We’ll go across to the day room, shall we?’

Emlyn’s father rose slowly. Kenny held an encouraging hand at his elbow and ushered them from the room.

The day room was quiet. A television, the sound turned low, flickered in the corner. His father sat listlessly in a chair by the French windows, watching the trees move silently in the wind. Emlyn sat on the lounge close by, the newspaper on his knee. The cryptic crossword seemed to be seeking inspiration from the ceiling. So far he had managed only two of the clues, the shorter words, and even those he wasn’t sure of. He

was trying to work up enough courage to ask about William Musgrave, his father's ginger-haired friend, and what had happened all those years ago out at the spinney.

'Pity,' said Emlyn, lightly pencilling in another clue, 'that we can't sit out under the tree today.'

His father only seemed to shrink further into his ill-fitting overcoat.

Some of Emlyn's best memories were camping trips into the bush with his father. Even those vast open spaces had seemed unable to contain his father's energy and enthusiasm. Perhaps it was his memory, colouring events: the smell of eucalypts, the carolling of magpies. He stared down at the crossword, then up at the ceiling.

'Come on Dad, you used to be killer at these. I'm hopeless. Here's one: six down: "At the end, homeless Greeks find shelter under a roof." Six letters: begins and ends in 'A'.'

'Attica.'

'What?'

'A-double T-I-C-A.'

'Of course,' said Emlyn. He paused, pen on paper, trying to remember something his great-aunt had said.

Attic —something to do with attics. Come on, idiot-boy, remember. Yes! Favourite hiding place —in the attic. "It's all been nailed shut now."

'Be back in a minute, Dad.'

Emlyn stepped quietly into the hall. A substantial part of the mansion was used by the administration. The area was designated Zone 2 and a swipe card was needed to access the upper part of the house. Frustrated, Emlyn looked around. There was no way he was going to get upstairs.

He was about to walk back to the lounge when the door clicked and swung open, blocking any view of him. A man pushing a trolley barged through and without looking



in Emlyn's direction lumbered off down the hallway. Emlyn grabbed the handle, catching it just before it closed, and shot through the doorway.

He was in the old part of the house, with its heavy wood panelling and ornate ceilings. The stairs were clear. He hesitated, one foot on the bottom tread, and then raced up. A keyboard clattered nearby and he could hear someone on a call, but the upstairs landing was empty. The walls were hung with nondescript paintings and everything had a subdued, slightly institutional feel to it. A few of the doors had card readers, the rest were locked. He wandered down the hallway, looking up to see if there were any hatches or manholes in the ceiling—hadn't his great-aunt said something about ladders—but no break showed in the neatly painted plaster.

He paused at the end of the landing and peered through a window at the gravel driveway below. His enthusiasm in the Square, when he had seized the idea of the McCrossans as enchanters as he waited for the bus, had waned. It sounded so implausible. He was thinking like a character from one of those fantasy novels he had read when he was fourteen. He was in a place for mad people. Maybe he should just stay; walk up to the charge nurse and say he wanted a bed, wanted to stay the night.

He stared out of the window, his brow furrowed into a question. The grounds had changed. The lawns and flowerbeds had an unkempt, desolate air about them. Patches of frost clung to the lawns under the trees. A man was being restrained in the driveway. Some sort of argument was underway about a large car. The limousine was driven away and the man sat on the front steps, head in hands. From some great distance in his mind Emlyn recognised the man as his grandfather.

A ringing silence filled his ears.

He was being sucked up that tunnel again: this time he did not fight it.

The scene shifted.

He was inside the house; bare boards beneath his feet. His footfalls echoed from the walls. A man's voice was calling angrily for him from somewhere downstairs and the scene shifted again. He was up under the roof.

A small grimy window, almost completely overgrown with creeper, sat up under the gable end of the attic. Sunlight chinked in beneath the slates and made bright spots on the floor. Boxes sat piled against the walls and under the sloping roof. A rusting bicycle wheel and some perished inner tubes hung from hooks in the rafters. A dressmaking mannequin stood near the window, its shoulders soiled with bird droppings.

The boy sat cross-legged on the dusty floorboards. A crude symbol had been scrawled over and over in crayon on the boards. The boy stopped. The crayon was a useless stub in his hand. He flung it away. Hunched over now, he rocked to-and-fro almost imperceptibly.

Even from the remote outpost he had become, Emlyn knew these markings: they were the same signs scratched beneath the stones of Sleepers Spinney. He wanted to touch the child, his father, help him, but he knew he couldn't.

'You shouldn't be wandering about up here, y'ken.'

Emlyn was standing beside the window again. He realised he should know the man standing in front of him. Down the corridor a woman stood watching in a doorway. What were they looking at?

'One of the office staff tried to— You were just staring out of the window. They couldn't get you to respond.'

Emlyn stared at the man. He felt like crying. Soon he'd be in here anyway —with his father. It'd be all right. They could do the crossword together.

'You all right, laddie?'

Kenny. His name was Kenny. He was one of the staff.

Emlyn nodded and followed him along the landing to the stairs.

In the lounge, his father was still sitting hunched in his overcoat by the French windows.

It's now or never, you bloody coward.

'William. Willie Musgrave. The ginger-haired boy with the limp —do you remember him, Dad?' His father's shoulders hunched. His massive neck settled further into his shirt collar. 'And the spinney? You do remember the spinney?' He knew he was taking a chance here. 'And the snow?'

His father seemed to take forever to turn his head. Emlyn grabbed the newspaper and scrawled the symbol he had seen when he had been transported back to the attic. He went over it until the pen tore through the newsprint. He held it out to his father.

'You remember the snow don't you? McCrossan was there. And his son. Willie too. What happened, Dad? They sung something didn't they? What was it?'

His father stood up.

'Who are they? And the signs —what do they do?'

His father was standing now, rattling the handles of the French windows, trying to open them; but they were locked. Some of the other residents were watching. Emlyn tried hard not to catch their eye. Somebody turned the volume up on the television. His father was crying. Tears welled and ran down his cheeks. The silent sobbing increased. The French windows were rattling under the force of the onslaught. Emlyn stood rigid, not knowing what to do. A snot bubble ballooned from his father's nose.

'Dad?'

A middle-aged woman he had not seen before appeared at his father's side.

'You better run along,' said the nurse. Emlyn hesitated. 'Away with you now. Your father'll be fine.'

Emlyn felt miserable. His father was upset—they were probably still trying to calm him or, worse still, to sedate him—and he was the cause. He stood in the lee of Huntleighbank's gatehouse. Across the road the treetops were a grey mass of whipped foliage. The rain was horizontal and the shelter the wall provided was better than nothing. A car went by and pulled up amid a spray of water. The passenger door swung open and Emlyn raced down the road and climbed in.

'Stand there much longer and you'll develop webbed feet.' His great-aunt was dressed in a tweed hat and a scruffy looking quilt waistcoat. 'Right, where to, young man?'

'Town would be great. —Hi.'

Emlyn settled back in the passenger seat and watched the wipers in their ineffectual battle with the rain. He was wrestling with the idea of showing her his father's note.

'The silver frame: there was—' He stopped, uncertain as to whether he should continue: there would be no going back with this, he thought.

'I don't want it back, if that's what you're about to ask.'

'Did my father ever mention —a horseman?'

'Good Lord! You know, I'd completely forgotten about the horseman incident.' His great-aunt, concentrating on the rain-eclipsed road, stared out over the steering wheel.

'Why do you call it the horseman incident?' said Emlyn.

'Your father had a series of recurrent nightmares. Went on for months. He'd wake the whole household, screaming at the top of his lungs. He seemed to think that a horseman was coming for him. My brother used it as a further excuse to curb his expeditions. An 'overfed imagination' was the phrase. Not a good thing in a budding soldier. It came out that he had been caught by Lord Yeaveburgh's keeper.'

'On the estate?'

'Yes. I can see you're looking puzzled.'

‘It’s just that—’ He paused: he had to be careful here. ‘Well, Dad mentioned something about being caught up the valley —and that’s not estate land.’

‘A good deal of that land was sold off when the 12th Marquess died. Death duties. The McCrossans bought most of it. Did very well out of it, thank you very much.’ His great-aunt seemed deep in thought. Finally she spoke: ‘The peculiar thing was that your father never seemed to recall anything and denied all knowledge of the dreams, something that sent my brother apoplectic. But then Freud’s notion of the unconscious was not high on his list of bed-time reading.’

‘Sorry, you’ve lost me.’

‘My brother was a black and white man. The subtleties of the developing mind were lost on him. From his perspective your father was simply lying. I’m sure Rory was merely working through some difficult episode, something that had frightened him perhaps.’

They drove on for several miles without speaking.

‘McCrossan,’ said Emlyn, ‘the older one —do people round here ever—’ Emlyn chewed his lip as the old woman studied him cannily.

‘Ever what?’

‘Take him on —stand up to him?’

‘Steer clear of Ol’man McCrossan, laddie, if you’ve a mind. I went to school with him. Even then—and we’re talking fifty years ago—he was always turning up like a bad penny. Once he took over from his father as head-keeper it really went to his head.’

‘And the boy who made the aeroplanes —Willie?’

‘William Musgrave?’ said his great-aunt. Emlyn nodded. ‘The last I heard —he owned a builder’s yard near the river —at the back of the Abbotsford estate. Bit of gypsy blood in there, so they say.’

‘Could you drop me there?’

The rain had eased and patches of blue sky were showing over the hills. His great-aunt looked at him.

‘I doubt you’ll find any answers there, laddie.’

Emlyn shrugged.

‘I think I’ll drop you home —if you don’t mind.’

The car swept down past the castle towards the Marchbank.

‘The last I heard, Musgrave was a heavy drinker. An unpredictable wee chappie, even as a child, and I’d prefer not having to explain myself to your mother.’

His great-aunt swung the car into the driveway of the cottage and slewed to a halt on the gravel. Emlyn got out.

‘How come you never visit us?’

‘I’ve never been what you might call an ambitious person. Your mother —on the other hand— I’m not one of the most tactful of people. Let’s just say we never quite saw eye to eye.’

The window slid up and his great-aunt reversed onto the road. Emlyn watched the car disappear between the flanks of the Marchbank and then he turned down towards the shed. He would take the tin with him.

## 30

*The smith will not touch the blade. The rumours have spread, as Arthur knew they would: a sword of the dead, a sword stolen from the gods. Arthur cares little for the rumours. He is a god.*

*There is another smith, a small nut-brown man from across the sea: a trader in blades, who has married a local woman and settled down to his craft. His speech is strangely laced, his face alight with smiles.*

*He is not concerned with the gods of the pool or ancestors. These are not his gods, nor his people. He knows words of power that will keep him safe and Arthur has his blade before the moon has come into its fullness. Truly, it is a blade like no other.*

## 31

Although the houses on the Abbotsford estate had a grey uniform look, the gardens were neat and well tended behind their chain-link fences. Emlyn cycled to the rear of the estate to where the last street tailed away into a rutted track. Beyond were a couple of bare paddocks running down to the river. An emaciated horse stood blinking at him from behind a fence. Emlyn locked his bike against a lamppost. The builder's yard appeared locked.

'Need any help, dear?'

A thin, elderly woman in slippers, her hair clamped in curlers, eyed him from her gate. 'Looking for Willie, eh? He's not open much these days but he's there all right. That's his truck parked by the shed. There's another gate 'round the back, faces the river.'

Emlyn looked in the direction the woman indicated. Beyond the chain-link fence a battered yellow Dodge stood in an oily puddle outside a Nissen hut.

'You won't get much out of him though, dear.' The woman made a tippling motion. 'Follow the fence down towards the river. He'll be feeding his horses. Part mugger, that one.' Emlyn looked puzzled and the woman made a clicking sound with her tongue. 'Do you youngsters know nothing? A gypsy, boy —part gypsy.'



Emlyn followed the fence, its corrugated iron covered in garish graffiti, until he reached the rear corner of the yard. Another field swept down to the river. A thin man with wild red hair tied back in a ponytail was tossing hay bales over the fence to some horses. He was dressed in a Stetson, cowboy boots, tight jeans and a black leather jacket with a ragged fringe hanging from the sleeves. A gold cross hung from a chain around his neck. Emlyn watched him until the man became aware of his presence.

‘What you staring at?’

The man turned back to the horses and started kicking loose hay under the fence, then picked up a hose that was trickling water into the dirt and dropped it into an old enamelled bath.

‘What’s the matter? Never seen a horse trough before, or do you fancy a swim?’ The man snickered at his own joke.

Emlyn looked at the nicotine-stained fingers. Beneath a greasy shirt cuff the blue and red of a tattoo was visible. Emlyn found it difficult to believe this could have been his father’s childhood friend.

‘Still here?’

‘They yours?’ said Emlyn. ‘The horses?’

‘Depends who’s asking.’

‘My name’s Emlyn.’ He held out his hand. ‘Wasn’t that what you were supposed to do with adults?’

‘Got a surname? Or you one of the great tribe of fatherless boys?’

‘Sylvesterson.’

Willie Musgrave stared at the outstretched hand, spat into the dirt, and rested his hands on the fence wire. The acrid smell of horse dung pricked at Emlyn’s nostrils. Suddenly he was back in rural Australia: the heat, the red soil, the bellowing of cattle.

'Yeah, they're mine.' The man made a soft crooning and clicking sound under his breath and one of the geldings ambled towards him. 'Not for long, though.'

'You're selling them?'

'Asset management. Capital appreciation. S'all crap. Anyway, I got better things to do than pass the time of day with some fuzz-faced brat whose balls only dropped last week, 'cause, whatever you want, likely as not I'll no be providing it.'

Sod you, pal! Let's see how you deal with this.

Emlyn yanked the tin from his pocket and pulled the lid free. The horseman appeared at the corner of the yard and the big chestnut gelding that had been eating from Musgrave's hand reared and thundered away across the paddock. The man's eyes flickered over the wooden figure and he crossed himself.

'Put the fucking lid back on you little—'

Emlyn replaced the lid slowly. The horseman, which Musgrave hadn't noticed, disappeared.

'Where'd you get that?' he said finally.

It was Emlyn's turn to remain silent.

'I asked you a question. Where'd you get it?'

'You're Willie Musgrave. Remember my father, do you? Because he remembers you.'

A strategy opened up in Emlyn's head. A gamble. This man's a gambler. It's all he understands. The lie came easily once he had framed it. 'He's not the only one who remembers you.'

Musgrave pulled a flask from his jacket and took a swig. His hand trembled.

'You were there when he found it, weren't you? It was snowing and McCrossan let his gun off.'

Musgrave stared into the distance as if he was remembering something painful. 'You been talking to McCrossan?'

‘Let’s just say I know things.

‘You best piss off, kid.’ There was a fierce hatred in his gaze and Emlyn flinched.

‘Before I lose my rag.’

Musgrave limped quickly towards the corrugated iron gates at the rear of the yard, slid eel-like through the gap and the steel frame swung-to with a clang. Nicotine-stained fingers appeared through the cut-outs as the chain was worked quickly in a series of loops. A padlock clicked and Emlyn was left staring at the fence, rising stockade-like in his face. He mooched down the side of the yard and into the estate and unlocked his bike. His back tyre was going down again. Bugger! Twice I’ve fixed it now, he thought. He was going to have to call into the petrol station on the way home.

Emlyn coiled the air hose and was about to hop on his bike when he saw Hugh McCrossan inside the workshop. Emlyn crossed the forecourt and entered the building.

‘Hey,’ said Emlyn, ‘I was thinking, you know, if he did have Digger, you might have an idea where—’

Hugh turned to face Emlyn, his eyes wide with fear. At the same time Ol’man McCrossan came in through the rear entrance.

‘Still vexed about that dog of yours?’

Emlyn realised too late that the car up on the hoist was the old man’s Renault. Hugh pushed a button and the hydraulics chirred and his grandfather’s car descended slowly. The tin was in his pocket. He was shaking. The old man was small but strong.

‘Okay, is this plain enough for you?’ Ol’man McCrossan made a backwards and forwards gesture. ‘Horseman—dog: dog—horseman.’

‘You’d no right to take him. I should go to the police.’

The old man was humming quietly to himself. He stopped and caught Emlyn with a cold eye.

‘By all means pop along and see Sergeant Crozier.’

Hugh shook his head quickly.

‘The terrier’s over at Hawick,’ continued the old man, ‘with a friend.’

‘This could all be complete bullshit.’

‘Aye, it could. If you want certainties, you’re talking to the wrong man, y’ken?’

Emlyn studied the old man’s weather-beaten face and the pale blue eyes, sensing patience and persistence in equal measure. He was beaten; he knew it.

‘What if I could get it, say today —now?’

‘No time like the present. Hawick, there and back —say an hour.’

Emlyn nodded.

‘Five o’clock, right?’

‘Here?’ said Emlyn.

‘Not here. Riverside Park. You know it?’

Emlyn nodded.

‘But, no horseman —no dog: we clear on that?’

Emlyn nodded again.

‘And my father?’

‘Your father’s a few slates short of a roof.’ Emlyn stared at him and the old man tapped his head. ‘Short a few pieces of furniture up in the attic, son.’

Emlyn’s skin curled cold with gooseflesh.

‘And Willie Musgrave?’

‘Like father, like son, eh? Always nosing into things that dinna concern you. Just bring the wee thing here as agreed. And on time, eh, because I’ll no wait?’

‘The sickle man —who —what is he?’

‘My, we are into the technicalities.’

