

Under the Stone of
Destiny

Ray McCarthy

Books by Ray McCarthy

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Four Kids, one Foxe

Trader's Isle

The Seven Talismans
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Under the Stone of Destiny

Ray McCarthy

Celtic Otherworld I

Four teenagers are trying to end the ruinous war. They are a human, a runaway Elf Princess, a Dryad Mage and Dwarf Wizard. Or at least that's what Kevin, the student magus thinks they are.

Most of the action is on a legendary Celtic Otherworld, in Magh Meall where all the Tuath Dé live. Out of food and close to despair in the mountains they are told to wait for another companion by Corbie, the rook Familiar of Dean David, from the Magi College.

The cover is edited from a detail of *Miranda, The Tempest*, by John William Waterhouse.

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The Celtic Otherworld

Contemporary travel to Otherworlds is mentioned in Celtic myth and legend. Meet the Tuath Dé, Sióg, Aés Sidhe, Elves and Faerie. Also set in Limerick, Ireland and Wychavon, England.



Court Grave, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick

Manannán Mac Lir led the Tuath Dé away to the Otherworld over 2500 years ago. Except for them it's been more like 600 due to the time-slip. The Portals were often at Court Graves, Rathes and other ancient Irish sites. Today Tuath Dé culture is a crazy mix of Mediaeval to Nineteenth Century styles. Now the Magi Council and the Druids of Ollathair have wakened the Sleepers, the Morrígna, – Badb, Macha and Neamhain – and the rest of Manannán Mac Lir's Aés Sidhe Warband.



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Notes:

Extensive use is made of older sources rather than more modern ones.

Modern and old Irish has been used to simulate Teanga Sióg or the language of the Tuath Dé. The Tuath Dé spoke a proto-Celtic language, likely related to the oldest Q-Gaelic.

Some Approximate Pronunciations

Many Irish (Gaelic) speakers don't know how names that have fallen out of use are pronounced. Some common names today might be over 1500 years old, such as Donal. These are Tuath Dé, Teanga Sióg and Irish/Gaelic pronunciations.

Badb. Might be from Badhbh with the dots lost, see below, so might be a little like Be'yve, not bevy, bad, bet or bed

Eilis = Ailish. Alice in some accents can sound similar

Eithne Eid-ne, intended here, not Enya which is likely from Áine Étaín = AY-teen

Neamhain is an archaic female name, possibly pronounced Nee'vean. Nevin is a close modern, male version

Micheal is the correct Irish spelling

Sorcha = usually Shor-ka

Sidhe = Shee as is the Scottish Side

C is hard, like k, ck or q almost never like ceiling.

S is always sh, almost never like sailing.

An accent (fada) usually lengthens a vowel.

Originally i had no dot to avoid confusion with í

The lenited consonants bh, ch, dh, fh, gh, mh, ph, sh and th are all modifications to the initial consonant and the h was originally a dot above the letter. Originally Celtic languages had no h. The dh is either silent or like a whispered y in modern Irish. The fh and gh is usually silent today, thus Maghnus is pronounced Man'us. Sometimes bh and mh are both pronounced like v, sometimes more like f and w.

There were no j, q, v, w, x, y or z letters originally, though modernised Gaelic spellings may have them and some of the sounds existed.

Today you spell and pronounce an Irish name according to the wish of the person. Thus Medb, Medhbh, Méabh, Maedhbh, Maebh are all pronounced Maeve. The db was probably dotted thus dh part and edh is like éa which is similar to ae in English.

Names of other species that are not human or Fay (Sióg) are written for English speakers.

Chapter 1: Ūrchins

Neamhain of the Morrigna changed back from a large raven to her normal shape and sat on the rock watching the waves. It was relaxing and reminded her of Manannán. The child was a few weeks old. A lot had changed in 2500 years. At least rooks were common near the parent's home, so she could watch as rooks. Her clothes were at least 200 years out of date despite being a recent fashion in Dalrinath. She'd need local clothes and somewhere to stay next time. She flew back to the Portal for Magh Meall. None of the old Portals to her mother's court worked. She'd have to make a new one eventually.

A few days later Neamhain flew back from the Portal to the house. The time slip was seriously bad this time. Seven years already for only a few days away in Magh Meall! Donal would have to visit almost immediately and find out what had happened to the missing father.

* * *

It was shortly after dawn in Dalrinath with dew on the cobbles and Barry had just finished setting up his stall when he saw the two street urchins come over and stare at the food. Normally street kids would wait till the market was crowded. Only a couple of other traders had set-up, folk like him from outside the city that had arrived the night before. He moved a jar of truffles from near the edge and adjusted the stack of salami style sausages.

"Show me your coin before you even think of touching!" insisted Barry. He moved back the cured dried beef that was sold by transparent wafer thin slice. An expensive item to lose.

"Ain't got none," responded Kevin. "Me and my brother is starving."

"You should be in the Dalrinath City Institute for the Poor." Barry was curious because the dirty clothes with the odd rent were expensive. The taller lad that had spoken looked just like... Someone he'd seen? The memory seemed evasive, elusive, he was sure a face in the newspaper.

"It's full," said Kevin, "anyways, it's like slavery, we'd never leave. I don't want to end buried in their cabbage patch."

"I think you are being unfair, I've visited it and it's not like that. Perhaps though you are bit old for it. You seemed younger at first. Where's your parents anyway?"

“Me mum was a doxie and two days ago someone strangled her.”

“I’m Barry McKay,” he said, “just call me Barry. What are your names?” He thought this was very unlikely or it would have been mentioned last night in the Livery Stable. Murder was rare and prime material for gossip. There was something else, he thought. His thoughts seemed fuzzy.

“I’m Kevin and this here, my younger brother is Meg... Meggels.”

“Either your mother was very inadequate or you’ve been on the street a lot longer than two days. Meggels doesn’t much look like you either?”

“Maybe we has different dads.”

“Meggels?” What kind of a name was that? he thought after inadvertently repeating it.

“He don’t really talk, Mister Barry,” explained Kevin. “You know, upset about it all.”

Barry peered at Meggels. He had his head bowed and a ragged sun hat. He’d bet good coin that the similar height supposedly younger brother was an Elf girl, maybe even older than Kevin. Meggels even had an elf made pack. Both had good quality boots. No regular Dalrinath Street urchin would be in the company of an Elf. “Would you like some sausage left over from last night?”

He produced it from his bag and cut it in half. He set the parts on the table near the back of his wagon.

“Thanks!” said Kevin and wolfed it down.

Meggels just stared at it. Just as he expected, as an elf would rather starve than eat meat or dairy.

“Perhaps Meggels would prefer a stale bread roll left over from my supper last night?”

He set it out and it was snatched and quickly eaten. The pale, smooth, long slim fingers had neat manicured nails and showed no evidence of manual labour. Elven rather than human hands.

“Thanks,” said Kevin.

“It’s going to get busy in a short while,” he said. “Go and wash in the wagon and you can help serve. I’m lacking an assistant just at the minute. If you are any good, then I’ll give you some lunch.” He hoped they were good because with the war he couldn’t get staff.

“What about later?” said Kevin. “I can count and read, so I can help serve. Meggels can tidy and restock? I guess people

are wanting to stock up because of the war? Meggels says the self styled Ard Draíodóir, the evil enchanter is behind the war, not Tuas at all?”

“We’ll discuss that later when it’s later.” He watched them carefully as they washed with his jug, basin and cloth. “Yes, I too think we and Tuas are being manipulated. You know that Tuas claims it’s all Lárnian aggression.”

“Yes,” said Kevin, “Meggels said that too.”

“Meggels,” he said, “you sit at the wall on the crate there. You can clear up any wrappers and chase any overly bold birds.”

As Barry watched their clothes seemed to shimmer and then were much better quality and condition. Kevin must be able to project a Glamour. Certainly no Elf ever had the talent. Meggels was now looking too pale and beautiful to be a Tuath Dé boy and now obviously wasn’t shorter than Kevin, perhaps taller. A hat hid the ears and eyebrows. He was nearly certain now who Kevin reminded him of. This was a mystery that would be good in his newspaper column eventually. Meanwhile he desperately needed some staff, he wondered was it really his idea to employ them or Kevin’s Glamour. He decided that it made sense anyway.

Kevin spoke politely and properly to the customers dropping the street accent and grammar, which had sounded a bit dubious anyway. Perhaps Kevin had run away from somewhere, maybe there would be a reward. The silent Elf girl was a puzzler. He kept half an eye on Kevin, but he was competent at serving, weighing, reading shopping lists of servants, and counting the coins. Trade was brisk as he was well known and had a good reputation. Tomorrow he would be back in his own shop in the nearby town of Carrigbawn. Once a week he came for market day, the evening before, to sell his preserves (jams and pickles), cured sausages and salamis, dried cured meats, nuts, dried fungi (truffles) and sweetmeats. He began to think maybe he was wrong as Meggels brought out more dried meat products from the wagon. Perhaps just a very strange girl and not an elf at all. They ate lunch as they worked, though Meggels brewed tea for them. Meggels ate little, and again nothing with meat or dairy. Kevin obviously enjoyed his sausage and cheese in a bread stick.

~

It was dusk. Soon the few oil lamps and very few new gas lights in the city would be lit. Quickly they packed up. There were few people about after dark. In the distance a Wolfhound howled, the only kind of domestic dog in the world.

“What now?” said Kevin.

“Do you want to come and work for me in Carrigbawn?” said Barry. “I can’t get any staff due to the war.”

“Maybe if Meggels can come and wants to.”

“Meggels can come,” he said, “as I’m short of staff. I buy the nuts and fungi from Elves. Either of you speak any Elvish languages?”

“When do we go?” said Kevin, ignoring the question.

“First light,” said Barry. “I’ll loan you a couple of blankets and you can sleep under the wagon. Then the livery stable boy will be here at dawn with the horses.”

Barry fervently hoped that Meggels was an Elf and could help as his partner was the only person he knew that could negotiate in Elvish and had managed to fall off his horse and break his neck. He’d always been clumsy. The special underground fungus and the choice nuts from the Elves was a nice extra bit of profit with no actual extra work. Both were in theory seasonal supplies, but they kept well. It would be the season soon enough, summer was waning.

Kevin helped him harness the beasts the next morning. Meggels just watched.

Now, another little test Barry thought.

“Would either of you like to ride up front or in the back?” said Barry.

“I’d love to sit on the board and watch you drive,” said Kevin. “I miss my horse. Meggels didn’t sleep so well, he’d like to lie down in the back if possible?”

“Fine,” he said. He resolved to tackle them later about the Meggels fiction when they got home, no dockland doxie owned a horse either. Either Kevin wasn’t running away from anyone likely to see him here, or he’d forgotten to be stealthy. Meggels was obviously the one on the run, which was very odd for an Elf.

Just outside the city they passed the huge semaphore tower with several of its signalling units clattering away. Later on the journey a vast steam driven road train puffed slowly past. Its eight wheeled traction engine was wheezing and clanking.

They didn't talk on the three hour journey, though occasionally Barry pointed out a landmark, or a wild animal and tried to start a conversation a few times. Kevin obviously wasn't in the mood for conversation.

Eventually as they came near the town gate Barry said, "Kevin, I can't take you on as an employee without knowing a bit more. What's the truth? You're no doxie's child, you're no street kid either. We'll be at the gate guard soon."

"I can't speak for Meggels," said Kevin. "Unfortunately my mother was the posher kind of doxie, it was rather longer ago than I suggested. Meggels and I have been helping each other out."

"No," said Barry, "that won't do. There is no posher kind of doxie in the city. No time now, you'll tell me properly at home."

"Yes," said Kevin, "everything. I have to talk to my friend."

The guard at the gate recognised Barry but insisted on his papers anyway.

"Who's the boy?"

"My new Apprentice."

"Mister Barry was kind enough to hire me in Dalrinath after a try out," said Kevin. "I'm Kevin Kolrinos of Dalrinath."

"I guess that's OK then."

Barry thought Kolrinos had to be a rare family name, or made up like Meggels.

The guard didn't ask for Kevin's papers as Barry's covered an assistant.

They passed in and turned off the main street then into the back yard of Barry's establishment. There was a small meat processing and smoking building, stores, and stables with the shop on the main street with accommodation above.

Kevin managed the horses and rubbed them down. Meggels helped the assistant unload what was left in the wagon and they backed it into a store.

"Right," said Barry, "breakfast and some answers."

"Tell him, Kevin," whispered Meggels.

They sat down to breakfast brought by one of the staff. Strong tea, which Meggels took black. Fresh bread, butter and wafer thin transparent slices of cured beef. Meggels though only took jam and bread without butter.

"Meggels is Megra," said Kevin after the worker had left. "She is an Elf Princess, that's why she knows little Lárnian. I'm

Kevin Kolrinos, formerly from Lord Aldiare's household. My mother is dead a while ago."

"All right," said Barry, "that's a bit more believable, you aren't comfortable talking about yourself then?"

"No," said Kevin, "maybe in a day or two. Megra says I can tell all about her."

Megra took off her hat and untied her hair. She re-tied it as a pony tail. With the hat off and hair back she was clearly an elf. She took off her jacket and pulled out a scarf from under her tunic and sighed. She gave Barry a smile. She was stunningly beautiful. Barry thought she must have been very uncomfortable. Clearly though Kevin was a Magus and had been using Glamour. So far though he hadn't mentioned it.

"She doesn't speak much of any Tuath Dé language," said Kevin. "She has run away, they want her to marry someone she doesn't like. She'd twisted her ankle badly and couldn't walk at all. She thought it was broken. I helped her. She helped me too. Megra is the Princess of the High Elven Hulredrinani. Though she's unused to being referred to as an Elf, they are really Lorinokin?"

"Yes," said Barry, "for some reason only we call a Lorinok an elf, Kranokin the Dwarves, literally light and dark people. You know Dryads are really Baltie?"

"I never met Dwarves, Dryads or Elves till recently," said Kevin. "I guess I had a very isolated upbringing. We never visited the parts of the city where the Dwarves live."

"The nomadic Glennaridel trade with me, can Megra negotiate with them for me?" asked Barry. "She isn't hiding from them?"

Kevin and Megra whispered in each other's ears.

"Yes," said Kevin, "she can negotiate. The Glennaridel are nothing to her. They despise the Hulredrinani, they will not tell she is here. If the Hulredrinani find out, then Megra will leave or go with them, either way there is no trouble for you. But she says even the Hulredrinani wouldn't interfere in our Realms, I mean any Tuath Dé settlement. It's different in the countryside."

Barry thought that was an odd turn of phrase, what did Kevin or Megra mean about the Glennaridel being nothing?

"What can Megra work at here?" said Barry.

"Cleaning, looking after stock and such," said Kevin. "She can't cook or bake yet but is willing to learn anything."

“But not cleaning the curing sheds, smoking stacks, butchery?” said Barry.

“She could if she had to,” insisted Kevin.

“Yes,” Megra agreed.

Kevin was pleased that Megra had at least spoken. He knew she wasn't shy, he was still baffled by her lack of knowledge of Lárnian, the local Tuath Dé dialect, even though she'd explained it.

“I'm exploitive, not perhaps completely honest,” said Barry, “but I like to kid myself that I'm not actually evil, I'm not cruel. No working with meat or cleaning meat areas. Can you learn to cook and bake, you don't have to eat the produce?”

Again Kevin and Megra whispered.

“Megra doesn't really understand anything I say?”

“Very little,” admitted Kevin, “we kind of figured out how to communicate. She might try learning to cook and bake, but not meat. She prefers raw but can eat cooked food if there is no meat or dairy in it.”

“Here's the deal. Accommodation, clothes, food. I'll consider paying you if you have a written offer of paid work elsewhere. Once you are more productive we will talk about money, but full board and clothes is a good start. I get first refusal for wages?”

“I guess if we work well you might consider paying us,” said Kevin, “or we might move on.”

“I'm not totally unreasonable,” said Barry, “prove your worth and we can negotiate. One or two pallets in your room?”

“We share a room?” said Kevin.

“I'm only offering one room, because I only have one empty,” said Barry. “Two pallets then. I'll organize a curtain. One last thing, what do you mean, Glennaridel mean nothing to Megra?”

Megra smiled and gave him a little bow. Barry felt unsettled by the fact he wasn't sure how much she understood. But despite not hating Elves, Dwarves or Dryads, after all there might be profit, he found them unsettling. He didn't like convention or ordinary prejudices to get in the way of running his business. Kevin and Megra were whispering to each other.

“It means the Glennaridel are not High Elves,” explained Kevin, “but Megra is now without house, so will not be arrogant with them. She's not actually very arrogant for an Elf, never mind a Princess or High Elf.”

Megra went to the bakery's kitchen with Barry and Kevin. There was only Beth, his head baker and pastry cook, now without any staff due to the war.

"Beth, this Megra," said Barry. "Just keep her busy cleaning and washing. Megra probably doesn't understand much of what we say, but say it anyway and then show her. Show her simple preparation, baking and cooking she can copy. But not in the meat kitchen. This is her friend Kevin, he can tell her anything complicated. Get her some more suitable work clothes first. Her outfit is more suited to a travelling lady."

"I'm actually Elizabeth," she explained, "however we are all very informal here, no titles or family names, so just call me Beth. Pleased to meet you both. Certainly we need the extra staff!"

Barry left with Kevin.

Beth eyed Megra, who was holding her ragged sun hat. She pointed at the dirty pots, pans and plates.

"Wash and dry?"

Megra took off her jacket and over kirtle, cleared some space and filled the basin from the big kettle.

Beth went off to get some working clothes. Some old ones of her younger sister, Kelly, might do. As she went up the street to home she reflected that Barry probably didn't want it broadcast that he was employing an Elf. If Kevin could speak Elvish of some sort why did he need Megra? Though they were always chronically understaffed and overworked, so she'd be able to concentrate on what she was good at while having Megra do all the skivvying. She hoped Megra could do what she was told. The Elves had a reputation for arrogance. She'd never heard of one willingly doing menial indoor work. Maybe helping tend an orchard or vineyard, things they cared about.

Meanwhile Barry took Kevin to the office.

"Can you enter bills in a ledger?" said Barry hopefully, not for a moment expecting that Kevin could do basic bookkeeping despite being able to count and write.

"Yes," said Kevin.

Barry sat him at a desk, gave him a pile of bills and the ledger and watched for a moment. Kevin produced his own penknife to adjust the pen and commenced. Barry watched for a moment. He'd got very much behind. At least he'd dated them and marked on them how much (if anything) was paid. Satisfied that Kevin did understand how to enter, he went to

the other desk and started checking yesterday's takings. He made a note on the Livery Stables receipt and passed it to Kevin. Later he bagged the coins and took them to his hidden safe in the cellar.

Then he got some old workers clothes for Kevin.

"Wash and dress," said Barry.

All the staff met for a quick lunch in the bakery. Barry introduced the new bookkeeper and odd job boy and the new scullery maid and skivvy.

"Megra and Kevin will manage our negotiations with the Glennaridel," explained Barry. "It's not important who knows about Kevin, it's probably wise though to only mention Megra if someone already knows we have an Elf. Neither have done anything bad, but have not been able to continue in their previous households for different personal reasons. I know you have all complained of being overworked and that we are understaffed so do be pleasant to them. The other good news is that I won't be cutting your pay. I expect our productivity will be better now that we have some help."

Kevin served in the shop for the rest of the day.

* * *

For supper there was only Barry, Kevin and Megra. Kevin wondered why Barry was single. He looked fit, handsome and still in middle age with slightly greying hair. He obviously didn't overindulge in his own goods, beer or wine. Megra and Kevin had prepared the dinner. Barry didn't attempt to make much conversation but asked a few questions.

"How are you managing with Beth, Megra?" said Barry. He'd decided that rather than talk around her to Kevin, he should treat her as if she understood everything.

Megra and Kevin exchanged glances.

"Fine," said Megra.

"It's good that Beth talks to her and doesn't just point," said Kevin, "as it means Megra will learn faster."

Kevin supposed it would do no harm for Barry to know that he used his limited Telepathy to communicate with Megra, but he'd wait till challenged.

"Bed," urged Barry, "we will be up hours before dawn. People want fresh bread before breakfast. We mainly do the specialities. Most of the bread in the shops comes from the big

bakery across town. They just do regular loaves and the odd speciality. Just as we do just a few loaves.”

“An illusion of competition to keep others from starting bakeries and the Town Council happy?” said Kevin.

“I see you understand business and politics,” said Barry, “good.”

Megra cleared and washed with Kevin drying without being asked. Barry retired to his room. The pair spoke softly in their own languages, really using Kevin’s telepathy.

