

Thomas the Rhymer



Paul Andross

A Jack Hughes Book

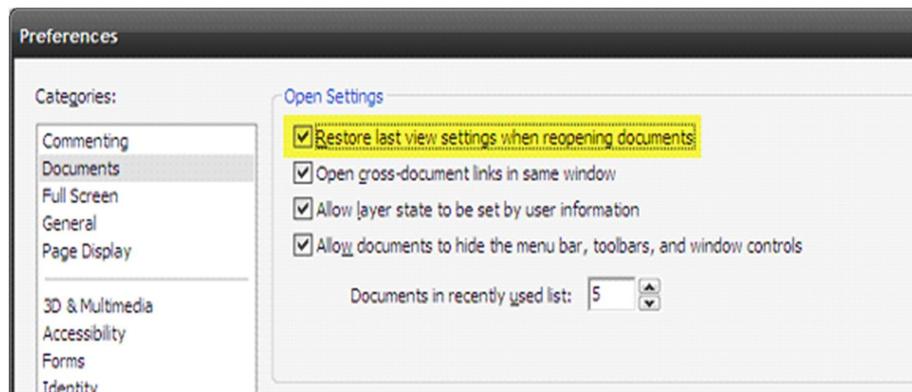
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Good luck & good reading

Thomas the Rhymer

Paul Andruss

Book 1 of the Jack Hughes Trilogy

*I'll tell you a story
About Jack a Nory;
And now my story's begun;
I'll tell you another
Of Jack and his brother...*

A Poem about Fairies

By Jack Hughes, age 11

Fairies are not cute little things,
Like Tinkerbell with butterfly wings
They look like us but are strange and sly,
And steal you away, in the wink of an eye.
I saw one take my brother Dan,
He vanished when she took his hand.
Now Mum and Dad think he ran away,
And I'm under a spell, so I can't say.
I want to tell, I really do!
But would they listen?
Well, would you?

Some strange tramp, no one can see,
Is hanging around and following me
I think he'll take me, just like Dan
And whip me off to fairyland.
Somehow, I have to chase him away,
Get Dan back and save the day.
But where to start!
I wish I knew!
I'm only eleven,
What can I do?

Chapter 1 Kidnapped

One miserable Thursday afternoon, eleven year old Jack Hughes crept into the park behind his brother Dan and girlfriend Alison. He hid in the bushes, hoping to hear what was wrong with Mum and Dad. Although he could not ask Dan any more than he could ask his parents, Jack knew Dan would tell Alison. He told her everything.

Today, Dan and Alison were not in the mood for talking, which left Jack feeling awkward watching them smooch. By the time Alison left and Dan set off home, Jack felt no better than a rotten little spy. Glumly following his brother he kept out of sight, ashamed Dan might discover him sneaking around snooping.

Jack saw an old woman waylaid Dan by the hill in the park. She looked filthy dirty and was dressed like a tramp. He wondered if she was begging. When she started stroking Dan's face and called him Thomas, Jack could not believe Dan just stood there and let her!

Horrified when she suddenly kissed his brother full on the lips, Jack could take no more. He burst out of hiding, shouting at her to get away and leave Dan alone. Freezing Jack with a stare, the old woman shimmered as if going out of focus. In her place a beautiful lady stood willowy, pale and radiant as a princess.

With tangled golden curls sparkling in the watery sunset, she playfully wagged a finger at Jack. In a low musical voice, sounding cosy as a secret shared, she cooed: “Frère Jacques, frère Jacques. Not today, but I will come back! I promise when your day comes, together we will have such fun. Until then silence learn, a kiss sweet Jacques ‘til I return!”

Blowing Jack a kiss which stung like a smack on the mouth, the beautiful lady took Dan’s hand and they vanished. There was no lightning flash or thunderclap. They were simply gone - like they were never there at all.

* * *

“What time do you call this?” growled Jack’s father. “If your dinner’s burnt to a crisp don’t ask your mother for something else. She’s sick with worry.”

Jack did not reply, but that was ok because Dad was in no mood to listen.

“And where have you been?” demanded Mum, as he plodded wearily into the kitchen. Without waiting for an answer, she picked up the tea towel to fish out a dried up dinner from the oven and slapped the plate in front of him.

“I don’t know why I bother!”

Jack knew his mother meant nothing. She could go on like this for hours.

“Don’t suppose you’ve seen that brother of yours?” she snapped, voice softening when she saw Jack’s face. “Are you all

right love? You look like you've seen a ghost. Is it Dan?" She felt his forehead. "Good heavens, you're burning up!" And called to his father, "Ron, ring the doctor!"

"I'm fine. I just want to go to bed."

"What about your dinner! Why don't you watch TV while I'll make you a sandwich? Your show's on soon."

"I can't be bothered, Mum."

"But you never miss it!"

It was as if Mum needed him to be alright because she was afraid of what it meant if he was not. Not having the heart to tell her nothing would be alright ever again, Jack said he'd watch it on catch up. When she looked relieved, he was glad he made her feel better.

Dad came into the kitchen. "What's up with you?"

"Leave him Ron. Go on Jack, I'll bring some hot milk."

The bed looked snug and inviting. Stripping off his clothes, Jack got into his pyjamas without bothering to shower or clean his teeth. Crawling into bed, he pulled the duvet all the way up to his chin.

It was ages before Mum came up. As she kissed him goodnight, he asked if Dan was home, immediately feeling stupid. She shook her head, wiping a tear. "Sorry love, I've a lot on my mind."

This was Jack's chance to ask what, but somehow that seemed unimportant right now.

Later, when Dad popped in, Jack pretended to be asleep, unable to face him. He felt his dad's breath on his face as he bent

over to kiss his forehead. His father hardly ever kissed him anymore, joking he didn't want to embarrass Jack or himself.

"I love you son," he muttered.

Love you too Dad, thought Jack, tears welling in the tight squeezed corners of his eyes.

* * *

Jack did not know he was asleep until the beautiful lady touched him. A roar filled his ears, like cars on a busy road. Tower Hill Park rushed away. Streets of houses blurred to trees and fields. Towns and rivers dashed past in frightful motion. Yet Jack did not feel like he was moving. It was as if he stayed quite still while the whole mad world raced by. Crossing a marsh, he shut his eyes as a flock of birds took to the air. When he finally looked, the birds were gone. They had flown through him and the lady as if they were in an entirely different world.

The roar in his ears stopped as everything lurched to a sickening halt. They were on top of a low hill ringed by tall stones. Away through the treetops he saw the imposing roof of a big old house.

"Where are we?" he stuttered.

"Elphame, your home!" she answered, voice ringing with the tinkling of a thousand silver bells.

"It's not my home. I'm not Thomas! It's not Dan's home either. You're mixing him up with someone!" Jack started to cry, bitter tears of frustration and fear.

She touched his tears, her touch light as thistle down on the summer breeze. “Poor Thomas, be not afraid for you are with your pretty maid, nevermore to wonder far from this loving eye or heart.”

Grabbing him with an iron grip, she dragged Jack towards the dark unfriendly trees, full of shadows like something from a horror film. He tried shaking her loose but she was too strong, too determined. Soon they were entangled in a wilderness of pine and thick rhododendron, whose glossy black leaves sucked the last of the light from the evening sky.

Jack heard things lumbering about in the suffocating gloom of the woods. Branches cracking as large, heavy animals blundered into them. It made him think it was not a good idea to run away; even if he could. Once or twice, he thought he saw shapes, but never clearly enough to make out what they were. He could tell they were massive, like lions or horses, but too big for either. From every side they hooted and screeched, making him wonder if they were dinosaurs. When the forest gave way to a gravel drive, he was relieved the creatures stayed in the trees.

Ahead was the creepy old mansion he saw earlier. Once again, he thought of all those scary films he never should have watched. As they approached the house, the windows filled with light and music floated on the breeze. Reaching the front porch, the door swung open making the music louder, the lights brighter. Drifts of heady perfume left Jack heavy-eyed, yet giddy with recklessness. As though in a dream, he stepped inside. The front door slammed behind him and all hell broke loose.

* * *

Waking in a cold sweat, unable to remember his dream, Jack was convinced something terrible happened to Dan. Blearily peering at the bedside clock, he wondered if his parents were up. Seeing light under his bedroom door, he knew they were. Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted to be with them. Throwing back the duvet, he found his slippers in the dark and went downstairs.

Two police officers were in the lounge. He stood in the doorway, unsure what to do. His mother got up from the settee.

“Jack, it’s late you know.”

Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. Dad was crying too. He had never seen Dad cry before and it scared Jack. He reached for his mother, wanting to be hugged like a baby. When she did, he felt safe for the first time since waking.

“The police are here about Dan,” she explained.

At Dan’s name Dad groaned like a beast in pain. The noise frightened Jack. He had never seen his parents so miserable. He had to say something. He had to try. He opened his mouth. His tongue swelled; chest tightened. His ribs, like iron bands, crushed air from his lungs. His throat locked. He could not swallow. He dropped to the floor with a hiss; his mother shrieking at his bloated purple face.

The police sprang into action. It was as if after all the waiting, they were relieved to have something to do. Strong fingers pried open his mouth, pulling out his tongue. Coming off his radio the policeman said a doctor was on the way. Able to breath, Jack snatched a lungful of air. Unused to oxygen, his head swam.

Shocked and frightened, Jack sat silent on the settee between his parents. Mum holding one hand, Dad the other. The

policewoman sat in one armchair, the policeman in the other. Everyone was waiting again. But now they were waiting for the doctor, they seemed almost cheerful. At least they knew this waiting would end.

By the time the doctor left, Jack was nodding off.

“Come on old man,” said his father, carrying him upstairs.

Jack was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. There were no more dreams. Indeed, he did not think he slept until he saw daylight pouring through the curtains.

Chapter 2 Happy Thoughts

Jack's first thoughts were about Dan. He had to tell his parents. But how? He tried last night and look what happened. It was the beautiful lady, he was sure of it. She put a spell on him when she blew the kiss.

He stopped, embarrassed at getting carried away. This wasn't a fairy story. In the real world, people didn't put spells on you. But then, people didn't change from old to young. Or vanish with your brother! Now he was being stupid. There had to be an explanation. Despite his optimism, Jack felt uneasy.

"Dad, Mum, last night in the park," he rehearsed, feeling mouth go dry, chest tighten.

He began gulping, opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish on a carpet. Beads of sweat ran down his face. He rushed to the window for air. What Jack saw made him forget all about choking and telling. The street outside was filled with police cars, news vans and a crowd of people.

Downstairs, his parents were with a policewoman who was writing something down.

"What's happening?" he asked.

The adults looked up, guilty as children.

“Constable Morgan is helping with a statement,” his father replied, voice breaking.

Jack felt his eyes brim over. Dad came to hug him, saying it was alright. Jack knew he was lying. It would never be alright until Dan was home.

Feeling in the way, he wandered into the kitchen for breakfast. It was gone half past ten. His parents had kept him off school and taken the day off work. Although usually overjoyed to be off school, all Jack could think about was Dan. Giving up any thought of playing on the computer or reading, he ended up flicking through TV channels for something to do.

Jack was not really surprised bad things were happening. Bad things had been happening for ages. It started when Dad got a job about fifty miles away. While they were trying to sell the house, Dad had to drive all that way to work, which meant they hardly saw him. When Dan chose his exam options, he moved to a new school in the town where Dad worked; so Jack hardly ever saw him either. Jack was four years younger than Dan and his parents were determined to move before he went to high school, which is what happened. They moved at the start of the school holidays, meaning Jack had a miserable summer because Dan spent all his time with Alison, and Jack did not know anyone else.

By September, Jack was looking forward to his new school. But even that went wrong. He hadn't been there a month and he already hated it. Nobody spoke to him except Catherine, the girl he sat next to in class - a right know it all. Dan was no help either, because he was in the fourth form while Jack was a puny first year. Besides, Dan was only interested in Alison.

Switching channel, Jack saw his house on the news. He shouted for his parents, causing the adults to hurry in. A crowd of neighbours were behind the TV reporter. It was weird seeing people on television you saw every day. There were Mr and Mrs Taylor, he wondered if Dad would call them nosy old buggers like he usually did, and Mrs Schofield, and Mr Gibson from over the road. Mr Gibson always shouted when Jack went into his garden to get the football, and he bet old Gibson was sorry now. He also bet old Gibson was not too happy with that tramp sitting on his precious front garden wall.

The day passed in a blur. About five thirty, Jack's mum started dinner. Nobody was bothered about eating, so she got burgers from the freezer. Cooking cheered everyone up, even the policewoman. Dad peeled too many potatoes for chips. Constable Morgan buttered too much bread. While Jack's mother kept asking if anyone wanted a fried egg. By nine o'clock Jack could hardly keep his eyes open.

* * *

Jack thought he was dreaming, but was unsure because everything felt so real. It was a lovely summer's day and he was lazing under a tree.

“Let's play a game!”

Opening his eyes, Jack saw the person speaking was a faun. Sitting up in amazement, he spotted an old-fashioned lamppost towering over the crowd of shy woodland animals, nymphs, centaurs and others Jack could not name, but was sure Dan knew.

When he realised he was in Narnia and the faun was Mr Tumnus, Jack grinned like a loon. Dan was mad on Narnia when he was young, had all the books and films, and everything. Jack could not wait to tell him.

“Hard to believe, but once upon a time, before Lady Sylvie, it was always winter, always winter yet never Christmas.” The faun’s voice was gentle, face kindly with sparkling brown eyes and little forked beard. “Now it is only winter when it is Christmas, and never Christmas without snow.”

The game was hide-and-seek. Everywhere Jack hid, Mr Tumnus hid too. It was like he could not bear to be parted and it got right on Jack’s nerves. What did he think he’d do, he wondered irritably; run away? It was a bit of a shock to realise that was exactly what the faun thought. This was no dream. No wonder it felt real.

Without a word, Jack tore off through the woods. Wherever he stopped, there was Mr Tumnus, huffing and puffing. A fixed grin plastered firmly on his face, while he mopped his brow with a huge linen handkerchief. After running off a few more times, the faun’s patience wore thin. He stomped around, furiously accusing Jack of not being his friend. They were in the deepest part of the forest, where the trees grew so thick there was no way through. As Jack wondered about somehow dodging past the faun, something happened to glue him to the spot.

The faun changed. Muscles bulged, growing in every direction under skin, now hard as leather. His face twisted into a leering devil-mask. Eyes glowed hot like coals. Teeth lining his cruel smile were as long and sharp as his long, sharp horns. He stomped a cloven foot and pointed a jagged claw.

“Come here boy!”

With the demon’s eyes burning into him, Jack could not resist. Despite himself, feet shuffled forward, one step after another. Until, stumbling on a root, the spell shattered. Without looking up, Jack ran. Only to grind to a halt a few seconds later as grasping branches caught him fast.

Unable to move, he looked back in terror, expecting to see the devil after him. Instead, there was Mr Tumnus, back to normal, tottering to the edge of the woods where he stopped to dance nervously, like he needed to pee. All the while the faun wrung his hands and moaned piteously.

Catching Jack’s eye, he implored, “Please come back, for your sake as much as mine! She will not be happy, not happy at all!”

Jack ignored him.

“You will not like what she sends after you!”

Now Jack knew he was free, the woods were not so bad. He fought his way through with renewed vigour. When the forest thinned, and Jack stopped to get his breath, he heard things all around him. Whatever they were, they sounded big and dangerous. He was sure they were the same creatures he heard when the lady brought him here. Catching the flick of a tail in the trees, he wondered if they were lions. If they were, they were bigger than any lions he’d ever seen. To the left, something moved, definitely a lion. Just then, the wood came alive with noise, the swish of wings, a cacophony of hoots, and he knew they were coming.

Jack ran until sweat blinded him; until breath came sharp and painful. Still they came. Still he ran. Ran until lungs ached and legs

felt like lead weights. Ran with a stitch in his side so bad, he thought he would throw up and die.

Having drove Jack where they wanted, the creatures melted away. For a few agonising moments, he was not even sure they were gone. Gradually silence pierced his tortured breathing. Holding his breath, he strained to listen. Safe, he bent double, gagging and gasping. Feeling calmer, Jack saw he was besides a lake. From its dark green depths Dan's face rushed to greet him when he bent for a closer look. Astonished, Jack reached out, causing his brother to vanish in a pool of ripples.

As a golden glow shimmered over the water, Jack looked up to see the beautiful lady from the park floating towards him, wrapped in the light.

“Happy thoughts are the thoughts of the many, while sad thoughts are yours alone.” Her warm, musical voice was hung with a thousand tinkling silver bells. “Do not choose solitude, be one with the one. Think happy thoughts.”

On the lily pads a frog orchestra struck up a jolly tune as she burst into song... “Hap, hap, happy thoughts, happy thoughts, think about things you like to do. You've got to have your dreams. For if you never dream, then how you going to have your dreams come true?”

With fireworks blazing in the twilight sky, Jack sat bolt upright. He was in bed. It was morning.

* * *

The fading dream only made Jack more determined to tell his parents. He got out of bed feeling desperate.

“Dad, Mum...” he nervously muttered.

His heart hammered, throat tightened, tongue thickened.

If he couldn't speak, he'd write it down. He grabbed a pen. His hand shook so bad he could not write. He considered underlining words in a book. When that was beyond him, he threw down the pen in disgust.

The day passed much the same as yesterday; with Jack using television to stop thinking. At lunchtime, his parents and the policewoman brought sandwiches and watched a woman reporter interview a police inspector on the local news. When she finished, she started repeating everything the Inspector had just said. Jack stopped listening until the camera swung to Mr Gibson.

The nasty old man from over the road was praising Dan and Jack, saying there were very nice boys. Well that's a lie for a start, Jack thought indignantly. Old Gibson was a right moaner, always complaining about him playing football. When the camera followed the old man, Jack saw the tramp was still on his front garden wall. Mr Gibson walked straight past without a second look. It was so unlike him, Jack almost commented on his personality transplant, but Mum hushed him.

Perhaps Mr Gibson had turned over a new leaf, because in his eyes sitting on his wall was as bad as going into his garden to get your football. Or maybe he was being nice for the cameras. Jack bet as soon as they were off him, he gave the tramp a right talking to. Curious, he went to the window to see if he was right. Old Gibson was nowhere to be seen, but the tramp was still on the wall.

And he was staring straight at Jack's house. Unable to shake off a creepy feeling, Jack hastily ducked behind the curtains, like Mum when nosing.

The tramp was old, about twenty or thirty; a strange looking man with pasty white skin and thick eyebrows hooding glaring black eyes, dead as buttons. His clothes were like something from a jumble sale: a funny old jacket with piping down the front; stripy flared trousers; muddy heavy boots, and a woolly hat over filthy uncombed hair. He seemed more like a hippy than a tramp. But regardless, he was certainly not somebody old Gibson would want hanging about his property.

Chapter 3 An Inspector Calls

Jack answered the door to the police inspector from the news. He felt a bit overawed meeting someone off TV - even if it was only a policeman and not a real actor. He stood gawking as the policewoman called the inspector in. A few minutes later, it was Jack's turn to be called in.

No need for concern, Jack," the inspector assured him. "Routine police work. We need to examine every possibility."

Jack thought the police inspector talked to him as if he was a kid. He wished he could say something to wipe that smug look off his face. But even thinking about it made him want to choke.

"I don't know nothing," he mumbled.

Dismissing him, the inspector turned to his parents, "This morning, Alison said something to make me think Dan ran away."

Jack saw his parent's guilty looks. Even before they spoke, he knew the police inspector had heard about Mum and Dad from Alison.

"Inspector, could we talk to Jack?" Mum pleaded.

"Don't bother, I know!" snapped Jack.

"How?" Dad sounded shocked.

“I worked it out. I’m not stupid!” Jack realised he sounded harsh. But it was too late. It needed saying. “It was the way you stopped talking when I came into the room, and Mum crying!”

Jack’s mum looked as if she would start crying again.

“So you know your mother is ill,” the inspector said.

The words hurt like a punch to the face. Jack thought they were arguing. Not this! His eyes stung making him blink back tears as he forced himself to be brave. He had to, for Mum.

“I had some tests before we moved...” Mum stumbled over the words. “At first I thought it was nothing but when the results came... We didn’t know what to say. You had so much on your plate.”

Dad reached for his wife’s hand. “In a couple of weeks, your mum’s in hospital for an operation. I’m sorry we didn’t tell you but it isn’t because we don’t love you.”

“Didn’t Dan mention it?” the inspector enquired.

Jack numbly shook off the question for one of his own. “How long did Dan know?”

“He found a letter from the hospital after the move. I made him promise not to say anything because I wanted to tell you... but with Dan so upset, I didn’t know how.”

Suddenly everything fell into place: Dan’s moods; why he avoided him to spend time with Alison. Jack felt really stupid. He had to say what happened.

The inspector spoke first. “It is likely Dan ran away. Around a hundred thousand children do every year.”

Jack’s mother looked horrified.

“Although it is a very alarming number Mrs Hughes, the vast majority are soon found safe and sound.” He smiled reassuringly.

Jack felt defeated. How could he argue with statistics? Yet, he had to try. “Dan didn’t run away!”

“What makes you say that Jack?” the inspector demanded, holding Jack’s gaze, willing him to confess.

Jack’s heart hammered. Throat went dry. He dropped his eyes, shook his head. “Just wouldn’t, that’s all!”

The inspector turned to Jack’s parents, “Is there anywhere Dan might go?”

They thought for a moment.

“About three years ago we met a Scottish family on holiday.” Mum answered. “Dan was friendly with their son, Jonathan. They used to keep in touch with text and email. I don’t know if they still do.”

Jack’s father remembered. “Didn’t they manage a holiday village on Skye, or was it somewhere in the Highlands?”

“Does Dan have a computer?”

“His laptop’s in his room, but he had his new smart-phone with him. He got it for his birthday a couple of months ago.”

“Do you mind if Constable Morgan takes a look?”

“Already done Sir,” she responded smartly. “I also requisitioned his phone call records and browsing, as the account is in Mrs Hughes’ name. Shall I expand the CCTV search for railways and coach stations in Scotland?”

“Excellent!” the inspector sounded pleased.

Jack was desperate. “Wouldn’t Dan need money?”

“Youngsters are very resourceful,” he answered with confidence. “Dan could sneak on a train, happens every day. Jonathan’s parents probably don’t even know he’s there. There would be lots of empty chalets this time of year. The boys could have come up with this between them.”

“What about Alison?” Jack persisted. “Dan would tell her!”

“Maybe she’s sworn to secrecy. Perhaps they argued and she feels responsible.” The inspector smiled in a peculiar sort of adult way at Jack’s simplicity. “By and large, the vast majority of young men run away because of family problems. Before the month is out, they come home, even though some take a bit longer.”

“Not Dan,” Jack protested.

“Don’t Jack!” Mum exclaimed. “I couldn’t bear it if anything has happened. I’m sure the Inspector’s right. He’s fine and will be home in his own time.”

“Exactly!” the inspector assured her. “But to put your mind at rest, we will continue our inquiries. Our colleagues north of the border may turn up something pretty damn quick!” He gave Jack such a smug smile, Jack wanted to hit him.

Outside the house, the inspector spoke to the reporters. Watching from the window, Jack could almost hear his smarmy voice saying Dan ran away. Within the hour, most of them had left. Even the tramp was gone from old Gibson’s wall.

With the street empty, things looked normal. Jack’s parents relaxed and the policewoman left. It was as if the thought of Dan running away was a relief to everyone. Angry and frustrated Jack hid in his room, not coming down until dinner.

After dinner, Alison came with her parents. Jack was surprised how eager they were to believe Dan ran away, especially Alison. It really annoyed him how she looked as if she was trying very hard to be brave. She so obviously relished attention that he wondered if she cared about Dan at all.

Unable to bear her a moment longer, Jack went upstairs. Sulking in his room, he wondered what they'd say if he blurted out the truth. They wouldn't believe him of course. Everyone would wonder why he was telling such dreadful lies. Then Mum would start crying. He felt sick as he realised the lady from the park didn't need to put a spell on him to keep him quiet. Upsetting Mum was more than enough.

Feeling if Alison started, something might slip out, Jack shouted goodbye from his room. Watching from the window, he saw the tramp on old Gibson's wall staring at her. As Alison's dad got into the car, the tramp shimmered like the lady in the park. A second later, he was halfway across the road. Knowing if the tramp touched Alison she would vanish under their noses, just like Dan, Jack sprang to life. Banging hell out of his window only caused Alison's mother to look up and wave.

Alison's dad switched on the car headlights and in the sudden glare, the tramp vanished. Jack could not believe it. He looked up and down the road, sure it was a trick of the light, but the tramp was gone. Shaken, he ran downstairs.

"At last! They're almost leaving!" snapped Dad.

"Sorry," Jack replied brushing past to look outside. The tramp was definitely gone.

“Are you going to wave or what?” scowled his father through a fixed smile, cheerfully waving at the car.

As they drove off, Jack asked if Dad had seen anyone on Mr Gibson’s wall.

“Can’t say I did, why?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he answered, wondering if the man was actually there, or if it was only his imagination.

* * *

Jack woke unable to remember where he was or how he got there. A pale young woman was in the room. A stray sunbeam caught in her auburn hair formed a halo around a face as beautiful as an angel. Her dress, the colour of summer cornfields, shimmered as she moved. Seeing him watching she smiled sweetly and gesturing to a bowl on the table, gently murmured, “Food, Thomas.”

The only light came from a handful of thin rays pouring through moth holes in the heavy curtains. It was not much, but enough to see he was lying on an old iron framed bed, with blankets but no sheets. He was dressed in the remains of his school uniform; trousers and shirt, without tie, belt or shoes.

“Where am I?” he demanded.

Hearing his brother’s voice come out of his mouth, Jack suddenly realised he saw what Dan saw.

Ignoring him, the woman opened the curtains in a swirl of dust. In the sunburst danced tiny golden people with butterfly

wings. Jack shook his head in disbelief. When he looked again, the woman and the dust fairies were gone.

He got off the bed, staring at the bowl, feeling ravenously hungry and thinking it smelled delicious. Before his eyes, the thin, grey porridge transformed into a burger with fries. Mouth-watering smells of meat, onions and ketchup filled his nose. Smacking his lips to the taste of bananas and custard, he thought it the most delicious meal he had ever eaten. Looking at the empty bowl, he wondered where the horrible gruel had gone. Suddenly exhausted, he threw himself back on the bed.

* * *

Jack woke confused, looking uncertainly around his room. Unable to understand how he could see in the dark, he realised the bedside lamp was on. Reaching to turn it off, something moved in the corner of his eye. His head shot round but there was nothing there. Thinking it was imagination, he pressed the light switch. As the room was plunged into blackness, it moved again.

Lying in the dark, ears straining for the tiniest sound, Jack flinched at every creak.

“There’s nothing there!” he cried, speaking aloud for courage and turned the lamp back on.

The tramp from old Gibson’s front garden wall was on his desk, staring at him with mad, dead eyes. Jack was relieved to see him. It was a nightmare. Spooked by the tramp, he was dreaming about him. It felt good to be having a normal nightmare after all the other weird dreams.

The tramp slipped off the desk. Jack heard a creak and then the muffled thump of boots on the carpet. It did not seem so much like a dream now, but it was still a nightmare. The tramp walked over with Jack hearing every sound, every breath. Wanting to scream, unable to move; all he could do was lie helpless as the tramp bent over him to whisper...

“Jack, oh Jack, you were there. Now you’re back. Does she miss me, did she say, in her tower far away?”

Reaching for the lamp, the man flicked off the light, leaving Jack staring wide-eyed into the dark. His cold hand brushed Jack’s forehead as his strong fingers closed his eyes.

“Goodnight sweet prince and flights of angels sing thee to thy dream, and when you see her once again, tell her who you’ve seen.”

The man’s fingers left his face.

All was quiet.

Lying in the silence, with eyes squeezed tight, Jack wondered what the tramp would do next. He started counting as if he could work out when it was safe to look. Once or twice, he lost count and had to start over. Then he stopped counting altogether.

When he opened his eyes, daylight was streaming through a chink in the curtains. Immediately he looked at the bedside lamp. He was sure it was on last night. But now it was off. Probably just Mum he reasoned, wondering why he did not believe it.

Chapter 4 Dream a Little Dream of Me

Coming downstairs, Jack thought he saw someone through the frosted glass of the front door, and wondered if it was the paperboy. If it was, he went away without leaving the Sunday papers. With no police or crowd outside, the house seemed almost cheerful. Mum suggested going to church, then changed her mind when she realised she would have to face everyone. Jack was glad she did, he could not be bothered going anywhere.

“It doesn’t feel like Sunday,” Mum remarked.

Jack had to agree. Yesterday wasn’t like Saturday either. No shopping, no chores, no settling down to watch a film with pop and crisps. He missed Dan.

After breakfast, Constable Morgan called. Over a cup of tea, she asked Mum about the hospital. His parents had explained what was wrong and Jack did not want to hear it again. Dad must have thought the same because he told Jack to watch telly. Halfway to the lounge, his mobile phone rang in his bedroom.

Jack had Dan’s old phone, passed down when Dan got a new one for his birthday. Running upstairs, he picked up the phone, shouting excitedly: “Dad, it’s Dan!” He pressed the answer button hearing only static sounding like far away bells.

His parents burst into the room, the policewoman following. Jack handed the phone to his father.

“Dan! Son?” His father took the phone from his ear, saying in a puzzled voice: “It’s dead.”

“Poor reception area,” commented the policewoman knowledgeably. Taking the phone, she pressed a few buttons. “No signal. Probably somewhere remote like you thought. It’s easy to triangulate the call, leave it with me.”

Despite his parents’ hopeful looks, Jack doubted it was Dan. The phone had been on his desk all weekend, and Jack was sure it wasn’t switched on.

* * *

Lying on a bed covered with a thin blanket, he stared through the high windows at the full moon, watching tiny fairies play in the moonbeams. Hearing the key catch as the door unlocked, he saw his mother enter. At least he hoped it was Mum but was scared it was a trick; like everything was a trick.

Closing his eyes, he listened to her footsteps on the bare cold floor. Gently, he started snoring, hoping she would think him asleep and leave him alone. The thin mattress sagged when she sat next to him. He smelled his mother’s perfume, the one she wore for best.

“I know you’re not asleep love!”

Cautiously, he opened his eyes. “Mum?”

“I’m here.”

“Are you better?”

“Yes.” She stroked his forehead.

He sat up, throwing himself into her arms, “How did you find me?”

Even as he spoke, he knew this was not his mother. She would never find him here.

“My lovely Dan.”

Jack was shocked hearing her call him Dan. This was no dream. He saw what Dan saw, locked in his prison hundreds of miles away.

Whoever was pretending to be his mother sensed his doubt. Her voice slipped to no more than a pale imitation. “I am what you remember. If you see me, hear me, feel my touch. What is the difference?”

“It is different! Just is that’s all!” Jack heard Dan shout.

“I can give her back,” she insisted. “She will never change; never grow old or ill, never busy. Everything the same, always.”

“It’s not the same,” Dan snapped.

You tell her Dan, thought Jack.

“It is if you want,” she answered, sadness weighing down her voice. Hugging him fiercely, she stroked his hair. He felt a terrible heat burning in her. She kissed him on the mouth, hot dry lips tasting of chocolate. Disgusted, he pulled away.

“You’re not my mum!”

She was gone. Only her silver voice remained, hung with echoes of mournful bells, as she complained, “I only want to love and be loved in return.”

When Jack opened his eyes, he was in his bedroom, soaked in sweat. He tried clinging to the memory of the dream, hoping to make sense of it. It slipped away, insubstantial as smoke.

His mobile phone rang. The phone he so carefully turned off. Terrified his parents would hear, desperate to protect them from whatever was on the other end, he flew out of bed. Seeing it was Dan, wondering if it was really Dan, he hesitantly answered. There was only static, and beneath, the far-away tinkling of bells that sent shivers down his spine.

“Dan?” he pleaded, “Is it you?”

A man’s voice whispered from behind, “Oh my sweet, here I be, all I ask... remember me.”

Jack spun round. No one was there.

At that moment, his father flinging open the bedroom door, cried out... “Dan?”

Jack nodded. The phone went dead.

* * *

When Jack came down for breakfast, he thought he heard the postman, but there were no letters on the mat. He wondered if it was Dad, even though he could not see him outside.

“What’s Dad doing?” he asked, walking into the kitchen.

“He’s at work.” Mum hesitated. “Jack love, it’s time things got back to normal. Your dad’s at work and I’m training the relief manager tomorrow.” She waited for him to say something. When

he did not, she continued, “You could do with going back to school.”

“It’s only been a few days,” Jack protested, shocked by the speed of everything.

“I know, but Dan’s trying to ring so he must be alright. The sooner things are back to normal, the better.”

His mum sounded like she was in no mood to argue, so he meekly helped himself to cereal.

That afternoon Mum asked if he wanted to come shopping. Now it was his last day of freedom, time suddenly seemed precious. Not wanting to waste it, he used unfinished homework as an excuse. When Mum left, he went upstairs and got out his books. Unable to concentrate spent his time wondering about Dan and wishing he could remember his dreams.

Hearing the letterbox rattle for the third time in two days, Jack wondered if someone was playing about and popped onto the landing to take a look. The fanlight above the front door gave him a perfect view of the street. He saw the tramp walk across the road to his usual perch on Mr Gibson’s garden wall. As there were no letters on the hall mat, Jack guessed the man had been creeping around. He thought he should tell Mum when she got home.

To Jack’s delight, no sooner was the tramp settled on Gibson’s wall, than who should come out but old Gibson taking his noisy little terrier, Benjamin, for a walk. He’s in for it now, Jack thought with glee.

As the old man headed down the path, Jack wondered how he failed to notice the trespasser on the wall. Benjamin saw him. As soon as he could, the little dog furiously charged the strange man,

yapping excitedly. And the tramp did not like it at all. Seemingly oblivious, Mr Gibson pulled the dog to heel, shouting for barking at nothing. Then, to Jack's amazement, old Gibson started to walk away pulling Benjamin behind him as the plucky little terrier continued growling.

While Jack watched Mr Gibson struggle with Benjamin, his mother's car pulled into the drive. He hurried downstairs to help with the shopping and tell her about the tramp.

"Did you hear that commotion? Honestly! I never thought that little dog was capable of such a racket. I heard him in the car. What set him off?"

"There's a tramp on Mr Gibson's wall," Jack replied.

"I bet Mr Gibson gave him short shift. We know how particular he is about his property. What did he say, or did the fearless Benjamin see him off?"

"Didn't you see? You drove right past!"

Mum shook her head.

"He's still on the wall!" Jack protested.

Ignoring him, she asked for a hand with the shopping. When Jack went to the car for more bags, the tramp had gone.

Chapter 5 The Man Who Wasn't There

Jack's mother gave him a kiss before asking if he was sure about not wanting a lift.

Jack shook his head. "I'm fine Mum."

She hugged him, seeking reassurance. He hugged back, reassuring her.

"You are brave Jack."

Jack smiled with embarrassment. He did not feel brave. He hated school and never wanted to go. Why should today be different?

Opening the front door, he almost changed his mind about Mum's offer. But with the coast clear, felt a bit awkward changing his mind; especially after she called him brave. Turning to wave goodbye, he thought he saw the tramp reflected in the front room window. He spun around, but there was no one on Mr Gibson's wall. And when he looked back, there was no reflection in the glass either. It must have been the thought of school making him jumpy.

Jack felt haunted every step of the way. Haunted was a good word. He kept thinking he saw some dark reflection in the windows he passed; almost like a shadow. When he looked properly, there was never anyone there.

At the school gates, everyone stopped talking when they saw him. Realising what they had done, they all started talking at once. Jack knew it was only because of Dan, but he still turned red. Without looking left or right, he hurried through the gate; across the playground; down the corridor, and up the stairs into class. With every step, he felt eyes burning into his back. Sitting at his desk, he waited for his classmates to pour in; the teacher to arrive, and the day to begin. The sooner it started, the sooner it would be over.

Moments later Catherine arrived, early as usual. Although Catherine sat next to Jack, he did not really like her. Nobody did. She was clever and wanted everyone to know it, often arguing for the sake of it, and not caring who she upset. Reaching her desk, she told him she was sorry to hear about Dan.

Somehow, Catherine, who always said the wrong thing, said the right thing, and exactly how he needed to hear it. In contrast to the rest of the class who either mumbled embarrassed greetings or ignored him like they usually did. The teacher was no better, making a lame speech that left Jack cringing.

* * *

At morning break, Jack hid in the classroom, away from the curious looks in playground. While Catherine left him alone, she did ask if he wanted anything from the tuck shop, which Jack thought was kind.

When Jack hid in class, he did not think of the consequences. Ten minutes into the lesson, he had to pee. When it got painful, he stuck up his hand to ask teacher. To be honest, he was expecting a

bit of a performance. Generally the teachers hated anyone getting out of lessons. Surprisingly, she simply nodded.

Finishing the biz, Jack got the creepy feeling someone was watching him. A shiver went down his back as the little hairs on his neck stood on end. Warily, he walked up the row of toilets to check if they were empty. While some of the cubicle doors were wide open, a few were almost shut meaning someone could be hiding.

At the first closed door, he got on his knees to look under, half expecting to see a pair of scruffy boots. There was nothing there. From where he was, he could see under all the stalls. There was no one in any of them. He heaved a sigh of relief.

Of course, if he was hiding, he would stand on the seat, because the first thing anyone would do is get on their knees to look. Gingerly, he pushed the door - ready to bolt if anyone pushed back. It only moved a fraction, so he pushed a bit more, causing it to swing open. The cubicle was empty. He moved onto the next and the next, until he went down the whole row of toilets. There was no one in any of them.

Still jittery, Jack went to wash his hands. In the mirror he saw something move. He had a horrible feeling this had happened before - something moving in the corner of his eye - but he could not remember. When it moved again, he spun round to see a cubicle door swing shut.

Jack froze, poised ready to run; waiting for something, anything, to spark flight. Nothing happened. Telling himself it was probably a loose hinge, he went to make sure. As he reached out to push the door open, there was a noise. Jack had no idea what it was, but it was enough to make him charge out of the toilets.

Outside, he felt a bit stupid. Although the noise was probably the pipes, he could not shake the spooky feeling. The empty corridor made his footsteps sound like someone was following. The echoes got louder as he got more nervous. Somewhere a door slammed. It could have been anywhere, but to Jack it was the door to the boy's toilets.

He wanted to run. The teachers didn't like running in the corridors. So he walked fast, and tried walking faster. His footsteps sounded louder with every step. He kept repeating behind every door was a class with a teacher. Nothing could happen.

With heart in mouth, he reached the corridor. Around the corner and up the stairs was his classroom. By the main entrance was the Headmistress' Office, and no one got past her. Jack was walking so fast he was almost running. His speed left him skidding to a halt when he saw who was waiting on the stairs.

The tramp shimmered, exactly as he had with Alison; appearing a quarter of the way down the staircase. Terrified, Jack froze. The tramp was coming for him. The same way he came for Alison. The same as the lady in the park came for Dan. Staring at Jack with black, hungry eyes, the tramp shimmered again; reappearing half way down.

Jack screamed.

A teacher stood on the top corridor.

The headmistress came out of her office.

“Jack?”

Now he was for it!

“He's going to take me.” Jack squealed, without taking his eyes off the tramp.

“Mr Robinson?” she exclaimed.

At the top of the stairs, Mr Robinson sounded puzzled,
“Me?”

“Not you!” Jack angrily pointed to the tramp in front of Mr Robinson. “Him!”

“What you are talking about?” Mr Robinson’s voice was deliberately calm. Slowly he started to descend.

“Can’t you see him?” Jack squealed desperately.

Of course they can’t, said a voice in his head. Alison’s family couldn’t see him. Old Gibson couldn’t see him - not even when Benjamin was going mad. Nor did Mum.

Mr Robinson was behind the tramp. Jack wondered what would happen when they bumped into each other. At the last minute, the tramp vanished, melting away like so much mist.

“Now, what’s this all about?” Mr Robinson asked him.

“He was on the stairs!”

“Jack, nobody is on the stairs.”

“Not now, there isn’t!” he cried out, breaking down.

* * *

The headmistress kept Jack in her office while phoning his mother.

“You look better,” she commented on returning. “You were white as a sheet.”

Jack nodded, still unable to believe no one saw the tramp. He could be snatched like Dan and nobody would be any the wiser; even if it was from under their noses.

The headmistress put her hand on his forehead.

“He feels clammy Pat,” she informed her secretary. “I might suggest his mother calls the doctor.”

She turned to Jack, “You poor thing you have been through so much. We were very fond of Dan.”

“What do you mean were?” He reacted angrily. “He’s not dead! She just took him, that’s all!”

He stopped; shocked. He’d said it, just blurted it out.

“What do you mean?” the headmistress asked warily. “Who took him Jack?”

“The beautiful lady,” Jack mumbled.

As the whole story tumbled out, the two women sat with disbelief written all over their faces. When he finished, the headmistress was solicitous. “Well, you have been through a lot!”

Pat, the secretary, clucked, looking ever so sympathetic.

After a while, the headmistress sent Jack to the school nurse. You have done it now he thought, trudging the lonely corridor. He was sure the headmistress would tell his mother. She did not; she only said Dan’s disappearance had upset Jack. Convinced she had, he hid in his bedroom.

Hearing the doorbell, then his father’s booming voice drowning out the television, Jack thought Dad was talking to a teacher come to see how he was. A few minutes later, Dad came in carrying his schoolbooks.

“Quite a charming young lady Jack, I wonder why you never brought her home?”

For a mad moment, Jack thought he was talking about his teacher. His father must have caught the look on his face because he grinned.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about her, Jack. I was your age too you know. Still, it would do no harm to have her over once in a while. After all Alison was always here.”

“Who do you mean?” Jack was puzzled.

“There’s no need to be shy about Catherine. She seems nice; very proper.”

“Catherine’s not my girlfriend!”

“That’s what she said. Still, she brought your homework.” Dad placed the books on his desk. “Actions speak louder than words!”

Jack thought Dad seemed chuffed. Probably because a girlfriend was something normal in everything that was happening. But Catherine! Not blinking likely!

Homework was almost a relief. Jack was lost in it when his mobile rang. He ran to his school bag, terrified his parents would hear. Grabbing the phone, he saw Dan’s name on the screen. As soon as he touched it, the phone stopped ringing. Dan’s name bled away. Desperately Jack pressed the answer button. There was nothing, not even far away bells. Suddenly, he was afraid Dan was lost.

Unsettled, he spent the rest of the evening staring at the television, wondering if he would dream about Dan. If he dreamt about him, it would mean he was all right.

Although Jack slept restlessly that night, he did not dream.

Chapter 6 Yesterday upon the stair

Jack woke late coming downstairs to find his mother in the kitchen.

“Your dad went into your room last night,” she told him. “You were burning hot and talking in your sleep. It must have been a nightmare.”

“I don’t remember,” Jack replied, honestly wishing he did. Hoping it was about Dan.

“We decided to keep you off school, but I’m in work in an hour. Will you be alright? You’ve got my number if you need me.”

“I’ll be fine Mum.”

Before Jack’s mother left, she gave him strict instructions to finish his homework. Strangely, although Jack would usually rather do anything than homework, it stopped him fretting.

Half an hour later, he heard the letterbox rattle and knew it was the tramp. Perhaps he was trying to snatch him. Hunting for his mobile, Jack realised it was in the kitchen, where he dumped his school bag.

As the letterbox was quiet, he peered out of his bedroom window to see if the tramp was back on old Gibson’s wall. When there was no sign of him, he panicked. If the tramp was not there, he could be creeping around the house, trying doors and windows.

He tried to remember if Mum had locked up, but why would she with him in the house?

Jack froze at his bedroom door, convinced the tramp was on the other side. It felt like a lifetime but in reality, only seconds had passed since he heard the letterbox. When the letterbox went again, it was like a green light. Flinging open the door, he charged into the landing, down the stairs and straight through the hall into the kitchen. The backdoor was locked, but he bolted it anyway.

Picking up his school bag, Jack pulled out his mobile. Now he had the phone, he was unsure what to do. Who should he ring: Mum; the police? What could he say? Someone's playing tricks with the front door. Oh right, they would send a cop car round for that!

He stuck his head into the hall to see if the tramp was at the door. Because the front door had glass panels, he could see there was no one on the other side, so he went to the kitchen window to check if he was in the back garden.

Thinking the tramp had got fed up and was back on old Gibson's wall, Jack crept down the hall to the front door. Getting a fingernail under each side of the letterbox, he pulled it up to look out. Staring back were the tramp's black, dead eyes.

Screaming, Jack fell back; letting the letterbox slam shut. He lay on the carpet, shaking as the flap slowly opened. Feeling his mobile in his pocket was all the courage he needed. He would call the police!

