

Where Beauty
Lies in Wait

A Peadar Ó Guilín Sampler



Where Beauty Lies in Wait

A Peadar Ó Guilín Sample

Table of Contents

[License](#)

[An Honest Introduction](#)

[Reviews](#)

[Hair](#)

[Fairy Tale](#)

[Where Beauty Lies In Wait](#)

[Three Hearts](#)

[The Mourning Trees](#)

[Winter In Japan](#)

[The Bag](#)

[Fantasy Tongue-Twister](#)

[The Evil-Eater](#)

[A Screen Play: The Boy Who Cried Wo—](#)

[Fairy Fort](#)

[The Inferior \(Excerpt\)](#)

License

Readers are free to distribute this work for non-commercial purposes so long as Peadar Ó Guilín is acknowledged as the work's creator and no changes are made to the text without his permission.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

This edition is: PDF Version 1.0

An Honest Introduction

Hello. This free ebook is a marketing gimmick designed to get you to read the first two chapters of my novel, *The Inferior*. I'm hoping that they, in turn, will convince you to read the full book — all the way up to the cliff-hanger ending. Then, you can either come around to my house and break my nose (I have insured it), or spend actual cash money on buying *The Deserter* — a direct sequel coming out on 5th May 2011. *The Deserter*, I swear it, does not finish at the edge of a cliff. You will *not* be left to dangle.

I hope you find my honesty refreshing. Or at least, pitiful — perhaps you imagine me on my knees as I type these words? I don't mind. Go on, give me an imaginary kick. Better?

The sample chapters are at the end of the ebook. Before that, unless the battery on your Kindle runs out, or your boss catches you reading online, you'll find half a dozen short stories along with a few bits and pieces of God-knows-what.

Do you need a bio? If you really want one, you can check out my web-page at www.frozenstories.com. Mostly, though, the tales that follow will tell you all you need to know: I'm Irish and I have a very unhealthy interest in carnivores, be they plants, aliens, monsters or people.

You can find my work on sale in all the usual places and in all the usual formats.

I'd like to give my heartfelt thanks to: Carol Connolly, ebook wizard and renowned gardener of coloured potatoes; Darren Morrison, brilliant cover designer, comic creator and evil goatee wearer; John O'Neill, neo-pulp publishing phenomenon who paid for most of the following stories to appear in Black Gate; the Staff of David Fickling Books, without whom, there'd be no need of sample chapters; Patrick Walsh, agent — in the Latin sense of the word.

Reviews

The Inferior has been published on several continents and has been translated into ten different languages. Here are some reviews:

"Read this, and remember why science fiction lit your fire in the first place." DeathRay

"Hugely enjoyable." The Scottish Book Trust. Book of the Month

"This is one of those 'aw-crap-I'm-gonna-be-reading-until-the-sun-comes-up' type of books."
The Book Smugglers

"*The Inferior* is a captivating book that I only reluctantly surfaced from to do things like work, eat and talk to my wife." Graeme's Fantasy Book Review

"Absolutely incredible [...] An exhilarating read, highly recommended and an incredible first novel in what is going to end up an incredible career." thebookfetish.org

"This is a stark, dark tale, written with great energy and confidence and some arresting reflections on human nature." Times Education Supplement

"[...] what really struck me about *The Inferior* was its freshness. It felt new, interesting, thoughtful, exciting." The Bookbag

"The second your eyes reach the first page, you're thrown into this deadly reality and the pace never ends. Ó Guilín does an amazing job matching momentum of the situation to dialogue and action"
The Daily Republic

"A stunning début..." Schuler Books

"[...] this book is different enough from a lot of recent SF&F to make a vivid impression on the reader and leave them wanting more." The Wertzone

"A great story which twists and turns bringing an exciting land to life." Soteria Magazine

"I could have read that book for the rest of my life!" Chicklish

"Not to be missed." Total Sci Fi

"The bad part is that [*The Inferior*] is putting my patience to a test, because I can't wait to read the next novels in the series." Dark Wolf Fantasy Reviews

"I can't wait to get my hands on the sequel." sf-fantasy-books

"It is well written for a first novel and the themes of cannibalism and survival in an apocalyptic future mark a boldness that is often missing from science fiction today." The Deckled Edge

"*The Inferior* is an action packed sci-fi/horror tale that will appeal to readers of both science fiction and horror. Highly recommended for public libraries." The Monster Librarian

Hair

At sixteen, Packie Sweeney fell out of a tree in the graveyard and smacked his head against a rock. He woke up in hospital feeling OK apart from some cuts and bruises, and four particularly painful scratches running in parallel down his left shoulder.

"You got off lightly," said his dad, the aul' fellah.

But his hair began falling out within days. The doctors said it was trauma. They said an impact to the head could do that, but sometimes the hair grew back.