“He’s very trusting,” said Kevin. “You were right about picking him. It was a good idea to ask around the day before to find which stall holder from outside the city had lost assistants.”

“It’s true he doesn’t really know who I am,” said Megra, “but I’m quite sure he thinks he knows who you are. He has watched carefully and had others watch us, we are cheap and competent. He thinks we have no alternatives, the war means he can’t easily find staff either.”

“He’s not far wrong,” said Kevin. “You can’t go back to the Hulredrinani unless you are prepared to be a teenage bride to that guy you say you abhor, you won’t even tell me his name. No other Elves will take you in once they discover who you are. You need to be more valuable to Barry than the reward offered. I’ve not told Barry everything, though I’ve told him part of the truth.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have been so ready to do the bookkeeping,” said Megra. “He’s bound to wonder how you learnt that.”

“I did it for your sake. Besides it doesn’t really matter if he knows who I am once I have proved I’m a worthwhile worker.”

“I can take care of myself. This place suits me fine. No-one would expect me to be here.”

“Really?” exclaimed Kevin. “You’d got into a pickle when I met you. You can’t speak more than a dozen words of any Lárnian and understand very little more. You aren’t sick, so the Dryads won’t take you in. The dwarves might, but that would probably be worse than suicide. They’d misuse you, at least that’s what elves believe? Few of the Tuath Dé would help you. We are lucky to find Barry.”

“It was my idea, after all, for us to approach him early and look for a job,” said Megra fiercely. “Any amount of abuse is better than suicide, as there is always hope, anyway probably most of what elves and dwarves say about each other isn’t true.

That was an accident, I was running and fell down the hillside, at least it meant I lost the pursuit. But I agree that the Dwarves and Elves have no love for each other. At least I'm learning the local Tuath, you haven't bothered to try and learn any Elvish, not even Common."

"It's amazing you only twisted your ankle and didn't break it, or your pretty neck."

Megra scowled at him and then laughed. "We are done," she said, "you need to wash before you come up. You stink, it's probably from what you eat."

Megra took a cloth, bowl, jug of water and towel to wash in their room.

"I can't give up meat and dairy," complained Kevin, "or I'd be sick, certainly we need to eat plants and animals we brought with us and not exclusively local ones."

"Nonsense," insisted Megra, "see the apothecary, who will know what you need, no-one needs to eat meat and dairy."

"We aren't the same species. I'm sure there are no vegetarian Tuath Dé."

"Wash well, all over!"

Megra was in bed when Kevin came in. His pallet had blankets and a night shirt. He put it on.

"Will I leave the screen or pull it back?"

"I can hear you well enough," said Megra. "I can't imagine why you can't do the telepathy properly. Put the light out and don't talk, I'm tired and it sounds like an early start. I'm not used to all this physical work, but I'll get used to it. You, however, should only stay till I know a little more Lárnian and then go on to the Magi College at Dunraglin."

Kevin suspected an Elven Princess did very little work at all, in this he was wrong, though certainly Megra had never washed dirty plates, pots and pans before. At least she admitted that she needed to be better at Lárnian.

Barry came quietly and listened at the door for a while. There wasn't a sound. So he slipped out quietly to the inn.

Barry ordered a small jug of beer.

"Well, Horagan?" he inquired as he paid.

The Innkeeper leaned over and lowered his voice. "They say it's going badly," he confided. "The black powder was simply raising the death toll on both sides so they are all dug into trenches. A stalemate now."

“Hmm, not good,” agreed Barry. “Did you hear of any scandal about a street walker, or anyone strangled in Dalrinath City in the last six months?”

“Aye, four months ago,” said Horagan, “not a doxie though, but the wife or mistress of Lord Aldiare was strangled. Some confusion as to motive or who did it. He said she had been a doxie, which is nonsense. Later he claimed she was his mistress, though everyone assumed they were married, that would be at least plausible. There was no evidence against the Lord, but he cast out their son. He claimed she cheated him and he wasn’t no true son at all. I don’t mind his name.”

“Kevin?”

“That’s the poor fellow. Folk say like as not he could be his son, looks the spit, but there is no law against it.”

“Kevin is working for me,” said Barry. “I can understand why he hasn’t been entirely forthright now, I thought myself he looked quite like Lord Aldiare. That’s what got my attention. Perhaps he knows little more than he has said.”

“You should write and ask the court to be sure, or even use the semaphore.”

“Thanks.” Barry took his mug and jug and joined the small group playing cards.

“You want to join?” Micheal the Tanner asked.

“No, I’ll just have the company,” said Barry. “My luck’s been bad, but maybe it’s turning.”

“You’d not be staying long anyway,” said Micheal.

“True, early start.”

He’d not waste money writing. Next market day in Dalrinath City he’d ask in person. There wasn’t any rush.

Chapter 2: The Truth Needs Coin

Megra and Kevin fell into the routine of Barry's establishment. Barry wasn't worried about Kevin and had no way to find out more about Megra. Megra was speaking a little more. It was clear now she only wanted to speak when confident of being correct and understood much more.

"Beth," asked Barry, "can you run the shop a bit more tomorrow than usual while I'm away at market with Kevin?"

"I suppose Megra can mind the kitchen, giving me more time for the shop. The bakery ovens can be done by then, she's working out well, learning quickly, though oddly lacking in any practical experience."

"I'll get Kevin to explain to Megra to avoid any confusion," said Barry.

Or for Kevin to get instructions from Megra. Barry had realised that it was Megra that was doing the thinking and making the decisions for Kevin. It was harder to judge the age of an Elf, but she must be almost an adult. Kevin certainly wasn't. She behaved impeccably.

Barry left leaving as late as possible.

It was dark by the time they reached Barry's favourite spot. Kevin unhitched the horses and Barry took them to the livery stables. Each street had one or two oil lamps, but it was very little light. Only the more important areas had the gas lights. Barry went to the Courthouse. Eventually someone came to his knocking.

"I want to look at records of the death of the wife or mistress of Lord Aldiare?" said Barry.

"What's her name?"

"I don't know her full name," said Barry, "it was about four months ago. Part is probably Kolrinos."

"Five crowns for a search," he insisted. "I'm Thaddeus, the record keeper."

Barry thought the five crowns seemed a lot as Thaddeus found the records quickly, but likely other people got very good value for the charge.

Barry studied the records.

"Do you charge for any questions about the records?"

"That's discretionary, it depend on what's involved."

"It's about Miriam Kolrinos that was murdered in the spring," said Barry. "She was garrotted rather than strangled,

so seems more like an assassination than a disgruntled thief, lover or client. Was she a doxie? It's certainly an unusual name."

"Why do you want to know?" said Thaddeus after he laughed.

"Her son is working for me."

"She was wife in all but law, for nearly twenty years, certainly long before the lad was born, possibly really was his wife, but we have no record here. If the lad brought a paternity case he might win. It's a civil matter, no criminality involved and he hasn't the money. Lord Aldiare has no shortage of money. Lord Aldiare claimed at the inquest that she was a doxie, but no-one else supported the claim. You can see here," he pointed, "that the judgement was that Miriam was murdered by person or persons unknown for reasons unknown. No evidence of a thief, hence the allegation of a lover or client of some kind, but no evidence of that either which is why Lord Aldiare was a suspect. No evidence, he had an alibi. Her son, Kevin was away hunting, he had an alibi too. Still, he turned out her son."

"Thanks," said Barry. "It's a pity finding out more and establishing paternity would cost so much."

"Someone has to pay the costs," said Thaddeus. "Judges and Clerks need to eat like everyone else."

Barry headed back to the wagon. At least he'd saved the cost of a letter which would have obviously required the five crowns anyway.

"Was there a problem at the livery stables?" said Kevin.

"No, I was at the Courthouse," said Barry. "What gave you the idea that your mother was a doxie?"

"Lord Aldiare said so," said Kevin.

Progress, thought Barry, the boy is answering questions at last.

"The official stance is that she was probably his wife," said Barry, "they just don't have record of a marriage, and no evidence at all that she was a doxie. You know her name?"

"Of course, everyone called her Miriam," said Kevin. "I never did, nor did Lord Aldiare, he called her Dear and I called her Mummy."

"So you three were a happy family?"

For a while Kevin said nothing.

"I thought so. I don't understand why he said that if it isn't true. Or why someone killed her. She never did a bad thing.

Actually I'm not sure what a doxie does, except it seems to involve inns near the docks and money."

Barry resisted laughing.

"They take money to give entertainment of a special personal kind to strangers," said Barry. "It seems very unlikely your mother was one. It's something generally only a desperately poor woman does, who has no alternatives. The Courthouse record keeper certainly thought the suggestion was crazy."

"My mummy wasn't poor," said Kevin. "She had gems and jewellery of her own that were from her mother and father. Real ones, quite a lot, not the paste that Lord Aldiare bought her for parties. Mummy showed me how to tell and value jewellery. She must have worked in the trade as she had a lot of technical words, all about cuts, water, caret, brilliance, fire, colour, settings. She knew all about gold, silver, brass, bronze and copper. I can probably identify and value jewellery. He's not as rich as people think, he couldn't have afforded to buy much stuff of that quality. I helped on the bookkeeping as I learnt it. He didn't want others to see the books. For a long time there were monthly payments from my mother entered into books and then a few months before she died they stopped. That was strange though. I can't believe that was her money, I need to think about this."

"What happened to your mother's things?"

"I expect Lord Aldiare took them," said Kevin, "wouldn't they have become his? Though actually I don't think there was any payments to banks or money lenders, he wasn't extravagant or living beyond his means, so he wouldn't have needed them for debts. There were though payments to other senior government people that had no matching purchases, that seemed strange. Really I don't know, maybe everything is just where it was."

"No, because they never married," said Barry, "or at least there isn't a record here, there might be a record somewhere else. You can sleep in the wagon under my bunk, there is an extra palette on the floor."

Barry considered the case. It would be Lord Aldiare's word against Kevin unless there was another witness. He'd claim he bought them. It was a shame, but it looked like it was a lost cause. There was now a motive. Why did he disown Kevin rather than kill him too if he killed Miriam, the alibi didn't count, he could have hired the assassin. If he wasn't involved,

why disown Kevin? Some part of the puzzle was missing. Kevin obviously didn't kill his mother. He hadn't even been there, perhaps if he had he would have died too. Now, who knew anything about Elves? He didn't want to be inviting trouble with Princess Megra under his roof. He only had Kevin's word, presumably via Megra that it wasn't a risk. Why all the whispering anyway? What common language did they have if she knows no Tuath Dé languages and he doesn't know any Elven language? Some sort of Dwarfish seemed unlikely for an Elf, though there was a sort of basic common language that all Elves even on the other continents understood. That left Dryadish or telepathy. If Kevin was a Telepath that might explain his expulsion.

"I think it's likely those payments had something to do with your mother's death," mused Barry. "They look like bribes."

Kevin said nothing.

In the half light as dawn broke they set-up the stall. Then they brewed tea on Barry's neat little spirit stove.

"Tell me," said Barry, "is the whispering an act and are you really a telepath?"

"Sort of," said Kevin, "despite what Lord Aldiare thinks, I can't read anyone's mind. I can only communicate at all with some people, to send, and Megra is the only person that I can converse both ways with so far. I can really only do it well if we whisper what we want to say as we think. I'm just whispering our own Lárnian, partly that's why she's picking it up. As I'm the telepath, I can't concentrate on her whispered Hulredrinani dialect of High Elvish, so I haven't learnt any of it. There are really only three languages Elves speak, common, regular and high. The Dwarfish common is of course similar to Elvish common, that's how they communicate, that's why it's called common. It's a misconception that Telepaths can read anything from a mind. They can only sense what people are thinking of saying, certainly nothing you are not thinking consciously about."

"Why of course?" said Barry. This was something, it was news to him that Dwarves and Elves ever spoke to each other enough to have a common language.

"Because they are the same species," said Kevin. "I'm sure you've heard such a rumour and discounted it as they look so different. But Megra is very well educated, in Elf terms anyway, so she knows her histories, her only lack is that most deliberately don't learn any Tuath Dé Language. This is the

reason that elves allege dwarves will eventually kill any Elf woman they capture and no ransom is ever asked or paid. Allegedly only the captured men and boys are bought back. Megra didn't want to talk about Dwarves captured by Elves. I expect it's similar, though Megra claims Elves are not barbaric with the prisoners. She said I was too young to know what Dwarves do, but then wondered if it was propaganda. Personally she's sceptical that any one could be as evil as Elves make out the Dwarves to be, she says there isn't the same animosity on other continents, it's really just here in Magh Meall and more rhetoric than reality."

"Yes," agreed Barry, "I have always found Dwarves to be honourable, if somewhat uncouth. I agree they have nothing good to say about Elves. You'd think the Glennaridel Elves are monsters to hear the local Dwarves talk! I know that's simply not true."

The sun was now peeking into the Market Square and potential customers were now arriving.

Barry puzzled over the revelation that Kevin was a telepath, though he'd suspected it from the first meeting. Why had he been starving on the street, or wherever he had met up with Megra when he could go to the regional Wizard's Tower, the Dunraglin Castle? He was loath to ask, but if Kevin didn't know, he'd find out eventually. Surely Megra knew, though she'd not have free entry, presumably not being a magus?

Barry questioned Kevin at the next lull in business. "Is Megra a magus?"

"No," said Kevin, "she hasn't any magic. You're wondering why I didn't go to Dunraglin Castle?"

"I was beginning to wonder."

"I didn't know about it!" exclaimed Kevin. "I've led a very sheltered life, with a narrow education from my mother only. Megra explained I'd get free entry to the Magi school, with full board, clothes and even a small allowance. But I didn't fancy the idea. After all the only person I can do telepathy with properly is Megra."

"You like Megra?" said Barry.

"We get on well," said Kevin, "nothing more, after all, she's an Elf."

They concentrated on serving.

Hours before dusk they were sold out.

"Busier?" said Kevin.

“Busiest ever,” agreed Barry, “and we didn’t have a full load. The war is starting to bite. People are panic buying and I can’t get even the usual amount of supplies. You pack up and I’ll get the horses. We’ll save money at the livery stables and head back now rather than tomorrow.”

“Do you think there is anything in the claim of the Magi Leaders that the war between Tuas and us in Lárn is actually manipulation of the Evil Enchanter, the self styled Ard Draíodóir in the Black Tower?” suggested Kevin.

[Ard Draíodóir = High Magician]

“You don’t read my Lugh column in the paper?” said Barry. He laughed. “I’m convinced of it, even though some people think an Enchanter in the Black Tower in the White Mountains is a myth. Likely there has been a succession of them. Ard Draíodóir is a title, not a name.”

Not far beyond the city gates was a small squat figure with a large backpack. Obviously a dwarf.

Barry slowed as it was very unusual to see one alone and without the small tough native ponies they loved, which unlike the Tuath Dé animals were not actually related to horses at all. “You want a lift as far as Carrigbawn?” he called.

“Aye, that will be grand,” said the Dwarf. “Ghiloric is me, I’ll not behold to any human Tuath Dé though. You’ll take half a crown?”

Barry laughed. “You’re a stout lad,” he shouted back, perceiving it was a youth. “I’m Barry and this is Kevin. I’ll not insult you by refusing your money. A crown would be better.” He stopped and waited.

“I’d rather walk,” said Ghiloric.

“No need,” said Barry, smiling. “Half a crown and two bits to carry your big pack in the back.”

“It’s not such a big bag,” said Ghiloric, “one bit, or I’ll carry it on my lap.”

“Done,” said Barry and handed the reins to Kevin. Barry got down and slapped palms with the Dwarf. “Give me the pack and I’ll stow it while you get up front.”

But Ghiloric insisted on paying first.

Soon they set off again. Barry in the middle with Kevin and Ghiloric on either side.

“Ye kin call me Ghil,” said Ghiloric, “or Ghiloric, which ever suits ye.”

Ghiloric had a very strong accent and southern fisherman’s dialect, but was quite easy to understand.

Barry and Kevin knew better than to ask his destination.

"It'll be getting dark when we reach Carrigbawn," remarked Barry.

"There's an inn there, the Wizard's staff," said Ghiloric and then laughed.

"It's my local," admitted Barry. "They won't turn you away, if they have space, though they may be full, due to the war as we are on a main supply route to the front."

"Aye, bad business."

"Bad for my business."

They rode on for a while.

"I'm heading to Dunraglin," offered Ghiloric, "no secret. So I'm technically not part of the clan or tribe, whatever you call it, any longer. Have to train to be a Wizard."

Barry grunted.

"Why no longer in the clan?" said Kevin.

"If ye have the magic ye canny belong to any tribe," explained Ghiloric, "though tribes can bid for your services, if ye trained. So I need to be trained."

"Does it make much difference to a person's magic powers to be trained?"

"A huge difference."

Barry scowled.

"That's what my friend Megra said too," said Kevin, "but I didn't take her seriously."

"You're a magus," said Ghiloric, "can't you sense me with your magic?"

"You seem sort of more solid? I can't explain. I'm only a little telepathic."

Ghiloric made a grunting sound. Barry wasn't sure if it was amusement or disagreement.

"You have papers?" said Barry. "They have got fussy lately on the gate."

"Aye."

"We must get you papers, Kevin, so I can send you on errands on your own," said Barry. "I assume you can ride?"

"Well enough," said Kevin. "I have papers though. They even have Lord Aldiare's seal. He did want them, but didn't know where to look, I'd hidden them when I came in from hunting and heard the bad news."

Barry thought he must ride better than well enough to have been away hunting on the fateful day, also why had he

immediately thought of hiding them? He noticed that Ghiloric was paying close attention.

The Gatekeeper wasn't interested in asking for Kevin's papers when he checked Barry's papers.

"Is this dwarf another assistant? Your papers only accommodate one anyway."

"No," said Barry, "I wish he was."

"Indeed, they work hard," said the guard. "Papers?"

Ghiloric produced a large leather wallet, that obviously served as a small bag with shoulder strap from under his jerkin. He passed a folded sheet of paper that he removed from an oilskin wrapper.

"That's fine," said the Guard, "but if the nearby inn is full, you'll have to camp outside the town. I know the other two are full. You're only just in time. I'm not letting anyone else in till morning."

It was dusk and after they rolled through they could hear him winching the gates across to keep out wild animals.

"He can stay with me as long as he pays," replied Barry.

They stopped at the inn.

"Why are you charging him?" said Kevin when the Dwarf went in.

"He'd be insulted if I didn't," explained Barry, "and be disappointed not to haggle. You've a bit to learn about Dwarves. Besides, why not?"

Ghiloric returned soon and didn't look very happy. "As the guard suspected and ye feared the inn is full. They even have people going to sleep in the kitchen."

"You might want to sleep in my kitchen," said Barry. "There is barely space for a third pallet in Kevin's room. The kitchen is maybe a bit drafty at times, but Beth and Megra will be up hours before dawn preparing bread to bake. Then it's warm enough. You can always stop up the drafts in the doors."

They got down, Barry went in and Ghiloric helped Kevin stable the horses. He insisted on helping to rub and brush them. Kevin fastened the yard gates and got Ghiloric to help to push the wagon into the store.

Kevin then helped finish up in the stable and they went into the kitchen for supper. It was nearly dark now, so Beth was long gone. Megra was on her own and setting out food as they came in.

Megra and Ghiloric stared at each other.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Megra slowly in Common. “I don’t really speak much of any kind of Tuath Dé, so I only grasped that there was someone extra for supper.”

Ghiloric was momentary speechless.

“I presume you’re the famous Megra, not any Megra,” he said in Common. “Ghiloric at your service.” He bowed deeply.

Megra smiled and bowed a little.

Kevin and Barry were amazed at the soft speech between the pair.

“Perhaps you’d like to wash at the basin,” she said in Common, “then I’ll serve the food.”

Megra went to Kevin and pointed at the basin. “Wash,” she said in Lárnian.

“Barry and Ghiloric know I’m a telepath,” explained Kevin. “I can telepathically hear you even when you use Common, but I don’t understand Ghiloric. I presume you were using Common? He speaks Lárnian fine, and he’s a wizard, or will be.”

“Yes,” said Megra in High Elvish, “I’m a little surprised. But not all Elves and Dwarves are blood crazed idiots. He seems to know exactly who I am.”

“I’m guessing Megra and Ghiloric are OK. Kevin?” said Barry as they sat to eat, momentarily forgetting that Ghiloric at least certainly understood.

“There will be Elves at Dunraglin College,” said Ghiloric. “I wondered when you said Megra was your friend. It’s only an Elven name. Now I find it’s the Megra.” He switched to common. “We do take some notice of Elven politics, some of us anyway, your reputation precedes you!”

“How did you know?” said Megra.