He stood up pressing ninety-nine without even looking. All he had to do was press one more nine and tell the police who he

was. His brother went missing a week ago. They would be round like a shot. Of course, they would!

Holding up his mobile to show the tramp peering through the letterbox, he cried out, "I'm going to phone the police I am! They're going to lock you up and throw away the key."

The letterbox slammed shut. Jack heard the man scramble down the path. Dashing to the front door, he jerked it open to see the tramp running out of the gate. Starting after him, waving his mobile, Jack shouted at the top of his voice, "Leave me alone or I'll put the law on you!"

Continuing with his homework, he got up every so often to look out of the window. When the tramp never came back, he felt tremendous. By lunchtime, when Mum came home, he was ready to face everyone in school; sort of get it over with.

Mum looked pleased and surprised. But she could not be more pleased or surprised than Jack, who could not stop grinning like a loon.

* * *

Jack's courage almost failed when Mum dropped him at the school gate. Everyone was staring because of yesterday. He realised he did not care. If he could face the tramp, he could face anyone. There was one scary moment halfway across the playground when he heard someone coming after him. He was just about to run when a girl's voice shouted his name. It was Catherine.

"Thanks for bringing my homework!"

“It seemed the right thing to do.”

“Well, it was nice, especially after what happened.” Jack stopped. He had the sudden urge to tell her everything. Even though the last thing he needed was anyone thinking he was weirder than they already thought he was.

“I heard about yesterday,” Catherine said psychically. “You know what this place is like!” She sounded apologetic.

Jack did not know what to say. After a few drawn out moments of embarrassing silence, inspiration struck. “Sorry about my dad.”

“Not to worry. I am sure parents do not mean to embarrass us, but why do they treat us like children?”

“Probably because it’s harder on them watching us grow up than it is on us being treated like we’re six.” He stopped; feeling awkward and wondering how Catherine would take it. Generally you only talked about pop music, football or TV in school.

When Catherine looked uncomfortable, he wished he’d kept his big mouth shut. Eventually she spoke.

“There is no need to be nice to me Jack. I know what people say, and I am used to being alone. Do not feel obliged to humour me or be kind.”

Jack felt his face burn. “I wasn’t humouring you. I was saying that’s all!”

Catherine shrugged in an off-hand way. “Generally people only talk about rubbish like sport or television or pop music.”

Although she only repeated what he thought, Jack did not like her tone. “I think you would be surprised what people talk about if you gave them a chance.”

Catherine was sharp. “Oh pardon me Mister Popularity! I forgot what an expert you are at making friends and influencing people!”

“No need to get nasty, I was only saying. Anyway if you weren’t so quick, people might like you more!” Feeling he said too much, Jack stumbled to a halt.

“Go on,” Catherine snapped. “You cannot say anything worse than I have already heard!”

Jack shook his head. “Look, I would like to have friends here, but I don’t know where to start. Everyone has their mates and after yesterday, they all think I’m a freak.”

“It will blow over,” Catherine smoothly assured him.

“Why? It didn’t for you!” When he realised what he said, Jack wished he could have bitten off his tongue.

To his surprise Catherine laughed. “No, and it will not for you either. I was only trying to make you feel better.”

He broke into a grin, partly with embarrassment, partly with relief. “I don’t know why I’m laughing. It’s not going to get any better here, is it?”

“Déjà vu,” Catherine retaliated smugly. “You look at me, and see the future staring right back.”

“If that’s supposed to make me feel better, it isn’t working! Anyway, what’s day-jar-voov mean?”

“It is French for something seen before,” she informed him through giggles. “Like going somewhere for the first time, but thinking you have already been there.”

Despite the fact Jack was laughing, an icy shiver ran down his spine. This *déjà vu* thing described exactly what he felt when the tramp was around.

* * *

After school, Jack walked home with Catherine, even though he had money for the bus.

“Which way are you going?” she asked.

“Smithdown Road,” he replied.

“That is miles out of the way. The park is much quicker!”

Jack wanted to avoid the park, but unable to say why, started walking that way with her.

“How come you knew where I lived?” he asked.

“When I told the teachers I would bring your homework they gave me your address.”

“What about you?”

Catherine lived in a big posh house beside the park with her mum. Her parents were divorced and her three sisters were much older. One was at University doing a master’s degree. Another was training to be a doctor, while the eldest was a lawyer in London.

Not wanting to say much because he did not want to speak about Dan, Jack let Catherine chatter on. As she spoke about so

many interesting things, he soon realised he did not have to talk about himself at all. It was as though every single thing she ever wanted to say was flooding out. She had an opinion on everything. Sensible ones too; ones she thought about. And she was actually quite funny. In fact, she seemed an entirely different person to the one he knew from school.

Reaching the park Jack began to feel nervous in case the beautiful lady appeared, or worse, the tramp. Sensing his discomfort, Catherine was sympathetic, “Jack, we do not have to go this way.”

“What do you mean?” he asked defensively.

“Nobody would go all the way to Smithdown Road unless there was good reason. Sometimes they call me names. Once or twice they chased me. I know where they hang around now and avoid them.”

“It’s nothing like that!” he protested.

When she looked unconvinced, Jack kept his mouth shut. Not feeling up to persuading her otherwise, he let her take him through the park. It was not long before he heard some shouting, and wondering what it was all about looked back before she could stop him. Recognising a gang of older lads from school, he realised they were probably the very ones Catherine meant.

“It’s that weird kid an’ look who’s with him. What a pair!” he heard one loudly say, and felt his face burn red.

“Hey, come here!” shouted one of the gang.

“Ignore them,” Catherine advised.

She took Jack's arm and he allowed himself to be pulled away. They got no more than five meters before they heard the older boys roar.

"They're chasing us!"

She grabbed his hand. "Run!"

As they ran, Jack looked around in despair. They were in the middle of the park, there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. They were heading straight for the hill where Dan vanished. It loomed closer with each step, rising like a mountain. The next thing Jack knew he went sprawling, almost pulling Catherine with him.

Briefly, Jack wondered if he tripped by accident or deliberately; anything to avoid the hill. He didn't dwell in it. Having almost knocked himself senseless, it was all he could do not to black out. She helped him to his feet as the gang closed in.

"Go on!" he rasped. It's me they want!"

Catherine was not going anywhere. Bravely she stood by Jack as the bullies descended. He felt such a coward. If anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

"Oh I'm mad now!" wheezed a big lad, dragging on a cigarette. "So what was it ya saw yesterday then? Yer brother's ghost? What was that rhyme, Mickey?"

Mickey smirked. He was smaller than the others, and younger. "Yesterday upon the stairs I met the man who wasn't there."

"Is that what ya saw then? The man who wasn't there?" the big lad persisted, mocking Jack.

Jack, trying to get his breath back, didn't say anything; mainly because he couldn't.

"Are ya deaf?" the big lad demanded.

"He wasn't there again today, I wish that man would go away," sneered Mickey.

"Shut yer hole Mickey!" barked another big lad, taking the cigarette off the first.

Mickey looked crushed. To make himself feel better, he scowled at Jack, "I could give you a right good pasting."

"I always believe people who bully are inadequate," Catherine stated bluntly.

She sounded calm and very adult, but under the circumstances, Jack did not think it was the best thing to say. If the gang were messing before, he reckoned they would really mean it now.

The leader jerked his cigarette at Catherine. "Piss off, you!"

Mickey tried to push her away, but Catherine was immovable. She knew she was right and there were principles at stake.

"You talk big," she began.

"Catherine, go home," Jack gasped, between clenched teeth. "You're making it worse."

"Too bloody right she is. She wants to get out of here before I make her," jeered Mickey.

"You and whose army?"

"She's got a right mouth on 'er! Is she yer girlfriend?" the leader asked.

“No, I don’t even like her! She sits next to me in class. Go on you, get lost,” Jack yelled desperately.

Things were turning nasty and would get a lot nastier before it was over. All Jack wanted was to get Catherine out of the way and hope they did not knock him around too bad. He racked his brains for something funny to say, knowing it is harder to hit someone who makes you laugh.

Nothing came.

Chapter 7 Ken

“Hi Jack,” came a voice.

Jack could not believe his ears. Someone sounded friendly.

“Hi Robbie,” the voice spoke again. “See you met my mate Jack.”

The gang leader did not say anything, but Jack saw he was uncomfortable. Gesturing to his cronies, he snapped, “Let’s go! I’m not wasting no more time on these monkeys!”

As the others shuffled off, the short lippy one called Mickey, muttered ‘Fatty’ at the new boy.

Robbie punched him in the back, “I said we’re going!”

“Alright! Alright!” moaned Mickey miserably.

Robbie and the older boys dropped their heads as they passed the stranger. While Mickey, mouth shut for once, glared at him.

Jack was amazed at the change in the gang, especially as the stranger had not done anything. Even, Catherine was impressed because for once, she said nothing either.

With the bullies sloping off, Jack got a chance to see the lad who saved him. He was tall as Jack but chubby with a mop of black hair. Jack thought he was in the year above, but whatever, he was certainly no match for Robbie’s gang of fourth form thugs.

From a safe distance, Robbie let Mickey yell: “You big fat get!”

“That is typical of that sort of boy,” Catherine haughtily declared.

Jack stared in disbelief, thinking it did not take her long to regain confidence; if she ever lost it.

“I don’t know what you did but that was amazing,” he told the stranger.

The lad shrugged, “It’s nothing.”

But it was something. It was marvellous. It had saved Jack from a good thumping, losing his bus fare and probably his mobile into the bargain. He wanted to show how grateful he was. “We’re lucky you came along.”

“I’ve run into Robbie Jenkins’ gang before. All except the little one, he’s new. They generally leave me alone.”

“You must do something, Robbie Jenkins terrorises everyone, but he is positively wary of you,” Catherine told the boy.

“It’s nothing. Anyone can do it.” The lad brightened. “But I am good. Mum calls me a natural.”

Catherine was curious. “A natural what?”

“I shouldn’t say, but if we’re going to be friends... I think we’re going to be friends, don’t you? But it puts people off.”

“When they find out what?” Catherine sounded impatient.

Jack jumped in before she stuck her foot in it. “Yeah, I think we’ll be friends!” He stuck out his hand for the boy to shake.

He shook it heartily. “I’m Kenneth. Named after Kunnetha, some old British King, but you can call me Ken.”

“Kunnetha?” Jack repeated, puzzled.

“Mum called me it.”

“You are lucky she did not call you Ethel after Ethelred the Unready,” Catherine piped up smartly.

Jack rushed into the awkward silence. “Jack; named after no one.” Adding unnecessarily, “Call me Jack.”

“Catherine after my grandmother, she was French. Actually she was a Breton from Brittany. So I suppose that makes me an ancient Britain too!”

“Yes,” Ken answered thoughtfully. “I think we all are.”

“Not me, my granddad’s Welsh!” Jack blurted out.

“Oh Jack, the Welsh were ancient Britons,” Catherine explained. “The English were Anglo Saxon invaders.”

Ken jumped in. “You know King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.”

Thinking Jack did not know, Catherine blundered on to save his feelings. “Well Kunnetha, and Jack of course, you can call me Catherine, not Cathy or Kate, or Kath or any other affectionate diminutive. If Catherine was good enough for my grandmother, it is good enough for me!”

The two boys stared open mouthed. Unabashed Catherine stuck out her hand. After Ken shook it, Jack surprised himself by shaking it too. It was like he had not known Catherine until her outburst, and it seemed the right thing to do. After all, they were almost beaten up together.

“I am impressed with the way you saw off those bullies,” Catherine informed Ken. “And I am proud of you too Jack, wanting me out of harm’s way. I knew what you were doing.”

Jack turned red at Catherine’s praise. He felt a bit of a phoney because Ken deserved all the credit.

“You know what Ken, you’re very mysterious,” he told his new friend.

“Don’t mean to be. Puts people off.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t said what it is that puts people off,” Jack shot back.

Ken shrugged. “Robbie Jenkins takes your dinner money. Mum hasn’t got much. So when he picked on me I knew she wouldn’t want me to go hungry. She’s always says I should stick up for myself. So I figured I might as well...”

“Well what, Ken?” asked Jack; sounding calmer than he felt.

“It’s simple to do but hard to explain. It’s something with your mind,” Ken smiled at their questioning looks. “Have you ever made someone look at you by thinking about it?”

The others shook their heads, half-suspecting Ken was making fun of them.

Ken did not look like he was having a joke, he looked deadly serious. The sort of embarrassed yet pleased look you have when you are telling the truth, but know no one will believe you because what you are saying is so awesome.

“Sometimes, when I think at someone sort of sideways, their mind opens up. It happened with Robbie Jenkins.” Ken hesitated. “I

don't want anyone else to know, because it isn't fair. So if I tell, you have to promise not to repeat it."

"We promise," they muttered eagerly, gagging to know Ken's secret.

"When Robbie Jenkins' dad got drunk, he'd batter his mum. Sometimes he gave Robbie a good hiding too. Put him in hospital once. Knowing what was coming, Robbie wet himself with fright. He was only eight. I made him remember the warm wet feeling. Now when he sees me, that's all he thinks about."

Jack and Catherine looked subdued by the thought of Robbie getting battered by his dad. But Jack was not the type to let sympathy get in the way of his natural exuberance. "Wow! That is so cool!"

"Yes," Catherine agreed, "if it is the truth!"

Ken stared at her for a moment. Catherine went quiet, losing some of her arrogance.

"All right, I believe you. What a special gift," she added, confidence returning.

"Not really," Ken shrugged. "Everyone can do it."

"I'd love to learn. Can you teach me?" Jack wanted to know.

"Don't see why not."

"When?"

"Now, if you want."

"Great! I'll ring Mum and tell her I'll be late."

"Can I come?" Catherine pleaded. "Mother does not mind what time I am home. The only thing she cares about is her job as a HR Director."

“What’s that?” asked Jack.

“Boring,” Catherine announced, “very, very, boring indeed!”

After a moment’s silence, Ken suddenly blurted out, “That little one was wrong, I’m not fat. I’m big boned! Mum says everyone in her family’s big boned. Says I take after my dad. When I get older I’ll shoot up and all the weight will drop off. He was dead skinny my dad was.”

The others looked at each other thinking Mickey must have touched a nerve.

Ken caught them. “What? I am big boned!”

Jack quickly changed the subject so as not to upset his new friend. “So how do you do it?”

“If you sort of stare at the back of people’s necks, nine times out of ten they turn around. The trick’s not to try too hard. It’s like looking out of the corner of your eye, suddenly you feel it happen.”

“Is that all?” Catherine sceptically demanded.

“No, it takes practice. You need to treat it serious too. You shouldn’t do it for fun. It was horrible seeing Robbie terrified of his own dad. I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.”

“I never knew my father,” Catherine quietly confided. “I was an afterthought. My sisters are much older, Chloe is at University and the others are working. My parents split when I was five and Daddy went to live in America with his new wife. He sends money for presents but I never see him.”

“I don’t know my dad either,” Ken confessed. “Mum tells me about him, says he’ll come back one day. But I think it’s all talk.”

“Mine are just normal,” Jack added, wishing they weren’t because he didn’t want to feel left out. “Except my mum’s got cancer and has to go into hospital.”

“That is terrible!”

Catherine’s sympathy left Jack feeling cheap. He wished he had not said anything. It should be his mum people felt sorry for, not him.

Chapter 8 Rosie Trelawney

Ken lived on a council estate behind the allotments on the far side of the park.

“Home mum,” he shouted as they piled in.

“About ten minutes,” Ken’s mum called back.

Through an open door at the end of the hall, two silhouettes were crouched over the kitchen table.

“What are they doing?” Catherine whispered.

“Mum reads palms and tarot cards,” Ken replied. Turning on the TV, he sank into the sofa. “Reads tea-leaves too.”

“Do you think she would read mine?” asked Catherine.

“Cost you a tenner!”

“Is she any good?” Jack wanted to know.

“She told Terry Dobson’s mum men in uniform would bring bad news. Next day, two policemen turned up to arrest Terry’s older brother.”

“That’s good,” said Jack, having no idea who Terry Dobson was.

“You do not need to be psychic to know the Dobsons are breaking the law,” Catherine retorted.

“I know, but Kevin’s been getting away with it for years.”

“Maybe your mum grassed him up,” Jack joked.

Ken blanched. “You don’t even think that round here.”

Jack saw Catherine was bursting for an argument, so he quickly asked, “What else do you do?”

Ken grinned. “I don’t want to seem big headed.”

“Go on,” he urged, seeing Ken was dying to impress.

Placing a pencil on the coffee table and moving his hands a few centimetres from each end, Ken hunched his shoulders in concentration. Within a few seconds, the pencil swung like a compass needle.

“Did you see that!” exclaimed Jack.

“You blew it,” Catherine accused.

Ken protested.

“You must have!” she declared.

“Honest! Look!” He straightened the pencil, assuming the position. Jack and Catherine watched like hawks. Within seconds, the pencil moved again.

“He didn’t blow it,” Jack told her.

“Then how did you do it?” asked Catherine suspiciously.

Ken shrugged. He was not grinning anymore.

The door opened and Ken’s mother entered, shoving a crumpled ten-pound note into her purse. Jack and Catherine jumped up as if she had caught them doing something naughty.

Somehow, Ken’s mum did not look the type to care if you were naughty. She looked young enough to remember being naughty herself. Rather than a mum, Jack thought she was more

like a big sister; for she was young and very nice looking with a lovely smile, large dark eyes framed by full sooty lashes, and a mane of thick brown curls tumbling to her shoulders. To Jack she looked like some beautiful gypsy girl from an old story.

“Hello my love, are these your friends?” She had a soft South-west country accent, the sort of warm voice that made you immediately like her.

Jack felt himself liking her immediately. He jumped up, sticking out his hand. “Hello Misses...” He realised he didn’t know Ken’s surname. “I’m Jack.”

Ken’s mum solemnly took his hand. “Hello Jack, I’m Rosamund Trelawney, but you can call me Rosie.”

“Catherine!” Catherine also stuck out her hand for Rosie to shake.

“Well my treasures I’m quite parched, so what do you say to a nice cup of tea?”

“I’ll have some pop,” replied Ken, getting up to follow her into the kitchen.

“Me too please,” cried Jack.

Catherine replied, “A cup of tea sounds lovely.”

“You wouldn’t be after me reading your leaves? What’s our Kenny been telling you?” asked Rosie merrily.

“Not at all!” Catherine responded, turning bright red.

* * *

Soon they were chatting like they had known each other for years. It was not long before the conversation turned to Ken's heroic rescue.

"I can't get over it. It was like magic!" Jack confessed.

"Not magic, talent," Rosie stated, "like reading cards and tea leaves."

Catherine looked surprised.

"These days there's lots of things people thought magic years ago," Rosie explained. "My great-granny told a story of when she was young and the village pub got the first television in the area. Everyone gathered to watch it, including old Mrs Winter who was about ninety if she was a day. When they switched it off at the end of the night, the old lady got right upset because nobody was going to let the little people out of the box."

When Jack and Catherine laughed, Rosie looked quite serious. "What is ordinary to one person is magical to another. Abilities like our Kenny's have always existed and lots of people have them, but because scientists can't measure them, they say they don't exist. Measuring talent is hard. What makes someone better at drawing or sport?"

"I know when the TV program's coming on, and call Dan in!" Jack fell quiet, not meaning to talk about Dan. Yet he could not help thinking if he could tell anyone, it would be his friends. But where to begin? Looking out of the kitchen window at the park beyond the allotments, he realised it was not even a week since Dan went missing. Less than a week. It felt like a lifetime.

“Dan vanished on the hill in the park,” he said hesitantly. “This old woman turned young and beautiful and they just disappeared.”

Catherine looked aghast.

Jack could see she was dying to ask questions.

Ken, also seeing the look on her face, confirmed it was true.

Something in his voice told Catherine Ken knew. Perhaps he looked into Jack in the same way he looked into Robbie Jenkins.

It was getting dark outside leaving Jack suddenly nervous. “I think I better go home.”

“I suppose your mother worries if you are late. Why don’t you ring and say where you are,” Rosie suggested.

“How did you know I have a mobile?” he wanted to know, a little in awe of Rosie.

“For heaven’s sake Jack, I meant you could ring from here. I may be good, but I’m not that good.”

* * *

Next morning all Jack spoke about was Rosie. Catherine listened patiently, considering she only wanted to hear about Dan’s disappearance, and the strange rumours going round school.

At morning break, Ken invited them for dinner. Jack needed to tell his mother, but didn’t think she’d mind. Although he had only really known Ken, and Catherine, since yesterday, he felt they’d been friends forever.

Rosie made a cheese pie, with scones for afters, still warm from the oven, running with butter and thickly spread lumps of homemade strawberry jam. Once the meal was over, everyone relaxed around the kitchen table feeling too full to move. It was not long before Jack started to feel guilty for enjoying himself.

Noticing he was quiet, Rosie asked, "Is it your brother, Jack?"

Soon he was telling them everything, even his dreams, which became clearer as he spoke.

"Yesterday upon the stair, I met a man who wasn't there," said Ken.

"That Mickey boy said the same thing," Catherine interrupted.

"It's a nursery rhyme... Yesterday upon the stair, I met a man who wasn't there. He wasn't there again today, I wish that man would go away," Ken recited.

Catherine turned to Jack. "Do you think your mind is playing tricks? You have a lot of worries."

"Sounds like fairies to me," Rosie interjected.

"Fairies!" Catherine could not believe her ears.

"Now Catherine, I know you have strong opinions, but you don't know these things like I do," Rosie maintained. "In Cornwall we believe in fairies. Great-grandma saw one when she was a girl and the same one when she was old. The fairy hadn't aged a day."

Catherine opened her mouth, but Rosie was too quick. "Fairies change from old to young at will. They take children and

sometimes leave a changeling, a fairy child grown up wrong, twisted and full of spite.”

“Do you think the tramp’s a changeling?” Jack cried.

“Or fairy himself. Be careful, they’re not like us,” warned Rosie. “They’re vicious and play cruel tricks! I don’t want to scare you, but if fairies took your brother, you may be next.”

Jack turned pale. “That’s what I thought.”

“Nonsense! I am surprised at you Rosie! Jack imagined it! You should not encourage him.” Catherine sounded very adult.

“You don’t believe me!” Jack accused her. “You think Dan ran away like everyone else.”

“It sounds more plausible Jack. I believe you think you saw what you saw, but thinking does not make it real. And you are not helping, Rosie! Now I think I should go.”

With that, Catherine got her coat and left.

Rosie was apologetic. Jack embarrassed. Having lost the party mood he phoned his dad. As he left, Rosie gave him a quick hug, whispering, “What I said goes against everything Catherine believes, but be kind to her Jack, she won’t like being wrong.”

* * *

When Jack got home, his mother also had a hug for him. “It’s good to see you made friends, especially now... We were hoping you would.” She wiped her eyes. “I am silly Jack. Your silly old mum.”

“You’re not silly Mum,” he replied. He hugged her back on the spare of the moment; quickly getting embarrassed at being sippy.

That night Jack prayed he would dream of Dan or his phone would ring. Anything so he could stop wondering if Dan was gone. But all he thought about was Catherine’s doubts.

Around one in the morning, his phone did ring. Jack woke blurry eyed, convinced it was Dan. His brother’s name was on the screen, but strangely, the sight of it left him nervous.

“Hello,” he hesitantly murmured.

The line was so full of static, he could hardly make out if anyone was there. Then he heard a voice, no stronger than a whisper. A ringing echo drowned out each word, but Jack was sure it was his name, repeated over and over.

His parents rushed in.

“Dan?” asked Dad.

Nodding, Jack handed him the phone.

Dad listened. “There’s nothing there, like last time!”

As soon as Dad spoke, the line went dead. Dan’s name slowly bled off the screen.

Too shaken to go back to bed, Mum suggested hot milk. From the stairs, Jack looked through the window over the front door. It was too dark to see much, but he was convinced someone was watching.

“I need my slippers,” he announced, flying back to his room.

His worst fears were confirmed when he peered through a crack in his bedroom curtains. The tramp was back on Mr Gibson’s

wall. All he could think about was the poem. Yesterday upon the stair, I met a man who wasn't there... He wasn't there again today... I wish that man would GO AWAY!

Chapter 9 The Church

Torn between fear and excitement over the tramp's return, Jack could not wait to tell his friends. Mindful of Rosie's warning, instead of rushing out he waited for a lift to school from Mum.

Catherine, already at her desk, put her head down mumbling, "Sorry if I upset everyone."

Jack dismissed her apology. "Oh never mind that, he's back!"

"Who?"

"The tramp."

Doubt flooded her face.

Seeing it, Jack assured her it didn't matter if she believed or not. Because when he saw him, he was sure she would see him too, or at least Ken would.

Catherine smiled, worries vanishing. She had not dared hope it would be so easy to patch things up. Or prove Jack wrong. At morning break, Ken agreed he would probably see the tramp. After that, the day dragged. Jack could not wait for it to end because he was convinced something would happen.

Walking home after school, the tramp was all the other two talked about. It gave Jack the funny feeling they were almost willing him to appear. Uneasy, he insisted on avoiding the park.

Despite that it wasn't long before he got a prickly feeling in the nape of his neck as the little hairs stood on end.

Suddenly the tramp appeared.

"There he is!"

"Where?" Catherine demanded.

Jack pointed, wondering how she could miss him.

"Where Jack?" she repeated.

Exasperated, Jack turned to Ken who was white as a sheet.
"What's wrong with you?"

"Him," Ken shot back. "He's all over the place."

"Who?" she barked in frustration.

"I'm in his head and it's a nightmare." Ken gripped Jack's arm so hard it hurt.

"What are you talking about?" Catherine stopped speaking, eyes widening as a figure shimmered into view. "Where did he come from?"

The tramp flopped towards them moving like a crazy man.

"I think we better take your mum's advice and run!"

"But that's the way home!" Ken complained.

"Never mind that Ken!" she insisted. "Run!"

They ran the length of one road and half way down another until Ken stopped, winded.

"Come on!" Jack urged.

"Can't!" gasped Ken. "It's horrible!"

“Can you switch him off?” Risking a look back, Catherine was relieved she no longer saw the tramp.

Ken shook his head. Pulling an inhaler from his pocket, he took a couple of puffs as the tramp reappeared.

“We’re never going to lose him. He’s going to keep coming!” he gasped, panic stricken.

Jack had to face it, with Ken’s asthma, they were lost. He wondered if the tramp would follow him if he ran off. If he didn’t, he was abandoning his friends and Ken was terrified.

“Catherine, where can we go?”

She thought fast. “The library opens until eight.”

He could phone his dad from the library. They did not have to go fast to stay ahead of the tramp, but they had to keep moving.

“Come on Ken! Catherine, which way?”

“Down the alley on the left. Past the church and across the road. Five minutes.”

They each took an elbow dragging a miserable looking Ken down the street.

Catherine encouraged him. “Come on Ken, five minutes then Jack’s dad will pick us up.”

This cheered Ken up and he began to move quicker.

Jack did not look back again until some sixth sense nagged him. They were only half way down the alley. The tramp was catching up. He wondered how he did it. At this rate he would catch them at the church. He hissed at Catherine. “Think of something quick!”

“He’s here,” squealed Ken, reaching for his inhaler.

“You’re fine Ken. We’ll look after you,” Jack assured him, while silently beseeching Catherine for a miracle.

The church came into view. It was not an old church but a new one, modern with acres of stained glass and a separate concrete spire that made it look like the fire station. Instead of a churchyard with trees and graves to hide behind, it stood in the middle of a huge empty space; somewhere for the congregation to park their cars.

“Look, a gap in the railings!” cried Catherine.

The three of them easily squeezed through, even Ken who was the heaviest.

“Well that’s not going to keep the tramp out!” Jack said, thinking aloud.

Catherine pointed. “The gate is up there!”

Running for the concrete tower, Jack saw the tramp was already through the railings. Rounding the church, he saw the fatal flaw in Catherine’s plan. The gate was locked. “What do we do? We’ll never get over the fence!”

“Keep church between us. Ring your dad,” Catherine told him.

Jack dithered.

“Say someone is following,” Catherine snapped. “Your brother is missing. He will be here like a shot!”

The tramp was closing in. Ken started to wail. Jack hunted for his phone.

“Keep moving!” Catherine roared, pushing the boys ahead.

Halfway down the church was a small side door that Jack did not even notice; until he saw Ken making for it.

“No Ken, we’ll be trapped inside!”

Forced to follow when Ken ignored him, Jack and Catherine grabbed him as he rattled the door handle in desperation. The door jerked open and they fell inside. Instead of a gloomy church, it was filled with a swirling tunnel of shiny blue light.

Jack felt a tingling in his stomach. “What’s that?” he asked as it grew, buzzing through him like an electric saw. Without warning, he shot towards the stained glass windows on the far side of the church. Hearing Ken gasp, he screwed his eyes shut for the collision.

“What just happened?” Catherine yelled.

Jack opened his eyes. No longer in the church, they were shooting across the car park towards a big brick wall. Despite wanting to see what would happen, he closed his eyes again, feeling something slow him down for the tiniest second. He only managed to open them once he speeded up.

On the other side of the wall was an empty site earmarked for luxury flats. They rushed over it at astonishing speed. The next second, they were charging across a road, plummeting towards a house. This time Jack did keep his eyes open. The wall slowed them down, hanging on like glue. Everything went dark for an instant as he passed through brick, insulation, and plasterboard into someone’s front room, kitchen and back garden. Then it was through the fence into next door’s garden, and off into the fields beyond housing estate. It all happened so fast, he barely had time to think.

Suddenly it dawned on Jack, they were not moving. It was the world outside the tunnel rushing past. Hearing a roaring noise, he remembered the beautiful lady. Before he knew what it all meant, he crashed into a door, which resisted for a moment before falling open, plunging him back into the world.

Looking around, Jack wondered how it was possible to fall into one church and out of another.

“Quick, close the door. He might be following!” shrieked Catherine, gathering her wits.

“It’s ok, he’s gone!” Ken sounded relieved.

Jack slammed the door anyway, thinking the tramp might splat against it like the baddies in Stargate when they closed the iris.

Unlike the church they fell into, the church they fell out of was really old; made from stone with a proper steeple. Instead of a car park, it stood in a real churchyard with huge old yew trees and falling down gravestones.

Catherine was puzzled. “How do we fall into one church and out of another?”

“That thing’s like a wormhole,” he told her.

“Did you see...?” Ken began.

“I know, right through someone’s house!” With Stargate firmly in mind Jack hesitantly asked, “Do you think we’re still on earth?”

Catherine looked at him in astonishment. “If that is a bus over there, then I would say we are!”

“Oh right,” he replied, feeling a fool.

Ken started towards the road, but Jack took a wistful look at the church door.

“Have you gone mad?” Catherine impatiently snapped. “Who is at the other end?”

Ken was more diplomatic. “We better find out how to get home.”

Crossing the cemetery, Ken heard Jack grumble, “I don’t care, I thought it was great!”

Now Ken’s panic was over so did he, and bet Catherine did too - no matter what she might say.

Catherine looked at a road sign showing the turnoffs on the roundabout. “I know that place. It is couple of miles from where we live.”

“So how do we get home?” Ken wondered glumly. “Anyone got any money?”

“I suppose I could ring Dad,” Jack told him.

“What would we say?”

“Well, at least we lost the tramp!” Jack cast an uncertain look at Ken, who nodded happily.

“Quick, that bus goes past our school!” Catherine exclaimed.

They covered the few meters to the bus stop ahead of the bus, which was stuck trying to turn onto the roundabout.

“We’ve got no money,” moaned Ken.

“Leave it to me,” Catherine answered firmly.

By the time the bus arrived, Catherine’s chin was trembling. “Let me on first,” she insisted.

They got on the bus.

“Where to?”

“Cherrywood Road,” Catherine replied. Her chin was wobbling uncontrollably, but the driver did not notice.

“That’s three pound sixty for the three a yer.”

She let out a hearty sob to signal the fact she was about to cry. The driver looked up. As he did, she burst into tears, right on cue.

“We have no money,” she wailed, tears streaming down her face.

Unimpressed, the bus driver merely stared, so Jack chipped in, inventing freely. “A gang of big boys took it.”

“Really?” said the bus driver, eyeing them up and down, making Ken look as if he would burst out crying too.

“They were about sixteen,” Jack volunteered, trying to sound posh like Catherine.

“Give me your names and addresses, your parents can pay.”

“Oh, thank you! That is kind!” Catherine cried out.

Slyly kicking her, Ken jumped in. “Billy Johnson, this is my sister Karen, and brother Patrick.”

“You don’t look like no brothers to me,” the bus driver remarked suspiciously.

“Well, we are.” Ken allowed no room for argument. “We live at 24 Anderson Drive.”

“Fill this out!” He passed over a form as Catherine fished in her schoolbag for a pen to cover her unease.

Later, when out of earshot of the driver, Ken confessed to thinking himself brilliant saying they were the Johnsons. “Pity the poor man from the bus company who calls round there for the money. I wouldn’t wish Mrs Johnson on anybody.”

Although Catherine did not like Ken lying, she bit her tongue rather than risk an argument.

Safely on the way home, it was not long before they were talking about the extraordinary journey. Jack was determined to go back to the church at the first opportunity, and the others needed no persuading. As tomorrow was Saturday, they arranged to meet by the library.

It was late when the bus dropped them off. They were debating whether to go straight home when a call from Jack’s mother settled it. Jack asked Mum to pick him up from Ken’s house, and if she would mind giving Catherine a lift. At least that way no one was alone.

Catherine apologised to Rosie who was as easy as Jack about it, saying she expected people to speak their mind. As soon as that was out of the way, they could not wait to tell her what had happened at the church.

“I’ve read all about these in a library book. Ley lines I think they’re called. They connect ancient places like Stonehenge and Glastonbury,” Rosie explained. “The author said churches were on ley lines because they were built on the sites of old pagan holy places. He didn’t say anything about travelling on them though. Unless it’s a fairy road, they run for miles from hill to hill...”

“Surely not the hill in the park!” interrupted Catherine.

“I wouldn’t be too sure Catherine. The fairy woman appeared there, now this tramp’s turned up. If it is a fairy road, then it’s dangerous.”

“But it isn’t like that,” the boys protested.

“What if it is,” Rosie argued back. “What if he chases you into one of these things and you can’t get off? Or she takes you like she took Dan?”

“You don’t understand. Why don’t you come and try one Mum?”

Rosie was firm. “I would love to Kenny, but I have a bad feeling and you know my feelings! I won’t ask you to promise, because you might have to break that promise, but I don’t want you messing with these ley line thingies until we know they’re safe.”

Chapter 10 Shadows

Catherine was at the library when it opened. No tramp, fairy or otherwise, was going to keep her from her favourite place. She found the book Rosie had read about ley lines connecting all the ancient mystical sites of Britain like a huge spider's web. When the boys arrived, she almost ran to the foyer, breathlessly rehearsing her discoveries.

Surrounded by mystery, these ancient trails, used since time immemorial, were more than simple roads. Called ley after an old word for track, they ran in straight lines for miles across the countryside. Dotted along their length, like a 'string of fairy lights', according to the author, were huge standing stones called megaliths, and other ancient monuments such as tumuli - manmade burial mounds - once thought to be fairy hills, holy wells, or other sacred places like churches which had been built on pagan sites, just as Rosie said.

Ley lines were also mixed up with fairy paths and corpse roads, where local people claimed to see ghostly processions or unexplained lights. If you walked on a corpse road it was said you would die or be snatched away to fairyland. In parts of Britain and Ireland, houses built on fairy roads left the front and back doors open at night so the fairies could pass straight through. Afraid the house might fall down otherwise.

By the time Catherine finished explaining all these marvellous things, the boys were well impressed. She was not done yet. There was another bombshell.

“Have you ever wondered about Tower Hill Park?”

The boys shook their heads, anticipating more exciting revelations.

“It is named after the hill where Dan went missing. You will have to be quiet if you want to see what I found,” she warned; leading them to the computer she was using to research local history.

Tower Hill Park, once Tower Hill Farm, was mentioned in the Domesday Book. It was named for the hill, even though there was never a tower there. The land was a park because houses kept falling down when they tried to build on it fifty years ago. A local historian, after finding stories in old parish records of strange lights haunting Tower Hill on certain nights of the year, claimed it was a fairy hill on a ley line.

“Looks like your mum’s right,” Jack whispered. “But, I can’t stop thinking how fantastic it was.”

“We could take a short trip,” Catherine suggested.

“I don’t like going against my mum.”

By the way Ken spoke they could tell he was as keen as they were, and bet he was just looking for an excuse.

“Come on Ken, we’ll be sensible!” Jack protested.

“We do need to find Dan,” Catherine added persuasively.

“I suppose so.”

* * *

Leaving the library, they crossed the road to the church. Finding the gate locked, they ducked down the alley to the gap in the railings. When Jack asked if the coast was clear, Ken nodded. With that settled, they made straight for the side door. Grabbing the handle, Ken twisted it like he had yesterday. Nothing happened.

“It’s locked!” he sounded surprised.

“Can’t be!”

“Try it!”

Jack did. It was locked.

Catherine was puzzled. “It does not make sense, open yesterday, locked today. Things do not work like that.”

“Or maybe they do,” commented Jack mysteriously.

“Knock it off Jack,” Ken retorted.

“Perhaps we are missing something,” she ventured. “I mean if it was easy, people would travel on ley lines all the time. There would be no cars or trains. Imagine rush hour, or getting to school in the morning!” She giggled. It was so unlike her the boys stared.

Jack groaned, “And you’re supposed to be the brainy one.”

“It might be how I felt yesterday,” Ken mused, getting back to the job in hand.

“You mean the tramp? Do you think it was because you were scared?”

“Let me think about him.” Ken grasped the door handle, taking a couple of deep breaths before turning it. “Nothing!” He sounded disappointed.

“Don’t worry Ken,” Jack replied putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Hang on,” Ken answered.

Jack dropped his hand.

“No, put your hand back. Catherine, do the same.”

They did what they were told and this time the door swung open when Ken turned the handle.

“It’s the three of us,” Ken cried excitedly. “When you put your hands on my shoulder, I felt it slip, like a bolt.”

Jack was equally excited. “That’s it! Last night we tried to pull you away.”

They stood staring in wonder at the milky blue light swirling into the distance.

“Yesterday I was too scared to notice how beautiful it is,” Catherine gasped. “Are we ready?”

The boys nodded.

“On three then!”

“One, two, three,” they counted, stepping over the threshold.

Like the day before, it started with a tickle in the belly.

Ken braced himself. “Here it comes!”

“And here we go!” yelled Jack feeling the tickle turn to pins and needles, until he could no longer resist the ley line’s pull.

They shot off, whizzing straight through the church car park, empty building site and house, just like yesterday.

“Why do I feel like I’m falling?” Ken shouted with a grin all over his face.

Catherine, who could never just enjoy something, replied, “Your mind is trying to make sense of what is happening.”

“Wonder how fast we’re going?”

“Faster than sound, judging by the roar,” she answered.

“Wonder what we sound like?”

“Probably like a car misfiring as we break the sound barrier!”

“I hear them all the time. Now I know what they are!” he started laughing.

“We’re not moving,” Jack protested.

He was right. It was the world outside speeding past.

Calmly, Ken stretched out a hand as a door rushed at them. When he touched the handle, they stopped. There was no shock or jerk, the world just stopped in a sickening lurch of vertigo as their minds caught up with the fact. The door opened and they stepped into the same churchyard as the day before.

They all spoke at once.

“Wow!”

“That was great.”

“There’s more in there.”

There were disturbances in the swirling light and each was another path. There was so much to explore.

“I brought money for the bus home,” Catherine admitted.

“I’ve got my pocket money too, but I don’t want to go home. I want another go!” Jack insisted.

“Me too!” Catherine confessed.

They looked at Ken, who grinned.

“My turn,” Catherine announced, quickly grasping the door handle, leaving the boys to place their hands over hers.

“Like the Three Musketeers,” she declared. “All for one!”

“And one for all!”

Turning the handle, they stepped over the threshold, letting the tickle build.

“Take the first turn,” Catherine warned, “or we might get lost.”

The first turn took them to another church in a couple of seconds. They stopped effortlessly as the door appeared. Jack grasped the door handle, but Catherine told him to wait. They could see through the door as if it was made of glass. Beyond the churchyard was a car park in front of a pub, called ‘The Old Church Inn’. As they watched, a couple walked from car to pub. The man cast an idle look at the church, yet although Jack felt he must see them, the man saw nothing.

When the car park was empty, Jack touched the handle. Becoming solid, the door swung open letting them step out into the church porch, where they immediately sat on the stone benches built into either side.

“Well that was boring,” Jack groaned.

The others agreed. If that was all there was to ley lines, it hardly seemed worth the bother.

“Let’s go for a longer one,” Jack suggested.

“To find out if they’re all just as boring?” complained Ken.

“Might as well, there’s nothing else to do!”

“We could go to the precinct.”

“Ken, it is only one o’clock,” Catherine argued. “We can go later.”

Choosing a path, they soon left the town, travelling at breakneck speed through the countryside. As they shot through a hedge, there was a sudden bone-sickening thud. A lorry zoomed past centimetres from Jack’s face. He heard Ken groan ‘I think I’m going to be sick!’

With nausea ebbing, Jack saw he was in the middle of a country road with his friends beside him and a lorry rumbling into the distance. Ken, holding his stomach, looked as white as a sheet. As Catherine comforted him, they shot off again, causing Jack to wince as they crashed through the hedge on the other side of the road before hitting open fields.

A moment later, darkness washed down the ley line, like the sun going behind a cloud.

“What’s that?” he yelled, fearing another truck.

The darkness came back. Jack watched it pass, huge lurching shadows distorted by the curve of the tunnel.

“Men and dogs! Probably from a nearby farm,” Catherine informed him.

Another ancient church with a heavy oak door rushed out of nowhere. They could not wait to get off. Without even giving them

time to stop, Jack grabbed the handle, sending them tumbling into a churchyard.

“We were almost killed back there!” he gasped. “It was like every bone in my body squeezing together.”

“I think the lorry broke our journey,” Catherine answered.

“How? We passed through everything else!”

She thought for a moment. “Maybe it was a fluke. We could try another. Find out if it was.”

“Are you mad?” asked Jack.

Ken did not look too keen either.

“Come on! What is wrong with you both?”

“We almost got killed,” Jack grumbled.

“We stopped miles from that truck!”

“Millimetres!” he corrected her.

“Well, if we cannot use the ley lines, how do we get home?”

The boys stared sullenly at her. They knew she was right, but it was hard admitting it.

“Straight home,” Jack warned, waving a finger at Catherine. “And when we get back, I’m never going on these things again.”

Catherine did not bother to argue. She knew Jack would get over it.

* * *

The shadows were back almost as soon as the journey started.

“The farmer’s men,” Catherine commented casually, racing past the dark shapes.

Rushing up from behind, the shadows overtook them before shuddering to a halt. Just as quick, they shot past the shadows; only for the shadows to overtake them again. A second later the shadows stopped in the tunnel ahead as if playing a game of cat and mouse.

“It’s like they’re looking for something,” remarked Jack. He suddenly had a horrible premonition of what they were looking for. “We need to get off, now!”

“Why?” Ken asked.

“Ley lines are fairy roads remember!”

As if to prove him wrong, the shadows started moving and within seconds vanished from sight.

“That’s a relief,” Jack sighed.

“Are we slowing down?” Ken asked.

Jack looked at the fields outside the tunnel. They were slowing down. Soon they stopped altogether, hanging helpless in the ley line, buffeted by turbulence.

“They’re coming back,” Ken yelled, reaching for his inhaler. He grabbed a sly puff as the shadows plummeted at them through the swirling blue rings of light.

“Something is wrong!” Catherine observed. “They are not coming, but growing!”

It was hard to judge what they were doing, but the more Jack looked the more he thought Catherine was right. The shadows were growing, getting clearer too. He could see details of young men with long hair who were dressed in extravagant costumes, each with

a hulking brute of a dog. As he watched, the swirling light peeled back, making it look as if the men were being forced into the tunnel from another world.

Struggling free of the sticky light, a man stepped into the ley line. It was all Jack needed. There was a junction a few meters behind him. He started pushing the others to it. Step by step they fought the turbulent flow with heads down and shoulders hunched. Bringing up the rear, Jack risked a quick look back. The men were solid, so were their dogs, ugly hulking brutes that they were.

“Hold fast child!” one shouted.

Jack had no intention of doing anything of the sort. Ken and Catherine had already slipped away and it was his turn. As soon as he moved, the man unleashed his monstrous beast, which leapt forward unfurling vast leathery bat wings.

“They’re not dogs, they’re dragons. No wonder they look wrong!” muttered Jack incredulously, as the swirling light dragged him off.

Far behind, shrouded in shimmering blue, the nightmare creature followed in pursuit. Every so often, Jack looked back to see if it really was a dragon, but thankfully it was too far away to tell.

