

THE ANCIENT EARTH TRILOGY

2

A HERO'S THRONE

ROSS LAWHEAD

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THE ANCIENT EARTH TRILOGY

BOOK TWO:

**A HERO'S
THRONE**

ROSS LAWHEAD



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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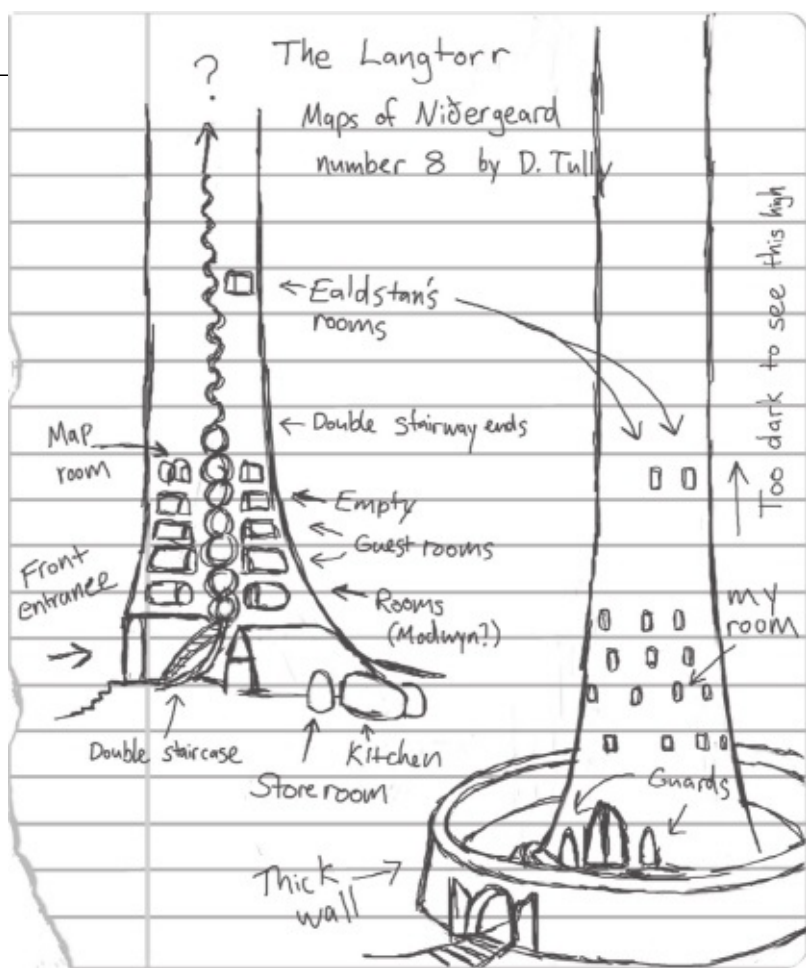
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What have the strong gods given?

Where have the glad gods led?

When Guthrum sits on a hero's throne

And asks if he is dead?

— G. K. CHESTERTON, *THE BALLAD OF THE WHITE HORSE*

FOR MOM—AN INSPIRATION TO

ADVENTURING HEROINES EVERYWHERE

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The Marriage of Modern Fantasy and Ancient Myth

About the Author

PROLOGUE

A Tale of a Western Isle

So, this is my tale, and it happened a long time ago. A long, long time ago, before there were Christians in the Hebrides. And it's about this here monk, see, and this here boy.

The monk was from the low country, and he was travelling to Broadford in Skye in order to spread the word of God among the inhabitants of that island, for there were even then folk living on Skye although they were from an old and strange people. This monk's name was Coel, and he was not native to those lands, but his name is remembered there still. He had a boat that was so small he had to sit in it cross-legged. This type of boat was called a coracle and was common in the time I am telling you about.

It was a damp, grey day on the sea—the type where a man didn't know if there was more water beneath the boat or in the air around it. The island of Skye ahead of him could not be seen at all, and the first he knew of it was when he heard the whisper of sand underneath the bottom of the boat. The monk was glad for this and gave thanks to God for not forgetting him in the fog. Stepping out of the boat, water squished into his leather shoes as he made his way up the beach.

He drew his bark up behind him, toiling along the wet shore, and set it against a cluster of rocks and boulders in order to shelter himself from the wind and mist.

He had just made his camp when he heard the sound of voices raised in wails of lament, loud shrieks and shouts, awful they were.

He followed the sound of these tormented cries to the forest that lined the beach. There before him, walking through the trees and the mist, he saw a shifting line of figures dressed in clothes of fantastic colours and design. They were marching in procession behind a column of jet-black horses that hauled a silver skiff, upon which was a glass coffin, containing the body of a very old woman. She was very beautiful, even for being dead, and although the fantastic bier dragged on the ground, it never hit a bump or fell into a rut.

The monk was canny—canny enough to realise that it was a Færie funeral he was observing. Planting his walking stick into the ground, he knelt and, to protect himself, began to read to himself from the Gospels, keeping his eyes trained fast on his book. He read out loud so as to keep the holy words in his ears, so as to seal them, in a way, from the cries of the damned.

As he read, one of the members of the funeral train—a boy dressed all in green—left it and came and crouched in front of him. Coel did not raise his eyes to look at him, he merely kept reading.

The procession disappeared and the wailing diminished, eventually vanishing altogether. But the boy did not leave Coel's side, and so he continued reading, not wanting to allow himself to be tempted into follies.

He read on, straight through Matthew and, when he finished that, continued on to Mark. And from Mark he went to Luke, and Luke on to John. And then he was finished; he had no more scriptures to read.

So he decided to pray—a long-winded and exhaustive prayer it was. He bowed his head low—very low, so as to shut out vision of the boy who might work enchantments on him to entice him away to destruction.

When he finished his prayer, he opened his eyes and looked around.