“They were not sure if you ran away or were captured,” he said and laughed. “The questions were delicate. Of course they think if we had kidnapped you and despoiled you we’d send back the body as a boast, though personally I can’t remember of any real such occurrence. At this stage due to lack of any news, I’m sure they assume you’ve run off or got eaten by wild animals. You were carefully described.”

Megra laughed till she cried.

Ghiloric repeated a summary in Lárnian for Barry and Kevin.

“But aren’t Dwarves and Elves supposed to hate each other, Ghiloric?” said Kevin.

“Oh yes we do,” said Ghiloric, “officially, though only here. I think a Princess with no home and a Kranok Wizard have to forget such petty bigotry. Nevertheless, I think best for everyone and continued truce that I sleep here, rather than share a room with you and Megra. That’s unusual enough that you two share.” He explained again in Common for Megra.

“Our room is divided in two with a curtain,” said Kevin. “I don’t know where a third palette would go without fitting two new curtain rails or having no curtain.”

“Now that we are finished Ghiloric and I need to discuss something.” Barry took Ghiloric to the office.

Megra started clearing up with Kevin helping.

~

“I can’t charge you as much as the inn, unfortunately,” Barry sighed. “It’s not proper accommodation and you are sharing a roof with an Elf.”

“She’s not any Elf,” said Ghiloric. “I never heard of an Elf serving meat! Though I see she only ate raw fruit, vegetables and crushed grain. You do realise she is the Princess, technically heir to Emperor of all the Elves?”

“I’m reasonably sure it was Beth’s cooking, just left in a meat pie oven.”

“Your wife?”

“No,” said Barry, “she’s my Master Baker and pastry cook and a general food genius. I’ve never married.”

“Is there anything I can work at or fix here,” said Ghiloric, “rather than pay actual cash? I know I’m just a kid really still, but I’m strong and skilled at all the usual things. As well as some unusual ones.”

“I’d appreciate a few days work,” said Barry. “I can’t get staff, I might even have to pay you!” He paused. “What do you mean by the princess and Emperor? I know she is a Princess of the Hulredrinani, a High Elven house.”

“Technically the Hulredrinani are the most senior house, the other houses only have a Princess or Prince as the ruler. The Hulredrinani ruler is technically Emperor of all the Elves, though really only has authority over the Hulredrinani. Megra would be the next ruler, Empress, if the Hulredrinani was like the other Elven houses. Except for hundreds of years if a princess would be Empress, she is married before the Emperor dies and her husband is Emperor. I’m not sure what they will

do if they can't get her married. In theory the Emperor and the Elders can decide any relation is the next Emperor, but if they don't pick someone or get Megra married before the Emperor dies, Megra is Empress."

"Is the Elven Emperor likely to die soon?" said Barry.

"No, likely he'll live another fifty years," said Ghiloric.

* * *

Beth used her key to let herself in via the shop in the early hours before dawn. She was surprised to find a Dwarf sleeping against one of the ovens as she set her lamp down and started to light the kitchen lamps.

"Ye must be the highly praised Beth," he said. "Ghiloric at yer service. That was a beautifully cooked supper Princess Megra served us. Barry suggested it was your cooking."

"Princess? The scullery maid?" she said. "No-one told me. Even if she is a Princess she's the exception to the rule of Elves are arrogant. I hope you were polite!"

"She's not any Princess," said Ghiloric. "I wonder why no-one told ye? She's the most senior one of the most stuck up arrogant Elves in the world, the High Elven Hulredrinani. Ye canny find a more exalted Princess in the world. Daughter of Emperor of all the Elves, in so much as the other Elven Houses take any notice."

"Why is she washing my pots, peeling and chopping vegetables and working as a Skivvy all day?"

"I'd imagine she prefers it to starving or marrying her cousin," said Ghiloric, "though I don't know much about him. Perhaps he's not as bad as made out."

"There is a lot of things Barry doesn't tell me," she mused. "I don't suppose you know who Kevin is?"

"No idea," admitted Ghiloric, "but if he was any significant relative to the King or any such I might know. I think he lost a close family relative lately, maybe his mother, from what they said about his papers, some connection to Lord Aldiare. I think Lord Aldiare is something important in the Government, probably in the King's Privy Council?"

"I better get started, I don't know anything about Governments, Kings or Emperors."

"Anything I can do to help?"

“Clear your stuff out,” she said, “wake Megra, top of stairs door facing you. Then keep out of our way, or bring some coal for the oven fires.”

“Aye, fine,” he said, “then when it’s light I’ll start my chores. I’ll be here a couple of days, helping out a bit.”

“What next?” exclaimed Beth.

Mid morning Barry was in the shop and Kevin was helping Ghiloric repair a mincing machine when there was a crash. The window was smashed by a rock.

One of the customers that was just leaving ran out.

“I can’t see anyone,” she reported. “I’ll tell the Constable?”

“Thanks,” said Barry.

“I’m passing the Glazier,” said the other, “if you want, I can tell him.”

“That would be great help,” said Barry. He lit a lamp, pulled closed the shutters outside and closed the door without latching it. Then he started clearing up. The rock had a note tied to it. It was handwritten in imitated printed capitals.

GET RID OF KEVIN AND FORGET HIM OR YOU WILL REGRET IT

The Constable arrived as he was clearing the last of the glass.

“Someone has delivered a threat,” said Barry and showed him the note and the rock.

The Constable took both to the daylight in the doorway. He sniffed them both and held the paper to the light.

“Who is Kevin?”

“My new apprentice,” explained Barry, “but there is more to it than that.”

He explained about Lord Aldiare, the murder of Miriam Kolrinos, who was evidently paying some of Aldiare’s inexplicable bills, Aldiare taking her valuable jewellery that by rights was Kevin’s as he’d never actually formally registered any marriage in Dalrinath with Miriam despite their relationship of nearly twenty years.

“Of course most of it is hearsay,” said Barry. “Kevin’s uncorroborated story. I did look at the inquest records and talk to the Court Record Keeper in Dalrinath City, the Record Keeper must have mentioned my interest to someone.”

“Someone not so bright,” said the Constable, “as the attack gives Kevin’s story legs. You think then he’s a bit naive and didn’t realise he’d been cheated?”

“Yes,” said Barry, “his papers even list Lord Aldiare as his father and have his seal. Lord Aldiare thinks they are lost. Though I haven’t actually seen the papers. It could be that Miriam was his wife and they were married somewhere else.”

“So unless Lord Aldiare marries and has offspring, Kevin is heir. Actually a good advocate could argue that Kevin’s papers and Miriam Kolrinos nearly twenty year residence is de-facto marriage. If the books support Kevin’s claim of payments and there is any independent verification of the jewels he’s looking at being charged with murder. It sounds like Miriam Kolrinos’s father was a jeweller or an unusually expert collector of gems. I’m curious enough to see if there was such a Jeweller.”

“Her father may not have been in Dalrinath City. Also Lord Aldiare had an alibi.”

“Still,” said the Constable, “I’ll ask, the Constable there owes me a favour. You pay your taxes, well mostly, I think, I’m obliged to put some effort into investigating this. I’ll tell the guards all to keep an eye out. I know you, you’re not likely to throw Kevin out. Alibis are not always as good as they seem. I’d hold off putting any of this in your column in the papers.”

“I’m afraid he may leave anyway to go to the Magi College,” said Barry. “I need the staff. I’ve plenty of regular chat for my column. Maybe someday in the future I’ll publish with Kevin’s permission. For now, it’s only in my diary, locked in the cellar safe every night. I never leave anything lying about.”

“You’re also a soft touch for the underdog and every hard luck case.”

“Only when it helps my business interests.”

The Constable laughed. “You like to everyone to think so anyway.”

Later the glazier replaced the window. Barry said nothing to the others, but customers talk.

* * *

“You’re looking very cross, Megra?” Kevin remarked just after supper one evening.

“The Dwarf boy tried to tell me how to clean the pans!” she exclaimed. “Also Beth is suddenly treating me like I’m a glass ornament. Why? The stupid Dwarf wasn’t content to tell her I’m a princess, but exactly which princess. He told me himself as if it was something good! So I shouted at him!”

"I'm only understanding you by telepathy," said Kevin, "but you are shouting at me in high Elvish? He's practically a man, older than me anyway."

"I'm even cross at me for being rude first." Megra struggled to hold back tears. "You're only a boy too, you don't understand."

Suddenly they realised that Ghiloric was in the doorway. Megra ran up to their room.

"You shouldn't have told Beth about Megra," said Kevin.

"I ken it now," said Ghiloric, "apologising to her made her even madder. She even got all arrogant with me, like Elves are supposed to be. I'll keep outa her way till ye tell she's calm again?"

"Unless that annoys her," said Kevin. "I've no experience of girls, I suspect it's girls rather than Elves I don't understand."

"Aye," said Ghiloric, "girls is trickier than Elves is true, but it's our fault for being ignorant boys. She's nearly a woman, nearly is always worse."

* * *

That night Kevin quizzed Megra. "It's not just Ghiloric?" he asked softly through the curtain. "Something else annoyed you."

"Well, I wasn't going to say," admitted Megra, "but someone threw a rock the other day, smashing the shop window. It had a message saying to get rid of you or regret it."

"I see." Kevin did see. He felt miserable already. At length he couldn't help it.

Megra pulled back the curtain and sat on the floor beside his palette.

"Is there something else you didn't tell me?" she said. She took his hand. "I didn't know Tuath Dé men cried."

"Well, I realised when I was doing Barry's accounts what some of my Dad's accounts must mean. So I think my parents were working for the Evil Enchanter and paying bribes to other people in Government. There was no entry for what was purchased. Only a payment. On Barry's accounts even the wage payments have a matching labour supplied entry with the same value. I did overhear them discuss the Evil Enchanter once. I think he must have been blackmailing them to do it. Maybe they wanted to stop. I bet the Enchanter had my mum assassinated."

“I think that’s why your dad claimed you weren’t his son, to protect you,” suggested Megra. “Perhaps also so you couldn’t be used to threaten him.”

“Obviously someone thinks I know something,” said Kevin, “maybe because I’m a magus. I’d be much more vulnerable to attack outside the town.”

“You should really get to Dunraglin Castle College,” said Megra. She let go of his hand. “It would be safer, you need training for the magic and eventually whoever threw the rock will attack here directly even though it’s a town with a Constable and all. You do know about the bribes.”

“As usual you give good advice,” agreed Kevin. “What about you if I go?”

“Kevin, other than a few days with a sprained ankle you have never taken care of me. Wasn’t it my idea to approach Barry? I think though you maybe used some Glamour on him, because my disguise was very poor. Probably even if I’d been on my own he’d have taken me on.”

Kevin laughed softly.

“How would you have asked? He doesn’t know Elven or Common and you didn’t know Lárnian! Well hardly any.”

“Well, I’d have managed, I did have a few words, he did want an Elf and I have negotiated with the Glennaridel for him and I’m getting on well here now. I don’t enjoy the cleaning, but the cooking and baking is fine.”

“You want to stay, you won’t go back to the Elves, your father the Emperor?” said Kevin.

“Well,” mused Megra, “if I wasn’t risking being married to someone I don’t want, I might. I don’t feel any sense of duty to be a useless Princess. If I had to be Empress, that would be something I’d have to do. No-one could force a husband on me then.” Megra laughed.

“That’s not likely though?”

“There hasn’t been an Empress in a long time. Maybe not since your people came. We should get to sleep.”

* * *

Megra forgave Ghiloric when it became evident that Beth had decided to ignore that her skivvy was a Princess. The days passed and everyone got into a routine. Kevin went with Barry on Market days. The Lughnasadh summer harvest festival with the games including hurling and horse racing at the fair was a

wonderful three days. Yet Ghiloric mysteriously had no inclination to travel on to the College, so Kevin put off making a decision about it. Barry even let them borrow books from his fabulous collection in the cellar. He even had old Inamok texts simply because they seemed like attractive hand copied manuscripts rather than modern letterpress printing. Kevin realised too that Barry was a regular writer for both a paper in the capital and in town here, though with the pen name Lugh.

“Have you changed your mind about the college?” said Kevin.

“Not at all,” said Ghiloric, “but I should go soon before the autumn now that Lughnasadh is over. You should come too.”

“I don’t like to leave Barry or Megra in the lurch, though Megra claims she doesn’t need me at all.”

“Either of them could buy and sell anything before breakfast,” said Ghiloric. “Barry will manage and Megra would laugh at the idea of anyone leaving her in the lurch. She seems oddly content to learn baking and give up being a Princess. Beth says she is making good progress too. I’d not be surprised if Megra didn’t become a partner one day. Beth could but lacks the ambition. Megra can’t resist organising people, she’s been educated to lead. I guess I’ll miss her even though she’s an Elf.”

“I guess I’ll think about it. Megra also said that I should go to the College.”

* * *

A few days later Ghiloric was wakened by the smell of burning wood and oil. It was late at night and everyone had gone to bed long ago.

He cautiously opened the door to the hall. It was an inferno. The stairs were well alight!

He closed the door again, grabbed his pack and went out to the yard. Ladder? He’d not seen one. Nor a grappling hook and rope. He lobbed a bottle at what he presumed was Barry’s window and another at Kevin’s and Megra’s room. Fortunately both broke with lots of noise.

He shouted and then went and pulled out the wagon. Slowly he pushed it across the yard.

Barry was at the window making a rope out of bed sheets and blankets. He’d already thrown out several bundles.

“Get the kids!” Barry shouted. “I’m fine.”

The yard seemed endless. Barry was down his improvised rope and helped him push the wagon. Megra and Kevin were trying to make a rope too. They'd thrown out their stuff. They clambered on to the wagon roof and then down via the front. Barry and Ghiloric got out the horses while Megra and Kevin opened the gates.

"Hitch the horses and get out to the square," said Barry. "Don't try and save anything. I'll raise the alarm. Megra and Ghiloric should get inside the wagon."

The clang of the alarm had been started by someone, They could see flames shooting into the sky, Barry ran ahead.

By the time they had the wagon in the square there was a crowd of people with the two water wagons, one with a steam driven pump. The Constable was in his night shirt and directing operations. They were pumping water to the roofs of the adjoining properties. An old flat bed wagon arrived pulled by two horses. It was loaded with giant barrels of water and a charge of black powder. Half a dozen people pushed it into the ruined front of the burning shop as the horses were led away. Everyone then rushed to the square just down the road.

There was an enormous explosion and then the fire was almost out. The men operating the big pumps and water wagons came back and resumed hosing down the properties on either side.

The Constable was satisfied that everything was under control. Beth and the other two workers appeared and stood dumbfounded looking at the smoking ruins. Shop, bakery, kitchen and accommodation gone. The stables, stores and other workshops at the rear seemed intact, as the entire yard was visible, the rear wall of the main building fronting the street had collapsed.

Beth and the two men ran up to the Constable.

"Are they?" she asked.

"I saw Barry on foot and also Kevin driving the wagon," he said, "look over in the far corner of the square."

They went over in the shadows and saw the wagon. Some people were lighting oil lamps now as the light from the fire was gone. There was a faint grey glow in the east. The false dawn, it was still earlier than even the time the bread making started.

No-one was visible near the wagon. The horses had nose bags, probably with a few oats, but had been hobbled. The Constable knocked on the rear double doors of the wagon.

Barry came out; "Everyone got out. Constable, can you set a guard on the ruins? The cellar is probably fireproof and it has my coin and books. I keep them there in case of burglars, rare as they might be here."

"Can I see?" asked Beth.

"Yes, go on in," said Barry.

The two workers stood looking at Barry nervously.

Barry spoke to the men and sent them home with instructions to come in an hour later than usual to see what could be done. He climbed back in. Beth was boiling a kettle on the spirit stove. The three kids were sitting very quietly wrapped in blankets in a row on the single fold up bunk. Someone had lit the lamp. He sat on his bundle of clothes.

"I know you said to not save anything," said Ghiloric, "but Megra and I threw in all our bags and bundles and yours. It seemed like there was time."

"Yes," said Barry, "I think, perhaps the wall only fell with the explosion meant to put out the fire."

"It was arson," said Ghiloric, "someone poured in oil and spirits, the flames had blue and there was a young lake in the hall."

"I didn't doubt it was arson," said Barry, "though I hadn't expected an attack so soon, or arson. Perhaps more rocks."

There was a knock at the door.

Barry opened it. Beth saw it was the Constable.

"Give them tea with something in it," she said, "then, Constable, when you are done bring them round to my place. The wagon is too small for four to sleep."

She hopped out after giving Barry a hug.

The Constable came in. He looked at the pale drawn faces.

"I just want a quick word while it's fresh in your minds," he explained.

"Tell Constable Farrell, Ghiloric," said Barry. "Ghiloric slept in the kitchen beside the hall behind the shop. Kevin and Megra sleep quite separately in the room at the top of the stairs beside mine. The office is above the shop. The bedrooms are above the main kitchen."

Ghiloric repeated what little he knew about the start of the fire.

"Some other time I'll get the account of how you actually managed to escape, as obviously the hall and stairs were almost instantly impassable," remarked the Constable. "I'm treating it as primarily attempted murder and arson as the

secondary charge. Your modest Dwarf saved you all. No doubt it's linked to the earlier threat."

"I'm very grateful, Ghiloric," said Megra in Common. "I'm sorry I was cross with you earlier. I mean I was sorry even before this happened."

Barry had no idea what she said, but the Constable had to know Common. He was amazed.

"What earlier threats?" asked Ghiloric.

"Oh, someone flung a rock through the window and demanded I get rid of Kevin," explained Barry. "Sit down, I'll lead the horses. Have the tea." He got out and took off the hobbles and nose-bags. Then led the horses pulling the wagon to Beth's house.

Beth, Brian, Beth's husband, and Niall, her sister's husband, came out and led them round to the rear lane. They stabled the horses in the disused stable.

"The kids are asleep," she said.

"See you tomorrow," said the Constable.

Barry looked in. "I think don't disturb them, they look comfortable enough, even though they are not lying down. The couch back is also a mattress so as to have a double bed."

"We've made up a bed for you in the parlour," said Beth. "We were going to put them in the dining room."

Barry was glad he'd made the cellar hatch proof against flood and fire.

Chapter 3: Cleaning up

Constable Farrell had a late breakfast and read the reports of the guards. Two had done a preliminary investigation. They had no doubt that a substantial quantity of oils and spirits had been poured in. They'd found an abandoned flat bed wagon with a tarpaulin and empty kegs. The four masked horsemen that left in the early hours via the West gate after assaulting the two guards had obviously been responsible for the arson. A tracker and a party of guards had been dispatched even as the fire was discovered. Competent killers would have killed the guards rather than having them raise the alarm.

The mail arrived. A stroke of good luck. The Chief Constable of Dalrinath City took the story very seriously as Miriam Kolrinos's father had been a successful Gem merchant and Jeweller. He apologised that the original inquest hadn't looked at what assets Miriam Kolrinos would historically have had. He'd quietly find her father's will and Executor records of the assets. The Constable wrote a letter explaining the developments of the previous night, he got the clerk to send it by Semaphore, though in code, as well as regular mail. Still nothing to arrest Lord Aldiare for. He'd have to get a certified copy made of Kevin's papers today, because Kevin might move on now. Or perhaps he needed to arrange a safe passage somewhere. Who exactly were Megra and Ghiloric?

He had his clerk get a professional scribe and a local notary. The three of them would sign and seal the copy.

He went to Beth's house.

"Barry is over at the ruins," said Beth. "I'm on paid leave till he either gives up or gets something sorted. He's not sure which. He wanted me to keep the kids here, quietly. You copying something?"

"I need to make a copy of Kevin's papers."

"They are all in the kitchen," she said. "You can use the dining room. Did Barry tell you Ghiloric and Kevin are Magi and Megra is some sort of important princess? He sometimes forgets to explain things. Ghiloric only stopped by temporarily, he's bound for Dunraglin College. It was meant to be only a few days, I don't know why he has stayed so long, something to do with Megra or Kevin I think. Kevin and Ghiloric have already discussed leaving soon before this attack."

"Thanks, Beth," he said, "that helps a lot."

They went in and Beth brought Kevin. She lit all the lamps.

“I need to make a copy of your papers,” he said, “routine. Do the Dwarf and the Elf have papers?”

“Ghiloric certainly had yesterday,” Kevin said. “He probably saved his wallet. I’ve an idea Megra may have no papers as such. You wouldn’t send her back to the Elves?”

“Back?” said the Constable. “If there are Elves looking for her, that’s entirely their problem not mine. If she has committed no offence against the Tuath Dé or in our villages, towns or cities she has nothing to fear. She looks grown up enough to take care of herself.”