Vortices sucked at them as they passed, sweeping them along like debris in a flood. Some junctions swallowed them wantonly. Others flashed by so fast they were impossible to reach. The ley line took them where it wanted, bouncing them one way then another. The land outside raced along in a sickening blur, until they lost all sense of direction.

“Are they still after us?” asked Jack.

Ken shook his head, hesitantly at first, then happily.

Now Jack did not have to worry about being chased by a dragon, he realised he was enjoying the chaotic ride.

“This is great,” he shouted. “It’s like a massive long tunnel in the water park!”

The others looked aghast. But once he mentioned it, he knew they would think the same.

“You are right!” Catherine admitted. “Never had so much fun in my life!”

“We’re flying,” yelled Ken in delight.

So they were. The ley line had left the ground and was taking them to a hilltop. With each passing heartbeat, they rose higher and higher. About a meter in the air, there was another bone-crunching jolt. Ken’s hand hit a car roof. Catherine kicked a door panel.

“Not again!” Jack yelped, plummeting to earth.

Before hitting the ground, the ley line caught them and they were off. Behind them, a car skidded to a halt as open-mouthed passengers spilt out staring at an empty road. Moments later, crashing through branches of autumn leaves in a riot of red and gold, they lurched to a sickening stop.

Picking themselves up off a muddy stone floor, they realised this was no church but a sort of cave with daylight streaming in from a hole in the roof.

“Where the hell are we now?” Ken grumbled.

Stumbling outside they found it was a crumbling pile of masonry mired in dense undergrowth and swamped by scrambling ivy.

Catherine instantly saw it was a ruined tower. “Fantastic! Do you think it was part of a castle?” She quickly scanned for the remains of walls or other stonework. The boys, too busy complaining, took no notice.

“It happened again!” Jack bellyached.

“Catherine’s right,” Ken moaned. “Lorries and cars break our journey.”

“How?”

“Iron! It defeats fairy magic. It’s in all the stories.”

“We must have passed hundreds of cars,” Jack protested.

“No we didn’t! Houses, walls, trees, do you remember cars?”

Catherine joined in. “I think they only break the ley line for a second, because they move so fast. And when it reconnects...”

“But cars are everywhere. It’s too dangerous,”

“Perhaps fairies use hills to get above the traffic,” she added, wishing the boys would take some interest in this wonderful old ruin.

“What about electric pylons, they’re iron. Aren’t they fried going through them?” argued Jack.

“They are probably very careful. Do you think the fairy men were warning us?” Catherine wondered. “But then why set the dogs on us?”

“Wasn’t a dog. It was a dragon.” Jack said flatly.

“It could not possibly be a dragon!” she answered.

Jack was defensive, “I didn’t imagine it! Anyway you said that about the tramp.”

Thinking about it, he did start to wonder if he had imagined the dragon. Tramps were one thing, but everyone knew dragons did not exist.

“We shouldn’t mess around with ley lines anymore,” Ken firmly decided.

“But what about this, there must be hundreds of places like this to explore!”

Jack shrugged, not wanting to commit himself, while Ken looked at his feet.

“How do we get home then?” Catherine snapped.

“I suppose there’s no other way,” Ken admitted, glumly.

Reluctantly, they stepped into the tower, waiting for something to happen. After a few moments, they looked at each other, puzzled.

“How do we make it work?” Jack finally asked.

They tried everything they could think. When nothing happened, Catherine scrambled up a pile of tumbled down stones to a window in the tower. “There is a steeple in the distance, maybe we should walk to it!”

The boys did not want to, but what choice did they have; lost in the countryside with no way home. It took hours walking the winding country lanes; with the boys whinging every step of the way about missing lunch and being starving.

The ley line journey home was a bit of a nightmare too. They had no idea where to go and Ken would only take short hops from one church to another. Eventually, they stopped on a main road where they grabbed a pie and caught the bus into town.

Chapter 11 Thomas the Rhymer

It was past five when they got off the bus in the High Street. The shops were closing, so even if they wanted, it was not worth going to the precinct. Catherine fancied returning to the library. But the boys insisted on watching a DVD at Jack's house. Less than halfway there, Ken announced, "He's back."

Jack looked around the deserted street. "I can't see him."

"Trust me, he's here."

"Let's run," Catherine suggested.

"Which way?" Ken whimpered, beginning to panic. "How do we fight what we can't see?"

"He's there in front of us!" Jack exclaimed with relief as the tramp shimmered into view.

"Back to the precinct," advised Catherine. "We can hide in the crowd at the bus station."

They ran down the road, occasionally passing people who did not even look. Typical, chased by a weirdo and no one bothers Jack thought bitterly. Before remembering no one could see the tramp. Perhaps he'd cast a spell and nobody saw them either.

By now Ken was wheezing and could go no further. Spotting an alley behind some shops, Jack made a split second decision and

bundled the breathless Ken into it; thinking they could hide behind skips and bins piled high with rubbish and cardboard boxes.

“What are you doing?” Catherine panted, following.

“We can’t run forever. Hide here, might be a way out!”

Seeing Ken snatch a puff on his inhaler, she realised they had no option. There was a slim chance the tramp might go past.

Squeezing down behind a skip, they peered out.

“Here he is!” Jack whispered.

“What is he doing?” Catherine hissed.

“Looking around! I think he’s going. No, wait, he’s coming. Was there another way out?”

“No, I checked!”

“He knows we’re here!” Ken snatched a hasty puff. He was red in the face and breathing hard. “His mind’s weird,” he wheezed.

Jack shushed him. “It’s all right Ken. Just let me think!” A moment later he turned to Catherine, “Run while I keep him busy.”

“No Jack!” she uttered, horror-struck.

“Jack!” echoed the tramp as if he heard her. “Master Jack, Cracker Jack... Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick.”

“Is he mental?” Catherine gulped.

“No, he’s fairy,” Jack reminded her, as Ken nodded in agreement.

“Here I am,” Jack said, bravely stepping out from behind the skip.

“No!” Catherine wailed.

At the sight of Jack, the tramp started crying.

“Master Jack, Tom’s a lost. Master Jack, Tom’s a cold. Master Jack, don’t be cross! Master Jack, take Tom home! For I did dilly and did dally, dally and did dilly, lost my way and don’t know where to roam. Now you can’t trust a story like old Jack-a-Nory, when you can’t find your way home!”

Jack stared stupidly at the tramp.

“It’s all right, he won’t hurt you,” Ken shouted.

“You’ve changed your tune,” Jack shouted back.

“I was wrong. He’s not trying to scare us. He’s scared. The noise, the people, he’s not used to it. It’s driving him mad.”

Coming from behind the skip, Ken walked to the tramp with hands held in front of him as if feeling the air around the man.

“He’s living rough,” he informed Jack. “I don’t think he’s had a good night’s sleep for weeks, or a proper meal, been eating out of bins! Oh dear, he could do with a bath.”

“I know he pongs!” Jack agreed.

Putting his head to one side, the tramp smiled.

“There’s something else, he might look older than us, but inside he’s about our age.”

The tramp smiled again, saying proudly, “For a year and a day I grew away, and I grew straight and I grew tall, and I was the fairest of them all, and she did love me, love me do, but now I’m lost. It’s sad but true.”

“Hello,” said Catherine, following Ken from behind the skip.

“Good day to you mistress mine, Thomas am I, Thomas of Rhyme.” The tramp gallantly bowed.

“Thomas? That’s what she called Dan! She was looking for you, wasn’t she?” Jack said to the tramp.

“Aye,” wailed Thomas, “that she were! Though she loved me most, kissed my cheek and stoked my hair, a new Sir Thomas does she boast and on him lavish all her care. And I am gone, like those before, beloved once, beloved no more.”

“Why?” asked Catherine.

“Though I both complain and moan, ‘tis no one’s fault but my own. She warned me true when she did say not to dally on the way. Off went the court with my good queen too. Tom followed on but what did Tom do?” he shrieked, slapping his own face and shaking his head wretchedly.

“Tom did dilly and did dally, did dally and did dilly, lost his way and don’t know where to roam. Now Tom’s afraid and all alone, and can’t find his way home.”

With outburst over Thomas blew his nose noisily on his sleeve and smiled a brave little smile.

Telling the strange man to stay put, Jack called a conference.

“What are we going to do?” he whispered.

“We cannot leave him. It is obvious he cannot take care of himself,” Catherine announced.

“Well, I can’t take him home,” Jack countered. “What would my parents say?”

“I can. Mother is always busy at work!”

“Catherine it’s the weekend, your mum will be home. Besides, he could be dangerous.”

“Oh Jack, look at him,” she shot back.

“But what if your mum finds him?”

“Mother would have an absolute fit! Then he would too I imagine! I do not know who would scream louder!” Catherine paused for dramatic effect. The boys never even smiled.

“I’ll take him home.” Ken spoke quietly. “He can sleep in the spare room. Mum will know what to do with him.”

* * *

Rosie knew exactly what to do with him. She made Thomas a cheese sandwich and a hot cup of tea; running a bath while he ate it.

“Get those dirty clothes off. I’ll put them in the washing machine,” she instructed.

Obediently, Thomas started to oblige.

“Oh my lord not in here!” screeched Rosie, blushing. “Go in the bathroom and pass them to Kenny. And when you’ve got his dirty washing, see what you can spare for him, my love.”

Thomas came back, mainly clean and decently wrapped in now filthy towels. He looked quite pathetic without his layers of clothes like a painfully thin, overgrown, child.

“Come on then!” Ken took Thomas into his bedroom where he sorted socks, underwear, a sweat shirt and a pair of jogging bottoms. All of which Thomas regarded with great curiosity and some distaste.

Piling a mound of toast on a plate, Rosie drowned it in baked beans and crowned the lot with three fried eggs. Slapping the plate

in front of Thomas, she told the others to help themselves to the fairy cakes in the tin.

They all sat around, while he wolfed his meal.

“Pretty maid, may praise come fast for such a bounteous repast,” Thomas said, mopping up the last of the bean juice with an extra round of bread.

“Can’t you speak normal?” Jack snapped in exasperation.

Thomas looked horrified. “Like you not the pace and patter of wit and rhyme and charming chatter?”

“It gets on my nerves actually.”

Thomas looked from Catherine to Ken. Seeing they sided with Jack, replied hesitantly, “I can but try.”

“So what happened to you, my treasure?”

“I dillied and dallied, lost my way and don’t know where to roam,” Thomas looked suspiciously from Jack to Ken to Catherine, and thought better of finishing the rhyme.

“How do you know Jack?” Rosie quickly asked to avoid an awkward silence.

“He dreams of his brother in paradise, where all is happy and all is nice. I see the fragments of his dream, as they drift in streets where he has been.”

“Don’t seem like paradise to me,” Jack stated flatly.

“Never mind that Jack,” Rosie retorted, turning back to Thomas. “Did you try to get home?”

“Lost my way and don’t know where to roam.”

“So what have you been doing?”

“Tommy-boy, Tommy-boy, where have you been?” he called out fretfully, “I went to London to see the queen. Up and down the City Road. In and out the Eagle, that’s the way poor Tommy goes.”

“And pop goes the weasel!” snapped Jack.

Thomas threw Jack a fearful look.

“For heaven’s sake Jack, he is only doing it because he’s upset. Don’t make him worse!” Rosie exclaimed.

“It’s all right now, calm down and have a nice sip of tea,” she told Thomas. Who sipped his drink, pulled a face, and proceeded to put four more sugars in it.

She turned to Jack. “You’re frightening him.”

“Well tell him to stop with them scary eyes.”

She laughed, “Oh Jack, he thinks they’re cute puppy dog eyes, but that’s not the point. If you frighten him and he starts speaking in rhyme, we’ll be here all night.”

“Why did you go to London?” Rosie gently prompted. “Was it to find your Queen? Now, speak slowly my treasure, you’re safe here.”

“My Queen is not in London, ‘tis the realm of Good Queen Bess, Queen of all the Elfin in the kingdoms of Britain who lives in splendour in Eye Open.”

“Eye open you say? Now I’ve not heard of that place.”

“Eye Open, as in the rhyme.” Thomas cast another uncertain look at Jack before muttering, “As I was going to Saint Giles, I met a man in Seven Dials. Seven Dials has seven streets. But of the seven only one leads to Bess in Eye Open.”

“I think he made that up,” Catherine confided.

“I swear Mistress Catherine, ‘tis Eye Open. I met many kindly peoples of the tribes who promised to take me to Eye Open. But London is a strange land. The streets do not stay still. The peoples are confused.

“When I asked passers-by for Eye Open, they ignored me or hurriedly gave copper, silver or gold. But it was false coin and what was I supposed to do with that? Tradesmen would not take honest copper for wares but wanted false gold, the fools!

“Nonetheless, Tom is a genuine Robin Goodfellow and does not deceive. Besides which, there were such delicacies left unattended in hampers in the streets,” he finished slyly.

“He means he ate out of bins,” Ken told them.

“Poor lad, I fished over fifty pounds from his pockets. They must have thought he was begging. He didn’t even realise it was money! Anyway at least we can afford to get him new clothes.”

At that moment, Jack’s mobile phone rang.

“That will be your brother,” Thomas confidently asserted. “Tell my lady I am here. She will be grateful I am with friends.”

It was not Dan of course, but Jack’s mother asking if he was ready to come home. Saturday night was spent watching a movie with a takeaway. His mum was dropping hints and Jack felt mean letting her down. So, although he wanted to stay, he said he was ready and offered Catherine a lift.

Catherine declined. After all, they were only being careful because of Thomas, and that seemed laughable now.

When Rosie asked Catherine to stay for supper, Catherine eagerly phoned her mother. Everyone listened intently to the

strangest conversation ever between a mother and daughter, even Thomas who probably did not understand a word.

“Mother? Out with friends,” went Catherine’s telegraphic utterance. “Yes it is good to meet new people... No, eating here... Not late... A taxi on your account, of course... I know you worry Mother... And a pleasant evening to you too.”

When Catherine got off the phone, she told the others, “It is not her fault really, she means well, but I think she sort of lost interest when Daddy left. And she does keep forgetting I am only eleven.”

Rosie wanted to go over and hug the girl.

Chapter 12 Coming of the Magi

Dad was preoccupied on the drive home. It made Jack wonder if he was annoyed because he was not spending more time with Mum. She was in hospital in a few days. Suddenly he felt very selfish.

In the house, Dad put a finger to his lips and gave Jack a copy of the local free paper, folded open at a page.

“Mr Gibson brought it over,” he whispered.

Jack’s heart sank. It was not going to be good news if old Gibson brought it over. His eyes widened with horror when he saw an article about the episode in school. No doubt brought on, it concluded, by his brother running away and his mother’s life threatening illness.

“I didn’t let your mother see it but I thought I better show you in case anyone starts teasing. Why didn’t you tell me son?”

Not wanting to lie, Jack quickly realised he did not have to. “It was one of those things Dad, I felt embarrassed. It seemed so real, only no one saw him.”

“The mind plays funny tricks son. Let’s hope it doesn’t get into the papers tomorrow.”

* * *

Jack was unsurprised to find the article in the Sunday papers. A week ago Dan's disappearance was big news. Now he was a runaway it did not get mentioned until something like this happened.

It was probably the papers that prompted nice Constable Morgan to visit. She apologetically told them there was no luck locating Dan's calls, and put it down to a poor signal area or freak weather conditions. She insisted they immediately let the police know if Dan rang again.

When she left, Jack retreated to his room, feeling he'd caused enough trouble for one day. He threw himself on the bed thinking about what the policewoman said.

It was days since Dan phoned. Jack even stopped dreaming about him. What if he was Dan's last link? And now that was gone because all he cared about was his friends? He even forgot Mum was in hospital. Everything was his fault because he was horrible and selfish.

Although Jack felt low, he did not cry because crying was for girls. He lay on his bed staring at the ceiling trying to stop his eyes smarting by blinking hard, and fell asleep wondering if he would dream about Dan.

When his mobile rang, he immediately thought of Dan and half fell out of bed in his eagerness to answer it. Dad charged upstairs like a herd of elephants, bursting through the door as Jack reached the phone.

"It's only Catherine. I thought it was Dan too," he said, seeing Dad's disappointment.

It was easy to talk to Catherine because she was a good listener. She sympathetically asked if he wanted to come over for the afternoon. Jack hesitated before saying he should stay with his parents as he felt mean leaving them.

When he came downstairs, Dad asked if he was going out and looked stern when Jack shook his head.

“Son, we appreciate you want to be with us, but we cannot put our lives on hold, no matter how hard it is. Don’t you think we want to pretend it will go away? But life’s not like that. We have to face it.”

Mum was gentler. “Jack love, don’t give up. Your dad’s right, we have to get on. We want you to go out. Moping around the house does no good. Let’s give you some money to treat Catherine and Ken to the cinema or something. They’re good friends and you hadn’t any before.”

Jack looked surprised.

“We notice love. We hoped Dan would help you settle in. But he took the news so badly... Shame we didn’t know how badly,” his mother broke off. “And don’t think we’ve forgotten how kind Ken’s mother is; having you over after school, giving you dinner. We were thinking of buying her something to say thank you. What about flowers?”

“I’m sure she’d love them Mum!”

“From what you say, she sounds nice and so do your friends, so give them a treat on us.”

“Thanks Mum and Dad, you’re great!”

“Yeah we’re great! That’s us!!” Dad pulled a pained face making Jack grin. “Now phone Catherine and I’ll give you a lift.”

* * *

Jack did not know when he first realised a big black car was following. He noticed because it looked like a gangster limousine with blacked out windows. He considered mentioning it to Dad, but decided against it in case it seemed like he was looking for attention.

Catherine's house was a huge old Victorian mansion backing onto Tower Hill Park. As Jack waved Dad off, he looked for the big black car, and when he could not see it, decided it was his imagination after all.

As it was his first visit, Catherine dutifully presented him to Mother. She was not at all like he imagined which was prim and proper like a headmistress or a businesswoman in a suit. Small and slight, she looked like an older version of Catherine. It was then Jack realised how tough she probably was. Although Catherine's mum seemed nice, Jack felt she wasn't really interested in him. There was no drink, cake or chat. She simply remarked how pleasant it was to meet a friend of Catherine's and left them alone.

* * *

They were half way to Ken's house when Jack whispered, "Don't look now, but that car's following us."

Catherine immediately looked round seeing a stately Rolls Royce with blacked out windows.

“I saw it before. There can’t be two of them!”

“One way to find out, we can go down that street and see if it follows,” she suggested.

As though the driver read their minds, the car sped past them, parking at the corner.

“Great, we’re trapped!” Jack hissed out of the side of his mouth.

“Since they have gone to so much trouble...” Catherine announced marching towards the car, and giving Jack the horrible feeling she was about to pick an argument.

“Don’t get too near, they might grab you!” he warned; relieved when she stopped after a few meters to glare into the blind black glass.

The rear window slowly descended to reveal an old man with white hair and a pleasant smile, looking very respectable in a black suit and jolly tie. He greeted them by name. “Catherine, Jack, how nice to meet you!”

“How do you know our names? What do you want?” Jack suspiciously demanded, moving to Catherine’s side.

“This is hardly the place to discuss things. May I offer a lift? We could talk more comfortably.”

“Don’t think so,” Jack barked.

“Jack, fairies snatched your brother and you now appear to be in danger.” The old man waved a newspaper.

“Fairies!” Jack scoffed.

“Yes fairies,” answered the old man.

“You know a lot,” Catherine remarked.

“I do,” the old man replied, still smiling.

Catherine looked at him coldly. “Start driving or I start screaming.”

“I believe you probably will young lady. And quite right too! Please accept my apologies. I confess it escaped me how this may look like abduction.”

“How do you know about Dan?” Jack interrupted.

“It is our business to know what the fairies do. Our magic is every bit as effective, which is something to bear in mind if you want to see your brother again. However, I do not intend to discuss magic, high or low, on the street like a common mountebank. If you wish to know more, here is my card.”

The old man held a business card out of the window.

Jack stepped forward, making it Catherine’s turn to pull him back.

“Not interested!” he retorted.

“You should be. We specialise in rescuing people like your brother. Without us, there is little hope.

“Again, I apologise for my somewhat thoughtless approach. I should have spoken to Mrs Trelawney as the adult of the group. However, I was unsure how much you confide in her. I will have my driver put the card on the pavement. Manfred, would you be so kind?”

An impressive looking chauffeur, dressed in a smart black uniform and peaked cap, stepped out of the car to place the card on the sidewalk.

“Jack, please take the card if only for your brother’s sake. Have Mrs Trelawney telephone me. With her skills in the psychic arts, she should be able to tell if this is genuine.”

The dark window slid up and the car drove off.

* * *

Rosie turned the card over. It was handmade, gold edged and expensively embossed in a cursive script of thick, black, velvet ink. It read Horatio Grin. Grin, Pipe and Thynne, Chartered Accountants, and gave an address in town.

“He thought I should be able to tell if it was genuine, did he? Well, it looks genuine enough, but it doesn’t take magic to know that.” She tapped the phone number on the card. “Let me give him a ring.”

Informed Mr Grin would return her call, Rosie left her number. Within a minute, the phone rang.

“Mrs Trelawney?” a man’s cultured voice queried.

“Never mind that,” came her curt answer. “What’s this all about?”

Rosie did a lot of listening but very little talking, except to answer questions with: - No, I would rather you came here - and - Yes, I would prefer you to come alone - and finally – No, I do not believe there will be trouble but at the first sign I will call the police -

She put the phone down, informing them, “Mr Grin is coming. Thomas, I think you’d better wait in your bedroom my

treasure. I've one of my feelings, it might be better if you're out of the way."

Without a word, Thomas left the room.

"I think he had the same feeling," Rosie confided.

Twenty minutes later, the posh black car pulled up outside Rosie's rather humble council house and a well-to-do, elderly man got out.

"He looks all right, although looks can be deceptive," she remarked, nosing through the net curtains with Ken, Jack, and Catherine eagerly pressed to her side. "Kenny my love, answer the door."

The old man entered the room, greeting them by name.

Rosie took control, "So how come an accountant is mixed up in this?"

"People see accountants as such dull fellows, little realising accountancy dates back many of thousands of years to the ancient city of Babylon. In those days accountants were priests serving a group of people with extraordinary powers called Star Gods."

"Fairies?" asked Ken.

"Fairies, Star Gods, the name is immaterial. The fact is they were not good masters," Mr Grin answered. "We, their priests, eventually became powerful enough to chase them out in a terrible and bloody war."

"When you did, I take it you returned the money to all the poor people you took it from," Rosie snorted contemptuously.

Mr Grin was smooth. "Then, as now, my dear lady, government is very expensive."

“No! I didn’t think so!” she sneered.

Mr Grin ignored her. “During our long servitude to the Star Gods, we developed more skills than accountancy; inventing chemistry, astronomy, and mathematics. Lacking our masters’ abilities we learned to command the universe through magic, which is often no more than a branch of science and technology, while appearing, dare I say, miraculous to outsiders.”

The children stared open mouthed. Even Rosie had to admit she was impressed.

“Magic was how I identified Jack so quickly from the newspapers. I have no doubt a fairy queen took his brother and now holds him prisoner. Just as I have no doubt, Jack knows more than he is telling.”

Jack was so stunned he could only nod.

“Do you want to save your brother?” asked Mr Grin.

Jack nodded again, this time more eagerly.

“Then I need to know everything. However before you speak, may I request a colleague join us? It saves having to repeat everything. She is very thorough and will be your caseworker.”

Jack looked at Rosie. She shrugged, so he agreed.

“In that case...” Mr Grin took a slim phone from his pocket and spoke into it briefly.

“She is on her way.”

When Ken went to the front door, he saw Thomas in the kitchen, stuffing the pockets of his shabby old bandsman jacket with biscuits. Catching Thomas’ eye he immediately knew Mr Grin

frightened him enough to make him run. Thinking quickly he went to help, shouting, “Mum that damn cat is in again!”

“All right my love,” called back Rosie, suspecting something of the sort. “You see to the cat. I’ll get the door.”

Making as much noise as possible, Ken ran into the kitchen and flung open the back door, shouting, “Go on you, scam!”

With a grateful look, Thomas was out like a shot, down the garden, over the fence and across the allotments to the park. Ken turned around to see his mother in the hall.

“I think something spooked that cat!” she remarked as the doorbell rang.

* * *

Walking into the lounge, Ken was sure Mr Grin saw right through him. However, although the old man smiled, he made no comment. No sooner had Ken sat down than the door opened.

“Children, may I introduce Agnes Day, an expert in fairy abduction,” Mr Grin stated.

In stepped a pretty brunette with dark auburn hair that caught the light in red and gold sparkles. Ken thought she looked like a model in her black tailored suit and high-heels. Jack muttered ‘wow’ as her long legs caught his eye. He quickly turned away, only to be drawn straight back. Mortified, he looked up to her face. Agnes smiled warmly, making him blush and look at his feet.

“Catherine, Ken, Jack what a pleasure!”

Agnes held each of them for a moment with piercing green eyes. She had a way of making each one think they were the only person that mattered.

The boys got up from the settee, standing awkward and uncertain. When Ken asked if Agnes would like to sit down, she smiled at him, before delicately threading her way across Rosie's cluttered lounge.

Agnes Day might have won over the boys, but Rosie was harder to impress. She suspected Agnes was the type of woman who used her looks to get what she wanted. With the boys already under her spell, Rosie had no doubt they would tell her everything. She could only hope Catherine had more sense. Unfortunately, this did not seem to be the case. For when Agnes turned her charm on Catherine, speaking as if she was a younger version of herself, the poor girl looked bedazzled. When sure each was sufficiently charmed, Agnes became all business.

"Tell me everything. Omit nothing, no matter how trivial it seems."

Jack started, eager to be her centre of attention. If he surprised Agnes with his story, her beautifully made up face did not show it. The intensity in her green eyes never wavered. By the time he finished telling her about Thomas on the stairs, he felt exhausted.

"You call him Thomas?" Agnes sounded almost fierce.

"That's his name," Jack replied quickly.

"How do you know?" Her stare was ice.

Jack, not relishing being her centre of attention quite so much, struggled on, wary of every word. "He was lost. I think the fairy queen was looking for him when she took Dan."

“I bet if she found Thomas she’d send Dan back,” Ken interrupted, jealous of Jack getting all the attention.

“I doubt it,” was Agnes’ cold response. She turned to Catherine, sharply asking. “And you met him?”

“We all did.” Catherine answered, enjoying Agnes’ discomposure.

“And where he is now?” she demanded.

“Gone,” Catherine responded, drawing a surprised look from Ken, who wondered how she knew.

“He was here,” Ken guiltily admitted.

Catherine jumped in. “But left shortly after, saying something about going to London to see the queen. That was a few days ago.”

“What did he say exactly?” Agnes enquired.

“He had a funny way of talking in rhyme,” blurted out Ken. “In fact he called himself Thomas the Rhymer.

“It got on my nerves,” Jack confided.

Agnes ignored him. “A Rhymer Horatio. Then he is more than a changeling. If captured, he could lead us to... Jack’s brother,” she finished smoothly, turning back to the boys.

“Did he say anything else?”

“Only something about don’t dilly-dally on the way,” Ken told her.

“And up and down the City Road, and in and out the Eagle,” Jack added triumphantly.

“That’s pop goes the weasel,” snapped Ken, leaving Jack feeling stupid. “It was more like: as I was going to Saint Ives, I met a man with seven wives. No, that’s not it either.”

Catherine corrected him. “As I was going to Saint Giles, I met a man in Seven Dials. Seven Dials has seven streets. But of those streets only one leads to Bess at eye open.”

Agnes turned her ferocious gaze to Catherine. “Eye open, are you sure?”

“I think he forgot the words,” she ventured, hesitantly.

“Fetch my bag!” Agnes imperiously ordered.

The two boys immediately jumped up.

Agnes seemed pleased. “Thank you,” she purred. “It is with my coat in the hall. Archmage I am sure we are on to something.”

“Archmage?” Incredulous, Rosie looked at Mr Grin.

“Please my dear, no need for ceremony, it is a largely honorary title,” the old man remarked absently leaning over to pat the back of Rosie’s hand.

The two boys hurried back holding the briefcase between them. As neither looked happy, Catherine could only assume they had argued over who got to carry it.

Thanking them, Agnes took out a large A to Z of London. Quickly flipping through the pages of maps, she called them around her. A slim finger, tipped by a scarlet nail, lightly ran along streets until she found the spot.

“As I was going to Saint Giles, I met a man in Seven Dials. Seven Dials is long associated with astrologers, magicians and other mountebanks.”

The Archmage winced. "I say, steady on Agnes."

She did not deign to acknowledge his remark. "As you can see Seven Dials does have seven streets, one leading to Saint Giles Church on the High Street. Saint Giles, the patron saint of beggars and lepers, is perfect company for elfin scum. If we follow Saint Giles High Street, we come to..."

"High Holborn?" hazarded Catherine.

"Pronounced by Cockneys as... I O'ben!" Agnes corrected.

"Eye open of course! But what has this got to do with Dan?"

Agnes beamed. "Thomas is seeking Queen Bess, a powerful fairy queen. If we find her, we are sure to find Dan."

"Give it up Agnes! We have known Bess is in Holborn for years," commented Mr Grin impatiently. "The Irish hid her in those stinking slums for almost a century and when the council pulled them down, she simply burrowed in deeper. The whole area is less than half a square mile yet she remains hidden. This offers little hope!"

Agnes looked flustered. "Horatio," she protested.

"My dear Agnes, simply because this Thomas fellow believes she is there, does not mean she is. His information could be decades out of date. Remember the fairies do not travel so freely since railways sliced up the land."

Ken snatched a look at Catherine, mouthing 'Iron!'

"I am simply concerned with finding Jack's brother!"

Sounding injured, Agnes offered Jack a wounded look. "Bess is like a spider at the centre of a web," she explained. "Find her, we find Dan."

Jack nodded, mesmerised.

The word web reminded Catherine of the ley line network. Aware Ken was jealous of Jack getting all of Agnes' attention she feared he might blurt out something. Before he could, she asked Mr Grin what he meant by the railways affecting the fairies, hoping to change the subject.

When Mr Grin finished, Rosie suggested the boys make a cup of tea. Once they were out of the way, she made it perfectly clear it was getting late and it was school tomorrow. The children had had quite enough excitement for one evening.

Catherine bristled when Rosie called her a child, but quickly realised it was the best she could come up with at short notice. Calming down, she cleverly asked to watch the news, knowing the television would distract everyone. After that the night quickly wound up.

Agnes Day offered Jack and Catherine a lift. When Rosie said they were staying for supper Catherine briskly agreed. Jack looked as if he was longing to go, but Rosie was so insistent, he thought it rude to contradict her.

As Mr Grin's stately Rolls Royce arrived, the old man took Agnes by the arm to walk down the path together. At his car, he turned to wave goodbye, while Agnes pointed a key fob at a sleek, red sports car, which beeped in anticipation.

"Cor, would you look at that!" muttered Ken.

"Wow!" Jack uttered for a second time that night.

"Are you sure I can't tempt you Jack?" Agnes called pleasantly.

Jack looked from Agnes to Rosie before reluctantly shaking his head. With a smile, Agnes climbed into her sports car. A second later, the engine settled into a purr and she was gone, with the boys staring longingly at the taillights, and Jack hardly able to believe he had turned her down.

“So what do you think?” Rosie casually enquired.

“She’s very nice,” Jack enthused.

Ken eagerly agreed.

Catherine only smiled.

Later, when alone with Rosie, Catherine confessed to thinking Agnes Day wore far too much make up.

“Thank heavens for that. I thought you had fallen under her spell like the boys.”

Catherine laughed, too ashamed to admit there were times she nearly had.

Chapter 13 Book of Adam and Eve

The following day Mr Grin telephoned, asking to see the children after school and promising to bring supper. Rosie said yes, mainly because she could not think of a reason to say no. She did not like the old man's interest, suspecting he was using them to find Thomas.

Catherine and the boys were not happy either, until they saw the food: goat's cheese and red pepper quiches and vegetarian filo parcels - both of which Catherine quite fancied; individual pizzas; dainty crustless sandwiches; sticky spare ribs; spicy Buffalo wings; cheesecake; ice cream; individual gateaux, and chocolate biscuits wrapped in gold foil.

"There's enough to feed an army," Rosie protested.

"It won't spoil in a refrigerator," he advised, helping unpack.

The food killed conversation, mainly because Jack, Catherine, and Ken could not speak for eating. After they had gorged themselves silly, Mr Grin said, "Let me tell you about fairies."

Rosie thought he chose his time wisely.

"Forget everything you heard about little creatures with butterfly wings," the old man began. "They are the product of Victorian storybook illustrators. Before that fairies were real people. Even the word fairy is wrong. It means enchantment,

describing what they do, not who they are. They call themselves Elfin.

“There are many stories about where they came from. We Mages wrote down our version in the Book of Adam and Eve almost two thousand years ago.” With that, he took from his briefcase a leather-bound volume that looked so ancient, Catherine half expected it to crumble into dust as he turned the brittle yellow pages.

“This copy is hundreds of years old and quite valuable. Like the Bible, it starts in the Garden of Eden, where we find Adam married to Lilith, a woman made from fire as he was made of earth. Adam lived happily with his wife and daughters but as creatures of fire, Lilith and her brood were inquisitive and disobedient. Such boldness could not remain unpunished so the Lord banished them. When Adam nearly died of grief, the Lord made him forget his first love by creating a second wife, Eve, from his side.

“Lilith fled to Babylon, where she and her fifty daughters were thought to be goddesses. So beautiful were they it was claimed they tempted angels down from heaven for husbands. The product of this unholy union was the Star Gods, whom we served as priests. Until that long, bloody war in which we hunted them all the way to the edge of the known world, called Hyperborea - the land behind the North Wind.

“The frozen north of Europe was a strange and fearful place to us. A land of the dead where we thought feathers fell like rain; never having seen snow. The Star Gods hid with the troll and dwarf, and their cross-bred offspring became known as the Alf or Elfin.

“In time the Alf inhabited the Isle of Britain, where they constructed stone circles such as Avebury and Stonehenge, or huge artificial mounds like Silbury Hill, to focus their power and remain invisible to us. Despite such efforts we eventually came, driving them to Scotland, Wales and Cornwall, leaving only legends of fairies and witches.

“Yet, it was another thousand years before we attempted to conquer their stronghold of Ireland, where we never really gained a foothold. Although heaven knows we tried.”

At that moment, the doorbell rang. It was Agnes Day.

* * *

“My sister was taken by fairies when I was nine. She was the same age as Dan,” said Agnes, surprising them all. “I saw it and felt so helpless. I tried to tell, but my tongue swelled as if I were spellbound. I was scared and alone.”

Colour drained from Jack’s face. He looked on the verge of tears. Watching him, Rosie realised how much he kept inside - with his brother missing and his mother ill. Perhaps Agnes would do some good after all, by causing a crying fit to draw the poison.

“It must have been terrible for you,” sympathised Catherine. Seeing Jack’s face it was easy to imagine what it was like for young Agnes.

“I wanted them to take me instead of Poppy,” Agnes confessed, looking at no one. “For years, I wondered why not me.”

It was as if Agnes was lost to memories that would not let her go.

Mr Grin stirred uncomfortably. “That is fairies for you,” he interjected, “unpredictable creatures of impulse without a shred of humanity. They can be kind one moment, although there is no inner goodness in them, and then on a whim capable of enormous cruelty.”

Agnes spoke across him, not listening. “I felt I let everyone down.”

She stopped, to stare at Jack. It was almost as if she was looking through him. Her large green eyes were moist and luminous. “Do you wonder what it is like?”

Jack blushed. “Not really! I... I suppose it’s because I’m older...”

“Did you find your sister?” Catherine enquired as the silence dragged on.

“What?”

“Did you find your sister?”

“The mages found her after they gave me this.” Agnes fished under her blouse to produce a silver chain holding a dull metal ring. “Iron protects against magic.”

“How did they find her?” Catherine wanted to know.

“I was not there, but I have been on enough raids since.”

Her brisk no-nonsense reply made Catherine think she had shut a door on the real Agnes Day.

“The first thing that hits is the smell. The whole nest is filthy. It stinks.”

“What do you mean nest?” asked Jack.

“Nest, like a rat’s nest. Elfin are not individuals with homes and families. They are hive creatures, slaves to a queen’s dream, where nothing is real.”

“She gave Dan dreams,” Jack remembered. “In one she pretended to be Mum, saying she would never be ill or old.”

“It was the same with Poppy. The things she told me, the dreams she dreamed. It makes them mad in the end. Poor mad creatures, nothing more than shadows of what they were, unable to cope with life.”

“So why don’t you leave them where they belong?” demanded Rosie.

“You don’t understand. We must save them.” Agnes snapped. “You have to tell me if you see Thomas again. If we find the fairy nest, we not only rescue Dan but many other poor souls.” She turned to Mr Grin, eyes glowing, voice strident. “We must find Bess, Horatio. The only way to hunt them down is through the old spider queen linking their world together.”

“But you can’t find her, can you?” Rosie reminded her.

“This is why we need the help of these brave children,” Agnes snarled, fully herself. “Thomas is our way past Bess’ familiars.”

“Familiars?” cried Jack.

“Fairy slaves, half fairy themselves.” Agnes’ voice dripped with contempt. “They look like beggars, but never beg. You feel their sharp eyes, watching, always watching.”

“The queen’s guardians have thwarted us on more than one occasion,” commented Mr Grin. “The woman on Dyott Street, with a shaved head who carries plastic bags filled with newspapers and mutters to herself; the skinhead with steel-rimmed glasses; the man off High Holborn who sits on the site of an old brewery, looking drunk but never drinks.”

“It feels like someone walks on your grave when they stare,” Agnes interjected.

“We have seen familiars come and go over the decades,” Mr Grin continued. “Old Simon the Beggar lived with his dog under the staircase of a ruined house. Jack Norris, the ‘Musical Shrimp’ protected Bess for seventy years. Anne Henley was thought to be over hundred years old when she vanished. We can only assume they join the others in the dream of the nest.”

“That’s quite enough scary stories for one night, I think!” Rosie announced firmly.

“Mum!” Ken moaned.

“School tomorrow Kenny and you have homework. Say good night to Mr Grin and Miss Day.”

Mr Grin stood up looking flustered. He thought everything was going so well. Agnes insisted on helping with the dishes. Adamant it was not necessary Rosie saw them out.

“Perhaps Jack would like a lift home?” Agnes asked desperately.

“That is kind of you, but Jack’s father is taking Catherine home too.”

As Mr Grin took Agnes’ arm, Catherine wondered what Agnes said to upset Rosie. Jack could not believe he’d missed out

two nights in a row. But like Catherine, he knew something was up and could not wait to find out what.

Agnes waved from her car, as if knowing how much he would like to ride in it.

“Who does that woman think she is?” muttered Rosie, slamming her front door in frustration.

“I don’t think she means any harm, Mum,” said Ken, defending Agnes.

“She knew exactly what she meant and I’m not having it!” his mum fumed.

“I thought her stories were great,” Jack bravely declared.

“Her stories aren’t the point! It was the way she spoke about Bess’ guardians. She knows what she is and hates herself for it.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“She means Agnes Day has fairy blood, just like Bess’ guardians,” Catherine told him. “That is why the fairy queen took her sister.”

“But Dan,” Jack squeaked in horror. “What about me?”

“I don’t want her infecting you with self-hatred. It is something to be proud of Jack!” Rosie reached into her sweater to pull out an iron ring like the one Agnes wore.

“You have fairy blood. That explains the psychic powers!” announced Catherine.

Ken shrugged, looking self-conscious.

“So what about me?” she demanded.

“Blood calls to blood,” Rosie answered.

“Good! I was beginning to think I was the odd one out.”

“Well, at least we’re in this together!” Jack reflected; the thought cheering him up. “But if you’re half fairy, why didn’t she come for you or Ken?”

Rosie touched the ring on the chain around her neck. “This. When I was young, a fairy queen took a baby from our village, which is why my Nan gave me it. I’ll tell you the story one day.”

“Is that why I can speak to you about Dan?” Jack wondered.

“Perhaps Jack, I really don’t know.”

“When Mum heard you saw Thomas in school, she told me to keep an eye on you,” Ken added.

“So that’s how you rescued us from the bullies,” Jack cried. It all made sense.

“Sorry Jack, we should have told you.”

Jack laughed. “I’d have thought you were bonkers! And she certainly would!” he added, looking at Catherine.

Catherine giggled, and had the good grace to look abashed. “I did, but I know better now.”

Chapter 14 Thomas Returns

Throughout the lesson all Catherine thought about was turning on her mobile phone. Even though Jack was the only other person she knew with one; except for Mother of course, who almost never telephoned. It was morning break before she heard Rosie's voicemail.

"That's odd!" she muttered listening to Rosie begging her to ring, but not tell the boys.

"What's up?" Jack enquired, looking for Ken.

"I need to make a call," Catherine mumbled.

Jack saw Ken. "Ok."

"Rosie, what is wrong?" asked Catherine when alone.

"Thomas is back. I have a horrible feeling the Mages are watching the house. I'm afraid for Thomas and don't know what to do. Can you come round Catherine? Make some excuse to the boys, I don't want them telling Agnes Day."

"I will be quick as I can," she replied.

Catherine hated lying. Sometimes, if pushed, she would force herself to tell a small lie to save someone's feelings; like when Mother got a new dress that really was unsuitable. However, she hated great big black lies, and whichever way she looked at it, this

was a big black lie. Worst of all, she was telling it to the people she liked best; Jack, Ken and her teachers.

“I forgot a dental check-up,” she told the boys, feeling as if her face was turning bright red, or her tongue jet black.

When they did not notice anything amiss, it gave her the courage to lie to the teachers. Because Catherine was an exemplary student who never missed school, the teachers believed her, which only made it worse. She slunk out determined never ever to lie again!

With Rosie thinking they were watching the house, Catherine went through the park into the allotments and climbed over the garden fence.

“I don’t know what to do with him!” Rosie blurted out, relieved to see her. “He can’t stay here if they’re snooping around and I can’t chase him away. He’s in a terrible state, living rough and eating out of bins.”

Rosie looked so upset Catherine thought she was more like a sister than someone’s mum.

“He can stay at my house for a couple of days Rosie.” Her offer was not out of the blue. She thought of little else since leaving school.

“It’s good of you, but I don’t want him creeping round your house at night. Anyway what will your mum say?”

“She won’t know! Our house is massive. We have a flat in the cellar my sisters used to use.”

Catherine and Thomas left through the back door to cut across the park. Determined not to sneak out of her house for anyone, Rosie got her coat and left through the front door. She

arrived at Catherine's to find Thomas in the kitchen drinking a glass of milk.

"Thomas, stay here while I show Rosie your room. Promise not to wander off."

Thomas nodded eagerly.

"And do not touch anything," Catherine warned.

Again, Thomas agreed.

Before they even left the kitchen, the ping of the microwave alerted Catherine to the fact he was exploring.

"On second thoughts, come with us."

The cellar was huge and colourful, brightly lit by high narrow windows with bars on the outside. There were big comfortable sofa-beds, a television with built-in DVD player set in a shelving unit crammed books and DVDs. An alcove held a kitchenette complete with fridge and microwave. While to one side was a small bathroom with a shower.

"This is a whole house." Rosie sounded impressed. "But is it safe?"

She meant was it safe for Catherine and her mother, for although Thomas looked harmless, you could not be sure.

"I can lock the door so no one gets in or out. There may be a problem with the cleaning lady on Friday. The place is pretty sound proof from when my sisters had sleepovers. It has not been used for ages so Mother has probably forgotten all about it."

Rosie wanted to hug the lonely girl, instead she said, "I'm sure he won't be here long Catherine. I'll take him back in a couple

of days when they lose interest. I don't want Agnes Day getting her claws into him; she'd treat him like a laboratory rat."

"I know," Catherine replied. "Look, do you want some lunch? I am starving! What about you Thomas?"

Catherine made Thomas wash his hands before letting him help make lunch in the kitchenette. It was only scrambled eggs on toast but Thomas looked very pleased.

"Mother will not be home until nine, so I can have dinner with him down here."

Catherine was already planning it in her head; pizza or spaghetti hoops. They could watch an old Disney film like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. It had been ages since she had watched any and she was sure Thomas would love them.

* * *

Agnes Day parked her red sports car by the school gates and stood next to it looking immaculate in a black Gucci suit and sunglasses; even though it was the dullest of October days. Seeing Jack and Ken, she offered them a lift.

Being the envy of every boy in the school was hard to resist. The thought of squeezing into the tiny cockpit of a sleek low-slung lipstick red sports car was harder still. But the most impossible thing for the boys to resist was the glamorous Agnes Day herself.

Rosie was flabbergasted to see the boys spill out of the sports car. Agnes Day's interest confirmed her worst fears. She was so angry she called them straight in, bidding Agnes a curt farewell.