The boy was still there.

“I have marked all that you have read,” the boy said. “Tell me, is there any hope of forgiveness for those words for my people?”

Coel spoke kindly but cautiously to him, fearing to be drawn into an enchantment. He said that there wasn't mention of salvation for any but the sinful sons of Adam.

Hearing this, the boy became disconsolate, and he picked up the wailing that he had laid down earlier and plunged himself into the sea.

CHAPTER ONE

“The Dragon Changed Everything . . .”

I

It is a golf hotel in Galashiels, just over the border. Gentle green slopes of the Scottish lowlands stretched into the distance, the pale, patchy greens only interrupted by an occasional blob of yellow.

They had driven through the day in the police cruiser, arriving at about six in the evening. Alex and Ecgryt took turns driving. Freya drifted in and out of sleep, still exhausted from her ordeal. Daniel sat next to her, gripped the door handle next to him so tightly it was as if he were the only thing holding her in place. Freya would look across to him in the moments when she awoke, and although his eyes were closed, he didn't seem to be sleeping.

They had taken two twin rooms—Daniel and Freya shared one and promptly fell asleep again. And now, on the restaurant's terrace after a hearty meal of meat, potatoes, and gravy, they were listening to Alex talk about dragons.

“It really did. I mean it—the dragon changed *everything*.” Alex paused to let this sink in. “Before then, it was just simple creatures that we were dealing with—the low or single ‘elementals’ as they're called; trolls, sprites, wisps, that sort of thing. Those sorts wander through our borders all the time causing trouble, and often wander back out again without anybody taking notice. They're not what you'd call complex creatures, so they can drop through the gates quite easily. When the gates are open, that is—there's sort of a season for it.

“Anyway. We'd noticed an increase in activity lately, but it was very gradual, and nothing we couldn't handle. Ecgryt and I were monitoring it, and we thought we had more time.

“But dragons are a different kettle of fish all together. Talk about your complex elementals . . . They're actually many types of elements all layered together, wrapped up in one. And smart. So smart.” He sat back, shaking his head. “Something like that doesn't just drop in from one world to another. It was brought here, possibly pulled here—*summoned*, maybe—or it was raised here, which is even more upsetting. So this was a new development. Its arrival was no accident or chance circumstance—it was pretty much a declaration of war.”

“By who?” Daniel asked.

“That's a good question.”

Alex took a long sip of his pint, then cradled it against his chest.

“Was it big?” Freya asked.

“The dragon? Big enough,” Alex said, lifting his eyebrows. “I was lucky it was only a hatchling. Ecgryt said it couldn't have been more than a few weeks old. And it near finished me, even at that.”

“How do you know all this?” Daniel asked, leaning forward on the table.

“My family descends from a very small clan in the highlands—one of the secret clans. We own a distinct tartan, which we never wear. We've been called, through the ages, the ‘Nethergrund Cannies’—that is, those that have knowledge of the lands beneath. But really we only use that to refer to ourselves, since we are a very secret clan, and few on this earth have knowledge of the knowledgeable.”

people. It has always been such, and it is best as such.

“Our current appointment goes back through the Forty-Five and the Fifteen, to the fourteen century. Our purpose was to defend the hidden land in three ways: to protect, to procure, and to uphauð. Protect the portals to the nethergrund, procure provisions for whatever was needful—be it metal or tools for smithing and carving—and to uphauð, to repair whatever tunnels have been felled by time and disuse. When I was a boy, I would be taken underground with my father and my grand-uncle to walk the tunnels, and I gained the ken. I learned them just as they learnt them, by sight and by memory. We had maps, but they are old and inaccurate. The best way is to walk them yourself. I many times walked the area where you popped up. And killed yfelgópes too.”

“Tell them about Ealdstan,” Ecgbryt said, placing another empty pint glass in front of him. The three made three.

“I met him once, just the once. Grim and uncommon mean, he seemed, although, mind you, I was only eight.”

“Why? What’d he do?” Freya asked.

“He argued with my grand-da about something, while my father stood by. None would speak of it to me afterward, but I gathered he wanted me to perform some task—a journey and *then* a task—but my grand-da refused. Said I was too young and the thing was needless. Aye, I believe it was the same task he sent you both on that he was wishing for me.”

“Killing Gád?” Daniel asked.

“Aye, mebbe, mebbe. I don’t recall Gád being discussed, but as I said, I was young. My family had many conflicts with Ealdstan over the years.”

“Why?”

“They didn’t like the direction he was taking. And Ealdstan called them traitors to his cause, although my father attempted to be conciliatory. And for myself? Well, I don’t really know what we’ve found ourselves in the middle of at the moment. If it was just a crazy old wizard, that’d be one thing. But like I said, the dragon changed everything.”

“How?” Freya asked. “I mean, I understand that dragons might be a big deal, but how exactly do they change things?”

“Dragons cause all manner of mischief.”

“That’s a truth, and putting it mildly,” Ecgbryt said, signalling for another dark ale.

“Aye, putting it mildly,” Alex assented. “You see, it’s not just the trouble that they cause in themselves—stealing sheep and livestock, people, pets—it’s also the effect they have on the area around them, in what you might say a spiritual sense. They literally depress the entire region they inhabit.”

“Depress it?” Daniel repeated.

“Aye,” he said with a nod. “I’ve felt it many times; it’s a thick, heavy, dark emotion that sticks to you like tar. Makes you tired, makes you sluggish. Not everyone associates moods with places, and so it takes most off guard. You don’t wake up when you want to, you don’t go out as often, you retreat into your cave. And when you do go out, you’re peevish and fashed, as are the people you meet. Everyone is at one another’s throats, knives out—suicides, theft . . . it brings out all that is worst in human nature.”