‘Answer his question.’ Hugh still stood sullenly, hands in pockets, behind his grandfather. The old man turned slowly but the blow fell quick and hard, knocking Hugh sideways.

‘Leave him alone,’ said Emlyn.

‘Or what?’ said Ol’man McCrossan.

Hugh picked himself up. His eye was starting to swell and colour. Emlyn edged from the workshop and wheeled his bike from the forecourt. Clambering on, he pumped it up the hill towards home.

## 32

*Arthur's interest in women proves his downfall; he hurt too many of them. And he bedded his half-sister, Morgause. The issue of that union was Modred, his bastard son.*

*It is Modred who calls the Northern tribes to him: the disaffected clansmen, the Picts, the Irish, anyone who has a grudge or who has been overlooked once too often or who can see an opening for profit or for power.*

*Arthur has his thirteen battles; the last could have been avoided if he had listened to me. But by then it was too late. By then he would listen only when it suited. He was no longer the pliable youngster on the rock outside the forest cave. The forest gods had wrought their work: Arthur had stemmed the tide of sea-raiders and settlers and set up his court upon at Ynys Avallach where the rivers meet.*

*For Arthur, youth had given way to stiffness in the joints and a grizzled beard. For some he has been at war not only with his family, but with himself. The forest was within him and on the march and the gods would not be held back. It was no longer he who summoned them. Now they would raise him from his sleep and pitch him into the darkness, calling for his men to ride out, but there were few Saxons to be found, they had been scoured from the land. I knew it must turn to this in the end and I could do nothing but stand by and watch it happen.*

*The summer has been wet, the harvest bad. Arthur has word of a Saxon settlement to the west. He rides out, taking me with him. The moon is full and well clear of the hills when we arrive and look down on the meagre scattering of huts. A dog barks, perhaps in warning, perhaps not, and a man steps*

*from a doorway. We are hidden well below the skyline. The man stretches and returns indoors as Arthur bids his sergeant-at-arms light the torches and we canter into the valley.*

*The dogs slink away. Figures, some bearing arms, emerge from the burning huts and are cut down. Arthur spots a boy break cover and turns his mount. I watch, sickened, wanting to shout a warning. I hold my tongue instead.*

*The boy believes himself to be running, believes that he glances over his shoulder and that his feet slip on the muddy ground between the huts. Escape is his only thought. The bitter night washes like death around his face as he runs. Arthur's mare rears over him. He turns to face the animal, one scrawny arm raising his blade, and sees the sword at the last moment, a dull arc that cuts across the stars.*

*In truth the lad stands, still as a house-post, his feet rooted in terror, a dark stain spreading across his leggings, while his comrades scatter before the wheeling riders. Arthur's blade cuts deep into his neck. His last thought, before he falls, is of his mother in a doorway holding his baby sister, but that is countless miles and years across a sea, and he is drowning now and will never find his way home.*

*This is not the venerable grey-bearded king of legend; this is a house-burner, a slayer of children, a taker of women and of slaves. I see him clear his silhouette against the sky as he wheels on his horse looking for his next victim: I see what I have made him and I am sickened.*

*As it happens the settlement was not purely Saxon. Some of Modred's men were quartered there that night on their way west. Thinking themselves safe, they set no guards. One of the fallen was his Marshal. Modred is incensed. The man was his cousin.*

*The quarrel is an old one, an open sore between them, for Arthur will not legitimate the lands that Modred holds in the West, nor will he ride out to treat with him. The chieftains are becoming nervous. An edgy calm settles across the land as autumn drifts into winter.*

## 33

The doorway of the cottage stood open. Voices he did not recognise were coming from the room at the front of the cottage that the family called the 'library', and he realised the vehicle he had passed in the driveway was a police car.

'What's going on?' he asked. A police sergeant was standing by the window looking out at the garden. 'It's Dad, isn't it?'

'What did you think you were playing at,' said Bridget, 'just visiting him out of the blue like that?'

'Will you tell me what's up?' said Emlyn.

The sergeant coughed, then turned his attention on Emlyn. 'It's okay, your father's fine. I'm Sergeant Crozier. The nursing home called us out. A patrol car found him wandering on the Edinburgh road. It seems he —that he became very confused shortly after you left. Did you talk about anything that might have upset him perhaps?'

'Nothing much,' said Emlyn. 'I took the paper so he could do the crossword if he wanted to.'

His sister folded her arms and turned away towards the fireplace.

'Like crosswords, does he?' The sergeant seemed concerned to keep him on side.

Emlyn shrugged and looked at the carpet. 'He used to.'



‘He seems to have calmed down now. They’ve sedated him,’ said the sergeant. ‘So, you’ve no idea what might have set him off like that?’

‘Not really,’ said Emlyn.

‘Does the name William Musgrave ring a bell?’

Emlyn looked up and the officer continued.

‘He was raving on about this chap, Willie Musgrave.’

‘This Musgrave fellow,’ said Bridget, addressing the sergeant but eyeing Emlyn.

‘Should we know him?’

‘He’s had the odd run-in with us. Runs a builder’s yard out near the Abbotsford estate.’ The officer turned his attention to Emlyn. ‘A lad fitting your description was seen up there this afternoon. Own a blue mountain-bike, do you?’

‘What’s this got to do with my brother, officer?’

‘Probably nothing, Ma’am. Musgrave was found by a horse trough at the rear of his yard this afternoon—’

‘What do you mean found?’ said Emlyn quietly.

‘He suffered massive head injuries. At the present there’s no suspicion of foul play. It appears he may have been kicked in the head —one of his horses, possibly.’

Bridget clamped her hand over her mouth and stared at Emlyn.

‘Is he all right?’ said Emlyn.

‘He’s in the Royal Infirmary. Did you see anything —while you were up there?’

‘He didn’t really want to speak to me. He was okay when I left. He went into his yard and locked the gates.’

‘Why were you up there?’

‘He knew my dad —when they were kids. I wanted to ask him something.’

The sergeant waited.

'I thought,' continued Emlyn, 'that he might remember stuff from when my Dad was a boy. My father doesn't say much anymore because—'

'Because of his condition?'

Emlyn nodded.

The sergeant smiled and turned to Bridget. 'I'm sure it'll all come out in the wash. If your brother remembers anything significant, then ring the station.' The officer pulled his cap on.

'I'll see you out,' said Bridget. 'You —you stay right where you are.'

Emlyn stared at the endless shelves of books. Outside the police car pulled out onto the road and Bridget appeared in the doorway holding his field-glasses.

'You left them in the car.'

She tossed them at Emlyn and he slipped them into the pocket of his greatcoat.

'Who's this Musgrave character?'

Emlyn pulled a large book from between its smaller cousins.

'Archaeology. I should have guessed.'

'Your little wooden horseman —where is it?' said Bridget.

Emlyn slumped into the battered leather armchair.

'Emlyn, there was a policeman —asking questions. This man, Musgrave —and the horseman, I mean, what the hell's going on with—?'

'This is about the horseman.' Emlyn was on his feet 'Not the little wooden figure you're so upset about, real bloody horsemen.'

'I will not be sidetracked on this. This carving that you were carrying around: I want answers.'

'You really can't help yourself, can you?' said Emlyn. 'You think that the whole bloody universe can be catalogued and measured and put in convenient little pigeonholes.'

‘Let’s just say I do and cut to the chase. Where is it? And what were you doing with it in the first place?’

‘If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me, so what’s the point?’

‘Try me. *Or* try Mum.’

‘I can’t talk —you wouldn’t understand, not with your background: neither of you. Numbers: you crunch numbers —carbon dating this, thermoluminescence that — there’s no way you’re going to have a clue what I’m going on about.’

‘Right,’ said Bridget, scrolling furiously on her phone.

‘You really can’t keep your nose out of my fucking business, can you?’

‘Don’t you talk to me like that.’

Emlyn pushed past her into the kitchen.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

He flung open the back door and crunched down the gravel driveway. Bridget ran after him and grabbed his coat sleeve. She wasn’t about to let go. He wrenched his arm free and spun around to face her, extracting the tin from his pocket and waving it in her face.

‘There is no antique dealer, okay.’

‘I bloody knew it. Right, so what’s the deal then, eh?’

Emlyn’s hands were trembling. He ripped the lid off and brandishing the tin, with its figure, he stood facing his sister.

‘This is what it’s about, these little wooden horsemen. Eighteen, twenty of them —I don’t know.’

‘There’s more of them?’

‘Yeah. A group of them. I’m collecting them. You get them free in cereal packets.’

There was a scraping sound against the side of the shed; the heavy weight of a horse turned in a confined space.

‘It’s stolen, isn’t it?’

‘Sorta – yeah,’ he said, moving past her up the driveway.

Bridget’s gaze shifted to the lawn where the rider’s unseen hooves cut into turf. Emlyn could see him now even with the carving in its protective ring of stones. The horseman reined in and sat staring at him. Beneath him his mount snorted, trampling the grass.

‘What was that?’ His sister looked around nervously; her voice lacked its usual certainty. ‘What’s going on?’ She was frowning at the gathering hoof-marks on the lawn.

‘Like I told you, you wouldn’t understand.’

‘Stone-walling might work with Mum, but not me.’

‘You can see the lawn, you work it out.’

‘I’m phoning the police.’

He laughed. Hers was the same logic that he tried to use against Ol’man McCrossan up at the filling station. ‘Phone away, Sis. I’m sure they’re going to be fascinated by your tale of a phantom horseman.’

‘What horseman? Is this something to do with that figure?’ She was watching the lawn. Several fresh impressions appeared as she spoke. ‘What’s going on, Emlyn? What are those marks on the lawn?’

‘If you can’t explain them ...’ He shrugged at the lawn. ‘... then how can I explain what’s happening to me.’

‘This is non-negotiable, Emlyn.’

Ignoring her, he started towards the road. Bridget took several quick strides and grabbed his wrist, pulling him up with a jerk. It was the hand holding the tin. The carving fell onto the gravel and Bridget screamed. She was gaping in the direction of the rider for some moments before she turned to Emlyn with a pleading look.

‘What is this, some kind of joke? I mean, you’ve some friends in one of those

historical re-enactment societies or something?’

‘You can see it, can’t you?’

Quickly she positioned Emlyn between her and the rider. She still clung to his arm. Impatient, he twisted free and heard her gasp.

‘Where’s it gone?’ Her voice was fractured, panicky.

Emlyn realised that Bridget could no longer see the rider. An idea came to him and he grabbed her hand. Still holding her, he squatted and retrieved the wooden horseman. His grip was firm and Bridget had no choice but to crouch alongside him, her upturned face towards the looming rider, her eyes wide and her mouth slack. He placed the carving between the stones, slid the lid into place and pushed it down with his knee. His sister gasped as the rider vanished. Spinning on her heel, she lashed out. The slap came out of nowhere and his cheek burnt.

They were both standing now.

It’s touch, he thought. When she was touching him she’d seen it sure enough. That was it. Before they’d touched she’d only been able to see the physical impression made by the rider. Yes, he could see it, but anyone else had to be touching him.

‘You supercilious little – how’d you do that?’ said Bridget, looking this way and that. ‘Come on, I’m waiting for an answer.’

‘Well, I could say smoke and mirrors, but I’d be lying.’

‘Don’t give me any of that airy-fairy rubbish. Where’s your little mate from the pony club hiding?’

Lifting the lid, he removed the carving again, and took her hand. He could already see the horseman as he lifted the lid, but, as his fingers closed over hers, her shaking told him she could see it too. The rider lowered his lance and his horse took a few tentative steps towards them. Backing away, his sister collided with the cottage wall.

‘Where is it?’ she shrieked. ‘Where ... where’s it gone?’

‘He’s still there. You just can’t see him.’ He stepped away from her. He felt sorry for his sister; as if he’d seen her clearly for the first time, realising it wasn’t simply their half-heritage that separated them. They were different: lived in different worlds.

‘I’ve got to go, Bridget. Sorry.’

‘But ... you can’t just ... not with him sitting—’

‘No, I can’t. It’s probably best if you stay indoor. So here’s what we’ll do. You stay behind me and back around to the kitchen door. That’s right.’ Bridget followed his instructions to the letter. ‘Open the door. That’s it.’ He turned and faced her. She was open-mouthed, glancing about wildly. ‘Seriously, you best stay inside until I get back.’

‘Emlyn—’ Her voice was quivery.

‘Best do as I say.’

He closed the door gently on her and turned down the drive. The horseman kicked his mount forward and followed. He caught a glimpse of his sister’s face pressed against the kitchen window; her eyes darting, straining for a glimpse of what she knew could not be. No time for explanations right now, he thought. Not that her scientific outlook could encompass any explanation he was likely to provide.

Emlyn was already halfway down the drive. The horseman kicked his mount forward and Bridget moved aside open-mouthed. Something about the horseman did not scare him so much this time. The hair had still gone up on the back of his neck when it had appeared, but something told him it was all right this time. He stopped on the road. Hooves crunched on the gravel. The rider followed him to the end of the drive and turned to face Bridget, who bolted into the house. Emlyn started off up the road, with the rider falling in behind. He had a military escort.

## 34

*Older, wiser now is Nimuë, and ever seeking, though few know it, Arthur's downfall. Tossed aside by him as all his women are, she latches close onto me. First in friendship and our understanding of the old ways, later as— well older and unmarried all these years, I am flattered. An old man's vanity, yes, but the smell of her hair is still with me and it was by such things, together with the brightness of her mind, that I let myself be seduced.*

*Half-truths often bind men together but it is the half-truths that we tell ourselves that bind tightest. To her I am second best and always will be. What could have been if Arthur had kept her at his side rankles; he is a blackthorn long buried beneath her skin. And, although nothing shows, old pains are an itch that we must scratch.*

*There is little I do not tell her, little she does not know of Arthur and his place amongst us. She knows the legends and the truth, and laughs quietly at the stories she hears from the women at the well.*

*On a bright morning as we gather plants she pauses, studying me. You say he is of the forest, Merlin.*

*She is speaking of what is held captive in Arthur. I answer that he is.*

*That the gods of the forest live in him? They are the source of his victories and give him his strength?*

*I answer that they are and they do.*

*But, she says, you are less than happy now with your creation, are you not?*

*Innocent blood is spilt too often now, I say hastily. And there is the matter of Modred; in this he will see no sense.*

*Then use the forest to tame him, she says, smiling.*

*What is in him cannot be tamed, woman. You cannot tame the gods.*

*You summoned them once, she says, can they not be summoned again? The forest rose up, that is what you said, rose up like a man lifts a garment from his bed to put upon his back against the night cold, rose up from the land and became a giant striding across the earth, a great rustling creature of branch and bough. Not any one tree but all. All wrought into a creature of leaf and bark and root before the gods vanished and the forest again became simply the abode of wild beasts. This was your experience when they took you as a boy, was it not?*

*You speak of what you do not know, I say.*

*Was this not his experience also, the time with the bird when you both sat before the cave? All of the trees, you said. Are not twenty-three sacred? As many as there are in Arthur's guard? Surely that is no accident, Myrddin.*

*I nod in agreement. But in truth I had not thought on this until she mentions it.*

*Then take the wood and trap that which is in him. It was your power that placed them there. She says this and smiles, and the seed of understanding is sown in me. The vain will always believe that they are the source of things and I have suffered my share of vanity. But Nimuë, whose reasons are not always clear to me, has her own motives. She is with child; another of Arthur's brood.*

*And I, who can see clear beyond the borders of this world, am blind to her subtleties and devices. I do not know it yet but I am to be used and thrown away.*

*Always it seems I am late to understand her reasoning and, worse still, her motives. Have I grown slow with age? Or was she always quicker than me?*

*Arthur seeks me out; keeps me close upon Ynys Avallach. I can be found often by the river now, staring into the current at the confluence of the streams, or out past the defences where the river is*



*shallow. I bait our conversations, small morsels, hints and innuendo, and he rises like the fish that hang lazily above the gravel shoals.*

*I have had a river of time in which to contemplate my deception.*

## 35

Emlyn was already halfway to the square when his phone rang.

‘Emlyn, it’s Lindsay Fraser.’

‘I thought you and Max were still in Newcastle.’

‘Back early. She said she’d told you—’

There was long pause. ‘Hello,’ he said.

‘She said she’d told you about her mother —Maxine’s taken it real bad. I thought maybe if you came up and had a bite with us.’

‘I’m meeting someone at five.’

‘In town?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Then you’ve plenty of time. You’re on your bike?’

‘Yes.’

‘Come up for ten minutes, eh?’

‘It’s just that—’

‘Just for a cup of tea. —Please, son.’

It was the one word that might make him go. How did they know, adults? Did they have some script that was invisible to him? The one word: son. God, how he missed it from his father. With his mother it had always been Emlyn.

‘Okay,’ he heard himself say.

Emlyn sat at the kitchen table and let the warm smell of baking envelop him, watching as Mrs Fraser rolled and cut the pastry into circles with a tumbler.

‘I’ve told her you’re here,’ she said, without looking at him. ‘She’ll be down in a minute.’

Moments later, the door opened and the kitchen was filled with Max’s presence. She sat, leaning against the wall, her arm on the table.

‘Would you mind making a pot of tea,’ said Mrs Fraser without looking up. Maxine ignored the request, and continued to stare at her grandmother with ferocious intensity.