The boys hesitated, caught between the two women; until Rosie yelled at them to move this instant. Ken had never seen his mother so furious and knowing better than to argue, sheepishly muttered goodbye to Agnes before skulking into the house.

“A lift home Jack?” Agnes enquired pleasantly.

Jack hesitated for a moment then shook his head. “Better not. Dad’s picking me up,” he replied trudging up the path behind Ken.

As soon as they were inside, Ken turned on his mum. “You really embarrassed us. We’re not kids you know!”

Rosie was meek. “You’re right! Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. That woman makes me so mad,” she rallied. “It’s like she’s spying on us.”

Ken nodded grudgingly. While Jack, who could not stay mad at Rosie, said it was okay and almost meant it.

Within five minutes they were round the kitchen table, Rosie with a cup of tea and the boys tucking into fresh baked scones, still hot enough to make the butter run.

“Remember last night I said when I was a girl a baby was kidnapped,” Rosie reminded Jack. “Well, here’s the story to make up for before.”

“It’s been ages since I heard this. It was one of my favourites when I was little,” Ken confided.

“Catherine’s going to go mad when she finds out!” Jack grinned mischievously.

“Jack Hughes, you are wicked!” Rosie grinned back. “Poor Catherine,” she added staring at her teacup and thinking how brave Catherine was to take on Thomas.

* * *

Rosie began speaking. The long vowels of her soft southwest accent rolled over the table, crashing against the boys, like Atlantic breakers against the cliffs at Tintagel.

“Our family has lived in Cornwall for ever. We’re almost part of landscape and some of our stories have been passed down for generations. One concerns a handsome young farmer who married a fairy wife. They were such a loving couple, the happiest in the county, it was said. Over the years she bore him many children, strong handsome sons and pretty, pretty girls.

“As the years passed, a canker crept between them. For he grew old, as men do, while she stayed young, as fairies do. He was angry all the time, finding fault with her, until, I suppose, her love died, murdered some would say.

“Or perhaps it was simply the pain of watching the husband and children she cherished grow old and infirm; knowing death drew ever closer and there was nothing she could do to stay the reaper’s hand. One day, unable to bear life any longer, her heart broke and she left without a backward glance.

“She wasn’t seen again until years later, at a christening by an old man who knew her when he was a youngster. Among the usual fairy godmother gifts of beauty, health and a sweet disposition, she gave an old silk shawl, saying it would help the tiny baby remember her heritage.

“When the girl was eighteen she ran away, believed to have gone to the fairies. There is a portrait of her hanging on our stairs,

painted on her eighteenth birthday. I'm her spitting image or so my Nan maintains."

"I never knew that," Ken remarked.

"You must have my love," his mum answered.

"Anyway, when I was seven or eight, there was a commotion in the village, men shouting, women crying, everyone angry. I was kept in the house with my Nan. When I wanted to know what was going on she wouldn't tell me because I was too young."

Rosie pulled out the dull iron ring on the silver chain. "That was the night she gave me this, a family heirloom from my great, great, great granddad. It's supposed to be made from a thunderbolt, a meteor. Iron is the best protection against fairy magic, and they thought thunderbolt iron the most powerful of all."

"So what happened?" asked Jack, eagerly.

"Although people don't mean to talk in front of you, when you're small they forget you're there. A baby had gone, disappeared from his pram, with a strange, squawking brat left in his place. The mother was distraught because she only left him outside to get some fresh air.

"In our village we're all related one way or another, so the grief hit everyone hard. Great-grandma was over seventy and she was furious. I couldn't understand it, for you could not meet a sweeter old lady. I absolutely adored her, we all did.

"When I heard the car come back I guessed Uncle John was out with Great-Grandma. Too restless to sleep, I snuck out to my favourite place on the stairs to see if I could overhear anything. Great-Grandma was too breathless, so I heard nothing crouched all

the way up on the stairs. Suddenly though, she pointed straight at me and everyone turned round!

“Well, my heart stopped dead, I can tell you. I flew into bed, but when no-one came, I realised she hadn’t seen me, so she must have been pointing at something else.

“Next morning I saw Great-Grandma was pointing at the portrait of the young girl I who looked like me. The one who’d vanished a hundred years before. Nan, creeping up behind me, fair made me jump when she said she hoped I never caused the same heartache.

“After spending years wondering what she meant, I asked when I was old enough. She told me that night Great-Grandma went to fetch the ugly brat from the woman’s house and take it to Becton Tor Manor, a wrecked old mansion that used to be a hospital during the War. It was supposed to be haunted and Great-Grandma thought it was... by fairies!

“You see, the queen had left one of her own as a changeling. The fairies had been dying for hundreds of years and their children were often sick or grew wrong. Great-Grandma thought the queen took the baby out of desperation. But once she saw her own poor sick mite, her mother’s love would prevail. She knew fairies take what they want and think about it later.

“However, she took the great big iron bar we kept in the barn to put across the threshold so the queen could not keep her trapped. When Great-Grandma met the fairy queen, she saw it was the girl in the picture! But Nan said she knew that all along because the fairy queen kept a close eye on our family and Great-Grandma had met her before.”

Chapter 15 Lower Netherhyde

After her mother left for work, Catherine went to the cellar to find Thomas asleep on the sofa with the television on. She shook him awake.

“Did you fall asleep watching television?”

“It is marvellous. I watched all night,” he replied.

While cooking breakfast, Catherine began to wonder what to say to the boys. She was not a coward by nature. In fact, she could never remember doing a cowardly thing in her life. Asking Thomas to watch the toast, she ran upstairs to ring school. Lying to the school secretary was not easy, but it was easier than lying to her friends. Knowing this was her first day of illness the secretary was very sympathetic, which only made Catherine feel worse.

After ringing school, Catherine rang Rosie. She sounded so upset, Rosie came right over. Shaken to see how miserable Catherine looked when she answered the door, a horrible thought occurred.

“Where’s Thomas?”

“Watching television.”

“He was like that in my house,” Rosie confided, with a hint of relief. “Watch it all day and night if you let him. He’s worse than

me for watching any old rubbish. Used to sneak down in the middle of the night but I'd catch him because he had the sound too loud."

"He keeps it down now," Catherine snitched.

"Does he?" laughed Rosie. "The sly little beggar, and here's me thinking I cured him."

Rosie soon saw Catherine was unhappy because she felt guilty. To cheer her up she started telling the same story she told Jack the night before. Halfway through her tale, they heard a noise in the hall.

"Oh no, it's Mother," cried Catherine in panic.

It wasn't. It was Thomas.

"Hello my treasure, what's the matter?" Rosie asked when she saw how upset he looked.

"A want a go home," Thomas muttered sadly.

"We know and we're trying, but we don't know how."

"No, A want ta go ta me real home. A want ta see Mam an' Da an' Peg an' Doll. Come an' see." He put out his hand to Rosie.

Catherine followed them downstairs.

"There!" he blubbered, pointing to a program on the television.

"I think it's a Catherine Cookson. It is. I've seen this one. It's good," remarked Rosie; identifying the costume drama set about a hundred years ago on a small farm.

"Take me home," Thomas half sobbed, pointing at the television.

“It’s only a play Thomas, my treasure. It’s not real,” Rosie gently assured him.

“Who’s Thomas? Me name’s Sam, Sam Bennett an’ it is real! An A want ta go home ta Da an’ Mam an’ our Peg an’ Doll, me sisters.”

Catherine stared open mouthed at Thomas. “What did you say?”

“Me name’s Sam Bennett an’ A want ta go home.”

“Where is home Sam?” Rosie quietly asked.

“Lower Netherhyde ‘twixt Giant an’ Dorchester town,” he explained.

“He seems pretty certain,” Rosie whispered to Catherine.

But Catherine was already charging upstairs to her get her tablet.

“Come on Sam, let’s see what Catherine’s up to.”

Catherine was on the Internet. “There are dozens of Lower Netherehydies... Here’s one, near Dorchester! Guess what, the Giant is close by. The Cerne Abbas Giant, cut from the chalk.”

“That must be a hundred miles from here,” Rosie exclaimed.

“Even if he’s right, how do we get there?” She paused, thinking.

“Can I use your phone?”

Catherine nodded.

“Hello Alan. No, I haven’t got another tip for the gee-gees. But as you brought it up, I need a favour. Have you still got that white van of yours?”

Alan must have said he had because Rosie replied, “Well I need a lift to Dorchester down the South Coast for me and a couple of friends.”

She listened for a second. “A hundred miles? More like two hundred and by my reckoning that’s not even half what you won on the horses the past month.”

Rosie listened again. “Yes it is a good day out, isn’t it? Oh, that is lovely of you Alan! Soon as you can, I suppose. Tomorrow? Hang on.”

Catherine nodded eagerly. The cleaning lady came Fridays and she was wondering how she was going to explain Thomas.

“Thanks Alan. See you about half nine, when the traffic’s died down.”

Jack’s mother was in hospital tomorrow and wanted to cook a thank-you meal for Jack’s friends. Having promised to help get things ready, Rosie felt terrible leaving Catherine with Sam, as Thomas now called himself.

Catherine was firm. “Look Rosie, he knows he is going home tomorrow. You have to go, I feel bad enough missing it as it is.”

Rosie knew she was right. Thomas was normal except for the fact he still only answered to Sam.

“If there are any problems,” she insisted, “ring me at Jack’s house.”

“I promise!” Catherine agreed. “Now go, we cannot both let Jack’s mum down.”

“I wish you could come.”

“Tell me about it tomorrow.”

“I will,” she replied, giving Catherine a hug.

Catherine squirmed a little. “What was that for?”

“Oh nothing,” Rosie shrugged.

She thought Catherine genuinely brave and good, but knew she would be mortified to hear it.

* * *

By the time Rosie arrived, Jack’s mum had cleaned the house from top to bottom, packed her bag for the hospital, and was cooking the evening meal.

“Lorraine, will you sit down!” cried Rosie, seeing how tired she looked.

“There’ll be plenty of time to rest tomorrow,” Jack’s mum briskly replied.

Rosie realised she was keeping busy to avoid thinking about hospital. “Do you mind if I put the kettle on? I’m parched.”

“You know what Rosie, a cuppa would be lovely,” Jack’s mum answered shyly. “I’m about finished anyway.”

The two women sat down together. Rosie was a good listener and Lorraine had a lot on her mind. She confided to feeling a bit of a fraud because she didn’t feel ill, just tired.

“I’d be exactly the same; especially as Kenny only has me to rely on,” agreed Rosie.

“I can’t thank you enough for giving Jack his dinner every night and letting him stay until his dad picks him up. It’s a big weight off my mind.”

“It’s no problem. The boys get on, and I know you’d do the same.”

“Do you think I’m being silly not wanting Jack to see me in hospital? I suppose I might feel different if Dan was here.” Lorraine looked as if she might cry.

“You do what you think best,” Rosie told her firmly.

Lorraine pulled herself together. “I need to sort the potatoes and some custard for the trifle.”

“Shall I make the custard?” Rosie offered.

“That would be smashing, thanks.”

Dinner was nearly ready and it was getting late. Catherine had phoned to apologise, blaming the dentist. Jack’s dad was on his way home. But there was no sign of the boys.

Lorraine started to fret. Rosie, suspecting they were with Agnes Day, suggested ringing Jack’s mobile. Jack apologised to his mum, saying they’d be about ten minutes. To Rosie’s relief, Agnes Day did not gate-crash the party.

Although Rosie knew it was Agnes’ fault, the boys were not entirely blameless. Intending to give them a piece of her mind as soon as Lorraine and Ron went to fetch the food, the boys beat her to it. The instant Jack’s parents left the room, they excitedly told Rosie how Agnes was taking them to a restaurant, and had promised to get them back in time for Jack’s dad.

Rosie almost hit the roof. But Ron and Lorraine returned, so she bit her tongue. Agnes Day needed a right good talking to, and as far as Rosie was concerned, she just the person to do it.

* * *

Alan cheerily introduced himself to Catherine and Sam, as Thomas now called himself. Alan was in his late twenties, with a muscular build, dark hair, unshaved stubble and a nice smile. Catherine blushed when he spoke, thinking him very good looking. It was quite obvious, he liked Rosie. And Rosie seemed quite different with Alan. Somehow she was more of a girl.

“Come on Princess,” Alan teased, giving Catherine a hand into the van.

The normally frosty faced Catherine grinned when he called her ‘Princess’ and catching Rosie’s eye found Rosie grinning back.

There were two rows of seats in the transit. Catherine took the second row behind Rosie, with Thomas, or Sam rather, clambering in next to her.

“Can A drive?” he pleaded.

“Can you drive?” was Catherine’s playful re-joiner.

“A can learn!”

“Tell you what mate, when we get where we’re going, I’ll let you have a go. If there’s somewhere quiet that is.”

“Oh thanks Alan.”

Smiling at Thomas, Alan winked at the girls. “No problem.”

Rosie got into the van, whispering, “I mentioned Sam was slow and we’re taking him to family.”

“He fancies you,” Catherine mouthed.

“Shush!” grinned Rosie as Alan opened the driver’s door.

Thomas was subdued by the journey, so Rosie and Catherine could relax. By the time Alan bought everyone breakfast at a roadside café, it really felt like they were on a grand day out, a sort of magical mystery tour. Under careful supervision, Alan let Thomas try his hand at driving in the empty car park, which thrilled him so much they never heard the end of it for the rest of the trip.

Lower Netherhyde was a tiny village consisting of a church, a pub and a dozen cottages around a village green complete with duck pond.

“There’s Saint Swithun’s an’ the Farmers Arms,” Thomas squealed excitedly.

“It looks like you’re home Thom... I mean Sam,” replied Rosie.

“After we drop him off let’s grab a pub lunch somewhere,” Alan suggested. “My treat!”

“Alan you’ve paid for enough,” Rosie protested.

“All out of my winnings,” he assured her.

It suddenly struck Catherine, they were about to lose Thomas. The thought of never seeing him again left her desolate. Who would have thought Thomas would become such a big part of her life in little more than a week? But then her whole new life was not even two weeks old. Everything happened so fast.

A fortnight ago, she had not met Ken or Rosie; while Jack was just some dull boy who sat next to her in class. She would have never thought of lying to school or phoning in sick, and would never ever have missed homework to spend all night watching television, like she did with Thomas last night, and the night before.

Thomas had also changed in the short time she had known him. It was almost as if the fairy magic was wearing off. He even stopped speaking in rhyme.

“There it is!” Thomas shouted, excitedly pointing to an old fashioned cottage that looked a little run down, standing alone outside the village.

“Well I guess this is it Sam,” sighed Rosie, wondering if Jack’s brother would come home like this one day.

“I think I better go with him,” she announced suddenly.

“Me too,” Catherine piped up. Heartbroken at losing Thomas, she felt it was the proper way to say goodbye.

“Alan, park the van. We shouldn’t be long.”

“I’ll park over near the entrance to that field,” he told them. “Goodbye Sam. If you’re ever visiting again, I’ll give you another driving lesson.”

“Thanks Alan!” Thomas happily replied.

Rosie wanted Thomas to knock on the cottage door, but he was too nervous. Now Thomas was home the last of his strangeness was gone. It left Rosie quite optimistic about Dan.

“Go on,” she urged.

It seemed ages before they heard the snick of the lock. The door opened a crack as an old woman looked out.

“Can I help?” she asked in a broad country accent.

“Peg? Doll? Is it you? It’s Sam,” muttered Thomas, uncertain.

The old woman looked at him strangely. “I’m sorry you must have the wrong house. Who did you want?”

“The Bennetts, there’s Da an’ Mam an’ our Peggy an’ Dolly.”

“Sorry?” the old woman exclaimed in surprise.

“The Bennetts! There’s Da an’ Mam an’ Peg an’ Doll, an’ they live here!”

“Is this some sort of joke?” she responded, sharply.

Rosie spoke. “No it isn’t. He’s been unwell for a while. He thought his family lived here. We’re trying to find them. Sorry to disturb you.”

“Dolly it’s Sam, A’d know ya anywhere but yar gone all old.”

The old woman stared at Thomas. “It’s impossible. Is it really you, Sam? You’d be over seventy, now but you’re a boy!”

“Should we leave or should we step in?” Rosie enquired.

“You better leave,” the old woman replied.

“I think it’s for the best,” Rosie agreed, pulling Thomas away.

Thomas struggled. “No Doll, don’t send me away. Where’s Peg?” he shouted, “Peg, Peg, Peggy!”

“Sorry about this!” Rosie apologised.

With Catherine’s help, she dragged him down the path.

All the fight left Thomas. By the time they got to the van, he was sobbing quietly.

“She knew him!” Catherine insisted. “You could see it in her face. Why did she say she did not know him?”

“She didn’t say anything of the sort. That was the problem,” Rosie countered.

Alan had to reverse into the field to turn the van round. When they passed the house, the old woman was at the garden gate signalling for them to stop.

Rosie wound down the window.

“Peggy died almost ten years ago,” the old lady said. “We never knew what happened to Sam but to her dying day Peg swore he was alive. She had dreams about him, you see.”

“What’s this all about?” asked Alan.

“Take Thomas, I mean Sam, to his sister and let me talk to Alan,” Rosie said to Catherine. “Alan, you better take the van back.”

She let Alan park the van before speaking. “Sam isn’t normal.”

“You can see that,” Alan replied. “Is he backward?”

“He’s been away for a long time. If I have it right, it could be a very, very long time.”

“Locked up you mean?”

“Alan, what would you think if I said there were people who kidnapped kids and brought them up as their own?”

“Like a cult?”

“Weirder.”

He laughed. “You mean alien abduction?”

“Pretty much except these people are from earth like us. But they’re not like us. They call themselves Elfin. We call them fairies.”

He was not laughing now.

“I know how wild it sounds, but you have to trust me Alan. You know I see things, read cards, choose winning horses for you; all that is just a fraction of what they do.”

“I only want to know one thing,” Alan replied. “If you see all them things like I know you can, why can’t you see how I feel about you?”

“Oh Alan you’re a lovely man and you’re kind, but it’s Kenny...”

“I like Kenny. We get on.”

“No Alan, I meant Kenny’s dad, Stacey. I never stopped loving him. Don’t wait for me thinking I need time, I can’t promise anything. Now, I think we better go in, don’t you?”

* * *

Inside the cottage, Thomas was excitedly looking through old photograph albums.

“Look Rosie here A am. Me there an’ there. An’ there’s Peggy an’ Dolly like A remember. She looks different now, durn’t she?” he chuckled.

Coming in with a tray of tea and biscuits, Dolly started to cry.

“I forgot the sugar,” she said stiffly.

“Here let me help,” Rosie offered.

Dolly broke down in the kitchen. “What happened to him? It’s Sam but it’s impossible. In all these years he’s hardly changed.” Pausing to wipe her eyes, she tried to pull herself together.

“He was fourteen, a lovely gentle lad, a bit of a dreamer, bright as a button. The Headmaster wanted him to go to college; was speaking to the Education Board about scholarships. Happy as a lark he was too. No one could believe he’d run away, but where else could he go?”

“It’s hard to explain and to be honest I don’t know if I can.” Rosie hesitated. “He was taken by fairies. But they’re not little creatures with butterfly wings.”

“I know. They’re beautiful young men and women who never grow old and live in a sunlit garden. My sister Peg dreamed about Sam for years. Thought she was seeing him in heaven. He can’t live here anymore. He’s been away too long and the world’s too ugly. Promise you’ll take him back.”

Rosie grasped Dolly’s frail knotted hand. As she did, the old woman’s life ran through her like an electric shock. It had only happened once before to Rosie, a long time ago, and it was nothing like this.

Dolly’s memories overwhelmed her, the years of tears, and beneath, a solitary spark of hope like a candle flame at the bottom of a deep, dark well. The sisters had never married, but all their

lives clung to the dream of one day seeing their brother, Sam, in heaven.

“I promise,” swore Rosie.

“Thank you,” Dolly whispered. “And now I know he’s going to be all right, let me enjoy the time I have left with my baby brother.”

Chapter 16 Trapped in Elphame Wood

Caught in traffic on the motorway, Rosie asked Catherine for her phone, to let the boys know she'd be late.

"I'll take Thomas with me tonight," she added thoughtfully. "I know you don't mind my treasure but I promised Dolly and..." She interrupted herself as the answerphone picked up. "That's funny, they're not there."

"I bet they are with Agnes Day. Shall I phone Jack?" Catherine enquired.

"Don't you dare," exclaimed Rosie, suddenly wary. "The least that woman knows the better!"

Rosie and Catherine's instincts were correct. Agnes Day met the boys at the school gates, looking immaculately tailored and very attractive in sunglasses and sports car. When she insisted Jack needed cheering up because his poor mum was in hospital, he admitted to feeling low all day long.

"Catherine still ill?" asked Agnes, sounding anything but sorry. "How about dinner? I know an adorable little trattoria! What about a spin first? Come on boys, squeeze in."

Half an hour later, the sports car pulled into the car park of a rather fancy Italian restaurant. Jack let Ken use his phone to ring Rosie. As she was not in, he left a message on the answerphone.

Because it was early, the restaurant was empty. The dimly lit interior was intimately laid out with small tables covered in red check tablecloths, upon which spluttered solitary candles in wicker-wrapped wine bottles. The smell of warm wax added cosy undertones to the irresistible aromas of baking bread, grilled cheese and roast coffee.

A waiter in white shirt and black trousers, with a white cloth draped over one arm, led them to a table where he began flicking away imperceptible crumbs, before seating Agnes.

Despite their excitement, the boys could not help feeling a little intimidated; not only by the posh surroundings but also by their glamorous hostess. This was mainly because they feared making liars of themselves and incurring her displeasure.

Seemingly oblivious to any discomfort, Agnes, charm personified, helped them through the menu by suggesting pizza. A proper pizza she was quick to point out. Not at all like one from a takeaway or supermarket but with a crisp wafer-thin crust, burned in the middle where the cheese caught in the oven and embellished with thin slices of brown mushroom, green pepper, red onion, translucent marbled rashers of Serrano ham, fiery salami rounds and glossy piquant olives.

For dessert, tiramisu, a sort of boozy coffee trifle that was very sophisticated. Although neither of the boys was sure they liked the taste, they knew they would order it again if they ever got the chance because it sounded so adult and made them look as if they knew what they were talking about.

After dinner came coffee, espresso for Agnes, dark and strong in a miniscule cup, while for the boys cappuccino; creamy, frothy and sprinkled with powdered chocolate. Watching Agnes take

delicate sips, they tried to do the same instead of choking it down in one as they normally would.

Throughout the meal, Agnes was full of light and sparkle like a precious jewel. The boys, more than a little bedazzled, increasingly vied to outdo each other. When Jack mentioned how Ken saved him from bullies, a fascinated Agnes suggested a demonstration.

As a straw from the coke glass rolled across the table, she exclaimed, “You have phenomenal gifts!”

Ken blushed with pleasure.

“I know people interested in developing such talent. With the right training, you could do unimaginable things; knowing where terrorists will strike, stopping them before they hurt anyone. What a hero you’d be. How admired!”

“I don’t know about that. It’s just a trick,” Ken protested, modestly.

“You underestimate yourself, people like Jack and I have no magic. Anything we do is hard won through years of toil.”

Seeing Jack sulk Agnes smiled. “Don’t be unhappy Jack. You have courage, loyalty and determination. While not the same as Ken’s remarkable gifts, they are just as rare. Magic isn’t everything.”

To Jack, magic felt much better than stuff like courage and determination, and he could not help feeling a little jealous.

“You boys are like Arthur and Merlin, Jack’s aura is gold and red like a king. Whereas yours, Ken, is silver and purple the colours of a great wizard.”

Being called King Arthur somewhat mollified Jack, but he still wanted to be Merlin too.

“Is an aura those rings of different coloured light that surrounds everyone?” Ken pondered, knowing full well what it was. “Don’t all the colours mean something?”

“Don’t be stupid,” exclaimed Jack, fed up with Ken showing off.

“I am afraid Ken is right Jack.” smiled Agnes.

“Can you see auras?” Jack was awestruck. He bet if he could see Agnes Day’s aura it would be a rainbow, like golden sun sparkling through crystal rain.

“It is hard and takes practice. You have to learn to see without looking.” Agnes closed her eyes to slits, seeming to stare sideways at the boys, and although they had no idea if she saw their auras or not, it looked impressive.

“I remember months of heartache, thinking I would never do it. Then one day, came the faintest smear of colour before I looked, chasing it away.” Agnes laughed self-consciously.

“The next time, I refused to look at it; although it is ever so hard to keep your eyes unfocused and stare straight ahead. I was rewarded with my aura opening around me like a brilliant beautiful flower of light.”

“Wow, I’d love to see my aura,” exclaimed both lads, simultaneously.

“Perhaps one day I will teach you.”

“Could you?”

“Would you?”

“Not until I have permission from the Archmage.”

“Will you ask?” pleaded the boys, hooked.

* * *

After dropping off Ken, Agnes turned her attention to Jack.

“I couldn’t help feeling sorry for you when talking to Ken about his fantastic gifts. I remember how hard it is being ordinary.”

“You’re not ordinary!” Jack vehemently protested.

“Neither are you.”

As they pulled up, Jack’s house looked in darkness.

“I see your father isn’t yet home,” she remarked.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t doubt it!”

She paused. “I was going to give this to you some other time, but you might as well have it now.”

Inside a plain brown paper bag was a nightlight on a coloured glass saucer.

“It’s to see your aura. If I tell you how, you must keep it our secret. Not a word to anyone, especially Ken or Catherine. I could get into the most terrible trouble.”

“I swear on my life!”

“No need to swear Jack. I see auras, I know you how loyal you are.”

Agnes dropped her voice to a dramatic whisper. “In a dark room, light the candle in front of a mirror. Stare directly into the flame. If you avoid looking at your reflection, after a while it will become a black shadow. Keep staring into the flame even when little sparks of light appear at the edge of your vision to dance around your darkened reflection. This is your aura. The more you ignore it, the stronger it grows.”

She hesitated. “You are brave Jack.”

Then, giving him a box of matches, added, “You’ll need these.”

Walking into the lounge, Jack found his dad asleep on the settee with the lights off; even though it was still only early. There was a half-eaten sandwich and a mug of cold tea on the coffee table. Poor Dad must be exhausted, working all day before rushing off to see Mum.

Jack was torn between waking him, and letting him sleep. The thing was, if he woke Dad, he would have to keep him company, or do homework. Whereas all he really wanted to do was see his aura. He decided to let Dad sleep. As for homework, the teachers would let him off because they felt sorry for him.

Clutching Agnes’ gift, Jack almost flew upstairs. The first thing he did was fling open his window, so the bedroom would not smell of candles or matches. Dad would be furious if he caught him messing with fire in his room. As the cold night air rushed in, Jack decided to keep his coat on.

He stared into the candle flame for what seemed like hours, only seeing his reflection outlined darkly in the mirror in front of him. His eyes went in and out of focus as he kept forgetting not to

look. At one point, he thought he saw little points of light dancing deep in the mirrored glass, but they vanished at a glance.

Encouraged, Jack tried again and was instantly rewarded with another display of dancing lights. Suppressing his excitement, he kept looking straight ahead - for although it was ever so hard, he knew they would vanish if he peeked.

His reflection became a black hole ringed by flickering flames. Everything was going exactly as Agnes predicted. Jack was convinced he was looking at his aura. The lights began to swirl around his head, getting faster and faster like water spinning down a drain. He felt as if it was dragging him in, deep, down, into darkness.

Frightened, Jack remembered Agnes warning how his aura would vanish if he looked directly at it. When he did, the gaping black hole became wider, enveloping the twirling lights, until one by one they winked out like stars. Suddenly he was following them, falling into the hole, even though the hole was nothing more than his reflection in a mirror.

* * *

Jack was in the bottom of a gully in a dark overgrown wood. The black swirling tunnel of his vision was a tangle of wet leaves and branches. The flickering lights nothing more than specks of reflected daylight. Far above, bright sunshine shone on leafy trees, but here everything was gloomy.

He tried to clamber out of his prison, but the soft muddy ground left him slipping and sliding. When he grabbed dead

branches, his hands slid from their slimy bark. Trapped, he began to panic. The harder he fought to scramble out, the deeper he dug in.

Then he heard a voice. A voice so quiet he thought it was imagination.

“Jack I know you’re here. Listen, she cannot hear or see us. Don’t struggle, we’re safe.”

Jack looked around. Unable to find Dan, he realised he could not see his brother was because he was his brother - just like in his dreams.

From the sunlit world above, came the voices of Dan’s woodland friends. The nymphs and fauns were playing Hide-and-Seek, and Dan was hiding.

“She’s looking for me, so I haven’t got long.” Dan’s voice echoed in his head. “I can’t fight her anymore; it’s too real. Tell Mum and Dad I love them. Tell Alison I miss her. I miss you too Jack. Never knew how much ‘til now. Say goodbye for me.”

“No Dan, you’re coming home.”

“She’ll never let me go.”

“We found Thomas, the one she’s looking for. We’ll bring him back.”

An angry faun poked his head into the tunnel. “There you are Daniel, shame on you! If you hide so well, you spoil the game; for if we never find you, no one else has a turn!”

As Dan obediently crawled out, Jack experienced the horrible sensation of being ripped from his brother’s body.

He called after him, “Speak to her Dan. We’ll bring her Thomas the Rhymer, him for you, a swap.”

Dan was already gone, out of the darkness and into the light. Once his brother left, Jack thought he would whiz back to his bedroom. Long minutes dragged past before he realised, he was not going anywhere.

The woody tunnel at the bottom of the gully was narrower than he thought, confining and oppressive. He tried to climb out but could not fight his way past the prickly twigs holding him like grasping fingers, snagging hair and clothes. The more he struggled, the deeper he sank into the mud, which made squelching, sucking noises when he tried to pull his feet free.

The light became grey at the tunnel entrance, his window to the world. The sunlit woods turned cold and unwelcoming. More than ever, he wanted to go home.

From above came strange snuffling sounds like large dogs searching for a scent in the undergrowth. As the noise got louder, Jack became uneasy. A huge black shape loped past the tunnel. It looked like a hunch-backed dog. If it was, it was bigger than any dog he had ever seen. He wondered if it was a dragon. The animal came back, sticking a long sharp muzzle into the tunnel and sniffing.

When it smelled him, instead of barking, it let out a croaky screech. Another creature joined it, forcing its head into the tunnel. Even though there was not enough room for both. The first screeched and snapped at the newcomer, who screeched and snapped back.

As the two animals pulled out of the cramped, narrow space, Jack clearly saw them, and was unable to believe his eyes; for although they had dog's bodies, they had eagle's heads. He could clearly see the wicked hooked beaks as they dipped and jerked with

odd disjointed movements, hissing and hooting in the circle of grey light above him.

* * *

A mile away in Rosie's house, Catherine had just gone home, leaving Rosie watching television with Ken and Thomas. Suddenly, Thomas jumped up from the settee with a wild yelp and headed out the room. Rosie had the presence of mind to shout, "Sam what's wrong?"

"Jack," he yelled as the front door slammed behind him.

Rosie and Ken sprung to their feet, looking at each other.

"Get the coats my love," Rosie instructed her son. "It's going to be cold out. You better bring one for Sam."

Thomas ran all the way to Jack's house. Through the open bedroom window, he saw eerie flickering shadows in the bedroom. It could only mean one thing.

"Sylvie!" he muttered.

The doors and windows of Jack's house were locked, but Thomas knew the way in. He was Thomas the Rhymer, a Prince of the Elfin; nothing mortal could stop him but iron. Avoiding lock and letterbox, he put his hands on the door. They slowly sank through the wood making the letterbox rattle, like it always did. His arms followed, then the rest of him. In his eagerness, he overbalanced, falling with a loud crash into the hallway.

"What the hell?" a man's sleepy voice cried.

Realising he had to move quickly, Thomas turning insubstantial as a whisper, vanished from sight. Yet, because he was in a hurry, the invisible man made an unholy racket hurtling up the stairs.

* * *

The strange hunchback dogs with the bird's heads, tired of waiting, were now taking turns to dig Jack out. One would dig frantically with its huge front claws then stop, flatten itself to the ground, and squirm into the tunnel wildly snapping its cruel beak. Each time one did this, the beak came closer.

Fortunately, Jack could not see how much closer because the massive head blocked out all light. It was only when the creature retreated, to let its companion dig, that Jack got a fleeting glimpse of the enormous size of the monsters bearing down on him.

Everything went black once more as Jack heard the snapping of a hard bony beak. This time, to his horror, he felt the creature's hot sour breath on his face. He was sure this was it, when out of nowhere someone grabbed his collar, yanking him backwards.

Jack had the sensation of falling. When it stopped, he was in his bedroom with Thomas shaking him.

"Girls and boys come out to play, the moon is bright and I'm away!" cried Thomas, dropping Jack to throw himself at the wardrobe unit. "Sylvie my pet, here I come, Thomas of Rhyme, your love, your one."

Thomas' head collided with the mirror in a rainbow of smashed glass.

“Are you all right?” asked Jack, a little shaken by the sight of someone head-butting his furniture. He half expected Thomas to be covered in blood, but the man appeared unharmed.

“It’s gone!” Thomas wildly lamented.

“What has?”

“Elphame Wood, a forbidden place. You must be bad to be there.”

Suddenly it made sense. “No, you’ve wrong,” Jack told him. “It’s a place she can’t go. That’s why Dan called me to say goodbye.”

“Then am I lost, for she loves another!”

“But Dan doesn’t love her. He wants to come home. That’s why she sent those things.”

“Ha-ha! They keep our secrets dark and dim, what’s out is out, what’s in is in.”

There was a banging on the bedroom door as his father shouted, “Jack, are you alright?”

“On the floor,” Thomas urgently hissed.

“Why?” Jack whispered back.

With a finger to his lips, Thomas faded into a silver shimmering outline and was gone; leaving Jack to do what he was told.

Dad burst into the room.

“What happened son? I heard an almighty crash!”

Seeing Jack on the floor he cried, “Are you all right?”

Turning to face his dad, Jack groggily mumbled, “I think I passed out.”

His father helped him to his bed. “What a mess.”

“Sorry Dad.”

“It’s not your fault son.”

The doorbell rang.

“What now?” his exasperated father groaned.

“Answer it, I’ll be fine,” Jack insisted.

When his father left, Jack quickly looked around. His wardrobe unit was broken and the mirror smashed into a thousand pieces. He got off the bed picking up the nightlight and glass saucer, still miraculously intact, and went to close his window. Downstairs he heard voices, one dad’s, the other Rosie’s.

From the landing Jack could see them talking. Catching a flick of Rosie’s eyes, Dad looked upstairs.

“How are you feeling son?”

Rosie quickly piped up. “I came over because I was concerned. You looked awful earlier. I should have ordered a taxi or phoned your dad to fetch you.”

As Jack came downstairs, he realised Rosie knew something was up, even if she did not know what.

“I passed out!” he explained sheepishly. “Perhaps it was something I ate.”

“Probably the tiramisu,” she replied, having heard all about Agnes’ treat.

“I think I better call the doctor son.”

“No I’m fine,” Jack protested.

“I’m sure he’ll be all right,” Rosie told his dad. “Why don’t you let him get off to bed? Sleep is probably the best thing.”

“You’re right. Damn, his room’s a mess.”

“When I fell I broke my wardrobe,” Jack informed her.

“Never mind son. I’ll get it sorted,” Dad assured him.

“Why don’t you have a shower while your dad and I clean your room?” Rosie suggested.

“You are good Rosie, doing all this for Jack.”

“I have one at home myself remember. I just hope someone would do the same for me.”

Despite his father and Rosie’s work, Jack’s bedroom was still unfit to sleep in.

“You will have to sleep in Dan’s room tonight old son,” Dad remarked.

“That’s ok,” Jack replied, thinking sleeping in his brother’s room would make him feel close to Dan.

Jack was tucked up in Dan’s bed when Rosie came in with a cup of hot milk. As she put it on the bedside table, she ruffled Jack’s hair, whispering, “Ken’s at home with Thomas. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Dad followed her in, gruffly demanding, “I don’t care how old you are mister, you frightened the life out of me and I deserve a goodnight kiss.”

“Dad!” yelled Jack, embarrassed because of Rosie.

“Don’t ‘Dad’ me!” Dad announced, kissing him on the forehead. “I love you son. Goodnight.”

Chapter 17 London

Rosie picked up the phone to hear Jack's dad say, "Rosie it's Ron."

A tinny voice in the background wailed, "Dad, you're embarrassing me!"

"I don't care!" Ron snorted impatiently. "Excuse me, Rosie."

The phone went quiet. Rosie still heard the faint sounds of Jack arguing with his dad until Ron told him to knock-it-off!

A moment later, Ron spoke again. "Sorry to impose, but I was wondering if I could drop off Jack? He's still pretty shook-up from last night and I don't think it's fair leaving him home alone."

"I'm not a baby!" whined the tinny voice.

"For heaven's sake Jack, put a sock in it!" growled Ron.

Rosie stifled a chuckle. "No, of course I don't mind. It'll be nice to have some company."

"Who was that?" Ken idly remarked as his mum put the phone down.

"Ron wants me to look after Jack."

"So he's not in school?"

Rosie shook her head, already knowing where this was going.

"No, you can't!"

“But Mum, nothing ever happens on a Friday!”

“No I said, anyway what about homework?”

Ken sloped off mumbling something about it not being fair.

Rosie called after him. “Someone’s got to tell Catherine what happened last night, or at least as much as we can put together from Thomas!”

“Suppose so,” he grudgingly admitted.

He obviously had not thought of that because ten minutes later he phoned Catherine and was out the door without another peep.

Rosie answered the doorbell to a surly looking Jack.

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel a fool the way he made you babysit me.”

“I know, I heard over the phone,” grinned Rosie.

Jack looked mortified.

“Forget it Jack, I’m glad you’re here. I need your help with Thomas.”

“Why what’s wrong?”

“Watch!” Rosie walked to the stairs. “Sam, Jack's come to visit.”

“Don’t want to come down,” Thomas shouted back.

“Sam?” Jack whispered.

Rosie put a finger to her lips. “I’m making breakfast.”

“I had my breakfast,” he whispered again.

Rosie shook her head. “Bacon and eggs!”

“Not hungry. I don’t feel well,” Thomas groaned.

“How about a nice boiled egg on toast then?”

“Leave me alone, I’m not well!”

“It’s not like him to pass up food,” muttered Jack. “What’s up?”

“It might have something to do with yesterday.”

“He tried to get home through the mirror,” Jack told her.

“Did he?” mused Rosie. “That can’t have helped after what happened.”

“What do you mean? And who’s Sam?”

“You don’t know, do you? Thomas remembered he was a chap called Sam Bennett and where he lived. So we took him to his sister’s house. But she’s really old now. He’s been away years and years. I think it gave him a bit of a shock.”

“Gave him a shock, I didn’t even know he was back until he pulled me through the mirror last night.”

“Come on Jack, we’ve got a lot to discuss.”

* * *

When Catherine and Ken rushed home to see Jack at lunchtime, Rosie made cheese toasties. Despite the irresistible smell, Thomas stayed in his room. After lunch, when Jack decided he was well enough for school, Rosie saw no good reason to stop him. As soon as she was alone, she took Mr Grin’s card from the

kitchen drawer intending to ring his office and give Agnes Day a piece of her mind.

The receptionist informed her Miss Day was in London on business. Not to be put off, Rosie requested Mr Grin. If the old man did not know what his assistant was up to, it was high time he found out. A moment later, the receptionist put her through.

“I wanted to speak to Agnes Day, but I suppose you’ll have to do!”

“Oh dear, this sounds serious, shall I come right away?”

“No! I’ll come to you.”

“It is rather a long way.”

“I can get the bus and train! I’m not helpless!” she snapped, worrying if she had enough money in her purse for both.

“There is no need for that. I will have my car meet you in the High Street. Would half an hour be convenient?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Splendid.”

When Rosie was shown into his rather posh office, Mr Grin hastened to make her welcome. Almost immediately, she began to blurt out everything, leaving out Thomas of course. As she did, his charming manner slipped.

“Believe me, I know nothing of this. I am afraid Miss Day is something of a loose cannon.”

He fell silent as his secretary brought in tea. After watching her fiddle with the tray, he sighed impatiently: “Thank you Dorothy, we can manage.”

Once she left, he resumed as though uninterrupted, “You know about Agnes’ sister Poppy. How she makes a point of saying this is why she feels so strongly about Jack losing his brother.”

Rosie nodded.

“I have often believed Agnes harbours some resentment to Poppy, who by all accounts was a bit of a prodigy; clever, pretty and popular. Perhaps even the fairies preferring her sister was the final straw.”

“What an awful thing to say,” Rosie replied.

Mr Grin merely smiled pleasantly. “Tea?”

Pouring a cup for Rosie, he indicated sugar, milk or lemon; then poured his own.

“Unlike Jack, Agnes did tell her parents what she saw; always strong willed that girl. They took her to a child psychiatrist who helped her remember the dreams. The psychiatrist merely thought Agnes over imaginative. It was all quickly forgotten when Poppy returned. Poppy, of course, only told her family she ran away. But Agnes knew the truth. Six months later Poppy did run away, never to be found.”

“Perhaps she was snatched again,” suggested Rosie.

“No, she made quite elaborate preparations to ensure she was not traced. A disappointment, but not entirely unexpected; the longer they are with the Elfin the harder it is to settle into normal life. About seventy per cent return.”

“How long was Poppy with them?”

“Around six months.”

“So there’s still hope for Dan?”

“To be frank dear lady, there is very little hope. There are hundreds of fairy nests. By the time we find the correct one, they will be long gone. We only found Poppy by chance. Something Agnes remembered from a dream, some well-known landmark as I recall.”

“Is that what she was doing with Jack?”

Mr Grin shrugged, “It is certainly possible she wanted to re-establish Jack’s connection with his brother; especially with the dreams and telephone calls ceasing. Of course without Thomas, Jack is all she has.”

“I thought she seemed a little too interested in Thomas. Is that why she’s in London?”

“Probably reporting to her masters. I am afraid young Agnes is very ambitious. So obsessed with capturing a fairy queen, she fails to see they would not risk Bess to save another.”

The old man pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. Rosie thought he looked tired.

“Given she is prepared to use the children so callously, it is best to forget Dan. I will do what I can to forbid Agnes from seeing them. I am terribly sorry it has come to this.”

“There must be something more we can do?” Rosie protested.

“I am sorry Rosie there is nothing left to do.”

Mr Grin’s parting words haunted Rosie on the long car journey home. Feeling defeated, she started to consider how she could possibly tell Jack his brother was lost. Then there was Thomas. She had to do something to help him. She promised his sister.

* * *

By the time Rosie got home, the kids were back from school. With Thomas nowhere to be seen, she asked if he had come out of his room and was unsurprised to hear he hadn't. She found him still in bed, pretending to be asleep.

"Come down my treasure. You haven't eaten a thing all day. You must be famished."

He did not answer.

"I'm starting dinner, so if you feel hungry join us. If you're not too good, you don't have to talk, just watch TV."

"I don't like television anymore," Thomas mumbled.

"You poor thing, do what you want," Rosie answered, thinking there was no place left for him. His best hope lay in returning to the only life he had ever known. What seemed so easy to promise Dolly yesterday; now looked impossible.

Ken followed her into the kitchen with the other two trailing behind.

"Have we got any biscuits?" he asked. "I'm starving."

"I'll be doing tea soon... Oh blow!"

"What's up mum?"

Rosie had been so busy she had forgotten about cooking.

"It's ok mum, we'll sort out something for us."

"You are good," she replied, beginning to cheer up.

“How’s Thomas, I mean Sam?” asked Jack opening a tin of peas.

“Not good, still won’t come down. I’m worried about him.”

“We’ve been talking Mum. We should take him to London. I mean we know where Bess lives, at least we know as much as the Mages.”

“We can’t rely on them for help! Not after yesterday,” Jack added with feeling.

“We are better off without them,” snapped Catherine. “When they see Thomas with friends, they will take us straight to Bess.”

“Who will?”

“Her guardians, the ones on Dyott Street, the bag lady and the skinhead,” Catherine replied.

“They sound dangerous. Anyway, even if we could go, I haven’t even got enough for the train fare!” Rosie had less than ten pounds in her purse to last the week.

“I have five hundred pounds saved. We can use that,” Catherine told her.

Ken butted in. “It’s not enough. It would only cover train fares and meals, what about hotels? If we’re down there for days it’ll cost thousands!”

“I can’t ask Dad for money,” Jack explained glumly. “Not with him buying new stuff for my bedroom.”

“We don’t need to be there for days!” claimed Catherine. “As soon as the guardians recognise Thomas, something will happen.”

“That’s what worries me,” Rosie answered. “Anyway Catherine you can’t spend your money, it’s not fair.”

“What about Alan, mum? He’s loaded and would do anything for you.”

“That’s terrible using someone like that! You should be ashamed Kenneth Trelawney!”