He shook his head. “It used to be that we were prepared—the whole *country* was prepared—against these sorts of attacks. I’m talking about the old days—the golden olden times. The old poems talk more about a knight’s virtues than his weapons; read *Gawain and the Green Knight*, see if I’m wrong.”

Read *Pearl*. Think about the knights of the round table; leaders with integrity. The common folk were neither here nor there, and there was an extremely high percentage of enchanters and evil princes per capita, it's true, but society was, on the whole, well-provisioned for means of correction against such mystical incursions. That is not true today. Most don't even acknowledge any sort of spiritual threat—any sort of spirit, even—and those that do have been lulled into an opiate daze by cushy lives, quiet cars, easy jobs, fast food . . . a hypnotic dance of colours and social interactions on your computer screen. People fight for their lives, but we've forgotten how to fight for our souls."

"Okay, but what does the dragon *mean*?" Freya asked, trying to get him back to the topic at hand. "You think the mythical world came into our world?"

"The *mystical worlds*, yes. There are more than one of them, and with Ealdstan missing and Niðergeard destroyed, our world is vulnerable to invasion."

"Niðergeard has fallen?" Daniel said.

Ecgbryt shifted in his seat. "Niðergeard has fallen," he said. "It is overrun. I blundered unwittingly and was lucky to escape with my skin when I found yfelgópes roaming the streets pillaging the smiths and stores."

"How did the yfelgópes organise and mobilise without Gád?" Daniel said. "Was it Kelm?"

"We believe so," Ecgbryt said.

"Who is Kelm?" Freya asked.

"Kelm Kafhand," said Ecgbryt. "Your paths have not crossed with his—even I would not know him to see him. He is the general of the yfelgóp army and moves at Gád's will as if he were his master's own hand. Since Ecgbryt came to me, we've been going over the library top to tail and found no mention of anyone by that name. Not in our library, at least. There were other libraries kept by cannies all over the isles, but over the years they have diminished and lost touch with each other. There once were cannies in Wales, Ireland, and all over England—the West Country, Kent, Winchester—but relations between them wore down over the years, and Ealdstan did not keep them up."

"Okay, so he's invaded Niðergeard," Daniel said. "What are you going to do?"

"Do, young Daniel?" Ecgbryt answered. "What do you think we are going to do? We are going to take it back!" He pounded the table with his fist, making their glasses and cutlery jump.

"Yes!" Daniel shouted. He pounded the table too. "Yes, yes! That's exactly what I wanted you to say!"

Freya, unsettled, looked to Alex. He was more subdued but smiling eagerly.

"What do we do? What do we do first?" Daniel asked, leaning in, his voice a harsh, excited whisper.

"It is no easy task planning to retake the underground realm with just a handful of faithfuls," Ecgbryt said, raising his palms. "Even with the stout party that is gathered here. No, we will need to marshal our resources, build an army."

"What about the sleeping knights?" Daniel asked. "Can we use them? Storm the city in force?"

"Patience, young Daniel, patience! First we would have to locate the knights and the tunnels used to access them. It is not a case of just wandering through the many thousands of tunnels—the old and inaccurate maps and texts would have to be studied and compared to modern ones. Then a route would have to be plotted—not as easy as it sounds—in order to pick up as many knights as quickly as possible."

“That couldn’t take that long to do, surely?”

Ecgbryt stroked his trimmed beard and eyed him. “Such an undertaking may require years. Seven years at least.”

“Years? Really?” Daniel asked, shrinking back in disappointment.

“Years, certainly. Which is why you are lucky”—Ecgbryt’s eyelids drooped teasingly—“that we have already done all that.”

“Really?” Daniel was as giddy as a child at Christmas. “Freya, that’s—” He became aware of the volume of his exclamations and lowered his voice. “This is what I’ve been waiting for ever since I left—the chance to go back and settle things once and for all. I’ve been seeing yfelgópes, you know, hunting and killing them. I knew this battle wasn’t finished, I *knew it!* When do we start? When do we invade?”

“Calm down, Daniel,” Alex said seriously. “It’s not as easy as all of that. We need to do more than just round up the knights. That’s just one aspect of the plan, and . . . actually, maybe this is a good time to introduce the fifth member of our party.”

“The fifth?” Daniel asked.

Alex made a vigorous waving motion into the dark bar area of the hotel. A woman emerged from the shadows; she looked to be about fifty, sturdily built, but trim and fit. She wore pea green slacks, walking boots, a wide tartan scarf, and a beige travelling jacket that appeared as old, hard-worn, and as tough as she. Her hair, silver-grey, was pulled back in a short ponytail.

“Daniel, Freya, this is my Aunt Vivienne,” Alex said, introducing them.

“Aunt Vivienne?” Daniel said, echoing him. “Seriously?” He made an unattractive sideways smirk at Alex.

“Vivienne Simpson—my dad’s sister,” he explained.

“His baby sister. Call me Viv,” Alex’s aunt added emphatically. “I’ll be joining you”—she lowered her voice—“*down under.*”

“I don’t think we can be bringing people’s *aunts* to Niðergeard,” Daniel scoffed. “I’ve been there. Not everyone makes it out alive. I can’t be responsible for dragging peoples’ *aunts* through one of the most dangerous places in the country.” Vivienne’s eyes sparkled as she leaned forward, placing her knuckles on the picnic table.

“Young man,” she said in a very lightly accented yet musical voice—was it an Edinburgh accent?—“I’ll have you know that I can walk thirty miles a day for weeks, if need be. I’ve hiked up K2 and over twenty Alpine peaks.”

“When? Thirty years ago?” Daniel asked.

