

Frank P. Ryan is a multiple bestselling author in the UK and US. A writer of the year for the *New York Times Book Review*, his books have been translated into more than ten different languages.

The Sunday Times – “Magnificently tense!”

The Sunday Telegraph – “The page-turning and spine-chilling ability of a good novelist.”

Glenda A. Bixler, Authorsden – “I simply cannot begin to give you an adequate overview of *The Snowmelt River*! It is, for me, undoubtedly the best fantasy novel I've ever read.”

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Falcata Times – “Wonderfully written with solid prose and great pace, cleverly crafted, wonderfully woven and all round really does give you something special.”

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The Twins of Moon

Frank P. Ryan



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The Old Woman

Her eyes are pools of darkness in which splinters of silver whirl, like a starry night seen through the blur of tears. The focus of her mind is no longer clear. She cares little for the fact she might miss events, a day, a century. Time for an Undying does not run in the linear fashion it does for humans. Time immemorial has been passing her by and still every single moment ravages her, her senses all-seeing, all-feeling, a never-ending torment of consciousness. Yet still her fists are capable of clenching until the bones crackle. Passions rage within her being. In her grief she lifts an arm, provoking the clanking of chains.

In darkness was I born? So they would have me believe. And it would seem that the very moment of my birth provoked conflict. Thus was it my lot to be meddling in the conflicts of this warrior and that. Death would have appeared to swirl about me, coming in the shapes of serpents, or ashes, or the ripping of the beating heart out of my chest. Even now would I deny my guilt in any of this, even though all that would prove me innocent has long wasted away. Yet in the face of a single new accusation, I would contest it – contest it all – and all over again. If Mechi had not met with his death, those serpents would not have grown, and the land would not have been blighted by chaos. I might have prevented such a dreadful metamorphosis – I might still end it. In such furtherance must I constantly seek the light!

Who then dares to call up the enchantment that enchains me?

A sigh – another meaningful barb that pretends to offer promise.
Yet a communication perhaps from somewhere distant?

A voice speaking as if in wonderment. ‘There is not a hero in him,
lying as he does in the shadow of the Mórígán . . .’

More lies!

Another sigh, and from that same source. It provokes the closing
of her eyelids. A meniscus of inner light within those old, old, eyes – a
sigh? All that a sigh might suggest . . . would it be too much to
extrapolate to hope?

She bows her head, closes her eyes, as if to refocus her thoughts.

Yet then – a third sigh! And then a whisper: ‘*A boy . . .*’

What could this mean?

The two words have inserted themselves into her ruminations.
She has fixated on them, their possible meaning: *a boy?*

Again the sigh, and again a whisper: ‘*Truly a boy . . .*’

It becomes more intriguing.

Could it be that a door is opening?

Her eyes blink open again. No – *no!* Hope is impossible on the
Beach of Bones. She hears her own scream tear the fabric of a sky
that is a lurid ultraviolet, shot through with spearheads of blood red.

A boy! My hope is with a boy . . .

‘YOU MISERABLE WRETCH, SCRABBLING AT SCRAPS!’

His voice – truly his voice for the first time in the aeons of her
banishment! Yet why would he bother to communicate now other
than to extinguish hope? What hope is there to be extinguished?

Could it be that he has detected something new . . . the possibility of change?

She draws upon her being, upon her ancestry, upon her anger, upon her hope, then . . . then she refuses to be baited by his angry words. She returns to the interesting suggestion of a boy.

She must focus everything on those two words of hope . . .

A boy!

Should she blot it from her consciousness? Was he capable of reading the tiniest tremor of hope in her mind? No – she must not think along such lines. Indeed if there was to be any hope at all she must focus all on what it might mean. She must implant and then protect that tiny splinter of hope. She must cherish it so deep that malice could not possibly discover it. And from such concealment play whatever role was left to her on the slightest possibility of redemption.

She must be careful.

The old woman climbs to her feet with groans of pain as the tide washes the stony beach in the revealing moonlight.

There is no hero hiding in the shadows. Her eyes focus on a tiny detail in her ravaged flesh: a hermit crab crawling out of the ruin of her left calf. She gazes down upon it with kindly eyes, as if from a great distance. She sees every detail of its scrabbling feet, the unwieldy rocking of the borrowed shell.

Yet already her mind is responding to this newfound whisper. She must focus all her cunning on what it promises while concealing all traces of hope from him: she must force herself to relocate in time! But she can only turn backwards. The future is not hers to see. She finds herself fluttering over some ancient battlefield in the shape of a

heron with neither side below her knowing, in the swirling fog of mist and blood, who is friend or foe. But the thought will not go away. The whisper still insists on breaking through:

'A boy! A boy . . . yet one unusual in spirit!'

The old woman turns ponderously around, then holds her figure still as an unyielding reef in the freezing waves of the incoming tide, gazing back up the Beach of Bones to consider the only respite that is on offer. It looms before her, a brutal hut, black as midnight, constructed of monstrous slabs of rusting steel. There is neither door nor window, yet into its grim shadow she now wills her miserable spirit to retreat, with the tardy tread of a prisoner returning to her cell.

The Stepping Stone

‘Stop fidgeting!’

Magio hesitated at his sister’s words. He had been spinning around and around within the den, using his upraised bare feet pushing against the wall to propel himself, using the big rounded stone as an axle. He should be so happy. Here, on occasions beyond counting, he had been lost in wonder, his ears filled by the beloved thunder of the sea. The world was magical. All you had to do was to sense the magic and let yourself go with the flow.

He chortled with glee, muttering, ‘Eefa – see ya – see ya – Eefa!’, delighted with his discovery of how the words rhymed.

‘Flibbertigibbet!’

‘I’m not fidgeting.’

Eefa sighed. ‘Yes you are, Gio. You’re fidgeting with your feet. And it’s distracting me from thinking.’

Surely she couldn’t blame him for feeling nervous? The magic was gone. It had abandoned them both when Gran died just ten days ago. It just seemed impossible that the magic, the happiness, had been taken away from them. The shock of that had stunned Magio. He just hadn’t anticipated it, even though Gran had been careless with her health for a long while. It had turned his world upside down. He

ignored the guillemots overhead, attempting to understand how it was that he and Eefa were sitting here, in their rocky den, pretending things were still britzy. Neither of them could escape the memory, just those same ten days ago, when, here in this same den, there had been the flapping sound of sandalled feet approaching over the baked sand. Magio had found his startled self staring up at Quimbre's bronzed bewhiskered face, with his thick mane of grey hair pulled back into a pony tail, and there had been no escape from the look in those coal-black eyes. Magio was still haunted by the sympathy in those eyes and by the words coming out of Quimbre's thick-lipped mouth, those terrible words, 'Gran – she's gone, kiddo.'

There was a depth of feeling in Quimbre's brown face. But right now Magio's head was turning slowly to gaze up out of the den at his sister, Eefa, as if demanding she contradict it. He just wanted her to tell him it hadn't really happened. He wished that Quimbre's message had been another of his daydreams. But Eefa was no longer looking back at him. She was sitting, side-saddle, on the rocky perimeter above the den, her eyes gazing out onto the incoming tide rushing between the rocks.

'I don't know where I am any more. I'm lost – I'm lost, Eefa!'

Her eyes continued to follow the crashing waves.

Gran gone – really gone. Gone forever! Dead! That was some kind of a stupid word, dead! He just hated that stupid word . . . dead!

Magio was finding it hard to swallow. He wanted Eefa to hug him. For days now he had wanted somebody to hug him. But what he really wanted was a magical hug, the kind of hug that would bring Gran back. There were no such magical hugs. He was fidgeting again, spinning his body around with his legs.

Why had Eefa brought him back here today? Was it because she needed something magical too? Because this place, their den, was the closest thing they had ever known to real magic?

Magio swallowed against a hard, dry throat.

It was magical. Or at least something about their den really was magical. The feel of it, the memories they had shared in it. Sun. Sand. Blue sky. The sea . . .

The sea!

That was the real wonder, the real magic of it. How many times had they run barefoot here, to sit ankle-deep in the pure white sand, and stare at the Sea of Stars, listen to it, feel its salty moistness on their skins, inhale it into their lungs? The neverending roar of it, the demand and wonder of it, the love of it in every fibre of their beings?

That was all that he, Magio, had ever lived for. It was all he dreamed about, all that occupied his mind every morning when he woke up. But now he was trapped in a confusion of panic and disbelief. The magic had forsaken him. It had left him in the strange and disturbing situation where there was no more Gran to go back to. He had struggled to come to terms with it. How could it be? Yet still there was no escaping the horrible memory of Quimbire burying her in a hole in the sand like she was carrying some kind of plague.

Oh, Gran!

Why did she have to be buried the very next day after she died? Quimbire had insisted on it, even though it didn't give Magio or Eefa time to understand it. Even now he had no idea what it meant. There was nobody to wake him up in the morning, nobody to tell him to wash behind his ears. Nobody to feel the bristles of the worn-out toothbrush to make sure it was wet and he had cleaned his teeth with

it. Nobody to care about them any more! Why couldn't he have sat there by Gran's body and howled his rage? Why did adults do such incredibly stupid stuff like burying her straight away like that?

'Jinxy! Jinxy! Jinxy!'