“You know I didn’t mean it like that!” Humiliated and not knowing what else to say, Ken started buttering bread as if his life depended on it.

Thomas popped his head around the door asking if dinner was ready. Rosie smiled, thinking it the best possible omen.

“Won’t be long Sam my treasure,” she chirped.

“Sam’s gone,” Thomas replied.

* * *

Saturday afternoon, Jack invited Ken and Rosie to come along to buy a new wardrobe and spend the evening. Dad would get a takeaway. They could watch a couple of films. Then he’d run them home afterwards. Catherine had already said yes. Ken thought it was a great idea. Rosie declined. She didn’t want to get in the way and besides, someone had to look after Thomas.

They had a great time with Jack’s dad. He took them to the café in the retail park for a cake. It was not posh like the restaurant they went to with Agnes but the cakes were massive and really tasty.

On the way home, they chose some treats to go with the films. The rest of the afternoon was spent giving Jack’s dad a hand, putting up the wardrobe. When they finished, he said they did a

splendid job. Before leaving for the hospital, he took their order, saying he'd pick up the pizzas on the way back.

As soon as Jack's dad left, they began talking about how they could get to London. The only thing they could think of was to use Catherine's money.

"Five hundred pounds," exclaimed Jack, still amazed. He did not know if it was because Catherine had so much, or because she offered to spend it on them.

"It's not going to be easy!" Ken grumbled. "Remember how she went mad when I suggested asking Alan, and he really is loaded!"

"Still, I could pay for myself... and you two of course," Catherine added, making the lads well chuffed by her generosity.

* * *

Alan popped round to ask Rosie if she had a feeling for the horses. It was Saturday afternoon, the racing was on, and he wanted to know if she fancied going for a drink later.

Rosie had a good feeling about Alan's horses, such a good feeling she had a rather cheeky idea. While it wasn't right to ask Alan for money, where was the harm in asking him to place a bet for her? She had heard people won a fortune on these accumulator things, but two pounds did seem like an awful lot of money.

Alan looked shocked. "Hey big spender, you must need it pretty bad to gamble your cash."

“It’s to take the kids to London. Kenny’s never been and with Jack’s mum in hospital, I thought it would be nice to treat them.”

“Go on?”

“Oh, Alan everything is such a mess, I don’t know where to begin. I feel responsible for Thomas since the other day. Then there’s Jack, he’s been through such a lot. Some woman took the boys out while we were taking Thomas home and filled their heads with rubbish. It’s a terrible muddle.”

“Do you want a cup of tea?” he asked.

“Love one.”

The day went more or less perfect from that point. Alan was a good listener and really cared for Rosie. After he phoned a few bookies to spread his bets, or so he said, they watched the racing on telly, with Thomas whooping and hollering as horse after horse romped home.

Alan returned from the bookies with a mountain of notes, which he gave to Rosie, saying he put an extra fifty quid on for her. Rosie counted almost eight hundred pounds. It was the most money she had ever seen in her life and she was really choked. “I don’t need all this!”

“You always give me tips and never take nothing, so go on treat everyone to the trip to London. Buy some nice clothes. Get Kenny a computer like all his mates. There’s nothing wrong taking a few bob.”

“Alan this is not a few bob, this is a lot.”

“I want you to have it, I do.”

Wiping away a tear, Rosie thought it the nicest thing anyone had ever done.

“I don’t know why you’re crying! You’re buying me and Tommy dinner,” he told her. “So get your glad rags on.”

Before leaving for the pub, Rosie phoned Jack’s house to say she was out for the evening. Of course, she could not resist adding they were all going to London because she had won some money.

When Ken shouted the news to the others, she heard them cheering in the background. They were desperate to come and plan the trip, but she said they could do that tomorrow as she was out for dinner. Besides, it wasn’t fair on Jack’s dad.

Despite Jack’s protests, she made him promise not to say anything until she spoke to his father, making it clear neither he nor Catherine were going anywhere without their parents’ permission. Jack was not too happy about his promise, but when Dad came home he was glad to keep it; for Dad had his own good news.

He came bursting in with the pizza boxes, grinning from ear to ear. Things were better than everyone thought for Jack’s mum. In a couple of days, when she came out of hospital she would only need the mildest medication.

Jack grinned, telling Dad that was great but he was not really convinced. He thought good news should go something like - They were wrong. It was all a terrible mistake! Your mum’s fine. But he supposed it must be better than Dad expected.

* * *

Jack nodded eagerly when Dad suggested he come to the hospital on Sunday morning, excited yet nervous because he did not know what to expect. His mum looked pale and worn out, but was pleased to see him.

At first, Jack did not know what to talk about. Generally he chattered about school or TV, anything really, but it all felt so trivial. Obviously, he could not tell her about the important things like seeing Dan, or Thomas rescuing him, or even explain who Thomas was. When Mum asked about everyone that broke the ice and soon Jack was chattering away as if he went to visit every day.

After the hospital, Jack had lunch with Dad before going to Ken's to plan the trip to London. When Rosie phoned Jack's father to ask permission, Dad said he would check with Lorraine, but did not see a problem. When he asked how much it would cost, there was a bit of an argument, well, difference of opinion really, because Rosie insisted on paying. In the end, they compromised, settling on a sum. Catherine's mother insisted on paying too, so Rosie didn't really need as much as she thought.

* * *

The week before half term, and the London trip, seemed the longest ever for Ken and Catherine. But not for Jack because there was so much to do before Mum came home. With the same daily routine, he felt more settled than he had since Dan vanished. Each morning he met the others on the way to school. Each evening he ate dinner at Rosie's before Dad collected him for a hospital visit.

After seeing Mum, Jack helped Dad clean the house before finishing his homework.

On Thursday, Jack did not go to Rosie's because Mum came home. It was funny having her home again, funny but nice. She was in the front room, wrapped up in her housecoat and though she looked tired, she also looked fine. Jack felt ever so pleased to have her back.

Rosie popped over with Ken to bring a get-well card and flowers. She only stayed ten minutes, but the two women must have got emotional because when Dad came into the kitchen, where the boys were, his eyes were red as he said what a smashing person Ken's mother was. Jack was pleased his parents liked Rosie, especially because he did.

The next day, school ended for half term. When Jack got home, Mum told him Rosie had sat with her while Dad went shopping. Rosie stayed for lunch and even though Jack's mum was not hungry, she managed some soup. Then they sorted out the evening meal together. When Mum added she had peeled the potatoes for chips, Jack thought she sounded very pleased with herself.

Dad brought back goodies with him for the night's big film. Except for the fact Dan was not there, and Mum went to bed at half eight, leaving Jack to watch the second half with his dad, this seemed the most normal Friday night they had spent as a family for ages.

Saturday morning, Jack helped tidy the house, staying with Mum while Dad ran errands. Mum seemed brighter as she sat in the kitchen watching Jack warm up some tinned soup and make a sandwich for lunch. As she only swallowed a few mouthfuls of

soup and nibbled on half a sandwich, Jack finished off the rest for her. After lunch, he went to meet his friends at the shopping precinct.

Thomas was with them because Rosie was out with Alan and Ken did not think it fair leaving him in the house alone. Ken was fine about Rosie seeing Alan, he liked Alan. The biggest problem was stopping Thomas shoplifting. Fascinated by everything, he always wanted one.

Thomas was as full of London as the other two. After listening to them going on about it for half the afternoon, Jack felt just as excited.

Chapter 18 Bess of Holebourne

Jack was so eager to be off that he woke at six o' clock Monday morning. Unable to get back to sleep, he was washed, dressed and breakfasted by seven, despite the fact they were not leaving until half past nine.

Giving everybody a lift to the station, Jack's dad was a little surprised to see Thomas. When Rosie explained he was a cousin she was taking to relatives, and a 'bit slow', he shook his hand and told everyone to squeeze in.

Fascinated by the train journey, Thomas was on his best behaviour. Due to flooding on the line, they missed the connection and were diverted to Euston. The station was mad. Its great open plaza was bursting with people charging about, dragging luggage, shouting into mobiles, greeting friends or checking for train platforms on the huge overhead board. Rosie had to keep stopping to make sure everyone was together and heading for the tube.

The crowds left Thomas increasingly jittery. Seeing all the people pouring out of the underground station, Rosie knew there was no way she would get him down there. She decided to take everyone outside to work out what to do next. Pushing on ahead, the boys were already on the down escalator. Yet with Thomas as he was, there was no way she could follow. Starting to fret about getting separated, she turned to Catherine, the one person she could rely on in a crisis.

“Get those two, while I take this one outside, before he blows a gasket!”

In the square outside Euston Station, it was apparent no one was going anywhere until they got used to the madness. Not unless they wanted a totally hysterical Thomas on their hands, and maybe run the risk of getting split up and lost. Feeling a failure, Rosie despaired.

“I never thought it would be like this!”

“Not to worry,” Catherine reassured her, knowing full well what to expect because she had been to London with one of her sisters a few years before to see a show and do some Christmas shopping.

Opening her A to Z book of London street maps she explained, “We could probably walk. It will take about an hour. Or longer if the streets are busy. On the other hand, King’s Cross, where Harry Potter catches the train to Hogwarts, is only five minutes away, and should be quieter.”

“I would love to see that!” whooped Jack.

“Of course, Platform Nine-and-three-quarters is not real!” Catherine asserted, sounding snootier than she intended.

Jack was scornful. “I wouldn’t be too sure if I were you. You didn’t believe in fairies a fortnight ago!”

They did not find Platform Nine-and-three-quarters. But as it was only half term and not the start of term, they did not really expect to. Still, it was fun looking. Next to King’s Cross was St Pancras’ Station, where Thomas enjoyed running senselessly around, when not gawking at the exotic passengers streaming off the Eurostar trains. Later, Rosie treated them to an early lunch in a

small café on a side street. A belly full of fish and chips was all Thomas needed to bury the horrors of Euston.

Now the Underground was quieter, it was easier to get Thomas onto the tube without a murmur. As he actually enjoyed the hustle and bustle, even changing trains was not a problem. However, it was a different story with the crowded escalators of Tottenham Court Road.

Outside, Catherine took charge again; huddling them into a corner while consulting her book.

“We are on Charing Cross Road. Cambridge Circus is that way with Seven Dials a few minutes further on. There is a quicker route, but we may need to go through Seven Dials to St Giles High Street, like Thomas says in the rhyme.”

Without knowing why, everyone agreed.

Thomas started reciting, “As I was going to Saint Giles, I met a man in Seven Dials. And Seven Dials has seven streets.”

Catherine cut him short. “And we want Monmouth Street, which takes us to St Giles High Street and Dyott Street - where the people who protect the queen are.”

“What if Agnes is wrong?” Ken wanted to know.

“We’ve got this far, let’s hope she’s not,” Jack replied.

* * *

Seven Dials was quite unremarkable, a small plaza with a pillar in the middle. On the pillar were six sundials, Catherine had

to count them twice, facing seven narrow streets radiating as from a hub.

“There is powerful magic here,” Thomas declared. His hair stood on end, as if he was full of static electricity.

“Wow, look at you,” Jack cried. “Did it do the same last time?”

“I have never been here before,” Thomas solemnly told him.

“So where were you?”

“Up and down the Old Kent Road, and in and out the Eagle,” Thomas answered.

“Yeah and pop goes the weasel!” Jack sarcastically scowled.

“Oh well, if he’s not been here, at least we’re not going over old ground,” Rosie hurriedly pointed out.

At the top of Monmouth Street was the bag lady with a shaved head. On the far side of the road stood the skinhead in steel-rimmed glasses; with face covered in tattoos and piercings, the young man looked very fierce.

As if possessing some sixth sense, the skinhead and the bag lady turned at the same time towards Thomas, who was spitting on his hands, desperately trying to flatten his hair. The look on the skinhead’s face gave Rosie the impression of a cool intelligence working quickly.

“Stay close to Thomas,” she whispered. “Mr Grin was right.”

The skinhead glanced at the shaven headed woman who, although not even acknowledging him, casually began to gather her carrier bags.

“They’re going to split us up and snatch Thomas,” Rosie warned. “She’ll distract us. Beg or argue. You watch.”

The shaven headed woman was a little more than three meters away, struggling with her bags as if they were about to burst open. The skinhead was across the road, making Jack wonder how he got there, as he had not seen the man move. Realising it was now or never, he shouted, “Stop right there, you two!”

A couple of surprised pedestrians turned around.

Jack ignored them. “He’s with us. We look after him. We go where he goes. We’re his friends. Tell them Thomas!”

“I don’t like. They frighten me,” he stammered.

“Thomas my treasure, they don’t want to hurt you. They just want to help. Don’t you?” Rosie demanded.

The skinhead looked straight through her as if she did not exist, but Rosie saw the bag lady nod slightly.

“You know who he is, don’t you? He is Thomas the Rhymer, Prince of Elphame. We need help to find Queen Bess.”

“How do we know where she is?” the skinhead grunted. He was standing next to Rosie, who was unable to believe he appeared without her seeing him move.

Sounding braver than she felt, she replied, “Because you didn’t ask who she is.”

“The streets are filled with hungry eyes,” the skinhead hissed. It was almost as if he was speaking in code or looking for a password.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” she answered evenly.

He leaned in uncomfortably close, sniffing her hair and clothes. “You stink of mages!”

“Of course we do!” Rosie retorted, repressing the urge to back away. “We’re hiding Thomas. They’re not stupid you know.”

“Go with her. I will distract any who follow. Do what she does. Do not separate. Do not hesitate!”

The shaven headed woman, abandoning her pile of bags against a wall, moved down the busy street at an incredible pace. Rosie was afraid they would never keep up. The skinhead shouted a piece of advice. “These people do not see you but they will avoid you.”

“Come on you lot!” cried Rosie speeding up and aiming for a couple walking towards her.

As if by magic, they parted without even looking. After that, it was easy.

They were hours dodging through side streets or cutting across alleys into tiny yards crammed with boutiques, street cafes and office entrances, only to spill out into spacious garden squares, edged by imposing houses. Once Catherine squealed, “Look, the British Museum!”

Sometimes Rosie thought they were going in circles. As the shaven headed woman never faltered, she had to believe she knew where they were going. Eventually, they stopped in front of a handsome four-storied house in an elegant square.

“Where are we?” Rosie asked.

“Here,” the woman replied, walking away without a backward glance.

Here proved to be a lawyer's office with a brass plaque declaring it to be 'Fairie, Elder and Crook - Attorneys-at-Law'. Catherine could not help but think Crook was not the best possible name for a lawyer.

In the reception area, a handsome, rather stern, woman sat at a broad lavish desk.

"I'm sorry," Rosie timidly ventured. "I think we're in the wrong place."

The stern woman smiled, asking them to take a seat.

A moment later, another young woman came down the corridor. "Please come with me, you are expected," she explained pleasantly before taking them through the building to a small elevator.

"It will be a bit of a squeeze, but you should fit in."

When they had, she pressed the solitary button. With barely a murmur from the electric motor, the lift ascended.

* * *

When it stopped, Rosie pulled back the concertina grating to find they were in neglected looking attics.

"What do we do now?" Catherine wondered.

The boys shrugged.

"Well they know we're here, so I suppose we wait," Rosie remarked.

They got out of the lift, looking up and down the corridor at the grimy glass in the windows and the peeling paintwork.

“It doesn’t look much like anyone’s palace,” observed Jack, “never mind a fairy queen’s!”

After Agnes Day’s description of fairy nests, it was exactly what Rosie expected. Agnes said the first thing to hit you was the smell, so Rosie sniffed, not knowing what to expect. All she smelt was old dust. For heaven’s sake, she thought, how can dust smell old? But those were the words that sprang to mind.

A motherly woman in her mid-fifties trundled towards them. Rosie immediately thought she had a kind Irish face, before wondering how on earth someone could have an Irish face. But the woman did, and there was no mistaking it.

Such bizarre ideas left Rosie a bit anxious. It was as if she had no control over her senses. Yet strangely, her senses made more sense than they ever had. She was unable to understand it.

The woman spoke in an Irish accent. The perfect accompaniment to her Irish face, thought Rosie.

“Thomas the Rhymer, Lord of Elphame, welcome to Holebourne. It cheers my heart to see you. I know it gladdens the Bilquis.”

Thomas bowed elegantly. He was a different person to the one they knew; gracious, self-assured, regal almost.

Rosie thought he bowed like a dancing master or a swordsman. Before wondering what the hell she was thinking about.

The woman turned to the others, asking, “Fare you all well? You are thrice welcome for protecting the lord in his wanderings

and delivering him safe to the Bilquis. Bless you, bless you, bless you.”

“Bless you too,” they replied abashed and somewhat overawed.

“I am Mistress Peachum but you may call me Polly as fits.”

“I’m Rosie...”

“I have known who you were ever since you stepped into the world. There are no secrets here,” Polly informed her.

“So you know why we’ve come,” she replied.

“I will present you to the Bilquis, though only one may remain with the Rhymer for my mistress is old and I am mindful of her health.”

Polly led the group into a long corridor of a room where beams of dusty sunlight streamed in through floor-to-ceiling windows, so dirty they reduced the city skyline to a smudged silhouette of rooftops, chimneys and steeples. At the far end, in a huge winged armchair, sat an incredibly old woman, tiny and frail with skin like paper, wispy white hair, and scrawny white legs roped with veins and mauve blotches. The old woman wore a fleecy bed jacket and on her feet were cheerful fluffy slippers, the type you buy cheap off the market. She appeared to be watching television or perhaps she was dozing. Whatever, she took no notice of them.

Polly scuttled towards her. When quite near, she bellowed, “Majesty, they are here to see you.”

“I am not deaf!” the old woman bellowed back, thin voice breaking.

Taking no notice Polly continued to shout. “Sylvie’s Rhymer, here Madam.”

“Is she still alive?” the old woman croaked. “I would have thought her long gone by now. Nice to know everybody is not dying around me.”

Rosie caught the looks of fascinated horror on the children’s faces. Wondering if this was who they came all this way to see, she thought they would find no help here.

Thomas walked down the vast corridor of the room towards the old lady. As he stepped into the pools of sunlight streaming through the tall windows, he seemed to change until Rosie found herself thinking him quite handsome and wondering why she had never seen it before.

When Thomas changed everything changed, even the dust in the sunbeams sparkled like gold. Wonderful crimson flushed the shabby curtains, while the wooden furniture gleamed, and the naked floorboards shone like glass under a sea of polish.

Rosie heard one of the boys say, do you see that! She was so stupefied she did not know who was speaking, Jack or her son.

“Sir Thomas of Rhyme, the gladness of our eye is only exceeded by the joy in our heart,” tolled a mighty voice, mellifluous and cultured in golden tones like the ringing of a great cathedral bell.

Rosie looked to see who spoke. It was the old woman, but she too had changed. Still old, though not so old, she stood stately and erect in a magnificent dress so huge and heavy it looked as if it wore her. Hoops of white silk, interwoven with golden thread,

cascaded in every direction. Jewels sewn into the skirt and bodice caused the woman to sparkle like a goddess.

A tight curled auburn wig, capped by cloth of gold, crowned a marble white face, ghostly except for tiny vermilion cupid-bow lips enamelled at centre of her thin mouth.

“It’s Queen Elizabeth the first,” Catherine whispered in awe.

Rosie swept into a deep courtesy with Catherine following. While the two boys, not knowing quite what to do, tried to imitate Thomas’ courtly bow.

“Now woman remain with the Rhymer, while you children come with me,” ordered Polly imperiously.

Rosie thought she detected a certain pride, as if Polly was pleased to have her mistress back.

“Polly put the kettle on. We’ll all have tea,” requested the queen in her beautiful voice; rich as golden honey dripping from a silver spoon.

“Madame!” sang Polly happily. She turned to her guests chirping gaily, “If you like herb tea, there is elderflower or camomile I get from a lovely little health food shop in Camden Town, or Indian or China, green or black, it’s all the same to me.”

Polly was getting quite animated. “Jumbals! I had a feeling in my water, so I baked them special. It will be such a joy to take out the good china. We have so little opportunity.”

“What are jumbals?” Ken wanted to know. It seemed ages since lunch and he thought they sounded rather tasty.

“Take loaf sugar and fine flour kneaded to a paste with fresh laid eggs, sweet butter, cream and sack wine, baked but a little in

the oven at 400 degrees or gas mark 6,” replied Polly Peachum; practical cook.

“They sound delicious,” he replied hungrily.

“They are,” she confirmed, taking the boys by the shoulders to lead them out of the room.

Chapter 19 The Fairy World

The boys liked jumbals. Polly left them happily working through a whole mountain of the little sugar cookies while she and Catherine brewed tea.

“Why do you call her Bilquis?” asked Catherine.

“Every High Queen is called so. The title is from the Queen of Sheba’s birth name. The child of a jinn and mortal, she was the first of her kind.

“My Bess was a gypsy girl who became Queen of Beggars in the Court of Thieves at twelve years old. When rumours of the Marvellous Maid of Bishopsgate reached the ears of Good Queen Bess, she summoned her to her Royal Court at Westminster Palace. By then the old queen was tired of life, and my Bess made her feel young. In the end they grew so alike you could not tell where one ended and the other began. It is still unknown if Edmund Spenser wrote his poem, ‘The Fairie Queen’ for old Bess as everybody thinks, or young Bess with whom he was madly in love.

“When the old queen died, my Bess had no time for James. Thinking the king who delighted in being called ‘the wisest fool in Christendom’ no wiser than any other fool, she retired to her country estate of Holebourne. In the next century when Charlie, the Merry Monarch, returned to make London gay again, she came back to court, where the saucy king even courted her!

“As London grew, the land from Westminster to the old city walls of London was much sought after. Bess became rich as Croesus. At this time she employed Master Fairie and Master Elder as her rent collectors, the families being faithful ever since. Mister Crook joined much later, in the time of the Georges from Hanover.”

“Is that why she lives here?” Catherine asked, fascinated by Polly’s story.

“Bless you child, she lived in many places but now rests with those who serve her best. Let us take in the tea.”

When Polly opened the door, the Queen’s room looked very different. The walls were painted duck egg blue, the paintwork mellow cream, while Chinese carpets of hand woven silk decorated the floor. Catherine got the impression time passed very differently as compared to the outside world.

The Bilquis, a handsome middle-aged woman, sat erect on a chaise lounge, wearing a short tailored jacket over a simple Indian cotton gown. Thomas looked splendid in a uniform bejewelled with medals, every inch a Regency beau. Yet to Catherine, Rosie’s transformation was the most startling, because it was the most unexpected. She was dressed in a plain cotton smock dress with her hair pinned up and curled. Her fresh complexion and air of innocence left Rosie looking exactly like a Jane Austin heroine.

Polly’s greeting was tinged with disapproval.

“You exhaust him Madame. He must rest and be restored. Beef tea and red wine is what this calls for, beef tea and red wine!”

The instant Polly spoke the glamour dimmed, letting Catherine see bits of shabby reality poking through. Thomas looked exhausted, although he had been fresh as a daisy a moment before.

Rosie protested, “Majesty, we cannot stay while Sir Thomas rests. We have to catch the evening train. There is no time.”

“No time? What are you girl, a clock? There is plenty of time. Time is all I have.”

The queen’s beautiful voice held a sharp, thin edge as though she was becoming as unravelled as the dream she wove.

Catherine watched in horror as the two worlds suddenly peeled apart. Separated by millimetres and milliseconds, both ran slightly out of synch. In the splendid world, the regal queen sat on the chaise lounge while an elegant Thomas played courtier. In the real world, Thomas sank exhausted to the floor, as the old woman, in shabby nightie and fluffy slippers, sat slumped and unmoving in her threadbare armchair.

Only Rosie bridged both worlds; speaking to the fleshy ghosts of Thomas and the Queen, who suddenly vanished, taking the illusion with them, and leaving her quite flustered.

“Help me,” Polly begged, struggling to pick up the unconscious Thomas. “He needs rest.”

Catherine ran out of the room calling for the boys, leaving a shaken Rosie, trying to help.

“Where do you want him?” she asked Polly.

“Away from her,” Polly retorted, as between them they dragged Thomas towards the door.

With the children’s aid, it was easier to haul him down the corridor into a tatty bedroom, where they manhandled him onto a dusty iron-framed bed.

“What happened?” questioned Rosie, breathless.

“She did!” snorted Polly in reply. “He is the means to her beautiful dreams, he the Rhymer, she the queen.”

“I don’t understand,” Rosie grumbled, feeling stupid.

“I think he’s like a phone charger or something,” pointed out Jack. “The energy goes through him to the queen, but he gets it from somewhere else.”

“The beautiful dreamers!” exclaimed Polly delighted by Jack’s cleverness.

“Who?” Rosie dully asked.

“The queen’s subjects!” explained Jack as the others nodded in agreement.

Suddenly things fell into place. Everything Mr Grin said that Rosie never really understood. Fairy queens wove a dream through their Rhymers from the hopes and fears of their subjects, the so-called beautiful dreamers. Without them, the psychic energy had come from Thomas and it exhausted him.

“So there are no beautiful dreamers here?” Rosie tentatively enquired.

“Heavens, there is no court,” Polly retorted.

“The beautiful dreamers are asleep, but Thomas has to be awake, that’s why I saw Dan,” cried Jack excitedly. “If he was asleep he couldn’t escape from her.”

“The Rhymer must be awake to control the dream. The beautiful dreamers must sleep, otherwise they might resist by having their own thoughts,” Polly explained.

“And you’re not a beautiful dreamer,” Rosie ventured.

“Indeed not!” Polly bridled at the very suggestion.

“It’s probably a lot harder to make someone see a dream when they are wide awake, like you were Mum. I bet you need a lot of beautiful dreamers to do that!”

“I see,” stammered Rosie, and she did see, she really did. It was amazing how the fairy world worked.

“When you speak to the queen again, you all must sleep. It is the only way or the Rhymer will die,” Polly explained.

“I won’t put the children in danger, I’ll go alone,” Rosie insisted.

“It is dangerous to go alone.”

“I don’t care.”

“Then do as you see fit,” Polly responded grimly.

* * *

They were watching television in a sitting room, which was comfortable and reasonably clean, if a bit scruffy. The boys, happy because Polly’s satellite TV included the sport and movie channels, squabbled over the channel changer. Seeing Rosie gawping at the screen, lost in a world of her own, worried Catherine. Hesitantly, she asked, “What was it like?”

Rosie stared, uncomprehending.

“With the queen,” Catherine persisted.

“It was real, not like this,” Rosie answered dreamily.

“Did Thomas remember where he lived?”

“No but the Bilquis didn’t think it was unusual. The better the prince, the more he forgets. She once had a Rhymer who could barely remember his own name. In the end he couldn’t survive without her.”

“So Thomas dies unless he goes back to Sylvie?”

“The Bilquis is dying too, you know. She’s afraid of leaving her people unprotected. The fairy world is crumbling, destroyed by railways and roads, pylons and power cables. We have light and heat at the flick of a switch; radio, television, telephones, satellites and computers. She thinks we have all the magic.” Rosie started crying.

Unsure what to do, Catherine searched for a handkerchief. Rosie grabbed her, hugging her tight. After the barest hesitation, Catherine hugged back.

“Mum what’s wrong?” demanded Ken. The boys got up from in front of the television. When Rosie opened her arms, they went for a hug.

“I’m a bit low. It took it out of me,” she murmured.

When Catherine found her handkerchief, Rosie dried her eyes. “I don’t think the poor Bilquis can help Thomas, she can’t help herself.” Rosie looked as if she would start crying again.

“Don’t worry Mum, things will work out,” Ken reassured her. “You’ll see.”

Rosie forced a smile. “When I saw Thomas in his own world, he was witty, charming and quite good looking.”

“Thomas!” squeaked Catherine in disbelief.

“I know!” Rosie laughed, blowing her nose. “How long was I...”

“About fifteen minutes,” Catherine replied.

“It seemed hours. I wish... I wish I could shake myself out of this mood. It’s like, well... it’s like that’s the real world and ours is just shadow.”

After a few minutes, Rosie fell back into a daze and the boys returned to the television as if nothing had happened. Watching them Catherine despaired. They were no closer to getting Thomas home, or rescuing Dan, than they had ever been. The whole journey was a waste of time.

The afternoon dragged on, marked only by the boys changing channel during commercial breaks. An eternity seemed to pass before Polly popped her head round the door.

“Thomas is ready. Unless you changed your mind?”

“No!” Rosie replied, making Catherine think she was eager to be back in the fairy world.

“It will be different this time. If you are the source, they will show no mercy.”

Although Polly’s warning frightened Catherine, Rosie did not care. Looking at her watch, Catherine protested, “It cannot be more than an hour! How can he be better?”

Polly chuckled. “So clever, yet so much to learn. Time is nothing. It flies or drags on a whim! Your clocks do not measure time, only cage life into ever-smaller boxes, splitting weeks to days, hours to minutes, seconds to heartbeats.”

Catherine shook her head shaking off Polly's nonsense. Time was her life, from the morning alarm, through break-time, lunchtime, dinnertime, suppertime, all the way to bedtime. Of course, she knew time flew when you were busy or crawled when you were bored, but it was only a feeling, not real.

Polly smiled in a superior way. "One day mistress clever noodle, you will learn to live a lifetime in an instant. But that is not magic. The magic lies in learning to treasure the moment."

* * *

They dragged an old leather sofa and an armchair to the old woman. Watching through her half-closed, cloudy eyes, the Bilquis reminded Rosie of her great-grandmother. Great-Grandma hated being old, swearing she felt like a young girl inside. If there was any way she could be young again, she would have jumped at the chance. Rosie knew Bess felt the same.

Catherine helped Jack support Thomas who, although still weak, was cheerful, almost eager. As Polly assured them he was strong enough, Ken sat at his mother's side on the settee. Everything about this felt wrong. He was frantic with worry, "I wish you'd let me do it."

"I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you!"

"What if anything happens to you Mum? What do I do then?"

Polly saved Rosie from answering. Having brought three crystals, she sat the largest on the queen's lap as Thomas took a jagged smoky yellow lump from the tray. Rosie was given a translucent pink egg, the smallest of all.

“Quartz helps the energy flow, so no one is drained.” Polly assured everyone. “Each beautiful dreamer has a stone. There is topaz for Thomas, clear quartz for my Lady and for you, Rosie, rose, the stone of love.

“Come children, we must away,” she added gently, looking at Ken.

“I want to stay!”

“I know my pet but you cannot. If you stay you must be in the dream, which is against your mother’s wish.”

Leading them outside, Polly firmly closed the door. “All is as it should be. Have faith.”

Inside the room, the queen spoke, “Rosie, please turn off the television.” Her voice, the dry whisper of an old woman, held no magic.

Rosie obeyed. The queen muttered something about changing one illusion for another and settling back in her chair, closed her dull eyes. Sitting on the sofa, doubting she would ever sleep, Rosie wondered if closing her own eyes might help.

* * *

Her eyes opened to a room filled with flowers. Hundreds of plants from rambling rose to orchid were in bloom, their scents intoxicating in the hot damp air. Hidden in the greenery a fountain played. Its presence betrayed by singing waters. Walking through paths overhung with blossom, Rosie caught occasional glimpses of waterspouts bejewelled by sunlight.

“This has to be a dream,” she thought.

“If it is, how do you know? You smell flowers. Feel sunlight. Hear dancing water. See all this beauty. How is it not real?”

She knew that voice. Even though she had not heard it for a long time, it was a voice she could never forget. If it were a dream she thought, he would vanish when she turned around, as he always did in dream. So she kept her back to him, feeling his breath on her neck. When he touched her it was too much. She spun around breathless.

“Stacey!”

Ken’s father looked exactly as she thought he would, older, wise. His dark handsome face had creases at the corners of the mouth and eyes. There were flecks of grey at the temple. Seeing him, her heart filled until she thought it would burst with love.

He clutched her hand, kissing it passionately, muttering, “My precious Rose, how beautiful you are.”

“You’re just as I imagined,” she told him.

“Because I am what you imagine. She wants you to know this is not real. It is the hardest lesson she can find.”

“But if I see, hear, feel, what’s the difference?” she protested. “You said as much!”

“If I were really here, we’d be arguing by now. You know we never saw eye to eye.”

“It isn’t you, is it?” Rosie muttered, wanting to weep. “It’s me, isn’t it? Just me!”

“You came into the dream to protect the children. How can you protect them trapped here? You do it with Kenny all the time. If you fight all his battles, how will he learn to fight his own?”

“I’m sorry,” Rosie stammered. “I try so hard.”

“I know and you do a great job. He reminds me of me,” laughed Stacey.

“I hoped he would,” Rosie agreed, wiping a tear.

Stacey was gone. The Bilquis held her hand.

“Where is he?” pleaded Rosie.

“Why ask what you already know!” came her sharp reply.

Chapter 20 The Living Tapestry

Hungry for company, and glad the company was hungry, Polly was in the kitchen baking like a demon.

“If they eat any more they will burst!” protested Catherine, watching Polly while the boys watched television.

“I don’t mind,” Polly replied, leaving Catherine to wonder exactly what Polly did not mind; the baking or the bursting.

“Did you ever meet Sylvie?”

“Once years and years ago. A flibbertigibbet if I ever saw one! Fled from France at the first sniff of revolution, and yet all that time later still sighing over Versailles like she was Marie Antoinette herself.” Polly sounded disapproving. “If you feel so strongly, go back home I told her. No one will miss you! Would she take the hint? Would she heck as like. Not seen her since.”

“Oh it wasn’t that,” Polly continued, seeing the look on Catherine’s face. “The world got harder, too much change, all of it bad. Visitors stopped calling. Bilquis stopped caring and lost the joy of life. Claims she wants to die, probably would too were it not for the thirteenth treasure.”

“What is the thirteenth treasure?”

“A future past, as Bilquis tells it. A key to a large door, behind which she sits, forever young on the throne of Holebourne,

from whence she rules in glory the twelve kingdoms of Britain, until the end of days.”

“Does the thirteenth treasure make her young?”

“I’m not sure. In the dream she sees a funeral with people dancing and singing and church bells ringing. I think it’s her funeral by the way she tells it, all wistful like she’s hankering after peace and quiet. But how can joy be unrestrained at the death of one as she?”

“Perhaps she is reborn like a phoenix.”

“Who knows? My mind won’t hold the weave.” Polly wiped a tear, getting flour on her face.

“The weave?” echoed Catherine.

“Child, you have more questions than an ape has fleas. The weave is each queen’s thread of life; and the threads of all who went before, for those who come after.”

“Can I see it?”

“Don’t see it will do any harm,” presumed Polly, wiping flour from her hands with a dishcloth. “Here, help me put these trays in the oven.”

Catherine followed Polly down a drab corridor to yet another dilapidated room. This contained a vast loom upon which hung a tapestry as big as a carpet, hand knotted in scrumptious colours that seemed to trap the light and reflect it back in a glorious rainbow.

There were shades of crimson, carmine, vermilion, scarlet and cerise; blues from sky to sea; greens dark as swamp cypress at midnight, bright as a spring morning. Yellows of liquid sunshine bled into tawny amber and sunset orange. Royal purple, mauve,

puce and fuchsia jostled russet, sepia and sombre ochre. Veins of copper, bronze, silver and gold marbled voluptuous violets, inky indigos and whites, pale as moonshine. Such polychromic splendour left Catherine giddy, breathless, and a little overwhelmed.

“Beautiful,” she sighed, mesmerised by the shifting hues washing over the weave like skeins of mist.

“I saw London once,” Polly confided. “But it ran from my eyes.”

“I see it too!” Catherine faltered as ghosts of shimmering buildings, iridescent, pearlescent, lustrous, melted into the chaotic maelstrom of the tapestry.

“Where is it?” Polly demanded.

“There!” Catherine answered, stabbing the cloth with a finger and falling down as if dead.

* * *

The boys found the tapestry by following Polly’s screams.

“What’s wrong?” they cried.

Catherine lay unmoving on the floor.

“Is she dead?” gulped Ken, struggling for breath.

Jack was too horrified to say anything at all.

Stooping, Ken felt Catherine’s forehead; listened to her breathe through clenched teeth. “She’s still alive! What happened?”

Polly was crying hysterically into her apron. "I never thought she would," she wailed.

"Would what?" he demanded, looking up at her from down beside Catherine.

"Touch the tapestry," she bawled, dabbing at her eyes with the hem of her pinafore.

"What do you mean?" Jack was instantly suspicious. Catherine looked pale, broken. As if some part of her was stolen away. Rosie was right, nothing good ever came from the fairies.

"Only a queen, or a queen to be, may touch the thread of memory," Polly dully quoted.

They looked at the huge glowing tapestry filling the room. It seemed woven from light, a living thing. Shifting images suggested buildings, even entire streets, thronged with haunted, hollow-eyed frantic souls. Crowds lost before ever fully formed, nothing more than recollections, regurgitated on a whim or a word, to be reabsorbed, stillborn, into the boiling vaporous colours. Tearing their eyes from the mayhem of the weave, they bent down to gently pick up their friend; wanting to get her far away as possible from its fevered threads.

"Where can we take her?" Ken demanded.

"Bilquis."

"I thought we couldn't go in unless we were in the dream," Jack protested, suspecting a trick.

Polly was honest. "You can't. It is dangerous. Especially now the tapestry wakes. You may be snatched into the dream to never return. Yet her only hope is with my mistress. Catherine must go to her."

“I’ll take her,” Ken announced. “My mum’s in there. If she doesn’t come out I haven’t got anyone else.

Jack thought about what Ken said. It was the opposite for him. His parents had already lost one son. What would it be like if they lost another?

Opening the door to the reception room, Polly assured Jack she and Ken could manage. He shrugged her off.

“Don’t do it, Jack!” Ken was adamant, knowing what his friend was thinking.

Jack smiled, trying to look braver than he felt. Then it came to him. Something Catherine once said when they were exploring the ley lines. “It’s supposed to be all for one isn’t it?”

“And one for all!” Ken sheepishly grinned. “What happens if we don’t come back?”

Jack looked hard at him. “We’ll have to make sure we do.”

The instant they took Catherine in, the tapestry came alive. It was as if it had been waiting for them to step into Bess’ presence. Erupting like a volcano, or a solar flare from the face of the sun, it spat streams of pure colour, which stained the floor and walls for an instant before fizzing into the ether. The eruption became stronger, bolder. Then just as quick died away.

It was not over. The tapestry had only paused, gathering its strength for one last push that came in a brilliant explosion of living light. A crazy rainbow bouncing from floor to ceiling, from wall to wall, sparking and spluttering white hot with every collision as it went ricocheting down the hall towards Catherine and the boys.

* * *

Catherine woke on a piece of embroidery stretching for miles in every direction. Turning her head, she saw the whole world move. It was so weird she sat up for a better look. When everything moved again, as if adjusting to her new viewpoint, she realised she was not so much lying on the cloth as woven into its very warp and weft.

More fascinated than scared, she stretched her fingers, turning hands back and forth to watch the pink and beige threads move within her changing contours. It was hard to imagine how she could move normally, while her body was nothing more than stitches.

With a mighty effort, she stood up, causing streets of narrow houses to spring up all about. She was standing in the shadow of Saint Paul's Cathedral, a towering white cliff in cross-stitch and cable. Looking around caused the embroidery to race by in a blur of colour which left her quite sick.

Nauseous, she stopped and stood perfectly still. A moment later, when the stitching also stopped, she found herself looking down Ludgate Hill to Fleet Street, where an old steam engine on an overhead railway puffed out clouds of white and slate thread. Ragged knots fluttered from the sky, descending as a flock of pigeons, featherstitched in dove grey.

“I am in the tapestry!”

“Where you wanted to be,” rang out a magnificent voice.

Spinning back to face the Bilquis, Catherine moved too fast and experienced another sickening moment of vertigo, before shape and colour settled to reveal Bess in front of the cathedral.

Bess, dressed in ivory, shot with silver thread. Hair wove close from orange and red. Seamless face, stitched marble smooth. Twinkling eyes - sunshine blue. Spoke from needlepoint lips, the shape and colour of a bloodied rosebud, "If you wish but to adieu, let nothing here retain you."

"No! I want to stay, but it so strange," Catherine grumbled.

Bess half smiled. "One often sees what one expects."

"How can that be when I am in your tapestry?"

"No, this is not the tapestry. This is my world."

"Then help me understand it," Catherine pleaded.

Even as she spoke, Bess was vanishing, dress and skin fading into the cathedral walls, hair and lips into the terracotta floor tiles, while her sky blue eyes were lost to the wide blue sky.

Her abrupt departure left Catherine frustrated and a little peeved. It seemed you had to do everything for yourself. Nobody would help, not even Bess. True, she wanted to see the wonders of London hidden in the tapestry. But she thought she would be flesh and blood in a real London, not a picture within a picture.

Conscious of sudden popping noises, Catherine was taken aback by the sight of fat sausage-like swellings on the ends of her hands. More pops and her feet ballooned. Horrified by the misshapen lump she was becoming, Catherine suddenly realised she was turning normal again. She was so used to being flat, round came as a bit of a shock.

By now Catherine towered over the tapestry. Looking down she felt sad to be leaving it behind. Except it was not staying behind; it was coming with her. In a thunderous roar London burst into life, buildings, soaring skyward, blotted out the sun.

She found herself in a dirty lane between rows of horrible tenements, among a crowd of ragged, filthy people. The sharp stink of sweat overlying the mouldering sweetness of decay and ordure left her gagging. Without knowing how, Catherine knew she was in the Rookeries. The slums between Soho and Holborn were notorious for every type of crime and human misery. It was here the Irish hid the Bilquis from the Mages for almost one hundred years.

This was not the London Catherine wanted to see, but it was the London Bess knew. Yet although the Queen felt comfortable here, Catherine certainly did not. She hurried on. Somehow travelling through the city much faster than legs could carry her.

It felt as if London was moving too, taking her where she wanted to go. From the theatres of Drury Lane, she passed into Covent Garden where the fine folk of an earlier age mixed with the ghosts of porters and flower sellers from the old fruit-n-veg market, and herds of modern tourists.

Time seemed confused in London. As if caught in swirling eddies or trapped in silted pools. Until the city itself looked no more than a loose weave of different ages.

Beyond Covent Garden, the buildings were older, oak timber frames supporting buff plaster walls replaced dull yellow and tile-red brick. Upper stories overhanging the narrow alleys almost met in the middle, blotting out all but the meanest light from the fetid street.

Arriving at Trafalgar Square, dominated by Nelson's Column, Catherine was surprised to find the roads almost empty. What few cars there were looked like antiques, even the red London buses appeared old-fashioned.

A man ran towards her as sirens wailed. He wore a khaki uniform with a tin helmet saying Air Raid Warden.

"Better get down the tube station Miss. You'll be safe there."

Catherine heard the ominous rumble of engines. The sky, now starless and bible black, was broken by searchlights illuminating barrage balloons and the sinister silhouettes of Nazi bombers. Anti-aircraft guns shot brilliant flares into the heavens. Explosions bloomed like fire flowers as bombs rained down, their booms deafening.

The night sky boiled red as London burned. Ash drifted like warm black snow. Taking the Air Raid Warden's advice, Catherine ran for the shelter of the Underground.

Chapter 21 Nipper

“Oi you two, out of the way!” roared a gruff voice. It was the driver of a massive cart pulled by two huge horses that was about to mow them down. Jack and Ken ran pell-mell for the sidewalk.

“Where are we?” Jack wondered in bewilderment.

If this was London, it was not the London they arrived in a few hours ago. All around people were crushed into a narrow street of tall, filthy buildings. There were no vans or buses, or rather there were but they had horses pulling them. Of course, wherever horses are it is inevitable they leave something behind.

“Look at my new trainers! It’s disgusting!” Jack moaned, desperately wiping a foot on the curb. The whole street stunk as bad as Mum’s rosebushes in summer. “Where in the blinking hell are we?”

“Looks like the olden days to me,” Ken commented.

“A big help, you are!” Jack snapped. Everything was dirty, even the air had black bits floating in it from the smoke pouring out of chimneys. “I wish Catherine was here, she’d know where we were.”

“She is!” Ken took a hasty puff on his inhaler. “We’re in the tapestry!”

“Oh!” Jack exclaimed, it suddenly making sense.

“Look for Saint Paul’s Cathedral, that’s where she is.”

Along the narrow street, Jack caught sight of a huge grimy dome towering over the grim, smog-wrapped street.

“Is that it?”

Ken nodded.

“Come on then, what are we waiting for?”

They set off, but it was hard going with the crowd against them. Each step was a fight as they were jostled or ignored. Every single person stank of BO. Even the well-off looked like they could do with a good wash. There were poor people everywhere too. Ragged women and children, selling things out of baskets like apples, flowers or ribbons, all wearing clothes that were mostly rags. Most of the kids had no shoes; their feet filthy dirty. The old women looked like they wore everything they owned. Some scruffy tough-looking men were sandwiched between wooden boards advertising stuff like Pear’s soap. The rest hung around in gangs. Ken thought they looked like they would kill you for fifty pence. Catching them staring, he picked up his pace so as not to get separated from Jack.

