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Also by Frank P. Ryan

The Snowmelt River

THE TOWER OF BONES

Frank P. Ryan

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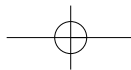
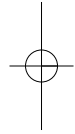
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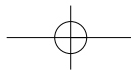
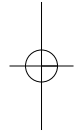
For Amy



Other rumours, equally venerable, tell a different tale – that long before the age of mortals there was a great war between the dragons and a brutal race of titans. So lasting and terrible was this conflict that the bones of the slain are still scattered over the blighted lands. It is said that the titans eventually won this war to bring to an end the Age of Dragons. This ushered in the Age of Tyranny, when mortals served no purpose other than enslavement, a tyranny that was ended by the coming of the Arinn.

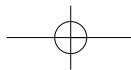
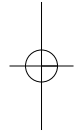
If such be true, deliverance surely came with a price.

Ussha De Danaan: last High Architect of Ossierel



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Lost

From her Tower of Bones the Witch's song ravished the night. There were no words to the song but still it managed to convey a terrifying mixture of power and triumph, flowing far and wide over the blasted landscape, eliciting echoes here and there among the wolves attracted to her swamps and marshes. They howled an answering chorus, gathering about the hill of the dead, snarling and snapping at one another with hunger. The Tower was a cyclopean skull, vast as a castle in its proportions and horned and fanged like some monstrous beast. Within this terrible fastness, in a freezing dungeon that was only faintly illuminated by a pulsating red light, an emaciated young woman lay face down against the floor, her hands pressed against her ears, her auburn hair dank and tangled, mixing with the dust and spiders' webs. But nothing she did could keep out the dreadful melody.

What was she doing here, in this alien world of

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continuous nightmare? How long had she been a prisoner of the Witch?

She had no answers to these questions. She had no memory of coming here to the Tower of Bones. She hardly recalled who she was any more. But now, struggling against the invasion of her mind by the Witch's song, she insisted on remembering her name.

I'm Kate Shaunessy. Kate Shaunessy from the town of Clonmel.

Slowly, through an impassioned effort of will, she recalled snatches of her childhood in the small town in Ireland, with just the Comeragh range of mountains separating it from the Atlantic Ocean. It was a struggle to bring to mind the street names or any clear memory of her home there. Still it comforted her to recall glimpses of the town's meandering streets, the remnants of its ancient walls and the great river that flowed through it, with its three or four limestone bridges . . . and, most precious of all, the names and faces of her friends. Maureen Grimstone . . . Mo . . . Mo and her brother, Mark. And Alan . . . *Alan!*

I couldn't bear it if I lost their names . . .

She recited the small litany again and again. Mo, with her long brown hair and her beautiful hazel eyes. The best friend she had ever had . . . and Mark . . . and Alan . . . Alan, the boy she had fallen in love with, who wasn't from Clonmel, or from England, like Mo and Mark, but from America.

Even now, recalling such things, recalling Alan's name,

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her heart raced within the half-starved cage of her chest. *Please . . . please! Stop it! Stop stealing my memories. Stop taking everything that matters from me!*

Climbing to her feet, she threw herself bodily against the wall of her cell. She smashed her fists against the hard reverberating surface that looked and felt like bone. She shrieked it aloud: 'I am Kate Shaunessy . . . from . . . from Clonmel!' She must never forget its name or the . . . the calling. The calling had led them to gather the waters of the three rivers . . . the sisters. *The River!* If she could only clear her mind sufficiently to remember things. The river's name . . . The river that flowed past her garden every day of her life. What was its name?

The Suir – she remembered its name.

She remembered more. All four of them had been seduced into leaving Earth. They had carried the waters of the three sisters to the portal on the mountain of Slievenamon. Through the portal they had arrived, as if by magic, into this alien world of Tír. Their coming here had been for a purpose. They had freed the bear people, the Olhyiu, from slavery in the Arctic wilderness of the Whitestar Mountains. They had sailed the Snowmelt River in the Temple Ship. But that had only been the beginning of why they had been brought here into this alien world . . .

Already her mind was hurting from the effort at remembering. The Witch was invading her being, stealing her mind again. The past seemed so long ago . . . an eternity . . .