Kevin took off his boots. “Inside the boots. I’ll explain to Ghiloric and Megra. It’s not great to leave them alone together, as they are trying so hard to be polite they can annoy each other. Or something. Maybe it’s just a boy and girl thing.”

Kevin realised that must sound very odd considering an Elf and Dwarf.

The Constable smiled at Kevin as he left. He easily found a set of papers in each boot. Wrapped in oilcloth and then in silk. One was certification of parentage. Signed and sealed too by Lord Aldiare as father. Another was surprising and a little harder to read because it was from the capital of Tuas, who spoke a different Tuath Dé dialect. The scribe looked at it.

“It’s certification of marriage about four years before Kevin was born,” explained the scribe. “It seems quite valid. Miriam would have had it and for whatever reason gave it to Kevin instead of lodging it at the Courthouse. Kevin obviously didn’t realise this is the Tuasian version of a marriage registration. Kevin is the heir no matter what, eventually, and the jewellery isn’t stolen. If it’s a fake, which is possible, then his father maybe did steal the jewels and Kevin isn’t the heir. Either way it’s confusing. There could be other documents we don’t know about. Perhaps they divorced, or Miriam Kolrinos gave her property to Lord Aldiare.”

The third and fourth was bafflingly two sets of personal papers, the usual internal passport, which despite being called papers was usually a single sheet. One had him as Kevin Aldiare and the other as Kevin Kolrinos.

“Make copies of all four,” said the Constable. “Are we all agreed that the parentage is clear and matches all known facts?”

The Scribe and Notary agreed.

“The other three,” he said, “we copy and note on them the problems. The marriage isn’t verified and doesn’t agree with the inquest, that can be cleared up quickly by the Druids. The two personal papers are mutually exclusive and depend on the Marriage veracity. Why both exist and Kevin has both is a mystery.”

They all agreed. The Constable signed the margin of four blank sheets and wrote his comments.

“I’ll add my seal when I’m done.” He left the scribe to it and went to the kitchen. Ghiloric showed him his Tuath Dé issued papers and cancelled Kranokin clan tokens.

Constable Farrell looked at the marks. “You’re a Wizard? Or will be?” he asked in Common.

“Yes, I’m going to Dunraglin College,” Ghiloric replied in Common. “I was just helping out Barry for a few days, returning a favour, which somehow extended to a few weeks.”

“That’s fine, you did a wonderful job saving the others too.”

He handed back everything to Ghiloric and sat opposite the even paler than usual Elf girl, the young Lorinok woman.

“Now Megra,” he said in Common, “I’m guessing you’re technically an adult, nearly grown up? There is no question of me sending you back to any Elves.”

“I know that,” said Megra, “that’s why I’m staying in Tuath Dé realms. Kevin has had sheltered upbringing. Sorry Kevin. He can understand me because he’s a Telepath of sorts, he can’t hear anyone else’s thoughts! He can send his thoughts to me. He only knows the local Lárnian. What do you want?”

“Just proof of who you are,” he said, “routine, eliminate all the noise from the enquiry. I’m pretty sure this isn’t an Elvish attack, besides four horsemen are involved. It’s not Elvish style?”

“No, a quiet knife job with no public disturbance,” she said. “Also never inside the Tuath Dé realms, only outside your village, towns or cities.” Megra passed him a large brooch that might fasten a heavy cloak.

He examined it closely. Only the very exalted levels of royalty of the High Elven houses had something like this. He took out a burning glass and peered at it. It had a beautifully worked portrait of Megra, probably done the customary year after leaving childhood. Tens of thousands of coloured glass threads mounted end on and fused together. He couldn’t read High Elvish, but could see the letters easily, he had an idea that it included a date as he recognised the counting symbols.

“It reads,” she explained, “Megra High Princess of her generation. Royal House Hulredrinani as well as my birth date, year 7316 and day 245, which means I’m nearly nineteen.” Megra started to get angry. “It means I’m the first ranking princess of the most arrogant insufferable people of the entire world, technically the heir, I’m an only child of his second wife, the first died with no children. Of all the Elves in the world, only my father, the Emperor of the Hulredrinani ranks higher. Even the elves that hate us more than dwarves hate us accept that. But he wants me to marry that old bumbling fool, his sister’s son. I could call him some other things, but I have to think of Kevin. So I ran off. It seems even Ghiloric’s folk and other dwarves have been delicately quizzed. They’d rather believe that a wild animal ate me or some sex crazed dwarf had his way and then killed me, as is the tradition, though more used to scare bad children than reality. I’ve never actually heard of these Elves killed by Dwarves, nor has Ghiloric! It seems to me they’d rather hunt animals. No-one ever suggested that Dwarves eat Elves, really it’s only rhetoric from uneducated bigots. People don’t talk like that on the other continents.”

“I must remember that about eating Elves,” said Ghiloric, “a good point, we only hunt what we eat. There is a lot of rhetoric, then they go out and hunt boar. Even humans love good roast boar, best thing Tuath Dé brought from Ireland. There’s no doubt that Elves and Dwarves have fought in the past in Magh Meall and generally can’t stand each other. Megra and I are trying to be polite to each other. But what I think is Dwarfish courtesy, she sees as mortal insult, and vice versa, except I’m a thick skinned ignorant boy so I annoy her by not even noticing her Elvish sacrifices. Most days though we manage.”

“You’re both obviously who you claim to be,” the Constable stated. “Personally neither of you seem completely typical for an Elf or a Dwarf. I promise not to tell anyone, but I can’t resist asking, Megra, you really work for Barry as skivvy and scullery-maid and work with meat products? Doesn’t he know who you are?”

“I only work with the non-meat areas,” she explained. “He and Beth are very particular that raw meat is separate from everything and that even smoked, cured, dried or cooked meat is separate from vegetable. Something Dryads taught his grandfather, meat is dangerous to spread illness, raw meat is

worse than dirt. Dirt spreads illness. I only move safe meat, the preserved, cured kind. I don't cook meat, I only serve it, to those eating any, also I know that Barry, while a meat eater like the Kranokin, that you call Dwarves, is very careful for his customers and doesn't over indulge. So my conscience is clear. Barry perhaps doesn't quite appreciate what I once was. Anyway I've repudiated my birth status, I have to make my own way. Walking up to people and saying, I'm a Princess, take care of me, isn't much good. Maybe I'll learn to be a Master Baker like Beth, I don't know yet."

"I'm amazed," he said, "a recommendation for a purveyor of meat products from an Elf. Elves here famously don't cook or eat cooked food and no meat or regular dairy, yet you contemplate being a baker. I must go, thank you."

He looked at Kevin.

"I'm sure the others have finished," he said in Lárnian. "It must be strange only understanding what Megra is saying by Telepathy."

"It's even stranger often what Megra says."

"Can you explain why you have two mutually exclusive internal passports?"

"People are often known by their mother's name," insisted Kevin.

"Yes, but you usually only get one set of papers using either parent's name or both. Not two sets."

"It's what mum gave me," explained Kevin. "She said I'd know which would be better to use. She must have had some inkling that bad things would happen. She told me not to let anyone know I had them, or the other two papers. I don't know what one of them is."

"It's your parent's marriage certificate. They married in Tuas's capital."

"I wondered if it might be that, but at the inquest they said my parents weren't married. I'm relieved though I don't understand why my father has said and done what he did."

In the dining room the Constable examined the copies and paid the Notary and Scribe. He gave Kevin back his originals.

"You need somewhere safer for those," he said, "though the copies help. The first place I'd look would be boots. Lord Aldiare mustn't be very bright."

"He's not stupid at all, but I hid my boots at the time in plain sight, in the stable boot cupboard. I didn't get to keep my horse though."

“The three of you shouldn’t go out or talk to anyone coming to the door. You do realize what the aim of the attack was?”

“Put Barry out of business?” suggested Kevin.

“No,” explained the Constable, “he doesn’t have any enemies, not serious death in the night kind, not till he took you in, certainly not among his competitors. They are all careful to be only slightly competitive yet make it look hard for a newcomer. There is no new business. Someone wanted to kill you.”

“Megra mentioned a threat, but it was vague.”

He left to talk to Barry and let him know about the news from Dalrinath City.

People had given up their own time, in some cases closed their shops. The site was getting cleared. A wooden frame had risen on the site of the rear wall. A path was clear to the cellar. Work had started on a second frame at the front.

There were three lamps and a desk in the cellar. Barry was talking to the biggest joinery shop owner, who had his oldest apprentice taking notes.

“We can be back up and running in a few days,” Barry claimed enthusiastically, “as all the ovens are fine. A wooden frame building with tarred felt and canvas panels. Then we build masonry around the outside and replace the internal panels with lathe and plaster. I’m adding a garret with two rooms.”

“So your coin, books, stores and equipment are all fine?”

“Yes, well,” he said, “it was bad to lose all of the front building, even though it was old and cramped, that’s actually not a huge loss. Some stock in the shop, furniture, almost all my ordinary personal effects and all the kitchen gear is actually nearly as bad, but Ghiloric saved our lives. I did save the important stuff in my room though. Fortunately nothing important was in the office as I put it in the cellar each night for security.”

“You know it was almost certainly attempted murder of Kevin?”

“I think so. You saw them?”

“Yes,” said the Constable, “Miriam Kolrinos, may have been very wealthy, she might have been Lord Aldiare’s wife. Look at these copies and the notes we added. Also the letter from the Constable in the City.” The Constable explained all he’d found out.

Barry smiled. "It's nice to be right," he said. "I was suspicious from when I met Kevin. What do we do next?"

"You get your business sorted," he frowned, "but you won't like the next bit. Otherwise you do nothing. Leave the investigating to me, if there is something useful you can safely do, I'll let you know."

"But Kevin is still at risk when who ever it is discovers he's not dead," said Barry.

"I've told the news-hounds that there were three bodies found. They can't come back. I think if we give them some money, horses and send them quietly to Dunraglin College at night. I think I'd spare three guards too, they can bring back the horses."

"But Megra's not a magus?" said Barry. "Kevin said so and Ghiloric would have mentioned it if she was."

"She seems pretty amazing though. The guards and horses will be back here before Dunraglin College figures what to do with her. Also she's the only person that can demonstrate Kevin's magic, though that's just training. She can quietly return and go back to work here?"

"Well," Barry mused, "you're right. I can't find staff, I can't take my coin with me. I'll give a generous back pay, I was going to pay them eventually once they learned a bit. Apprentices don't get paid, Beth was training Megra. Really I should pay Kevin something for the bookkeeping. We should send them off after dark, if the guards know the way well enough. I'm coming to Beth's for supper anyway. I think a thousand Crowns reward to Ghiloric, twenty Crowns pay for Kevin and ten Crowns for Megra. I hope Megra comes back."

"Go on, double it," said Constable Farrell.

"Only if you never tell anyone. I do reward where it's earned, Look at what Beth is paid."

"I've no idea what you pay her."

Barry flipped pages of a ledger and pointed.

"Right, you do reward excellence," he agreed, "no doubt you're terrified she'd leave and work for someone else. The question is who is behind the attack on Kevin?"

"The Ard Draíodóir in the Black Tower," insisted Barry, "known also as the Evil Enchanter. I think though this far south he is having difficulty hiring professional help."

"I guess that makes as much sense as anything," said Farrell. He frowned. "Would you like to enlighten me further?"

So Barry explained what Kevin had said about the bookkeeping and what he had overheard.

Chapter 4: Dunraglin College

Kevin felt a little excited about the idea of a moonlit ride. Ghiloric and Megra also quietly followed the Constable as they passed out an unobtrusive steel door in the town wall. The Constable led them to a grove where the horses waited. One guard rode in front and two rode behind. It wasn't the main road to Dunraglin. Kevin was delighted to be riding a good horse. He was surprised how well Megra was coping as she'd never ridden. Ghiloric rode quite well, considering he was probably used to the smaller native horse like animal. It was tedious as they were forbidden to talk. There was a rendezvous arranged for fresh horses so they were riding harder than normal. These poor animals would need a few days rest. He was excited too about the college, but no-one knew much about it. Megra seemed sanguine about the prospect of visiting the college for a few days and then returning to work for Barry before Samhain.

At the rendezvous there were twelve extra horses with the three new guards. They rode on. At regular intervals they stopped and switched horses. Even so by dawn they were slower. Very cold too as it was now the beginning of Deireadh. Due to the clear sky the ground was frosted and the grass crunched under their hooves. It was late morning when they arrived at the town. Kevin helped tether the remounts off the road and as arranged they went into Cappamor town in pairs, each with one guard and a good gap between. Eventually they all met in the inn. They all took to their single shared room after a meal. No conversation allowed in public. One guard went with the message to the local Constable who sent off people to get the horses left outside and organize the next stage. When in late afternoon three new guards arrived the other two left. At dusk they ate and then left with the three guards and different horses. All six wore army trooper's cloaks with helmets. They had swords, a horse crossbow, a pistol and a musket each. The routine was the same as the previous night as they stopped and switched guards and horses with remounts too.

Before dawn they stopped and rested. The guards took turns taking watch.

Now they were travelling a less used bridle path that had never seen wheeled traffic. The horses were tired and now only

walking. After one change they all walked leading two horses each.

It was late afternoon when they arrived at Dunraglin College without passing through the town. They had been expected. Not fast courier or magic but enciphered semaphore. Ghiloric had been expected to turn up eventually anyway as the college was informed as soon as his magic appeared, over a year ago. They were welcomed and basic details noted and then shown to guest apartments. Megra finally admitted she was in agony and collapsed in the corridor.

She woke up in bed feeling wonderful but starving. Old and young green faces were watching her carefully.

"I'm suddenly very hungry," she exclaimed in High Elvish.

"She's very hungry," Kevin explained.

"Do you speak Common?" The older Dryad asked in Common.

"Yes," said Megra replying in Common. "You healed me and that's why I'm hungry?"

"I'm Lahro," he said, "this is my apprentice Anrhi. She was supposed to heal you as it was a simple task. Really you should have told the others how raw you were getting, there are quite good creams I'm sure your guards had. I'm afraid that while she is an exceptional Mage in most areas, she's an erratic healer. She'll explain things a bit and food is on the way. I must go. Oh yes, which magic have you, Megra, the message said Lorinok girl, Kranok boy and human boy? I'm a healing mage and teacher, I'm poor at sensing that. Anrhi is excellent at it."

"Oh no," said Megra in High Elvish and lay back closing her eyes.

"See you later." With that Lahro left. In a moment he popped back in. "Your strange hunting knife is in the drawer," he explained. "I took your boots off and found it. Too sharp to leave lying around. I'll have to tell the Dean about it. You need permission to carry a weapon in the College. Though I never heard of an Elf hunter."

"I think someone somewhere has been a little misleading," said Ghiloric in Lárnian.

"What do you mean?" said Anrhi also in Lárnian.

"You tell me which magics we have," said Ghiloric, "seeing as the teacher says you are good at that?"

She touched Ghiloric. "You are a Wizard." She touched Kevin. "I think you are a Telepath. Perhaps a bit more.

Certainly minor Enchantments like Glamour. I'm not sure if you'll rate as an Enchanter."

"I can only do it with Megra," insisted Kevin.

She touched Megra and frowned.

"But," she hesitated, "that makes no sense."

"Why?" asked Kevin.

"That's like you are only a partial telepath," she explained, "two partial telepaths can communicate. But just as the Inamok can be Wizards, we Baltie are only Mages, only Fair Folk have Glamour, Shape-changer and Enchanter magic, hence the reputation for the Glamour and the nickname, the Fair Folk. Megra can't be a partial telepath, Elves need to be powerful Magi to be a telepath and don't have Glamour. Anyway, this is something I can do well. Megra you aren't anything. I mean you are just mundane, not a magus. I know, Kevin, that you are a proper Telepath, maybe an Enchanter, just you need training. Only really good telepaths can communicate with regular people."

Megra sat up.

Anrhi touched Megra again, then held her wrist and closed her eyes. "No," she said, "there is nothing at all."

"I've never claimed to be magical," said Megra. "Someone sent a misleading message. No-one ever even hinted at it. I was only to visit a few days."

Anrhi took Kevin's wrist. "Imagine I'm Megra," she said in Common.

"You want me to imagine you are Megra?" Kevin laughed.

"It's just a matter of training," insisted Anrhi, in Common. "Megra has nothing magical at all, you are a full Telepath. You do understand Common?"

"I only understand Lárnian properly, though I can follow a lot of any Tuath Dé language."

"I was speaking Common," she continued in Dryadish turning her head away. "You understand what am I speaking now?"

"Why, it's Lárnian?"

She collapsed onto the bed giggling,

"I was speaking Dryadish, well the Baltie language," she said in Lárnian. "Now I'm speaking in Lárnian. I think it only seemed to work with Megra because you have no common language. Still, she is obviously amazingly open for an Elf."

"Aye," said Ghiloric in Lárnian, "our Megra might not have a scrap o' magic, but she's the most wonderful, honourable,

amazing and unusual Elf you'll meet in the whole world. Yis better not tell her neither I said it."

"Obviously, Megra," said Anrhi in Common, "you have a hitherto unknown kind of magic that affects Kranokin." Then she laughed like a lunatic.

"You forget yourself Ghiloric," Megra scolded in Common. "I'm learning Lárnian quickly! I admit to feeling somewhat flattered though."

Someone brought a trolley with food and hurriedly left again.

They all ate to keep Megra company.

"So you didn't just happen to arrive here at the same time?" asked Anrhi.

"I've known Megra about three months," said Kevin, "and we met Ghiloric nearly a month later. Hmm, it's longer now as it must have been the end of Iúil just before Lúnasa, a while before Lughnasadh festival when we met Ghiloric. So I guess nearly five months since I met Megra. It must have been Bealtaine or Meitheamh. We were a bit aimless before we met Barry."

"Aye, I was on the way here," said Ghiloric.

"Kevin," said Anrhi, "you'll have to learn Common."

"Megra says common Elvish," said Kevin, "isn't that common among Elves."

"It's actually not really Elvish," said Anrhi.

"It's obviously Dwarvish," insisted Ghiloric, "most Dwarves would say so, but it's called Common because Elves and Dwarves both speak it, not because it's commonly spoken."

"It's very old," agreed Anrhi, "probably derived from what ever was spoken before the Sundering of Elves and Dwarves. Nothing written survives from those days, it's before we came to this world. It's certainly not really Dwarvish either. You both were speaking it when my species arrived, long before the Tuath Dé."

Megra started checking and arranging her bag and fixed up her smock, kirtle, jacket and surcoat. She pulled on her boots and fastened her cloak with an ordinary brooch rather than the royal one.

"Thanks for everything," she said in Common.

"What ye doing?" exclaimed Ghiloric in Lárnian.

"Leaving."

"Yer mad, 'tis near night."

"Well, I'll leave in the morning."

“Yer no going anywhere! Ye were supposed to stay at least a few days!”

“I can’t stay here as I have no magic,” she insisted.

“She’s right,” said Anrhi, “but you can stay certainly a few days as the guest of Kevin and Ghiloric.”

Kevin by dint of concentration had managed to follow most of this with the aid of Telepathy, Anrhi was right!

“No, please, Megra,” he said, “stay awhile. Beside you’d want to book a road train, I’m sure you don’t want to ride off on a horse?”

“No, that’s true,” said Megra. “I’ll never forget the last couple of nights. I’ll have to stay long enough at least to find Lahro and thank him again. I’ll find out about road trains. I’ve seriously gone off coaches and wagons. They have horses.”

“You seemed to be riding well for a beginner,” said Kevin, “you mean you don’t like horses?”

“It was sheer arrogant determination,” said Megra. “I can be as much an Elf as any Elf. I’ve never ridden anything before. I watched carefully.”

They all laughed.

* * *

Ghiloric was meeting with the Dean. He was a tall yellow haired Tuath Dé, though Ghiloric thought not as tall as Chancellor Mordechai who was well over six foot.

“So, what’s this about?” Dean David asked.

Ghiloric hoped as a senior magus in the College that David didn’t have the occasional Tuath Dé prejudices about Elves, or indeed occasionally Dwarves.

“Can’t Megra stay?” said Ghiloric.

“She’s not a magus,” explained David, “so she has to leave tomorrow. I appreciate she doesn’t want to rejoin the Elves but Barry is keen to have her back, he’ll even pay her if she is serious about learning the crafts from Beth. Why do you want her to stay?”

“Yes, that’s what she is talking about. What if I paid her board and other expenses? I have over 2000 Crowns. She’s very smart, can’t she do the non-magic studies? She gives people good advice too. Even Kevin sometimes follows her advice. I suppose this sounds a bit pathetic?”

“The 2000 Crowns wouldn’t last long, Does she even want to stay?”