Struggling through the crowd was exhausting. In the end they gave up and let the tide of humanity sweep them along. Sometimes they washed up in front of shop windows where they were amazed by the strange things for sale. Or were left stranded on corners listening to dirty musicians, or watching the drivers of the big wagons, horse drawn buses and handsome cabs, fighting and swearing because they were all snarled up in a traffic jam.

“What’s that?” Jack stopped almost causing a pile up. Smelly men in black suits or military uniforms bumped into them, cursing impatiently before marching on.

A Punch and Judy show had attracted a crowd, not just kids but grown-ups too. Everyone was laughing at Punch hitting Judy with a big stick. So they stayed to watch.

A ragged skinny boy about Jack’s age, squeezed past until he was in front of them. Suddenly stumbling against an old gentleman, he hollered, “Ay! Thee pushed me thee did.”

Furious, he swung around, spitting out his words right into Jack’s face and waving his fists as if ready to box his ears. “Wotcha or I’ll give yah a right bloody nose, I will!”

“What was all that about?” Ken wanted to know as the lad slunk off.

“My watch!” thundered the old gentlemen, accusing Jack and Ken with a look. “Gone! Stolen!” his voice rose with indignation.

“It wasn’t us!” Jack argued.

“Thieves, I say. Thieves!” he bellowed.

“Come on Ken!” Jack pulled his friend to get him moving.

“But it was the other boy,” Ken feebly complained.

“He’s not listening!” Jack shrieked, diving through the crowd, dragging Ken with him. From behind came the piercing sound of a police whistle.

“We’re done for now!” Ken howled in terror.

“No were not!” swore Jack, pulling him into the busy road, almost under a monstrous horse that reared above them, as the handsome cab driver tried to calm it down.

Ken stood petrified as the horse's iron shod hooves pawed the air above his head. Jack pushed him to safety just as the thrashing hooves crashed down on the very spot where he stood. Ken went sprawling over the slimy stinking cobbles with Jack tumbling after. As he flung out his hands to break his fall, the thick iron rim of a giant cartwheel missed crushing his fingers by centimetres. Shaken, Jack scrambled to his feet.

Together they shot off down the road hoping to get lost in the crowd. Although the streets were busy, London was used to thieves and it was not as easy as it looked to get lost in the maze of narrow alleys leading to the river. They heard more shrill police whistles, answering the others. The new lot did not sound too far away.

Defeated, Ken stopped for breath beside an old brick warehouse, pulling out his inhaler to take a sly puff as he coughed and spluttered, slowly turning purple. Knowing his friend was unable to go on, Jack scouted around for an escape route. The sound of boots, pounding cobbles, was ominously close.

"They hang you for stealing," gasped Ken.

"They wouldn't do that!" cried Jack, outraged. But he wasn't so sure.

Grabbing Ken, he half ran, half staggered, down the side of the warehouse towards the river; not even noticing the narrow wooden door that swung open at the last minute, almost hitting him in the face. Jack yelped skidding to a halt, as a hand reached out yanking him inside. Panting and wheezing Ken followed, slamming the door behind him. Their rescuer was the thief.

"Wotcha!" he said brightly.

“Wha’ d’ya mean wotcha?” Jack was so furious he turned as red as Ken. “You put the law on us.”

“No ‘arm done. You’ve got a good pair of legs on yah,” the thief laughed.

“I’ve got a good pair of fists too,” Jack scowled.

The thief squared up as Ken held Jack back.

“Yah must be the brains an’ he’s the brawn,” the thief said coolly to Ken.

Ken nodded, unsure what to say. All he knew was that he was knackered from the running, and trying to keep up with, when not hanging onto, Jack. Luckily, Jack was calming down, so Ken let him go.

“Yah new round here?”

Ken nodded again, breathless.

“Got a living?” He looked at their puzzled faces. “I’m a nipper me,” he smirked, flattening his hand to slide it up and down as if slipping in and out of a pocket.

“He’s like the Artful Dodger,” Ken wheezed. “You know like you gotta pick a pocket or two.”

“That’s the idea. Come on,” said the nipper, who called himself Spike.

* * *

It was like a game of cops and robbers. In fact, it was a game of cops and robbers, thought Jack. Spike went ahead whistling like

a bird when he saw the coast was clear. Jack had no idea exactly what type of bird whistled like Spike, probably a magpie. They were thieves.

They made their way through a labyrinth of derelict wooden shacks to the riverside, where a patch of muddy shoreline was being picked over by ragged urchins.

“Mudlarks, yah don’t wanna’ end up like them poor little bleeders,” Spike said feelingly, heading for a sopping slimy ladder fixed to one of the impressive stone arches of London Bridge.

London Bridge was full of pedestrians along with every type of vehicle imaginable; carts, wagons, cabs, buses. All pulled by horses. With the inevitable stinking the place to high heaven. On the other side of the bridge, they slunk into a warren of crumbling slums, even more smelly and disgusting than the bridge itself. It was full of really poor people, half of them mad, the rest drunk.

Spike led them up a narrow rickety staircase to a big grimy attic where a gang of skinny worried-looking kids, about six or seven years old, were trying to pinch handkerchiefs, pocket watches, or purses from a washing line without ringing the little bells hung on it.

“It’s like Fagin’s den,” muttered Ken. “Talk about consider yourselves at home!”

The ragamuffins crowded around Spike like he was some sort of hero. An evil faced old woman clipped him over the back of the head demanding to know what he got. While everyone was busy admiring the shiny pocket watch, Jack whispered, “Run!”

Pelting out of the door, they were almost halfway down the staircase before hearing the yell. The old woman cackled something as the little tykes came charging after them.

“What can they do, they’re only kids!” sneered Jack as a knife whizzed past his ear to bury itself in the mouldering wainscoting.

They hit the street like the hounds of hell were on their heels. The drunk and desperate staring as they crashed out of the tenement door. Everyone in the slums was in the same boat. They all looked out for each other; when they weren’t killing each other that is. Now the boys were the enemy, they picked up sticks, bits of cobble, broken bottles, even handfuls of mud off the filthy street. The fugitives were something to break the monotony of their miserable lives, a bit sport. Blood sport.

“What do we do now?” squeaked Ken in desperation, as the ugly crowd turned uglier.

“The river,” Jack yelled, “back over the bridge.”

Down an alley they ran, with the mob snapping at their heels. The two boys stopped at the corner, shocked by what they saw. London Bridge was different. Gone the never-ending stream of traffic, instead the bridge was chock-a-block with ramshackle houses built all over it from one end to the other, each propping up its neighbours without a space between them.

“Look at that!” Jack gasped, almost going head over tip on the slippery street.

“Never mind the bridge, look at the river!”

The Thames was frozen from bank to bank. On it sailing ships fitted with skis skated along the ice in the wind. Under the

bridge was a town of stalls, crowded as the London streets. From the way everyone was dressed, Ken thought they had gone further back in time, probably to the Elizabethans. Thinking to lose their pursuers, they quickly scrambled down the stairs boatmen used to unload passengers, and mingled with the crowds.

They wandered through the ice fair with mouths watering. You could buy anything here, from all sorts of pastries to hot spiced wine. There were massive bonfires roasting whole pigs or oxen. Chunks of meat were a halfpenny. It was a pity they had no money.

It was cold on the ice, the chill crept through their trainers into their bones, so they stayed by the bonfires where it was warm. That is, until they saw a place where the ice had cracked and people had fallen in. Now the ice was frozen again, their pale, drowned faces stared out as if eager for the thaw. They reminded Jack of the poor people in Charles Dickens' stories on TV at Christmas, with hungry faces pressed to a bright shop window. It was horrible, but there was a grisly fascination about it and they could not tear themselves away.

Eventually, they thought they better get to the far bank before the ice cracked again and took them with it. Seeing how people made way for the man with a dancing bear, they followed him past a makeshift stage where a play was in full flow. It must have been Shakespeare because Jack could not understand a word; although the audience were laughing and nudging each other at some saucy joke or other. The actor, standing at the front of the stage, was giving a speech. He didn't attempt to act, just stood there shouting his head off!

“Cor blimey, he's rubbish!” Jack sneered.

“Yes, he is rather,” said a voice behind them.

They turned around. It was Thomas.

* * *

People filled the station platform to overflowing. Having brought bedding, they made nests in every available corner. Some brewed tea or warmed soup on paraffin stoves, others read by oil lamp. Groups of family, or perhaps friends, played cards or gossiped. Mothers and grandmothers rocked infants on their knee. From above, came the muffled sound of falling bombs. A tube train arrived, unloading nurses to serve tea and biscuits. The train left but the bombing continued, on and on until Catherine thought it would never end.

Suddenly there was an almighty explosion. A roaring hot wind plastered her with grit. The tunnel filled with deafening silence as everything went dark. For a horrible moment Catherine thought she was dead, before realising the blast had left her deaf. Plaster dust filled mouth and nostrils. She coughed, attempting to spit it out. Blowing her nose made her ears pop, letting in the panicked sounds of crying babies and hysterical screaming people.

Swiftly checking for missing limbs, or wet patches that meant she was bleeding, Catherine was relieved to find neither. As fear subsided, people started relighting stoves and oil lamps blown out by the blast. From all around came mutterings of a direct hit. A bomb falling into the station exploded in the ticket office leaving casualties, perhaps even fatalities, by the entrance. The exit was blocked. Someone would have to dig them out.

Seeing lamps on the track, Catherine realised a group of people were escaping down the tunnel. As nobody stopped them, she decided to follow. Somehow, they always managed to stay ahead, but the lamplight gleaming off the rails guided her. Calling out, she pleaded for them to wait. When no one answered, she wondered if the explosion deafened them too.

Picking up her pace, she was soon close enough to see they looked like monks in long black robes. Reaching out for the nearest, her hand passed through him like a ghost. If Catherine was the type to scream, she probably would have. Instead she watched with morbid curiosity as one after another, they drifted through a solid wall. All the while unable to believe ghosts actually existed. Moments later she came to a station called Blackfriars.

As the exits from Blackfriars were locked, all she could do was follow the dull red emergency lighting, while listening out for relief trains on the track. Gradually she became aware of brighter, pure light. It came from a crypt, half concealed in a side tunnel. Here a group of knights knelt in prayer before an altar. Afraid to disturb the apparitions, she hurried on towards a platform, unsurprised to see the station was called 'Temple'. Perhaps it was named after the Knights Templar. Maybe one of their castles had stood there.

Temple Station's exits were also locked, meaning Catherine had to continue following the tunnel. Eventually she returned to the very station into which she had fled the Blitz.

Hundreds of stairs and miles of corridor later, she escaped Charing Cross only to find herself in the middle of a construction site, where medieval masons laboured over an ornate stone cross - a grief-stricken king's memorial to his dear dead queen; his 'chère

reine'. Once more she passed unnoticed amongst them as though they, or she, were no more than spectres to be half recalled then discarded in the press of memory.

Ahead lay a featureless wasteland of scorched black ruins. The bombers had gone, leaving London burning. In the night sky, red and angry as a wound, specks of hot ash, adrift in the waning firestorm, irritated the throat, and made eyes itch and burn. Through blinked away tears, she saw Trafalgar Square dissolving, fading into slums, then green fields. Still the city burned.

In the east, like dawn on the Day of Judgement, sullen flames silhouetted the great church of Saint Paul's, dominating the sprawling city. Its lofty square tower, rising like Babel intent on assaulting God's heaven, left Catherine wondering if the blaze was divine retribution for man's overweening pride.

Refugees fleeing the inferno looked no larger than ants beneath an immense wall of fire. Many pushed handcarts heaped with possessions, some had elderly relatives precariously perched on the top. The men wore frockcoats, periwigs, three corner hats, while the women's long dresses swept the ash from the earth.

As they passed, Catherine became confused, for it seemed puritan and cavalier freely intermingled with noble knights, priests and peasants. Others looked like Saxons or Vikings, farmers and serfs, or Romans in togas with freedmen and slaves. Whoever they all were, they fled in equal terror before the flames; before Death, the great leveller. And still the city burned.

"London has burned to the ground sixteen times in her long life, each time rising from the ashes like the legendary phoenix."

The voice sounded like Bilquis. But there was not just Bess in the voice, Catherine heard other voices too. Echoes of all the lives held in the tapestry.

The woman standing beside her looked like Bilquis in the same way she sounded like Bilquis; Bess but not Bess. In her features swam the faces of hundreds of others jostling to be seen, emerging for a moment only to vanish once more.

“Women have been weaving for twenty thousand years,” proclaimed the many different voices. “My memories have long threads. Once I was Alba; once Branwen.”

Bess who was not Bess took Catherine by the hand as dawn broke in the east, red and fierce as the flaming night. It was summer. Avenues of London lime trees were in leaf under a perpetual film of soot. Turning a street corner Catherine gasped at the sight of burning orange, yellow and red, for a moment thinking it some new conflagration. It was only nasturtiums cascading down walls from flowerpots on windowsills.

The street came alive with the scent of flowers as a child brushed by selling bunches of sweet violet for a farthing. Milkmaids carried pails hanging from heavy wooden yokes. A woman balanced a large basket of apples on her head. A girl, younger than Catherine, sold lengths of brightly coloured ribbon.

Each woman sang a different ditty to advertise her wares. Heard together they formed a tapestry of sound, a dawn chorus to rival the birds of the air. Beneath their song, from far, far away, came the faint strains of a mournful violin as a blind fiddler, perhaps in a deserted street, plied his trade to the rhythm of the knife-grinder’s wheel.

“It is foolish sentiment to believe people are the life of a city,” declared Bess who was not Bess. “London has her own life, a heartbeat, a will. A ravenous hunger that feeds on all who dwell within, gorging indifferently on rich and poor, swallowing bones in crypt or plague pit; until Father Thames, sick of sin and woe, bursts his banks to wash the quick and the dead from the stinking, pestilential street.”

Chapter 22 The Lace Map

Bess wore a crinoline dress and huge white wig crowned by a tiny hat. With skin powdered pale, lips incrimed and sporting a large beauty spot on her cheek, she sheltered from the fierce noon sun beneath a tiny silk parasol festooned with ribbon. Rosie was surprised to see she too was dressed the same.

The garden had also changed. No longer a steamy hothouse of exotic plants, it was a landscape in miniature. Meadow, lake and carefully tended wilderness basking under a cobalt sky; a blue so pure, you would think it painted. Neat geometric gravel paths bordered lawns rolled flat for playing bowls. Flowerbeds sown with tulips were punctuated with regimens of clipped yew topiary.

Behind the two women stood a red brick mansion, partially refaced in sheets of gleaming white Portland stone. Its new grand entrance of Doric columns supported an ornamented Palladian pediment. To Rosie's critical eye it made the house look less like a home than some sort of temple to forgotten ancient gods.

The alleys and lanes of London, having outgrown their boundaries abutted every single one of the estate's high brick walls. To the west the towers and spires of Westminster Palace and the ancient abbey dominated. To the east the Thames, thick with ships, looked like a forest of mast.

The conversation started abruptly, as if continued from another time, another place.

“If you are here hoping to find Sylvie, you are on a fool’s errand,” Bess bluntly stated.

“But the mages said you had a map...”

“How much they know!” the Queen cried in surprise. Hunting in her reticule, she pulled out a piece of old yellowed cloth. “Here is the last map of the thirteen kingdoms. I am old and no longer hear its voice, but our blood is strong in your veins, see if it speaks.”

Rosie took the cloth, a round piece of lace like a doily. One of those things old people put under an ornament to stop it scratching the sideboard.

“Loose its threads,” the queen commanded, “it may yet answer.”

Having no idea what to do, Rosie looked nervously at the delicate round cloth in her hands.

“Few hear its voice, fewer tread the thread,” murmured Bess with regret. “I am sorry child but there is nothing here for you.”

“Thomas dies if I don’t find Sylvie. Can’t I leave him with you?” Rosie pleaded.

“I have no choice but to use him. Yet with no court to share his burden, he would only die more quickly.” Bess sympathetically patted Rosie’s hand. “Even if you return him, Sylvie will not free Jack’s brother. In my youth, I had a string of princes. Their power is your power, and power is as strong liquor.”

“Is there nothing I can do?” begged Rosie.

“Perhaps, this is not your burden,” replied the queen looking over her shoulder.

Rosie followed her gaze to see Catherine.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Rosie, it is fantastic! St Paul’s is the sun god’s temple. Guildhall stands on a Roman amphitheatre. Did you know, the Saxons thought giants built London’s walls and temples?” Flushed with excitement, she turned to Bess. “Your majesty, your tapestry is a wonder.”

The Bilquis sighed, “You have seen but a fraction. It holds such marvels child, it would take a lifetime; even one as long as mine.”

“Hello everyone!” Ken cried out.

The boys were with Tomas, and Rosie could not understand why they were grinning so wildly.

“Sorry we’re late,” said Jack, unapologetically. “We sort of got lost.”

“Are you alright?” Ken asked Catherine.

“Fine,” she replied, bursting out laughing.

If Rosie did not know better, she would have thought them all drunk.

“We were worried,” Ken added, without looking in the least bit worried. “Sorry Mum, we couldn’t leave her.”

Jack spoke over him. “Great, isn’t it?”

“Amazing!”

“We met Dick Turpin the highwayman and saw them hang Jack Shepherd on Tyburn tree,” bragged Ken.

“Cor blimey it was ‘orrible it were,” Jack chipped in, sounding like a regular cockney sparrow.

“I saw the Great Fire of London!” Catherine answered haughtily.

Ken was dismissive. “So did we!”

“Yes, well I saw all of them and Spring-heel Jack, jumping up to the rooftops to murder serving girls in the attics!” Catherine announced, determined not to be outdone.

“Did he have glowing red eyes?” Ken slyly asked, snorting derisively when she nodded.

“Lor that were just Thomas havin’ a lark wif yer,” cried out cockney Jack.

Catherine blushed. “Then I met Winston Churchill, Samuel Pepys and Isaac Newton.”

“Yea, well we met Jack the Ripper, Sherlock Holmes and Sweeney Todd the demon barber of Fleet Street.”

“When he was shavin’ ‘is customers, he’d cut the froats from ear to ear, an’ make ‘em into pies!” Jack declared with ghoulish relish.

“Wonder if they tasted as good as they looked?” Catherine enquired.

“Ewww, yer dirty mare!”

“Jack!” yelled Rosie. “Catherine! Behave!”

Thomas clapped his hands with glee. "All together in the dream, a place to be and to be seen. Nothing here we cannot do, with you with me, and I with you."

"Eloquent as ever good Sir Tom," observed Bess merrily.

"You promised to keep them out of this!" Rosie snapped.

"You cannot keep, from them who seek," the queen answered sharply.

"How can I trust you?"

"Trust them instead!" Bess was mild. "Catherine, take this lace."

"What is it?"

The queen put a finger to her lips, warning Rosie to stay silent.

"Set it loose, child."

Catherine idly stroked the heart of the knotted lace as if it were a kitten.

The boys stared at the grimy cloth in her hands.

"What are you doing?" Jack wondered, dropping his comical accent. "She wants you to loosen it!"

"Wouldn't it make sense to start at the edge?" Ken suggested, trying to be helpful.

The queen was sharp. "How can you know the end if you cannot see the beginning?"

Curious, they watched Catherine's fingers flow from knot to knot; saw her face grow puzzled as she tried to understand.

“It is a map of fairyland!” she exclaimed at last. “It knows where Thomas lives!”

The queen beamed with delight. “Catherine my child, when you can read the lace, you tie the world in knots.”

“Like you!” Catherine replied.

“I am too old. The map requires a mind nimble as fingers.”

Made aware of what she was doing, Catherine’s fingers ground to a halt. Bewildered, she stared at the cloth.

“It is trying to speak to me, but I cannot understand. Perhaps I cannot hold the weave, like Polly.”

The Bilquis laughed, “Nonsense, the tapestry brought you to me, girl. The weave is in you, never doubt it.”

Catherine hesitated. “I...”

“Give me your hands,” Bess requested in a voice both honey and gold. “Together, we will tread the thread.”

Catherine reached for the queen. When they touched, they vanished. In exactly the same way Sylvie vanished with Dan a few weeks before.

“Where have they gone?” Rosie demanded, panicked by their disappearance.

“Where do you think?” Jack lamented. He felt sick, wondering how he could let Catherine walk into a fairy trap.

A moment later, they reappeared. Catherine looked terrible; ghastly white, and sickly green around the gills.

“Come away Catherine,” wailed Jack, rushing to tear her from Bess.

Ken too reached for his friend. At their touch Catherine's colour flooded back. While turning pale, Bess withered inside her magnificent dress.

"What's wrong?" howled Jack.

As he spoke, the old woman pointed a thin, crooked finger in Catherine's face booming in a hollow voice that sounded barely human. "Remember Atropos when Malfi; the lioness fierce has sharp claws and teeth."

The queen spun round to him so fast, Jack wondered if she actually moved at all. "Jack Hughes, Jack Hughes, hear her shout, tricks and lies to make you doubt. Harken now to wise advice, you found him once, find him twice. Against a heart whose love is pure, nothing but the truth endures."

"Is she mad?" Jack sounded afraid.

"She has visions. Polly mentioned one about a treasure," Catherine whispered. "I think this is about Dan." It suddenly dawned on her. "Jack, we find Dan!"

"How?" he demanded.

It was too late Catherine was gone. He looked around. Rosie was gone too. And Thomas! Nothing remained of the queen but her magnificent dress. Whale-boned and wired, it slumped empty to the floor. Uncertain and a little afraid, Jack turned to Ken, who was also fading.

"Ken you're vanishing!" he exclaimed in panic.

"No you are," Ken replied in a deep booming voice that broke into a squeak at the end.

"No, it's you," yawned Jack.

Waking on a settee, he saw Catherine to one side and Ken on the other, squeezed in besides Rosie. They were yawning under Thomas' cold, unsmiling eyes that looked through them to another world.

The old woman, slumped in her chair, covered her face with a bony hand as she groaned.

"Take them away quick as can be. A gift they are, but not for me."

Turning pale Polly rushed forward.

"Come! Come!" she urged through pursed, white-edged lips, and began pulling them to their feet, abandoning Rosie and Thomas.

The old woman's voice echoed through the vault of the great room. "Flee, flee, flee you now! Flee you now from here. In the Lamb of God beware, for when a victory seems assured, defeat draws ever near."

"What's wrong with her?" Jack demanded.

"We give her visions," Catherine replied breathlessly.

Ken jumped in. "It started when we touched you. It's the three of us, like the lay lines!"

Polly slammed the door behind them, shutting off the queen's ravings.

"Tis the power of three united. Power times power, times power writ large," she hissed. "Once she could bear it. Now she is too frail. The kitchen should be far enough."

In the kitchen, Polly slammed that door too, standing with her back against it as if expecting the power of the Bilquis to smash it asunder and snatch them away.

Winded, she managed to mutter, “To think you brought her Thomas this day. A temptation indeed, yet she did not sway! A lesser queen would forsake you in dream, yet she in kindness sends you far away. Be thankful you were spared this day!”

“But how do we find Dan? She didn’t tell us!” Jack wailed.

“She predicted you find your brother, the rest is your task,” Polly answered simply.

“No she didn’t! She went on about the Lamb of God. What’s that supposed to mean?” Ken complained.

“Or Malfi or Atropos?” added Catherine.

“And all that rubbish about making me doubt and where I found him once.”

“It is not rubbish, she meant a mirror!” Catherine suddenly exclaimed. “Jack, you went through a mirror to find Dan in the woods. It all means something, everything. We just have to figure it out!”

* * *

The delicious smell of cooking made them realise how hungry they were. They could not believe it was only a couple of hours since lunch, it felt like days. Rosie helped Polly cook chops, eggs, tomatoes and mushrooms. As well as thick slices of black

pudding, which Polly, Thomas and Rosie ate with gusto; much to the disgust of Catherine, Jack and Ken.

After dinner, they watched television while the two women washed dishes. Having been stuffed silly, it was not long before they dozed off. It seemed no time at all before Polly woke them, saying it was time to leave. Adding the Bilquis wanted to see them, she herded the group down the hallway to her mistress.

“You cannot all go in at once,” she reminded them, “Catherine, Jack, you first.”

Ushered into the long reception room, Jack and Catherine had no idea what to expect, but were unsurprised to find the glamour gone. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Through the long windows, fading with the last of the day, the light departed meekly without a hint of sunset, leaving the room draped in shadow.

At the far end, sat Bess enveloped in gloom. In housecoat and fluffy slippers, she appeared the same frail creature they first met. Stripped of magic she seemed barely alive. Jack found himself feeling sorry for her as Polly pushed him forward.

“The Bilquis has a gift.”

Bess held out a white skinny arm. In her arthritically clawed hand was a silver chain holding a teardrop crystal, the colour of green apples, set in silver filigree encrusted with tiny emeralds.

Polly enlightened him. “The stone is Chrysoprase. It sees truth in the hearts of men.”

“Does it see the hearts of women?” Catherine demanded, thinking of Agnes Day.

Polly chuckled. “Most especially women my little Amazon, even Elfin Queens are not immune.”

Not quite knowing what to do, Jack took the chain, thanking Bess politely. Impatiently Polly waved him back and as he gratefully retreated, Catherine was pushed forward.

Her gift was the piece of shabby lace seen in the dream.

“Thank you your majesty!” Catherine cried; voice choked with emotion she could barely contain.

Picking up a flat wooden box Polly explained one gift was to see the other.

Surprised by its weight, Catherine looked inside. Wrapped in black velvet was a thin slice of highly polished black glassy stone about the size of a dinner plate.

“An obsidian scrying mirror to help you understand the threads,” Polly whispered with reverence and some pride.

“This mirror is ancient and precious.” Bess’ voice, no stronger than a dry twig, cracked. “From the city of Chatal Hüyük, a place so old even legend has forgotten it.”

Carefully Catherine placed the lace map within the folds of black velvet inside the box. Speechless, she mumbled, “What can I say?”

Polly beamed with pride. “We know your heart. There are no secrets here.”

Moments later, they were unceremoniously marched out to be replaced by Rosie and Ken.

“Kunnetha, you honour that ancient name, a warrior prince once you were. A warrior prince again,” came the queen’s dry rasp. “Today your boy is a man, woman. It is time to pass on the legacy.”

Without a word, Rosie reached into her blouse pulling out the ring made from a thunderbolt that had guarded her since childhood. Unfastening the silver chain, she refastened it around her son’s neck.

“Thunderbolt iron is powerful, for the earth metal is transformed by its journey through the stars. This ring is one of the sacred treasures of Britain with the power to make or destroy magic,” revealed Bess. “Conceal it from those who covet such power.”

* * *

Outside, Jack asked for proper look at Catherine’s gifts. She took off the lid, letting him stare into the black depths of the mirror before saying, “Cool! All I got was this stupid pendant. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“It sees truth Jack. It helps you see true love in a pure heart, like Bess said.”

“That’s just stupid.”

Catherine looked him straight in the eye. “Not stupid. Everything has a purpose here, even if we do not know what it is. The map, the mirror, the necklace will take us to Sylvie and save Dan. She promised.”

“Then why not just say, instead of all these stupid clues!”

“Maybe it does not work that way.” Catherine stared at her reflection in the mirror’s depths. “Maybe it is more like the old saying about seeing through a glass darkly.”

After bundling out Ken and Rosie, Polly went to fetch Thomas. When Jack asked what Ken got, he showed him the thunderbolt ring. Everyone loved Catherine’s gifts and this time, even Jack seemed satisfied with the crystal pendant.

“You know, you’re the best friends in the world!” he muttered as he held it up for them to see. He was so unlike his usual brash self, it took Catherine aback.

Chapter 23 Homeward Bound

Everyone felt sad piling into the lift. They had only arrived a few hours ago, but felt they had known Polly a lifetime, and were missing her already. Seeing their surprised looks when she pressed the sub-basement button she explained, “You can’t leave the way you came. They will be looking for you. We can’t risk leading them to her.”

“Then how do we get home?” Rosie protested.

“You will see!”

The sub-basement, a burial place for the law firm’s old files, was as dark and forbidding as a crypt. Polly led them through the legal labyrinth to a small room half filled with a huge ancient pulley.

“I have a something for you.” Shyly she gave each a leather pouch of beautiful polished pebbles. “Power gemstones,” she enlightened.

“Opaque for my boys: tigers-eye, lapis lazuli, malachite, jade, cornelian, onyx, jasper, and aquamarine.

“Clear for girls, which is why we women so love our jewels: quartz, topaz, peridot, ruby, sapphire, emerald, garnet, tourmaline, amethyst, and aquamarine too.

“If you wish to use one as a talisman set it in gold or silver, although you boys can use iron.”

Everyone thanked Polly, touched by her expansive, not to mention expensive, act of generosity.

“This is a dangerous path, but the stones give some protection from the resentful torrent.”

With these ominous words, she manfully pulled a stout rope, which through a series of cogs opened a heavy wooden trapdoor in the cellar floor. Twenty feet below, a dark furious river raced through a gloomy Victorian sewer.

“We can’t go down there!” objected Rosie.

“You must. If they saw you with the guardians, they know your purpose. If they find you, they will trace you back here. Water is the only road.”

“Is it a fairy road?” asked Catherine.

“There’s too much metal, if it is!” Ken squawked. “There’s the Tube and all sorts... We’ll all be killed!”

Polly soothed him. “Iron don’t go where water doth flow. At Turnmills Stream, the Oldbourne Brook grows into the River Fleet. He is one of London’s secret rivers and will take you to Father Thames at Blackfriars, who will bring you safe to the sea.”

“Secret rivers?” Catherine mused, half-remembering things found and lost in the tapestry.

“The old river god and his wife, the Isis, have many children, the Tyburn twins both brook and river, the Effra, Westbourne and Neckinger, to name a few. Each filled with rubbish as the city grew. So noxious were they, man caged them underground, but though

buried deep or in tunnels bound, rivers flow where rivers go.” In her enthusiasm, Polly had lapsed into rhyme. “Keep your wits for he remembers running free and no friend to his master, man, is he. If he tempts you on the way, stay on course, and do not stray!”

They nodded thoughtfully, absorbing her advice.

“The blue stone is Aquamarine,” she added soberly, “a sailors’ charm against drowning.”

“But what about Thomas, where’s his jewels?” demanded Jack.

“Bless you Jack, Thomas is elfin. The river knows the old ones and keeps them safe. Join hands in a circle before entering the trapdoor,” she instructed.

“Thomas, Rosie, jump into the circle. Goodbye my dear children, I will miss you most of all,” she added with a tear in her eye. “Hurry now! Go!”

Holding hands with the boys, Catherine peered into the darkness at their feet. “I see it,” she called out as the shimmering blue swirl of light appeared.

“And me!” echoed the boys as one.

“Then jump!” Polly urged.

* * *

Suspended above the torrent in the milky blue haze, they fought to stay in one place against the pull of the ley line. Thomas jumped into their midst, hanging in the space between them. They took his hands making the circle bigger.

“Come on Mum, quick!” shouted Ken.

Rosie jumped, lunging fearfully at her son as behind her Polly let the trapdoor drop, plunging them into darkness.

Slowly their eyes adjusted to the eerie glow. Gaining comfort from the pale, eldritch light, the group went from circle to chain with Ken leading. When he asked if everyone was ready, they answered by squeezing hands up the chain.

Not as swift as other ley line journeys, the pace was more in keeping with the flow of the river a few feet below. Rosie got anxious when the sewer narrowed to water level, but Catherine reassured her as they plunged through brick and dank earth at the usual phenomenal speed, only slowing once back in the sewer.

Within a minute, two at most, they broke through a wall to find they were floating above the inky waters of the Thames. Nothing prepared them for beauty of the city seen at night from the river. The sparkling blue ribbon of the ley line stretching west and east, acted like a lens, leaving details so clear it was tempting to think you could take each glittering prospect and put it in your pocket.

“Look!” squealed Catherine delighted at seeing a bold glass needle piercing low yellow cloud. “The Shard! And on the other side there is the Cheese grater... and the Walkie-Talkie. Oh my, they are building ever so many! I would love to be an architect one day. And look... look at those over there...”

“What’s that?” Jack interrupted, staring straight across the river. “Does it spell Oxo?”

“It does,” Ken excitedly agreed.

The lit up tower did indeed spell Oxo, the word written in the design of its brickwork and etched in fluorescent red light.

“It is all so magnificent,” Catherine gushed, captivated by the magic of soaring towers, and delicate bridges spanning the river. Lit from below the illuminated bridge arches were reflected in the dark water, while the brightly lit buildings on every side caused wind whipped waves to twinkle like stars.

Across the Thames, strings of blue fairy lights shimmered between lampposts on the South Bank. Beyond the Oxo Tower, the distant rim of the London Eye, edged in sombre lilac, dominated the night. An immense bicycle wheel, dwarfing towers of concrete and glass, and the electric neon boxes Catherine claimed were the National Theatre.

On the embankment behind them, as far as the eye could see, stately buildings stretching above the treetops stood ghostly pale in the headlights, streetlights and spotlights glistening off their rain washed walls. Over the parapet of Blackfriars Bridge, the huge sepulchral dome of Saint Paul’s Cathedral dwarfed the sparkling summits of the city’s business skyscrapers.

More interested in ships than architecture, no matter how grand, Jack was fascinated by the boats moored on the river. The closest looked like an old warship, or so he thought. Following the sweep of the embankment, Catherine saw the tip of Cleopatra’s needle rising over a distant bridge. While somewhere lost to sight, Big Ben struck seven o’clock.

“One day, when this is over,” said Rosie. “I’ll bring you to London for a proper day out to see all this for real.”

“So which way do we go now?” asked Ken.

“That way!” Thomas pointed to Blackfriars Bridge, London Bridge and the turrets of Tower Bridge beyond. “I smell salt!” he laughed, happily singing to himself over and over, almost like a sea shanty: *L'air salin est l'air marin. Sous les ponts, sur la rivière, soufflant de la mer.*

* * *

A full fathom above the black water, they shot under the mighty arches of Blackfriars Bridge, and adjacent railway bridge - where ranks of cast iron columns stood guarding the river like sentinels. Past the Millennium Footbridge, suspended between the dome of Saint Paul's and the chimneystack tower of the Tate Modern - where the tourists swarming like ants over its delicate spider web struts did not even notice them. Then, almost missing sight of Shakespeare's Globe, which Catherine particularly wanted to see, they passed beneath Southwark Bridge and its companion railway bridge.

“Who'd a thought London had so many bridges?” Jack cried out happily, zipping under London Bridge and past Billingsgate Fish Market with its golden fish weather vanes, and the adjoining old Port of London Customs House.

Moored between the Shard and a fat glass egg of a building was the HMS Belfast, an impressive iron-grey warship; now a tourist attraction and definitely one for Jack's must-see list. On the riverbank opposite the battleship, the Tower of London's cyclopean walls stood as strong as they had for a thousand years before. And

as long as Bran's ravens deigned to reside, would for millennia more.

Between the counterbalanced bascules of Tower Bridge they flew, with people walking and cars thundering overhead; past St Catherine's Dock, down the great curving sweep of the river towards the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, glittering like Manhattan. Past the Naval Hospital at Greenwich where, high on a hill, the Royal Observatory's ghostly green laser slashed the arc of heaven, dividing the world. Around the vastness of the Millennium Dome they sped, under the cable cars and between the metal seashell shapes of the Thames flood barrier, deafened by the roar of aircraft ascending and descending into the city airport from parts unknown.

They flew for miles until streetlights and houselights gave way to acres of docks. At one point, they passed a container ship, high as a block of flats and so long they were unable to see either end from the middle. Then it was under the gargantuan arch of the bridge at Dartford, choked with cars and so bright with headlights, it looked lit for Christmas.

Soon after the river widened into estuary and they found themselves skirting empty countryside; sometimes lit by patches of streetlights but mostly by pale moonlight reflecting off black water and glossy mudflats. Somewhere, outside a seaside town, they stopped dead on a shingle beach, washed up like so much flotsam and jetsam.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know," Rosie answered.

"There was something a while back." Jack pointed out the yellow glow in the sky. "It can't be more than a couple of miles."

“There’s a car park up there, and a road!” Ken exclaimed.

They scrunched up the pebble beach getting no more than a few meters before being dazzled by a van’s blinding headlights. Rosie cried out in surprise. Polly said people were looking for them. Had the Mages tracked them down already?

She heard a van door open and the crunch of gravel. A broad masculine shape briefly appeared in the glare, before charging down the beach at them.

“What do we do?” hissed Catherine.

“Run,” whispered Jack.

Rosie looked along the empty beach. There was nowhere to run.

“Rosie?” a man’s voice shouted.

“Yes?” she answered timidly.

“Polly sent me. I’m Vic.”

Close up, Vic was only short, about five foot, but massively muscular with incredibly broad shoulders. His bulging arms were covered in tattoos and his cut-off lumberjack shirt was open to reveal huge chest muscles under a thin, tight t-shirt. He sported long sandy hair tied in a ponytail and a chin beard woven into a thin plait.

“Is he a dwarf?” Jack muttered in awe.

“You cheeky bugger!” came Vic’s reply.

Rosie laughed self-consciously. “I think they’ve been watching Lord of the Rings a bit too often.”

Vic winked, laughing too. He turned to the lads who could not take their eyes off his massive muscular shape, “Don’t you

know nothing I'm too tall for a dwarf I am. And anyway wouldn't I have an axe and a big bushy beard?"

"How did you know we'd be here?" Rosie enquired.

"Polly has a device that fits in your hand and lets you speak to anyone, anywhere. It's amazing. Do you want to see?"

Everyone nodded eagerly, even Thomas.

Vic pulled out his mobile phone. "Ta-dah!"

The boys started laughing. Rosie could see he was a big hit with them.

"The lay line finishes on the beach, before going underground for about a mile to St Mary's Church," he explained.

"Is that where we're going?"

"No, I'm taking you to the London train. We'll be about an hour but you should be in time for the half eight. Did you enjoy the trip?"

"It was fantastic," Rosie told him. "Have you ever done it?"

"A couple of easy ones but never on the river, it's too dangerous. If you hit a ship you'd have gone down faster than the Titanic and drown like rats."

Rosie blanched at the thought of smashing into the giant container ship like a bug on a windscreen. Suddenly the journey did not feel quite so fantastic.

Vic's van was as amazing as Vic. Painted all over in psychedelic day-glow colours it sported huge motifs of the earth tree, flowers, doves, rainbows and peace signs. It was truly a work of art.

"Wow," said the lads.

“Get in,” Vic flung open the back doors.

“Cor blimey, what’s that smell?”

“It smells like...”

“That’s me!” Vic replied. “Sorry like but being an eco-warrior I hate using petrol. It’s destroying the planet. So it’s methane, but I haven’t got it right yet and the bottles leak a bit when they slosh around in the back. So watch out for them. It helps if you leave the windows open. You soon get used to it.”

“Aww, cor blimey! What’s methane?” gasped Ken waving a hand in front of his nose.

“A gas released when poo decomposes,” Catherine informed him.

“Trust you to know that,” Jack retorted.

“I know it’s not pretty,” Vic explained, “but nor’s what we’re doing to the planet. I’m a pagan I am! The Earth’s our Mother! That’s why I help them. They never tried killing the world. No, it’s us killing them! It’s not just me either, there’s hundreds like me, wanting something to change.”

Despite the handmade nature of his methane engine, Vic was as good as his word and got them to the station in plenty of time for the train. They bought drinks from a machine to wash down the feast of pastry Polly had thoughtfully packed in their rucksacks and got stuck in. The journey passed like a shot.

Picking up a taxi at the station, Rosie dropped off Jack first. When he opened the door, his dad asked, “Did you have a good day out in London son?”

“Oh Dad, it was fantastic. You wouldn’t believe what we saw!”

Chapter 24 Children of the Ice Age

Jack slept like a log, not getting up until ten. While eating breakfast he told his parents about his adventures in London. Or at least those he could tell without worrying them too much; such as looking for platform nine and three quarters and the sights he saw from the river. Without actually saying he was floating over the river when he saw them. He even mentioned Vic and his wonderfully painted, stinky van; omitting the lift of course because he knew Mum would think Vic's van unsafe. He was not convinced she would approve of Vic either, with his tattoos, muscles, ponytail and strange little plaited beard.

When Dad said he was taking Mum to the supermarket Jack volunteered to come too. He was enjoying their company and wanted to spend time with them. Dad replied he should be with his friends, but Jack insisted. Anyway, it was nice doing something normal with your family; if you could call it normal to be pushing your mum round a supermarket in a wheelchair lent by the hospital.

* * *

Thomas had a terrible night's sleep. He was shouting so loudly, Rosie went to quiet him down. Ken, already with him, informed his mum Thomas was shouting in French, which he

thought was a bad sign because he must be dreaming about Sylvie. Feeling Thomas' forehead and finding him feverish, Rosie woke him with a couple of paracetamol. Once he took them, Thomas went out like a light.

Wide-awake and worried sick, Ken and Rosie were not so lucky. It was obvious London affected Thomas. The visit to Bess must have brought everything back. No matter which way they looked at it, shouting out French in his sleep did not bode well. Wondering how much longer he could last, they kept going over things, looking for clues, until exhausted they retired, defeated, to bed. Rosie slept badly haunted by dreams she did not remember on waking.

* * *

Catherine also had a restless night, sleeping through the alarm to wake late, feeling groggy and irritable. Scrapping together a sullen breakfast of soggy cereal and burnt toast, she sat in the kitchen with the lights on, watching the rain lash down. Not bothered about speaking to Ken or Jack, she settled for idly browsing the Internet.

It did not take long to find Atropos, one of the names Bess called her. She thought it sounded familiar and now she knew why. Atropos was one of the three Fates in Greek mythology. The Fates were sisters who controlled the thread of life. Clotho spun the thread that Larchesis used to measure your lifespan, while Atropos cut it, killing you dead. Of the three, Atropos, the smallest, was said to be the most terrible. Catherine wondered why Bess called her

Atropos. She knew she was small for her age but she was hardly terrible.

More puzzling was the word 'Malfi'. Wikipedia only found Amalfi, a holiday resort in Italy, and the 'Duchess of Malfi' a play described as 'a tragedy of suffering', which Catherine did not think particularly helpful.

She then spent time idly perusing the magical properties of the precious stones Polly gave her. A couple of weeks ago she would have dismissed the idea of magic as nonsense. It was a bit of a shock to realise how far she had come so quickly.

From gemstones, she moved quite seamlessly she thought, onto obsidian - the substance from which her scrying mirror was made. Obsidian, a type of volcanic glass that broke easily into sharp edges, was valued in the Stone Age for spear points and arrowheads; once called elf-shot because people believed fairies made them.

The article went on to mention the obsidian mirrors found in Chatal Hüyük, calling them mysterious because in those days people did not have the tools to polish brittle obsidian into smooth mirror-like surfaces. She remembered Bess said the mirror was from Chatal Hüyük; a place so old it was forgotten by legend. So naturally Chatal Hüyük came next.

Like Bess said, Chatal Hüyük a town in Southern Turkey was almost eleven thousand years old. Built just after the end of the Ice Age, it was one of the oldest towns in the world. Here archaeologists discovered fantastic sculptures of bulls and a female figure sitting in a leopard throne, which they thought was a goddess but which Catherine guessed was probably a fairy queen.

Eager to find out more about the Ice Age, Catherine read about the many glaciations of the past two million years; when ice sheets covered large parts of Europe and America.

In the last inter-glacial period, when the climate warmed, our ancestors met their cousins, the Neanderthal, who inhabited the icy wastes of Europe. Soon afterwards, Neanderthals died out and we started painting on cave walls. From that point on we developed in leaps and bounds, and not so long afterwards civilisation began.

Devouring each article, Catherine felt increasingly feverish. It was as if someone was yelling in a foreign language, making her head ache with the effort of trying to understand. Unable to concentrate, she snapped off her tablet, throwing herself on the bed in frustration. She did not want to sleep, but as soon as her eyes closed, her head felt better. Within minutes, she was dreaming of bleak icy wastes and people who did not look quite human.

* * *

Later that morning Agnes Day came calling. Rosie was taken aback when she answered the door. Agnes being the last person she expected to see.

“What do you want?”

“Can I come in?” Agnes was all sweetness and light.

“No!”

This was not going as Agnes imagined, standing with cold, persistent rain soaking her smart, expensive suit, but she put a brave face on it.

“I called on the off chance, about Thomas.”

“He’s not here.”

Rosie’s reply was a relief to Thomas listening at the lounge door. He whispered to Ken, “Madam est une mal dame, ne pas?”

Ken absently nodded, too busy eavesdropping to take much notice.

The silence dragged on, until Agnes spoke again. “I don’t know why you are angry with me, I am not the enemy. Don’t let what they showed you in London cloud your judgement. This is not a Disney film. These creatures are not Tinkerbelle. They steal children!”