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With her fingers in her ears to block out the song, she insisted again: *I can't forget . . . I won't forget!*

To memory, unbidden, came a beautiful morning, early, under a summer's sky. Alan was waiting for her. He was astride his bicycle, outside the gates. With a mixture of terror and grief she held tight to that memory, that one brief moment of clarity like an island of wonder in the cloudy seas of her memories.

The memory became overwhelming. The clumsy kiss of the shy, gangly boy – Alan. And how, in that moment, she knew she loved him.

A sound of screaming in the corridor beyond her cell: the clatter of calloused bare feet in the echoing labyrinths of bone. The unmistakable snap of a Garg-tail whip. Faltana was lashing some unfortunate creature. Kate trembled with fright, struggling to recover the precious vision of something so beautiful, but already it had slipped away.

I'm lost, she thought. I've died and gone to hell – and there's nothing that anybody can do to help me.

The New Kyra

Across the three-mile-wide estuary of the Snowmelt River, the walled City of Carfon was ghostly in the half-light of dawn. For Alan Duval the stroll, in the company of his friend, the dwarf mage Qwenqwo Cuatzel, offered a brief respite from the despair that had set, like an iron cage, around his heart. Tall, slim, almost gaunt in his features, with his thick brown hair grown a little wild and long, he kept the sea to his right as he headed in broad sweeping strides towards the surf.

Carfon! He spoke its name softly, as a man might speak of a fabled wonder, even when that wonder confronts him in solid stone. Carfon, pearl of the Eastern Ocean, and the last free city in the entire continent of Monisle.

No description in words could have prepared him for the reality of this vision. The walls were a vast cliff face of masoned granite, two hundred feet high on their aprons and a quarter as much again atop the towers that studded

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the battlemented summit, with row upon row of bronze cannons lowering defensively over sea and landscape. Now, leaning on the heavy spear he had been using like a shepherd's staff, its upright blade spirally twisted and warded over its cutting edges with Ogham runes, he stared across the choppy water at this brooding fortification.

Yet for all their impregnable appearance those walls were threatened. There were enemies in this strange and menacing world that would be undaunted by any protection of cannons and stone. Carfon might fall, no matter that such an eventuality was unthinkable. And uppermost in the plans of the enemy, as in his own, was the fact that deep within those ancient walls was the portal to the most powerful force of all, a force so dreadful none dared openly to speak its name.

In his mind Alan whispered that name: the Fáil – a strange and ancient word. Even in whispering it he felt a tingle of its power activate in the ruby triangle embedded in his brow – the Oraculum of the First Power. The tingle spread out, a wave of pins and needles, through his heart and limbs. Such a power could never be allowed to fall into evil hands, or the consequences would be too dreadful to contemplate. Alan knew that much about it although he knew little to nothing of its true nature, or for that matter the dangers it might pose to him and his purpose. But now he was this close to it he had no choice but to confront the Fáil.

He took a deep breath, exhaled it slowly.

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He couldn't help but reflect on the fact that he had lost two of the three friends who had been summoned with him to this strange and dangerous world. Thank goodness Mo was safe, sleeping within the protection of the Olhyiu and Shee, whose tents and campfires covered several acres of beach behind him. The very thought was a reminder of the strangeness of this world. The Shee were descended from great cats and the Olhyiu were descended from bears. But as to his friend Mark – heck, he didn't rightly know where Mark was any more. Mark had saved their lives during the battle for Ossierel. But he had paid a terrible price for doing so. For all Alan knew his friend might be dead. Mark's body had disappeared from the Rath at the top of the tor. Alan had witnessed the extraordinary change in the statue of the dark Queen, Nantosueta, who now appeared to be locked in an embrace with the figure of Mark. And in his brow Mark bore the same triangle of power as Nantosueta – the Third Power, the Power of Death. The memory caused Alan to hesitate in his stride. He didn't know how to come to terms with what had happened to Mark. It was a problem that wouldn't go away. And yet he had no choice but to put it to one side for the moment, such was his anxiety about Kate. Thoughts of Kate, the girl he loved, had preoccupied every distracted moment of his life since she had been abducted by the repulsive bat-like warriors, the Gargs, during the battle. The Gargs had clearly been in league with the Great Witch. They had carried Kate across the Eastern Ocean to the

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Tower of Bones. Of the four friends only Alan and Mo had stayed together. Mo had also been terribly injured, an injury to the spirit that she was only slowly recovering from. Meanwhile the abduction of Kate, the thought that he might have lost her altogether, provoked a rising nausea.