“Offer her the option and classes, but don’t explain how it’s paid for and I’m sure she would. Especially don’t mention me. I don’t believe that working in a bakery is what she really wants, she puts on a brave face and makes the best of things, she has her own subtle arrogance.”

“We’ve never had a non-magical student, even in regular classes, such as law, mathematics, astronomy and non-magical aspects of Alchemy, History and Languages. It’s an intriguing idea, especially as she seems very clever. She’s well educated for an Elf to start with, being High Elven and a Princess. But why do you care? You are a Dwarf and you have only known her a few months. Is Kevin not a closer friend?”

“Doesn’t that add weight, seeing as I’m an unlikely person to ask? Kevin would be glad, they are best friends. Very close, though he’s not known her much longer I think. But he has very little money and is maybe younger than me, he’d not think of it. To be honest I don’t quite understand their mutual friendship. Her being an Elf and him a Tuath Dé. There is the other thing.”

“What other thing?”

“The fact that the so called Ard Draíodóir in the Black Tower, the evil enchanter, or someone else wants to kill or maybe kidnap Kevin and may have been responsible for his mother’s death, Miriam Kolrinos.”

David leaned back and seemed to stare at the ceiling.

He sat forward and stared at Ghiloric. “Does Kevin have friends back in Dalrinath?”

“The only friends he ever seems to have had are here,” said Ghiloric, “he had acquaintances among other nobles. None of them would admit him when his dad disowned him. I guess due to being tutored at home. Barry and Beth were friendly, but not real friends. Megra is his only close friend, why I’m not sure, I mean I still don’t understand Megra, but mostly I think I don’t understand wimmin. Anrhi and I are friends with him too. Anrhi seems a bit disconnected from the other Mages. She’s really appreciating sharing a room with Megra.”

“I knew his mother well and met his father,” said David. “I only saw Kevin from a distance. It’s a pity I didn’t pay more attention. Perhaps I’m partly to blame. You think it matters a lot to Kevin if Megra stays or goes? You really think Megra has something to contribute to the College?”

“Well, she’s very sensible, generally. I’m sure it would mean a lot to Kevin if Megra could stay. Why is that so important rather than what Megra would like?”

“Why is it important to you? Never mind, don’t answer. Do you know anything about her hunting knife?”

“No,” said Ghiloric, “it’s a strange thing for her to have and very old. A family heirloom.”

“There is a lot I don’t understand. Perhaps someone thinks Miriam Kolrinos told Kevin some of my business. Or that she told Kevin something of the other business she and Lord Aldiare were in. The knife might be stranger than you can imagine, it’s not been made in this world, it’s very old.”

“Certainly he overheard something,” said Ghiloric.

Then Ghiloric told him what Kevin had told Megra and then himself.

David leaned back again. He closed his eyes.

Eventually Ghiloric ended the silence. “You’re speaking in riddles, what is your dilemma?”

“My daughter’s husband’s brother,” he replied. “I’ll discuss it with the Council and if they agree, then I’ll offer a place to her, same rules as if she has magic. Even extra duties so she is just as busy as any regular student. Before the morning, and a day and night for her to consider, during which she would be treated like any student. It can’t do much harm and may help. Kevin should be safe here from the self styled Ard Draíodóir, the Evil Enchanter. Really Manannán Mac Lir is the last Ard Draíodóir, no-one else has a right to the title as the Council of the Magi never bestowed it since.”

“Thanks,” said Ghiloric. Though he was very puzzled by David’s comments and reaction.

“Back to class!”

Dean David smiled after the door closed again. A Kranok in love with a Lorinok he thought. At least they are the same species. He wondered at the Tuath Dé calling them Elves and Dwarves because those had only been tales among them before the Crossing.

David called out to his secretary, “See if you can get the council to meet before supper. This is the proposal.” David finished writing it and explained it to him.

Then he went to find Bran the Librarian and Mordechai the Chancellor to tell them what was in his mind and what wasn’t on the proposal.

“Get a look at her hunting knife she keeps in her boot sheath,” he said. “I’d nearly forgotten about it before Ghiloric called. Lahro mentioned it and I let her keep it as she would be leaving. But something is niggling me about it. It’s certainly been brought by the Tuath Dé at the time of the crossing.”

“You didn’t mention the two necklaces?” said Mordechai.

“No,” said David, “I have one and I know where the other is, best only the three of us know there are two even though Miriam knew. Kevin may have seen the real one once, but that’s not important. The fire worries me as it suggests the Evil Enchanter has decided that Kevin doesn’t have it but is a threat anyway. I know they are supposed to be dead, but the Morrigna are convinced he’s the Aés Sidhe, Elcamar, or maybe the other twin, Ealcmar. I’m fairly sure only Miriam, the jeweller that helped, my wife and ourselves know there are two necklaces. Miriam might have talked, but no one has approached the jeweller to find out who the customer was, and she wasn’t tortured. I’m sure she was killed because he thought she was going to reveal who her contact for the money for the bribes was, not over the necklaces. I could be wrong. He knows the one in Ireland is enchanted.”

“We can enchant the original,” suggested Mordechai.

~

The councillors read the proposal. Mordechai thought it wise to say what everyone would be thinking.

“There is little here,” said Mordechai the Chancellor, “it basically boils down to just that Megra, someone that isn’t a magus at all, should be allowed to study and treated as a regular student? Technically she is the second highest ranking Elf, no magic is actually required to qualify as Clerk, investigator or Judge of legal matters. That’s why she wants to study.”

“She is the foremost Princess of the Hulredrinani,” said David. “Kevin and Ghiloric are her very loyal entourage, and importantly Kevin takes her advice. Ghiloric even offered to pay the costs! Diplomatically it’s useful. Likely she will return to the Elves and be the next Emperor’s Wife or Empress in her own right.”

Bran the Librarian grinned.

“I see,” said Mordechai, “I approve of the proposal, but refuse to take any money from Ghiloric.”

David didn't smile. He looked around the table. It was evident that only Bran could see it too, but that wasn't a surprise.

"Do we vote now or does anyone one else want to make a comment?" said David.

"I think just a show of hands," said Mordechai, "it's not a big issue, she'll be a good role model. It's unusual, but it won't set a precedent, after all Megra is really unique. The Emperor's heir has never run away before."

He put his hand up, followed at once by Bran and David. The other three bemusedly added their hands.

"Carried," said Mordechai. "I'll tell the lucky girl."

Quickly they all dispersed.

David heard someone whisper, "Obviously some project that David and Mordechai have cooked up that Bran supports, can't do any harm."

Mordechai waylaid David.

"Don't mention the knife," Mordechai insisted, "anyone seeing it will assume she has permission, it's not an issue like a full size weapon. I recognise it. I wonder how these pseudo Elves got it though as it's really Fay Elven? I doubt anyone outside our special band would know it. Some early Tuath Dé noble, perhaps part Aés Sidhe must have brought it and given it to them."

"Well, I did look at it and give permission the day after she arrived," said David. "Yes, the Fay Elves, our own, not the people here the Tuath Dé call Elves."

"That's why you noticed it, you might be Fay, Aés Sidhe yourself, that's why it's so serious that you broke the ban, however Fand is still sore about Étaín, so don't mention it to her.

"So what is it?"

"I'll explain later, as I'm not entirely sure which one it is, but it's certainly been made by a real Elf and enchanted by Queen Oonagh and from before the Crossing, so Megra should go with Kevin. Also you should take Ghiloric and Anrhi. They are nearly a Triad and although Megra isn't magical she has that knife, we need all the help possible."

"Should I tell them what we have in mind?" said David. "What about Sorcha instead of Anrhi?"

"Not yet," said Mordechai, "when it's time to go is soon enough. Probably there is a spy here. No, Sorcha is too disturbed. The other apprentice Enchanters, Ersk mac

Ragnall, Conn Brodie and Guin Morbhan aren't suitable. I admit Anrhi is fragile and a poor healer, but otherwise she's a powerful mage, mature for her age and very knowledgeable on magic theory."

"Still," whispered David, "every time someone mentions the fake Ard Draíodóir, I can't help thinking of you and have to resist setting them straight. You haven't met your sister since the Crossing? Not even a quiet visit?"

"Are you mad? I'm sure Oonagh is still quite cross. It's only known to Aés Sidhe elders that she's my sister, well, half sister. We've very carefully removed the Fay from any Tuath Dé histories before they started printing. Fortunately their Druids originally only allowed unimportant things to be written down! Best that most people think the Aés Sidhe are myth."

* * *

Megra was surprised to be called to the Chancellor's office just before supper. Especially as he had seen her not long before and asked to see her knife, though he wouldn't say why it was interesting.

"Sit down, relax," said Chancellor Mordechai.

He smiled at her. Megra studied the human. He was surely the tallest Tuath Dé she'd ever met. Surely he wasn't going to confiscate the family heirloom when she was leaving in the morning.

"I'm quite relaxed," she said.

Mordechai supposed she was, she was every inch a Princess, not a flicker of emotion was on her face. He studied her closely, yes it wasn't a pose. She really was relaxed. She had the beauty and poise to match her title.

"You're not magical," he stated. "The Tuath Dé call you Elves, but you and the Dwarves call yourselves Lorinokin and Kranokin, originally both Inamok?"

"Yes, light people, dark people and the people," said Megra. "I've never claimed to be magical."

Mordechai remembered his past life. All those Elves had at least some magic. Still, the Lorinok and Kranok looked like the Elves and Dwarves in the human stories. "You never wondered why the Tuath Dé renamed you?"

"No," Megra paused. "You have your own names for everything."

“There are in their past stories of people that look like you. However, we have decided to offer you a place,” he explained, “we have accepted your application due to your unusual background. You’d have to work as hard as any student and we would as a courtesy inform your family immediately. It’s not intended to set a precedent either. We don’t envisage any other mundane students, I mean ordinary people, but the Elven Emperor’s only daughter is certainly a special case.”

“I was going to explain to him once I had a definite contract with Barry,” said Megra. “It’s not fair for them to think I’m dead or worse, or hear by rumour, especially my father. I don’t actually recollect making an application?”

He passed her a handwritten document in High Elvish. It almost looked like her writing but missing her signature. She guessed a good enough copy to fool almost anyone. He indicated the pen and ink pot. He pointed at the space for the signature. It was dated the day of her arrival. Then he set a pre-printed acceptance form requiring her signature.

“You have tonight to decide to leave, if not you have tomorrow as student, and can leave the following morning. If you stay, you’ll be under the same restrictions as all the other students.” He passed her a slim machine printed and hand bound booklet.

“What age are you?”

“I’m eighteen, very nearly nineteen.”

“Then I expect you to set a good example to the younger students and work harder,” said Mordechai. “I’m familiar with your training and education, in a general sense, if the Hulredrinani haven’t changed it.”

“If I stay, my father can’t demand my return?” She set her royal brooch on the table. “I doubt it’s changed since your people arrived.” Megra read her application and the acceptance form.

“Yes,” said Chancellor Mordechai, “I do understand exactly which Princess you are, and about the cousin, who is old enough to be your grandfather as your own father is as old as some great-grandfathers of elves your age. I can read the text on your brooch too.”

“My mother is his second wife, he remarried very late when his first childless wife died,” explained Megra. “I’m his only child. She also died when I was quite small. Though I do remember her well.”

“Yes, Megra, I know. We keep a close watch on everyone’s politics, even you Elves, I mean Lorinokin, occasionally use our arbitrations and judgements, some of the Magi council are Lorinokin. Even he wouldn’t even consider asking for your return. He might even be proud of you. I’m sure he’s no fonder of your cousin than you are. He’s a victim of his own politics. Don’t let that influence you. They will equally accept a contract from Barry. He just needs a politically acceptable way to avoid the marriage. I’m sure soon it will be safe to visit, he probably misses you very much.”

“I’d discussed it all year with him,” she said. “I panicked when it was the last night. I thought I’d be fairly safe in the Fair Folk Realms, but I didn’t realise he’d accept a contract.”

“He could hardly explain the loopholes in case anyone overheard, or you repeated the advice.”

“I could have some position in the legal system, the courts, doing law?”

“Yes, any rank, you don’t have to be magical for that. Or you can return to the Elves at any time, if circumstances change. We also have regular teachers for ordinary subjects. You’ll have one for Lárnian. Perhaps English now it’s replaced Latin for the Artistic Progress Council, you don’t need to actually be a Magi for it, just trustworthy. It decides which innovations to import from the original world of the Tuath Dé via the Portals.”

“It’s more attractive than peeling and chopping vegetables, cooking and baking, I don’t want to sound like a proud arrogant Elf, but don’t you think it’s more suited to my existing education and background?”

“I’m advised you’re the least proud and arrogant elf,” said Mordechai. “It sounds more believable. Frankly I admit I’m more sceptical about you sticking with Barry than being our first non-magical student. Your father, the Emperor, is likely to insist on a contribution to the College, is that a problem?”

“No, I’d not cut off my nose to spite my face. I know my own mind, I’m not stupid, I don’t need a one day trial, I can see what the students do from seeing Anrhi, Ghiloric and Kevin. Kevin has had a sheltered childhood, I read the rules already and explained them to him. I’d forgotten about the Artistic Progress Council, it sounds interesting too.”

She signed her supposed application letter.

“There is another issue,” said the Chancellor, “the war means this College may have to close soon. I’m also glad you see Kevin’s limitations.”

Megra stared at him.

“Is this about me or Kevin? I’m not his minder.”

“But he’s a friend?”

“Yes, one of my best friends.”

“Well,” said Mordechai, “that’s good. Perhaps this is mostly about Dean David. A little nepotism now and again for a good cause. He knew Kevin’s mother quite well.”

Megra started; “He’s not David’s son?”

“Not that well, I’m pretty sure he is Lord Aldiare’s son, just some business about jewellery, a necklace, then later a copy of it. However unknown to us then, Lord Aldiare and Miriam Kolrinos were mixed up in a rather unsavoury enterprise, probably blackmailed into it. Someone thinks Miriam Kolrinos explained it to Kevin and started to explain it to Dean David. Possibly the Evil Enchanter. Perhaps you are safer here than at Barry’s. Anyway, David now feels a little guilty, though really it’s what he wanted the jewellery for is what he should feel guilty about, not about Miriam Kolrinos, that wasn’t his fault at all. I trust you won’t explain any of this to anyone else, especially Kevin. I know anyone of your background can be very discreet.”

“I don’t believe I could explain any of it,” said Megra. “I doubt if I could remember half of it. Though it sort of explains why someone tried to kill him. Is the someone the Evil Enchanter, the self styled Ard Draíodóir?”

He didn’t answer her question about the enchanter, but said, “You also need to sign your acceptance of our offer. Co-sign the crossed out part too.”

The acceptance form had the section on magic crossed out and signed by Mordechai.

She signed it and put the date.

Mordechai shook her hand. “Welcome to the College, Megra.”

She suddenly felt stupid.

“If the College is closing soon this doesn’t mean much,” she said angrily.

“No, it’s binding,” he explained, “we’ll split up, one group will temporarily be at the Druid’s Abbey in Dalrinath City, the another smaller group temporarily at a further away college. In time we will open a new site. A small number will go east with

David to the Fens Abbey. You'll be assigned a group closer to the time."

"Do I have to hand in my hunting knife now that I'm not leaving? Is that why you wanted to see it?"

"The Dean gave you permission to keep it?"

"Yes, but I assumed that was because I was leaving."

"Don't make an issue about it," said Mordechai. "People will correctly assume you have permission to carry it. It's not as if you have it plain sight, keep it safe and with you always. I'm sure there isn't another like it in the whole world. It would be nearly criminal to part you from it, it's quite special. Go to supper and tell the others your good news."

~

At supper Megra was grinning as she joined the others. But she was puzzled too. Why was he glad she saw Kevin's limitations and why tell her before any other student that the College might close soon? How was he sure there was no other knife like hers in the entire world? She presumed she was expected to keep that to herself too. "Meet the College's first non-magical student," she said. "The Chancellor thinks my father will be privately very pleased and probably insist on a contribution to the College."

She loaded her plate with a selection of Vegan foods, specially selected for Elves, but available to any student.

Soon the Masters had to call for silence, the students were chattering so excitedly. With so many Elves it was inevitable that some knew she was the Megra, not some rare random Megra. Megra quietly put on her royal brooch.

"I like it," she said to Ghiloric and Kevin. "I'm not being too proud by wearing it?"

"No," said Ghiloric, "it's not being proud and arrogant to admit who you are. The other students will see you don't expect special treatment and don't get special treatment. Most of the Elves here are far more uppity and I don't think I've met any from your house."

"They'd be in another college much closer to our territory, like Mórbeal College," said Megra, "so I won't have the awkwardness of meeting any of them."

"I think it's fine too," said Kevin. "It's nice to have good news, I've failed in the tests for an Enchanter, so I won't be in

the special extra classes that Sorcha, Ersk, Conn and Guin get with Mordechai.”

“Yer disappointed at not being in Sorcha’s class?” said Ghiloric. “She’s the stringy one with nearly white hair and piercing blue eyes?”

“She stays outdoors, claustrophobic. She has to sit at a window. I’m more disappointed at not being an enchanter, or anything special in particular, I seem to just have Glamour and Telepathy, you and Anrhi will have magic titles, Wizard and Mage, I’m just a plain Magus Kevin.”

“She has night terrors too,” said Anrhi. “She’d cheerfully give up being Enchantress Sorcha to sleep at night.”

“Is that normal for an enchanter?” said Megra.

“No, we don’t know what’s wrong with her,” said Anrhi. “That’s her there at the window talking to Guin and Mage Lahro. It got bad last year just after she arrived, though she said it wasn’t homesickness as she’d suffered from it occasionally at home.”

Megra looked at the fair haired girl. She looked quite like any ordinary Tuath Dé, though a bit thinner and tall like a noble. She wondered why almost all the Tuath Dé Magi were from noble families. It wasn’t the case at all for the other species. So far she hadn’t met any Tuath Dé magus here that wasn’t noble apart from Sorcha.

* * *

The College was indeed well informed about everything and news from the semaphore system was shared on the College single page broadsheet. It was on an enormous page, printed on both sides. There was quite a technique to folding it and the print layout and sections suited the folding method, which made it look strange completely open on a large table. Two copies pinned side by side were on a notice board in the main hall for those that couldn’t afford to buy a copy, or were too mean.

Kevin watched Megra cut her copy up and bind them in bundles of four issues with a neatly written index. It was amazing the difference in perception inside the College about the war. People assumed there had been a succession of Enchanters with a small following at the original college, referred to as the Evil Enchanter by the Magi and self styled as the Ard Draíodóir. For whatever reason, nothing had been

done, possibly because till now it had been harmless. No-one at the College was now in any doubt at all that the current Evil Enchanter was behind the war and stirring the Tuath Dé conflicts. This one also seemed to have been in operation for some years and had an army, though many were Skand mercenaries.

Kevin was making good progress with his telepathy and Glamour, really a specialised form of telepathic broadcast mixed with enchantment.

“I’m convinced now,” said Megra, “that you were unconsciously using it and the Glamour technique on Barry. It explains why he helped and trusted us so readily. Also why people often didn’t notice I’m an elf. My disguise wasn’t very good. Nearly non-existent.”

Anrhi, Megra, Ghiloric and Kevin had become closer friends. As a result none of them were in any other circles of friends and only slowly getting to know others. The four apprentice enchanters helped Kevin with his magic lessons and Glamour as he was completely ignorant of magic theory and he was almost but not quite an enchanter, which was why his Glamour was very good. Sorcha even studied outdoors and unlike everyone else had a room on her own with a door in the outer wall facing the northern hills. Apart from the claustrophobia and night terrors, Kevin found her quite normal, for a budding enchantress. No one was cruel or silly enough to taunt Megra for having no magic. She was older than most students which helped. Ghiloric was amazed that the College refused to take any of his coin after he got over the amazement of her acceptance.

“Kevin,” said Ghiloric, “I’m baffled, I actually suggested to the Dean that they take Megra as a student, but Dean David said he couldn’t remember any such discussion and in any case Megra had personally applied. He searched and produced Megra’s application letter. It was dated the day we arrived.”

“It does seem odd that she made such a show of leaving,” said Kevin, “but I guess she assumed they would turn her down.”

“It’s strange that they didn’t,” exclaimed Ghiloric.

Megra just laughed and wouldn’t explain the joke.