She didn’t bat an eye. “I have made countless trips underground; not just in this country, but all over the world. Have *you* traversed”—Freya loved the way Viv rolled out the word *tra-ver-r-rs*—“the hidden tunnels of the Tibetan mountains? Have *you* mapped the London subterranean passageways, the forgotten undergrounds, the Fleet River? Do you know where the seventeen sunken churches of Britain are located? Have you taken dives to Llyonesse?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Can you not only read but *speak* seven dead languages? *Young man*, if you are to have a hope of returning from the underground realms in one piece, then you will do best to heed my experience and my voice.” She now straightened to her full height. “And not scoff at assistance freely given. I have already visited the Langtorr, I’ll have you know.”

“Really?” Daniel asked. “How did you get in and out when Ecgbryt only barely escaped from it?”

“How indeed?” Vivienne said coyly.

“Okay, okay, I’m sold,” Daniel said, grinning and holding up his hands.

Vivienne pursed her lips and glared at Daniel, getting the measure of him.

“So that’s settled, then. Aunt Viv, please, take a seat. The plan is this: Daniel, you and Freya will accompany Aunt Viv down to Niðergeard—as a special task force.”

“A task force to accomplish what, exactly?” Freya asked.

“Fact finding, primarily,” Vivienne said. “But we shall also function as agents of opportunity.”

“What does that mean?”

“There are additional tasks—missions, if you like—that we shall endeavour to complete, should circumstances present themselves.”

“Such as?” Freya asked.

“Such as the Great Carnyx,” Vivienne said. “It is a large horn—”

“They remember,” Ecgbryt said. “They were there; they have seen it.”

“I do remember,” Daniel said. “The horn. It’s a bronze sort of thing, long, curved at the top and bottom—made to look like some sort of an animal shouting. You mean that?”

“That’s the one,” Alex said.

“Hey, I remember—if you blow it, then it wakes up all the knights in the country. Why don’t we just get that instead of rounding them up individually?”

“We could if we knew where it was, which is the point of going to look for it. In any case,” Vivienne continued, “we’re not exactly certain what it does. Do either of you know what the inscription says on it?” They shook their heads. “It’s printed up one side and it reads: *‘Bláwst þes horn and se æftera here laðiastr.’*”

The enchantment that Daniel and Freya received on passing through the first arch to Niðergeard still worked, for their minds already understood the words and their meaning.

“Blow you this horn and summon the next army?” Freya said. “Is that right?”

“Yes, you have it,” Ecgbryt said.

“Why wouldn’t that inscription refer to the sleeping knights?” Freya asked.

“It may,” Alex allowed, “but it doesn’t expressly refer to them. It could be talking about something else. And without Ealdstan to confirm, we just don’t know.”

“So how do you find out for sure?” Daniel asked. “I mean, if it could be anything . . .” Visions of otherworldly armies crossing through fields of mist at the horn’s call flooded his imagination.

“It’s going to be your job to find out,” Alex said.

“You mean find the horn and blow it? Sounds simple enough—if it’s there to blow.”

“A war is not fought with just might of arms,” Ecgbryt said. “It is also won by wit and cunning. Especially when numbers are few or uncertain, a small amount of knowledge can be key. Why, remember—” He caught himself and frowned, his gaze seeming to turn inward for a moment and then back to them. “I remember times when just a little information has turned the tide of an entire war. That is the sort of information we will need. We not only need to know if this horn can be found and made use of, we need to know what happened to Ealdstan, Modwyn, Godmund, Frithfroth—anything you can find.”

“Mostly we want information,” Alex continued. “If the worst has come to the worst—and we now have every reason to suspect that it has—then Ealdstan has been imprisoned, incapacitated, or even

killed. He would not have allowed Niðergeard to fall otherwise.”

“Are you sure?” Freya said, clearing her throat. “I mean, when we met him, all those years back, he didn’t exactly seem on top of things. He stopped you from blowing the horn then, if I recall. What’s to say that he didn’t turn traitor?”

Ecgbryt gave a vigorous shake of his head. “Niðergeard has been Ealdstan’s labour of love for nearly a score of centuries. To let it fall into disgrace—he would quicker slit his own throat.”

Freya bit her lip. They weren’t factoring Gád into the equation. Should she tell them? It would be admitting to guilt, admitting to being a silent witness to Swiðgar’s death—of hiding what really happened to him. She opened her mouth to say something.

And then closed it.

“So he’s dead or being held captive,” Daniel said. “We need to free the city and, therefore, free him. I’m ready now. When do we get going?”

“Wait,” Freya heard herself say. “Just wait a moment. I’m uncomfortable with the idea of . . . charging back into the city and starting a war by summoning the sleeping knights. Is this really the best plan?”

“The city is occupied,” Daniel said, smacking his palm on the table. “We must liberate it. Stop the dragons, save the world. Right?”

“Okay, but is this the best way? Do we even know what’s going on in—”

“What exactly do we need to know, Freya?” Daniel broke in. “They wouldn’t hesitate to kill us. That’s all *I* need to know.”

“But we don’t even know what’s going on down there. Maybe it’s *best* that Niðergeard has fallen. I mean, what good has it been doing anyone?”

Daniel nearly exploded. “It’s . . . Freya! It’s been—”

Alex held his hand up. “It’s not about what good it’s been—although it’s been plenty over the centuries, that’s certain—it’s about the future, about protecting this country from future invasion—about stopping the one that’s already in progress.”

“Right. Exactly,” Freya said. “It sounds like—with the dragon and everything—as if there’s a larger problem beyond Niðergeard. Shouldn’t we address *that*, instead of a dusty old city that everyone has forgotten about?”

“Young Freya,” Ecgbryt said after consideration, “you may be right. But the situation is as you stated—we simply do not know enough yet. We need answers from Niðergeard and her people. And you three are the best for the job.”

“Three?” Freya asked.

“You, Daniel, and Vivienne,” Ecgbryt said.

“But . . . the army. Shouldn’t you go around and gather them before we know what the deal is?”