Sensing trouble, Emlyn cut in. ‘I’ve decided to—’ He had been about to say that he was taking the figure back to McCrossan when several things happened at once. As Lindsay Fraser returned from the stove carrying an empty baking tray, Maxine pulled some papers from her hip pocket. Opening one, she flattened it out on the table. It was a child’s crayon drawing of a man wearing a hat with the word ‘daddy’ in awkward lettering at the bottom.

The tray clattered to the floor. Mrs Fraser’s face was ashen. ‘Where’d you get that?’

‘What’s McCrossan to us?’ Max’s question cut through the warmth of the kitchen. Emlyn knew he was not included in the ‘us’.

‘You’ve been in my wardrobe, haven’t you?’

‘What is McCrossan to us?’ Maxine was almost shouting.

‘I was worried about you, with that lad of his. He’s no good, that one. They’re all badduns in that family.’

‘Crap!’

‘I’ll have none of that language at this table.’ But Mrs Fraser’s voice lacked its usual force.

Maxine slammed her fist down and Emlyn started.

‘So what is it with McCrossan and you? What’s your little secret?’

Emlyn sensed the fine tight thread that bound them; it had cut into Mrs Fraser over the years, was still cutting, he could see the pain of it as she struggled to form another lie.

‘Not going to tell me? How about explaining this, then?’ Maxine pulled an old envelope and an official looking paper from her hip pocket and slammed it on the table.

Mrs Fraser gasped. ‘You’ve no right to be going through my things.’

‘Your things?’ Maxine ripped the letter from the envelope and thrust it at Emlyn. ‘Read it.’ Emlyn stared at her. ‘Go on! Read it —aloud!’

Mrs. Fraser lunged across the table. Maxine shifted slightly and the letter was out of reach. Emlyn shook his head slowly.

‘Okay, I’ll read it.’

‘Maxine, don’t —*please*.’

‘I always wondered what was in that old hat box. You used to let me look when I was little. Photos, is what I remember, lots of old family photos —and a big buff envelope. But once I could read, then suddenly it was all out of bounds, wasn’t it? I wonder what that was all about, eh?’ She started to read from the paper. ‘“Dearest Lindsay,” blah, blah, “and how sorry” they are about “the terrible accident” and how “you must miss your Douglas terribly” and then we get to the main point: the point of interest in all this. “What happened happened. We can’t undo that. It’s the future, the bairn we need to think on now. We need to think carefully, Lindsay. Don’t make a rash decision that you may regret. We need to talk about this. The child needs a home, needs to know where it came from. You’re not the only one who’s on your own.”’

Maxine looked up. Mrs Fraser’s hand was clamped across her mouth. She mumbled through her fingers, ‘I never wanted this—’

‘It’s signed ‘L’. What’s that ‘L’ for, eh? Let me guess. Lovely, lonely—? And why are they so concerned with this ‘bairn’? This baby due to be born —when? The envelope’s postmarked about six months before I was born. Were you starting fill out a bit and had to leave?’

‘Stop it,’ said Mrs Fraser. ‘Please —you dinna understand.’

‘I understand plenty. *They* did, too. Well, this *they* is a he, and the he has a name. Go on, say it. Say it!’

‘I canna.’

‘L for Lawrence, eh?’ Lawrence *bloody* McCrossan, who would’ve thought it, eh?’

Maxine unfolded the official-looking document. Her eyes shone and her mouth was an ugly question mark as she smoothed the paper.

‘And my birth certificate, eh? Mum always came up with some excuse about that whenever it was needed. You always had it, didn’t you —and why? Why would your grandmother need your birth certificate, eh?’

‘I just — couldn’a tell you Maxine.’

‘Wouldn’t.’

‘I couldn’a. I know it’s hard for you to understand but—’

‘Hard! Hard! No, I’ll tell you what’s hard: having a smackhead for a mother—or is it a *sister* —that’s hard. Living on that poxy estate in Newcastle with all them no-hopers dragging us down, when all the time your real mother’s here but she’s not saying anything: that’s hard.’

‘It just happened.’

‘How did it just happen? Tell me how *it* just happened.’

‘You’ll judge me and—’

‘And what?’

‘Leave.’

‘Like I’ve somewhere to go.’ Maxine slammed the birth certificate down on the table. She was shaking with rage. Emlyn thought she might strike her mother but she stormed from the kitchen, knocking the chair over as she left.

Stiff-backed, Mrs Fraser collected the plates and placed them on the draining board. Emlyn’s chair scraped the tiles as he rose and she turned to face him. Moments later a door slammed heavily and Mrs Fraser collapsed at the kitchen table, head in hands, and her shoulders heaving silently.

‘I better go after her,’ he said, righting Maxine’s chair on his way out.

Outside the street was empty. Emlyn ran to the corner but Maxine was nowhere in sight. The sound of a motorbike starting reverberated along the back lane. Maxine shot into the street. The bike slewed around, nearly hitting a lamppost, and careered down the hill. He opened his mouth to shout but Maxine was already out of earshot. She would not have turned around anyway. He stood in the middle of the road, hopelessness and outrage washing through him. He could not face Mrs Fraser. He looked at his watch. In twenty minutes McCrossan would be arriving at the garage with Digger. Max would have to wait; for the moment the pup was his priority.

Maxine slipped between the pines trees. It was late afternoon out on the road but under the trees it was already dusk. She stopped. A light had come on in the caravan. Her stockinged feet ached with cold. Her boots were with the bike on a forestry track. She had no intention of letting McCrossan hear her follow him.

‘C’mon, make your move,’ she whispered. ‘You’ve them hid around here somewhere.’

The caravan door opened with a snick. There was the brief flare of a lighter followed by the glow of a cigarette beneath the trees.

Maxine followed, feeling the ground with her toes. Twice she located dead branches before she put her weight on them. Ahead the torch flashed out. The silence welled up around her and she waited. Had he heard her? Seen her? No. McCrossan had moved off again. Maxine could barely hear the keeper's passage through the plantation. He was moving quickly and silently.

Maxine slowed her pace, stopping every few paces to listen. Beneath the trees it was difficult to judge distance. McCrossan's torch flickered on briefly in the gloom. She concentrated on the spot where she had last seen movement. She remembered the clicking sound of the dead torch in the tumuli. Fear engulfed her. She wanted to run and forced her limbs into stillness.

He was there somewhere, standing beneath the trees, the same as she was. Her eyes made shapes out of nothing. Her stillness, the ache in her back and legs, had become a song, as she listened for any movement. A branch cracked. He was further away and in a completely different position than she had suspected, heading back towards the caravan, a shadowy figure hidden by the trees. Over by the derelict cottage McCrossan's Land Rover roared into life.

She waited until the faint echo dwindled to nothing down by the river and walked between the trees towards the spot she thought she had last seen the torch. A carpet of brown pine needles greeted her. Nothing: not even a boot mark. She began to search between the rows, looking for any disturbance and discoloration in the forest floor and wondering if she had become confused and miscounted. No, there! A scrap of bright green wool snagged low on a tree. She sunk to her knees and began sweeping the needles aside. The stones were flat and arranged in a circle. She lifted one and turned it over. Her fingers were black.

'Well, X marks the frigging spot, eh, McCrossan.'

She scraped away the pine needles and dug at the soft loam until her fingers hit something hard. Wrapped in several plastic bags was a tin. She lifted it clear of the shallow hole and ripped the bags away. On the lid a red-checked Santa Claus grinned back at her from a circle of holly.

‘Season’s greetings, McCrossan.’

Symbols had been scratched into the Christmas design: the bare metal gleamed pale. Maxine pulled the lid free. Jammed tight between sawdust were twenty-odd wooden figures. Overwhelmed by an urge to lift them out one by one, she let her fingers brush the wooden forms.

A branch snapped behind her. She spun around. A scream echoed between the trees and she realised it was hers. A rider, his leather cuirass creaking, had materialised between the trees. His lance tip was pointed at her chest. She jammed the figure back in the tin and slammed the lid on. The figure disappeared. Her hands were shaking as she sat back on her haunches.



## 36

*Wood is cut under a waxing moon and is put away to season. For each tree, we tramp deep in Cat Coit Celidon, to the sacred places, groves of ash and beech, the alder with its legs astride the stream, the solitary yew and holly. Offerings are placed at the foot of each tree before it is toppled and its trunk split open by her bondsman.*

*Over winter my beloved Nimuë carves the horsemen. My hands are old and gnarled and such work has never been my gift. Great care she takes in these images, singing the old songs that will turn the wood to her will. All winter she works, the blade bringing forth the squat figures from the wood. She does not ask permission. Nothing is spoken, only our tacit glances across the fire all those months past.*

*On a bright spring morning I return from the forest to find the figures set in a circle upon the hearthstone and my beloved Nimuë deep in thought. All that remains, she says, is for the spirit of the forest to be sung from him into the wooden likeness, and that is your task, Master Myrddin.*

*In this, great care is needed. Arthur can smell a trap or a feint like a bear noses the wind for carrion. He has a warrior's cunning. I have laid the groundwork over many months. But amongst my hints and cryptic ramblings are other signs, real enough, and there for those who can see: the red fever holds three settlements in its maw; there's news from the south of renewed raids; the crops fail—but above all else there is an omen in the night sky.*

*And to these omens is added Arthur's frustration. All summer he has tried to draw Modred forth, to tempt him down from the high country. But his bastard son—his nephew, as many now whisper—is*

*not forthcoming. Cattle raids and skirmishes prick at Arthur's pride. Modred is his blood; he has his father's skill at arms, his cunning, and will not be drawn. Not yet. And in this Nimuë's hand is at work, although I do not as yet understand how deep her plotting runs.*

*Soon Arthur will move his pieces upon the board.*

## 37

Emlyn cycled along Riverside Walk, heading for the park. The sky had darkened and there was the smell of rain on the wind. He pulled his greatcoat tight about him, aware of the tin tucked in one of the voluminous pockets. Was it his imagination or was it getting colder? The park was deserted. He sat on a bench and waited.

Ol'man McCrossan's battered green Renault pulled up across from the Park. Emlyn could see the small white and tan shape ducking back and forth along the top of the back seat. He fingered the tin in his pocket and started towards the car. The old man got out, motioning for him to stay where he was, and crossed into the park.

They faced one another on the grass. 'One wooden soldier and he's all yours. He's there in the car. You'll have him soon enough.'

Emlyn handed him the tin. Ol'man McCrossan opened it without a word and looked at him. Behind Emlyn there was the creak of harness and leather and the gentle snuffling of a horse. The old man pushed the lid back on and the sounds faded.

'You're a smart lad, scratching the signs like that. Not many would have worked that out.'

Ol'man McCrossan started back towards his car.

'Hey! My dog, you—'

'Dinna sweat, I'll fetch the dog.'

The old man signalled to somebody in the car. The back door swung open and the terrier ran into the street. There was a squeal of tyres and a delivery van braked hard to avoid the trotting animal.

‘Digger,’ Emlyn called. ‘Here boy, here.’

The terrier sniffed at the rose bed near the park’s edge and cocked his leg. Ol’man McCrossan was at the car.

Emlyn whistled. ‘Digger. Here boy, here.’

The dog was quartering the grass, preoccupied with a scent. Emlyn started towards the edge of the park, snapping his fingers as he went; that always did the trick. The terrier’s ears pricked up and he trotted half-heartedly towards Emlyn.

McCrossan’s Renault was nosing up into the town. The dog ambled up to Emlyn.

‘You bastard,’ Emlyn hissed. ‘You fucking bastard.’ Several pedestrians glanced towards the park and hurried on.

Hugh locked up the filling station workshop and wandered out onto the forecourt. He looked up at the sky; black clouds were massing over the hills. Emlyn was trudging up Castle Wynd with his bike. The terrier’s head was peeping out from Emlyn’s greatcoat.

‘Hey, you’ve got him.’ Hugh registered the look of misery on Emlyn’s face. ‘What’s up?’

‘It’s not Digger.’

‘What d’youse mean?’

‘This isn’t Digger.’

There was a peal of thunder and a rush of wind and the squall tore across the forecourt. Water cascaded from the filling station roof. Lights sprang on in every building as the clouds swept in low. They huddled behind the pumps but it was impossible to escape the wind.

‘What you gonna do?’ shouted Hugh.

Emlyn let the question be ripped away in the wind. He stared at Hugh. You’re related to Maxine, he thought. I could just tell you, blurt it out now, your father’s dirty little secret. Expose your family for what they are. What would you say? Would you believe me?

‘You all right? You’re looking a bit weird.’

Hugh was staring at him. There was genuine concern in his eyes and Emlyn felt his antipathy for Hugh’s family dissipate in the roaring sound above them. His mind drifted back to another storm, another time. He was a toddler, barefoot on his parent’s lawn as a huge storm swept in from Sydney Harbour. He remembered the crack of lightning as it hit a tree in a garden close by, the smell of ozone, and his father’s crouching run as he raced across the grass and swept him up under his arm. The thunder and lightning had scared him less than the argument that followed. His parents had fought over something. He remembered his mother at her desk in the drawing room and his father, pacing furiously and yelling as she ignored him and continued with her work.

‘Your phone,’ said Hugh. ‘It’s ringing.’

Emlyn pressed the phone to his ear.

‘This’ll shit ‘em something wicked.’ Max’s voice was breathy and excited. ‘Where are you?’

‘Hugh’s work.’ Emlyn had to shout above the roar.

‘What you doing there?’

‘I wanted to get Digger back. I couldn’t see the point any more, not after what you said at your Gran —sorry—you know what I mean. I handed it back.’

The peal of laughter was loud enough for Hugh to hear it above the din of the rain.

‘What’s so funny?’ said Hugh.

Max’s voice hardened. ‘Who’s there with you?’

‘Hugh. I told you, I’m up at the garage.’

‘Right.’ There was a pause. ‘But you’ve got Digger back?’

‘No.’

‘Then why hand the wee man over?’

‘He had a pup but it’s not Digger.’

‘I’m not following this. I’m too hyped. Meet you opposite the Crown,’ said Max,  
‘Ten minutes.’

The phone went dead.

Emlyn walked out into the rain towards Castle Wynd.

‘Hey,’ shouted Hugh. ‘Your bike.’

Hugh grabbed the bicycle from where it was propped against the pumps and followed Emlyn up the Wynd.

Hugh sprinted across the square and ducked into the bus shelter, his jacket pulled over his head against the rain. ‘Your bike’s over by the butcher’s,’ he said. Emlyn was huddled in a corner, clutching the pup. Hugh had been unable to get a word out of him on the way up Castle Wynd. ‘I’ve tucked it in behind the bin. Should be okay for a while. I can’t imagine too many are going to be out in this.’

A throaty chugging echoed up the hill. Hugh dodged out into the wind, waving frantically, as the ancient motorbike ploughed up the hill, sheets of water spraying from the front wheel. Max’s hair was plastered against her skull, her face white against her black clothes, as she squinted into the driving rain. She saw Hugh at the last moment and braked hard. The bike skidded, cracking the back tyre against the kerb. She leapt on the pavement as the machine crashed onto its side, its engine silent.

‘You look like you’ve been pulled through a hedge backwards.’

‘How I look’s my concern, okay?’ Maxine scrambled to her feet. ‘Where’s Emlyn?’

Hugh pointed to the bus shelter. Maxine dodged into the shelter.

‘I owe you an apology,’ she said haltingly. ‘All this spooky supernatural shit that you were going on about, I thought you were, you know—’

Emlyn stared blankly at the water streaming off the shelter roof.

‘Well, not, you know, mad, more sort of making it up or something.’

‘I wasn’t making it up,’ he said.

‘I know that now. I saw him, down in the wood behind McCrossan’s van. Scared the shite out of me I can tell you. Bloody great horseman, like straight out of *Braveheart* or *summat*.’

‘That day you broke down the wall —he —one of them was there then.’

‘What?’

‘The horseman, one of them leapt through the breach you made.’

‘You said nowt. Why did you not say?’

Emlyn shifted his gaze from the water and stared at Max.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I take your point. But hey —*now*. No more pissing about, right.’ She pulled a canvas drawstring bag from inside her coat and pulled out the tin. ‘He’ll be singing a bloody different song when he finds out about these.’

Emlyn stared at the tin. ‘That’s them, isn’t it?’

Maxine removed the lid. The wooden carvings sat snug in their sawdust. Hugh groaned. The others looked up: a ring of horsemen surrounded the shelter, steam coming off the animals’ flanks in the rain.

‘Cover it,’ shouted Hugh.

‘There was only the one down at McCrossan’s.’

The circle tightened around the bus shelter. Hugh pressed past Max into the corner. ‘Put the lid on.’ His voice was strained. Max replaced the lid and the riders disappeared.

‘Wow,’ she mouthed, ‘That’s dead brilliant.’ She pulled the lid clear and the horsemen rematerialised.

‘For fuck sake put the lid on.’ Hugh was yelling. Maxine did as he asked and the riders vanished again. ‘Jesus!’ he said. Then to no one in particular: ‘Those things are not toy bloody soldiers.’

‘You knew about this —these phantom horsemen?’

‘Yes and no,’ said Hugh. ‘Bits. It comes back when— Look, it’s too difficult to explain.’

‘That’s what they were talking about, the horsemen getting loose, up at the spinney.’

They turned to Emlyn but there was a vague expression on his face. Maxine spotted the terrier peeping out from under his coat. ‘You’ve got him after all, then?’

‘It’s not his pup,’ said Hugh. ‘It’s a ring-in. The cunning old sod must have got another one from somewhere.’

‘So where’s Digger?’ said Maxine.

Hugh grimaced and shook his head.