Megra didn’t ask if her father had contributed, but he did send a friendly letter recognising that her commitments of study and special circumstances meant there was no question of her marrying his Nephew Doontrat. Megra wondered had he

implied to the Elven Council, the Conclave of Lords, that she had developed magic. The House wasn't too keen on Doontrat now for the next Emperor anyway. The Conclave of Lords was considering if Glamdinal, already married and younger than Doontrat, eldest son of his cousin could trump Doontrat's succession. One faction succeeded in getting Doontrat judged incompetent as he'd not wooed his betrothed, and she'd managed to escape from his mother's care (Megra's Aunt, the Emperor's younger sister) only hours before the Wedding's dawn. So far no new successor had been chosen, but Doontrat was now not in the succession at all. The Emperor wrote that technically she was still heir. Neither he, nor the council would accept her resignation. Would she return and fulfil her obligations if the occasion arose? The council had agreed there would be no second attempt at an arranged marriage.

Megra translated it to Common to the others and explained.

"Doontrat is going to be indicted as incompetent to rule," she explained, "with us an arranged marriage must at least have the appearance of agreement. The theory is that if he can't manage a princess, that isn't yet an adult, he can't be trusted to be Emperor of the High House of Hulredrinani. An arranged marriage between a Princess and the Future Emperor can't be refused, but any other arranged marriage must in reality have the agreement of both parties. I'm basically forgiven, because I've given people an excuse to change the succession. Besides a lot of people were unhappy about first cousins marrying and the huge age difference, I'd easily outlive him and be Empress for a long time, too young to be encouraged to abdicate."

"So you can go home," said Kevin, "you don't need to get exhausted studying."

"I think," said Megra, "I'll complete my studies. It's not exhausting so why would I go home? Have you any idea what a Princess does, well, in my position? I might consider going home if they decided I'm next in line. That's what the bit about meeting obligations means. I shouldn't be passed over just because I'm female. He is really saying feel free to stay away unless I become Empress. Likely though the council will decide on a new heir."

"No," admitted Kevin, "I mean no to all of those."

"Think of the richest most important Fair Lady you met, what did she do?"

“Evenings at home, Balls, um, tapestry?”

“We don’t even have evenings at home and Balls in the woods and forest, not much anyway, Anrhi?”

“Yes, they live much like us except they move around much more. We mind our trees and make silk. They collect food, sing a bit, tell stories and share poetry, but only in good weather, outdoors. They have small light tents as they have no ponies like dwarves keep.”

“Well, perhaps in good weather we have the equivalent of Evenings at home,” said Megra. “It gets very tedious being an Elf, and a Princess is just an ornament. We are not even expected to do Tapestry, that’s work! After a while you’d find being the Scullery Maid, Beth’s Skivvy more exciting and satisfying!”

Megra and Anrhi stared at Kevin closely.

“Aye, you’d have more fun as a Dwarf,” said Ghiloric. “You’d be allowed to hunt.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t want to,” said Megra, “but I agree that it sounds less boring being a Dwarf. I may consider applying if I’m kicked out of here and it doesn’t work out with Beth and Barry. If hunting and eating meat and dairy is optional. I don’t think I could manage fish either.”

“Kevin, they are both pulling yer leg,” explained Ghiloric. “They don’t build much out of stone in Magh Meall, but Baltie and Lorinokin do have real villages with gaily painted wooden towers among the trees of artfully planted woods designed to look wild beside the Lorinokin farmland. I expect Anrhi’s folk really don’t have balls, but they certainly call on each other. It’s true that there are no towns or cities except yours in Magh Meall, Kevin. We, who you call Elves and Dwarves, have our towns and cities elsewhere.”

Megra and Anrhi laughed.

“You looked so worried,” said Anrhi.

“So you prefer it here to home too, Anrhi?” said Kevin.

“Being close to nature is a romantic notion of poets,” said Anrhi, “but after fourteen years I’m happy to have a break from hugging trees, only one kind too. I do appreciate those at home supporting us here by shipping sap regularly. It’s not as primitive as we made out, but I like the diversity of people here best.”

“We have no villages at all,” said Megra. “Just small to medium towns and only two cities on each continent. More

efficient. We do go camping in tents in the summer, partly for farming and other resources.”

“What do you cultivate to get the silk?” said Kevin, “or is it made from the tree somehow?”

Megra smiled and resisted laughing. Ghiloric went red and seemed to be choking.

Anrhi did laugh. “You know how Fair Folk babies are made?”

“Yes, in theory,” said Kevin.

“Dwarves and Elves are similar to you Fair Folk,” said Anrhi, “though incompatible with you, but we lay an egg. It’s wrapped in vegetation that ferments a little to warm and protect it. That is all wrapped in a protective silk cocoon. We need protection from the elements, we use silk for that too. All Dryads old enough can spin silk, male or female. We think maybe once we used to eat small animals caught in silk as the amount we can produce is far more than needed to keep warm or for a cocoon, we do eat a little of plants and even some animals, not just take sap. Unlike Megra’s people, we don’t actually have any aversion to cooked food or meat, we just don’t normally eat much of it, it’s of little nutrition to us. We think because there are no animals at all from our home-world and very few plants, there are Elven houses that do eat meat and dairy, it’s just a thing here. You Tuath Dé brought a lot of plants and animals. That’s why you are only allowed on part of one continent. The mountains to the east form a natural barrier. The Skands have very much less variety of plants and no animals. They are concentrated in three areas and not allowed to expand them. Here sometimes I have the malt that beer is made from and a little cooked meat and vegetables.”

“You don’t eat our Honey?” exclaimed Kevin.

“That goes without saying and it’s so good you even named this part of the world after it.” Anrhi closed her eyes and smiled.

Ghiloric and Megra laughed.

[Magh Meall means Plain of Honey]

Kevin now realised why Anrhi looked so boyish or childish for her age, yet taller than Ghiloric. Dryad women didn’t feed babies, the trees fed the babies. Megra was perhaps a little taller than himself, but much more slender, not emaciated, though quite obviously female. She and the male Elves he’d seen didn’t seem fragile like Dryads. The Dryads were all various shades of pale green. Megra was as white as snow, or

hoar frost, only the barest tinge of pink, almost imperceptible, appeared on her cheeks if she was very overheated or embarrassed, her skin was flawless, more so than any Tuath Dé Lady. Ghiloric even for a youth already had rough skin. It was far darker than his own even when tanned, Ghiloric was heavily built and muscled. As much shorter than Anrhi as she was shorter than himself or Megra. Kevin had the blue eyes and golden hair common among Tuath Dé, though ginger was common too, black less common than brown. The Tuath Dé had all colours of hair, though fair to ginger was most common. The Tuath Dé also had green, hazel, brown and grey eyes as well as blue. Anrhi had a ginger fuzz and ginger mane of very fine hair, but not the same shade of ginger as the Tuath Dé. Megra and Ghiloric had raven black hair, but Ghiloric's was wavy and coarse, Megra's was nearly as coarse but straight. She had green eyes, more vivid than any Tuath Dé, though Elves might have violet, amber or hazel eyes. Dwarves mostly had amber eyes, though some had any of the Elven shades, hazel was the next most common.

* * *

"Bran," said Kevin, "can you spare me a moment?" Kevin sat at Bran's desk.

Bran put a marker in his book. "Yes."

"We don't use the normal calendar here?"

"It depends on your point of view," explained Bran. "The Colleges of the Magi unlike Druid Abbeys are not Tuath Dé institutions. They are under the Magi Council which is the only pan species organisation. The native calendar is the normal one. The Tuath festivals are a novelty here, though 600 years old, so now the year is divided into eighths. The Dwarves and Elves only count days, they have no months. The Dryads adopted the native calendar. The Tuath Dé now have a modified version of the calendar used by the Irish, but with thirteen months. Year 1 was the year of the crossing from Ireland to Magh Meall for the Tuath Dé, now year 615, though really it's more than 615 Old World years as the days are longer and a year has 389 to 391 days, depending on the solar corrections. No-one knows for sure what the start of the native calendar commemorates, except that now it's year 7335, the native year changed at the summer solstice. It might be from the death of the last Emperor that ruled Dwarves and Elves."

“Thanks,” said Kevin, “that explains why it’s out of step as our year changes in the autumn at Samhain.”

The two big festivals were Bealtaine in the Spring and Samhain in the Autumn, like the Old World these were not on the equinoxes. The Samhain feasting, storytelling and games had taken place just after Megra, Kevin and Ghiloric arrived in the Autumn. The festival of Imbolc would mark the start of spring, then Bealtaine the start of summer and later in the summer would be the summer harvest festival of Lughnasadh. But as well as these Tuath Dé festivals the college celebrated Galvima, the Dwarvish Winter Solstice, but only the log fires, food, and stories, not the day long hunt and late night drinking. The College also celebrated Lorint, the Summer Solstice, the Elven festival of light, flowers, food, and music. Dryads in their woods celebrated only the ancient Inamok festivals Lorint and Galvima, in their own way, not the more modern Tuath Dé festivals.

Everyone wore extra clothes and cloaks indoors. Winter was biting hard. Everyone stayed in the common rooms till bedtime. Megra, Anrhi and the other Elves and Dryads did have wool like garments from the native domestic animals but fur was popular among Dwarves and many Tuath Dé.

The war had been going badly, not in the sense of anyone losing, but it was getting larger and no-one was winning, everyone was losing. It was a spreading stain on Magh Meall, consuming people and resources, achieving nothing. It was the worst event in the 600 years of Tuath Dé colonisation of what they called Magh Meall. The early colonists had named the other two major continents Tír na hÓige and Hy Brasil. All three places allegedly west of Ireland in the Old World, though now they knew that the Americas were the only western land mass. History before the Crossing from Ireland was very sparse. The larger Tír na hÓige (in the east) only had Lorinokin (Elves) and Kranokin (Dwarves) who called it Leerthmokeiner or Lerthimok, no humans or Baltie (Dryads). Hy Brasil had Skands from the North of the Old World due to Portals someone opened direct from Sweden. It was presumed that the incoming Portals had been destroyed. It also had Elves, Dwarves, and Dryads, they called it Kranmokeiner or Kranimok. After a war which the Skands lost badly against united Dwarves, Elves and Dryads (helped by Tuath Dé) they no longer had any Magi and were limited to three coastal

peninsulas, they called Vanaheimr; divided as Norromrade, Mittomrade and Sodomrade.

Merideth of Carrigmór had developed the Musket to breech load instead of via the muzzle. Then he thought the war would be quickly ended by belt feeding the cartridges. The following month it had ten barrels with one loading, one firing and one ejecting as it rotated. Soon both sides (though that was just the main protagonists) had them. Instead of ending the war in fifty days, no-one could advance at all or leave the trenches. The trenches got deeper and became tunnels. Canons became larger.

Merideth of Carrigmór vanished during the stalemate, partly due to the depths of winter. Lárn accused Tuas of kidnapping. But actually the Magi Council had snatched him, fearing what he might invent next. Everything he designed was being carefully archived, though many felt burning would be better. The College security chief wasn't sure if they meant burning the work or Merideth. The College council communicated with the other councils of magic users. Increasingly the idea of a malevolent Enchanter was gaining ground outside the Magi Community. But what exactly was the motive? The 600 year old practice of importing ideas, technology and science quietly from the Old World now looked very suspect though in theory regulated by the Artistic Progress Council, currently suspended. The four Tuath Dé kingdoms, the Druids and the Magi Council each had a representative to approve or veto imports.

Kevin enjoyed the stories and feast at Galvima, the Dwarvish Winter Solstice festival.

"It's not proper without a day getting frozen, tired and wet hunting," explained Ghiloric, "you really appreciate the food and fire then!"

"It's cold enough in most of the College to appreciate the roaring fire in the Great Hall here," said Kevin.

"I can't imagine how they manage such variety of fresh fruit and vegetables though," said Megra.

"It's by road train from Newbridge to Dunraglin," said Anrhi. "They bring it by ship from the far south of Deas Ceat, then up the Great River by steam tug pulled barges to Newbridge."

* * *

Soon it would be spring and Imbolc. The snow was gone already replaced by squalls blowing in from the west. They were walking back to their classes after lunch. Kevin stopped to look at the notice board.

“You remember, Megra, you said studying wasn’t exhausting?” said Kevin. “We are all together again all next week.”

“We are never in the same classes any more,” said Megra, “because we are all at such different stages in ordinary and magic education.”

“It’s not education as such,” said Kevin, “but book binding.”

They all groaned.

“This war is terrible,” said Kevin. “I was thinking was there anything we could do so I was searching the library. We’ll have a lot more library access next week too.”

“How could we do anything when the Magi Council can’t?” argued Ghiloric.

“At least they are now anathematizing any Magical Folk helping either side,” said Megra. “Use of magic in the war is now proscribed by almost everyone, now that only rogues will do it.”

“What’s anathematizing?” said Kevin.

“It’s like excommunication,” said Anrhi, “except not religious.”

“At least it will be the festival of Imbolc after the book binding is over,” said Megra.

“You’ve really improved your Lárnian, Megra,” said Kevin.

* * *

Later that night they were all sitting in the study bedroom that Anrhi shared with Megra having apple juice.

“At least though binding is tedious Bran is giving us breaks to explore the archive stacks,” remarked Anrhi.

“Anyway,” said Kevin, “you know the rumour that the Evil Enchanter is behind this war and a new inventor will pop-up, maybe the stuff is imported from the Old World, or the prototypes anyway. How did the other side get the inventions so quick too?”

“I think spies,” said Megra, “nothing magical. Maybe capture one. That’s not to say there isn’t someone demented

who just wants mayhem behind it, there is no sense to the war, or perhaps the Evil Enchanter just wants both sides to hurt themselves. So what's your point?"

"There is some kind of really powerful magical artefact in the White Mountains. It might give our good Magi the power to stop the war."

"The White mountains encompasses a very large area," said Ghiloric.

"I have a scroll," said Kevin, "well we will have a copy, it has a word puzzle and a map. Bran the Librarian wouldn't let me take the original as it's old, but he thinks it was just an apprentice scribe amusing himself. He says we can copy it after supper if we get on well at binding tomorrow. There is some sort of magical artefact, a large brooch I think, associated with peacemaking."

"Sneaky of him," remarked Anrhi.

"It refers to our arrival from the White Mountains," said Kevin, "my Mother told me the old stories."

"Arrival?" said Ghiloric.

"All the Tuath Dé came about 600 years ago," said Megra. "From the White Mountains, long after the sundering of the Inamok or the arrival of the Baltie you call Dryads."

The door was knocked and Matron stuck her head in. "Curfew shortly, you boys make sure you aren't in any girl's room after the curfew bells."

Megra smiled, "I'm quite safe." She was cutting up the news sheet with her knife as was her habit.

"Rules don't have exceptions," she said, "except in writing."

Megra put the sharp knife, that any Dwarf hunter would be proud of, back in her boot holster. Though it was mistreating it a little to cut the paper of the news sheet. Not for the first time, Kevin wondered why an Elf carried a hunting knife even though it was an antique. Anrhi had never mentioned if it was enchanted, but it never needed sharpening.

"It's great to have you as room mate, Megra," said Anrhi. "Normally I'd be sharing with another Mage, which I'd find embarrassing if she was telling me her progress in healing."

"Your master, Mage Lahro doesn't seem too concerned."

"He's of the party that worries more about the damage really powerful magic can do. I feel I'm getting worse at healing."

"I don't have any magic," said Megra, "but you can do other Mage stuff fine?"

“Yes, I’m better at sensing things than other Mages,” said Anrhi. “It’s ironic though that you are getting on better than practically all the other students at anything that doesn’t need magic.”

“I don’t think so, I’m older and trained to think, analyse and learn, then plan, make decisions, organise. I’ve had a lot of education already from my governess. Just in case there is no male heir.”

“I didn’t know a girl could rule the High Lorinokin House of the Hulredrinani?”

“It’s not happened for a very long time, they usually find someone. So senior Princesses get trained as seriously as the Princes to rule, but for over 600 years anyway we have been ornaments.”

“Seems a waste,” remarked Kevin.

“Well yes, Lorinokin, Elves, are proud and arrogant, the males more so. I’m a second class Lorinok just because I’m a girl. Technically it’s not discrimination as I could be Empress. They still haven’t agreed a different heir. My dad is healthy, so they have at least another twenty years to think about it.”

The boys left and Anrhi latched the door. Shortly afterwards the curfew bell rang.

* * *

Bran the librarian was pleased to see how seriously the four students were working at the binding. If only one copy of a book was needed a scribe did it by hand. But for hundreds or thousands of copies the presses were used with engraved plates for images and re-usable type for the lettering. The forms were huge and printed on standard size large broadsheets. Some care was needed to ensure that the pages were set in the correct order. So a pair of forms were inked by hand and then a heavier sheet of proofing paper rubbed down. After the reverse was printed it was folded and then the outer folds slit and then the page numbering checked to ensure the form layout was correct. The press here was water wheel driven, which is why it hadn’t been running most of the winter when the river was frozen, but the big commercial presses now had steam engines.

But binding was partially by hand. A giant punch put all the holes for the thread and was set-up for the page size. A fearsome vice and circular blade was used to trim the bound

pages before final mounting of end-pieces, spine and cover. These machines were operated by geared wheels so easy even for Anrhi as she had delicate skin and hands.

The waxed linen thread was sore on the hands. Anrhi did all the cutting of broadsheets into double leaves, punching and trimming so she had slightly less sewing to do. She only tied the bundles of stitched leaves and glued them to the outer bindings.

Fortunately Fair Folk could handle iron and steel quite happily, no-one knew the origin of the old myth of iron stinging or burning the Fair Folk. Anrhi claimed it probably dated to the Bronze Age and people failing in the fights against Iron Age invaders from the East of Ireland. Kevin was often amazed at her knowledge of Tuath Dé history. Nevertheless Kevin was hating the needle. He wondered if the recently introduced sewing machine for cloth could be adapted.

They had a short break for lunch and the Librarian let them study the scroll. He fetched a sheet of used parchment.

“More durable than paper,” he explained. “You know how... Ah I see you do.”

Megra was scraping off the old writing someone learning had done. “I’ll do the map and the drawings, Kevin is best at lettering.”

They’d seen Megra’s drawing and Kevin’s writing, so no-one disagreed. Anrhi gently traced the lines on the original with a finger tip.

They got back to work.

After supper the Librarian let them in and sat reading a book.

“I can make it easier,” said Anrhi. She put the prepared parchment on the old scroll. “Hold it still and tight.” She placed her hands on the parchment and concentrated. A copy of the old scroll appeared.

“Now work fast,” she urged. “It will fade.”

Megra quickly did the map and drawings in black. “I’ll add colours later.”

Then Kevin did the writing, it was fading well before he finished, but he could read the original in any case, using the now rapidly fading lines to preserve the layout.

“How did you do that?” said Ghiloric.

“I don’t know really,” said Anrhi. “I just can, it’s a Mage thing, but none of the Dryad healers can do it.”

“You mind it, Kevin,” said Megra. “I’ve realised you telepathically deflect people asking awkward questions. Likely that’s why Lord Aldiare didn’t get the papers off you.”

“Because I’m nearly an Enchanter,” said Kevin. “It’s the Glamour.”

The Librarian came and looked, inadvertently setting his book where Anrhi could see it. It was handwritten and seemed to be about the Enchanter’s tower and the old college in the White mountains. The Librarian lifted it and put it in his cabinet.

Chapter 5: Slee!

There was a shock at breakfast time a few days later.

“Due to the war and our proximity to the front line there have been concerns about security and safety,” announced Chancellor Mordechai. “Now we may not getting any more food supplies. It’s been decided to split you among other Colleges. Dunraglin town has started evacuating. You’ll all help pack everything important including the Library. Then we will destroy the site entirely so it can’t be used for war. This is because Ard Mhaca, on the west adjoins both Tuas and Lárn and has now allied with Tuas. This morning we got word on the Semaphore that the Ard Mhaca troops have crossed the Lárn Border. They have ended their neutral status and allied with Tuas, claiming that Lárn attacked. Certainly someone raided Cappameller and it’s likely still burning. We think it was some force pretending to be Lárn troops. We had an idea this would happen in the spring.”

Kevin realised that tomorrow would be Imbolc. No doubt the war would be starting in earnest again now with the better spring weather coming.

They only packed the older valuable scrolls and books from the library. Most of the printed ones would be abandoned. The printing presses were dismantled. The parts and the type were all dumped in the river from the middle of the bridge. The next day parties were leaving in different directions, but away from the new front. The wagons headed south-west toward Carrigbawn and then south to Dalrinath City, the capital of Lárn, as were about two thirds of the staff and students. The rest heading south to Mórbeal College in Deas Ceat – the name of the Kingdom being a corruption of Southern Quarter – via Newbridge. But the Dean would take Kevin, Megra, Ghiloric and Anrhi to the nearer Fens Abbey in the North of Deas Ceat nearly due east because of the still unresolved threat to his life. The four had packed bags and been waiting in the main hall for hours. They were the last students. Dean David was supervising the work of the team setting mines and delay fuses to at least make the castle worthless if not totally destroy it, but this was taking longer than had been anticipated.