'Hush,' Eefa said. 'You'll draw people's attention.'

What people? There wasn't another soul around.

'I don't know if I can bear it!'

'Hush!'

He climbed out of the den and sat down, cross-legged, next to his sister. 'You know it isn't fair!'

She put her arm around him and hugged him.

It was the mitziest thing, her hugging him. How had she guessed that he wanted it so much? He felt a shiver run right through him.

'What are we going to do?'

'I don't know.'

It was so unlike his sister to say that. She should be saying, '*It's okay. There's nothing to worry about. We'll think of something.*'

Gran hadn't been all that old – not for a grandma. Sixty-two years and nine days. He'd drawn a birthday card for her just nineteen days earlier. Then, when he saw her lying there . . . when he had felt the coldness of her skin and he knew for certain that Quimbren wasn't lying . . . that she really had died . . . Oh, jinxy! He let go the breath he had been holding with a tremble. He had blamed himself. Somehow, he hadn't tried hard enough to look after her. Somehow, he had let her go. How else could you explain that first your parents – he didn't even feel able to think of them as his mum and dad because he had no memory of them – but just the same he had managed to lose them too.

Magio joined Eefa in staring at the incoming tide.

How many times had they come to this beach to watch the first rays of the sun glimmering over the misty ocean immediately below their den in the black rocks? The early light was kind of pearly, as if the glimmer of the sun on the sea had brought steam out into the air. But it was no good thinking about that sort of thing now. Nothing really mattered now. This morning he had woken and just lain there on his mattress on the boards of the loft and listened to the racket of the birds in the trees nearby, and he had stared and stared at the smoky light creeping into the loft space through the cracks in the roof. He had exclaimed what he had been thinking, for about the millionth time.

He whispered it. 'I hate that name, Magio!'

'It's what Mum and Dad called you.'

He shook his head.

Magio! Like some . . . some baby flibbertigibbet! It would have been typical of Gran to have called him something like that, maybe . . . maybe when he was little and getting into mischief.

'Well, you don't mind being called Gio!'

No, he didn't mind Gio.

He felt Eefa hug him again.

He had to blink stuff away because it was too much to think about. He could hardly recall getting here today. His mind was blank for a moment or two before he recalled the memory of running. It had been Eefa's idea that they race here, to the den, again – just like always . . . His mind had been blank as he was running through the dust-baked streets. He had run like the wind, panting for breath as he arrived at the beach, his lungs fit to burst. But still Eefa had beaten

him to the boulder. He had hated her for that, hated her just for a moment, then felt the hate turn back to love. Back here again, the sun rising over the incoming sea – it had felt so britzy. He so loved it all, this paradise of feathery pine trees, and the black rocks poking up out of the white sand. The boulder that was the first step onto the beach, warmed by the rising sun . . .

The anger rose in him again until it enveloped him, making it difficult to think. He knew he was fidgeting with his feet. He just couldn't stop himself fidgeting. It was so frustrating that he couldn't stop things happening.

Eefa had climbed onto her feet while he was preoccupied with his thoughts. She was out of sight now, exploring the cinder-like outcrops that had spewed out of a volcano a long time ago. The crater was close by, one of several dirt-covered mountains with hollow tops that surrounded the town. He tried to imagine it. The crackling earthquake roar of the thing going off, the spewing rivers of flame-spitting rock . . .

'Oh, for goodness sake!' Eefa was back, peering down at him with her face in shadow, a vexed expression. 'Stop twittering. You keep asking me questions. I'm trying to think and you're distracting me.'

'What am I distracting you from?'

'I – I don't fully know.' She shook her head, as if she, too, was baffled by something, but she sat down beside him again.

Magio sniffed. What kind of an answer was that? What was the point of spying out the land? It was just sea and rocks and seaweed and tide pools – the same view they had looked out over every time they came here.

He said, 'What is it you're really thinking about?'

‘You’re such an idiot.’

She was the smart one, so insistent when she was in this kind of a mood that he fell silent. All he could hear was the crackling detonations of the incoming tide through the porous black rocks and the sound that came between, like the cry of a bird – or like a human baby – that was hidden between the surges.

Gran dead . . . That was all he could think about.

Magio sighed, just looking around their den in the basin of volcanic pumice. During the run down to here, through the sleeping menace of Scogtown, he had almost felt the normal thrill, the joy, of the race. He had been no more than a few yards behind her, their bare feet taking the steps two at a time before she declared herself the winner, her feet astride the boulder.

‘Race you again – to the den!’ She was already running, looking back at him over her shoulder.

Thoughts of Gran had made him hesitate.

But already her lithe figure was a blur of movement, her flashing feet throwing back cascades of the powdery white sand. He had followed the trail of her footprints between the pine trees, with the rosy glow of the dawn captured in the myriad drops of dew among their leaves. Their feet had discovered a better purchase on the stony slope up to the headland, their eyes narrowed against the sand-whipping wind. With screeches and whoops, they had mounted the hillock of black tufa, weaving to avoid stepping on sharp stones, or carelessly discarded glass. Eefa was shrieking again, in celebration of having beaten him to the hollow in the cindery rock right at the edge of the headland, its roof open to the sky.

Their den . . .

She was already ensconced on the smooth rounded stone within it, ground to a giant egg-shape by its rolling around with past high tides, probably, they had both reckoned, for millions of years. They had figured that the stone, rolling about within the soft black pumice stone, had actually carved the den, which now provided them with a lookout over the rock pools and, as now, the incoming waves. On arrival, Magio had pressed his shivering body against hers on the stone, their warmth mingling where they made bony contact. He had drawn his knees up to his chest, his ears drowned by the roar of the tide through the pools and cracks and crannies of rock, and beyond it the rhythm of the onrushing breakers.

Her voice had shrilled in his mind: *My win, your forfeit.*

‘Stop talking to me like that.’

It was supposed to be secret: their shared secret.

‘No – I won’t. And for your forfeit you must answer my question: what colour are my eyes today?’

Eefa and her stupid questions. What did the colour of her eyes matter from day to day? He shrugged. ‘Pink.’

She inhaled, pleased to have confirmed that her eyes reflected the rosy hues of the dawn.

In Magio’s mind, girls were strange. There was no figuring them. All those mornings when he had looked in on Gran before leaving her, her damp grey hair stuck to her scalp, attempting to rearrange the tousled blankets and sheet in an effort to keep her warm. There had been no bread to toast, not so much as a crust. Only after her death had he looked with more questioning eyes at the ruin of breeze block and boards where his grandmother had raised them.

Now, watching Eefa squint out at the waves, Magio squirmed. Maybe he should stop thinking altogether in their situation. Thinking wasn't such a good idea. He shifted his limbs to find a more comfortable position, staring out into the gorgeous vista of shore and sky. He wondered if he could glimpse the fading belt of Orion the Hunter in the lightening sky, which was between night and morning. The sky was the next best thing to the sea here . . . Here – this place – as he now imagined it, must be somewhere close to the end of the world.

Jinxy!

He was doing it again, thinking about things. Tears moistened his eyes. A shiver of fear ran through him as he recalled Gran's explanation of the weirdness of the world, they were living in.

'The world,' she would speak in her husky smoker's whisper, taking Quimb're's self-roll cigarette from her lips, *'has changed.'*

But what did she mean? Magio didn't believe, for a single moment, that Eefa understood what this meant any better than he did. Once upon a time kids went to school. School had been a place where the kids had gone to learn about the world before the calamity changed everything. Magio gazed again at the vista of rock pools and enormous arch of dawn-glowing sky.

The world has changed . . .

That was why he and Eefa had never been to school, why they had ended up living here on a desert island called Moon and in this ruin of a town called Warren. But Warren had changed, just as the world had changed . . . and it made no more sense than anything else. Magio snuggled closer to his sister on the spongy black rock.

'Don't you wish we'd gone to school, Eefa?'

‘You’d have hated school.’

‘Why?’

‘You’d have broken the rules, every day, and in every way.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re such a flibbertigibbet.’

‘Aw!’

Magio flicked a lock of fair curly hair out of his right eye, where his untrimmed fringe had fallen down. It was so hard to stop thinking about things. How could you stop trying to figure out what was ordinary from what was . . . was something else? He squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn’t bear to think of bad things any more. It made him feel more fidgety than ever. When he opened his eyes again, Eefa was back on her feet and frowning.

‘Time to get back.’

Right now, Magio didn’t want to go back home. He kidded himself that he was intrigued by the figure in the rock pools. But the truth was he just didn’t want to go home, with its memories of Gran’s death. ‘Hey, look!’ he whispered. ‘There’s somebody looking at us from the rock pool.’

Eefa spun round to peer at a woman, who was up to her thighs in the water, dipping and clutching at things. Neither she nor Magio had noticed her arrival. ‘What’s she doing?’

‘Shrimping maybe – I don’t know.’

Magio rubbed at the side of his knee, which felt raw from rubbing it against the rough side of the den. He thought he recognized the tall, skeletally thin figure wading through the pools encircled by the black spongy stone.

‘Quimbire calls her Bird Woman.’

Eefa laughed at the notion.

Magio whispered, 'He reckons she's mad.'

'A mad bird woman!'

'She looks like she's mad. Have you seen her hair?'