Qwenqwo, the dwarf mage of an extinct warrior people, the Fir Bolg, waited patiently while Alan recovered his composure sufficiently to walk on again.

The beach itself was serenely beautiful, an oasis of fine white sand set between sea-worn rocky outcrops. Broad-canopied trees, their foliage as delicate as puffs of olive-green smoke, decorated the undulating sand, the focus of tiny blue-winged birds that hesitated and darted among the branches. Inhaling the briny air, he might be strolling the seashore of some warmer part of his native Earth had it not been for the alien appearance of the two women who watched him from a low headland, perhaps fifty yards away.

A warning, sudden and fierce, cut through his musing.
Halt!

Alan stopped walking, a warning hand on Qwenqwo's shoulder, arrested by the force of the command.

Take not another step!

The command was non-verbal but it invaded his mind with irresistible force through the oraculum. He stood barefoot in the sand, his path, and that of his companion, a wandering trail of prints over the virginal white surface – it had been the inviting prospect of this that had tempted

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him to remove his seal-skin boots, which he had strung by their leather thongs around his neck. He turned his head to stare at the two women, the taller one in particular. It was she who had issued the warning. But now that he was still, she made no further attempt at communication. *Leaving it to me*, he thought.

Something about the sand.

He gazed ahead at the region immediately in front of him, the place he was about to step into . . .

‘What is it, Mage Lord?’ Qwenqwo’s right hand had crested his shoulder and it rested on the hilt of the double-bladed Fir Bolg battleaxe that straddled his back.

‘The Kyra has sent me a warning.’

Alan planted the spear in the sand before going down on his haunches and studying the beach in front of him, angling his face to its apparently innocent surface. An offshore breeze played over the surface, blowing sand grains against his cheeks. He saw nothing suspicious, just a few fragments of shell glittering with a mother-of-pear opalescence. But as he searched harder the ruby triangle in his brow came alive, an inner matrix pulsating with complex whorls and arabesques of light. What his eyes could not see, his enhanced mind quickly detected. There was something there . . . a series of ultra-fine hairs protruding through the smooth white surface. Returning to his feet he retrieved the spear, then poked the blade among the protruding hairs. Four gigantic jaws erupted from the sand. At their centre was a maw big enough to

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swallow his leg, stinking of meaty digestive juices, and with the jaws lined with concentric rows of teeth.

‘What demon is this?’

‘A hungry one, Qwenqwo – probably detected the vibration of our feet!’

The jaws closed with a violent snap before withdrawing into their den in the sand.

Alan stood back and lifted his gaze to stare at the giantess who still watched him, expressionless, from the headland about forty yards away. He lifted his open hand in a gesture of thanks.

On the headland, which offered a vantage over the entire estuary, the shorter of the two women spoke to her companion.

‘You do not respond to his wave?’

The speaker, Milish Essyne Xhosa, Princess of Laàsa and unofficial stateswoman of the Council-in-Exile, was herself a statuesque six feet tall, yet she was dwarfed by her companion.

There was a flattened oval disc of a pearly smooth material in the centre of the giantess’s brow, the mark of a Kyra, hereditary leadership of the Shee, and known as the Oraculum of Bree.

The Ambassador placed a tentative hand on the young Kyra’s naked shoulder, decorated with a tattoo of naturalistic shapes and forms.

The Kyra shook her tawny head, returning the young

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man's acknowledgement with a frown. She growled, low in her throat. 'There is much I do not understand – or trust – in him.'

The giantess's hair was coiled into a braid clasped to her left shoulder. Thick and luxuriant, it would have passed for normal on Earth. But there the comparison ended. No woman on Earth sported those side extensions, which grew down from her temples as ivory-coloured sideburns, any more than those symmetrical markings, like large brown freckles, that decorated the downy skin over her face. The Kyra's snow tigress inheritance was all too evident in her size and facial markings, as in the glacial blue of her eyes, the upper lids padded, so they readily closed to slits. The same brown marbling bisected the ash-blond down in two widening tracks, with stripes splaying out to either side and dappling her cheeks. Her oval crystal, like the ruby triangle in Alan's brow, pulsed with an inner matrix of power.