“If we went North East we could search for the artefact!” said Kevin.

“We—” started Megra, but she was interrupted by an almighty bang.

Kevin scrambled up on the window sill.

“We need to go,” he shouted, “the gates are destroyed. They are fighting in the courtyard.”

“Shouldn’t we help?” said Ghiloric.

“I don’t think so,” said Anrhi, “as I don’t doubt we’d be killed.”

“I’ve never fought anyone,” said Megra, “we should leave, we are no match for soldiers. I expect our people will surrender.”

“Out the North East postern in Sorcha’s room!” said Kevin, “no time to debate, the fight is over in the courtyard. We can see from the woods to the North East what’s happening as it’s higher ground, all open in the other directions.”

“I left something in the Library!” shouted Anrhi. “Help me Megra!”

They stopped as it was on the route to Sorcha’s room and the girls dashed in.

“Open the cabinet, Megra!” Anrhi thought the Librarian was absent minded and might have left the interesting book about the White Mountains.

Megra sprung it open with her knife and Anrhi grabbed the book. “It’s about the White Mountains, there used to be a college there, the first one.”

Sorcha had left the key in the lock, which wasn’t surprising as it was heavy and she used the door many times a day. Ghiloric locked it behind them and dropped it in some bushes as they ran towards the hills. No-one intercepted them and they climbed up the hill a bit till they got a good view. Ghiloric produced a small brass telescope and watched.

“The fighting is over. I can see the Dean and most of the workers, They are heading on the road to the capital.”

“Is anyone looking our direction?” said Kevin.

“No, well, perhaps the Dean keeps looking back.”

“Anyone got a mirror, the sun’s position is suitable,” said Kevin.

Megra produced a small brass box and polished the bottom of it on her cloak.

Kevin flashed M G C A repeatedly.

[Kevin is really spelled something like Caoimhín]

“He’s stopped looking back,” said Ghiloric. “They are moving, though oddly in line along the edge of the road and also with some abreast across the road.”

“That’s L,” said Megra, “for all received.”

“So it is,” said Ghiloric.

“What did you send?” said Anrhi. “It can’t have been much.”

“Just our initials as they would mean nothing to any one else,” replied Kevin. “We now need to go north.”

“Because of all those troops coming from the west,” said Megra. “Even if we could get past them and the castle, someone needs to warn the Lárnian army or there will be terrible bloodshed.”

“We better go as fast as we can,” said Kevin. “Fortunately the troops can’t move as fast as us.”

“But they have horses for the baggage,” added Anrhi morosely.

“If we have anything we don’t need we should cache it away from here a bit,” explained Kevin. He set off up the hill to the north. “Someone might have seen the flashes and come and investigate. Horses can’t come this route.”

The others hurried to catch up.

“Try not to trample plants or break branches,” said Megra, “walk in each others footsteps so it’s hard for someone to know how many there are. Anrhi, you can sense life?”

“Yes,” she agreed, “I’ll be able to sense if someone is on our trail.”

“Then you take the rear, Ghiloric next and then Kevin in front of me,” said Megra.

“Megra, can I have your knife?” suggested Kevin.

They stopped while she got it out of her boot. Kevin looked at it and then tucked it carefully into his belt. “It’s like a hunter’s knife, or a dress sword for a child, very old. Very big for a utility knife?”

“It’s a family heirloom,” said Megra, “and I’ll be quite annoyed if you break or lose it.”

“I appreciate that,” said Kevin. “I’ve never fought for real, thought I was taught fencing, more as a sport. It’s best though if we don’t need to fight.”

Kevin was thankful that there had been a warm wind and no rain for the last week; the ground was firm. Most of the trees and bushes had a lot of fresh growth, here they were all

native. About half an hour later there was a series of almighty bangs.

“They’ve deliberately destroyed the college,” said Ghiloric. “They can’t be meaning to hold the territory.”

They reached the ridge before dark; the trees meant they had no view back toward the college. They could see a smudge on the northern horizon and over to the east the White Mountains. They were moving slower now.

Several times Anrhi thought she sensed someone or an animal following, maybe two large animals, then she stumbled and Ghiloric took her bag and mounted it on his chest. He insisted she go in front of him. After dark they could see a glow to the north. Probably the camp of the command group and reserve troops. They decided to keep going.

“Keep your hoods up and say nothing,” urged Kevin, “let me do the talking.”

At last they were challenged. Kevin projected a Glamour of four young adult Tuath Dé troopers. His training of over the last four months was proving valuable.

[The end of Deireadh, all of Samhain, Galvim, Eanáir and the start of
Fisabh.

Imbolc is in the middle of the month unlike Ireland]

“We have come from Dunraglin Castle with an urgent message from the Chancellor to your Commander,” said Kevin. “It’s for a senior officer’s ears only.”

“Why not by the Semaphore system?” said the guard.

“It’s not possible, you will take us to your senior officer.” Kevin knew he was over exerting his magic, but the Glamour held, the guard didn’t notice Kevin’s skin was starting to sparkle.

“Come this way,” he said. “I must take you to the Captain.”

Soon they were in the Captain’s tent.

“You have no time to spare,” explained Kevin. “We have just escaped from Dunraglin Castle. Um, yesterday afternoon. We got warning that Ard Mhaca had declared war and we were mining the castle. Unfortunately the vanguard of their expeditionary force arrived before the plan was completed. There is a massive army moving east from Ard Mhaca.”

“Then we are cut off from supplies and surrounded,” he said. “I’m Captain Macbranagh. That’s quite a trek.”

Ghiloric set down Anrhi’s pack and sat down on a stool.

Suddenly the Glamour was gone and Kevin collapsed, but was caught by Megra and laid down gently.

The Captain stared. "You're an Elf, he's a dwarf."

"Yes, and I'm a Baltie, what you call a Dryad," said Anrhi. "Megra can't speak Lárnian so well, You'd find Ghiloric's accent hard to follow when he's so tired. I'm not so lively right now either. I think though we are both stating the obvious like rain is wet. I speak Lárnian better than Ghiloric the Kranok and Megra the Lorinok, though she, well never mind..."

She sat with a bump on a camp stool.

"I better talk to some people," he said. "Private, fetch Sindearg, but first get these people food and drink, blankets. Light the charcoal heater." He dashed off.

The guard was astonished. He was sure he'd brought four young Lárnian Troopers to the Captain. These were kids, only one was even a Tuath Dé. He stood staring at them a moment after the captain had gone. He realised that the boy was asleep and the other three close to collapse. But what an Elf. He'd never seen her like.

"Don't move," he said. "I'll do what the Captain said."

"He says we are not to move," said Anrhi in Common. She laughed. "Yes, as if we could manage it."

"I do Lárnian not bad now," said Megra, "don't tire yourself more, Anrhi."

Soon men came with a selection of food and drink. One stayed. The original guard was presumably back guarding.

"I'm Private Sindearg," he said. "I look after the Captain's needs."

The smell of food roused Kevin.

"It's OK," said Megra in Lárnian. "The Captain went off to do whatever he needs to do."

They sat eating and drinking.

"Thoughtful of them to provide food we can all eat," said Megra. "Anrhi, have you Mage ability to know if Kevin is fine? Kevin, your skin had gone sort of sparkly before you passed out, isn't that a bad sign?"

"You're right," he said. "I over exerted myself. I was too tired. I'm ravenous now."

"Take it easy," admonished Anrhi, "or you'll sick it up again."

Kevin grimaced and chewed more slowly.

"Aye listen to the lass," said Ghiloric as he took a huge bite from a massive wedge of bread and chicken.

Kevin was relieved that there was apple juice, the tea looked poisonous. Besides over five months ago Megra had

never had tea and couldn't have imagined she ever would, though she actually quite liked tea now. But this stuff looked and smelled like diluted tar.

"Is that really tea?" said Megra.

"Army tea," said Kevin, "only possible to drink with a large amount of sugar and milk, or perhaps preserved cream. Some take it with butter."

"Sounds disgusting," she said.

"Tis grand," said Ghiloric, quaffing it. His mug did look like it was mostly dairy produce flavoured with tar and it smelled sweet.

"I agree with Megra," said Kevin. He took some apple juice.

Anrhi sniffed at it suspiciously. "It's started fermenting," she stated, "but it won't do me any harm."

"What about us?" said Megra setting it down.

"You couldn't drink enough to even get jolly," she said, "it's fine. You only think you are fussier about food than I."

The Captain arrived back.

"I reckon the young lad is a telepath or an enchanter?" said Sindearg.

"That was already evident," said Captain Macbranagh. "Get some sleep, I'll need you again later." He turned to the visitors. "I must thank you on the behalf of the command team for breaking your neutrality. You are all Magi, magic students from the Dunraglin Castle College?"

Kevin looked at Megra and she nodded her head slightly.

"More or less," said Kevin. "We are all students."

"There still appears to be a connected semaphore network, but careful tests messages suggest Ard Mhaca is operating it because it seems most messages to and from the rest of Lárn are probably not getting through or are heavily edited. Possibly using some of our people under duress. So we are assuming current codes are compromised. I think we have avoided revealing to them that we know we are cut off. What are you going to do now?"

Kevin looked at Megra.

"Don't tell him our real destination," she replied in High Elven.

"We'll go east to Fen Abbey?" suggested Kevin.

"I can arrange that," he said. "You have no bedrolls or bivouac sheets?"

"We had to leave rather suddenly due to the storming of the College," explained Ghiloric.

“Sleep here till the morning,” said the Captain. “I have a lot to do, I’m sure being neutral you don’t want to know. I presume you felt it was the least evil to warn us rather than leaving us to be surprised.”

“The others agreed we should warn you and they are not Lárnians, we didn’t analyse it or debate it.”

“Your plan of going to Fen Abbey in Deas Ceat is probably a good idea. Goodnight.”

They made themselves as comfortable as possible and were soon asleep.

* * *

They each had a lightweight bed roll and waterproof sheet tied on their packs. Each also had a scabbard and an army hunting knife on their belts, so Megra had her own knife stowed in her boot again. It was now late in the day. They had travelled a little south of due east, using the compass they’d been given, to avoid troops. Now they planned to go due east. Megra and Kevin sat on the turf studying the maps. Anrhi was lying on her back. She was asleep. Ghiloric rifled her pack and transferred as much as he could to his own.

“Maybe this is a good time to mention it,” said Ghiloric.

“What?” said Kevin.

“I had to get up in the middle of the night,” said Ghiloric.

“Perhaps that ghastly tea?” said Megra.

“Whatever,” said Ghiloric. “I overheard them discussing their redeployment. Obvious really that they have to give up the valley here and fall back through the much lighter Ard Mhaca Troops before they get dug in. They are going to mine with a special new kind of delayed anti-personnel booby trap. They expect 50% to 75% casualties for the Tuasian troops.”

“We have to tell the Tuas Commanders,” said Anrhi, “then they can advance more carefully or stay put. That would benefit everyone. More of the Lárnians will escape, and less Tuasians will die and be injured.”

“I’m suspicious,” said Megra, “what is this special device, this new type of mine? How could they have made the hundreds of thousands needed without the secret getting out? Perhaps this was something they wanted us to hear. One or more of us was bound to get up to go in the middle of the night.”

“You’re very devious, Megra,” said Kevin. “How do we quickly get across the lines to warn them anyway?”

They all studied the maps.

“What about simply going north here?” said Megra pointing at the map. “The Lárn line is likely thinner because of the terrain to the south, no point in the Tuas army trying to break through here. It’s more the direction we need to go for the White Mountains as staying this side of the lines would take us far out of our way to Fen Abbey.”

They all looked north, certainly Kevin could see the start of the trenches.

“How do we get past?” said Ghiloric.

“Kevin can do some sort of Glamour where we are invisible,” said Megra.

“I’m trying,” he said.

“Not working,” she said.

“Because she knows we are here,” suggested Anrhi.

Megra closed her eyes and spun around and a walked off a little.

“Now I can’t see you,” she said opening her eyes and twisting around to face where she though they where.

“Can you hear me?” said Anrhi.

“You sound very far away.”

“What about me?” asked Kevin.

Suddenly everyone was visible.

“Talking to me telepathically broke the spell,” said Megra.

“I don’t know if it’s because you know me or you can’t do both at the same time.”

“Likely the latter,” muttered Ghiloric. “I’ve been learning to use my Wizard magic over a year and I can’t do two spells simultaneously, only Mordechai and David are good at that. Don’t use telepathy while you are making us invisible, certainly not to Megra.”

As they could think of nothing else better, they folded the maps, adjusted their packs and set off north.

“Interesting that it worked on you, Megra, and not on Ghiloric or Anrhi,” said Kevin.

“You’d have to be very good indeed for Glamour to work on a magus,” said Anrhi. “I had thought that kind of spell doesn’t work on anyone magical no matter how powerful the Magi is, but Mordechai proved me wrong. He can do it.”

“Are we likely to meet anyone magical?” said Ghiloric.

“Hardly,” agreed Kevin.

“So I’m useful for testing spells,” laughed Megra. “I’m glad to be walking and not riding, even our trek yesterday was better than riding.”

“I’d happily have ridden,” said Anrhi, “that trek did in my feet. I managed to heal the blisters though.”

“The Baltie don’t keep horses any more than we do,” said Megra. “Well, on this continent.”

“I learnt at college,” said Anrhi. “Your people used to have the native animals like horses?”

“Some sort of plague wiped out the larger beasts that we used,” explained Megra, “the other two continents have them. We do use the same ones as the dwarves for packs, but they aren’t tall enough for us to ride.”

“Right,” said Kevin, “we better not talk till I say.”

“Um, a problem,” said Anrhi. “I’m sure I can’t jump over the trenches.”

“Can I try lifting you?” said Ghiloric.

She nodded and took off her pack.

“I’ll throw,” said Ghiloric, “you catch, Kevin, she’s very light for her size.”

“I have hollow bones and break easily,” gasped Anrhi. “Don’t drop me!”

Kevin caught her.

“I’ll take your cloak and knife?” said Kevin. “You weigh maybe half what I thought!”

Anrhi grimaced, “My ribs are sore! But not broken.”

Kevin released his grasp and set her down gently.

Megra took Anrhi’s pack.

Crossing areas of sharpened stakes and razor wire was difficult. Time after time Kevin jumped, Megra threw hers and Anrhi’s packs to him and jumped, then Ghiloric threw his pack, and then Anrhi. Sometimes Ghiloric used his wizardry to push aside wire and stakes for them.

Kevin could see Anrhi was now in pain.

He shifted the Glamour so that they looked like Tuasian troopers.

“We need to see your commander with urgent news,” he told an astonished trooper.

He spoke Lárnian softly and trusted his magic to make it sound like loud commanding Tuasian. A lot of the speech was similar. Because he wasn’t exhausted from walking he found maintaining and projecting the Glamour easier. Anrhi and Ghiloric looked very concerned, but Megra was smiling.

Kevin let the Glamour fade after the trooper introduced them in the lieutenant's tent far behind the lines. He left and had never suspected.

"An Elf, Dwarf, Dryad, and a Glamorous Tuath Dé!" He laughed. "This better be good, I guess you must all be Magi."

"We are neutral," said Kevin, "we were students at Dunraglin Castle College till your allies, the Ard Mhaca, seized it. So we felt bound to limit pointless bloodshed by warning the Lárnian troops of the fact they are cut off. It seems they expect to inflict terrible casualties on you with some sort of new booby trap mine, as they withdraw south."

"Sit down," he said. "I'm Lieutenant Hennessy, your names?"

"Princess Megra, Wizard Ghiloric and Mage Anrhi," he gestured and each bowed. "I'm Magus Kevin Kolrinos mac Lord Aldiare. It's entirely possible that the supposed mines are a fiction. But in the interest of reducing pointless bloodshed, we thought you ought to know. The Lárnian commanders think we went east, I cast invisibility to cross the lines, then changed the Glamour to appear as your own troops."

Megra groaned.

"Yes, very convincing," he said, "but it would be as I expect to see, not really what you project. I have studied the subject a little. What ails you, your Highness?"

Kevin and Megra looked at each other.

"I'm fine," she said in Lárnian.

"That would be how it works," said Kevin, "so we can appear as people I've never seen. If I don't make some suggestions, then different people might see different troopers. I'm sure people did as we were in a hurry. Megra would rather not be reminded of being a princess, my fault."

"What do you plan to do next?"

"Go east. You don't seem very worried?"

"No, I'm not," he said. "It was wrong of the Ard Mhaca to seize your College. Everything about this stupid war is as wrong as can be. If I believed in magical conspiracies it would make more sense."

"There certainly is someone malevolent behind it," said Kevin. "He's based in the Black Tower where evil enchanters have been based for generations."

"Ah, the original Magi College in the White Mountains. Anyway, we are not in a rush to advance as the Lárn retreat or attack the Ard Mhaca. The Mechanised gun is a good defensive

weapon, not much use for a rapid advance, unless perhaps on a wagon, which don't work in a valley full of trenches and earthworks. "We'd not easily get supply wagons across the mess here, much less road trains. I think you should slip off now to the east before someone higher up decides to take the Ard Mhacaian view of how to observe the status of magical neutrals."

He wrote out four passes. "Take these in case you run out of magic before you are clear. Just head north a little then east. I can't tell on you if I don't ask exactly where you are going."

Chapter 6: In the Dark Tower

The Ard Draíodóir knew the value of appearances.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 7: Farrell and Barry

The Dean and Chancellor called with Constable Farrell after telling Barry that Megra, Ghiloric and Kevin were not with them, but had escaped.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 8: Chancellors Meet

The Chancellors rarely met.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 9: Journey East

After two days they were almost out of food.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 10: A Council Meets

The hooded Druid of Ollathair led Lieutenant Hennessy down the passage.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 11: The Stone Circle

Ghiloric explained the contents of the book, more a booklet.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 12: Alice

Alice watched the jackdaws trying to get the crusts from the rook.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 13: The Mist

“We should move on and find somewhere better to stop for the night,” said Megra.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 14: The White Mountains

“Are you awake in there?” asked a raspy voice in Common.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 15: The Caves

They were far north and not quite as high an altitude

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 16: Barry and the College

In an unusual display of solidarity the Druids had given up a large part of their under used Abbey in Dalrinath for the refugees from the Dunraglin Castle College.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 17: The Last Battle

Badb, Neamhain and Macha, the three Morrígna, flew as a huge flock of carrion crows over the lower slopes of the mountains.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 18: The Cranes

Five cranes flew across the plains.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 19: Consternation

There was shouting in the Black tower and the adjoining barracks.

* END OF SAMPLE *

Chapter 20: Decisions

“Let’s go explore!” said Alice.

* END OF SAMPLE *

The End

Next: Carrying the Shining Sword

Appendix

People

Tuath Dé (Tribe of God) were later renamed as the Tuatha De Danann (Tribe of Goddess Danu, a Central European Celtic Goddess, the Danube is her river) in Irish literature.

There are quite unrelated kinds of Fay or fairy creatures. Not all kinds of fairy count as Fay, in this text the Fay kind are also called Sióg, Irish for fairy, but a different kind to the Irish Púca.

The Celtic Fair Folk or Fay people (Tolkien used them for his Elves) have different names in different parts of the British Isles. Aes Sí, Aés Sidhe, Daoine Sidhe in Ireland, Síth or Alba Síth in Scotland, Elves in the North of England. In Wales An Siabhra or Tylwyth Teg (the Sheevra, literally the Host, Welsh: y Tylwyth Teg yn y Coed, the fair family in the wood). They are also called the Lords & Ladies, the Good Neighbours, the Fair Folk or the Good People.

Language

The Bronze age Tuath Dé probably spoke a proto-Celt language. The Tuath Dé in the book have imported native words, Latin, Hebrew, Greek, French, later Gaelic and English.

The Fay speak what in Irish is called Teanga Sióg, which is literally Language (tongue) of the Fairies. Usually Irish or old Irish words are used to represent it. It would be even less like modern Irish (Gaelic) than any modern Tuath Dé dialect.

Don't assume any Gaelic style content is meant to be real Irish!