'What about it?'

'If she let it down, it would dangle to her waist.'

Together they continued to watch the half-naked figure wade out into a pool, then bend down so her face entered the water, staring down into the shallows before pouncing on something that she hauled out and dropped into the canvas bag at her waist.

'She's not shrimping. She's scavenging.'

'You and your scavenging!'

Eefa liked to make fun of his interest in scavenging and hunting.

'So, what's she supposed to be scavenging?'

'I don't know – maybe crabs.' Magio peered down at the figure in the tide. 'Hey – I think she's looking straight at us.'

'No! She's looking at you.'

Magio grimaced at his mistake. Eefa so hated to be reminded that she was invisible to anyone other than her twin brother.

'Look – she's getting out of the pool.'

'Gio – we need to go!'

'Not yet. I just want to watch her for a little longer.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'Quimbire says she talks to birds.'

'That's it!'

'He does. He says that she talks to the birds.'

Eefa grabbed hold of his arm. She was yanking him onto his feet. 'C'mon! The Scogs'll be up by now. We'd better hurry!'

Too Late

They really were hurrying by the time they got to Scogtown. This had until recently been a wilderness of sand dunes full of rabbit holes. But now the Scogs had made it their peculiar home. In just a matter of a few weeks, the rumpled wasteland of hillocks, spiky grass and wild flowers had been transformed by a proliferation of Scog mounds.

Eefa moaned, 'I told you! They're already awake!'

'They don't scare me.'

'Well, they scare me.'

They hurried on, gazing about themselves in amazement at the towers of maroon sun-baked mud that were scattered, like grotesque anthills, on either side of the road. They were huge, anything up to thirty or even forty feet high, and utterly strange in their variety of shapes. As far as folks knew, the Scogs didn't actually live in the mounds. They lived in a maze of tunnels underground, a warren vaster and far more complex than anything the rabbits had constructed. People were increasingly fearful that the Scog tunnels would soon undermine the whole town.

Eefa whispered, 'I think we'd better run!'

'No! That'll only draw attention to us. Let's just hurry.'

But even as they hurried on through, Magio couldn't help thinking about the Scogs. The townsfolk didn't like them. People and Scogs just didn't mix. They mistrusted one another. Rumour had it that Scog's were cold-blooded, like reptiles. And that was if they had blood in them at all and not something more filthy and muddy. Some even claimed that Scogs were cannibals. They snatched pets for their cooking pots and, given the chance, were just as capable of baby-snatching. Others claimed the very opposite: that Scogs didn't eat meat. They were strict vegetarians. That was why they had such green fingers when it came to the plants that sprouted in abundance around their towers of mud. Some went so far as to claim that the Scogs must be part plant themselves and this explained the greenish tinge to their thick, bark-like skin. Some put it about that the reason why Scogs, though vegetarians, snatched pets and children, was to feed the roots of their jungles of plants.

Eefa muttered, 'I don't like it.'

'Me neither.'

It was because of the Scogs that Quimbire insisted on arming himself with his flintlock pistol and cutlass whenever he went into the town these days. Right now, Magio was also thinking of how Quimbire touched the talisman gold quarter moon he wore on a chain around his neck when talking of the grisly ones. Magio wasn't sure he really believed the stuff folks said about Scogs. As far as he was aware, nobody had ever seen Scogs doing any of these terrible things. In fact, folks rarely saw much of the Scogs since their mysterious arrival into Warren. They seemed to be more active at night, when folks were asleep. Magio assumed that it must also be during the night that they

planted and harvested their gardens, since he had never seen them doing it in daylight.

‘Hey,’ he said, by now somewhat breathless, ‘just look at their gardens . . .’

Even the nervous Eefa couldn’t help but wonder. ‘Oh, Magio—they’re riots of colour. Look at how the bushes are blossoming!’

‘Yeah!’

He really was looking – looking and wondering. How could the Scogs, who were supposed to be so wicked, grow such lovely gardens around their towering mounds of maroon-coloured clay in what had previously been desert sand?

There were wild grasses of a great variety, waving as the breeze blew through them, and mesmerising islands of wild flowers. How could monsters that supposedly devoured children take such an interest in flowers? In fact, the tide of blossoms shouldn’t have been happening. Grasses and flowers like this just didn’t grow in the dry sandy soil of Moon. And look at those trees . . .! What a strange wood was thrusting into life in Scogland, dense and beautiful – like . . . well, like the kinds of woods you found in fairytales. Magio would have so loved to climb those trees, make a den in their branches. Gran had agreed with the townsfolk when it came to Scogs. She had cursed their strange, wild gardens, calling them the witch forests of the lumpy folk.

Witch forests . . . and lumpy folk!

Magio just didn’t know what to think about it all.

Folks said such unpleasant things about Scogs. Who knew if such things as magic really existed? But from the look on Gran’s face when she spoke of it, it was clear that she had no doubt as to the nature of

Scogs. She had grimaced as if even talking about them had brought an unpleasant taste to her mouth.

He spoke his thoughts aloud to Eefa. 'If you ask me, I suspect that the Scogs are not half as bad as folks think.'

'We don't know what they are. We just don't want to have to weave all the way round their mounds to get back home.'

How right she was! To skirt Scogtown entirely would involve a considerable additional trek. The only alternative was to run helter-skelter through the heart of the Scog warren.

He grinned. 'Let's run!'

'Don't be stupid.'

'Hey – most of 'em are probably still asleep.'

'I doubt it!'

'Race you!'

Magio was already running, forcing Eefa to follow on his heels. It was a thrill to hare it through Scogtown, following the curly tracks around the mounds, and knowing that under their feet the Scogs must be snoring in their burrows.

As they ran Magio couldn't help but notice how thick the tree gardens had grown in such a short time. Maybe the Scogs really did have green fingers. Eefa was already several yards behind him, though he could hear the slapping of her bare feet in the sandy ground, and her panting for breath. Then her loud shriek stopped him dead as they ran straight into what appeared to be a gathering of the huge lumpy figures, with their equally massive lumpy faces.

He took hold of her arm. 'Stop it, Eefa – stop shrieking!'

'I can't.' She shrieked again. 'We must turn around – go back. We have to! Come on, Magio!'

‘Give over! They’re behind us as well. They’re all around us.’

Eefa grabbed hold of him in a clutch of terror.

‘Stop panicking. They haven’t hurt us. Look around you. They don’t seem to be planning to hurt us.’

Now they were so close to them, the Scogs really were giants. Their hairless heads were turniplike, with huge dangling chins, deep-set jade-green eyes, and a tapering brow. One larger than the rest appeared to be addressing the others, who had gathered around some kind of lumpy sculpture, as tall as a two-storey house. Even more of them were now gathering about their leader, several dozens of them at least, with a rolling of their massive bodies and a curious side-to-side lumbering of shoulders even more massive than the boulder that opened onto the beach.

Magio grinned. ‘Hey – maybe they’re just come out to warm up in the sun. You know – like lizards?’

‘Don’t be such an idiot! They’re dangerous, Magio. Look at their eyes. They’re cold, like . . . like something that isn’t human. And those nails are sharp as steel. That giant one – he’s looking straight at us.’

‘Uh-oh!’

Magio’s eyes widened as he confirmed Eefa’s fears. The Scog leader was gazing down directly at them with those baleful green eyes.

‘Oh, jinx! We’ve got to go back.’

But the other Scogs had formed a circle around them, moving surprisingly quickly, forcing Magio to be confronted by the leader, whose arms, as thick as the boughs of a large tree, were now flung wide apart, as if blocking any escape. Magio gaped at the enormously long, wide fingers, with thick flat nails, on hands shaped like massive spades for digging and shaping mud. His gaze lifted to meet those

alien eyes, which were boring down at him. The others were shuffling ever closer, closing them in. The Scogs were making a growly sort of humming in their throats, which dawned on him as some kind of speech.

‘What are they saying?’

Eefa shuddered. ‘How would I know?’

Their speech was so slow and deep; it sounded utterly alien, like a wind blowing through a deep hollow or cave. But then he heard what might be their way of addressing Magio himself, with more and more of them calling to him.

‘Boy . . . ! Boy . . . ! Boy . . . !’

Oh, jinx!

The realisation that they really were speaking to him provoked even more panic in Magio. Then Eefa shrieked. ‘Their leader – he knows I’m here. He’s sniffing me out. He’s got my scent.’

Magio stood frozen to the spot, his eyes wide with shock.

The Scog appeared to be addressing him again in that strange low-pitched hollow voice. ‘Boy – not want . . . Want she. . . Must have she . . . Give us she . . . Boy . . . ! Boy go . . . ! Boy go free . . . !’

‘No!’

Magio shook his head.

This couldn’t be happening. It had to be some cruel trick of his imagination. They couldn’t possibly take Eefa. How did they even know she was there? Nobody other than he could see her. Nobody else, not even Gran, had ever been able to see Eefa. Never – not since she was born. Only he could see her, hear her, touch her.

The lead Scog was now tapping him on the shoulder with a finger that was as thick as Magio’s calf. The taps felt like nudges from a

sledgehammer. ‘Boy . . . not want boy . . . Want she . . . Boy give us she . . .’

‘Get lost!’