“Freya,” Ecgbryt said in a stern voice. “Kelm and the yfelgópes will need to be defeated, whatever the situation. Trust me on that. Their progress will only harm us.”

Freya shook her head. “Count me out,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Daniel asked.

“I mean, I’m not going. You don’t need me.”

“Oh, what? You’re losing the argument so you’re going to sulk?”

“Not at all. I’m no good at fighting, I’ll just get in the way. More likely killed. It’s dangerous and I’m not prepared for that, so I’m not going.”

Daniel's mouth hung open, a half smile of disbelief across it.

"Let's all take a moment and find some space to have a bit of a think," Vivienne said, rising. "It's a lot to take in all at once."

"Freya," Alex said, when she eagerly rose too, "don't go too far. Stay on the grounds and try to avoid others—you're a celebrity now. Your picture has been plastered all over the news. The 'twice-abducted girl' story has rather sparked the public imagination."

Freya nodded.

"If someone does recognise you, just say that you are already in the escort of two police officers and find a way to contact Ecgbryt or myself. I'm Constable Simpson, he's Constable Cuthbert."

She nodded and struck out toward the golf course to stretch her legs.

II

Freya skirted the edge of well-cultivated woodland. It wasn't the messy, organic sort of woods that you got in actual forests; it was the thinned out, well-tended woodland where anything rotten or dead was quickly carted off.

"They tricked you. They blindfolded you with their lies, told you all sorts of fantastic tales until your head started spinning, and when you were all mixed up, they took off the blindfold and pushed you where they wanted you to go."

Gád's words came back to her easily. It had been so hard to repress them, to push them away into any dark closet of her mind, but now they were coming back to her freely, in complete snatches. They'd obviously left more of an impression on her than she knew.

"They want to control us, make us live in the past with them, give up our identities, our hopes and dreams—make us something less than human."

She had expected a villain but instead found someone who made a lot of sense. And he'd given her what she most wanted: an escape from their underground prison—which was considerably more than anyone else did for her. Even for all the hype about his power and wisdom, Ealdstan did not do that.

However, Gád had told her to lie, and he had killed Swiðgar. Those two things could not be forgotten.

But his words kept coming back, as if she were hearing them for the first time. It was like digging for a skeleton in the ground; every so often a bone unearthed, and she would fit it together with what she already had. Given time, she felt she could piece together the entire conversation.

"They told you I was an oppressor, but what if I'm a freedom fighter? A revolutionary?"

Rationally, she knew that there was little reason to take what Gád told her on trust, any more than Ealdstan. But even if Gád was not completely right, he couldn't be as wrong as Ealdstan and Modwyn and the rest of them, with their secret battles, stockpiled soldiers, and weapons and enchantments for some supposed future mystical battle. With a creeping realization, she found that she sided more with Gád than with any of the Niðerguarders. Ecgbryt and poor Swiðgar included.

She suddenly noticed she was walking faster now—her hands, arms, and shoulders were clenched and she was sweating. Anxiety was taking over; it almost had control of her.

She wished she had her pills, but her pills were long gone. She hadn't escaped Stowe with them, and right now it would be next to impossible to pick up a new prescription. Her heart was going as fast

as an alarm clock bell. Without the pills, life was like a death-metal soundtrack with the volume kicked up to eleven. It was hard to think and hard to feel anything except the Fear. She ran through some exercises that a therapist once tried to teach her—she built up the mind-wall and tossed even fear that she came across over it, but that was only of limited help. She could still hear her fear behind it—scrabbling, skittering, climbing . . .

“You’re right, you know.”

Freya whirled and found Aunt Vivienne looking into the trees.

“Sorry to interrupt your solitude, but I wanted you to know: you’re right. I know it, you know it—and that’s why we all need you to go down there with us.”

Freya looked away. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” she said. “I don’t really want to go back. For years I’ve been terrified—literally terrified, often almost paralysed with terror—of being sucked back into that world, of what would happen to me if it did.” She looked about at the trees, then back at Vivienne. “It’s ruining my life—it’s ruining me. I’ve thought of killing myself lots of times. Regularly, I would say. I probably never had a chance of a normal life after getting sucked into Niðergeard, but I think I could have a life without fear if I could go back there and deal with it.”

Vivienne came closer to her. “Well, don’t go off and do anything foolish. You’re a good thinker and I feel that we need thinkers more than we do fighters in a situation like this.”

“I’m worried about Daniel, that he’ll mess things up. He’s too eager to run in and start chopping people’s heads off.”

“I believe I can keep him in line. I know his type, but I need you with me.”

“And Ecgbryt. We don’t need the knights yet. It’s stupid to send him off to get them. Wouldn’t it be better off taking him with us?”

Vivienne shook her head. “We not only must find out if we can find and wake the knights; we need to try and save them. They’re already being tracked down and killed. The dragon Alex discovered he killed all the knights and made their chamber its lair. We have to get to the others before they’re discovered too, and Ecgbryt and Alex are the best qualified and able to do that.”

Freya chewed her lip. This was the time to tell Vivienne about Gád if she was going to, but she still wasn’t sure.

“They told you I was an oppressor, but what if I’m a freedom fighter? A revolutionary?”

Freya looked out over the green landscape of Scotland. A light rain was moving in on the hills ahead of them, misting the horizon in a grey blur. *If I’m really going to wade into a war, she thought, then I want to make sure I’m on the right side before I start sharing information.*

“Dreary weather, eh?” Vivienne said.

“We’ll miss the view when we go underground.”

“Does that mean you’re coming?”

“I don’t think I have much choice.”

“Wonderful.”

“How do we get there?”

“Through the Langtorr tunnel,” Vivienne said matter-of-factly.

“The what?”

“The Langtorr tunnel. You must know the Langtorr, correct? Ecgbryt said that’s where you all stayed. If you go to the top of it, it connects here—well, to the midlands at least. We’ve been keeping a very close eye on it. It seems to be still open and unguarded by the yfelgópes.”