‘And why’d he hand the figure back then if he knew it wasn’t—’

‘I gave it back before—’ said Emlyn. ‘He had the pup in the car. I thought it was—’

‘Look, I’m real sorry —about Digsy an’ all. You dinna think he’s still got him—’

Emlyn shook his head.

‘Come on, the pub’s open. Let’s get in out of this.’

Maxine pulled Emlyn from the shelter and dragged him across the road. Hugh heaved the bike upright and followed.

‘How did you find them?’ said Emlyn.

‘Been watching his van. They were there sure enough. Buried out in that plantation, with a ring of his daft stones around them and them exact same marks you were talking about chalked on the underside.’



The landlord was standing in the porch watching the heaving clouds.

‘Hello, young Max. Your Gran isn’t on tonight. The missus changed the roster last week. You’re drenched, lassie.’

‘I was hoping you might let us in anyway, like?’ said Max.

‘Ach, go on then. But no mentioning it to any of your pals, I’ve ma reputation as a hard man to maintain.’ He let the three of them brush past. ‘Will you look at that water? I’ll be needing to light the fire if this lot keeps up.’

The pub was a gloomy cavern that smelt of yeast and stale cigarette smoke. The only patrons, they walked over to their usual corner. The landlord followed them in and flicked on the lights.

‘What’s the plan?’ said Hugh. ‘What you going to do with them?’

‘Burn ‘em,’ said Max. She seemed unwilling to meet Hugh’s gaze. Emlyn stared at her. ‘You heard me.’ She nodded towards the landlord, who had come out from behind the bar with a box of kindling. ‘He’s lighting a fire and I’ve got something to throw on.’ Fishing in her pocket she pulled out her purse and threw it across to Hugh. ‘You gonna just stand there or get the drinks in? Some nuts and all, like. I’m paying.’ She turned to Emlyn. ‘Gi’s the pup. I want to hold him.’

Hugh wandered across to the bar. A sprinkling of regulars drifted in. When he returned with the drinks, the landlord was on his knees, cursing, in front of the already made up fire.

‘What’s up?’ Hugh nodded at the publican, before passing Maxine her drink. He tossed a packet of nuts at her.

‘Can’t get it lit.’ She took a sip of her lemonade and dropped the pup on Hugh’s lap. ‘Here,’ she said to the landlord, ‘gi’s a go.’

‘I’ll have to grab some firefighters. You can try, if you’ve a mind.’

The landlord disappeared behind the bar. Maxine was on her knees, swearing as one after the other the matches failed.

Emlyn looked around. Ol'man McCrossan stood there, immaculately attired in his tweed jacket and cap, the spotless white shirt, the polished brogues.

Emlyn twisted round to face the old man—the bag with the horsemen was out of sight beneath the table—and as he did so, he hooked Max's bag with his foot and slid it under the bench.

Ol'man McCrossan jerked his thumb at the door and Hugh shuffled out of his seat. Hugh caught Emlyn's eye briefly and held the pup up, indicating that he had him, and then the doors swung shut.

'Damp!' Maxine threw the matchbox onto the pile of crumpled newspaper and kindling.

'Having trouble there, are we?'

Maxine looked up. Ol'Man McCrossan Senior pulled a disposable lighter from his pocket and tossed it to her.

'Try that.'

She flicked the lighter and held it to the paper. The edge darkened and charred but would not catch.

'Must be damp, like you say,' said McCrossan. 'The paper, I mean. What you need is some old, dry wood.'

Maxine pocketed the lighter, pushed past the retired keeper, and plonked down on the padded bench seat. Emlyn could see she was feeling for the bag with her feet. He shook his head imperceptibly. She picked up the signal and settled back.

'Just gi's 'em here, eh. You don't know what you're on, either of you. Messing with things beyond your ken, you are.'

Maxine stared at the old man and then looked away.

‘I’ve seen your bag there under the table. Now tell me why, my wee girlie, I shouldn’a just take them off you now, if I’ve the mind.’

‘Screaming’s very useful,’ said Maxine. ‘Us *wee girlies* do it quite well, like.’

‘Think you’re a clever wee thing, don’t you lassie, but you’ll leave the pub soon enough.’ He stared between each of them for several seconds, and then moved off across the bar and sat down. There was a full pint on the table in front of him.

‘Sod him,’ said Maxine. ‘Sod the lot of ‘em.’

‘Shit! Think —bloody think.’

‘What’s up?’

‘What day—? Wednesday: brilliant. And it’s nearly six.’

‘So what?’ said Maxine.

‘Wait here.’

‘Hey, you’re not leaving me here with that creep?’

Emlyn held up his hand, fingers splayed.

‘You better not be any more than five minutes either.’

The grandfather clock in the hall was chiming six. Upstairs, the chessboards were set out exactly as before. The room was empty; nobody had arrived. Scots’ weather, you could rely on it every time. He took a final look into the landing and then, dodging between the tables, he crossed to the cupboard. Unlocked. Brilliant! He pulled out a largish tin with tape on the lid: it was marked ‘spare pieces’. He opened it and tipped the contents onto the bottom shelf. Shutting the cupboard, he walked to where the Lewis chess set sat on its low table. He stared at the pieces, trying to judge size and weight. He needed enough pieces to fool that old bastard downstairs.

Quickly, he shot the pawns into the tin—the first few rattled horribly and he glanced over at the door—and then he selected four of the smaller court pieces. Picking up the

board, he shot the remainder onto the sofa and pushed them down behind the cushion; the board he slid out of sight beneath one of the armchairs.

Out on the landing he stuffed the tin under his greatcoat and leant over the balustrade. No sign of anyone. Down the stairs, slow—slowly—and through the double doors—hurry and Ol'man McCrossan will spot it straight up.

He pushed open the swing doors. The bar had filled up. People were shaking coats off and talking about the weather. He slipped between them and plonked down alongside Max.

'Where the hell have you been?'

Emlyn glanced across at Ol'man McCrossan. A large group had come in and had halted, dithering and chiaccking with one another near the door. A discussion broke out about whose round it was. McCrossan's view of them was momentarily blocked. Emlyn dragged out the tin and put it on the seat between them: 'See,' he said.

Maxine bent forward and shook her head.

'Two tins? I dinna see what—'

'We can't stay in the pub forever. You can't burn them here, not now, too many people. Besides, the fire's not lit. Come closing time, he'll have us for sure. So, we play by our rules, not his. Which means we leave, now. He's not expecting that. He'll follow, right? Make sure he sees you throw me the tin. We've a fifty-fifty chance.'

Maxine nodded. 'Same as when Bridget forgot her bag.'

'Too right,' continued Emlyn. 'He's already cottoned on that we've some way of protecting the figures, otherwise they'd be out in the square—all twenty of them. I mean, you saw what happened when you pulled the lid off out there. I reckon that's what he homed in on—when the riders appeared. He must be tuned into them or something. He comes after us—we'll have the odds in our favour. It's our best chance. Trust me.'

The old man's eyes gleamed over the rim of his pint.

'Best head off. If someone discovers the chess set's gone missing it won't take him long to put two and two together.' Emlyn stuffed the tin into Maxine's bag and squeezed out between the tables. He turned to her as they pushed their way out of the rapidly filling bar. 'Make sure you throw me the right tin, okay?'

McCrossan Senior watched as the door hissed shut behind them and then tossed down his pint.

38

*He has always listened to me. Less, it is true, in these later years, but still he comes before each sortie, each campaign, and asks about the signs and omens. Then he seems as the child I once nurtured. Standing before me, asking on his fate. Tomorrow, is that the fateful day? Will he ride home to his women-folk?*

*This time, on the eve of the battle at Camlann, I look into his eyes and lie.*

*The signs are ill, I say.*

*He says, Ill? How so?*

*Three ravens up at Black Birren.*

*He shrugs and laughs. Only three?*

*Picking— I hesitate. I have little stomach for this. Picking at the carcass of a she-bear, I say quietly.*

*He turns pale, then flushes, clutching at the jet amulet that hangs about his neck. The leather thong is threaded with a rearing bear no bigger than a child's thumb.*

*You think it is time? I have hardly begun and I have you to protect me. Surely it cannot—*

*I've been wrong in the past.*

*But I have already turned my face from his.*

*You must be wrong, he says. I feel no such doubts.*

*Doubt is writ large across his face. He walks to the doorway and pauses.*

*You could—*

*Yes, I say, but this time it should not be only you. Bring your guard. I will sing you all.*

*Brawling and bragging, dressed only in their breeches and carrying their weapons, they come to the hall. Some are drunk, laughing and swaggering, charged with the moment and the coming fight. Others, the recent converts, enter quietly and a little apart from their comrades. A few choose not to come this night—their priests have told them that the old ways are full of traps for the unwary soul—and these Arthur has replaced with headstrong youths and older men fallen from favour. There are faces I do not recognise; Arthur has alienated many of the old guard. I will make it as easy for them as I can. I have placed a wooden cross, no higher than a toddler, beneath the watch-beam. It is common knowledge that Arthur has taken the faith of these river-washers only to keep the chieftains aligned with his purpose.*

*The smoke from the fire makes the air thick and aromatic. They sit in a circle, coughing and calling to one another. Arthur comes last and sits cross-legged, while I weave in and around them, chanting and calling out for the power I need. In time they fall to silence; bored, perhaps, or each in his own thoughts.*

*Arranged unseen around the hall sit the wooden figures; wedged between a high cross-beam here, behind the leg of a trestle there, hidden in the deep shadows hard against the wall. For each man that sits cross-legged and unknowing by the fire there is a corresponding wooden figure. Tears run down Arthur's face. He seems relieved as he cries out from his trance. But the shadows hide my love also. Nimuë sings a different song, whispering the lines that I leave out. We make a powerful duet this night.*

## 39

Outside, the rain had turned to flurries of snow. Under the sodium lights Emlyn could see that Max was trembling. He put his hand on her shoulder for a moment and then withdrew it.

‘He’ll be out any second,’ said Max. ‘Best place ourselves as strategically as possible, eh?’

‘Let’s stick together until he comes out. My bike’s by the butcher’s.’

Ol’man McCrossan emerged from the Crown, pulling on his gloves. Emlyn and Maxine had reached the far side of the square. He felt an overwhelming desire to run but instead turned and faced the old man.

‘Now,’ he whispered. ‘The tin. Quick! And move away after, not too far but like you’re watching but scared to get too close.’

Emlyn held his backpack open and Maxine slid the tin inside. Ol’man McCrossan was approaching across the cobbles.

‘Well, are the wee figures to find their way back to their rightful—?’

‘Owners?’ Emlyn’s breath plumed in the night air.

‘I was going to say ‘place’. They’re of this place, if not this time.’

Maxine backed away towards the shop fronts.

‘How old?’ said Emlyn.



‘Some things exist outside words, son. So you found where Lawrence had them hid, eh? You’re a fast learner, I’ll give you that. You’ll have some of your own markings in there with them. Copied from the wall, no doubt. The old signs hold them back but — not entirely. They’ve tasted freedom once too often today. Cold enough for you, is it?’

‘I’ve no time for you riddles, McCrossan.’

‘Arthur’s last battle was fought at this time of year, on just such a day: bitter cold, so it’s said.’

Ol’man McCrossan took a step forward, as if testing an invisible barrier. Something hard bumped the back of Emlyn’s legs and he glanced down. The heavy granite horse trough was at his knee. He edged around it, putting it between himself and the keeper. Something was wrong. Water usually trickled from the lead piping even though horses were seldom seen in the square nowadays. The thin stream of water was trickling down an icicle; the surface of the trough was glazed with ice. Emlyn looked up. The old man was staring at him, his eyes hard under the brim of his cap.

‘This isn’t a normal weather, something’s leaking from your wee tin box there. It’s not just the marks, it’s the singing that holds them back.’

‘I’ll still give you a run for your money.’

‘Lead on, then. These old legs have seen their share of moorland.’

A low singing echoed off the shop fronts.

‘Run, Maxie, run!’

Maxine took off towards the River Stairs. The old man advanced on Emlyn, a low drone escaping from between his lips.

‘That won’t work,’ said Emlyn. ‘I don’t know why. But it doesn’t with me.’

McCrossan stopped singing and a muffled silence filled the square. No car’s engine broke through the whirling snow: no footfall: no movement. The whiteness settled on

their shoulders and clung to their hair. The tinkling jangle of harness rattled in Emlyn's head. He strained his ears. Hoof-falls echoed eerily in dark enclosed spaces.

'You can hear them,' said the old man.

But the spell was broken and Emlyn looked about him. The snow was already thick on the ground. The low drone of McCrossan's Land Rover could be heard climbing Castle Wynd.

'That'll be ma son. He was to put them all safe in his hidey-hole. But he wouldn't listen, had to have it his way. He'll not be happy to be outsmarted by a slip of a girl.'

Hooves clattered somewhere in the streets behind him. This was not in Emlyn's head. The keeper's Land Rover turned into the square.

'You youngsters never learn, do you?'

Emlyn backed away towards the shops and, snatching his bike from beside the butcher's, was away across the square towards Castle Wynd. At the corner he glanced back. The old man was climbing into the Land Rover. Emlyn plunged down the hill, his tyres sledding on the treacherous surface.

Braking was a nightmare; corners impossible. The last steep run down to the Marchbank was too much; Emlyn felt the machine slew away from under him. The bike hit the litter bin side on, pitching him into the snow, and lay with its front wheel buckled and misshapen.

Leaving the bike, he plunged on. The snow fell thick now, making the white flanks of the Marchbank into an eerie, soundless tunnel. He followed the loop of the road until he came out onto the straight. Ahead in the whirling darkness somewhere stood his mother's cottage and the bridge.

His phone rang. The screen displayed his sister's number. He slid the phone back in the pocket of his greatcoat and stood, listening. No hooves. He tuned his ear tighter—no jingle of harness—and then staggered on through the snow, slipping, picking himself

up, and slipping again. He slowed to a walk. Why had he come down here? You should have stayed in the town, in between the buildings. You could've out-manoeuvred them there, you idiot. Here? His mother's cottage stood lifeless behind the garden wall as he trudged past. Ahead, the bridge was a dark throat in the snow. He was being swallowed. He could go no further. Something terrible was about to happen.

As the Land Rover disappeared slowly from the square, leaving only its tracks, Maxine stepped out from her hiding place. The snow was already ankle deep and the cold seemed to have taken on a crystalline strength that made breathing painful. She felt the weight of the figures in their tin. She would burn them and put an end to it. She hurried into the driving snow.

Maxine unlatched the gate into the laneway, careful not to make a sound. The dull squawk of the television spilled out into the yard. She pushed open the shed door and switched on the light. Crouching down on the oil-stained concrete, she stared at the tin. No, there's no going back now. Forget all that archaeological, historical crap. They're just wood, dead wood. And dead wood's for burning.

At the back of the shed she found a battered fruit crate stuffed with newspaper and kindling. Rolling some newsprint into balls, she tipped the kindling on top of it and pulled the lighter from her pocket.

'Are you mad?' Hugh stood in the doorway, snow swirling around his shoulders. He was still holding the pup.

'What the hell are you doing here?'

'I was watching from the other side of the square. I followed you.'

'Then help me burn them,' said Maxine with a scornful look. 'Or are you just like the rest of your tribe?'

‘Burn away. But in here? Look at the floor. There’s enough oil soaked into that concrete to set the street alight.’

Maxine stared at him. She had misread him.

‘Where then?’

‘Not here, for sure, unless you want to burn your gran’s place to the ground.’

‘The spinney: we’ll burn them there.’ She looked at him. ‘It’s where we found them.’ She couldn’t explain it but the spinney was calling her; what had started up on McCrossan land was to be finished there.

Hooves clattered on the cobbles out in the laneway. She stood up and looked at Hugh.

‘Emlyn’s some sort of decoy, am I right?’

Maxine looked at him. You’re my half-brother, she thought. Same blood, same skin and bone: in part at least. Well then, let’s see if blood’s thicker than water, like.

‘He’s a chess set he nicked from somewhere.’

‘My grandfather’s a hard man.’

‘He’s in this, same as me: same as you, now. And I’ll not give them back, not after — not until I get the truth.’

Hugh was staring at the darkened glass of the shed doors. Huge shadows moved outside in the dimly lit laneway. A hoof crashed against the woodwork.

Maxine snatched up the tin. ‘Damn, the bike’s still up behind the pub. Come on.’

‘They’ll not burn in this weather. Got any petrol?’

‘No. Grab that crate. It’s full of kindling.’

‘Newspaper. There’s some in the corner there.’ Hugh snatched a wad and jammed it between the kindling and the side of the crate.

‘Yep. It’ll have to do.’

Another kick resounded against the doors, splintering one of the panels.

‘The pup?’ he said.

Maxine snatched the Jack Russell, dropped him into a box of oily rags. ‘He’ll be fine. Come on, we’ve enough to worry about.’

Hugh grabbed some of the rags and stuffed them in his pockets. ‘They’ll burn well,’ he said, as Maxine yanked him through the side door and closed it.

Crossing the yard, she eased open the back door and they slipped through the house. The television was still blaring from the kitchen as she pulled the front door closed with her key.