The Ambassador spoke again. 'The recent death of your mother-sister has placed you at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding the young Mage Lord.'

'My mother-sister departed the Guhttan heartlands without the opportunity to exchange memories. My legacy has not been confirmed.'

Milish nodded, understanding what a bitter blow this must have been. The Shee, with their great cat ancestry, did not reproduce in the normal way. There were no males. The mother-sisters gave birth to identical daughter-sisters.

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And it was essential to the Kyril inheritance that the mother-sister should confer her acquired wisdom and experiences on the daughter-sister with her coming of age. 'If he appears distant or distracted it is through grief at the loss of his beloved companion, Kate.' Milish continued to watch the young man, her luminous eyes the speckled brown of tortoiseshell. Her voice remained soft, a measured contralto: 'In time you will come to understand why your mother-sister trusted him like no other.'

'Perhaps.'

Ainé was the daughter-sister of the recently dead Kyra in a lineage that stretched back into the mists of history. She was too shocked by the situation she encountered here to be free with gestures of friendship. And none was more puzzling than this youth, Alan Duval, who bore the Oraculum of the First Power of the Holy Trídédana. A callow youth, yet her mother-sister had trusted him like no other? She was obliged to take the word of her companion on that. Milish had been her mother-sister's mentor in perilous times leading to a battle that had already entered legend. And if such legend were to be believed, this youth had stood shoulder to shoulder with the former Kyra in the thick of that battle. Out there, in the estuary, floated the strangest ship she had ever seen. People spoke of it with awe as the Temple Ship. All this the young Kyra knew. But knowing was not understanding. The warrior race of Shee, under her hereditary command, was exclusively female, as was the

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Council-in-Exile here in Carfon. Theirs was the honour and burden of protecting continental Monisle from the evil that beset it.

She spoke brusquely, a whispered growl: 'Nothing in my education by Seers and Aides reveals why such power has been granted to a youth, and an alien youth at that, who has arrived in Tír from another world.'

'Appearances are deceptive. The mage lord lost his youth at Ossierel. You would be advised to treat him as a man.'

The Kyra snorted.

Most disturbing of all, her mother-sister had died without a Seer present, and thus without the opportunity of transferring her memories to her successor. With a sweep of her arm the Kyra drew her cloak about her shoulders. It was loose-fitting over a tough leathery jerkin fastened high about her neck and falling halfway over her trousers of pale green, which fastened at mid-calf above the cross-lacing over her thin-soled boots. Immediately the enfolding cloak took on the camouflage colours and patterns of the surrounding rocks and sand, so the young Kyra became close to invisible, and yet all the while she continued to watch the young man.

The dwarf mage turned his gaze on the ancient walls, which appeared more substantial and awesome by the minute as the rising sun invaded the estuary from the horizon of the glittering ocean. 'I see from your expres-

sion that you worry still about the silence from the Council-in-Exile.'

'We've already wasted six days here, waiting for these people to agree to a meeting. Meanwhile Kate is suffering at the hands of that terrible creature.'

'Mage Lord . . . '

'Alan!'

'Alan - my friend. Though patience is trying in such circumstances, never has it been more necessary. The Councilwoman, Milish, has warned you that Carfon has ever been a city of intrigues.'

He shook his head. 'You know I find this formality a waste of time. I just don't care about appearances.'

'Here, above all, appearances matter. Carfon is a city under threat. Soon it may be under siege. Though the Tyrant's armies have been repulsed from the Vale of Tazan, they may yet attack, in great numbers, from the sea. The Council-in-Exile has its own worries. To them you will appear no more than a distraction.'

'Meanwhile we lose another day.'

'My friend - when I was a child at my mother's knee, she taught me how to play a board game called "Strategies". The aim of play was to win a great prize, a victory of victories. But to obtain that final victory I had to learn not merely the rules of play, but also the importance of planning and patience. From what you have told me of your dreams, Kate is being held in the Tower of Bones. And her gaoler is none other than the Great Witch, also known as Olc.'

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‘I don’t know a damned thing about witches.’