But the huge being, with its plate-sized eyes, insisted. ‘Shee-warg . . . shee-warg wants . . . Shee-warg will have . . .’

‘No!’

Had he truly understood the giant Scog’s words? He was talking about something he called a shee-warg? Had this shee-warg, whatever that was, put some kind of spell on the Scogs? Magio knitted together the words of the giant Scog in his mind. The monster wanted Eefa. Could it be that the Scogs’ only purpose in coming to Warren was to take his sister? But that was so stupid, so idiotic, it couldn’t be true. How could the Scogs – or this shee-warg thing – possibly know that Eefa existed?

But somehow, they did.

Nobody other than Magio, Quimbire and, until her death, Gran, even knew of Eefa’s existence. And Quimbire refused to believe in her very existence, putting her down to an invention of Magio’s fertile imagination. How then could these horrible creatures even talk about taking Eefa?

‘No! No – you can’t take her!’

That deep voice replied, a growly rumble. ‘Boy . . . not stop us . . . not stop shee-warg.’

‘No – you can’t!’

Eefa was screaming in his ear. ‘We must run, Magio! They don’t want you. They only want to take me.’

‘No!’ Tears erupted into his eyes.

The Scogs were all around them now. Paralysed by his own rising panic, he was at a loss as to what to do. His eyes, blurred with his tears, saw how more and more Scogs were coming out of the cave-like holes around the bases of the huge clay mounds. His ears were filling with the strangest clamour, a thundering cacophony of growls and moans. Then, suddenly, his vision was filled with a cyclone of wheeling shapes. At that same panicky moment, in the confusion of his despair, a new face confronted him: a tall, rangy woman with a weather-beaten face stretched taut over prominent cheekbones. A voice he did not recognise was shouting above the thunderous clatter of birds' cries into his ear.

'It is pointless to argue with them. Their communal mind is controlled by another.'

'I . . . I don't understand.'

'There is a terrible power at work here. More powerful by far than these simple beings. Yet by confusing the common mind, I may yet break the warg.'

'Who . . . what are you?'

'You saw me earlier from your eyrie among the rocks.'

'You're Bird Woman?'

'Some call me that. But this is no time for introductions or explanations. You must flee – you and your enchanted sister.'

Magio stared, blinking hard, at the strange woman, baffled at her words, but excited by the possibility they might somehow escape from the Scogs. He gazed up into her deep-set pale grey eyes, surrounded by wrinkles. 'Why should I trust you?'

'Who else can you trust?'

The Scogs were muttering urgently among themselves and beginning to edge closer to them again. 'I don't have time to explain, Magio, and even if I did, I doubt that I could explain to your satisfaction.'

Eefa grabbed Magio's hand and squeezed it hard. 'We have no choice. We must do as she tells us.'

Bird Woman was staring up into the sky. 'The Scogs are superstitious. And they are far more observant of nature than humans.'

Magio gazed up to where sea birds of every description were invading the morning sky, wheeling around them in gigantic circles.

'Now – while they are distracted – you really must run.'

'Run where?'

'As far away as you can.'

'What – you mean leave Warren?'

'Decidedly, yes.'

'Where would we go?'

'I shall direct you.'

'We can't just leave. Leave Gran's, where Eefa and I grew up? Leave Warren, leave the beach . . .?'

'I'm afraid that you must!'

Magio exploded. 'Why?'

'Warren is no longer safe for you.'

'Why – why, isn't it safe?'

'Look around you.'

He looked around at the circle of Scogs, who appeared for the moment to be transfixed with the encircling birds. 'Why – why are you helping us?'

‘Would you delay even a moment longer, merely to ask questions?’

Eefa was tugging hard at Magio’s reluctant hand. All of a sudden, they were running again, with Bird Woman pressing them to run even faster.

Breathless as he was, he just couldn’t stop himself demanding answers. ‘But what does it all mean? Why me – or Eefa?’

‘You must head north – to the wild lands, where those who would hurt you will not find you.’

‘Quimbire looks after us here. He’ll stop the Scogs from harming us.’

‘No one can protect you if you stay.’

Magio stared back at this tall, lean woman, with her wrinkled leather face and her calm, smoke-grey eyes. ‘But . . .’

‘No more buts, dear Magio.’

Eefa, who was now as breathless as Magio, spoke. ‘But we can’t just run away. We live here. Warren is our home.’

‘Your enemies have sensed your importance. Now they know you exist, they will never give up. They will come for you again.’

Magio, too breathless even to shriek, couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Bird Woman had spoken to Eefa. She had even heard her speak.

Strange Words

Magio whispered, 'Listen – they're talking about some kind of an adventure. Like the stories Quimbire used to tell us.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'I'm not. You can hear it for yourself.'

They were supposed to be asleep. But Magio and Eefa were too excited to sleep. At this moment, Magio was peering down, through a gap in the threadbare blue curtain that acted as a door to the loft space that was their bedroom. He was perched on a single bare foot, holding on with his right hand to the top of the rickety ladder that led down into the tiny hall and beyond its open door into what had been Gran's living room,

'Grow up, you idiot,' Eefa whispered. 'They're arguing over whether we stay or leave, because they know it's going to be horribly dangerous whatever we do.'

'Dangerous?' The idiot grinned.

Eefa shook her head. Magio and his silly notions of adventures! She couldn't believe that he was giddy with excitement. He didn't seem to understand what any such adventure would really entail. And this was happening after they had barely escaped by the skin of their teeth from the Scogs. She had no such giddy notions. What Quimbire

and Bird Woman were really talking about was running away – fleeing Warren. They were expecting Eefa and Magio to abandon their home.

She felt his hot breath on her neck, whispering, ‘What do you think is going to happen?’

She felt like slapping him back to reality. ‘Never mind what’s going to happen. We need to figure out what really did happen back there.’

‘I know. I keep going over and over it in my mind.’

‘It really frightened me, that stuff with the Scogs.’

‘You reckon the Scogs really could smell you?’

The very thought terrified Eefa. ‘Shush!’ she muttered, needing more time to think about what was happening. ‘Keep your voice down.’ But the reminder of what had happened scared her so much she brought her hand to her mouth. ‘I can’t bear the thought that those . . . those horrible creatures could . . .’

‘Could somehow see you?’

‘They didn’t see me. They smelled me.’

‘But surely if they could smell you – at least it means that you’re real.’

‘I know that I’m real.’

Magio sniffed at her to see if he could smell Eefa, like the Scogs, but she pushed his sniffing face away from her.

‘You’re always complaining that you can’t be real because nobody can see you, or hear you, or touch you? But – hey – if even the Scogs can smell you – you’re real. They said they were sent to get you . . .’

‘Shut up!’

Eefa’s eyes sprang wide open with the thought. ‘It’s not that simple. I just don’t even begin to understand what’s going on.’

They shared a look: neither of them really wanted to think too much about what it might mean.

‘Oh, Gio! You know, don’t you, that it was Bird Woman who saved us?’

She was so nervous she was calling him by his kid name, something she had never done in years.

‘Yeah! I know.’

‘But how did she do that? Why did she save us?’

‘I don’t know.’

Eefa remembered the bizarre circling of the birds in the sky. Wow – all those birds, wheeling in circles. She had never seen anything like that before. It was as if they were obeying some . . . some enchantment.

‘She really did it,’ she whispered. ‘Bird Woman somehow frightened off the Scogs by calling up those birds. I know – oh, I know it just seems so incredible, now I think about it.’

Magio whistled softly. ‘You’re not kidding.’

‘Hsst!’ She made a face. ‘We’ll find out what really happened. We’ll ask Bird Woman about it later. But right now we need to listen to what they’re saying down below.’

‘They’re talking about you, Eefie.’

His kid name for her! His was Gio and hers was Eefie! Eefa, who hated to be hugged, curled her taller figure round his to snuggle up to him at the parted curtain, listening to the conversation rising up out of Gran’s living room. Quimbre’s voice sounded argumentative, broken with the sucking pauses that she knew meant he was drawing on his pipe. ‘Why run away? What protection is Magio going to get out there?’

Eefa bridled. *It's us . . . not just Magio!*

Then it was as if Bird Woman had read her mind. 'The boy isn't the only one we need to protect. Both the twins are in danger – they are in greater danger than you could possibly imagine.'

They heard the sounds of Quimbre's sandals pacing the bare earth floor. 'What you so worried about, woman – ghosts and phantoms?'

Bird Woman said, 'Do not nudge against me!'

'I beg your pardon, gentle lady.'

Magio and Eefa grinned at each other. 'Quimbre up to his old tricks!' They couldn't help giggling.

Bird woman appeared to pause. 'I'm no gentle lady. And I wish you wouldn't smoke that filthy thing. It pollutes my mind as much as it does my lungs. I don't know what you put in it, but it surely isn't tobacco?'

'There! I stop from puffing.'

'It would appear that you doubt Eefa's existence.'

'Pah!' Eefa and Magio could imagine how Quimbre's shoulders were now shrugging. 'Why would you say such things to me?'

'I've heard Magio talk about you.'

'Magio's a very imaginative boy. I have lived for quite a while with him and Gran. All this time and I come across no invisible sister. This twin exists only in Magio's head.'