## 40

*All Arthur knows is that he feels uncannily himself as he sits astride Llamrei, his battle-mare. He reads this as the protection that he sought from me; reads it as strength, as a vindication, after all, is he not riding out to keep the clans together and to hold back the Saxon hordes? Is he not riding out against the usurper, Modred?*

*He is not to know the real reason he feels so 'uncannily himself'. He believes the gods are still in him and he will call them up in his battle lust. But the spirit of the trees has deserted him, seeking the dark oak wood that it came from, the carefully carved figure wrought by my beloved that he carries. And each of his guard, the twenty-three men he trusts with his life, carries a similar figure, tucked into a saddlebag or pouch, or sequestered beneath some article of clothing.*

*But he is not to know this.*

*He trusts me—as I trust Nimuë.*

*Arthur is not the only one to have sat beside the fire with her and gazed into her eyes.*

*The memories are there and I slip them on like clothes.*

*Which figure is that, I ask, suddenly full of doubt, that you carve so deftly?*

*A warrior, she replies.*

*His guard have names.*

*If I said Cei, with his beard like a spade, she says, would you believe me?*

*I nod, even in my doubt.*

*Then it is Cei.*

*There are no gods in these men, I say. All that moves them is Arthur himself, that and his cause.*

*To trap them bodes ill.*

*But she will not listen, arguing that with his guard roaming the country nothing is certain. Her brief time at Arthur's side has taught her much of politics and intrigue.*

*I did not see that it was his death that she desired.*

*Nor do I ask what plans she has for the figures. That she has a special place, a dark tomb fashioned by our forefathers, the workers of bronze, a narrow cleft of darkness that she sees as sacred—none of this the sight reveals. It is there she will place the figures once she realises that she cannot control what she has imprisoned in the heart of the oak.*

*But for now, my mind cannot, or will not, take in our subterfuge. It is a fundamental mistake on my part.*

*For her treachery goes deeper than this.*

*There is another figure, carved by her from oak cut deep in the forest. No bondsman has touched this wood, no-one has seen the tree fall or heard her sing the words of power; there is no-one to whisper warning in my ear. The carving lies hidden from my eyes. No horseman this, no warrior, but a cloaked figure with a staff.*

## 41

Emlyn stood by the bridge, listening. The great soft flakes that earlier had drifted down out of the darkness had given way to mean flurries that whipped across the ground as if in search of someone or something. The hedgerows creaked and sighed under the constant battering of the wind, while in the wood across the river the bare fingers of the trees clawed the sky. A voice echoed in his head:

*Death stalks us all. She is a fey companion and will drink from any well.*

The voices were bad now.

He had learnt to tell them apart. The old man's voice was mellifluous; he minded it less than the child's, whose tone was sharp and insistent. He knew he was not mad, rather they could be likened to some part of himself that he could not control, dogging him in both his waking hours and his dreams.

Headlights swept across the Marchbank and a vehicle crawled out onto the straight. The driver switched to high beam. Emlyn shielded his eyes as the Land Rover crawled closer. When it was level with his mother's cottage, Emlyn skidded across the bridge and climbed over the stile at the end of the parapet wall. The embankment fell away to the river in a white curtain. His feet slipped and he was down the bank on his back, a tangle of arms and legs and a flurry of powdery snow, the chessmen rattling in their tin.



Up on the bridge McCrossan killed the engine. Emlyn picked himself up and looked around. There was nowhere to run. The riverbank stretched empty and white on either side. He moved down along the heavy stonework of the bridge towards the bank and stared at the river. A sheet of ice, thick enough that there was no sense of the water passing beneath it, had crept out along the masonry pier.

The black branches of a tree, uprooted by the spate and washed downstream, were wedged beneath the first arch, while the trunk, skewed against the bank by the power of the water, sat locked in the ice. He stamped his boot down: the ice held. He stared out to where the river ran free of ice beneath the central arch and remembered his leap across the Edderton Water. If he slipped here the heavy greatcoat would pull him under. He ripped it off, threw it up the bank and then inched tentatively onto the ice, moving out alongside the tree. A dead branch presented itself. He reached for it, missed, and went down hard. But the ice held. He scrambled upright between two broken branches. Holding one, he balanced on the other. He was shaking, whether from the thought of what might happen or from the intense cold, he was not sure.

‘Cold enough for you?’

Ol’man McCrossan was eyeing him from the bank. At his back stood a rider; the animal’s head was bowed and its breath plumed in the cold air. Emlyn caught movement up by the bridge and McCrossan slithered down the bank, only to stand silently alongside his father.

‘The lad still doesn’a ken what happened that day up at the spinney with his father and Willie Musgrave,’ said the old man. ‘That what this is all about, eh?’

‘You cursed him. You put something on him and —and he wasn’t the same anymore.’

‘He sung him,’ said the son. ‘Sung away his memory. Cold it was, like this. But he wasn’t a like all the other kids, he was different, a dreamer, and the singing —well, it sung him into the dream that is the horsemen and he never really came out.’

‘Young Lawrence here was at school with him. The seeds were already there, all that rubbish about Arthur and his knights and chivalry.’

‘Gi’s the bag, eh?’

‘Oh, he’ll be giving us the bag all right.’ Ol’man McCrossan stepped towards the riverbank. Emlyn scabbled into a cleft on the tree trunk, his feet slipping on the snowy surface. Grabbing a branch, he steadied himself.

‘Careful,’ said the younger man, ‘you’ll have him in the water.’

‘If you’d listened to me, we wouldn’t a be standing here.’ The old man turned his attention back to Emlyn.

‘None of this makes any sense, I know,’ said the younger McCrossan, ‘not from where you’re standing, leastways. The wee horsemen, they’ve been contained time out of mind, generation after generation. The name, McCrossan, means ‘Son of the Rhymer’. Each man, the first son—’

Ol’man McCrossan’s tone was scornful: ‘This the full historical tour or the cut-price no-frills job?’

‘Each man,’ continued the gamekeeper steadily, ‘the first son, the son that survived, women too when there were no boys, was told their place, what they were to do. Leave the valley by all means, that’s what ma father said, but when you come back, if you come back, and you take the oath and sing the stones up at the spinney, then there’s no leaving.’

‘You make it sound like you had no choice,’ said Emlyn.

‘The stones dinna give up their own so easily. A few have tried. But there’s always been another to step into his boots. Now gi’s the wee men and we can all away to our respective firesides.’

Max would be trying to burn the figures. Maybe they were wreathed in flames now. Doubt crept in. He remembered the unlit fire back at the Crown and the landlord with his damp matches. He could see Max struggling with the flame from McCrossan’s lighter and the charred paper. She would need every minute he could give her.

‘Okay. They’re yours.’ Emlyn swung the bag as if he were about to throw it onto the bank and then stopped. ‘But I don’t understand how—’

‘There’s a power in them that comes from—’

‘Enough o’ this.’ Ol’man McCrossan cut his son off with a wave. ‘Can you not see what’s going on here. He’s stalling for time.’ He took a step forward onto the ice only to be held back by his son.

‘Wait.’ The gamekeeper’s eyes searched Emlyn’s until he looked away. ‘He’s no got them.’

‘What are you talking about, man,’ said his father. ‘The figures were gone, you said so yourself. You think this weather’s just upped out of nowhere? He’s them in the bag.’

The gamekeeper shook his head. ‘Whatever he’s in that bag, it’s not them.’

‘You’re talking bollocks, as usual. He’s them in a tin. I saw it. The lass threw it to him.’

The son ignored the comment, speaking quietly. ‘Show me the tin, Emlyn.’

Emlyn waited defiantly. They had him.

‘Santa —there was a Santa on the lid. Show us the tin and then—’

Cursing, Ol’man McCrossan was onto the ice before his son could stop him. He snatched at Emlyn, missed, and then threw himself at the bag. His fingers caught the strap, tearing the fabric, as they went down onto the ice together. The tin bounced once

and the Lewis Chessmen went spinning towards the water. Emlyn gasped as his foot pushed through into the icy water. McCrossan Senior was on his knees, his feet scrabbling for a hold as he tried to prise himself upright using Emlyn's shoulder. The old man's face was inches from his own. 'Just a few chessmen, that's all,' said Emlyn.

'You cunning little shit.'

A deep groan echoed under them and for a moment Emlyn thought the old man was having a heart attack.

'Pity about your dog, though.' The groan transformed into a squealing creak and their eyes locked over the bag. 'Still you've a new'n, now.'

Emlyn saw the weighted bag, the splash as it was flung into the darkness from the bridge. He hardly had time to cry out before he was dragged beneath the black waters of the Yeave.

Hugh kept the motorbike to the side away from the drifts that covered the hedges and gates. The cold pierced everything; his fingers were numb in his gloves and he was shivering. Maxine clung to his back, the box of kindling wedged between them. He could feel her trembling through his jacket.

'We should turn back,' he shouted.

The bike slewed on a corner, its front wheel no longer steering the machine and they nearly came off in a snowdrift.

'No! Keep going,' yelled Maxine.

McCrossan stared dumbstruck at the swirling water. Seconds had passed before he registered the white silk snagged on the black waterlogged timber. The boy had been wearing a scarf. McCrossan moved upstream of the dead tree where the ice was thickest, and grabbed a branch. With his free hand he reached out and rolled the silk around his

wrist. He felt the jerk of the water in his shoulder as the boy's body turned slowly in the current. He hauled at the scarf. The lad's head broke surface, his eyes wide with fear. Christ, he was still breathing, McCrossan shifted his grip to the heavy waterlogged clothing and slid him up on to the bank. The boy's hand snatched at the scarf and wrenched it loose as he took in the bitter air.

'I've some blankets and a sleeping bag up in the Land Rover.'

Emlyn scrambled to his feet. 'My coat,' he stammered.

McCrossan fetched it and draped it around Emlyn's shoulders.

'We need to get you to the truck.'

'My hand.'

The splintered end of a tree branch had pierced the pad of his thumb. The snow was tinged red at his feet. McCrossan grabbed Emlyn's scarf and bound it quickly around the wound. 'It'll do for now,' he said. 'Come on.'

Emlyn remained motionless, looking down at the hole in the ice.

'Your father—'

'River took him,' said McCrossan. 'C'mon, there's nothing to be done.' He took Emlyn's arm and helped him towards the road. 'The horsemen —has the lass got them?'

Emlyn looked at him as he climbed shakily over the stile. 'She was going to burn them.'

'Burn them? But—'

'How's it feel not to know what's going on?'

'You think this is about gloating? Are you mad, boy, or what?'

'The horsemen will be free. What's trapped in them will be free.'

'Free! Trapped! An' what is it you think is in those figures?'

'Arthur. His men. His knights ranged in a circle.'

‘Arthur? Oh he’ll be free, all right.’ McCrossan pulled the bedding from the Land Rover. It smelt of dogs but he took it and pulled them around him. ‘Hop in.’

McCrossan slammed the rear door, slid in opposite Emlyn. The gears crunched and they crawled onto the bridge.

‘That’s no king, no warlord. That’s the old Gods —the forest itself. Twenty-three figures. All carved from different wood, different trees: rowan for magic, oak for strength and leadership. You want me to go on?’

‘But the legend of the Sleeper under the Hill. It’s a local legend. I thought that—’

‘Best you listen hard, boy, time is running out. Aye, the figures, they each represent Arthur, his men, who fought alongside him. They have their names: Cei, Bedwyr, Gwalchmai. Warriors. Brigands. Freedom fighters. Fighters they were, whatever you want to call them. But Arthur, and the rider carved in his likeness, are different from the others. He had the seed of the old gods planted in him as a child and that was their undoing. He could not be controlled. He became wild and cunning like an animal. They called him ‘The Bear’. That is what Arthur means: bear! What’s trapped in that figure doesn’t see through our eyes, it’s blind to pain, blind to the suffering of others. Now, will you tell me for God’s sake, is she up at the spinney?’

‘I’m not sure. Everything happened so quickly after I gave you back the other figure.’

‘We best try it first.’

With an awful delicacy, McCrossan inched the vehicle up over the bridge.

‘Does this thing have a heater?’

McCrossan pulled a couple of vents open and a blast of warm air rose around Emlyn’s legs.

‘We couldn’t light the fire in the pub,’ said Emlyn. His teeth had begun to chatter uncontrollably. ‘Not even wi-with —with the lighter we were given.’

‘They’ll not take fire willingly but—’ McCrossan glanced across at Emlyn. ‘One of us, a keeper, could burn them. Just pray she hasn’t torched the one that matters.’

They glanced across the cab at each other.

‘She’s your daughter, isn’t she?’

The gamekeeper sat hunched over the wheel, his eyes narrowed, concentrating on every dip and turn as the Land Rover crawled up the valley. The snow was being driven straight off the great drifts piled against the hedgerows and onto the windscreen. The wipers slushed it away but he could barely see. They came around the bend and nearly saw the animal too late. A shaggy brown beast was caught in the headlights, running in front of them with an awkward shambling gait.

‘What’s that?’ cried Emlyn. ‘Is that what I think it is?’

McCrossan glanced at him briefly and nodded.

‘How?’ said Emlyn. ‘What’s happening?’

The bear shuffled down a wooded track. Emlyn swivelled in his seat and watched the animal disappear into the whiteness. McCrossan drove on with an intensity matched only by the silent snow-shrouded night.

## 42

*As the Bards tell, I have watched over battles in the forefront of the host, I have been held in stocks and fetters, I have drunk from the Hag's cauldron. I have borne a banner before Alexander. I have held a sword and seen other men's blood seep into the earth. Death stalks us all. She is a fey companion and will drink from any well.*

*Arthur dies, this we know. It is writ large in legend and story: The Once and Future King.*

*And what of me? What of my death?*

*I wander the forest, an old man alone with his ravings, waiting for death to find me, for although I know the manner of my demise, the hour I cannot see.*

*The trap is set by Nimuë: not only for Arthur, but for me also.*

*It is a cruel hardness that makes the track set before a man's feet a path of riddles. So long have I proclaimed my death that I am blind to the signs. The forest is at once a safe retreat and a place of menace, for it is not only the dwelling place of animals but of men.*

*Too late I see how my death has been engineered. My usefulness has waned. She has other plans, more powerful friends now that Arthur is no more. She hides her true faith and joins the river-washers. A wandering enchanter is a threat to those who will have the new ways swallow up the old.*

*They say it was some shepherds, new converts to the faith, but this I doubt. No, they were too well fed, these liegemen of her new husband, dressed as shepherds.*



*The catcalls, the first stone, it is all there. For all my powers I cannot save myself. I totter at the river's edge, heading for the shallower water of the ford so that I may escape my tormentors. The stones hit hard against an old man's flesh. It is a dream that I have dreamed a thousand times and will continue dreaming: the stones, the muddy bank, the fall towards the green sliding water and the brutal cry as the pointed spear of the fish trap pierces my side. The green waters are a relief. The twisting eddies and currents speak the language of madness and of dreams. For that is what I have become—a dream within a dream.*

## 43

The riders sit motionless, the horses with their heads down, the breath of man and beast pluming in the air, each man holding a torch. The flames blaze cold, untouched by the winds of this world. Beyond sleeplessness and edgy with fear, they shift on the backs of their ponies: soldiers who have a task to do and want an end to it. For some an end had already come. Human heads hang draped across saddles, the long flaxen hair bloody and knotted.

‘Go on, burn them,’ said Hugh. ‘Best thing.’

Maxine knelt in the snow beside the fruit crate and piled the scantlings and off-cuts over a heap of newspaper.

‘The damn lighter won’t do anything. The wind—’ She glanced at the sky. The clouds were gone, the snow was no longer falling; an icy silence had descended on the world. A distant baying drifted down from the hills.

‘What’s that?’

‘A dog or something,’ said Hugh. She could tell from his face that he was thinking the same thing as her. An answering howl came from the head of the valley.

‘Let’s burn them and get out of here.’

‘The paper,’ said Maxine, ‘I can’t get it to catch.’

‘Here. Give it.’ Hugh knelt beside her and flicked the lighter. The flame took on the paper and blew out. He shielded it with his hands. The oily rags caught, sending a spiral of black smoke into the night; flames licked at the kindling.

‘Now,’ said Hugh. ‘Throw them on before it dies down.’

Maxine pulled the tin from her pack. Now it was in her hands she hesitated. The fire spat and hissed in its bed of snow.

‘C’mon! What’re you waiting for? I thought you wanted to burn them?’

‘I do, it’s just that—’ Maxine shuddered violently. Still invisible to the two youngsters, the riders sat impassive in their circle. A rider broke ranks. Their leader spurred his chestnut mare, Llamrei, to a walk, moving from the shadow to firelight, until the point of his lance was between Max’s shoulder blades. ‘What was that?’ she said, looking over her shoulder. ‘Somebody just walked over my grave.’

She clutched the tin to her, reluctant to remove the figures, and the horsemen shifted uneasily on their mounts. A gelding stamped and whinnied.

‘You hear that?’ she said, spinning on her heel. The rider’s lance was at her breast, the point snagging her clothing, and she shuddered again, brushing away an imaginary hand. ‘They’re here: I know it. We just can’t see them, Hugh. And it’s so cold.’

The wind died. The flames sent sparks up towards the treetops and the drone of a diesel engine came across the snowy stillness.

‘They’re here! The keepers,’ said Maxine. ‘They’ve found us.’ She looked at Hugh, saw his confusion, and prised the lid free.

Then she saw him.

She knew him immediately. And, although—in the way the mind works in moments of great fear—she registered every tiny detail, the mounted man before her looked nothing like the images of the Hero-King she had been fed as a bairn. He was short and his hair was thinning and dark.

His eyes held hers and she felt the darkness run through her.

Her coldness came now from a source other than the deep snow and the biting air. Arthur's mare took a half-step and she felt the cold steel prick her shoulder. Blood trickled down inside her shirt.