‘It was Olc who sent the succubus that ensnared your friend Mark. It would appear that she understands the need for strategy and patience. Her game set in train the series of events that seduced him and ultimately led him to his present fate. And it is another of her games that torments you through the capture of Kate.’

‘I’m not afraid of her, Qwenqwo.’

‘Fear her you should! You fought bravely against the Legun at Ossierel. But the Great Witch is far more powerful than a Legun. She is second in power only to the Tyrant himself. Were you to rush headlong into such a confrontation, you would lose. And what then would become of Kate?’

Alan sighed. ‘I just can’t bear to think of how Kate is suffering.’

The dwarf mage shrugged.

‘Hey – I know your advice makes sense. But I’m convinced in my own mind that the answer to my problem lies with the Fáil. We both know that there’s a portal to the Fáil right here in Carfon. I’ve got to find the portal and use it to help rescue Kate.’

The dwarf mage shook his head. ‘Even if you persist in this course you must persuade the Council-in-Exile to grant you access to the portal. And they have refused to meet with you, despite Milish’s protestations.’

*

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The Ambassador, Milish, gazed beyond the estuary to the soaring walls of Carfon, where Prince Ebrit had offered them quarters in his palace on their arrival. But courtesy in Carfon was barbed with subtle obligations – not to mention dangers. The palace, more than two thousand years old and a labyrinth of hidden passages and spy holes, offered poor protection. And so, politely, she had declined the Prince's offer. In the meantime the new Kyra had arrived to take command of the encampment of Shee on this side of the estuary. In the six days since their arrival it had mushroomed to cover a square mile of hinterland above the beach, with sentries posted by Bétaald, the dark-skinned spiritual leader of the Shee, herself not yet fully recovered from wounds received during the battle in the Vale of Tazan.

Milish was aware of a stiffening in the posture of the Kyra. In the Oraculum of Bree she observed a heightened flickering. At the same moment a tiny bat-like creature erupted from the beach below them, close to the walking figures.

'What is it?'

'A snooper,' Milish declared.

In a blur of movement, the dwarf mage's arm reached back behind his left shoulder and in a flowing arc of movement the double headed axe was in his right hand. But Alan reached out to block the dwarf mage's purpose.

'Why does the Mage Lord hold the weapon back?' the Kyra asked.

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‘To spy, a snooper must need a communicating brain – for it accommodates no more than a tiny mind. My guess is that he wishes to follow where that tiny mind will lead him.’

The Kyra followed the flight of the snooper until it passed through a crevice-like window in the city walls. From there, her eyes returned to the youth, whose attention had also followed the flight of the snooper. The movements caused the thick braid of her hair to strain against the silver clasp that tied it down onto her left shoulder.

‘The snooper has reported to a spy in the walls opposite. From what you’ve told me about this city we can anticipate spies aplenty.’

A frown creased the Ambassador’s patrician face. She couldn’t help but be concerned at the thought of somebody spying on them. With her striking beauty and regal manners and posture Milish would have commanded attention in any world. Her hair was a lustrous blue-black, the thick black strands parted centrally over her forehead and falling down in careful bundles over her temples, with folds that hid the upper third of her fleshy lobed ears. On Earth, with her hair and coppery complexion, she might have been taken for an Oriental noblewoman.

The Kyra pressed her: ‘Would your instincts suggest that such a spy works for the Council-in-Exile?’

‘It’s one possibility.’

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The Ambassador shivered as the offshore breeze blew a tuft of hair loose from her plume of ornamental silver, the liberated hair gambolling over her fine intelligent features.

A Song of Innocence

'Out - Earthspawn!'

Faltana's figure filled the open door to Kate's cell. The face of the chief succubus was like that of a porcelain doll, but with pallid blue eyes as cold as a snake's. Her rosebud lips were tensed into a purse-string, drawn back over ivory fangs that had turned blue-black and hoary with age.

'Your attendance is commanded!'

Faltana was spare with her flicks of Garg-tail, but cruelly accurate. The scaly whip, as wiry as steel and barbed at its end, raised a bloody weal on Kate's thin neck, just below the angle of her jaw. Pain seared through her, sharp and sickening. She had to clench her fists to keep the scream from her lips. Faltana fed on such expressions of pain. To scream would provoke more attention.

'Dung-eating wormchild!'