'Your scepticism is understandable. Indeed, it is comforting! It means that Eefa's invisibility is working. You can't see or hear her. But she's real. You heard what those creatures said about her.'

'We only have Magio's word for that!'

'You, sir! You just nudged me again! Must I remind you not to do so?'

‘Sorry – sorry, gentle lady!’

Eefa and Magio grinned.

‘The twins are threatened. Now that the Ursascogans have confirmed Eefa’s existence, that danger has greatly increased.’

Magio was now squirming with excitement. His hand, in squeezing Eefa’s shoulders, was shaking. ‘Hey, did you hear . . .?’

‘Hush! I want to hear what else Bird Woman is saying.’

‘What is this danger you speak of?’

‘Since the Chaos,’ the calm, determined voice of Bird Woman rose into the loft, ‘there has been much going on that would otherwise appear strange. You must believe me that Eefa is real. What is more, she is special. We must do all that we can to protect her.’

Magio squeezed her. ‘Wow, Eefie!’

‘Shush!’

Quimbre’s tone remained sceptical. ‘How then? How are we to protect somebody we cannot see?’

‘Well, I don’t believe that we can possibly protect Eefa – or Magio for that matter – in this ramshackle ruin.’

Quimbre’s voice fell to a growl. ‘Here – this is Magio’s home. What do you want him to do – to abandon his home? I don’t fear those stupid Scogs. I see no good reason we run away. We shore up the windows and doors. If the Scogs come here, we make ready for them.’

Magio rattled his right foot on the top step of the loft ladder with excitement.

But Bird Woman’s voice remained determinedly calm. ‘Use your brain, man. The Scogs tried to abduct Eefa in the open street. They won’t give up. It’s possible they can detect her scent.’

Magio heard Quimb्रे snort aloud.

‘It doesn’t matter that you don’t believe in Eefa. What matters is that she’s real. I have reason to believe that not only is she real, she is important to the powers-that-be.’

There was a loud slap. Magio guessed it was Quimb्रे slamming the flat of his hand down onto the bare wood of the table.

‘Be petulant, if you like.’ Bird woman exhaled a sigh. ‘I’ll not argue with you. It’s clear to me that the Scogs are determined to take her. They have located Eefa, are capable of sensing her, and they *will* come for her.’

Eefa’s hand was reaching up to her mouth again, aghast.

Quimb्रे’s reply was equally urgent. ‘Four walls are safer than taking our chances out there.’

‘You’re mistaken, Quimb्रे. Gather up your weapons by all means, but meanwhile get ready to run. It doesn’t mean we won’t fight. We’ll run and we’ll fight, too, if it proves necessary. But I must warn you, this situation is more complex than you could possibly know. There are many unknowns. Here Magio and Eefa cannot hide. How would you protect them if and when a giant hole appeared from under our feet to swallow them up through the Scogs’ tunnelling?’

Bird Woman seemed to wait to hear Quimb्रे’s reply. But there was no reply. Magio assumed she had him thinking about the frightening notion of Scogs tunnelling under the house.

Bird Woman spoke again, but now her voice was softer. ‘You’re right to worry. Out there, we shall enter wild lands – but this is country familiar to me. We can hide from Scogs, or any other pursuers. This surely offers us a better chance of keeping them safe,

and even then, only if we keep on the move. Heed my words. We have so little time.'

'You know these wild lands?'

'I know them as well as any. I have travelled them widely and am familiar with some of their resources, and their entrapments.'

'Hmph!'

'Consider this. It would now appear that the Scogs came here for no other purpose than to abduct Eefa. They found her through Magio. They were so bold as to openly admit it. It now appears that this was their sole reason for coming here to Warren.'

'You know I have never seen her – she is not there. Don't you see – Magio is now alone.'

'Then help me to save Magio.'

They heard the grunt that surely came with a shrug from Quimbre. They heard the puffing of his relighting his pipe. 'Woman – you're right to think Magio matters to me. But surely I need to know what is happening. I will not risk any danger to Magio. I need to know what's really going on.'

'My dear Quimbre – I don't pretend to know what it all means myself! The Scogs have a long history in these islands. They are easily underestimated and they are possessed of a vicious cunning. But I doubt that even the Scogs themselves are cunning enough to plan what is going on here.'

'Hmph!'

'They mentioned a being they called a shee-warg.'

'Superstitious hokum!'

'Call it what you like. Are you denying that a determined attempt at abduction took place in this town today?'

‘What are you saying? We face attack tonight?’

‘I doubt it will come tonight. They have identified and thus located what they want. The Ursascogans are slow thinkers. Moreover, they appear to want Eefa alive. If I am right, and Eefa is so important to them, they will do nothing immediately. Rather they will report back to whoever is directing them. They are not quick-reacting people. But it’s my guess that a much more planned and purposeful attack will follow. That gives us a window of time to prepare our escape. We should be out of here by dawn.’

Listening to all of this discussion by the adults, Eefa and Magio couldn’t help but hold onto one other’s shoulders and stare, with looks of utter astonishment, into each other’s eyes.

‘Hey! Don’t just grab at my sleeve. You’re pinching my skin.’

‘I’ll hang on to your ear with my teeth, Magio, if you don’t calm down. Stop getting excited like that. You heard what Bird Woman told us to do. This isn’t a sprint to the boulder on the beach. We have to pace ourselves.’

Magio took a deep breath to calm himself, waiting for Eefa let go of his sleeve. He whispered, ‘Sorry. I’m too mixed up to think. Do you suppose we’ll ever come back to Gran’s house again?’

‘Do you think I don’t hate it too? But you heard Bird Woman. We have to get away. And then, if I guess right, we need to hide.’

‘Easy for you!’

She ignored the barb. The fact was she was worried about what he felt. She could see that he was white-faced with the shock of leaving home. He had been forced to abandon all of his beachcombing treasures. His prized collection of shells, starfish and sea urchins, and weird driftwood shapes. She knew how much he

cherished those things. But it wasn't easy for her either. Neither of them had been able to catch a wink of sleep last night. And now, barely an hour after dawn, the company must have already covered five or six miles after sneaking out of Warren. They were trekking fast between tussock-clad sand dunes in an enormous sweep of bay, ignoring roads, even the winding goat tracks, always keeping the sea to their left. Bird Woman had been their guide from setting out. She had insisted that they travel northwards, into a bleak landscape in which they must appear, to any potential spying eyes, to be tinier than a sprinkle of ants against the vastness.

Magio was more excited by it all than Eefa was. All of his life he had longed for some great adventure, like the tall tales of the sea spun round the fireside by Quimbre. Well now he was setting out on an adventure of his own. Lucky Gio! But Eefa wasn't keen on any kind of adventure whatsoever. She was too shocked after the frightening events of yesterday to feel other than she was trudging in a daze. But they could hardly complain. Quimbre and Bird Woman hadn't had the opportunity to sleep at all. They had spent all night preparing for the journey, making up backpacks that would carry as much food, water, change of clothes and blankets, as well as weapons.

Weapons!

Quimbre was armed with his heavy flintlock pistol and his cutlass and Bird Woman had a long bow, which she was using as a walking staff.

'Hey,' whispered Magio, 'do you recall how Gran used to call Quimbre a pirate?'

'Yes – I do!'

It had seemed just a silly insult that Gran would hurl at Quimbre whenever she was annoyed with him. He would merely turn his back to her and say nothing. Recalling poor old Gran's irascibility, Eefa swallowed against a lump in her throat. In her heart she didn't know what to think of yesterday – it had all seemed so unusual. Things appeared to be changing about her with disturbing speed. Eefa shook her head, plodding on, deep in thought, a few feet behind the impatient Magio.

There had been something else that had astonished her last night. Bird Woman had talked as if she had no qualms that Eefa was real. She had even hinted at the possibility that she was special. It was as if she were somehow special – as if this was what had brought the Scogs to Warren. They had come here just to capture her and take her away. Bird Woman had also used that curious word 'enchanted' in relation to her. She had spoken to Magio about his 'enchanted sister'. Eefa wasn't altogether sure what that could possibly mean. On the one hand, wouldn't it be wonderful if this was the reason she had been born invisible? Wouldn't that be the most fantastic thing if it explained why she had to be invisible?

Could that possibly be true? Oh, could it?

But, now in the cold light of morning, she was inclined to doubt it. That same word, enchantment, had other connotations, other implications. She had spent her entire life being invisible, unseen, unheard, untouched – unvalued! She had felt like adding the word 'unloved'. But to be unloved you had, at the very least, to be visible.

Eefa trudged and trudged through the resisting sand and rock of Moon, while the wind-whipped sand excoriated her invisible legs and whistled through her non-existent hair.

The fact that she was invisible didn't mean that she didn't feel things. She felt everything. If anything, she felt things more deeply than visible people felt them. And now she sensed that things were not merely changing: things were already so terribly, convulsively, changed that her life was never going to be the same again.

Why was all of this happening to her? Why had those stupid creatures – those monstrous, lumpy-faced Scogs – come to Warren just to look for her?