'He's real, isn't he?'

'Yes,' whispered Hugh. 'The fire —throw them on the fire.'

He dared not look directly at the riders and let the flickering fire fill his vision. The air held the smell of leather, sweat and fresh horse dung; a memory of something long past.

'They're all around us,' he said. 'Do something!'

Maxine's fingers closed over a carving. Pulling it free, she tossed it into the flames.

'Max! Max! Don't burn it.' A voice was calling her name. 'For God's sake don't burn it.'

'Emlyn,' she wailed.

Confusion swallowed her. McCrossan stood inside the ring of trees, a dark shadow in the firelight.

'Where is he?' she screamed. 'What have you done to him?'

'Nothing, lassie, he's here. But have you burnt any of them?'

'I'll burn all of them. Where is he?' She threw another carving into the fire.

'Dinna do that, for God's sake. You've no idea what you'll unleash.'

'As if I care.'

Emlyn stumbled into the clearing, stood a second beside McCrossan, and then staggered forward and sank to his knees near the fire. In a single bound Maxine had cleared the flames and the rider's lance found only air where her throat had been. The tin fell from her hands, scattering the carvings in the snow at her feet.

'He went in the river,' said McCrossan. 'Keep him warm at all costs.'

Maxine knelt beside him and took his hand in hers. His fingers were freezing and he was shivering uncontrollably. An old sleeping bag and some threadbare blankets were draped stole-like around his shoulders. Maxine pulled the blankets tight about him.

‘You’ll be okay.’

‘The o-old man,’ croaked Emlyn. ‘Through the i-ic-ce.’

His words slapped her mouth open and stunned her into stillness. She heard Hugh groan behind her. The sickle man: the phrase from the note Emlyn had shown her. She could see them: the peasants bent low, cutting the grain, their gleaming blades moving in unison. Poor harvests and harsh winters. Death moving from hut to hall; no one safe. Her grandmother’s— mother’s—old saw: the wolf from the door —keep the wolf from the door. Keep the sickle man from the door. Keep him away at all cost.

Death was on the move.

Maybe it was her death? Or Emlyn’s? Or Hugh’s?

What was happening to them, to her?

McCrossan was on his hands and knees in the snow. He was murmuring. For a moment she thought he was praying and she started to laugh. She thought she heard him say ‘I’m not strong enough by half.’ But she could not be sure. The murmuring took on a new shape and changed to a strange low chant.

Maxine watched, immobile, as the burly figure that was Arthur held out his lance to another rider, dismounted and drew his sword. His eyes were on her now; she knew his cold desire and it was for her to burn the figures. He stepped around the fire and raised his sword. The bitter touch of it was beneath her jaw and the cold breath of iron rose in her nostrils. She looked away, pulled a figure from the snow and tossed it into the flames. The wood flared, burning quickly.

And another.

Then two more.

‘The others, yes, if you have to.’ McCrossan’s voice came at her from a cold distance. She had stepped into an older world when she picked up the figures. ‘Time, we need time,’ continued the keeper. ‘The others can do nothing without him. But not his: not in the flames, or we’re lost. Not his, y’ken? You’ll know it when you’ve it in your hand.’

She tried to answer but her mouth was dry. Emlyn’s hand trembled in hers. She glanced at McCrossan. He was chanting but his eyes were on her. He nodded and, taking her time, she tossed the figures into the flames. One by one, as the flames devoured the carvings, the riders shimmered in the firelight and were gone.

Her fingers closed on the wood and she shuddered. The power long contained there held her: she could smell the forest, could sense the movement of the earth and the stars, no longer simply pinpricks of light but a high bright song of which she was a small and insignificant part. McCrossan’s voice seemed to come out of the earth itself. Life coursed through her; death stalked the darkness between the trees.

She knew what to do.

She wrenched her will away from Arthur and placed his figure on the ground beside her knee. Reaching forwards, she plucked the remaining figures one by one from the snow and tossed them into the flames. Two wooden horsemen remained, Arthur’s, beside her on the ground, and the one in her hand. A solitary rider sat upon his horse, holding Arthur’s lance and his mare, Llamrei —yes, she knew the beast’s name. She knew many things. Her connection was to another world now. She looked down at Emlyn’s pale face and understood.

‘I know things,’ she said. ‘Through you: through your hand. I can see somehow. A connection. I can’t explain it.’

Emlyn’s grip weakened. ‘I’m cold,’ he said.

She looked up again. She dared not look at Arthur. As each carving went into the flames she had sensed his power, the dark light growing in his eyes, until she thought she would go mad: she understood, all too well now, Emlyn's fears.

Beyond the dying fire was the last of his guard, an ox of a man, his hair grizzled, his face lined and scarred, one eye closed and swollen. The rider's beard was thrust towards her, his face expressionless in the firelight. There, at the first, and at the last —Cei, Arthur's faithful steward. She tossed the figure into the flames and Cei faded.

McCrossan broke his chant momentarily and said 'Easy, girl, *easy*.' The chanting resumed; its pace altered, the notes deeper, the singer rocking in time. Maxine felt a change but dared not shift her gaze from Arthur's chest. Again the keeper paused. He turned to his son. 'Sing with me.'

Maxine heard the years of hurt gathered in Hugh's answer. 'I canna. I canna do it.'

'I'll not hold him on my own, son.'

Maxine glanced up. Arthur's gaze bore down on her and held her. Whatever he was, this was no ghost, no phantom. The sinews in his forearm tightened as he shifted the weight of his blade. He was real: flesh and blood and bone.

'Can he —can he hurt us—?'

But she already knew the answer.

Too late: her words had let him in.

The stillness broke and the wind keened in over the fields, rushing between the trees. The riders' torches sputtered but held. They were of this world now. Arthur shifted the sword tip from Maxine's throat to just beside her ear and McCrossan's voice faltered in the icy blast. He knew the god's purpose well enough: his strength was not enough; he needed his father's presence.

Max shut her eyes and felt the repositioned blade. In her mind she could see the tensed muscles in his arm and sense the impending swing. It would be over now before

it had even started. She wanted above all to be home and to be warm again and for this to be over. Hot liquid trickled between her thighs and over her calves and into the snow. There was only Emlyn's hand and her fingers closing on the rough wooden figure beside her and the bright flickering images.



44

*For some the prospect of death holds little mystery; we know the hour or the place, the how or the why, and we plod forward, disregarding all the rest. I had seen the rocks in the hands of the shepherds, felt the cold sting of the river stake, and heard the rush of water as it swirled about my ears.*

*But for all this there is one death I cannot wipe clean from my memory. Arthur's life had been mine in the making and could not be undone by any save me. It hangs still, a cloud over my eyes, a narrow space through which I am condemned to crawl. The thunder of hooves as the Gododdin ride out upon the field of Camlann, the hiss of the draconarius, these sounds haunt my dreams still. And yet what other way was there? How else could he be dissuaded from destroying that which he had been empowered to protect: The People of the North—Y Gododdin.*

## 45

His father's cheek was pressed against the windowpane. Snow whirled in the darkness beyond the glass. The room was stifling. A lamp shone dimly on the bedside table.

A hand clutched his —Max.

Max! Stay with me. Ma-aaa-ax!

I'm here.

Emlyn was aware of another presence in the room. A dishevelled child sat on the bed, staring out of the window. The boy's clothes were of a coarse plaid, a leather corselet several sizes too big was loosely strapped to his chest; a wolf's pelt hung about his shoulders. He looked no more than six or seven.

Emlyn squeezed the hand that held his.

I can't see you, Max.

I'm here beside you. Max's voice came from a great distance, clear and bell-like.

It's him, she said, as a boy, isn't it?

You can see him?

Yes.

Emlyn's father kept his face turned to the window, his voice no more than a whisper.

You're in his world now —our world. And perhaps I'm there in his world as well, I don't know. There's a comfort in that. Do you see?

Emlyn nodded.

We talk often, the boy and I. He's lost. We're both lost.

But you're not, are you? Please, said Emlyn, we're talking now. We're talking to one another. You can't be lost.

The room was fading and his father's face remained turned to the window.

There's an oak, down by the bridge. Gave the biggest acorns. Merlin's Oak we called it—a gateway it is—a gateway for the gods.

He strained to hold his father but the distance unfolded into night and the cold spun him away, back to the spinney and the dying fire, back into his shivering body.

The sword was coming down.

Again the sword was coming down on Max's neck and he could do nothing but watch.

Hugh sang on, a thickness rising in his throat. He felt hollow, empty; images crowded his head. A vast forest spread out in his mind's eye. Gnarled trees, green with moss and lichen, disappeared rank upon rank as far as the eye could see. He stood on the edge of a field. Something was in his hand: a sickle, its iron blade no protection against the unseen and the ragged darkness that came from the east. The trees held a dread he could not name. He sang the old songs of protection. The sword blade seemed to waver in the air as it swung down.

Hugh heard his father's voice.

'The tin! Put it in the tin!' His father fell to his knees in the snow and made a sign in the air. 'I canna hold him.'

Arthur, his dark eyes staring out from under an iron cap, stood sword in hand. Hugh knew who this was: every haunted memory from his childhood was contained in the burly frame. A sword hung loosely at his side. Hugh's voice faltered. The eyes sent a

cold terror through him. His spine was shot with ice and fire. He looked away at Emlyn, took a few steps and stopped. Arthur had moved between them, his sword raised level with Emlyn's chest. His father's singing changed key, shifting into a quicker cadence. Arthur faded and then gathered and then faded again.

Maxine knelt, her shoulders hunched, her hand clasping Emlyn's as she peered down at him. His face was scarily blank. Hugh watched, shivering, as his father pulled a smoking branch from the fire and began to draw in the snow with the smoking tip. Strange symbols appeared in the snow around them.

Hugh swallowed his fear. He remembered how in his childhood his father had held his hand as they had walked across the fields.

His father's singing changed again; the chant was different now, lower, and more pedestrian. Still he over-drew the markings on the ground, raking the leaf litter through the carpet of snow, making the signs blacker and heavier with each stroke. Hugh reached for the figure between Max's knees.

The night shifted around him.

He was back amid his childhood dreams, holding his terror at arm's length. The figure was rooted to the ground. He could feel the fibrous strength of it anchored in the earth, the shoots bursting beneath his hand.

Horses snorted. He heard the crying of wounded men. He was at the edge of a wood; broken grassland ran down to a river and a gravel ford. All around were the dead and dying. A woman walked among them, singing. Here and there she bent and picked something from a saddlebag or a tunic. Hugh watched as she collected the small wooden figures and placed them in her bag, aware that he sang the same song as her.

Someone was yelling at him. It was his father.

'The tin! Put the figure in the tin.'

For a brief moment Emlyn watched the dying embers, felt the snowy ground under his back, before the cold drew him into the earth, and he was spun back down through the vast cavern that was his madness.

Calling was futile: struggle pointless —give in to it, boy—

The evening sun slanted down through the leaves. He felt the horse shift under him. He was on horseback, sheltering among the trees at the edge of a wood. *The marshy ground runs down to the river where a line of horsemen splash across the shallows. Sensing battle, horses snort amongst the trees.* Riders were gathered either side of him, men and a sprinkling of women, their hair braided down the back of their leather tunics, rank upon rank, all in their own thoughts, each with eyes on the ford and the approaching column. Someone spoke to his right.

*Remember—the gods go with us.* Her voice was as cool as her eyes.

To his left a bear-like man, dark-eyed and balding, sat astride Llamrei his battle-mare. *Arthur roars, lifts his lance and kicks his horse forward. And, as the long shadows of the northern autumn creep across the earth, line upon line of horsemen break from the trees and gallop towards the ford.*

Emlyn felt his heels dig into his animal's flanks as a hand lunged out and *holds the pony back.*

*No, she whispers. Better that we stay here amongst the trees, for a while, anyway. We must sing away his power. It must be done. Not an easy thing, Master Myrddin, when a sword is in your hand.*

*On the field of Camlann the two waves of horsemen mesh, a bloody warp and weft of shrieking men and women. Here upwards of six hundred perish. The blood of the northern tribes seeps into the ground.*

*I had not foreseen this.*

*Had she not said—had I not thought—that with the passing of the gods, Arthur would be rendered weak, directionless?*

But he stands, still, thought Emlyn and will win through, surely.

*We have not taken his mind away; his strategies, his strength, his skill with weapons, the love of his comrades and their deeds is as strong as ever—none of this has withered. He is a man fighting for his life and for his friends.*

*How could I not have seen this?*

*And Modred calls his scattered household to him in twos and threes, and with a grievous cry wins through into the heart of Arthur's circle, driving his lance deep into his rival's side.*

*Isolated momentarily from the ruck, Owain ap Urien stares skyward and calls out that the ravens have come. All eyes turn towards the heavens and the circling birds. Later, in the legends, it is Owain who calls the great birds down on Arthur's host.*

*All eyes but one are on the carrion birds. Cei, Arthur's steward and armourer, sees only his fallen captain. Bellowing, he throws himself across Modred, and the two of them disappear like drowning men. Modred is trampled, pinned beneath his horse as a rider goes down. His death is slow and painful, stealing over him with first light.*

*For others death comes more fleet.*

*Cei, his beard stiff with blood, one eye swollen and closed, fights on, only to fall to a woman's blade. Naked, apart from a breech-clout and the blue painted designs that cover her body, her hair bound in a tight knot and pinned with gold, this Pictish woman has taken her fallen husband's blade. Her grinning, frenzied face is the last thing Cei sees. He is grinning too, while tears course down his face.*

*Arthur calls, Myrddin —Myrddin!*

*Already the crows and the ravens strut stiff-legged amongst the bodies. Theirs is the only profit this day. Come the setting of the sun they can barely flap their way to the lowest branches. Later, under cover of darkness, the wolves will come down from the hills.*

*Only a handful of warriors limp away.*

*Nimuë moves among the dead. I sit as still as stone upon my horse and do not come forth from the great wood; my grief is too great. This thing has been done and cannot be undone.*

*For forty years he pushed the Saxons back and held this country.*

*Is this it? This bloody field; this place called Crooked Glen.*

*How blind: how blind indeed.*

*But my eyes are forced wide. I cannot look away. Nimuë picks through the dead and dying. It is as when she collects the healing plants on a summer evening. Arthur's guard—all carried the wooden figures. Not one carving is left upon the field. The amulets have served her purpose and she will have them back, placing each in her bag as the birds flap away and settle on another corpse.*

*She bends over Arthur. Even from back here, amongst the trees, I can hear him whisper her name as she kisses him. I can hear his whisper above the bonking of the ravens.*

*Take it, Lady. The gods have deserted me.*

*Her fingers close upon his talisman, given so recently for luck and strength in battle.*

*And my sword, Lady—take it. Let the lake have it—The Mothers. I should never have taken it.*

*She does not answer; she is singing the forest from him into the oaken carving.*

*I can smell the sea. There is a boat? Yes, he says. I hear the keel on the shingle.*

*His eyes close and his breathing weakens. He asks if any have survived.*

*She does not answer: cannot, I think.*

*A handful, I whisper, and turn my pony into the forest and the comfort of the trees.*

*Only a handful.*

Emlyn lay with his head in Max's lap. McCrossan crouched over the two of them.

'Only a handful,' murmured Emlyn.

'Steady, laddie,' said McCrossan and turned to his son. 'We need to get him to the Land Rover.' McCrossan held the tin out to Maxine. 'Take it. For the moment.'

She stared at the keeper. There were so many questions in her mind. He shook his head imperceptibly and she took the tin from him. Stooping, the McCrossans each took one of Emlyn's arm and they started down towards the spinney wall.

'I'm—I can manage,' said Emlyn. 'I saw the battle at the ford.'

‘I saw the same thing,’ said Hugh.

‘His last battle,’ said McCrossan.

Maxine remained silent: the room, Emlyn’s father, the boy sitting on the bed —it had all seemed so real.

‘How come I could see that stuff?’ said Hugh.

‘The horseman —there’s an energy.’

‘Emlyn,’ said Maxine.

They were approaching the wall; father and son stared at her.

‘He’s some sort of link. He had my hand. I was holding it when— I saw him— Arthur— when he was a child. He was sitting on the bed.’ They were staring harder now. ‘Em’s old man was there as well. Hey, don’t look at me like I was psycho. The whole thing’s psycho if you ask me.’

‘My father,’ mumbled Emlyn, ‘My father was there. The oak by the bridge —he said it was “a gateway”.’

They shuffled to a halt beside the dyke. McCrossan stared at Emlyn and then at his son.

‘The trunk’s split,’ said Hugh. ‘It was hit by lightning last week.’

‘We—me and Emlyn—were there when it happened,’ said Maxine.

‘I think,’ McCrossan drew a long breath, ‘your father means for us to put the figure in the split oak.’

Maxine followed silently, clutching the tin.

‘Why?’ said Hugh.

‘The wee men are —were of oak,’ said his father. ‘Him in the tin, too. It’d be a gamble.’

They helped Emlyn over the wall into the field and across to the Land Rover, where he sank onto the back seat. A beeping came from the depths of his greatcoat. ‘Your



phone,' said Max, climbing in beside him.

'What?'

'It's okay,' She reached in his pocket. 'Text message, that's all.'

Maxine scrolled quickly:

WHERE HELL R U.  
WORRIED SICK  
WITH WEATHER.  
REPLY NOW. B.

'Your sister. Mebbe you better read it.'

'What's it say,' said Emlyn.