Rosie was furious. “And you use them! Look what you did to Jack!”

“It was a mistake,” Agnes calmly replied.

“The only mistake you think you made is being found out. Now get lost.”

“He’s here, isn’t he?” Agnes was defiant.

“You’re too late,” Rosie responded. “He’s with Bess.”

“I want to see for myself!” demanded Agnes.

“Well you can’t,” Rosie snapped, slamming the door in her face.

Wanting the last word, Agnes bent down to shout through the letterbox, “You didn’t leave him alone with young Catherine, did you? What is she now; eleven, twelve? That sounds the right age for a fairy bride.”

Rosie stormed into the lounge, shaking with fury. “That woman should be grateful I closed the door before I punched her!”

* * *

Within minutes of Agnes Day leaving, Mr Grin rang.

“What do you want?” Rosie asked bluntly. She put a hand over the mouthpiece, mouthing ‘Grin’ to Ken and Thomas.

“Your trip to London was not the success you hoped.”

Rosie did not answer.

“May I take it that you would not tell me, even under torture?”

“Are you threatening me?” Rosie barked.

“No dear lady, a humorous attempt that unfortunately fell flat. I am telephoning to say I have persuaded certain old colleagues Miss Agnes Day, who you so soundly sent off with a flea in her ear, is on a false trail and much too emotionally involved.”

“I thought she worked for you?”

“I hardly think she could afford a sports car on the salary I pay. No, she works for the darker elements of the Magi.”

“Get a grip Mr Grin, you’re an accountant not James Bond,” Rosie replied sarcastically.

“Has it ever occurred to you, the reason people think accountants are boring is because we want them to?”

“No Mr Grin, I can honestly say it hasn’t.”

“You are a cool customer Mrs Trelawney.”

Alarm bells went off in Rosie’s head. What if Mr Grin was keeping her talking while Mages snuck in the back door? Putting a

hand over the receiver, she whispered to Ken: “Check the back door!”

“My dear lady if I had wanted to snatch Thomas I could have spirited him away anytime, even while he was with Catherine,” said Mr Grin as if he had heard her, or rather more worryingly, read her mind. “I have many more resources than Agnes.”

“Why are you ringing Mr Grin?”

“To the point. Very well. You must cut Thomas loose. I am afraid I can no longer protect him. Agnes knows she cannot dupe you, but has risked too much. Needing a fairy queen to save face may attempt something desperate.”

“Why is she obsessed?”

“She does not take failure well on a personal level. Also she is ambitious and desperate to impress her masters in Whitehall.”

“What are you saying?”

“Agnes works for our government, who use psychics to spy on enemies. If you witnessed the power of Queen Bess, you can imagine what such power could do if properly harnessed. It could turn enemies into armies of willing slaves.”

“That’s horrible!”

“What is more horrible is the real enemy is never a foreign power, but a government’s own citizens. Anyway, that is enough betrayal of the Official Secrets Act for one day. You mocked when I mentioned accountants Mrs Trelawney, but what are accountants if not shepherds of money. And money, of course, is power. Personally, I have little argument with the Elfin. They pose no threat.”

“So you think the odd kidnapping is no threat do you? Tell that to Jack’s mother!” barked Rosie.

“Of course kidnapping is wrong and we always rescue people. Even though they usually go back. We rescue them because that is our purpose and we know no other. But, consider this... The Elfin are a dying race who steal children to continue their bloodline. Amazonian Indians, also on the brink of extinction, steal children from Brazilian towns for much the same reason. Have you ever thought the Elfin may deserve your compassion every bit as much as those poor Amazon tribes?”

* * *

Soon as Rosie put the phone down, she rang Catherine, waking her up.

“Hello?” said Catherine, full of sleep.

“Catherine, bring that map and mirror over will you? We have to get Thomas home.”

Catherine could not speak. Something strange was flooding through her, filling her to bursting. When describing it to Rosie afterwards, she said it felt like all her lights switched on at once.

“Catherine, what’s wrong? Talk to me!” cried Rosie, worried in case London was affecting her like Thomas.

“I know!” Catherine mumbled.

As soon as the words were out, understanding faded. Feeling as empty as when her grandmother died, she burst into tears.

“What’s wrong?” Rosie began to panic.

Catherine was unable answer, so Rosie made soothing noises and let her sob until the snuffles subsided.

“Stay put, I’m on my way.”

“No Rosie, I am fine. I will explain later. Give me an hour?”

“And you’re all right?”

“Yes.”

“No one’s there?”

“Like who?”

“Agnes Day.”

“Honestly Rosie, it is nothing like that.”

“Why don’t I ring Jack and ask him to bring you over?”

“That would be smashing, thanks,” Catherine replied, already trying to remember everything and thinking about trying it out on Jack.

* * *

Jack was home when Rosie rang, in the lounge with his parents. While his phone was on the desk in his bedroom. Alison and her mum, Carolyn, were visiting. Carolyn had brought some of the romantic novels his mother liked to read and a huge bunch of flowers. After five minutes, when Jack started getting bored, Dad suggested he make everyone a cup of tea.

On the way out, Jack had a brilliant idea, and asked Alison to give him a hand. Alison was not pleased when her mum insisted she help, making Jack suspect the adults wanted to talk about the gory

details of Mum's operation; the ones they did not want to mention in front of the kids.

In the kitchen, Jack came straight to the point. "Do you miss Dan?"

Alison nodded looking uncomfortable. It was like she did not want to discuss her feelings with a stranger. Even though they did not really know each other, Jack thought they were hardly strangers.

"I haven't had a chance to give you Dan's gift. I know he'd want you to have it," he told her.

Alison looked surprised and a little flattered.

"I'll get it," Jack said, flying upstairs.

This was his brilliant idea. He would give Alison the necklace from Bess. Once she was wearing it, she would have to believe him. Bess said it let you see into someone's heart. So she would know he was telling the truth. Snatching it from his desk drawer, he noticed a voicemail on his mobile.

Jack felt strangely hesitant about giving Alison the crystal. He couldn't help but wonder if she really was a person whose love was true and heart was pure. He dismissed the thought as stupid. Sure enough, once he handed the necklace over, his doubts faded.

"It's beautiful," gushed Alison. She let the bright green crystal dangle from its silver chain, watching it catch the grey afternoon light and throw it back in undersea sparkles.

"The tiny stones are real emeralds."

"It must have cost a fortune."

"He got it for your birthday," Jack lied.

“That was months ago,” Alison protested.

“He saved up.”

“So sweet! Sweet of you too Jack, thank you!” she cooed as she fastened the chain around her neck.

“No it’s not!”

“No it’s not is it?” Alison sounded puzzled. “What are you up to?”

“Dan didn’t leave. He was taken by fairies.”

“Don’t talk rubbish. He didn’t buy me this! Why are you lying?”

“A fairy queen gave it to me. She said it helps you see the truth in a person’s heart.”

Alison looked on the verge of disbelief, but remained silent.

“She said true love is Dan’s only hope.”

Alison blushed.

“I had to tell you Alison, because if you won’t help, I don’t think we’ll see Dan again.”

“You hypnotised me or something,” Alison accused, reached for the chain.

“No, keep it. Please! It might help you see how much we need you.”

Alison looked at the glittering crystal before tucking it into her jumper. “I’m only keeping it because it’s lovely, doesn’t mean I believe your stupid story or anything.”

* * *

“She said what?” Catherine was so indignant, she was shouting down the phone.

Jack shrugged even though she could not see him. “She probably needs time. Look how hard it was for us.”

Catherine calmed down at this. “Well, you did the right thing giving her the pendant. It was what Bess wanted. Are you coming round, or do you want to meet at Ken’s?”

“I’ll come over if you don’t mind.”

“No! Good! I learned something. I think you will be very surprised.”

“What?”

“Touching the tapestry affected me.”

“You’re alright, aren’t you?”

“More than all right, Jack, I know what they are. I figured it all out.”

“You mean the fairies! Go on tell me!”

“When you get here!”

“Tell me now!” he demanded.

This was exactly the reaction Catherine wanted. She almost giggled at the thought of making poor Jack suffer.

“You can have a clue,” she teased. “It started in the Ice Age!”

“What sort of clue’s that supposed to be?”

“The only you get,” she said mysteriously, and despite his pleading would say no more.

Jack flew round to Catherine's house. When she answered the door, instead of greeting her or anything like that, his first words were: "Come on then, what's this all about?"

"Last night I had strange dreams and woke up feeling odd."

"Oh, that's everything from yesterday in London."

"You are right Jack," said Catherine thoughtfully. "But not in the way you mean. It was as if someone was telling me something I could not understand. I was really angry for being stupid."

"You're not stupid."

"I know, but it felt like I was. Then, this morning I started reading for no reason."

"Since when did you need a reason to read?"

"Look, do you want to hear this or not?"

Jack bit his tongue, terrified to say another word.

"While I was reading, I got more frustrated. It was there, right in front of me, yet I could not see it. My head ached and I fell asleep... I dreamt I was in a cave with a big smoky fire. It was snowing outside. Everywhere looked really bleak, like it had been snowing forever. In the cave were these ugly people, sitting around watching the fire. And there were pictures in the flames, Jack, real pictures. They made them with their minds."

"Sounds like the Elfin."

"I know, but they were not Elfin. They were their ancestors called Neanderthals. They lived in the Ice Age, tens of thousands of years ago."

* * *

After trying it on Jack, Catherine found it easier with Ken and Rosie.

“Do you know about evolution?”

Rosie nodded as Ken answered, “You mean like being descended from monkeys or the X-Men?”

“Sort of!” said Jack; now an expert on evolution, having heard it all from Catherine half an hour before.

“A million years ago, an ice age started lasting hundreds of thousands of years,” he continued knowledgeably. “Massive glaciers covered England, Europe and America. This place, here, was buried under ice a mile thick!”

Catherine resumed. “During the ice age two types of human evolved. One, Neanderthals, lived in the cold icy wastes. The others, our ancestors, Homo sapiens, lived in Africa, which was still quite hot. The ice kept Neanderthals separate from us for hundreds of thousands of years, meaning we each evolved differently. For example the Neanderthals I saw looked ugly, and I suspect we looked just as ugly to them.”

“What did they look like?” prompted Jack, who loved this bit.

“They wore animal skins, had low foreheads, big jaws and teeth, with thick red hair, wide, flat noses and were short and stocky.”

“Sounds like those troll dolls you had years ago,” Rosie remarked.

“There is more... I saw them make pictures in the fire with their minds.”

“Like fairies!” Ken exclaimed.

“That’s what I said!” declared Jack.

“When the ice melted thirty thousand years ago and our ancestors left Africa, they met Neanderthals, who were struggling with the warm climate,” Catherine continued.

“Suddenly, after hundreds of thousands of years of evolution everything changed for us. Archaeologists say our stone tools became more sophisticated. We made beads from carved bone and ivory, and used needles to make clothes. We buried our dead, and began painting on caves.”

“It sounds like you’re saying cave painting was us trying to do what the Neanderthals did with the fire pictures,” said Ken.

“Yes, we evolved differently, you see. We had technology. Warm in Africa, we travelled about and were curious. So our minds developed logic and investigation. But living in the frozen wastes and liking to stay put, the Neanderthals had nothing but imagination.

“And how did we get their imagination?”

“When we met Neanderthals we lived together. In a cave in Israel, scientists found the skeleton of a boy half human, half Neanderthal. They now know most Europeans have three to six per cent Neanderthal genes. Some of us with more, others less.”

Rosie interrupted, “So we bred with Neanderthals and the result was fairies?”

Catherine hesitated. “It is a little more complicated.”

Jack interrupted. "It's like we are half and half. Being human or fairy depends on how many genes you get.

"So what happened to the Neanderthals?" blurted out Ken.

"Scientists say they died out," Jack replied. "But she thinks different."

"Neanderthals were dying. There were more of us and we were cleverer. I think we overwhelmed them," confided Catherine.

"With some of their genes most of us became modern humans- same as all of us alive today. But others with more genes, in a different combination, changed even more, becoming the Star Gods, as Mr Grin called them. It does not end there either.

"Remember the Mages chased the Star Gods into the frozen north to the trolls and dwarfs. I think dwarves and trolls were the last of the Neanderthal people, isolated in tiny groups at the frozen edges of the world. When they met the Star Gods, the result was..."

"Fairies," said Jack, quoting Catherine.

"I thought of something else!" Catherine interjected, annoyed with Jack stealing her thunder. "Neanderthals had bigger brains than us with bigger front lobes. Now, paranormal researchers..."

"She means ghost hunters," Jack butted in.

"Not quite!" Catherine snapped. "Anyway, these..."

"Ghost hunters," Jack repeated.

"...paranormal researchers say psychics have large frontal lobes, which are responsible for telepathy and telekinesis."

"Like what you do Ken! Wow, your frontal lobes must be massive!" declared Jack sounding well impressed. While Ken had the good grace to blush at the compliment.

Chapter 25 The Scrying Game

Frustrated at getting nowhere with the map, Catherine found it hard to bite her tongue when Thomas kept pawing her mirror, saying: take me home.

Each time he took his fingers away, she thought she saw pale florescent whorls fading from the dark shiny surface. At first, she wondered if he was on to something. Later, while irritably rubbing off his greasy fingerprints, she dismissed the marks as a trick of the light.

Despite a restless night, fraught with dream, Catherine woke strangely confident about Bess' gifts; especially with no one around to distract her. She opened the wooden box immediately on getting out of bed, without bothering to wash or dress. Unfortunately, her endeavours proved just as fruitless as the night before.

For the umpteenth time, she found herself stroking the lace, desperately hoping for an answer to appear in the black glass; like it was some sort of magic mirror in a fairy story. Five minutes dragged by. Then ten. With nothing surfacing but the nagging doubt she was doing everything wrong. Finally looking at the clock and seeing she had wasted almost three hours, she abandoned her efforts and flounced downstairs for breakfast.

She had missed a call from Jack and Ken, who were wondering if she wanted to meet up. Ringing Jack, she had a

peculiar three-way conversation where he repeated everything to Ken and then back to her. The boys had no idea how the map worked, and she suspected they were not interested. They had been on Jack's computer all morning looking up Neanderthals and the Ice Age. Jack even suggested going to the library, which must have been a first. Saying she would speak later, Catherine grabbed a bowl of cereal before heading back upstairs, convinced she was missing something.

Staring at the lace and the mirror, she considered what would happen if she put them together. Laying one on the other, she hesitantly touched the cloth, watching with growing amazement as the mirror underneath glowed in exactly the same way as when Thomas touched it.

Unlike the night before, instead of fading the phosphorescent blue whorls shimmered, pulsing at the edges of her fingertips as if waiting. Pressing the map hard on the mirror's surface, Catherine was rewarded with a rainbow burst, like an oily smear on a wet road. When she was little, one of her sisters told her those iridescent patches on roads were the remains of fairies mown down by speeding cars. She was upset for weeks.

Beneath her fingers, pictures appeared in the greasy rainbow. It was hard to see what they were with the lace in the way. But removing her hand caused the colours to fade. Laying the lace to one side, she touched its centre, while letting the fingertips of her other hand rest lightly on the mirror's edge.

Another rainbow of oily colour immediately flooded across the slick black surface, swiftly congealing into Bess' throne room. The old lady wore her dressing gown and fluffy slippers. Standing over her, like a ghost, was the handsome Bilquis of dream, who

waved and vanished, only to reappear seconds later to wave and vanish once more.

Touching another part of the lace caused a new rainbow, which quickly formed into another room with another fairy queen. Instead of fading, the young woman grew plump and matronly, continuing to age until she was old and frail before finally becoming a silver outline. Whereupon the sequence started again. After watching the hypnotic transformation run through its cycle a few more times, Catherine knew she was looking at the Moon.

This time Catherine let her hand rest across the whole lace and watched in amazement as the mirror sprang to life in a translucent web of pale blue threads connecting images so small she could barely see them. Hundreds of tiny fairy queens waved in unison. They left Catherine suspecting each lace hole was a fairy nest, and each thread a fairy road. While the smaller holes, where many threads crossed, must be the junctions she had seen in the ley lines.

Moving her hand lightly caused the pictures to flow over the black glossy surface at dizzying speed, so she stopped. Once still, the mirror revealed greater detail. Catherine noticed some threads were broken; some tiny images dim. Reaching a dim image, she saw a dead fairy nest where the ghost of a veiled queen kept silent vigil. The ghost did not look or wave, nor did she vanish. She stayed frozen, like a statue guarding a grave, a memento mori; a remembrance of death.

There were lots of dim images. Each a dead nest guarded by a sombre veiled queen. There were more dead nests than Catherine could see. More than she could count, or bear to look at. Mr Grin spoke the truth when he said the fairy world was dying.

Looking closer still, she tried to see how many of the pale blue threads were broken. Tracing a finger along one such thread, the image lined with tiny shops and houses, she came to the break, a tiny railway line stretching both ways into the distance.

The vision of the fairies' dying world made her think of Thomas. Resting a hand on the lace she instructed it to take me home. Repeating what Thomas said the night before.

The images dissolved, resettling at dizzying speed to a tiny Tower Hill Park with the fairy hill at its centre. There was the church by the library where they first travelled on ley lines. And further away, on the outskirts of the town, there were other churches.

As Dan was taken from Tower Hill, she touched the lace looking for clues. A web of interconnected blue lines sprung to life. There were so many, they would take a lifetime to explore. The church by the library showed fewer lines. She followed one, looking brighter than the others, to the old church they travelled to on their first journey. The bright thread continued. Tracing its path, she already knew it led to the other old church; the one by the pub called the Old Church Inn. If those bright lines were the path of their journey, perhaps the other bright lines were other recent journeys.

Back at Tower Hill, a couple of threads were brighter than the rest. Catherine traced one that took her over rolling countryside to Stonehenge. Starting again, she traced it back to a wide estuary and expanse of salt marsh, before coming to a hill. The hill, ringed by standing stones, stood beside a wood that concealed a large handsome house. It was exactly like what Jack described from his

dreams. As she stared, a beautiful fairy queen welled up from the depths of the mirror and gave a friendly wave.

* * *

Hastily Catherine rang Jack.

“I know where Thomas lives,” she blurted out as he answered. For someone so pleased with her own cleverness, she sounded very matter of fact.

“How?” he asked, wary.

“Come and see.”

The boys, round within fifteen minutes flat, were as excited as Catherine.

“Watch!” she instructed putting one hand on the lace and the other on the mirror. The oily rainbow instantly flooded the surface. “See!”

“What?” Jack demanded.

“The colours, the pictures! Watch when I move my hand!” she added, mesmerised by the dizzying race of images.

“We don’t see anything Catherine,” Ken informed her.

Jack nodded impatiently.

“Try touching the mirror!”

“Wow!”

“Blimey!”

“This is Tower Hill. Watch that bright line when I follow it.”

Tiny countryside flew by, the estuary and marsh came and went leaving the standing-stone ringed hill flickering on the mirror.

“See the woods, the house, exactly what you saw Jack. Now watch.”

The beautiful young queen rose out of the inky depths to wave at them.

Jack hesitated. “I’m not sure! It was a dream. I don’t know!”

“I know Jack,” Ken was soothing. “It’s not like a proper map, with place names and everything. I suppose we could go and look.”

“Why don’t we show Thomas before rushing off,” Catherine protested.

“Don’t know. He hasn’t been so good since London.” Ken ran a finger round the side of his head to emphasise his point. “He’s confused. Couldn’t even find his way in London, remember. What happens if he says it is and it isn’t?”

“Or a fairy queen grabs him, or worse, grabs us too?” Jack piped up.

Catherine nodded solemnly, seeing their point. How could they risk Thomas until they were sure? She was about to suggest investigating. But as always, when there was anything stupid or reckless to be done, the boys were way ahead of her.

“We can check it out first,” Ken suggested.

“We can’t go from Tower Hill. We don’t know how to make it work,” Jack grumbled, “Unless you do?” He looked hopefully at Catherine.

She shook her head. “Sorry.”

“Any ideas?” he asked, still looking at her.

“There is a line from this church to Tower Hill. We could start there. It is about three miles away.”

“Let’s go then.”

“Better not.” Catherine moved her hand across the lace. “Here is the church and there is Tower Hill, look at the roads.”

“Remember what happens when cars cross our path,” Ken groaned. “We’ll be killed!”

“We’ll be all right,” Jack insisted.

“No, we won’t! Catherine’s right, it’s too dangerous.”

“We could go early tomorrow, before the traffic starts,” Catherine suggested. “I can order a taxi on Mother’s account for six in the morning to take us to the church.”

“Won’t your mum mind paying for a taxi?” asked Ken, impressed by the extravagance.

“She wants me to use her account late at night, which is like early in the morning really. I will say we are out for the day. It is not a lie!”

“Stay at ours tonight Jack, save worrying your mum and dad,” offered Ken generously.

“Thanks, Ken.”

* * *

It was still dark when the taxi pulled up outside the church gates.

“Are you sure you want to be dropped off here miss?” asked the taxi driver.

“Positive!” Catherine sounded eager. “We are the first to arrive. I am sure the rest of the youth group will be here in a few minutes.”

“Do you want to wait in the car?”

“No, we will be fine honestly. Oh look, a light in the vicarage. They must be here already. Goodbye.”

They purposefully marched into the graveyard as the taxi drove off.

“This place is creepy,” muttered Jack. “What’s it called?”

“The Good Shepherd,” Ken answered before asking, “Is there really a light in the vicarage Catherine?”

“What vicarage?”

Seeing the boys uncomfortable, Catherine suggested they get moving before a youth group really did show up.

Reaching the church, Ken put his hand on the wrought iron door handle. “Come on you two, after three.”

Catherine and Jack joined him and together they pushed. The huge wooden door easily swung open to reveal a pale blue tunnel of swirling light.

“Which way?” Ken pondered.

Catherine felt the lacy map, realising she could sense places with her fingers, without needing the mirror. “Behind us.”

They turned around giving themselves to the ley line. Within seconds, they were on Tower Hill, the meeting place of a myriad of

sparkling blue tunnels floating over the town and stretching to infinity.

“Amazing!” murmured Jack.

“Blimey!” Ken agreed. “They’re like them lines from the earth’s magnetic core. And look at the sky!”

Inside the tunnel, the moon and stars seemed close enough to touch.

“So which way now?”

Catherine felt the map. “Second star on the right and straight on ‘til morning,” she responded wittily.

“What?” Jack asked densely.

“Oh for heaven’s sake Jack, that way!”

Chapter 26 Griffin Hunters

“I remember this,” exclaimed Jack as they flew over an estuary lit by a fading moon. Beneath them, ducks squabbled sleepily in the marshes. They landed on a small hill surrounded by standing stones. Off to one side a pebble path vanished through a wood of black leafed rhododendron, spindly pine and bleak autumn trees.

“This is definitely the right place. The house is over there.”

“I see it!” Ken pointed to a roof with tall fluted chimneys silvered by moonlight.

“That’s where Dan is!” Jack excitedly ran down the hill.

“Jack, wait!” Catherine cried out. But he took no notice.

“I suppose we better follow before he gets lost,” groaned Ken.

Reaching the trees Jack stopped, waiting for them to catch up.

“I suppose it’s that way?” Ken sighed, looking at a narrow path winding into the gloomy wood.

Jack nodded.

“Thought it was!”

Within minutes they were lost, with Jack recklessly pushing deeper into the inky shadows of the trees.

“Hear that?” Ken whispered.

“Something is following,” Catherine whispered back.

They stopped and listened, hearing only silence.

“Perhaps it’s an echo.” Jack was not as confident as he sounded. A nagging doubt said it was no echo.

“Shush!” Ken hissed.

They held their breath, hearing heavy breathing.

“Sounds like a horse,” muttered Catherine.

“A big dog?” Ken suggested.

Something stirred in the back of Jack’s mind, making him nervous. “Let’s not wait to find out. Come on, run!”

“No!” Catherine hissed. “If we surprise it, it might attack. For the moment, it seems happy following us.”

“I can’t sense anything. Could be our imagination you know. This is a fairy place,” Ken reminded them.

“Do you think?” asked Jack, relieved. Somehow the thought of fairy magic calmed him. They were old hands at fairy magic.

“Ignore it!” Ken advised.

They started walking.

The noise followed.

“It might feed on fear, like a nightmare,” Catherine suggested, sounding worried.

“I thought that,” Ken replied.

“Come on you two,” Jack sounded desperate. “If it’s our imagination, it might go away if we think happy thoughts. La, la, la, I’m so happy.”

Clapping her hand over her mouth, Catherine stifled a giggle. Ken laughed so hard he sounded like a barking dog. After this, the noise got fainter until it stopped altogether.

“It was imagination,” breathed Ken with relief.

Every few meters, they stopped to listen. Hearing nothing, they pushed on, reassured. Moments later Jack darted towards a gap in the rhododendron bushes.

“This way!” he called out.

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea to leave the path,” said Ken nervously. “Anyway I don’t think you’re right!”

Jack was impatient. “Look, I had nightmares about this place. The house is over there, believe me!”

“Well, you look! We’ll wait here!”

“I’ll be two minutes.”

“Stop it! We have to stick together,” snapped Catherine. “Are you sure Jack?”

“Positive.”

“Then we all go.”

Jack was right. Through the gap in the bushes they glimpsed a roof with chimneys. Running eagerly through withered bracken and scratchy bramble, they came to the edge of an overgrown meadow, damp with dew. From here the house was clearly visible against the pallid dawn sky.

“This looks like the back,” Catherine said staring uncertainly at a plain white box. The tall chimneys on the pitched roof were almost hidden behind a balustrade with ornamental corners. “The front is a lot fancier. I saw a columned porch on the map.”

Her words calmed Jack, who was worried because the house was not at all like he remembered from his dreams.

Along the building ran a raised terrace topped by a short wall of delicate columns and eight stout plinths, each holding a shapeless statue. In the centre, a broad staircase descended to the meadow.

“That is probably the ballroom,” said Catherine, pointing to French windows above the staircase. “When they have parties, they will throw open the doors to dance in the moonlight,” she added, imagination getting the better of her.

Ken took no notice. He counted three stories of windows, without a light in any of them. They reminded him of empty eye sockets in a skull. “The windows are pitch-black. This place scares the hell out of me!”

“Windows are the eyes of a house,” muttered Catherine.

“Eyes are the windows of the soul,” he answered darkly. “I don’t like the look of that soul one little bit!”

“Shut up you two, we’re scaring ourselves again. Everyone’s probably still asleep. I bet it’s not even the right house!” Jack protested, even though he did not believe it.

“What was that?” yelled Ken in surprise.

“What now?” Jack snapped.

“One of them statues moved.”

“Don’t talk stupid... Which one?”

“The end one there.”

Jack looked at the end statue. It was stone still. He was about to tell Ken to calm down, when he glimpsed movement.

“I saw it too,” Catherine exclaimed.

“What?” Ken asked.

“Another statue.”

“We’re jumping at shadows,” Jack sternly protested.

“You saw it too, you know you did.”

Ignoring her, Jack turned to the statues. He could clearly see the shape of the statue’s head, a bird with a wickedly curved beak. It sent shivers down his spine.

“They are statues of eagles.”

“Not eagles,” Jack shot back.

“But you can see the wings,” she insisted.

“I saw them when I was in the mirror.”

She realised what he meant.

One of the statues stood up on its plinth. It looked more like a lion than a bird; until it unfurled huge eagle wings. Catherine and Ken stiffened, before looking at each other in disbelief. On the plinths, all the statues were moving. All were the same, a lion’s body with an eagle’s head and wings.

“I think we need to be in the woods,” Catherine whispered to the boys.

Reaching the shadow of the trees, they looked back. The statues were stretching on their plinths like cats in front of the fire, and unfurling wings as if readying for flight.

“They are griffins,” Catherine sounded awestruck.

“They’re what was trying to eat me down that hole,” Jack muttered grimly.

“So it’s the right place then!” Ken joked; humour falling flat.

“We should get out of here,” Catherine prompted.

“Hang on a minute. Look!”

“Never mind hang on a minute, Jack!”

She pulled his arm, but Jack, rooted to the spot, stared at the griffins. Despite herself, Catherine could not help looking too. The creatures on the plinths were sitting to attention like guard dogs. Their eagle wings were unfurled so that the tip of each wing touched its neighbour’s wing tip.

“We should run Jack,” Ken insisted.

“What am I telling him?” Catherine groaned.

Still Jack did not move.

Catherine made for the woods.

A great whoosh of air broke the still morning as a griffin took flight. It was all Jack needed to start after his friends. Through the trees, all they heard was the rhythmic beat of wings washing over them like a wall of sound.

Missing the path in panic, they were soon lost. Unable to breathe, Ken hunted for his inhaler. Sucking it laboriously as one of the great beasts, hovering overhead, let out a harsh screech to tell the others it had found them.

“Ken, we must keep moving,” Catherine pleaded. She and Jack grabbed an arm, frogmarching Ken between them.

“Which way?” she demanded.

“I don’t know!” Jack was frightened. “This way, I think!”

Minutes later, they came out of the woods onto a broad drive. Jack spun around seeing the top of the house behind them through the trees. There were no sign of griffins.

“Let’s get out of here.”

They ran as fast as they could down the drive; dragging the wheezing Ken between them. Ken kept begging them to leave him, but they wouldn’t. He knew they wouldn’t. And they knew they wouldn’t. So he puffed on his inhaler trying not to slow them down.

Within a minute they heard, almost felt, the shockwave of beating wings. The broad roadway did not look like such a good idea now. Rather than an escape route, it was more of a landing strip for one of the massive creatures to swoop down and pick up someone up in its wicked beak or claws.

Holding his side Ken gasped, “Can’t run! Stitch!”

Thinking quick, Jack commanded, “Back into the woods where it’s dark.”

They headed for the shelter of the trees.

“Don’t lose the path!” Catherine warned. “Just stay in the shadows.”

Safe under cover, they stood gasping for breath. Overhead, three magnificent griffins flew in formation down the drive, swinging heads right and left, searching for them.

“Look at them. They’re beautiful,” gasped Ken; snatching a breath from his inhaler.

They followed the animals' flight until the first turned to the left, soaring skyward with a lazy wing beat. The second, turning to the right, did the same.

"They are stopping at the same place. It must be the property boundary! It is not far," cried Catherine.

As she spoke, the third griffin turned in a lazy arc to descend. Folding its wings along its back, it landed on the driveway in a hefty crunch of gravel, causing the three friends to edge deeper into the shadows.

"It's got us cut off," Jack whispered. "Keep cool, if we get lost, we'll never get out of here." He crouched, pulling the others down with him. "If we can make it to that thicket, it'll never see us."

They shuffled deeper into the trees. Although careful not to make a noise, the griffin jerked its head looking straight at them. They stopped, absolutely terrified as the beast cocked its head from side to side, listening.

Jack pulled the others backwards as the griffin stared straight at them.

"Bloody hell, it knows where we are!"

"It's all right. I figured it out," Ken hissed.

Standing up, he walked to the griffin. The creature stared impassively as he approached, only moving when he turned to run back to the others. Leaping down the drive, it covered twenty meters in a single bound, sending a spray of gravel ricocheting in all directions.

"Ken!" yelled Jack.

“I’m all right. Come on!” Ken grabbed Jack with one hand and Catherine with the other, dragging them towards the giant animal.

“What are you doing?” Jack wailed.

“He is right Jack. We have to get back on the path and walk to the gate,” Catherine said calmly.

The griffin continued to stare as they approached, but did not move.

“They’re meant to frighten us,” Ken revealed. “When we ran they could have caught us at any time, but one only landed when we panicked and they couldn’t see us. They didn’t want us wandering to the house.”

“Of course, griffins are mythological guardians of magic places,” Catherine added; struggling with a reluctant Jack.

Jack stopped resisting. “That’s what Thomas said! He laughed at me for being scared. Why she couldn’t get a dog like normal people!”

Ken grinned, retorting, “Hurry up Jack, wouldn’t want you to get eaten.”

“Very funny!” grumbled Jack, falling in step. “But what if you’re wrong?”

“If I’m wrong, we’re not going to be able to do much about it. I wonder if we’ll be bird food or dog food.”

“You mean cat food,” Catherine wittily shot back.

“Shut up you two!” Despite himself, Jack chuckled.

“Hi there,” shouted Ken to the griffin.

“Ken, no!” Catherine warned.

“They’re probably illusions!” Ken insisted.

“If they are, they’re good ones,” hissed Jack.

Standing less than ten meters from the griffin, he could clearly see the huge beast in the brightening daylight. Could hear it breathe as its chest moved. Hear the gravel scrunch as it shifted its weight.

Taller than a man, its eagle head was covered in sharp black feathers that glistened as if made of metal. The feathers flowed onto the shoulders, where a lion has its mane and here the wings started, now folded neatly along the length of its back. Its front legs were like a bird’s, covered in feathers and ending in talons the size of meat hooks. While the hind legs were a lion’s with massive square paws, bigger than their heads.

The griffin fluffed its feathered mane, appearing even larger, as it unfurled mighty wings. They felt a blast of hot sulphurous breath, followed by a rush of cold morning air as it bounded at them flapping its wings. They instinctively ducked. But the griffin was already above their heads, gaining altitude. They saw it outlined against the clouds as it circled. Then it was gone. All except for the fading rhythmic whooshing sound of its flight.

“I will never forget that sight as long as I live,” said Ken.

“I will never forget the sound of those wings,” Catherine added.

“I’ll never forget one trying to dig me out of that hole and eat me!” griped Jack, sullenly. He nodded to the gate. “Let’s get out of here.”

Squeezing through the half open gates, Ken saw a name carved in the gatepost. The remnants of peeling paint looked

ghostly in the pale grey light. Unable to read it because of scrambling ivy, he shouted, “Jack, give me a hand!”

The two boys pulled the ivy loose.

“Look, Elphame House!”

For Jack this was the final proof, if any more was needed, they had found Thomas’ home.

“How do we get to the ley line from here?” Catherine pondered. “Maybe we should sneak back to the hill.”

“Why? We can’t make it work even if we do,” Jack reminded her.

“So what then?”

“All I know is I’m not going back until it’s properly light!”

“Let’s see if there’s a village,” Ken suggested, hoping to prevent an argument. “There might be a train or a bus. Anyone got money?”

“A few pounds,” Catherine replied.

“Oh well, we can dodge on the train, or talk our way onto a bus. We’ve done it before.” He winked at her.

They followed the wall of the estate down a country lane overhung with branches and smothered in fallen leaves. Ten minutes later, they came to a junction. The estate wall swung to the left while straight ahead was a sign for Lesser Brookingham; only a few miles on. It was fully light by the time they got to the village, a tiny place of no more than a handful of houses without bus stop, train station, or even a shop to buy anything. There was a church though, a fine old Norman church with a heavy square tower and a big arched door.

“Great. I was beginning to think we’d be stuck here forever,” said Jack; cheering up.

“Can you find it on the map Catherine?” asked Ken.

“It does not work like that,” she replied. Surreptitiously running her hand over the lace in her pocket, she announced a few seconds later. “Apparently it does work like that, I can feel it!” She stopped. “The only problem is we pass the hill by the house.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. Anyway there is no need to leave the ley line.”

“And it’s not like we have a choice,” Jack added glumly.

There was no excitement twisting the handle of the church door, only an enormous sense of relief that they were on their way home.

Reaching the hill in seconds, they paused in the flow with Jack exclaiming, “Look!”

“I can’t see anything,” replied Ken.

“That’s what I mean. Where’s the house?” said Jack. And he stepped out of the swirling tunnel.

“Jack, no!” Catherine called, knowing they had no choice but to follow; wondering how on earth they would get back on the ley line.

“I wish you would think sometimes,” she complained materialising out of thin air.

“Wow. You stepped out of nowhere,” Jack grinned.

“Is it safe?” Catherine asked.

Joining them, Ken shrugged. It looked safe. What's more, it felt safe. There were none of the jitters of the earlier visit.

Wondering through the woods, they saw nothing unusual and heard nothing unusual. When they got to the house, it was gone with only a few charred ruins remaining.

"It burned down years ago!"

"Then what did we see?" Catherine wanted to know, "A phantom? An illusion?"

"Maybe this is the illusion," Ken suggested.

Picking up half a brick Jack chucked it at a pile of masonry where it landed with a satisfactory thud. "If it is, it's a good one."

"So were the griffins," Catherine reminded him.

"You weren't calling them illusions an hour ago," Jack sneered.

"No, but..."

"But nothing!"

Catherine spoke firmly in her adult voice. "Listen Jack, we know griffins do not exist but fairyland does, and it is all illusion. We saw that with Bess. We need to come back with Thomas and see what happens."

"She's right," agreed Ken.

"I know! Sorry Catherine," Jack apologised sheepishly.

She smiled, "Come on you two! It's a long walk back to that church."

Chapter 27 The Good Shepherd

It was that time of the morning when Tower Hill Park was empty: too late for joggers, too early for the mums and toddlers in the playground. Stepping off the ley line, they headed straight to Ken's house. When Rosie opened the door, Jack excitedly asked for Thomas. Sadly, she took them to his bedroom where he lay looking like death, pale, feverish and mumbling incoherently. Jack was shocked, when he stayed last night Thomas was a bit quiet, but he seemed all right.

"What's happened to him?" he mouthed silently; once outside Thomas' bedroom.

"I don't think he's got any more fight left," Rosie answered dejectedly.

Ken tried to comfort his mum. "He might pick up. He did yesterday."

"He keeps saying something that sounds like, jus we per du."

"That means I'm lost," Ken informed her.

"It means I am forgotten. Do you two pay any attention in class?" piped up Catherine in a harsh whisper; sounding as if she was about to deliver a lecture.

In an effort to keep the peace, Rosie hurried on. "He was saying other things too about hearts and flowers. Even though I

don't speak French," she reminded Catherine, "it was pretty easy to follow. Then there was one I spent ages working out, something about seeing the face of his love before he dies."

"He needs Sylvie," Catherine concluded.

"Let's take him home then!" Jack announced.

"He's not going anywhere in this state Jack," Rosie insisted.

"And we need Alison," Catherine reminded him.

Jack realised how much there was to think about. For a start, Elphame House had vanished.

While Ken brought Rosie up to date, Jack phoned Alison. It was strange speaking to her because it was like she did not care. He could understand her not being interested in him, but she was not even bothered about Dan. Finally, he lost his temper. "Look, meet me at the library in an hour."

"Why?"

"It's to do with Dan!"

"I'll have to get the bus," she whined.

Yes you would, he thought, but wisely held his tongue. If things were the other way round and Alison was asking for help, Jack bet he'd be a lot nicer.

* * *

"Who are they?" scowled Alison seeing Ken and Catherine.

"Friends."

“Oh!” She managed to sound as if she had stood in something.

Feeling Catherine’s hackles rise and afraid she would snap, Jack quickly grabbed Alison by the wrist. “If you won’t believe me, perhaps you’ll believe this!”

Sneering with disgust, Alison shook him off. “What?”

“Come on.”

Sort of penning Alison between them, they marched her to the church opposite. Ken grabbed the handle of the little side door, while Jack told her to watch closely. As she leaned forward, Jack grabbed the doorknob, seizing her hand as he fell into the ley line.

“What happened?” she snivelled.

The ley line whipped them away, with Alison screaming as she was sucked through the town at incredible speed. Jack could not help feeling pleased when she winced at every wall and hedge she passed through. Within seconds, they were in front of an old oak door, transparent as glass. Jack quickly checked the coast was clear before stepping out.

Alison stared at the church, unable to comprehend how a modern, concrete building surrounded by asphalt could turn into this old church with gnarled yew trees and crumbling gravestones. She looked as if she would burst into tears.

“It’s true then!”

“Yes, all of it true!” Jack was defiant.

“Dan really was taken by those awful people.”

Seeing how scared she was Jack relented; sorry he had been so hard on her. “We can save him.”

“How? We’re just kids. What can we do?”

We’ve already done a lot,” he explained patiently and gestured for her to sit with him on the bench under a massive hollow yew tree; so old its branches touched the ground.

He told her about seeing Dan in the mirror and the ley lines; about the trip to London and finding Sylvie’s house. He shared secrets, trying to make her one of them. She sat through it all, shaking her head with disbelief, as if unable to take anything in. When Jack finished, Ken also pleaded for help.

Reaching into her jumper to pull out the pendant, Alison vowed, “I will save my Dan.”

Jack was satisfied. “Right, let’s go home then.”

“Are we going to do it again?” she timidly squeaked.

Jack nodded.

The others grinned.

Alison did not look happy.

“It is quite exciting really, once you get over the shock,” Catherine confided; trying to encourage her to be brave.

Nervously, Alison tightly gripped their hands as they took the door handle. Noticing how she kept her eyes shut, Catherine could not help thinking it was not a good sign.

Jack, being Jack, wanted to head straight off to Elphame. But Catherine reminded him the house had vanished. After some negotiation, trying to suit Alison, they agreed to meet tomorrow morning. Once everything was settled, Alison fled.

As soon as she was out of earshot Catherine confided, “You do not need a magic necklace to see she is a bit of a disappointment. Are you sure Bess meant her?”

“Who else! They spent every minute kissing and cuddling. It was disgusting!” Jack protested, feelingly. “Look, I don’t like this any better than you Catherine, but I think it’s because she’s frightened. True love has nothing to do with being brave.”

“I always thought if I loved someone it would make me very brave indeed,” Catherine argued.

Jack shrugged. “Perhaps that’s as brave as she can be.”

* * *

When they got back, Thomas was tucking into cheese on toast. He looked tired but was entirely rational. Greeting him like the long lost brother he soon hoped to greet, Jack took great delight saying he was going home. Thomas listened intently. Excitedly clapping his hands at the griffins he cried out, “When?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Jack informed him.

“Thomas, you have to stay awake tonight. You cannot have any more nightmares, they make you too ill,” Catherine warned.

“I’ll sit up with him to make sure,” Rosie promised.

An hour later Alison rang to say she could not go. Her parents were keeping an eye on her - perhaps worried she might runaway too. It was the worst possible news for Jack, who was convinced they had no chance without her. Dejectedly he repeated Alison’s words to the others who crowded around to listen.

“Can she do some other time?” Catherine prompted.

Alison must have heard because even before Jack spoke, she blurted out, “What about today? My parents are out until late. I can find my own way. Where was it again?”

“The Good Shepherd on Arundel Drive,” answered Jack. “It’s a great big church, you can’t miss it.”

“All right I’ll meet you there. What time?”

“What about now?”

“Can’t,” said Alison hastily.

“Jack, the traffic needs to die down,” Catherine reminded him. “Also the house might only appear after dark. See if she can come about six tonight!”

Jack suggested it to Alison.

“See you then,” she replied brightly.

Ending the call, Jack turned to Catherine. “Told you she’d be all right.”

Unable to shake the feeling something was wrong, Catherine gave him a weak smile that was meant to be encouraging.

“What’s the face on you for?” he snapped.

“Nothing!” She was evasive. “I was only wondering what will happen when we get there.”

Ken jumped to Catherine’s defence. “Sunset’s around six. So if the house appears at night, we should be ok.”

“I hope it is not too dark, I am not sure Alison will like the griffins.” Catherine was only thinking aloud, but realising it

sounded like criticism, hastily added, “I am sure we will have heaps of time.”

Jack did not look at all happy.

* * *

Mindful of Bess’ warning to let Ken fight his own battles, Rosie refused to go with them. Waving goodbye yet needing something to worry about, she began to fret over Thomas behaving himself in the cab.

Fortunately, Thomas was on his best behaviour. As he had been in Alan’s van, on the train to London, on the underground and in Vic’s van too. For some reason any form of transport brought out the best in him.

When the cab pulled up outside the churchyard, Thomas used his sleeve to polish the chrome handle after carefully closing the door. Thinking him a bit slow the driver cheerfully thanked him for the impromptu valet, before saying knowingly to the others, “So he likes cars then?”

“Mad for them. Aren’t you Tommy?” teased Jack.

In reply, Tommy grinned like a loon.

Alison was not outside the church.

“She is not here,” Catherine announced, sounding unsurprised.

“Give her a chance,” Jack snapped, unwilling to believe Alison would let Dan down.

“Perhaps she’s inside,” said Ken diplomatically.

Opening the door Jack quietly called her name.

“Down here Jack,” came Alison’s voice.

“We need to get going,” he answered with relief.

“I want to show you something!”

Stepping into the church, he looked around. It was too gloomy to see much. There was no light other than the last of the day coming through the high narrow windows, and there was very little of that. There was not even enough to light up the stained glass window over the altar, which simply looked black, except for a vague milky patch in the middle.

“Where are you?” Jack shouted.

“Here!” Alison stepped from behind a screen.

“We don’t have a lot of time!” he reminded her; annoyed at her messing them about.

Jack was not the only unhappy one. Catherine thought Thomas looked particularly worried. But that was Thomas, always up or down, either over the moon or spooked. There seemed to be no happy medium with him.