She kept thinking about it over and over and she just couldn't figure it out. It made no sense at all. Yet that the horrible Scog leader, chewing on words with that inhuman rumbling noise, had not only sensed her, he had insisted on taking her, seizing her, like – like she was an object! What in the world could that mean? Eefa had never thought herself as being of the slightest importance to anyone. Quite the opposite! She had thought of herself as being nothing to everybody. And that meant that the very notion that she was running for her life from these horrible Scogs was all the more baffling and, so, all the more terrifying. In her daze, she lifted her head and noticed something that seemed truly enchanting.

There were birds immediately ahead of her that appeared to be suspended, motionless, in the air. The sight of them stopped her dead.

Skylarks!

She stopped walking, falling a few yards behind the others, feeling such a powerful impulse just to observe them. As she began to walk on again, softly, quietly, between them, the larks ignored her presence. They were hovering in mid-air, in twos and threes, frozen in space, just as she had seen fish hold still in a current of river water. It looked wonderfully impossible, so much so as to appear magical. Looking

about her, she realised that she was climbing a rise, where currents of air were wafting in from the sea. Maybe the larks were being held aloft by those air currents. But now, in passing through them, in gazing at them more carefully from close quarters, she saw that their eyes were fixed other than on her, as if entranced. They were completely unaware of her nearness to them. The birds were trembling slightly, as if responding in some very fine way to their hovering with tiny oscillations and adjustment of their plumage. Somehow, she had to presume that this allowed them to glide in the air, as if they were weightless. But they were not gliding. They weren't moving at all. They were . . . caught, entrapped – and then another word entered her mind – *entranced!*

Her hands clasped her mouth in shock.

At a call from Quimbire, she came to. She had allowed herself to become mesmerised by the birds. It had caused her to fall far behind the others, forcing her to hurry to catch up.

What did this mean? Had it been some kind of a message? Or some sort of clever trap aimed at separating her from the others? A thrill of fright caused goosepimples over her skin. She couldn't help looking back at the still suspended larks even as she hurried on to catch up.

Seduction

Eefa woke to a peculiar state in which she was still half asleep but also strugglingly half awake. As evening was falling at the end of the second day after fleeing Gran's home, Bird Woman discovered a surf-washed bay with a crumbling blackstone tower. When they explored it, they discovered a single underground chamber that would provide shelter for the night. For Eefa, this musty repository felt less than comforting. But what comfort could one expect when you were invisible to all except an annoying brother and a strange woman with a thing for birds? Finding herself overcome by restlessness, she woke early in this murky dungeon, only to discover that she was still half lost within a dream. But the feel of spiderwebs about her face shook her awake and she now wished she was back in her dreams. The events of the previous two days so overwhelmed her that she felt like screaming.

The whole thing – this setting out into an unknown and hostile world, with nothing other than the packs on their backs – seemed foolhardy. All because the Scogs had cornered her and Magio as they were returning the beach. Perhaps Quimbre had been right in his arguments with Bird Woman? Eefa had thought hard about that when attempting to go back to sleep. But now that same unsettling feeling

made sleep impossible. It caused her to climb up out of the shabby basement, and then further, up the broken steps of the spiral staircase within the ruined tower, bringing her up to the level that must once have held the flame that had protected ships out there on the inky blackness of ocean.

Sleepy as she was, she still tried to imagine it: a stormy night, lashed by gales and rain, the men living in this tower firing up the brazier that had once stood atop this level. They must have been hardy and brave. People who anticipated bad things and tried to stop them happening. That thought comforted her. She took a deep breath, keeping that comfort in her mind. It reassured her that there were good folks in this crazy world – folks who strived to save the lives of others. It wasn't just full of Scogs and cobwebby spiders.

She held onto that thought: it helped to calm her fears.

Eefa found herself sitting, straddle-legged, on the cold flagstone floor of the lighthouse platform, dressed only in her nightdress, gazing out onto the great bowl of charcoal sky with its myriad stars casting their light over the ocean. It really was beautiful. How lovely to think it must have been sights like this that had caused folks long ago to call this small piece of the ocean, with its many islands, The Sea of Stars!

Stepping back down the spiral stone staircase, Eefa emerged onto the beach, from where she gazed up once more into the night sky. They said that stars were other suns, perhaps some of them with other worlds around them. How wonderful the universe must appear to those who were visible, ordinary folks with normal lives, normal hopes and desires! Why, oh why, was she condemned to the terrible loneliness of being invisible?

Gran – oh, Gran, how I miss you!

Gran would have known what to do. She would have put her foot down, grown angry and very likely produced a few telling words that would have stopped this mad flight into the wild lands at the very beginning.

But Gran was no longer here to take care of them.

Panic at the thought caused a flutter in Eefa's heart. She must take a grip. She must close down those fears before they overwhelmed her.

She clenched her eyes and her fists tight shut. She took the deepest of breaths and then reopened her eyes and looked about herself once again in the moonlight. She was standing on a gravelly embankment looking down onto the wide cove that surrounded the stone tower. A tickle in her throat caused her to cough into her hand. A freezing onshore wind gusted against her, flattening her nightdress against her body, making her feel colder than ever.

She thought, *I am not alone!*

The others, Magio, Bird Woman and Quimbire, were still close by, huddled in sleep in the chamber at the base of the tower. They had all walked themselves to the point of exhaustion over those two days, with only the briefest naps in place of sleep before arriving at the cove with its ruined shelter.

Was there no lookout? She hadn't come across anybody. Yet the night before she recalled how Quimbire had sat it out as lookout over their first nocturnal shelter. Eefa and Magio had been put to bed, utterly exhausted. But surely tonight must have been Bird Woman's turn? That provoked another anxious flutter in her heart. Had there really been nobody looking out for them as they slept? Overhead, now, as she turned her face up once more to gaze at it, the sky

appeared altogether cold, colder than the ocean, despite its lovely twinkling stars.

'Eefa!'

She recognised the voice, even though it was the gentlest of whispers in her mind. She felt Bird Woman's hand touch her shoulder. She turned to be comforted by what looked like the ghost of the tall, thoughtful woman who had brought Eefa a blanket that she was now wrapping about her shoulders.

'Trouble sleeping?'

Eefa nodded, glad to be proven wrong about the lookout – and as astonished as ever that Bird Woman was able to see her.

'I expect that you were too anxious to sleep.'

'Yes.'

Bird Woman's arm enfolded her shoulders over the comforting blanket. Eefa hadn't realised how much she'd been trembling until now.

'I'm scared.'

'Your feelings are understandable. So much has happened in just a few days. It must be very confusing for you. Come – let's sit and admire the night.' Bird Woman wrapped the blanket tighter around Eefa's shoulders as they sat down together, cross-legged, on the shingle.

'Thank you!'

'My purpose is ever to protect you and Magio.'

Bird Woman's voice was not really in Eefa's ears. Rather it felt like it was coming directly into her mind. Perhaps she wasn't really awake after all? Perhaps this was still a dream: a comforting dream.

Eefa sighed. 'I just can't get my head around any of it. Why we have to run away – the fact you really can see and hear me. I don't understand right now why I am hearing your words inside my head.'

'It must be very confusing. We both appear to be communicating from what would appear to be a common dream state.'

Eefa shook her head.

'I sense that you resent your invisibility.'

Eefa stiffened.

'Perhaps, if my senses are correct, you have struggled to understand why the burden of invisibility was placed upon you?'

Tears dimmed Eefa's eyes.

'To be subjected to such a fate from birth, it must have felt unrequitedly cruel. But appearances can be deceptive.'

Eefa was electrified by Bird Woman's words. What did she mean?

Bird Woman hesitated, as if she were about to explain further but decided against it. She maintained her hug around Eefa's shoulders.

'Can you really see me?'

'Ah!' There appeared to be a momentary hesitation. *'From your lovely flaxen hair to the storm-crossed turquoise of your eyes.'*

Was that the real colour of her hair and eyes? It was a question that had tormented her all her life.

It was such a comfort for Eefa that Bird Woman's arm now hugged her so powerfully. It was the only human touch she had ever felt other than Magio's in her entire life. Her shoulders rocked with her sobbing.

'Come now! Dry your tears. Let us take a stroll in the starlight. Perhaps you are ready this night to open those beautiful eyes, and that determined mind, to the mysteries.'

‘The mysteries?’

‘Is not that ocean of stars not the greatest mystery? Oh, I promise you that there are myriad such mysteries in the everyday world about you. You, Eefa – you, in your very being – are such a mystery.’

‘How am I a mystery?’

‘Did you not wish yourself to come here tonight, though you should be sleeping after such an exhausting journey?’

‘I . . . I think I must be sleepwalking.’

‘It is natural that you should attempt to explain an enchantment. Why else would you come here, when not yet awake? Does that not suggest that something attracted you here?’

‘I don’t know.’

Eefa wiped her nose on the edge of the blanket and stared out to where the neverending wrinkles of waves caught the moonlight, as if, somehow, the whole scene, ocean and starry sky, were part of some wonderful whole. Now that she listened more carefully, she could hear the roar of the waves behind the bluster of wind.

‘Perhaps we can take advantage of the situation to learn something about your mystery? Would you like that?’

Eefa nodded.

‘I would help you to explore it – that is if you are not too tired?’

They walked, barefoot, down onto the cold white sand of the beach, then further out into the bay, to an area that was dotted with large, rounded stones.

‘What do you see, Eefa?’

Eefa hesitated. ‘I can see patterns in the rocks.’