Maxine read the message aloud. Emlyn groaned and leant his head against the window. Maxine looked across at the huddled figure. She could not erase the image of his father sitting by the window. 'I'll make something up. Say you're up at my place.'

Illuminated by the eerie light of the display, Maxine set about composing a message, and then read it aloud.

STAYING NIGHT  
WITH MAX. C U  
TOMORROW. EM.

'Terrific,' said Emlyn and closed his eyes. 'Thanks.'

Outside, McCrossan looked up at the night sky and the hurrying clouds that were blocking out the stars.

'Wind's backed to the southwest. Rain.'

As if on cue the first drops fell heavily on the roof of the Land Rover.

'Snow'll be gone by morning and the river'll rise.'

'Grandad —might —might he have survived?' said Hugh.

McCrossan shook his head and walked around to the driver's door. A childhood verse was running in his head as he climbed into the cab:

Yarrow said ta Yeave  
Though ye run wi' speed  
And I run slow  
For every man ye kill  
I kill twa.

## 46

*My madness is not unlike Arthur's, save that his is the madness of the Gods while mine is for all that was undone that day; his leads him to his death, mine to wander the forest. When I flee back into the great forest of Cat Coit Celidon, it is as an old man running from the realisation that the power he has unleashed upon the world is no longer his to command.*

*That Modred dies too, while making sense in the later legends embellished by monks and scribblers, makes Arthur's death the harder. Modred: one of the few who can unite the tribes and the only chieftain that the Selgovae will treat with. Camlann is a battle that should never have been fought. No Saxon blood is spilt. The Isles lose their finest warriors. And for what: Modred's pride, Arthur's uncontrollable and insatiable urge to fight: an urge planted in him by me.*

*There are legends aplenty of Merlin's mad forest wanderings. Trapped by the trees some said, entrapped by his magic. A fitting end, a rough ironic justice for one who had used a boy's body, Arthur's, as a vehicle for his own will.*

*And here I remain—still.*

*For all my seeming freedom, the realm of sky and wind, the high bowl of stars, I am trapped in this valley and cannot leave. Here, where the two streams converge. It is the price paid for power; the price paid for blind love and an old man's desire.*

*Nimuë it was who set the people against me, calling me a weaver of evil, appealing to the river-washers and their converts. It was not long before I was not welcome even at the most isolated forest*

*hearth and, in truth, I was half-starved when the shepherds found me wandering by the river. They did not come upon me by chance but were drawn there by her mercenaries. Her star was on the rise and she would have a guard to protect her.*

*Long before they drove me to the water's edge, I had, in my wanderings and ravings, seen the true nature of her schemes. The one figure would have sufficed to trap Arthur: the others she would have to use against any who opposed her.*

## 47

Emlyn rested his bicycle against the rough stones of the bridge and gazed down into the water. The previous night seemed like a dream. The snow had melted quicker than it had come. Along the banks the ice still clung in thin translucent sheets. Below him, three fish hung just clear of the weeds, their dark forms flickering over the sun-dappled gravel. Much as he might want it, he could never really know that green, still, peace; his imagination would have to suffice.

Emlyn glanced at the Land Rover parked against the hedge below the bridge and then across to the old oak beyond his mother's cottage. Two figures were high in its branches. One of them turned his face and waved: Hugh. Emlyn waved back.

McCrossan, his burly figure wedged in the branches, his boots winking in the sunlight, was threading a wire cable between the branches and looping it around a cut section of car tyre. The gamekeeper and his son were binding the split bough, tightening the cable. They had asked him if he wanted to help but he had said he would watch from the bridge.

That's how it had started, thought Emlyn: a boy wedged in a tree. Still a boy, are you, eh? Maybe I'll always be this age, somewhere deep down. It would be hard to let go of everything that had happened. Part of him wanted to pretend none of it had occurred;

another part clung to the already fading images, sifting them, trying to work out which were his and which belonged to —which were his memories.

*Memory is, at best, perhaps a trick of the light. The boy stands there on the bridge wondering whose voice it is he hears. But there are so many voices: ours, our parents', brothers', sisters' —perhaps our children.*

*And there are the old voices.*

*The trick amongst the sparkling waters of this world is to tease from that riddle one's own song, one's own voice. Mine is fading. I am growing back into the earth, out into the sky. The boy has been released. He is walking in those fields of his childhood or swimming down at the river. The gods have gone back to the earth whence they came and I am not needed any more.*

Maxine pulled the front door closed. Her mother, the woman who for so long had been her grandmother, was waiting at the corner. Maxine walked down to where she was standing, a bright scarf tied around her head, her handbag on her arm, and the two of them started up the hill towards the castle.

Maxine stared ahead, tears in her eyes, willing herself not to look at— No! It was no good: she couldn't even say the word. And the sunshine only made things worse. Somehow the bright sky and the hills mocked her mood. They walked in silence until they came to Castle Green. Maxine pushed away the image of Digger chasing seagulls from the grass.

'Why'd she have to go and die the day after ma birthday? Why?'

'Sometimes it's—'

'—Dinna start on about grandad, okay? It's not the same. Why couldn't you have told me?'

'I couldn'a tell you Maxie. I just couldn'a.'

‘Wouldn’a.’ Maxine rubbed her eyes.

‘I know it’s hard for you to understand but —it started with a lie. Now, I’m frightened you’ll leave and—’

‘Hah, like I’ve somewhere to go.’

Lindsay Fraser reached out uncertainly for her daughter’s arm as they wound up along the castle wall and then let her hand fall away to her side again. The wind skittered up the slope of the hill behind them and seemed to cut through her clothing and into her flesh. She could not bear the thought of losing this one as well, and everything she might say, everything she might own up to might be the catalyst to send the girl spinning away and out of her life.

‘Your moth— your sister got herself pregnant the year the sea took her father. She was fast, that one. We never had a lot in common. Rows all the time. With her father as well, when he was home. We were too slow, too pedestrian for her. She left for the big smoke. I was unhappy. You canna imagine what it’s like losing someone you really love, someone like my Douglas. I was in the pub one night and I’d had too much to drink and Lawrence, McCrossan, was there. We’d known each other since school. Familiar faces an’ all that. The next thing I knew I was pregnant. I was thirty-five years old, a widow, living in a town the size of —well.’

Maxine had turned and was watching her mother closely. The woman’s eyes were bright and fixed on the distant hills.

‘I took off for Newcastle. Your sister was in with some feckless bastard. He shot through as soon as I turned up. The bairn was sick. She soon guessed what was up with me, the morning sickness was that bad. Gary, her son, my grandson, he was a cot death. Three months he was. Wee thing —in a wee grave. She was never that stable, I know that now, but it really turned her. I didn’a see the turn at first. She hid it. She hid a lot o’ things, that one. But inside she’d turned a corner and wasn’a coming back.’

‘I was going to have you adopted. She said why bother. I’ve lost my son, you dinna want this one. Give her to me. That’s what she said, “Give her me. I’ll look after her.” And I did. I should have kept you but I couldn’a see ma way clear of the mess I’d made.’

They were climbing up through the castle. Maxine realised that they were heading to the same spot where she and Emlyn had talked the day she had been fired from the Castle Teashop. Somehow it felt important to stand there again and look out across the town.

‘If you want your privacy I’ll turn around and go down,’ said Lindsay Fraser.

‘This is doing ma head in. I want to call you Mum but it’s just not right somehow.’

They had reached the highest point on the battlements and were staring out across the surrounding countryside. Lindsay Fraser reached into her bag.

‘I thought you might like to hand them back.’ She was holding Emlyn’s field-glasses. ‘He left them in the spare room.’

Maxine took the binoculars. There was a figure on the bridge down by Emlyn’s cottage and she thought it was probably him. The familiar outline of a push-bike leant against the parapet wall. She adjusted the glasses.

And there she was, alongside him, looking down into the waters of the Yeave. She felt like crying and bit her lip and jammed the glasses harder against her eyes. He pushed himself up from the wall and waved. She swung the glasses across the fields. Two figures were in the branches of the oak. Hugh was waving back. He should be waving at her. Instead he was waving at the lone figure on the bridge. Maxine lowered the field-glasses and leant further onto the wall so that her mother could not see her face.

‘Does it get any better when you’re an adult?’ Her voice was coarse and shaky. ‘Do we learn anything much?’

‘Not much,’ said her mother. ‘Something.’



Maxine remembered the knock at the front door earlier that morning. Her mother had answered it. The silence and the footfalls in the hallway had told her who it was before the kitchen door opened and she had drawn a long breath as if it were her last.

The gamekeeper stepped into the kitchen and took off his cap.

‘I canna let this lie. You need —I need to say this to you.’

Maxine folded her arms and hunched her shoulders.

‘I don’t know what your —what Lindsay’s told you. You’re my daughter. I’m your father. She’s you’re mother—’

‘You’re not to blame,’ said Lindsay Fraser.

‘She’s—’ McCrossan bit his lip, searching for words. ‘Your mother’s trying to make —she’s in shock. We’re all of us uncomfortable. None of this fits properly for any of us.’

‘You can say that again.’

‘Listen a minute. Please. I’ll not be long saying this. What’s happened has happened, we canna turn it back and I dinna just mean this —us —blood —I mean what’s happened in the valley these past months: the horsemen, Emlyn, the whole sorry mess. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that this place is special. But to me it’s special in a different way.’ He turned to Lindsay Fraser. ‘There’s something you should understand.’

‘Larry, please—’

Maxine started: the name sounded strange coming from her —mother. She was going to have to make some adjustments: they both were.

‘No —I knew you were pregnant. We were drunk as lords that night, and I’ve still no idea how —but it happened. I’d liked you since school. I suppose I was a little bit sweet on you but by then I was married, not happily, but married. I wanted a son.’ The gamekeeper turned back to Maxine. ‘Hugh was two when the cottage burnt down. We’d

been trying for years but—’ he turned back to Lindsay. ‘I wanted to come after you. But you shot through so quick. And I couldn’a leave.’

Maxine snorted. ‘Hah!’

‘You dinna understand. I canna leave this valley.’

‘You left to go into the army,’ said Maxine. Her mother was silent, staring at the keeper.

‘Aye, the Paras. That was before I took the rhymes, the songs from my father. I was keeper —of the horsemen. It was my job to see those wee figures remained where they were. To see that what was inside them never got out into the valley. What was in them, in the main figure, wanted its freedom. There’s a price that comes with that. The price is that I, like those before me, canna leave. Aye, you can look at me. But I’m wedded to the ground we’re stood on. It’s like a curse. I took it willingly, so I’ll no complain. But I canna leave.’

‘What,’ said Maxine, ‘you’ll die or something?’

‘Aye. Or worse. Not too many have tried it. I can go round about. Into the next valley, down river a ways. Up into the hills. Round and about. But eventually I have to turn back. I always know. It sounds ridiculous, what with all our science and rockets and wee phones, but should I try and leave, the horsemen would no longer have been trapped. You know the old story, the legends of Arthur and Merlin. Merlin was imprisoned. Some say in an oak tree, other tales say in a cave. He was trapped here, in this valley. He’s still here, still paying the price. I can trace my blood line back fifteen hundred years.’

Maxine and Lindsay stared at him.

‘I know you think what I did to Emlyn and you, I did out of malice.’ The girl stared at him. ‘And you would be partly right. I canna say I’m proud of the man I’ve become since Lorna passed away but I had the valley in mind and the people who live here.’

From a teenager I knew, my father made sure of that, what would happen if the horsemen breached the wall. There's a tale, old as these hills probably, about Arthur's return, a time when the islands will be threatened and he'll defend us. I've no idea what that means. What I do know is that my family has sworn an oath time out of mind that the horsemen, those wee figures that have caused so much upset to us all, that they be contained at all cost. I had no choice in the matter, lassie. Anyhow, I've said ma piece.'

The gamekeeper touched his cap and Mrs Fraser managed a lame smile.

'Hugh's my brother, then?'

McCrossan turned and looked at her. His voice was thick and the words seemed to quiver in the air around them.

'Your half-brother, aye. Mebbe you dinna know it yet but your place is here too, Maxine.'

'What about Digger, Emlyn's dog?'

The question threw McCrossan and he pulled his cap off and crushed it between his hands.

'Aye, Hugh told me. A sorry business. Still, he's the pup, eh?'

'And Digger?' She felt like pushing.

'I knew nothing of that. Well, an inkling mebbe.'

'He's —dead —right?'

'Aye, I'd say so, lassie. My father was—' McCrossan faltered and looked away momentarily. 'Whatever I say —if I say he treated his own animals no better, y'ken?'

Maxine nodded assent.

The keeper had turned to leave but paused by the door. 'We're putting it to rest, putting it back into Merlin's Oak later this morning. You're welcome to join us.'

Maxine heard the words come at her from a great distance. She seemed still, almost to the point of paralysis. She shook her head and McCrossan pulled his cap down tight

on his head, nodded at her quickly and left the kitchen, her mother on his tail. Standing there amid the clutter of the small objects her mother had collected over her life, it seemed she had taken root. Was this place hers, as the gamekeeper had said? Was any place hers?

That had been only this morning and already it felt to Maxine as if it had happened in some distant age of the world. She glanced at the woman who stood a little to one side, her hand on the parapet wall. Her age showed, or was it just Maxine's perception? She looked older now— her mother. Maxine parried the word away.

'I'll not pretend I understand about the figures,' said Mrs Fraser, turning to face her. 'A powerful glamour is what I said. I always thought Larry —McCrossan, was a tortured soul. I didn't understand half of what he was on about either. You say they're putting the wee man into the oak tree by the bridge?'

'Here.' Maxine passed the binoculars to her mother. Mrs Fraser raised them gingerly to her eyes. 'You're to say nowt, to no one.'

'As if I, of all people, canna keep a secret.'

'Aye. With secrets, you're top drawer.'

They had still not looked directly at one another. To Maxine the tiny figure on the bridge seemed from another time and place: somewhere she had been exiled from and to which she could never return.

'You're welcome to stay.' Lindsay Fraser lowered the field-glasses. 'What I'm trying to say is that I want you to stay. Daughter, granddaughter, you're still blood. I know it's been difficult these past years and I've not seen a lot of you, but I care about you.'

'Care about me.' Maxine repeated the words quietly as if they came to her from a great distance. Lindsay Fraser held out the binoculars. Maxine stared but did not reach for them.

‘Mebbe you could give them to him.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better if you did?’

Maxine shook her head and Mrs Fraser pushed the glasses into her bag.

‘I’m away to do a spot of shopping. You look as if you’ve a mind to stay up here a wee bit longer.’

Maxine nodded again. ‘D’youse think—?’

‘What?’ said Mrs Fraser.

‘I should go down —talk to him, mebbe?’

‘That’s for you to decide. I’m not the best person to ask.’ Maxine’s mother squinted out at the river and the bridge. ‘He does look a bit lonely down there all by himself.’ Then she added quickly: ‘Probably because he seems a long way off and there’s the two of us up here. There’s less time to feel —you’re less caught up in yourself when there’s two—’

‘He’s nice —in an odd sort of way, I mean. But he’s just a boy, like.’

‘Aye, just a boy,’ said the older woman and she turned away down the narrow walkway. As she picked her way down the steps, she was muttering to herself. Maxine thought she caught the words before they were carried away on the breeze: ‘Are they not always the source of a woman’s troubles.’

Lindsay Fraser had reached the far side of Castle Green when a car pulled up beside her and the passenger window rolled down.

‘Are you Max’s grandmother?’ The driver was a young woman. She leaned across.

Lindsay Fraser hesitated. ‘Yes, I’m —a relative.’

‘Where is she? I’m Emlyn’s sister.’

‘She’s up on the Castle wall.’

‘Thanks.’

‘If you’re looking for—’

But the woman had already pulled away and was heading around the Green.

‘Suit yourself,’ muttered Mrs Fraser, and started down the Wynd for home.

Maxine looked at the solitary figure on the bridge and then across to the tree.

‘I saw him too, Emlyn. He was like us. Like someone you’d meet down the pub. No gold or jewels. No banners. Just a short, bald man with a sword.’

She was suddenly aware of another person on the parapet wall and looked towards up.

‘Hello.’

‘Giddy,’ said Bridget awkwardly. ‘Where is he?’

Maxine pointed and Bridget squinted towards the bridge in the distance.

‘What’s he doing down there? Did he stay over at your grandmother’s last night?’

‘He didn’t want to walk home in the snow.’

‘I’m going to get to the bottom of this you know,’ said Bridget. ‘All this stuff with antique dealers and—’

‘None of it’s his fault, like.’

‘Right. Well, he better still be on that bridge by the time I get there.’

Bridget hurried away down the steps.

Down in the field, a movement caught Max’s eye. A child was running through the grass towards the river. The tiny figure passed close by the oak and disappeared at the water’s edge. As she watched father and son climb down, gather their gear and head towards the bridge, Maxine felt a sudden urgency to be down there next to Emlyn.