Alison was half way down the church in front of a side chapel. Behind her was a statue of the Virgin Mary lit by racks of devotional tapers, between her and the statue stood Agnes Day.

“What are you doing here?” Catherine demanded.

“Hear her out! You gave me the crystal to see people’s hearts and her heart’s true; see for yourself,” she said, passing Jack the necklace.

“It’s not too late Alison, let’s run,” he whispered squeezing her hand.

Alison pulled away from him. “She wants to help rescue Dan! Her poor sister was taken!”

“What have you done?” Jack moaned in despair.

“It’s not what have I done. It’s what can you do! We’re children Jack! All of us just children! Really, what can any of us do? We need her!”

“We have done fine so far.” Catherine was angry. Ignoring Alison, she stared straight at Agnes Day. An almost imperceptible flick of her eyes was enough to convince Catherine something was wrong. Instinctively she screamed, “Run Thomas!”

From behind came the noise of three burly men charging down the nave. It did not take a genius to know they were blocking the escape route to the door.

“Get him,” Agnes commanded, pointing at Thomas, who ran for the shadows in panic.

As he did, Thomas seemed to merge with gloom, growing so faint, he looked almost transparent. Catherine thought she was seeing things, until she realised he was vanishing before her eyes.

Thrusting a fist in the air, Agnes Day roared out the words, “Fiat lux!”

A ball of blinding white light flared from her hand, instantly banishing all shadow. It took a moment or two for the dazzles to clear but when they did, everyone saw Thomas was gone.

“Damn!” Agnes grunted. “Hold them, while I smoke him out.”

Her goons hesitated, recovering from the shock of the sudden glare. It gave the three friends a split second start. As one, they tore

off down the church towards the altar, and a possible way out through the sacristy at the rear.

The light on Agnes' fist dimmed, letting shadow creep back. Suddenly the church was lit again. This time by a glow so fierce, it seemed the building was on fire. The setting sun had caught the huge stained glass window over the altar. At its heart, amid ranks of angels and gaudy saints, lay a pure white lamb with a golden halo. Its foreleg held a spear tipped with a white pennant showing a blood red cross on which blazed the words 'Agnus Dei Lamb of God'.

"Look!" shouted Ken, so shocked he almost collided with Jack.

In the moment it took to recover, they lost the advantage. The thugs were closing fast. Now at the rear of the church, they saw there was nowhere to hide. Neither the altar nor the pulpit offered shelter.

Literally seconds from capture, Bess' prophecy about the Lamb of God flooded Ken's mind. It was a warning not to let the ring fall into Agnes Day's hands. The ring, of course, how could he be so stupid! Now Ken knew what to do, he realised there was no time to do it. Desperately, he looked to Jack.

While Jack was unsure what passed between them, he knew something had. With a wild man's whoop, he turned to charge their pursuers. A second later, Jack's madness seemingly infected Miss Sensible. For with the same hooligan cry Catherine also rushed Agnes' heavies. Grateful, Ken headed for the pulpit as if his life depended on it.

At the very last instant, Jack swung sharp to the left, while Catherine spun to the right. Their pursuers hesitated, unsure who to go for. It only bought a second, but every second counted. By the time the men split up, one heading for each of them, Ken had the ring out of his shirt and was struggling with the clasp on the chain.

Ken's pursuer reached the tiny pulpit as Ken gained the top. As he struggled with the clasp, the man grabbed at his ankle. Impatient and frustrated, Ken snapped the chain and rammed the ring on his finger. There was a brief tightening as the band shrunk to fit. Power pulsed through his body.

With his attacker swiping at his leg, Ken raised his hand, shouting loud as he could, "Thus I bind our enemies."

The man froze in an impossible position - scrambling up the stairs literally supported by toes and fingertips. It was a miracle.

"Wow!" exclaimed Jack, sliding out beneath his pursuer's grasp.

"Look at Agnes Day," Catherine called out; ignoring her stalker who was frozen attempting to vault over a pew.

Agnes was frozen too; as was Alison.

Ken squeezed down the pulpit stairs, gingerly manoeuvring around the paralysed man who, he was sure, was bluffing and would spring at him any second. Joining the others in front of Agnes and Alison, he thought Jack would be delighted. Instead his friend looked crushed.

"What are we going to do without her?" groaned Jack.

Alison blinked, but did not move.

"Did she blink?" Jack was flabbergasted.

“Leave her Jack. We have to get out of here.” Catherine was emphatic. So much so Jack forgot his troubles and followed her gaze. Agnes Day, although immobile, was struggling to move her lips. Defying the binding’s power, she managed, barely, by sheer force of will, to mutter an incantation.

Alison moved. Seeing it from the corner of his eye, Jack’s head snapped back.

“Leave her Jack,” Ken echoed.

“How do we free Dan without a pure heart?” he protested.

“Obviously she does not have one,” Catherine retorted.

“Yes I do! What do you know?” Alison snarled.

“You were faking!” Jack was disgusted.

Alison did not answer.

“Come on Alison. Please!” he implored.

Agnes started to flex her fingers. Her head moved slowly and painfully from side to side as though a stone statue was coming to life.

“We have to leave,” Catherine insisted. “She made her choice!”

“Please Alison!” Jack begged.

Alison refused to budge.

“We’re wasting time,” warned Ken; heading for the door.

As Catherine reluctantly followed, Thomas stepped from the shadows. With a last contemptuous look at Alison, Jack fled.

“Thus I break the power of the Elfin,” crowed Agnes Day in triumph.

The church door slammed. From behind came the sounds of her thugs scrambling up stairs, vaulting a pew, clutching the space Jack once occupied.

“Get them!” she ordered.

The goons were remarkably quick, hurtling past Agnes to close the gap on their victims. Despite this, the friends did not worry. All they had to do was open the church door, and they would be safely on the ley line where no one could touch them.

Reaching for the door handle, Catherine grabbed Thomas. With Agnes’ heavies bearing down, they turned the knotted cast-iron ring and pulled... only to find themselves stepping outside the church.

“What happened?” yelled Jack.

Catherine looked back. The goons were almost on them.

“Quick!” she screamed, pulling Thomas behind her and pushing the boys ahead.

Fortunately, seeing how close their pursuers were, Jack slammed the door without thinking. There was an almighty crash as one or more of the men ploughed heavily into the other side. Watching in horror as the handle began to move, Catherine unthinkingly grabbed it. Unprompted, the boys added their strength. Without any resistance at all, the door swung open onto a tunnel of pure blue swirling light. Tumbling into the ley line, Catherine grabbed Thomas.

They were literally centimetres away from Agnes’ thugs. Yet the brutes could not even see them. The men carried on struggling with a ghostly door handle for the briefest of moments before the

ghostly door yielded, letting them rush out of the church and straight through the friends.

“They walked though us!” laughed Ken in disbelief.

Catherine thought Jack might get a bit silly at this, but he was ignoring the men to look at Alison.

“Forget her,” she gently advised.

Turning their backs on Alison, Agnes and her goons, they gave themselves to the light.

Fortunately, the roads were empty meaning they arrived at Tower Hill without incident, although later than planned. The sun had set, leaving clouds streaked bloody and golden.

Suddenly in reach of their goal Catherine wondered if they would be all right; before realising they had to be. There was no going back now. All they had was each other. So far, that was all they needed. Secretly she was glad Alison was not with them; although she felt sorry for Jack.

“There are other hearts with pure love,” she said, thinking out loud. “Your love for your brother for instance; we would have never have done this without you.”

Jack nodded, looking unconvinced.

“What about your mum’s love? Perhaps all you need do is to remind Dan about your poor mum.”

That seemed more like it. Jack brightened, “Do you think so?”

“I am sure Bess meant that,” Catherine informed him.

Chapter 28 Sylvie of Elphame

Thomas clapped his hands with glee as he stepped out of the sparkling blue tunnel of the ley line onto the grassy hill.

“Home again, home again jiggy jig,” he squealed joyfully.

The others were too busy looking for the house to pay much attention.

“It’s not there,” said Ken.

“No, I can’t see it either,” Jack replied. “Thomas what time does the house appear?”

Thomas did not answer.

“Oh no!” Ken groaned.

“Where did he go?” cried Catherine, not entirely sure if she was echoing Ken or voicing her own surprise.

“So this is the thanks you get!” Jack snarled resentfully. “First Alison, now Thomas, we’ll never find Dan!”

Catherine was sharp. “Stop it! Do not dare give up Jack Hughes, not after everything we have done. We found Bess and we found Sylvie. It is more than the Mages did. If nothing else, we brought Thomas home and saved his life.”

Her voice softened. “The odds were always against us Jack. We cannot give up now we are so close.”

“She’s right.” Ken was looking at the thunderbolt ring. “Bess told us to beware the Lamb of God and that was Agnes Day. There are still more prophecies.”

“I just called you Jack Hughes,” exclaimed Catherine. “Bess predicted something about that!”

“And didn’t she say something to you too, Catherine?” Ken reminded her.

“Remember Atropos when Malfi; the lioness fierce has sharp claws and teeth,” she quoted.

“So there you go! There has to be more to come. Look, Jack, look!”

As the last of the day left the sky, the first stars appeared and with them the house. Almost lost in the trees, they saw roof and chimneys silhouetted against sky.

Ken pushed his friend towards the path. “Go on Jack, last time it was us trying to keep up with you!”

Jack pushed Ken back, grunting ‘get-off!’ but it was a good ‘get-off’ because Jack sounded more like his old self.

The woods looked dark and forbidding, but that might have been because there was no fearless Jack leading them; not giving them time to think. Before long, they were hopelessly lost in black, wet, choking undergrowth.

Ken held up his hand. “What did Agnes say? Oh, I remember...

Fiat lux!” he roared but nothing happened.

“It means, let there be light,” Catherine informed him. “The first words God says in the Bible.”

“Thinks a lot of herself doesn’t she!” quipped Jack.

Catherine giggled. Ken snorted so hard even Jack had to laugh at his own joke.

“I think it’s this way!” he added. He sounded so sure, they relaxed. This was more like the Jack they knew.

Before long, they heard heavy breathing from the undergrowth.

“There is that sound like a horse again,” commented Catherine.

“Griffin,” Ken loudly answered.

“Shush!” Catherine warned.

“Why? She knows we’re here!”

They carried on through woods with the creature following, always maintaining the same distance.

“Which way now?” Catherine wanted to know when they reached the gravelled drive.

Unsure, Jack hesitated.

“One way to find out!” Ken said, trotting slowly down the broad roadway.

After about twenty meters or so he stopped.

“Well?” called Jack.

“Wrong way,” Ken shrugged. Wheezing a bit, he trotted back. Instead of stopping, he carried on past his friends. Before he had gone another ten meters the griffin bounded out of the woods, coming to a halt in front of him with an almighty thud.

“Told you!” he announced, sounding a bit out of breath.

Running to join him, Catherine suggested, “Pretend to head to the gate. We can cut into the woods later.”

“No!” Ken was determined. “Bess said the ring has the power to bind mortal and fairy.”

He raised his hand, pointing the ring at the griffin. “By the power of the ring you see. Thus I bind thee unto me!”

The huge beast reared, unfurling massive wings, and let out a mighty screech. At more than four meters high on its hind legs, they seemed no bigger than ants before it. The griffin landed with a huge crash that sprayed gravel in all directions like bullets.

“That stung!” Jack yowled, as a piece, sharp as shrapnel, struck him in the face.

Catherine and Jack started to back away, but Ken stood his ground; defiant. Heartbeats dragged past like minutes as he squared up to the griffin. After what felt like an eternity, the huge creature dropped to its knees and stretching out full length on the drive put its huge eagle’s head between its muscular feathered forelimbs, like a naughty puppy.

“Gosh Ken, how did you do that?” gulped Catherine, a little awestruck.

“Just said the first thing that came into my head,” he nonchalantly replied. “I think it’s more to do with confidence than any actual magic words.”

Coolly walking over to the griffin, Ken began stroking the feathers on its forehead, while it hooted softly like a contented owl.

“Nice Griffy,” he murmured soothingly.

As impressed as Jack was, he still had it in him to be sarcastic. “Nice Griffy? Are you joking?”

“Okay clever dick, if you can think of something better be my guest,” Ken shot back.

Ignoring him, Jack wondered excitedly, “Do you think we can ride on its back?”

Ken was quick. “Not unless you want to end up riding in its stomach.”

“Stop it you two! You sound like a comedy team from the television,” wailed Catherine in mock disgust.

All of them were stroking the massive griffin. Not only did it let them, but it seemed to enjoy it, for it hooted softly with pleasure. Getting a bit bold, Jack ruffled its feathers.

“Ouch! Those feathers are sharp!” he yelped, showing Catherine his hand covered in tiny paper cuts.

She gave him her handkerchief to wrap his cut hand. If this was an illusion, it was the best illusion she had ever seen. Better even than Thomas becoming invisible in the church. Not only could they feel the griffin’s feathers and fur, and its long sharp beak, which Catherine discovered it especially liked to have stroked, but they could also feel its body heat in the cool evening. And smell its breath, which was a bit rancid like the smell of the animal itself. In fact, Catherine thought the griffin had a funny sort of zoo smell, like the lion house or the tigers; the big cats it most resembled. Except for the bits that resembled an eagle, she reminded herself. But then, what did eagles smell like?

The griffin walked tamely at their side as they continued towards the house. Jack kept staring because he could not believe

how big it was. It was huge, almost twice as high as him, and he was tall for his age. He bet it was even taller than his dad.

Before they had gone a hundred meters, another griffin appeared. When it spotted them, it landed with the customary thud and great flurry of feather shaken wings. The two griffins hooted at each other, moving their heads in odd disjointed movements, exactly as they had when squabbling over who would get to dig Jack out and eat him.

“Ken you better do something. If these two fight we’ll be mincemeat!” Jack insisted waving his bloody handkerchief wrapped hand as a reminder.

Ken pointed his ring at the newcomer, repeating the words. “By the power of the ring you see. Thus I bind thee unto me!”

The huge beast bent its forelegs to bow its head to the floor in submission, before falling in on the other side. The next time it was two griffins. And if they thought that was scary, things got really scary when four griffins swooped down.

After Ken managed to tame them, the animals boxed them in, two at the front, two in single file at each side, followed by two in the rear, closing the box. This left them distinctly uncomfortable because it was hot in the box. Hot from the bodies of the great animals surrounding them. All they could smell was breath and beast.

Looking at the muscular haunches and tails swishing in front of his face Jack remarked, “I’m going to pass out if one of these farts!”

“Trust you!”

Although laughing, Catherine quickly saw his point. It was a trap!

“How are you feeling Ken?” she asked.

“All right, I suppose...” He sighed, sounding tired.

“She is testing you. She knows we are here and is trying to exhaust you before we get to her.”

Overhead, four more griffins appeared.

“Not more bloody griffins!” Jack exclaimed. There was no sense of wonder in his voice now.

“This is it Ken, if you do not control them, they will fight our griffins. We could be ripped to pieces in the battle,” Catherine sounded very frightened.

“But you were so sure they’re only illusions!” Jack piped up, desperate for assurance.

“Yes, but all this is to make us think they are real. Look at the cuts on your hand. If they fight, will we be injured when we think we are? And what happens when we think we are dead? It is not the griffins we have to worry about, but Sylvie.”

“You’re right,” Ken agreed. Balling his hand into a fist, he smacked the ring hard into the middle of his forehead as if trying to punch out his own brains.

“Get out of my head! Get out of my head!” he started shouting.

The griffins in the sky began to dive. The others reared up unfurling their great wings in a rush of animal heat.

“Oh my God!” yelled Jack.

“Shut up Jack, let him concentrate! Come on Ken, you can do it!” urged Catherine.

“Get out of my head! Get out of my head! Get out of my head!” Ken chanted, determinedly punching himself silly.

The griffins in the sky unravelled as if they were no more than wisps of cloud. While the griffins on the ground simply melted away.

Ken opened his eyes. “She’s gone.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Jack jauntily.

When Ken saw they were alone, he looked at Jack, grinning with relief. “Oh shut up you clown!”

“Look, look, it’s amazing!” Jack was serious now. He took the handkerchief from his hand. The cuts were gone and the bloody handkerchief, clean.

* * *

After following the sweep of the drive for a hundred meters or so they spied the house, white, spacious, faced with columns and topped with ornate chimneys.

“Just like in my dreams,” Jack whispered in awe.

Approaching slowly, uncertain what further traps Sylvie may have set, they reached a pair of ornate wrought iron poles supporting round metal braziers that burst into flame as they passed beneath them.

“Told you she was expecting us,” Ken remarked flatly.

The others nodded glumly as the next pair of torches also burst into flame, then a third. By the time the fourth pair ignited, Ken noticed the house was blazing with light.

“When did the lights come on?” he asked.

No one remembered. They only knew the house was in darkness when they first saw it. Cautious and afraid, they carried on walking.

“What’s that?” Jack whispered.

He stopped, listening to faint strains of music that for some reason sent shivers down his spine. He had the horrible feeling something bad was about to happen. But was unsure what.

“Sounds like a party,” muttered Ken; getting worried because he knew they had no choice except to go on.

As the final set of torches burst into flame, the door of the mansion slowly swung open, spilling noise and light onto the porch.

Tentatively, they crept up the portico steps to the open doorway. Scared of what might be waiting, they hesitantly peered inside. All they saw was an elegant hallway of gleaming white walls and a black marble floor, shining like the surface of Catherine’s mirror in the dazzling golden light of a crystal chandelier. The house was completely empty.

“Should we knock?” Catherine wondered.

“Why? She knows we’re here. She’s playing with us,” Ken answered. “Let’s go in.”

“Be careful,” Jack warned. The alarm bells ringing in his head left him wishing he could remember why.

They stepped over the threshold. The front door slammed behind them. A throng of partygoers appeared from nowhere. The music and chatter filling the spacious hall reverberated with the power of a physical force, setting teeth on edge and deranging the senses; making it hard to think. Stifling heat left them struggling for breath.

“Where did everyone come from?” Ken shouted to be heard over the noise. The effort left him wheezing.

The party, in full swing, was like no party they had ever seen. It was an exotic masked ball with sumptuous costumes of silk and satin, finished with ribbon and lace. The masks were equally ornate. Some looked to be made from pure gold, beaten into the shape of animal heads. Others, festooned with feather and sequin, were enamelled with shiny arterial red, cyanic blue, acid yellow or green - the colour of sour apples.

A pair of women wearing huge dresses bumped into Jack as they wheeled around the floor. He was surprised to feel a framework, hard as steel, under the flounces of the ruffled silk skirts. The first woman looked down at him, seemingly gigantic in a mountainous white wig, pale as moonshine. High above her head, cresting Marcel waves of powdered white hair, was a delicate silver sailing ship complete with pin-sized crew, frantically trimming the sails as if running before a storm.

“Pardon Cherie,” she giggled. She snapped open an embroidered fan concealing her face. Her eyes shone through slits in a black domino mask - the type worn by comedy criminals in stripy jumpers with bags of swag slung over their shoulders. Then she and her companion were gone, swept away by the mad swirl of the dance.

Pushing through the breathless, manic, twirling dancers, trying to find Sylvie by following the music, Jack, Ken and Catherine passed from the hallway into a lavish reception room, brightly lit by another glittering chandelier. Here, with the guests more spaced, they could see them properly.

In one corner a man in satin matador suit, wearing a golden mask beaten into the shape of a bull's head, was talking to another with a real bull's head, a genuine Minotaur with the gleaming oiled, naked body of a muscleman.

"I don't believe it," said Catherine.

"There's a lot not to believe," observed Ken.

She followed his gaze to see a centaur, part man, part stallion, casually chatting to a woman with the head of a scarlet ibis. As they watched, she dipped the thin curved beak of her bright bird head into a tall glass and took a delicate sip of her drink.

"It's like bring your own straw," Jack muttered out of the side of his mouth.

It did not end there. There were half-man, half-goat fauns. Tree nymphs moulting leaves and lichen. Water nymphs, sopping wet like drowned women, spouting streams and rivulets that soaked the expensive carpet.

The normal people were no better either. In this one room alone, there were cowboys and Indians, pirates, ballerinas, harem girls, dancing girls, chorus girls, sheiks of Araby, Paladins of Saladin, Chinamen from Aladdin, gypsy queens and harlequins, columbines and demon kings.

"Blimey, it's like an explosion in a pantomime factory," Ken hissed; for once not joking.

They pushed on into the main ballroom, where an orchestra of man-sized frogs in dinner suits, vigorously scraping away at a waltz, provided the music.

“This is just weird,” Jack exclaimed.

Catherine laughed. “No Jack, it is fairyland. Look, there are even fairies!”

The boys looked. Above their heads, waltzing around the chandeliers in time to the music were sunbursts of tiny golden humans with butterfly wings, no bigger than your thumb.

“I’ve seen those before.” Jack sounded nonchalant.

“Excuse me, where is the queen?” Catherine enquired of a couple waltzing by. The couple stopped to look at her quizzically, almost causing a collision on the frenetic dance floor.

“Où est la reine?” the man repeated in French.

“Oui, où est la reine?”

He was a young man who looked quite handsome beneath his black mask. Catherine thought he was dressed like a prince from a fairy story. Letting go of his partner, he took her hands, leaving her giddy at his touch.

“Où est la reine?” he repeated once more before dragging her off, waltzing into the swirling couples with Catherine, who had never waltzed before, feeling light as air and glowing with excitement.

His companion, a woman in a white, floppy Pierrot outfit, sporting a whitened face with tears drawn in black outline running down one cheek, took Ken’s hands, repeating the question, où est la reine?

“No! What are you doing?” Jack demanded. “Where’s Catherine gone?”

He was too late. The woman whisked Ken away. Jack struggled through the chaos, was overwhelmed and disoriented. But still had enough presence of mind to bump into as many couples as he could, simply to disrupt the mindless, madding crowd.

Deftly they avoided him, asking as they did: où est la reine?

The words became a chant, a throbbing counterpoint to the jangling manic rhythm of the waltz. Jack thought his head would burst. Eventually reaching the centre of the dance floor, he found his friends, marooned and tormented.

“Just a guess but I think the queen’s a bit peed off,” he said with a casualness he did not feel.

“She hasn’t even started!” Ken retorted with that look which always made Jack think he knew more than someone should.

A tiny streak of gold flashed in front of Jack’s eyes as something stung his face. “Ouch!”

“Oww!”

“Get off!” they bawled as they were dived bombed by the tiny golden fairies; pretty as dragonflies, angry as wasps.

“I don’t really know if she is pissed off,” Ken growled, “but I can tell you I am!”

He stood up, raising his fist to display the ring and shouted, “You know what I can do with this!”

The dancers froze. The music scraped to an enervating halt. Even the little fairies stopped attacking, to hang motionless in the air with wings beating so fast they were invisible.

“Now, where is the queen?” Ken bellowed.

The crowd parted forming an avenue to a golden throne on which sat Sylvie, impossibly young and incredibly beautiful. Jack thought her even more beautiful than he remembered from his dreams. Hair of spun gold fell unbounded to the floor, complexion pale as moonlight, lips red as cherries, eyes green as the shimmering sea silk robe she wore.

Sylvie was preoccupied. Talking intimately and persuasively to Thomas, she constantly touched his face. Perhaps they were arguing because she looked to be soothing.

“The child has power but no art!” Her voice, interwoven with the tinkling of a thousand silver bells, sent shivers down Jack’s spine. “You must train him in your style, your grace, dare I say, your panache, mon amour!”

“Ha!” Thomas scoffed. His voice warm, masculine, and proud, was the way it sounded when they were with the Bilquis.

Catherine thought him every inch a prince, every inch a man and understood why Rosie claimed him so handsome in Bess’ presence.

The queen’s voice dripped honey as she continued to placate Thomas, calling him *chère* and stroking his cheek. Realising she had an audience she turned to the eavesdroppers graciously addressing them. “*Bienvenu mes enfants.*”

As they met her gaze, each felt the immense power behind her doe soft eyes. On either side of her throne an albino peacock slowly opened a magnificent ghostly tail scattered with a thousand glittering gem-like eyes, which only served to magnify the intensity of her unblinking stare.

Fearless, Jack marched forward. "I want my brother back!"

The Queen's laugh was more than musical. It was a melody; a symphony.

"J'accuse Jack Hughes. Vous avez le cœur d'un corsaire. Ce n'est pas votre frère que vous cherchez, mais l'aventure. Règles à mes côtés, mon bon fils."

Her words raced through Jack's head translating instantly: I accuse Jack Hughes. You have the heart of a pirate. You do not seek your brother, but adventure. Rule beside me, my bonny boy.

Jack was shocked hearing Bess' prophecy from Sylvie's mouth. She spoke again, and once more Jack had no trouble understanding, even though her lips did not match the words in his head.

"I will give adventures beyond compare, dragons to slay, hearts to conquer."

"All I want is my brother back," he answered simply.

She dismissed him with a lazy wave. "We shall see, but meanwhile you shall remain at court."

Refusing dismissal, Jack continued to stare defiantly. Ignoring him, Sylvie turned to Ken. "Grand magicien, vous êtes bienvenu à mon royaume."

No longer able to understand, Jack tried to work out what she was saying in his almost non-existent schoolboy French. Having no such trouble, Ken, of course, appeared delighted at the compliment of being called a great magician, and welcomed to her realm. So delighted was he that he rushed to shake Thomas by the hand, whispering as he did, "Sorry Thomas, but with this ring I bind thee to me."

Looking shocked, Thomas acknowledged the enchantment, whispering back, “With that ring, thus bound am I.”

Then, with pleasing smile firmly fixed, Ken offered his hand to Sylvie.

She laughed gaily, waving an elegant finger in admonishment. “You are naughty my bonny boy! Be aware your ambition exceeds your skill, yet I could make you a new Merlin, guide you, groom you. Lay a world at your feet.”

“Maybe or maybe not but first give Jack his brother back.”

The Queen chuckled warmly. “You have more tricks than an ape has fleas, my bonny boy. How, I look forward to two new sons brightening my days.”

Dismissing Ken, she turned to Catherine; the only one who’s French was good enough to follow the whole conversation.

“Sweet Catherine, so beautiful, so clever.”

“Your imperial majesty,” she answered in perfect French; indeed, better than Sylvie’s.

“Do you know you broke Bilquis’ heart on the day you left? In you she saw the daughter she never had, a worthy successor.”

“I am not worthy, majesty.”

“That is my sister’s misfortune, her nemesis, her doom; for none are worthy of her illustrious selfless self. Often do I think of her, stitching day after day only to unstitch the weave by night, like Penelope bent to a lonely loom, under the burden of her terrible task. Perhaps the real lesson for all is to grasp what is so firmly offered and not pine for futures unknown.”

“Wise as well as beautiful,” flattered Catherine. “I would so much like to gaze upon your tapestry. It must put all others to shame!”

As Sylvie’s eyes shifted nervously. Catherine willed herself not to follow her gaze. Recovering swiftly, the queen forced a gay laugh.

“If you knew my tapestry, you would know my heart! Yet perhaps one day you shall, for Bilquis is not the only one who yearns for a loving daughter. Life is long and often lonely. And though men are gallant and amuse us well. In the end, they are but men. See what you could be, *ma chère!*”

“Gosh Catherine, you look beautiful,” Ken gulped.

The partygoers sighed, parting ranks to reveal a wall of mirrors. Catherine gasped at her reflection. Her short dull hair, grown long, was lustrous with shimmers of ruby and bronze. Her pale skin glowed, cheeks blushed, lips bee-stung and strawberry ripe. She wore a dress of sky blue silk simply gathered by a golden girdle. Gone her slouching bookish posture; she stood stately, and erect, every inch a princess.

It was such a temptation Catherine had to be quite firm in telling herself to look away. It was not real, and yet despite knowing it was not real, it was hard to abandon all the same.

After what seemed like a lifetime of heartbeats she heard Jack’s voice call out in warning, seemingly from far, far away. Yet, despite his earnest entreaty, it was not Jack who saved Catherine, but Sylvie’s shrill reply.

“*Mal fils!*” Sylvie screamed at Jack: wicked boy!

It could only be what Bess meant when telling Catherine to remember Atropos. Knowing everything now depended upon her, Catherine spun to where Sylvie looked when talking of her tapestry. It was a huge wall hanging of a knight slaying a dragon. Hidden in plain sight, beneath the faded dyes and ruptured threads lay the radiant glimmer of Sylvie's weave.

"I am Atropos, cutter of the thread," Catherine uttered, words ringing out flat and pitiless.

Sylvie blanched before summoning the courage to scoff. "Where are your scissors, little girl? Where is your knife?"

Catherine answered in an unnerving voice, shorn of emotion. "I am the nightmare from which you wake screaming. I am the lioness fierce. I shall tear this tapestry asunder with naught but teeth and nails like claws. I will rip you from your world. All that is yours will perish, for I, not you, am la belle dame sans merci."

Queen Sylvie gasped, clutching her heart.

The court wailed, as if possessing one voice. Recovering, Sylvie let out a scornful laugh, hard and brittle. Everything began to fade, the glittering courtiers, Thomas, even the queen herself. The walls of the house were so insubstantial they were no longer even memories of walls; for Catherine could see right through them into the meadow where the moon had risen over the trees.

"You were bound Thomas," roared Ken, thinking fast.

Thomas instantly became solid.

Catherine pointed to the fading wall hanging. "Quick Ken, the tapestry!"

"No, if Thomas is ripped from the weave, he dies!" the queen screamed.

“My love I would rather die than betray the kindness of friends.” Thomas sounded resigned, downcast yet noble.

“Die then, for you shall never put another before me!” Sylvie raged.

“It’s Thomas,” Jack shouted in surprise, “his love is pure, his heart true.”

He held up the crystal pendant to Sylvie, adding bluntly, “And you love him just as much.”

Instantly the court solidified. Whereas previously everything was gay, lavish drapes of black crepe now subdued the magnificent ballroom; while the courtiers were sombre in mourning attire.

The queen wiped a tear as she spoke to Thomas. “My love ‘tis true, ‘twas fury, not heart that bitterly railed to you. For without you, je suis perdu. The world is but ash in my mouth!”

“M’oiseau sauvage!” Thomas answered passionately, embracing his queen.

“Wild bird no more, for without you my heart is caged,” she confessed, all aflutter.

“The sight of your heart in a cage puts all of heaven in a rage,” replied Thomas, handsomely.

Soft strummed chords rippled through the ballroom as Sylvie tremulously sang, “I embrace you!”

Her voice, rising and falling like a sob, left all who heard it desolate yet filled with indescribable longing and irrational hope.

In a high plaintive echo, Thomas answered, “I adore you.”

“What is life without you?” she sang, tears forming.

“Would die for you,” he joined, brokenly.

“Without you, life has no mystery.”

“Without you, death has no victory.”

“Embrace me,”

“Embrace me,”

“My sweet embraceable you!” They sang the words together, voices at last intertwining like two wild roses growing from the tombs of star-crossed lovers.

“Without you, life has no meaning for me.”

“Without you, I have no reason to be.”

“Your lovely face is all I desire to see.”

“In your loving arms I am safe for eternity.”

“Oh my love,

“Oh my love,

“Hold me and don’t let me go.”

They sang for a full five minutes as a frogman, in black rubber wetsuit, diving mask and flippers, accompanied them on a solitary lute.

While they sang, the chandeliers brightened and the courtiers resumed their former splendour. With the last refrain fading, even before the echoes of their voices died away, the court burst in rapturous applause. There were cries of brava, encore, and thunderous clapping, as blood red roses were thrown at the couple.

Sylvie and Thomas separated, taking bows like seasoned players. Graciously, the queen pointed to the lute-playing frogman who bowed in turn to a new frenzy of applause. Thomas picked up a handful of the long stemmed roses strewn across the floor and

threw them back at the ecstatic audience. Sylvie caught Catherine, Jack and Ken staring with open mouths.

“Are you still here?” she sighed impatiently.

“I want my brother back,” Jack snapped.

“You people are so tiresome!” she snapped back.

“We brought you Thomas!”

She paused as though considering. “Let no one call me ungrateful. Take your brother, if you can find him. You have three guesses,” she added smugly, “as in all the best fairy tales!”

* * *

Jack stared wildly round the room, not knowing where to start. His brother was hidden somewhere in the crowd of glittering masked guests. It was hopeless.

A man in a harlequin outfit nodded, catching his eye. The man’s face was concealed by a mask with a long pointed nose. He could be Dan thought Jack, he was about the same size. He touched the man’s shoulder. In response, the man pulled off his mask by the long nose. He was not Dan. He shrugged, grinned, bowed with a flourish. As the court clapped in delight, Jack heard the queen’s implacable voice say, “One!”

Realising he could not afford another mistake Jack knew he had to choose more carefully. Scanning each figure, aware Dan could be anyone, he prayed for a clue. Come on Dan, he silently begged, give me a sign.

At that instant, there was movement at the back of the room. Jack could hardly make out who was moving as the person was in a shapeless black cape, and wore a beaten gold mask. Although he struggled through the crowd to get a better look, the mysterious costumed stranger always contrived to keep people between them. The more Jack chased, the more convinced he became it was Dan. At last, he caught up with his quarry.

“Stop!” he cried, aware he should not touch until he was sure.

The figure stopped.

“Turn around.”

The figure turned.

As he did, Jack thought he saw a flash of school uniform beneath the shapeless cape. It was then he noticed the gold mask staring back at him. It was beaten into the likeness of his own face. Someone had once said the fairies liked their jokes. This had to be Dan. Just had to be. He reached out to make his choice.

Unlike the first time, the costumed stranger did not take off the mask but simply stood, waiting.

“Take off the mask Jack,” Sylvie commanded.

With heart hammering, he obeyed.

Underneath was a girl dressed in Dan’s school uniform. She looked to be the same age as Dan: three or four years older than Jack. She giggled, kissing him on the lips before sweeping away. Jack stood rigid. Holding the mask of his own face, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand to rub away the poisoned kiss. The court laughed scornfully as, with heart breaking, he heard Sylvie call out. “Two!”

This was his last chance. There could be no more mistakes. He had to think and think hard. It was now Jack remembered who said the fairies liked playing jokes. It was Rosie, and she added their jokes were cruel and heartless. Yet not all fairies were heartless and cruel. Bess was not cruel. Then it came to him, what Bess foresaw: the last prophecy. He would show them. He would show them all. They would not be laughing soon.

Ignoring the crowd, Jack walked to the huge mirrored wall. He pressed his hands and face against the surface, feeling it cold and hard. He saw his breath fog the glass. There was no doubt it was real. But then wasn't everything real here? So real you could see it, touch it, even smell it if it had a smell. All you had to do was stop believing.

He stepped back and closing his eyes, reached out. He tried to ignore the feel of cold resisting glass by repeating how he would find his brother where he found him once before. Suddenly falling forward, Jack opened his eyes in shock. His hand was through the mirror. He pushed harder, sinking his arm up to the elbow as he felt for Dan. Nothing!

Walking slowly along the length of the mirrored wall, he trailed his arm through the silvered glass, which rippled behind him like the surface of a pond. Someone grabbed his hand almost tugging him in. Instinctively, Jack struggled to break free. He had almost escaped before he realised who it was. Steeling himself, he forced his arm back deep into the mirror until, once more, he felt someone grasp his hand.

Slowly and deliberately, he pulled. Pulled with all his strength. Pulled as if his life depended on it. Out came his arm, then his hand with another hand grasping it, then another arm... making

it look as if Jack was dragging his own reflection from the looking glass. A shoulder emerged, a chest, a head. It was Dan. With a mighty tug, Jack pulled his brother free.

Defiantly he turned to Sylvie, and in a forced stupid voice, whining like a spoilt child, he said, “He followed me home. Can I keep him?”

Catherine and Ken whooped; clapping and cheering until the tears ran down their faces and Ken had to use his inhaler.

Chapter 29 Epilogue

“Take him,” Sylvie commanded.

The splendour was fading from the house. The tiny golden fairies were gone. The partygoers were joining them in abandoning the dream. Only Thomas and Sylvie remained. Two lonely figures etched in shadows cast by feeble flickering oil lamps. They looked tiny, lost in the dirty, cavernous ballroom of peeling paint, cracked plasterwork, and grimy, cobwebbed windows.

“We shall not see joy abound, ‘til he now lost to us, is found,” Sylvie muttered bitterly.

If Sylvie sounded old and tired, it was because she was. Gone her glorious impossible beauty; hair of spun gold, alabaster complexion and willowy unbent frame. What remained, a shrunk, ancient woman, looked so like Bess, they could have been sisters. Catherine wondered if the resemblance was simply because they had grown old together over hundreds of years; old beyond human comprehension. Seeing her reduced to this, Catherine felt nothing but pity for the poor old woman, guilty of nothing more than trying to save her world.

Unlike Bess, in dressing gown and fluffy slippers, Sylvie was swathed in dirty white satin and lace. To Catherine it looked like a wedding dress, which immediately brought to mind Miss Haversham in the Charles Dickens novel. It crossed her mind that

Sylvie might be playing another trick. But as Thomas looked like Thomas, she had to believe it was real.

Poor Thomas was frantic. He held his beloved's arthritic hands, all swollen joints and knotted veins under parchment thin skin mottled by liver spots. Tears streamed down his face as he fervently whispered over and over...

"We shall grow strong to build a dream, the like of which was never seen. Your name shall be gloried from day to day. Over the hills and far away, they will carry the fame of your name my love. They will carry the fame of your name."

Embarrassed Jack, Ken and Catherine backed away. Not Dan, he stood rigid, shocked; perhaps not knowing what he saw, perhaps not believing it.

"Dan, you're free," Jack spoke quietly but firmly as he dragged this brother away. It made no difference. In the end, he had to put his arm around Dan's shoulders to coax him to move.

They left the ballroom for the equally shabby reception room, noting with faint disgust the leprous mould blooming on the walls, the collapsed water-stained ceiling, blistered yellowed paintwork, filthy cracked windows, and the smell of too many unwashed bodies, too many years of decay.

Sylvie's voice haunted them, no longer silver or gold but still pure, like the tolling of a great bell foretelling misfortune. "You can take him but can you keep him? For when men are troubled, they remember with longing the sweetness of the lotus. And men are always troubled."

“Ignore her!” hissed Catherine helping Jack, who was struggling with his indifferent brother. Ken helped too, putting a comforting arm around Dan’s shoulder.

The house was behind them now, crumbling and shabby but solid enough. Looking back, they saw ghostly faces peering from the grimy windows, lit only by the feeble glow of candle or oil lamp. It left them so unhappy they stopped looking back, and tried to remember the beauty of the court; the excitement of victory. Unable to rekindle the mood, they lapsed into melancholy.

Continuing down the drive, they listened for the sounds of the night, hearing badgers in the woods, and the soft hooting of owls that were only owls. Not a single flying griffin eclipsed the moon. Everything was commonplace. They did not know whether to feel relief or disappointment.

* * *

The walk to the village of Lesser Brookingham seemed endless, especially as they had to coax Dan every step of the way. Jack was so worried about his brother. All Catherine could do was keep repeating he would be fine after a good night’s sleep. Eventually reaching the church, they escaped onto the ley line, intending to disembark at Tower Hill.

At Tower Hill, they did not even slow down. Seconds later they were standing outside the door of the Good Shepherd, made transparent by the ley line’s power. Through the glassy, shimmering ghost of the heavy oak door, they saw Mr Grin with an anxious looking Alison. The old man stared directly at them and beckoned,

as if knowing they were watching him from the ley line. Anxiously they looked for Agnes Day and her bullies. Finding them absent, they opened the door into the church.

Alison rushed to hug Dan. Jack was pleased to see his brother remained as unresponsive to her as he had to him. She burst into tears, making Jack instantly regret his meanness.

Turning to Mr Grin, he snapped, angry and suspicious, “What are we doing here?”

“I summoned you,” Mr Grin replied pleasantly, before saying to Alison. “There, there my dear, did I not say everything would be fine.”

The old man managed to sound as if he was somehow responsible for Dan’s rescue.

Alison whimpered, “What’s wrong with him?”

Jack demanded, “Why, why did you summon us?”

Ignoring Alison, Mr Grin addressed Jack. “I am here to free your brother from elfin glamour. If you would be so kind as to join hands, we will soon resolve this matter.”

Holding out his hands, he indicated Jack should take one. After a moment’s hesitation Jack did, grasping Catherine with his other hand. Catherine grabbed one of Dan’s hands as Alison took the other. When Ken completed the circle between Alison and Mr Grin, the old man began to clear his throat.

The noise went on and on, gradually resolving into a monotonous chant, which seemed to be nothing more than the vowels of the alphabet repeated continuously one after the other, building in rhythm and volume until it became oppressive. Reminding Jack of Red Indians on the warpath, it reverberated

through the empty church, bearing down to seemingly crush their little circle or sweep them asunder like a mighty tsunami. When the old man suddenly stopped, a deafening silence rushed to fill the emptiness.

“What was that?” whispered a dazed Ken.

Mr Grin enlightened him. “A closing spell to remove the taint of the Elfin. I have stripped away your memories. Within hours, these past weeks will fade to nothing more than fever dreams. I wish it were permanent, but whatever is made in this world has a way of unmaking itself.”

He paused for a moment as if collecting his thoughts. “Although you will not thank me, I did this for your own good. You are growing up facing difficult choices. Life is hard. But unfortunately in fairyland, life is never hard; everything is all too easy. In glamour, the lonely find company; the sad, joy; the hungry, sustenance. Yet all they do is dream. Even the starving do not eat. Simply because they do not know they hunger.

“That is why the elfin die and we thrive. Human history is one of struggle. Struggle is what it means to be human. I hope it is some consolation when I say, Dan will now recover.”

Jack, having no reply, stood looking at Mr Grin with open-mouthed stupefaction as the old man continued.

“Your memories of me will fade as quickly as those of Thomas, Sylvie and Bess. So let me give you a farewell gift. I did to Agnes what I did to you, but with more cruelty. Poor Agnes will be lucky to remember basic bookkeeping. I have arranged for a colleague to give her a clerical job a long way from here. Let us

hope she continues to forget, for should she remember, I fear her vengeance will be terrible.”

At this, Mr Grin walked to the door of the church, fading with every step.

“Do you see that?” Catherine remarked as the old man vanished.

“More magic,” snapped Ken angrily. He was sick of magic.

“Never mind him, look at Dan!” Jack exclaimed.

Alison was stroking Dan’s hair and Dan was crying. It took a long time for Dan to stop. When he did, all he wanted to do was sit in the church with Alison and hold hands. Jack had to be quite sharp in telling his brother they needed to get home.

“How do we get home?” murmured Ken. “Anyone got bus fare?”

Glumly, they shook their heads, thinking of the long walk back.

Parked on the lonely road outside the church was Mr Grin’s big black Rolls Royce. Approaching the car, the driver’s window rolled down and the chauffeur called out, “I thought you were never coming. Get in.”

Dan sat next to Alison, who would not let go of his hand. When Dan said he wanted to bring Alison home, Jack put his foot down. Sulking, Dan insisted on dropping off Alison last, which meant Ken was dropped off first.

Catherine got out with Ken and Jack wanted to join them. As neither Dan nor Alison would even go in for a cup of tea, Jack felt

he had to stay with his brother. With only the three of them in the car, Dan and Alison got quite sickly.

Alison made herself out to be some sort of heroine by telling Dan how brave she was. And Jack could tell Dan thought she was wonderful. When they stopped at her house, he had to suffer the long indignity of watching them kiss goodbye.

As she got out of the car, Jack called out, "Don't tell anyone."

"Why not?"

"Well, you don't want to look like a liar do you, or worse, bonkers!"

"Dan'll back me up."

Jack was firm. "No he won't!"

She shot him a hateful look. Jack could see she was thinking she could hardly say Dan was away with the fairies. Nudging his brother to elicit some support, he was not surprised when Dan weakly said, "See you tomorrow Alison!"

The chauffeur dropped the brothers outside their house. Dan hung back as they walked up the path. Jack rushing ahead to put his key in the door told his brother to hurry up. Reluctantly, Dan followed him into the hallway.

"What do I say?" he wanted to know.

"Tell them you can't remember. You were hit on the head."

Jack added in a sudden burst of inspiration, "I can say I found you wondering about outside, not knowing where you where!"

"I'm not lying," Dan protested feebly.

"Suit yourself, but Mum is ill you know!"

It was strange for Jack to feel like he was the older brother and Dan the younger.

They stood in front of the lounge door, listening to the sound of the television. Neither wanted to make the first move.

“Go in. Surprise them,” urged Jack.

Dan shook his head.

Hearing Jack’s voice, Dad called out, “Is that you, Jack?”

So Jack pushed open the door and said, “Hi, we’re home.”

I'll tell you a story
About Jack a Nory;
And now my story's begun;
I'll tell you another
Of Jack and his brother,
And now my story is done.

Traditional Nursery Rhyme

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Contact thru

<http://www.jackhughesbooks.com/talk2me.php>

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