Freya felt like she was plunging downward already. “The Langtorr . . . It’s been there all the time?”

“Indeed. I even did a quick scout of it myself.”

“You’ve been to the Langtorr? Recently?”

“Just to see if I could or if we had to arrange something else. There are scads of entrances if you know how to look for them. The Langtorr is the most direct one.”

“Would Ecgbryt have known about it? Even years ago?”

“Certainly. It’s one of the oldest gates.”

Freya turned her back to Vivienne. She could feel her face flushing with rage. There *had* been a direct exit from Niðergeard. They could have been sent home at any time at all. The only reason she agreed to go on that ridiculous quest was to get back home—something Ealdstan told her was impossible to do unless they destroyed Gád. She had known they were being used but had consoled herself by knowing that there was no other way through the terrible situation they were in. But it was another of Ealdstan’s lies—and one that all the other Niðergearders—Modwyn, Godmund, and Ecgbryt and Swiðgar included—were complicit in.

That settled it. She may not wholly be on Gád’s side, but she certainly wasn’t on the side of those who would manipulate small, helpless children into going on missions of assassination. Was he a revolutionary? Then she was too.

III

Kelm Kafhand sat on the hero’s throne. It was a chair made of rough-hewn stone and sat atop a large, irregular pile of rubble in the largest courtyard of Niðergeard. Coal fires burned in braziers at the base of the pile. It was difficult for him to heave his powerful but unwieldy form up the heap, but the view from the top gave an appropriate perspective for his thoughts.

Kelm huffed in large, ragged breaths as his enormous chest moved up and down with a slow, inevitable regularity. His body may be still, but his mind was racing—running through exercises and plans, and even evil thoughts to help while away monotony. His scowl was deep—he had been frowning for decades.

Occasionally he would sneer in pleasure at a particularly ugly thought, but even then the large, heavy jowls that anchored his face to his shoulders and chest would remain unstirred. His eyes were buried beneath a flabby brow that pressed down on his cheeks and created a series of folds that masked his eyes. His face, grotesque as it was, was not one without emotion. Long, shaggy eyebrows moved and twitched almost constantly, and his wide mouth had found nuance and subtlety in conveying fifty different shades of displeasure unobtained by younger, more inexperienced faces.

He was doing what he always did, whether he was eating, drinking, dreaming, or just sitting: he was plotting. Plotting was as natural to him as breathing. Every minute of every day was filled with him cooking up plots—small acts of meanness or large acts of cruelty, it didn’t matter. Most of his plots never went further than the grin on his own slimy lips, but that didn’t matter. Each plot kept his mind in shape for the next one.

Kelm’s lieutenant, a wretched little yfelgóp with a large head and weak arms, slouched into view from around one of the buildings and began his address with a bored drone. “Your honour, my general, the most exalted among all military leaders, illustrious master of the underground races and magnificent commander of the five unseen armies”—the lieutenant drew in a deep breath before finally getting

the point—"a messenger has arrived."

Kelm glared at the miserable creature for almost a minute before nodding. During that time the lieutenant merely stood gazing vacantly at his esteemed general, breathing heavily through his mouth and drooling. Kelm decided that none of his soldiers could be as stupid as this man looked and therefore this one was trying to fool him, and therefore needed to be killed. He already had what must be a dozen plots to accomplish it, but he'd need to spend time selecting the most satisfying one.

For now, he signalled to the lieutenant, who turned away unceremoniously and shuffled back through the curtain. A moment later the messenger appeared.

He was dressed in white with a light, full-length travelling cloak made out of a thick, bleached hide. Kelm's lip curled with pleasure; his breathing shifted into something that, in him, perhaps passed for a type of slow laughter.

The messenger frowned.

Kelm's breathing slowed. "You look like him."

"But I am not him. I am his mannequin. His fetch."

Kelm wheezed. "And what message does Empty-Grinner send to me in your empty shell?" the enormous leader asked, contempt raw in his voice.

The messenger bristled at Kelm's tone. "A wise man would advise you to be more respectful of your superior."

The right side of Kelm's mouth jerked upward, showing a flash of black and orange teeth. "Show me a wise man and I'll consider his advice. Show me a superior and I'll show him respect."

The messenger gave a sly smile. "Wisdom and superiority are not mine to possess. I merely speak and listen for those who are greater than myself." He gave a bow but kept his eyes on Kelm's.

"Gád and I have an understanding," the massive general said with a belch. "There is none other who can control his troops with the skill that I can."

"No. You killed all those who might have."

"It is right that it was thus. Power is undeniable—in me it is irrepressible. He who is stronger must lead, and none have proven to be my strategic equal. It is I whose strength and prowess allowed us to conquer this city. I raised this hero's throne, and now, *I rule*."

"None but Gád," the messenger said quietly.

"What?"

"None but Gád have proven to be your equal."

It may have been the fire that made Kelm's eyes gleam viciously for a moment, but it was only for a moment, and when the gleam left, Kelm's face had a fairly apathetic cast to it. "My ambition does not extend to Gád's . . ." His breathing caught and he let out a wheeze. ". . . responsibilities. What Gád has, Gád can keep. I shall remain here."

"That is very generous. I'm sure that Gád thanks you for such a consideration. But perhaps when Gád has more, then you will want more? I wonder, have you already numbered Gád's days in your mind?"

Kelm's face was expressionless for several seconds, and then he let out a loud, ugly snort. "Watch yourself, your words tread closely to outright sedition."

"I had better do what I came to do then, hadn't I? My master's message is this: events are even now in motion. The two lifiende heroes have been reengaged and will shortly be on their way here. You are to resist them but not defeat or collaborate with them. Keep them alive. You are to bait them

bear—to within an inch of its life—but not to kill it.”