## 48

*I failed to grasp that Modred would fight so hard, have such seasoned troops, allies whose constant hope was the fall of Arthur. I failed to see the bitter worm that ate at him. I underestimated his strength. I had grown old.*

*Arthur fell because of my blindness.*

*His star was eclipsed, while Nimuë's rose.*

*Indeed, Nimuë sought two things: Arthur's death, and power over the wooden riders, power to call them up when needed. Although her singing was a powerful tool, and it undid me as I slid beneath the waters of the Yeave, it was barely enough to contain the gods trapped with Arthur's oaken figure. Once released, his guard came alongside. No ghosts these but flesh and blood called from the past.*

*But often that which we seek to control ends in controlling us.*

*She could not do with them what she planned and they became a hindrance.*

*Twice she tried twice, with partial success—raiding a neighbouring kingdom, breaking an alliance—but the effort to bend those forces to her will was too great and her third attempt went awry, crippling her lover and one true heart. Her wrath knew no bounds: a bitterness that could not be washed away with wine or covered with fine silk. She cursed me; she cursed Arthur and his line; she cursed her own offspring, condemning them to watch over of the figures.*

*Sung afresh, the carvings were placed with great ritual in the darkness, a narrow place dedicated to our forefathers, the workers of bronze, a tomb, for her children to sing over and maintain the signs that would hold them back.*



## 49

Emlyn stood listening to the water rushing against the piers. The rivers had risen and were in spate, the turbid water overflowing the banks in a few places. He had woken in the night and found himself in the safety of Mrs Fraser's spare room, the wind driving the rain against the slates. Pulling his coat over his shoulders, he had shuffled to the window and stared out into the darkened street. He had stood a long time before the rain-distorted glass. Feelings of relief and sadness, some inexplicable loss, rising and falling until he had felt his way back to his bed. The feelings were still there. He pushed it aside and looked out across the fields to the oak down by the river. Raising his arm, he waved.

'Pay attention,' said his father, 'or you'll be out of the tree.'

Hugh ceased waving to the figure on the bridge, shifted his weight, and reached for the bamboo cane being pushed between the branches. Taped to its length was the steel cable they were using to pull together the split branches of the oak.

'It's Emlyn. Over on the bridge.'

'Dinna fret, I see him well enough.' Hugh's father pointed to the heavy bough that had split away from the main trunk and was held only by another branch of even greater girth. 'Now, have you any ideas about how to get it around the outside there?'

‘Climb out. Only way really.’

‘Aye. But be careful.’

Hugh squirmed between the branches until he could get his foot onto the huge bough that was anchoring the split section. Pulling himself up, he inched his way out until he could pass the bamboo around the stricken branch. Once he had the cable in position he let the rod dangle and, swinging it gently to-and-fro, arced it towards his father, who caught the end.

‘Do you think they’ll find him —the body?’ Hugh shifted his gaze to where the river ran sleek under its canopy of trees.

McCrossan gave a lop-sided smile and worked on in silence.

‘It’ll be strange —having a service and no coffin. I’ve to get used to the idea.’

‘The river’s a tricky lady. Nine times out o’ ten, she’ll give back what she’s taken. I’ve a mind he did not want to be spat out white and bloated on some sand bank.’

McCrossan threaded the cable ends into a small hand winch. Slowly he cranked the lever and the belly disappeared from the wire. Hugh pulled a worn piece of car tyre from where he had it wedged in the fork of a branch.

‘Slip it in behind the cable. Hold it ’til I’ve picked up the slack.’

Hugh threaded the tyre into place and watched as his father cranked the hand-winch and the cable took the strain. The heavy branch trembled and began to straighten. Hugh stared down into the split as it closed up. Father and son looked at one another across the gap of interlacing branches.

‘It’ll work,’ said Hugh. ‘I’m sure of it.’

The gamekeeper looked down at the base of the tree. A battered case sat open on the grass. Inside the wooden horseman sat surrounded by a circle of flat river slates. Each stone had a symbol chalked on its surface. A length of twine was tied around the figure and looped upwards to a branch near the gamekeeper’s elbow.

‘It’s whether you want it to work,’ said Hugh.

‘I want it to work well enough, laddie. It’s just that—all those years. All those lives: for what? You and I’ll be the end of it.’ He looked at his son. ‘No more keepers.’

‘But you’ll have the freedom to—’ Hugh trailed off.

‘You see what I’m talking about, eh? Best do it, then. We’ve a few minutes to do this. I’ve no idea what’s going to—’ McCrossan shrugged and pulled on the twine tight. The horseman skidded and jiggled across the bottom of the suitcase.

‘Whatever happens, happens,’ said Hugh.

The wooden figure swung in time to their chanting. The sound of hooves scattered birds across the meadow. A horse snorted. McCrossan had the figure in his hand. Gently he paid out the twine and lowered the rider into the oak tree.

Hugh looked up towards the river again. He had no idea what made him do so because his attention was on the figure being lowered into the crack below. He could hear his father sucking in breath between the verses and the chickering sound of cable being cranked through the winch. The chant died on Hugh’s lips.

A child, maybe six or seven years old, came hop-stepping through the field, running through the grass towards the river. He passed more or less beneath the tree. Hugh glanced at his father but he appeared not to have noticed. Hugh did not recognise him as anyone from the town. The boy was dressed oddly; ragged and dirty, his hair a dishevelled knot of dark curls.

On the riverbank the youngster discarded his rough clothing and splashed out across the shingle spit where the river bent back upon itself. On the opposite bank there was a deep pool. For a brief moment before his father closed the figure in the crack, Hugh thought he could see other children laughing and splashing.

There was only the sound of birds, the breeze high in the oak branches, and the drone of a car crossing the bridge. High above, a con-trail was dividing the blue vault of

the sky. His father had unhooked the cable and was climbing down. Hugh followed, showering moss and bark down on his father. On the ground they pulled the cable clear of the branches and collected the tools.

‘I have a fancy,’ said Hugh’s father, ‘to visit Berwick. It’s a long time since I was in that neck of the woods.’

‘Today? I thought you were working?’

‘The farm can do without me for a day. Will you come with me? I’m a bit scared, to tell you the truth. You know, what I told you, about leaving the valley. Be the first time in a long while.’

‘Sure, but I just want a word with Emlyn.’

‘Emlyn. I’ll come over with you,’ said his father.

‘What you looking at?’ said Hugh.

Emlyn was leaning out over the water. He had been listening to the voice as it faded.

*Sometimes it is my voice as I remember it, or think I remember it, but often it is the boy’s. Our childhoods have merged together like two rivers.*

*Maybe it is he who is real, not me.*

*No matter.*

*What matters is that the harsh memories fade and only the boy remains—which boy matters little now.*

Emlyn straightened. ‘Sorry, what was that?’

‘You were looking at something

‘Oh —yes —the grayling.’

‘I’ve a rod you could borrow,’ said McCrossan. ‘If you’ve a mind.’

The three of them stood awkwardly on the bridge.

'I just like watching them, really.' Emlyn looked at Hugh. 'There was a boy in the field just now and—'

'Aye, I saw him right enough.'

'Did I miss something?' said the gamekeeper.

'Nah —nothing really,' said Hugh. It seemed to him that what they had witnessed was something for the two of them, something outside his father's provenance. 'We did it. Put the wee man back where he came from.'

'Will that be the end of it?' asked Emlyn, looking at McCrossan.

'I canna feel him anymore. Aye, I think we've put him to rest.'

A vehicle shot from between the flanks of the Marchbank and came barrelling down the straight.

'Here we go,' sighed Emlyn.

Bridget screeched to a stop hard up against the hedge. Squeezing across the seat, she straightened her clothes, slammed the passenger door, and ignoring Hugh and his father, stalked onto the bridge.

'In the car.'

'Oh, come on, Sis...'

'Whose clothes are those?'

'I had to borrow them. It's a long story.'

'Get in the car.'

'If I get in first you won't be able to get in,' said Emlyn.

'Hey, I've had it with your smart answers.'

'Where are we going?'

'Home.'

'But we are home.' Emlyn gestured at the nearby cottage.

‘For a drive,’ said Bridget. ‘We’re going for a drive. During which you can bloody well explain what’s been going on. I’ve already phoned Mum and she’s pissed because she’s had to cut short her lectures.’

‘This wouldn’t be about a small wooden figure, would it, lassie?’

Bridget rounded on McCrossan, fixing him with her gaze. Emlyn stared dumfounded at the keeper.

‘What the hell’s going on here, Emlyn?’

‘Dinna upset yourself,’ said McCrossan. ‘There’s a perfectly rational explanation, I can assure you.’

‘What, like your little mate on the horse. Have you any idea how much your little show upset me, Emlyn? Have you?’

McCrossan was already chanting.

‘What’s this some sort of cabaret performance? Emlyn, you better just do as I say and—’

His sister seemed to lose her focus, twisting to face each of them in turn, as Hugh’s voice joined in. The hairs prickled on Emlyn’s neck. A long time ago the same words must have been used against his father. He watched Bridget’s face, watched the anger and hostility dissipated and felt sorry for her. There was something here that she would never grasp, a world from which she and his mother had cut themselves off from a long time ago.

A delivery truck and two cars passed over the bridge, the drivers’ faces questioning, but not stopping, and then Emlyn became aware that the singing had ceased.

His sister was staring at him with a vague expression.

‘Are you all right?’ she said. ‘There was something I was going to ask you but it’s gone. Oh, Mr McCrossan, I didn’t see you there. Would you tell your father that he can pick up the rent tomorrow after lunch.’

McCrossan nodded. Emlyn saw Hugh look down at his shoes.

‘Right,’ said Bridget. ‘I’m away to the dig.’

They watched as she walked back to the car and puzzled for a moment at the angle it was parked before sliding across into the driver’s seat.

‘Will anything come back to her?’ said Emlyn.

‘No, laddie, it won’t.’

‘Can—’ Emlyn paused, struggling to control his voice. ‘Can you un-sing somebody?’

‘Your father, you mean.’

Emlyn nodded.

‘No.’ The keeper registered the disappointment that clouded the boy’s face. ‘But I owe you some sort of explanation. My father was old school: a stand or fall, black-and-white man. When he sung your dad that day, when he made me sing with him, there was the weight of fifteen hundred years behind it. This valley, it’s like an echo chamber. Nobody goes —went up to the Sleeper Stones because they didn’a really register it, d’you ken what I’m saying? It might be on *the* map but it wasn’a on *their* map, their radar if you like.’

Emlyn nodded again.

‘Things change. A hundred years ago keeping people away from the spinney was easier to manage. Now. Well, people come and go; there’s your tourists, holidaymakers. I think you and young Max, newcomers, youngsters, you were a bit outside it. Outsiders, I suppose. I know you were up there that day we fixed the break but I still dinna ken what made you so curious in the first place?’

‘Max—I was watching for a fox, hoping for some shots—and I saw her break the wall down. A horseman jumped through the gap. I thought I was seeing things, but then she said that the wall would be back up again the next day. I think the spinney was somehow —sort of calling me.’

‘It’s an old place, right enough,’ said McCrossan. ‘The stones have mebbe been there before the tomb was built. Not that anybody knows. There’s never been an archaeologist up there. Mebbe your sister would like to take a look?’

‘I think she’s got enough on her plate.’ Emlyn felt strangely possessive about the spinney and was reluctant for his sister to be told. ‘I tripped over one of the stones. It was hidden in the bracken. But I didn’t see any more.’

‘You wouldn’a have. Two stones only you’ll find in the wood itself. The rest were incorporated into the dyke when it was built.’

‘Not your average wood.’

‘Aye, you could say that.’

They walked off the bridge towards the Land Rover, Emlyn pushing his bike.

‘I canna see Max traipsing around in the mud. But then she’s her reasons, right enough.’

Emlyn and Hugh looked at one another but said nothing.

McCrossan opened the driver’s door. ‘Can we give you a lift, laddie?’

Emlyn patted his saddle. ‘I’ll ride. Thanks all the same.’ He paused. He wanted to ask about Digger, about what had happened.

‘Changed your mind?’ said McCrossan.

Emlyn shook his head. The words were broken bones in his chest; they needed to heal before he could speak them aloud. The pup was at Max’s. He had already decided to call him Digger. He climbed on his bike and rode towards the Marchbank.

Maxine hurried down through the town, wondering if Emlyn was still at the bridge. As she turned the corner into the square, he sped by on his bike. She waved but he did not seem to see her. She was about to call out but something stopped her. The urgency that had driven her down from the castle dissipated in the idle talk of passers by. A toddler



was screaming over a dropped cake as his mother dragged him down the street. A group of elderly women were nattering outside the newsagent's. A woman came out of the supermarket laden with bags. Maxine stood for a moment, watching, before she realised it was her mother. How strange that word on her lips.

She dodged between the traffic. Hopping lightly around a car reversing into a parking bay, she made a face back to the driver and stopped in front of her mother.

She held out her hands and took several of the grocery bags. In silence, they crossed the square and started up the hill. The funeral was tomorrow. She hoped she could be brave.

Across the river the town seemed hard and sharp in the bright autumn sunlight. The five of them, including the priest, stood awkwardly—with Maxine a little apart at the head of the grave—as they listened to the priest's short eulogy and even briefer prayer. Maxine threw a pair of red stilettos into the grave, and then they each took a lump of sodden earth and tossed it onto the coffin. Emlyn did the same as much from uncertainty as from solidarity. Bridget had gone down to Durham for the day to meet with their mother and Emlyn had phoned his great-aunt and asked her if she minded going with him to the funeral.

It was over. His great-aunt tapped him on the arm. 'We should wait by the gate.'

They moved off down the hill towards the entrance. Emlyn glanced over his shoulder. Maxine and her mother were following. At the cemetery gates they caught up and the two older women nodded at one another. Maxine held her head up. Her face was streaked from crying and wore the stubborn look Emlyn had become inured to. He tried not to stare at her but found he could not help himself, and an awkward silence followed.

‘I’m off to see your father, young man. If you’ve a mind —well, a lift’s not out of the question.’

Emlyn hesitated, torn between the desire to see his father after all that had happened and to stay with Max, if only for the short time it would take to cross the river.

‘Could I come as well?’ said Max. She turned to Emlyn. ‘I know I haven’t met your dad, but after what’s happened, somehow I think I would like to see him just once — Emlyn?’

Emlyn shrugged and then nodded.

‘Shall we go, then?’ said Emlyn’s great-aunt. ‘If that’s all right with your mother, that is?’

Maxine looked across at her mother, who said: ‘You done well enough without me up to now Maxine, so it’s up to you, sweetheart.’

Maxine and Emlyn sauntered along the drive towards the Hall.

‘You know something,’ said Emlyn. ‘Even though he wasn’t a king or anything, and really it was the Oak God trapped in the figure, in the end he was sort of crowned.’

‘How’d’ya mean?’

‘The dyke, around the spinney, and the standing stones, they’re kind of like a crown or coronet.’

‘I kinda see what you’re getting at.’ Maxine laughed. ‘Put a fair old dent in it, eh. Never been too pro-monarchy, me.’

Emlyn chuckled and then became serious. ‘You had an argument with Hugh that day, didn’t you?’

Maxine nodded and grinned.

‘Dyaagh, I know what you’re thinking but it’s not the whole thing, all right. I was so pissed about the bike —about him not being able to help me finish it. The wall was sitting there like—’

‘But he did help you —with the bike. He was there when your—’ Emlyn faltered, uncertain how to speak of the newly exposed relationship.

‘You can call her my mother. S’all right, it’s what she is. Yeah, anyway, Hugh’s away for an engineering apprenticeship, lucky sod. Must have learnt something from hanging around me, eh?’

They halted just outside the Acute Care Unit. Emlyn’s hand was on the door. He could see Max’s hesitation.

‘You don’t have to—’

‘Is he—?’

‘Mad?’

‘Yeah, I suppose that’s what I’m asking. You know, will he act strange or anything?’

‘Mostly he just sits. I sit with him. There’s a big tree out in the garden but it’s getting a bit cold now. You still want to come in?’

‘Sure, why not. It’s not like I’m a stranger when it comes to acting weird. My —ma sister was out of it on a right regular basis. She was queen of the weird shit stuff. I mean, you’ve got to wonder how I turned out to be such a shiny example of —what was it old Lowry said the other morning—?’

‘Moral rectitude?’

‘Aye, moral rectitude.’

Maxine stepped forward and Emlyn pushed the door open for her. She winked at him and grinned. ‘But —just because I’m meeting your father doesn’a make us engaged or anything.’

Out on the Edinburgh road Emlyn coasted along beneath the trees. Winter had passed and the spring sunlight flickered across his face. The road was straight and clear of traffic. He aimed the bike and shut his eyes. The scintillation turned blood red under his eyelids.

The image would never leave him. The boy was walking through the meadow towards the river. And if he listened very hard he could still here an echo of the voice he had heard on the bridge the day they had sealed up the oak.

*Surely, after so long a time, the boy and I are one-and-the-same? Which of us it was that walked the forest no longer matters—only pleasant memories now—summer meadows by the river—the sweep of rye in an upland field—the feel of the grain as it runs through the fingers— But the bright envelope of memory fades. Even now, as the blessed darkness draws me down into the earth, I struggle to retain it. No doubt, we are still there on that hillside or swimming in the river with our friends.*

That day on the bridge, when Hugh and his father had been up in the oak, he had seen the boy plunge out into the deeper pool that lay where the river turned back towards the town. He had seen him chiacking with his friends in the shallows, the sound of their play coming to him on the clear autumn air. Under a summer sky, in a place that he could never go to, the river ran on, the green water sliding by the ripening grain.

It seemed to Emlyn that he had ridden through that warm tunnel forever. He opened his eyes. The bike had veered to the middle of the road. The broken white line disappeared beneath his front wheel. Huntleighbank Hall was still a good distance down the road and he was in no hurry to get there. His father would be sitting on his bench under the huge Cedar. He would take the crossword out and sit beside him: read the clues; fill in the blanks. He was getting better at solving them now. Things would be the same: things would be different.