Faltana gauged the precise moment when the pain

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had subsided to bearable levels to lash out again, raising a second weal, after which those doll's eyes studied the effect, as if relishing Kate's inner struggle to contain her anguish. It took all of her determination to rein back the tears.

'My mistress is impatient. Do not keep her waiting.'

With an occasional crack of her whip Faltana drove Kate before her, shambling and twisting through the organic warren of passageways that formed the interior of the Tower of Bones, with its rancid smells and echoes of pain. In her mind, as always, Kate whispered the mantra remembered from the school yard of childhood. *Sticks and stones may break my bones! Sticks and stones may break my bones!* She no longer remembered what it had meant to her as a child, only that she had injected it with new meaning here. Let Faltana tear her skin. Let her humiliate her with words but she would never break her will. So, driven through the labyrinths of nightmare, she clung on to tiny comforts, using them to blot out the terror and pain.

'Soon,' Faltana's pointed red tongue licked her fangs in exultation, 'there will be feasting and celebration. The Ugly Ones have captured a singer.'

Kate was overwhelmed with horror: the Ugly Ones were the horrid bat creatures. And the singer they had captured must be a Cill child.

'Make haste!'

Faltana had driven her into the great chamber of the

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skull, opposite the pit that fell away into darkness. The chamber was filled with a choir of succubi who were crooning and writhing their bodies in concert with the Witch's melody of triumph. Faltana brought the Garg-tail whip across the backs of Kate's calves, causing her to pitch forward onto the bleached bone floor. Pain seared through the nerves of both her legs, from her hips right down to her toes. She gasped, feeling her muscles jerk and spasm, with the poisonous sting of the tiny barbs that added venom to the whip.

'On your knees from here!'

Witches! Succubi! It was madness. It was impossible – a nightmare she would wake up from, and, as she had always woken from nightmares, she would go to the barn-like bathroom in her uncle's house and douse her face in cold water over the big old-fashioned white porcelain sink. But Kate saw no hint of normality. And that meant that somehow the nightmare was more real than any memory of the echoing bathroom, with its brass plugs and cast-iron fittings, more real than her memory of her dog, Darkie – friendly, loving Darkie, who must have been really missing her. A nightmare shouldn't go on like this, for day after day. A nightmare shouldn't feel this real. A nightmare wasn't filled with such pain and fear and loneliness . . .

Faltana grabbed hold of Kate's hair and jerked her head around so she had to watch what was happening. It took all of Kate's faltering reserves of willpower not to shriek in terror.

Gargs! There were seven or eight of them, forming a semicircle in the chamber, their folded wings merging with the deep purple shadows that jerked fitfully over the vault of fossilised bone that made up the ceiling. The Gargs were hugely tall and skeletally thin, their bat-like heads peering down at her and their oily skins reflecting the red glow that permeated the chamber from deeper underground. Faltana had told her that it was Gargs like these that had captured her and flown her here, in some perverted homage to the Witch. And there at the centre of the semicircle, bound and venom-dazed on the bone-scattered floor, she saw their captive.

The Cill looked very young, a boy of perhaps six or seven years, completely naked, and bound into a ball, his body twitching and trembling. Kate was trembling herself, her teeth chattering. She didn't know why Faltana had brought her here. She didn't want to see what they were doing to the boy. It grieved her that she couldn't do anything to help him. But she couldn't just watch and let them do it.

'Let him go, you . . . you monsters!'

Faltana twisted the fistful of Kate's hair so hard it tore at her scalp. She forced Kate's head down and round on her neck until her eyes were only a few feet away from the Cill. 'Since you are so interested, you should relish the sight. A Cill so young, it is rarer even than your insolent self. See how its flesh is now diaphanous with fear! Why, it is no more substantial than a puff of smoke. But sever

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those bonds and it would shift colour and form so fast the eye could not follow. It would become part of this chamber, invisible to every watchful sense.' Faltana laughed. 'Is that what you want to see happen? You would help it to flee?'

'Why do you so delight in hurting him?'

Faltana yanked so hard on Kate's hair that clumps tore from her scalp and a trickle of blood ran down over her face. 'Why - but for the pleasure of hearing it sing!'

At this the company of Gargs laughed with their strange throaty gurgles in tune with Faltana.