‘Good! Now – take your time – see if you can decipher the patterns.’

‘Does it matter?’

'Let's just treat it as a game.'

Eefa asked herself, is this really Bird Woman talking to me in my mind? If it wasn't, the implication was terrifying. She couldn't avoid the new tremble in her voice. 'It isn't easy to make things out in the moonlight.'

'No, it is not. But if my eyes do not deceive me, these stones were meant to be read not in the bright glare of the sun, but in the moonlight.'

'Who do you think made the patterns? Why did they make them?'

'Those are interesting questions. Judging from the lichens that coat the rocks, I would imagine that, whoever made them, it was surely a long time ago.'

In spite of the dread that was now invading her being, the notion that she was reading a message from people from so very long ago intrigued Eefa. A thrill crept over her goose-fleshed skin.

'I think I can see a spiral.'

'Clever girl! You're right. And quite a big one, at least fifty paces across, and with a great many coils.'

Eefa was about to walk on further but the touch on her shoulder suggested that she should stop.

'What is it?'

'Observe the pattern of the wind within the spiral.'

It wasn't easy to make it out in the moonlight, but when she knelt down on the sand and watched the pattern carefully, Eefa saw that the sand was blustering within the spiral, as if following its contours. She hauled the blanket even closer about her shoulders, trembling even more.

'What does it mean? Do you think we are expected to walk around inside it? To follow the coils to the centre?'

'That's a brilliant insight!'

Out of the side of her vision she saw that a shadowy figure squatted on the sand to one side of the circle. The figure nodded as if expecting her. She had the terrifying notion that it had been this shadow speaking to her in the words of Bird Woman. It spoke. *'Why don't you follow the pattern right now, just as your instincts direct, while I watch over and protect you?'*

Eefa hesitated, now deeply uncertain. That voice was a little too friendly, the hugging a little too close for Bird Woman. Was she really speaking to Bird Woman at all?

'Don't worry. As far as I can see, there appears to be no threat. Though I strongly suspect that the people who created the spiral danced as they followed its coils – and very likely their dance would have been accompanied by music . . . by song.'

Eefa hesitated again. She was increasingly uncertain about this dream journey. 'I don't think I could dance my way round it.'

'Why not?'

'I'm not very good at dancing. To learn to dance, you must have others, at the very least a partner. Dancing wasn't on offer to me.'

'One does not need a partner to dance. Merely the inspiration. Take your time in doing so. Let the lullaby of the sea provide your music.'

The lullaby of the sea!

Seductive words! Eefa hesitated at the entrance to the spiral. She wondered if every word in her mind was a lie.

She twirled and fluttered her way through the coils, all the time with the sounds of the sea in her ears and under the glorious ceiling of the stars. In truth, it felt glorious to do so. She had to control her sense of exhilaration as she danced around every coil until she reached the whirling sand at the centre of the spiral.

The voice whispered, *'Now you must tell me exactly what you feel.'*

'I feel that I'm one with the ocean and with the sky.'

The shadow chuckled, a gentle, almost self-conscious sound. *'It would appear that you have solved the mystery of the spiral.'*

Eefa felt emboldened by her own resolve. 'Thank you! Whoever, or whatever, you are. You've somehow made me feel special for the first time in my life.'

'Your gift goes beyond that, Eefa. You didn't just wake from sleep, in spite of your exhaustion, and come to this beach by accident.'

Eefa stared at the shadow, her breath catching in her throat.

'Oh, come now! Let me truly hold you. You so belittle yourself that you cannot see your own potential, your wonder of being.'

Eefa left the spiral and approached the shadow, reluctantly allowing herself to be held. The shadow embraced her, hugged her much too fiercely. But Eefa didn't feel love in the hug. She was increasingly alarmed. But at the same time she needed to know what this was all about.

'Is it not a wonder that you have interpreted a communication from people so long ago, from nothing more than a collection of stones on a beach?'

Eefa steeled herself, refusing to be flattered. 'Was this the mystery you wanted me to see?'

'The mystery I would show you is the mystery of yourself. Look upon it as an initiation of sorts. Shall we continue our stroll?'

Reluctantly, Eefa nodded.

They walked on for a short while, moving out towards the tide, entering a section of bay that sloped out into nearing surf. It was full of stones.

'Oh, my!'

'You sense another communication from long ago?'

'What is it?'

'I cannot interpret it. You must discover the mystery by yourself.' The figure squatted down again, straddle-legged, and lowered what appeared to be a cowled head. *'All I ask is that you tell me what you are experiencing – not merely the vision in your eyes but in the totality of your senses.'*

Eefa gazed for several moments at the cross-legged figure, caught by moonlight as if etched in silver. She took a deep breath and then she stared at the strange patterns of the stones in the glaringly white sand.

'The stones – they're glowing.'

'You're right.'

'Why – how could they be glowing?'

'I don't know. But, perhaps, when the big tides come, they are under water. Are there not beings in the oceans that glow?'

Eefa walked among the stones. 'I'm seeing stones piled up on other stones to make little pyramids. Big stones on the bottom and then smaller and smaller to the peak at the top.'

The voice was silent.

She stood erect and gazed about her. As ever, the fact it was night made it difficult to see anything clearly. 'I can't see a pattern. Only the fact that they seem go on forever in all directions. Maybe I should walk a bit more.'

'Have a care. Keep me informed of all you see, hear, sense . . .'

The wind strengthened. It struck her body, causing her to stagger, almost knocking her over. Eefa tightened every muscle, her elbows hugging her chest until it blew over and then she looked about herself again.

‘The pyramids are in lines.’

‘Is there a pattern to the lines?’

‘None that I can see, other than the fact the lines spread out over a big distance . . . and there are huge numbers of them.’

The shadow appeared to hesitate. *‘Perhaps we have explored enough.’*

Eefa thought that, perhaps, she was winning in this confrontation of thoughts and words. ‘No. I’m going to follow a line back to its source.’

‘I’m not sure that you should explore any further.’

‘I’ll be careful.’

The shadow climbed back onto its feet. *‘Stay close to me. Tell me all you sense, even as you sense it.’*

Eefa stopped walking. She was staring down at the nearest pyramids, which reached as high as her knees. ‘I’m looking into the distance along a single line. But as I do so my vision seems to blur.’

‘It senses that you are resisting it. Perhaps you should lower your resistance. Allow it to enter your senses.’

Eefa shook her head. What was this strange place? Was it the focus of some religious gathering, long ago? People from before the Chaos?

‘You are now so close to answers to the mystery. Please keep talking to me. Do not allow your mind to wander.’

She shook her head. There was a new voice inside her head, a more powerful voice, one that was rapidly rising in strength. It appeared to encourage her.

‘Go on! You are so near!’

She began to walk again. Her legs appeared to be performing the motion all by themselves. The urge to hurry was growing so strong within her that she could not help it. She took several more steps.

'I can see the pattern more clearly now. The lines are coming together. As far as I can see, the pyramids are laid out in lines radiating from a single focus – something like a great eye. The eye is at the very edge of the shore where the beach meets the incoming tide.'

'Go on! Do not hesitate . . . Come . . . Come to me!'

The topmost stones, the cap stones, on the pyramids were somewhat rounded and flat. The sound she heard was the capstones vibrating in the wind. It was a beautiful if eerie sound, like a legion of tiny organs humming . . . and then a new, much deeper, voice. It sounded urgently guttural.

'Come! Come! Here you will discover what truly awaits you . . . Something very special . . . a mystery of vital importance to you.'

She so wanted to believe . . .

Eefa gazed at the nearest line and she took her bearing from it. She walked in that direction without taking any notice of what was happening about her. But a jolt of fright caused her to hesitate.

'I . . . I'm afraid.'

The two voices were competing in her head. But the powerful voice was drowning out the kinder, weaker one. *'Do not be afraid. The eye is beckoning. It is calling you . . .'*

Eefa could not stop her feet from picking up pace. She was now running, despite her tiredness, her every sense reaching out to the furthest limit of the converging lines. They were leading her to

the incoming ocean. There, at the very pupil of the eye, something hungered for her arrival at the meeting of ocean and sky . . .

‘No!’ This was a different voice, a clear voice, one in her ears rather than inside her head . . .

‘Heed your instincts, girl . . . The answers you crave are so close now . . .’

‘Don’t listen to them, Eefa.’ This really sounded like Bird Woman’s voice. But it was half strangled, as if she were hurling it through a malevolent gale.

Eefa was no more than half a dozen paces from the surf. Here she sensed the closeness of the more powerful voice, the malevolent spirit that had seduced her to this place. A raw terror blocked her throat so she could no longer breathe.

‘Don’t take another step.’ Bird Woman sounded breathless, as if she had been struggling to break free from some terrible constraints . . .

The urge to walk into the tide was overwhelming. ‘Please . . . Please, help me!’

‘I am here to help you, Eefa. You must resist its suggestion. Step into the cynosure and you will lose my protection.’

Eefa looked back over her shoulder at the first of the two shadows, the one she had believed her protector. The face within the hood was charcoal grey in the moonlight, around which a cataract of white hair fell to her waist. Eefa felt a wave of dread sweep over her. It was as if a malevolence was enveloping her, attempting to take possession of her. With every last ounce of her will, she forced herself to turn around. She resisted the instinct that pressed her towards the eye.