“This is an inglorious assignment.”

“I imagine it would be harder to keep these overworlders safe while they’re running around down here rather than to just smite them outright. Consider it a test of skill—and one, despite your own convictions about your prowess, I personally doubt you’ll manage.

“In any case, they must be allowed to blow the horn. It is all over for them when they blow the Carnyx. It shall be the honeyed hook that, when pulled, will bring steel jaws rushing in on them.”

Kelm nodded. “I understand. It will be done.”

The messenger turned and beamed at Kelm. “Very good. And now with your permission, I may depart?”

He lazily flicked his hand. The messenger bowed and turned to walk away.

Kelm’s lieutenant appeared again, his face twisted into a question. Kelm narrowed his eyes and then nodded. The lieutenant lumbered off.

Kelm sat patiently for several moments, which turned into several minutes. His lieutenant did not return.

With a supreme effort, he lifted himself out of his chair and manoeuvred down the pile. The courtyard guards were missing.

One of the city’s silver lamps lay askew in the path ahead. He went to it and picked it up and found that it illuminated a scene of carnage. Bodies lay everywhere. All four guards lay on their backs, a thick cut at the base of each of their necks that poured blood out into a deep puddle. The lieutenant lay a small distance apart, his own knife in his chest. He was twitching slightly, painfully trying to breathe.

The general squinted into the darkness to try to see some trace of a pale figure dressed in white. Nothing was visible between the buildings.

Kelm went over to his lieutenant and peered down at his face. Then he raised his foot and brought it down hard, ending the officer’s misery. He turned to one of the yfelgópes who yet lived. “You are my new second officer,” he informed him. “Draft a new guard immediately. Then bring me my dinner.” The newly promoted lieutenant bowed.

Kelm climbed back up to the throne and continued to brood and plot.

IV

Two days later they walked along the grass verge beside a road that ran along the fields and farmland of Warwickshire. Their trip to Scotland had only lasted as long as it took to get provisioned and kitted out in sturdy hiking and spelunking gear. They had stayed in Alex’s parents’ manse—on land where Freya and Daniel had emerged after completing their quest in the under realms. They met Alex’s father and Vivienne’s older brother; James was privy to more information than perhaps even Ecgbryd had about the underground realms, but his days of travelling below were far, far behind him, he said gently tapping a knee with his cane.

“You’ll be best off wi’ Viv, I can tell ye’ tha’.” His accent was stronger than either of the other Simpsons, and with it he continually sang his sister’s praises. “I’d take her as she stands now over myself in my prime, any day. Yes, you’ll do well with Viv, if there’s well to do! I’ll gi’e you what support I can up here, but dinnae expect it’ll be much. You’ll stay in my prayers—count on that.”

Freya found him a kind and affable man ready to help out but lonely in the years since his wife died.

During the stay in Scotland, Freya felt that she had finally managed to catch up on her sleep, and now, hitching her rucksack up her back and loosening her breathable waterproof coat, Freya felt considerably more prepared than she did eight years ago. All she'd had then was her school uniform and a jacket. Now she had several changes of hard-wearing clothes, military-grade food rations and utilities, and shoes that cost more than a month's rent.

They were getting close. Freya could see Ecgbryt checking his map more and more often—even dozen paces or so, in fact. He had a lot of maps. “Is this what you've been doing for the last eight years?” she had asked Ecgbryt after seeing the stacks of them on Alex's dining room table.

“Aye. I have been marking and charting the positions of the sleeping knights across the isles,” Ecgbryt answered, running a palm over a map of the British Isles that was spread before him. It had crosses and annotations in red, blue, and black. Beneath his other palm was a stack of papers that he had been diligently copying details of the map onto. “I have been hunting out the ancient markers and indicators, tracking the legends and secret demarcations of the old land that I used to live in. I am sorry, both of you, for not contacting you before now,” he said apologetically, thinking, mistakenly, that there was accusation in Freya's question. “But only I could do this task, and only Alex could assist me.

“Do know that of me, Freya,” he said, raising sad eyes to her. “I am sorry.”

Alex, just ahead of her, looked at his watch and then turned, pulling open a long, metal gate. “Shortcut,” he explained. “But let's try to pick up the pace. The sun's about to set,” Alex called out in his soft Scots accent. “Daniel, Ecgbryt?” The two behind them hefted their packs and lengthened their strides across the thickly grassed field.

Focusing primarily on keeping her footsteps measured and even, Freya tried to stifle the nervous energy that was coursing through her, which was making her hands and knees shake. She wanted to run away and collapse to the ground all at the same time. The Fear was now an ocean that was pressing against her wall, threatening at any second to push it over and sweep her away on waves of terror. So instead, she built a boat and put the Fear beneath her feet. As the sea raged around her, she only watched it roll and bob past the window. Soon it would be “The Evening,” when horrible things could happen; the sort of things that sent her life careening beyond her control. There were traps and pitfalls in the half-light that were not there in the day or the night, and they were actively trying to search for her.

“Can I ask you a question?” Vivienne bustled up close to Freya. She was apparently as strong as a mule. Where Freya constantly flagged and felt crippled by her load, Vivienne bounded quickly and merrily beside her. “No, don't turn to me,” Vivienne said in a quiet tone. “Don't stop. Keep your voice low. Your friend, Daniel.”

“Yes?”

“Is he alright? I mean, is he well?”

“Well?”

“Aye, well. I only ask because he wanders around at nights, talking to himself.”

“He does?”

“Aye. Now, I only need four hours of sleep a night—one of the few benefits of being as old as I am—but I'd guess that your friend there has had less than that—much less. If any at all, in fact.”

“Really?”

“Really. You wouldn’t know anything about that?”

“No. Honestly. I’ve been sleeping like crazy. I wouldn’t have noticed if the building fell down around me.”