Festivals and Calendar of the Inamok Otherworld

Calendar:

The two big festivals are Bealtaine in the Spring and Samhain in the Autumn, like the Old World these were not on the equinox. The Samhain feasting, storytelling and games had taken place just after Megra, Kevin and Ghiloric arrived in the Autumn. The festival of Imbolc would mark the start of spring and later in the summer would be the summer harvest festival of Lughnasadh. But as well as these Tuath Dé festivals the

Magi celebrated Galvima, the Dwarvish Winter Solstice, but only the log fires, food, and stories, not the day long hunt and late night drinking. The Magi also celebrated Lorint, the Summer Solstice, the Elven festival of light, flowers, food, and music. The Baltie (Dryads) in their woods celebrated only the ancient Lorint and Galvima, in their own way, not the Tuath Dé versions of Celtic festivals. This meant the year was divided into eighths. The Kranokin and Lorinokin (Dwarves and Elves) only counted days, they had no months. The Tuath Dé now had a modified version of the calendar used by the Celts, they had earlier used a more complex system, but year 1 was the year of the crossing from Ireland to Magh Meall for the Tuath Dé, now year 615. No-one knew for sure what the native calendar commemorated, except that now it was year 7335, the native year changed at the summer solstice. Some said it was the date the last Emperor of all the Inamok died, also called the Sundering. The Tuath Dé year changed at Samhain rather than the Winter Solstice.

Festivals

Elves: Lorint: Festival of light, flowers, food (and wine), and music at the Summer Solstice, though the Dwarves do celebrate it in a modified fashion with a slightly different name, Larn.

Dwarves: Galvima: Stories, food (and beer), log fires after a day of hunting at the Winter Solstice. The Elves do celebrate it without the hunting, as Gaelivamae.

Tuath Dé:

Samhain Mid October (Celtic is 1st Nov) Start of Year / Winter

Imbolc Late February (Celtic is 1st Feb) Start of Spring

Bealtaine April/May (Celtic is 1st May) Start of Summer

Lughnasadh July / August (Celtic is August) Start of main harvest season

Months

These differ from Irish Celtic months, particularly the summer, December, February and March. There are thirteen months. Only the Tuath Dé names and divisions are given:

Samhain, Galvim, Eanáir (Winter: Geimhreadh)

Fisabh, Mághta, Aibreán (spring: Earrach)

Bealtaine, Meitheamh, Lorint, Iúil (Summer: Samhradh)

Lúnasa, Meán (middle), Deireadh (end), (harvest / Autumn: Fómhar)

As can be seen three months are named after Tuath Dé festivals, one after the Dwarf festival and one after the Elf festival. Only the humans call them Dwarves and Elves. The dates of the four Fire Festivals are set equally between the four Inamok festivals for the Solstices and Equinoxes.

Actual Celtic Calendar

The Celtic Fire Festivals:

Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine (Beltane), Lughnasadh.

The Celtic Albans (Equinoxes & Solstices) are less important:

Alban Arthuan, Alban Eiler, Alban Heruin, Alban Elved.

The Celtic lunar months given on the Coligny calendar are not the same as ancient or modern Irish, though some are related, they are Gaulish Celtic. The translations are based on those of Caitlin Matthews:

Gaulish	Modern months	Meaning
Samonios	October/November	Seed-fall
Dumannios	November/December	Darkest depths
Riuos	December/January	Cold-time
Anagantios	January/February	Stay-home time
Ogronios	February/March	Ice time
Cutios	March/April	Windy time
Giamonios	April/May	Shoots-show
Simivisionios	May/June	Bright time
Equos	June/July	Horse-time
Elembiuos	July/August	Claim-time
Edrinios	August/September	Arbitration-time
Cantlos	September/October	Song-time

Places

By the late 4th century Ireland was divided politically into five provinces or Over Kingdoms. The Irish word for province is similar to the Irish for fifths.

Ulster was dominated by Ernean tribes.

Meath, or the Midland territory, included Tara and was ruled by Gaelic tribes.

Leinster was held by Gaelicized tribes subject to Meath.

Munster was ruled by Gaelic tribes (Cashel).

Connacht was ruled by Gaelic tribes.

Place Names

Anglicised Irish names are often similar to the actual Gaelic. Some examples are Anglicised.

Ard = high

Ath = ford

Dar, Dara = oaks

Cathair = Stone Ring-fort or seat of a ruler, later Caher

Rath = small fort

Dun = large fort

Carrig, Carrick = rock

Cnoc = Hill

Bawn = farm

Bel, Beal = mouth (of a river, estuary)

Sli = beach, strand

Cnoc, Knock = small mountain, large hill

Drom = hillock

Sliabh, Slieve = mountain

Linn = pool

Dal = place

Bally = town

Mór = big

Gort = field

Dubh = black

Tuath Dé Currency

4 pennies = 1 groat

10 pennies = 1 quarter

4 quarters = 1 shilling

10 groats = 1 shilling

6 shillings = half crown coin

12 shillings = crown

30 shillings = eighth of a sovereign

60 shillings = 2 bits = quarter sovereign

240 shillings = sovereign

20 crowns to a sovereign

The Celtic Otherworld

Contemporary travel to Otherworlds is mentioned in Celtic myth and legend. Meet the Tuath Dé, Sióg, Aés Sidhe, Elves and Faerie. The series is set in Limerick, Ireland and Wychavon, England as well as the Otherworlds.



Court Grave, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick

Unlike Greek and Roman myth there are many Celtic Otherworlds that appear to be magical and often inhabited by the Fair Folk – Fay, Fairy, Elves, Sióg – or sometimes the Tuath Dé who were later called the Tuatha Dé Danann. They are not realms of the dead.

Manannán Mac Lir led the Tuath Dé away to the Otherworld over 2500 years ago. Except for them it's been more like 600 due to the time-slip. The Portals were often at Court Graves, Rathes and other ancient Irish sites. Today Tuath Dé culture is a crazy mix of Mediaeval to Nineteenth Century styles. Now the Magi Council and the Druids of Ollathair have wakened the Sleepers, the Morrígna, – Badb, Macha and Neamhain – and the rest of Manannán Mac Lir's Aés Sidhe Warband.

Under the Stone of Destiny

Celtic Otherworld I

Under the Stone of Destiny



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

Four teenagers are trying to end the ruinous war. They are a human, a runaway Elf Princess, a Dryad Mage and Dwarf Wizard. Or at least that's what Kevin, the student magus thinks they are.

Most of the action is on a legendary Celtic Otherworld, in Magh Meall where all the Tuath Dé live. Out of food and close to despair in the mountains they are told to wait for another companion by Corbie, the rook Familiar of Dean David, from the Magi College.

The cover is edited from a detail of *Miranda, The Tempest*, by John William Waterhouse.

Carrying the Shining Sword Celtic Otherworld II

Carrying the Shining Sword



corvids press Ray McCarthy

Who has poisoned Megra and her father, the Emperor? The five learn about Skandi culture and the forbidden Skand magic. Then they take ship to another continent in search of an antidote and answers.

Eilis (also called Alice) accepts she is different and reveals why to her four friends.

The cover is an edited detail from *The Love Potion* by Evelyn De Morgan.

Seeking the Flaming Spear

Celtic Otherworld III

Seeking the Flaming Spear



corvids press Ray McCarthy

Megra must decide how to deal with Morien, who is Fay, so she contacts Queen Oonagh of the Aés Sidhe for help by throwing a Ball. Alice (Eilis) decides it's time to do more matchmaking. Alice (Eilis) meets her adoptive grandmother (Queen Oonagh) and makes some friends in the Otherworld of the true Elves.

Alice gets to show off some warrior training that Neamhain, formerly of the Morrigna, has taught her. She finally figures how to stop Kevin having a crush on her.

The cover is an edited detail from Morgan Le Fay by Frederick Sandys.

Hero Genesis

Celtic Otherworld IV

Hero Genesis



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

An urban fantasy set mostly in the Worcestershire-Wychavon area of England.

Four teenagers doing A Levels get sucked into a strange situation with Superheroes and Aliens. They are rescued by the High Queen of the Aés Sidhe.

The cover image is an edited detail from Freya by Doyle.

No Silver Lining

Celtic Otherworld V

No Silver Lining



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

An urban fantasy set mostly in Limerick. Alice (Eilis) joins the four English teenagers going to the University of Limerick, but senses a Horseman of the Apocalypse.

Kate finds that Eilis is a strange friend with many surprises.

The sequel to Hero Genesis, though the books can be read as pair or even on their own. The first three books of the Celtic Otherworld series are a trilogy covering Alice's magical development for her most critical three years.

"If an in-house system fails, only one bank, or one retailer or one supplier is affected," insisted Louise. "If everything is outsourced to the Cloud, even if it's a hundred times more reliable it's an apocalyptically bad event because you lose everything at once. There are too few cloud providers, who are too similar and too big."

The cover shows a detail of Apocalypse by Vasnetsov.

Exiles and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld VI

Exiles and Rooks



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

The action is parallel to Hero Genesis, No Silver Lining and Fairy Godmothers in the partially Steam Punk world where the Tuath Dé live.

Alice's half sister Catherine's two children (met briefly in Seeking the Flaming Spear) are exiled from Ireland because they too have magic.

The cover is edited from On the Threshold by Edmund Blair Leighton.

Fairy Godmothers

Celtic Otherworld VII

Fairy Godmothers



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

Alice (Eilis) had previously agreed to be a godmother for Órlaith. Now the baby has quickened and a geas is triggered. You can't invoke a Fay blessing for a baby without invoking a Fay curse first!

The cover is a detail from Lady of Shalott by John William Waterhouse.

Conspiracies and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld VIII

Conspiracies and Rooks



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Marion is now a Student Guard. Tony and Sorcha settle into the town house and make friends. Why does the shop-keeper not want the Guards to catch the thieves?

The cover is based on the portrait of May Sartoris by Frederic Leighton.

The Fay Child

Celtic Otherworld IX

The Fay Child



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

Flinn, Manannán and the war-band are still off doing something and it's time to do the godmother bit for Órlaith's child, Daniel Og, again as he is a year old.

Why do Danu and Freyja have such an interest in Alice?

Is Danu the mother of the twins Áine and Grian? Certainly Alice's great-grandfather, Manannán Mac Lir is their father.

The cover is a detail edited from *The Kiss* by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

Artists and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld X

Artists and Rooks



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Marion is now a successful private detective. But why is the visitor anonymous and waiting till after hours?

The cover is based on Artists Sketching in the White Mountains by Homer Winslow.

Dwarves and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld XI

Dwarves and Rooks



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Marion gets a contract from the Aés Sidhe to investigate the murder of a Dwarf Chief.

The cover is based on Freyja and the Dwarves by Patten Wilson, an illustration. Freyja is receiving the Brísingamen, which was probably a torc rather than the modern conception of a necklace. Perhaps to fasten on her falcon feather cloak used for shape-shifting.

Goths and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld XII

Goths and Rooks



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

Marion has been secretly visiting Hy Brasil. Who is the mysterious Marianne that's started in Sixth form after the Christmas holidays? What killed the two girls last term?

The cover is based on *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* by Caspar David Friedrich.

Jewels and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld XIII

Jewels and Rooks



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

Marion is concerned about the agency that has opened across the street, yet Marion decides to do an investigation without charging for it! Neamhain wasn't always the third member of the Morrígna. In this case it's not mór meaning big, but mor meaning terror, so Morrígna means Terror Queens. Morrigan is the singular meaning Terror Queen.

The cover is based on *The Valkyrie's Vigil* by Edward Robert Hughes.

The Wooing of Marion

Celtic Otherworld XIV

The Wooing of Marion



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

Marion takes a holiday but gets another Aés Sidhe job. Princesses have obligations as well as Balls.

The cover is based on *At the First Touch of Winter Summer Fades Away* by Valentine Cameron Prinsep.

The Ensorcelled Maid

Celtic Otherworld

The Ensorcelled Maid



corvids press Ray McCarthy

A sequel to *The Fay Child*

From the beginning everyone is very suspicious as to the identity of the ensorcelled girl. Marion decides she needs the help of Alex Dunne. Several times.

The cover is based on *The Crystal Ball* by John William Waterhouse.

Four Kids, One Foxe

Celtic Otherworld

Sour Kids, One Soxe



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

The Next Generation

It's just after the Faerie Midsummer's night Ball. Leodith, Angus, Port and Star decide on one last game before going home. Unfortunately it goes badly wrong.

The cover is based on Midsummer Eve by Edward Robert Hughes.

The Talents Universe

The Talents Universe series feature characters with the mysterious Talent, of which there are seven kinds, or with some involvement of the Caemorian Empire, a world 80,000 light years away from Earth (Tellus) on the other side of the Milky Way. Apart from Jump Drive for the starships and the psychic like Talent, the Science Fiction attempts to be compatible with known science.



Circle College campus, Caemoria.

Mostly involving the activities of the Caemorian Empire, a single planet 80,000 light years from Earth. They are about 5000 years more advanced. Their culture dominates nearly a third of the Milky Way. Anyone developing Talent, always at puberty, must be trained in the Circle College on Caemoria.

Many of the stories involve Maisie Kelly from Ireland the only person from Earth with the special Talent. The time scale is contemporary, and as we didn't notice any giant starship visiting, it must be an alternate reality?

The Apprentice's Talent

Talents Universe 1



Part 1 of trilogy

Mei Zhen Kelly is a twenty-three year old computer programmer from Belfast working in Dublin for nearly three years. She's talented and very dedicated to her work. People think she'll go far now that she's had her second major promotion. Only her Chinese mother called her Mei Zhen, her official name. Her parents died while she was at university and now everyone calls her Maisie.

The UN and world governments are confused. While it's wonderful that the aliens hope to explain how the interstellar Jump Drive works, they aren't even going to orbit. They want to send a team to talk to an unspecified European woman and leave. Some other group will do a proper First Contact now that they know Earth exists.

The aliens want Maisie to attend a special college about 80,000 light years away.

The Journeyman's Talent

Talents Universe 2



Part 2 of trilogy. Sequel to The Apprentice's Talent

Maisie is no longer an Apprentice, but a Journeyman studying to be a Master, three times over, at the Circle College for Talent, 80,000 light years from Earth, on Caemoria. But on a visit to Laramos city to sign a contract for her full spectrum colour system she narrowly escapes being murdered. Why does she want to own a flitter? Why was the Mogul of House Funathim assassinated?

What will she spend her rapidly growing quantity of credits on? How has Earth managed to build a fusion powered starship without Talent? Maisie thinks it's a bad sign that Earth has named them the Valkyrie Class and that Russia, China, Europe and USA have all switched their military budgets to co-operate and build Valkyries, all managed by the Solar Alliance. The Wildgrave Plonnis seeks to understand by

questioning Maisie while helping her to spend her new found wealth. She's still the only Tellurian to ever leave the Solar System till the first Valkyrie jumps from just beyond the Kuiper belt.

The Solar Alliance

Talents Universe 3



A parallel story to The Apprentice's Talent and The Journeyman's Talent, mostly in Mid West of Ireland. Earth has cracked the problem of Fusion power and has the secret of how a Jump Drive for a starship works. But what does the shadowy New World Order conspiracy want?

Starship chief

Talents Universe 4



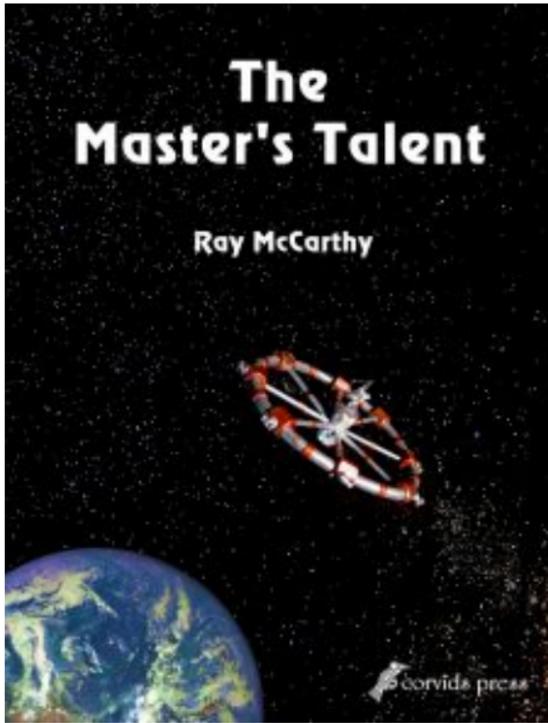
A prequel to the entire Talent series best read any time before The Master's Talent. Set many years before first contact with Earth, three Karnd teenagers are on the way point station's starship to retrieve a valuable hidden artefact on a planet that's never been contacted.

Juili was born on the station and Kordina on a starship. Neither have ever been on a planet.

But how many of the crew are really criminals, the next generation from the people that stole the artefact?

The Master's Talent

Talents Universe 5



Part 3 of Trilogy

Maisie is reaping the results of her foolishness. How can she teach her classes and be the Emperor's Emissary on a First Contact Mission?

The Legal Talent

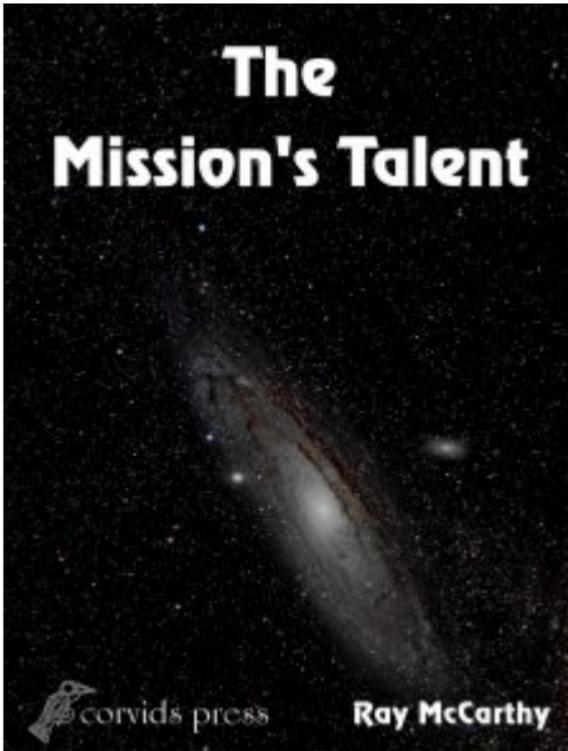
Talents Universe 6



It's three years since the events of The Master's Talent. Maisie has to work with a famous retired detective who is now a Master Lawyer to learn legal aspects of treaties, contracts and civil rights. But someone is shooting at diplomats!

The Mission's Talent

Talents Universe 7



This is the last in the Talent's Universe series. A lot of endings and beginnings. It is a fairly close sequel to The Legal Talent and covers many years of Maisie's experiences including visiting Andromeda and a last stay on Earth also called Tellus.

Trader's Isle

The Trader's Isle series is set in mediaeval like world without Black Powder. The massive world wars and loss of much technology a thousand years earlier was bad, but the rise of the Sorcerers called the Silver Wolf Heads using the Arinopean Barons as puppet leaders was a disaster for the Isle of Amrat and the people curiously called Traveller Folk, even though they are not nomadic.



The painting is a detail from *Le Jardin de Maubuisson* by Camille Pissarro (1830-1903).

The Seven Talismans

Trader's Isle 1

The Seven Talismans



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Jorath is hardly adult but hopes to find the Talismans of the High Lords. They must do something to fight the people that want to eradicate their tribe.

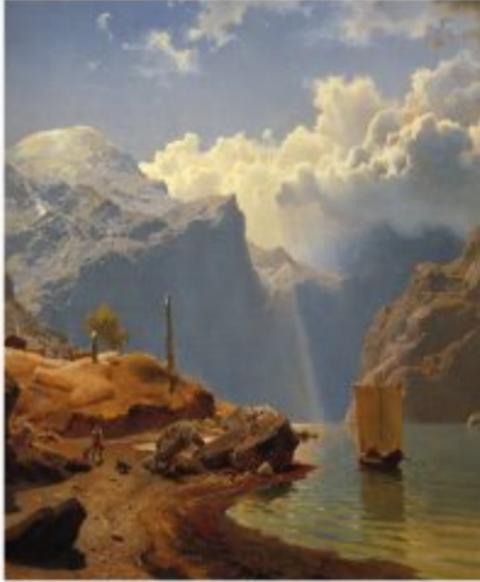
Set in a mediaeval style fantasy world with no ship's clocks or black powder, this story is based on a novelization completed in 1992. The sequel was nearly completed in 1996 and now is called *The White Fire Stones*. Both stories can be read on their own.

The cover is based on *Pauvre Fauvette* (1881) by Jules Bastien-Lepage.

The White Fire Stones

Trader's Isle 2

The White Fire Stones



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Sequel to The Seven Talismans

Amrat is free but needs trade deals for protection from Arinopa and to earn hard cash.

What exactly are the White Fire Stones and can they help to fight the Silver Wolves, the humans that have sold their souls in Arinopa?

The cover is based on a detail of Hardanger fjord by Hans Gude (d. 1903).