The Cill were said to be very brave. The older Cill could maintain a stubborn silence even when they were being whipped and tormented to death. But Faltana knew how they could be made to sing. In death a Cill lamented the passing of its soul spirit with the strangest, sweetest song. Kate couldn't bear to think how this child would discover his beautiful voice. He would shrill his death song. All this Kate knew because Faltana had exulted in telling her about it, again and again. The young Cill were prized above all others because they sang so plaintively before they were eaten. Kate had never heard a Cill sing but she had suffered nightmares of imagining those songs of innocence. Of witnessing what she knew would come afterwards. The shrieks of glee that would accompany the devouring. The stink of blood and the crunching of bones as the succubi fed like ravens on whatever remained. Faltana had gloated over every detail, how they would lick

every last drop of blood from the floor and then gnaw for days on the juicy bones. She took command, addressing the Gargs:

‘It must be unbound, in the position of supplication. Take care it does not shape-shift and flee. No shedding of blood – that honour is mine. First take a firm hold of its throat, so tight it can barely breathe. Only then cut its bonds!’

The choir of succubi sang, melodious and vile. At Faltana’s demand, a Garg took the Cill by its throat, then a claw extended from the bent wing joint of another, from which a venomed blade, as long as a dagger, slit through the thong that tied the Cill’s ankles to his wrists. Kate tried to avert her face. She was gagging from the stink of the Gargs’ oily secretions, which grew more copious and rank with their increasing excitement. When their leader spoke, it was through slits in the leathery skin high up in its neck, its voice emerging as a warbling hiss.

‘Are we to be honoured with the presence of the Great One?’

Faltana rocked from one foot to another, her quivering bulk preening like some love-sick girl: ‘Yes – *oh, yes!* My mistress is pleased with this gift. She will conduct the sacrifice in person. But first I must prepare the offering.’

High-pitched cattish squeals and cries emerged from the gaping mouths of the succubi, as their singing became distracted by Faltana’s tormenting the Cill with precise flicks and lashes of the Garg-tail whip, circling his body

with padding twists and turns of her figure on feet that seemed obscenely dainty and delicate, in a parody of a dance of joy. It was a belief amongst the succubi that the fully mature Cill had, through their ability to change form and colour, perfected the art of resisting pain. No extreme of torture could make them sing. Only the younger Cill could be made to sing, and the death song of a Cill child was prized as the highest delicacy by their mistress. Olc did not sacrifice children because she was merely hungry for their flesh. She devoured them because she coveted their spirits. This sacrifice would devour the child's very soul, and the strange, sweet death song would adorn her act of spiritual plunder.

Alan paused in his stroll to allow Qwenqwo to reattach the heavy bronze battleaxe with its twin-curved blades to its harness to his back.

'The snooper?' the dwarf mage asked.

'It flew directly to the Prince's adviser, Feltzvan.'

'You're sure of this?'

'I'm sure.'

A week earlier their arrival into Carfon had been welcomed by a barque of state. On board the barque, Alan's hand had been taken by a short, corpulent man with a deeply pockmarked face and brown eyes as hard as glass. When he spoke his voice had been curiously soft and as high-pitched as a girl's.

'Permit me to introduce myself. I am Feltzvan, emis-

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sary of Prince Ebrit, Elector of Carfon. You are most welcome to this beleaguered city. Be comforted that you are now among friends.'

Nodding his thanks, there was little opportunity for Alan to speak more than a word or two in reply, since he found himself being greeted by so many dignitaries at once. Within minutes the powerful oars had taken them across the estuary and through the Harbour Gate to enter the docking area, where they were welcomed by a band of musicians, adding a brassy medley to the cheers and general din.

Alan kept his focus clear, scanning the crowds for the bent old woman who had issued a warning, mind-to-mind on their arrival. But there was no sign of her now among these welcoming crowds.

'The Prince Elector,' whispered Milish, during a lull in her manifold introductions to people, 'is not among them. He's the head of the most duplicitous of noble families, the Ebrits of Werewe. It will be interesting to see who greets you at the Water Palace. Keep alert in your conversations, even the most trivial. Trust no one, least of all those who seem most welcoming.'

Alan nodded. 'Are you in danger, Milish?'