“What happened to him? Was it really Elfland?”

“I suppose so—he says it was. I really don’t know.”

“Keep a sharp eye,” Vivienne said, and then she shouted, “Are we nearly there yet?” in a jovial bellow.

“Almost, Aunt Viv,” Alex said, calling over his shoulder. “Look, you can see it there.”

Alex made a gesture, and Freya saw a fenced-off area to her right that seemed well looked after. It was tidy and neatly mown. Through gaps in the bordering hedge, she could see a curved line of grey stones.

They approached the stone circle, which Freya judged to be thirty meters in diameter and made of dark limestone. They entered at the small wooden gate, which bore a wooden sign that informed them. Beneath the English Heritage symbol, these were the Rollright Stones. They began to walk the circumference, passing the stones inside, on the right. The smallest markers of the circle came up about their knees while the largest were a couple feet taller than Ecgbryt.

Ecgbryt was counting stones, and this was apparently not as easy as it sounded. Alex and Daniel were doing a control count. Every five stones, Ecgbryt would turn and compare his number with Daniel and Alex.

“I count twenty, thus far,” Ecgbryt called over his shoulder.

“Twenty also,” Alex reported.

“Twenty,” Vivienne said.

“What are you looking for?” Freya asked.

“The stone that does not fit,” Vivienne told her. “It is said that no two countings of the stones in this ring are the same. The stones come and go. We are looking for one of the ones that is going.”

Freya nodded her head as if to say that made perfect sense. She dismally fell into step behind them, contemplating the dark days ahead of her. She took one last, long look at the aboveground scenery.

It was then that she noticed the four of them were not alone. A man, large, and shouldering something bulky, was standing between two of the stones on the other side of the ring. At first Freya thought it was another hiker or a tourist, but he was wearing a dark, shaggy coat that hung from his shoulders and came to just above his knees. His legs and feet were bare and stocky, hairy. His face was black with bristles around the mouth, his head as shaggy as his coat, to the extent that the hair from one entwined with the other.

He was just standing, staring at them, and something in his aspect seemed menacing to Freya. The twilight shone into his eyes, making them large and bright, like cat’s eyes in a dim room, giving him an added animalism.

“Come away, Freya,” Vivienne said, coming alongside her and pulling her gently by the shoulder. “We see them. Keep to the task. Quickly now.”

“Let us speed on,” Ecgbryt said, continuing the circle, brushing the tips of his fingers against the dark stones. “Thirty-five. What have you?”

“Thirty-five.”

Ecgbryt grumbled.

“There’s another one,” Daniel said to Alex in a low voice as a man, almost identical to the first

stepped out from behind the standing stone by the wooden gate.

Freya hurried to catch up to the others, Fear gaining on her. "I'm still not—ah!" She reeled as a third man stepped out just in front of her. Up close she could see the matted hair of his massive cloak quite clearly, as well as the features of his face, which were broad and rough, his mouth and nostrils protruding snout-like. She could also smell him. He stank of grease and wind and dead animal. Fear loomed over her, gazing intently but not moving. She hurried around him to stay with the others.

"Who are they?"

"They're . . . people we'd hoped not to run into," Alex said. "We should be fine if we hurry. As soon as you go through the portal, then you'll be safe. Mostly."

Freya looked across to Daniel. He was keeping his eyes on the men behind him, a hand under his coat where his sword was, an eager, sneering grin on his face; he was counting under his breath.

"Forty," Ecgbryt said.

"Forty," Alex said, coming to stand next to the knight.

"I've got forty-one," Vivienne said.

"Forty-one also," Daniel said, joining them.

There were more of the hairy men now—six in total—striding between the stones.

"It is one of these, then," Ecgbryt said, studying the stones behind him. He circled one that stood about five feet high. "Which one? Which one . . ."

Freya took two steps toward Ecgbryt and then froze in terror as the men—the six of them that they could see plainly—started howling at the top of their lungs. As each one stood, heads thrown back, they began to shudder and shake, their fur coats bristling. By degrees they leaned forward, spasming, arms extended, transforming. Their fur skins drew tighter around them, their arms and legs growing thick and bulky, and their skin darkened as fine fur grew everywhere, even on their faces—faces that lengthened, noses flattening into snouts, jaws widening, opening to show teeth that grew visibly. Their eyes turned black and sank back into deep, dark-furred brows.

Their arms—now forelegs—touched the ground and the transformations were complete. Where large men once stood, now there were large, black bears with slavering jaws and clawed limbs.

Freya gaped. "Oh, you're kidding me."

As one, the bears rushed them, tearing across the neatly trimmed lawn at a sprinting pace.

"Yes, yes. Here. Daniel, Freya—it is time, quick!" Ecgbryt yelled at them, but Freya was rooted to the spot. She felt Daniel tug at her arm and she stumbled forward, trying to pick her feet up far enough so as not to stumble.

Ecgbryt drew his axe from his rucksack and stepped forward to deal with the bears. He pulled a silver can from his belt and tossed it on the lawn. Freya watched as it rolled to a stop on the grass and then exploded in a flash of light and a head-rattling boom.

Of all of them, Freya was the only one who hadn't braced herself for the flashbang grenade. Wooded and blinded, she felt arms join around her waist and she was hoisted off the ground. She rubbed her palms into her eyes to try to clear them. The last she saw in the twilight of the overworld was Ecgbryt wading through white, smoky vapours, swinging his axe swiftly around him. A bear carcass already lay at his feet, but the others were rallying. She heard the sharp, tinny pops of Alex's firearm, Ecgbryt shouting, and then she was pulled down into darkness, as if into the grave—as if into the Fear.

She was released and stumbled down a short flight of steps, shouting and grabbing at the stone walls. She stopped her slow fall by pushing her weight against a wet stone wall, its texture and smell

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