‘Oh, Eefa – I am here.’

She threw herself into Bird Woman's arms.

'I'm so confused.'

Bird Woman hushed her. Eefa had the impression that even Bird Woman was trembling, shivering.

'There was . . . what seemed to be your friendly voice in my head.'

'It wasn't my voice – and it was no friend.'

'I . . . I don't understand.'

Eefa's entire body shivered with cold. She was still dressed in no more than her nightdress. There was no blanket around her shoulders. 'It pretended to be you. It pretended to care for me.'

'Hush, hush!' Bird Woman was wrapping a real blanket around her. Bird Woman was leading her away from the surging tide.

'There was a voice – a voice telling me to walk into the sea.'

Bird Woman, who seemed a little out of breath herself, halted on the inner edge of the great sweep of bay. She had fallen to her knees onto the sand and stones. 'It so nearly had you . . . Oh, so very nearly!'

'What was it?'

'A shade of place! It took advantage of our exhaustion. Even I was overcome – lulled into slumber – when I should have been guarding you.' Bird Woman took a deep breath, then climbed back onto her feet. 'Come,' she said. 'Let's get you dressed and warmed with a hot drink. It would appear that this crumbling ruin is no refuge. We must wake the others. We need to get you and Magio away from here.'

An Unexpected Comfort

He never speaks, but she can read him – she who has long been intimate with every twist and turn of his pitiless and labyrinthine plotting. On this occasion, she holds herself utterly still, every sense alert. There has been a change, a shift in the quality of the light, in the blows and eddies of the air, in the very crash and thunder of the sea. This would appear to herald a cutting change of mood, sharp as the severing of flesh by a honed blade. Her mind spins. It is no surprise that the weather, the angry seas and livid skies, reflect the darkness of his moods. There are invisible movements about her, hostile sensations that alert her to the likelihood of a renewed attack. His brooding presence is nearby – so close by now she positively feels the weight of his malice. She is sensitive to myriad minuscule perturbations, the most significant of which is an overwhelming, rancorous weight upon her heart. She takes to striding the stretch of stony beach, making a show of dragging her chains. But this is a duel she is not equipped to win.

He suspects!

Very well, he inevitably suspects. But what can he possibly know of what is already afoot?

She can hear her own laboured breathing in her ears, the pounding of her own heartbeat. She can predict his response: some new, and even more terrible indignity. She must strike first.

'Think you that through such torment you are become the object of my thoughts, my fears, my hopes? Though it grieves me in so many ways, you are mistaken! My thoughts are elsewhere. My desires, my hopes, my deeply offending loves . . . all of them deliciously elsewhere. How much must this offend my Lord of Pain that I remember them, all of them, with such precision and indeed an effusion of joy! You will, perhaps, find this questionable? Yet I would assure you that it is this simple – I know you put little value on truth – yet still I refuse to kneel before your capacity to inflict pain. In this you are undoubtedly the master. Yet still have I learnt to sleep, when sleep should have been denied me. Oh, I have learnt many other lessons. I have discovered the bliss of unconsciousness, even through the manifold punishments you have racked me with. Does this affright you – this spurning anew?

I dearly hope so.'

In answer there is a monstrous downpour of rain. Lightning crackles in the navy sky overhead. A vision of monsters of the deep invades her mind, creatures of nightmare that provoke fright even in one inured to such visions. How vital the fact that he can invade her mind, but he cannot read it.

'Have you not asked yourself why darkness so readily drew you in? You could have chosen the light? The killing of Mechi might not have condemned you. My love might have saved you.'

She senses another violence of mood, which is reflected in the growing maelstrom of wind and sky and ocean. Amid the lashing storm, something quite terrible comes into being and then hauls itself out of the ocean and up along the battered shore to hover before her. A wraith of reptilian coldness, vicious jaws, claws of monstrous violence, eyes as pitiless as quartz.

She laughs.

When you are tormented, the instinct is to curl up and attempt to hide. But she has never been inclined to do so. It feels more as if she were metamorphosed to a falcon, sitting astride her perch in the glimmering light of morning, hooded from the world she once existed in. She flexes her talons. Then, at the first lunge, she hurtles headlong into a dive of rage, clawing, then wheeling and changing direction, aiming always at those quartz eyes, ripping and tearing apart the apparition.

In this she has taken her persecutor by surprise. For a split second her soul spirit is freed, clear of chains, the enchantment suspended. It surely is a rare opportunity to signal to her beloved Woll. She signals just three words:

'An unusual boy!'

As abruptly as she sends the message, it is extinguished – before her persecutor, in his startlement, has the opportunity of noticing the communication. Yet still she worries that she might not have been speedy enough. She cannot breathe until she knows, from the ambient mood, that she has succeeded. Even then, knowing she has succeeded, she hesitates. She must not let

slip her advantage. Yet she cannot resist further distracting him with a gloat:

'Change is coming.'

He employs silence.

She has become familiar with the dreadful truth of change in the very fabric of her being. Change is acid to the Undying. Even so, she is familiar with the fact that even in the world of the Undying change is just one more measure of the unstoppable, unalterable measure of existence, overwhelming feeling, overwhelming ambition, overwhelming hope and love . . . and most especially pride. There is no escape from it. Even to struggle against it would appear to be futile. But such logic would be insufficient to alter his indomitable ambitions.

She whispers the word into that cold but listening ear, *'Change!'*

She allows herself the lament, *'How sweet my solace within a word! Yet words surely are the expression of ideas. And ideas are the very core of thought, and redemption, and your incongruous punishment of me.'*

Was there more she could have said? Much more. She hesitates for a moment, or a year, she knows not in human terms.

Her tormentor, as ever, is silent.

Yet it would seem fruitful to concentrate on what clearly irritates him, all the more to distract him from the glorious truth.

I give nothing away in addressing such thoughts at you. For I know that you have sensed them and scowl in response. You fear change as much as I long for it. My fault, if fault it can be construed, was to welcome the wonder and delight of love, to give my heart gladly to one who touched my

heart, to cherish that feeling of love within me. That was something alien to you, a blessing you could never understand since there was never love within you.'

No response.

She goads him. *'Am I wrong in sensing your pause for thought? Surely even you must consider the possibility that we may be wrong in a decision, a behaviour, an ambition? How else but through the admission of fault do we find understanding? Consider then, offensive husband, there might be the possibility that you have got everything wrong'*

'In all that deals with feeling I am your mistress. I am aware of the irony that I am the antithesis of that. Even the terrible punishments you judge condign are flawed through your inability to misunderstand the meaning of love.

'You buried me here on the rim of the ocean so the wild creatures could feed on my flesh. You chained me, and so drowned me, in the neverending ebb and flow of the tide. You employed storm and rage of wind and ocean to tear open wounds in my flesh, being further food for the creatures of tide to gorge on. Thus would you torment me, anticipating that I would beg for mortal death!

'So would a petty mind devoid of love imagine victory!

'Even so, how stupid you were to choose the sea. You failed to realise that the sea was my first love. It was upon its shores that I was brought into being, to revel in sight and smell, and exult in the glory of the strange creatures and forms that abound in its bounteous depths. Perhaps it was that same old jealousy that so provoked you to torment me thus? Do you really think that revenge is everything? There are deeper passions.

'I cannot believe that you have forgotten our love. But then perhaps you imagine you have discovered a better avenue of passion, some sly intercourse,

which extenuates your pleasure of tormenting me? Be careful, my former darling. There might be danger in seeking a darker love.'

She hauls at her chains and barks a laugh; her tormentor is capable of shortening or lengthening them, even to eternity. She is obliged to remind herself of the gathering peril. She has a secret to conceal through such distractions: a boy – a mortal boy! One she must be careful not to reveal.

She must give nothing away.

'Do you remember a day of glorious sunshine when we walked by a river, with trout rising, and the birds and insects busy in the air and sky about us, the same day you took me in the wild flowers and made tender love in the shade of a blossoming cherry tree? And remembering this, do you feel even a morsel of compassion for me?'

Silence in return.



For some time the old woman glares at the storm-ridden sky over the ocean as she struggles to recall the distant emotions, the enveloping darkness, that her reflections have brought back to mind. She must find courage in a new hope, no matter how in this moment she is bewildered by its promise, even as her tormentor lashes at her all the more, lashes at every aspect of her being. But even he cannot quench the rising hope, any more than he can halt the flow of time and tide . . .

The flow of change . . .

Her senses are filling up with the disturbing sense of change, of change unstoppable . . . But even as she does so something else intrudes, a newcomer lurking at the periphery of her vision, something altogether darker than usual.

She gazes again into the shadow world and she sees there the spectre that newly accompanies him. Then it would appear that he has truly wedded darkness! And with it, the game has taken a lurch into new danger. He has ratcheted up the screw.

The old woman abandons her obsessive ruminations about herself and her torment. She signals, taking care to conceal it behind a blurry camouflage of thought, a noisy distraction: and her call is answered.

'Give me hope!'

She is presented with the vision of a boy – but now it would seem that he is a twin. There is a sister. Immediately she quenches the signal and closes her mind as if to sleep. Why would her allies place the repository of her hope in such innocents? It is not safe to dwell on such a question.