'The Family of Xhosa have suffered hard times through the prejudicial influence of the Elector, Ebrit, in our affairs.' But she would say no more, not wishing to spoil the joy of their welcome.

Alan, Qwenqwo, Mo and Milish had been invited to a

civic reception in the Elector's palace, where Alan had been introduced to Prince Ebrit himself. While Milish went down onto one knee before the Prince, Alan had refused to genuflect or bow. Ebrit smiled wanly, but he gripped Alan's proffered hand in a two-handed clasp, his brown eyes gazing with frank curiosity into Alan's own.

'I mean you no disrespect, Sir – but in the country I come from nobody genuflects or bows before anybody else.'

'Are there no princes in your world?'

'Not in my country.'

'Ah!' The Prince regarded him with a cool amusement for a moment before affecting to bow himself. 'Yet, if the rumours are true, you led a motley gathering of forces in the destruction of an entire army of Death Legion in the Vale of Tazan. And you defeated a Legun incarnate!'

'Sir – if I can speak bluntly. Ossierel was just one battle. The war continues. And we desperately need your help.'

'As, equally desperately, do we need yours. Come!' The Prince turned to beckon all of the company. 'A banquet is waiting, during which I hope to learn all about you and your adventures.'

The Prince had shown himself a master of polite conversation all through the dinner – a feast Alan had little stomach for yet felt obliged to partake in – and his obligation continued into the music, dancing and acrobatic entertainment that followed in a gilded hall, under murals of royal hunting scenes. Ebrit had acknowledged the dangers facing his city from the army of the Tyrant, but

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it was clear that he also thought himself prepared for any siege. Having seen what the Tyrant's armies could do, Alan disagreed with Ebrit.

'Sir - if all you are prepared to do is get ready for a siege, the Tyrant will win. The way I see it, there's only one way to beat him. We have to take him on in his home ground and finish him once and for all.'

Prince Ebrit had barked a short laugh. He made no attempt to hide his scepticism. 'And how, might I ask, would you go about such a feat?'

'The Tyrant has opened one of the portals to the Fáil. Already he has begun to subvert it to his purpose. That leaves me no choice but to confront the Fáil myself.'

Ebrit had stared at Alan, his eyes wide with shock, and he had placed his hand firmly on his shoulder, bringing his lips close to Alan's ear and reducing his voice to the most intimate of whispers. 'Be warned, young man! I most earnestly beg you. What you contemplate is foolish even beyond your wildest imagining. As one who would be your friend and ally, I would counsel you to put this perilous course of action out of your mind.'

Recalling that conversation with the Elector, Alan shook his head, staring out into the incoming tide that that broke, thunderously and violently, against the sandstone rocks on the oceanic lip of the estuary.

If only Kate were here beside him. If only he could put his arms around her and hug her to him and take

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strength from their love for each other. But the Gargs had carried her far from here, to that dreadful place across that glittering ocean.

A sudden sense of despair made his heart falter.

‘What is it, Mage Lord?’

‘Kate is hurt – in danger.’

‘How do you know this?’

‘I feel it, Qwenqwo!’ His voice had fallen to a groan, his hand reaching up almost to touch the flaring oraculum.

Staring out into the sunrise, despair overwhelmed him. He felt her loss as a wound in his heart that would never heal until he had her back or he died in the attempt. He didn’t care about the warnings of Milish or the Elector. He would face whatever danger the Fáil would bring if there was a chance it would free Kate into his arms.

In his passion, the oraculum pulsed suddenly, fiercely:

Kate! I’ll keep my promise. I’m coming for you!

On the promontory the violent flash of power startled even the young Kyra, causing her eyes to widen and the Oraculum of Bree burst into flame, even as the rocks beneath her feet appeared to quake.

‘By the Holy Trídédana!’ muttered Milish, who had to be supported by the left arm of the giantess. ‘How his power has matured since Ossierel!’

The Kyra stared at the alien youth, who brought the fingers of his right hand to his lips, as if blowing a kiss.

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The eruption of power condensed to a tiny star of pure energy, emerging from his brow like a bolt of lightning. The Kyra's eyes followed the razor-line trajectory of its flight, from the figure standing before the ocean to cross the horizon in what seemed less than a moment.

'I think,' she purred dryly, 'the Council-in-Exile will see him now.'