It didn't. A week after the accident in the graveyard, Packie Sweeney washed off his eyebrows as if they'd been makeup. Before the fall, he'd shaved twice in his life. Now, not a single hair grew anywhere on his body.

The others laughed at him, Bosco and Mickey and them: "He looks like a girl," they hooted, "looks like a girl, so he does."

And so he did. At least to himself until he stopped looking in the mirror.

Packie took to walking alone and wearing a farmer's flatcap like his aul' fellah even when the sun shone and sweat poured down his naked face like kids on a slide. He didn't want to see the others any more. He stopped going to football in O'Donnell Park. He hid from girls his own age and dreaded the whispered pity of his mother's old friends.

But then, one day, when he was sitting on the jacks doing his business and picking his nose, his heart lifted. Normally, he spent as long as he could in there, passing his whole lunch-break where the boys couldn't see him, sneaking back into class under the sad gaze of Fr. Cunningham at the last minute.

As he was picking his nose that day, out of boredom more than from any real hopes of finding anything, his index finger made a discovery that brought Packie as much joy as Columbus' discovery had brought him.

"Hair," he whispered. One finger after another caressed the tiny, tiny strands of hope clinging feebly to the wall of his nostrils. "Both sides!" he exulted, "Hair!"

He wandered back to class earlier than usual. Bosco and Mickey looked up from the obscene work of art they were scratching into a desk for future generations, as if they were unaware that maths was next and not biology. They blinked almost as one. Mickey recovered first, "Well, well, how's Shiny today?"

"Aye," said Bosco, his little mouth working hard, "let's see if I can see my face in it, or did you not polish your head this morning?"

Packie hadn't expected to find anybody in the classroom on such a fine afternoon. He wanted to turn around then and there and run back to the jacks. But he had hair now, albeit not on his head. Hair grew in his nose and surely he'd have it back all over soon enough. His scalp itched. "Hair?" He wondered, or just the flatcap?

He removed the hat and sat down as the taunts began. Insults didn't touch him today. They couldn't. Not even as the other boys filed in from play and added their scorn to the rising chorus.

"Hair," thought Packie again, and again, "hair," and his hands clutched at the desk as the boys surrounded him, as Mickey took a marker and wrote on his head, as Bosco spat on his pate and with a rag began to polish.

"Hair."

The aul' fellah came in from work starved with the hunger. Packie served him his dinner and both of them muttered grace and a quick prayer for the soul of Packie's mother. That was the only time

her name got mentioned in the house but they covered her grave in fresh flowers every week and kept photos of her in all the rooms. That's why Packie had fallen from the tree in the first place — he was after cherry blossoms for his mammy's grave. Why he had done so at night could only be attributed to the cider he had shared earlier with Mickey and Bosco.

He wanted to talk about the hair in his nose with his dad but didn't know how to start the conversation. The aul' fellah surprised him, however.

"Fr. Cunningham," it sounded like "far Cunningham", "was telling me them boys was at you again today," he paused to pull a bit of gristle from his teeth and to wipe his stubbly face with a sleeve. "You have to hit one of them a clatter and they'll learn to leave you alone." With his fatherly duties out of the way, the aul' fellah threw his dishes on top of the others in the sink and went out to the pub.

Packie sat in the darkening kitchen lit only by the lamp in front of the picture of the sacred heart. Jesus had a beard in the picture and Packie daydreamed a beard for himself. Then he daydreamed the fantasy of every puny boy, the one suggested by the aul' fellah, where he would hit Mickey a clatter and Mickey would go over like a cow hit with a bolt gun.

His ear began to itch before his daydream self had a chance to catch his other ex-friend, Bosco with a devastating left-hook.

He slid his finger into his ear thinking it was no more than another bit of wax to be scraped onto the underside of the table. Instead — and his heart skipped a beat — he found... more hair!

"Yes!" He whooped and punched the air.

The days that followed brought no further progress. He had stopped wearing the flatcap so that he could run his fingers over his pate every few minutes. He found nothing, but the hair in his nose and ears gradually thickened and filled him with hope. He went to class on time every day, refusing to sit out the breaks in the toilet, and sometimes the boys even left him alone apart from Mickey's constant hilarious requests for the loan of a razor.

Packie refused to respond except for one time when nobody else was around, "Me and you was friends, Mickey," he said, "why don't you give it a rest, hey?"

"Why don't you make me, Shiny?" Mickey grabbed him by his sore shoulder — the four parallel scratches he had received in his accident had never healed properly and still bled from time to time. He winced with the pain as Mickey shoved his square face into Packie's round one, so close that Packie could see the bits he had missed shaving at the corner of his jaw as well as the mole that separated his eyebrows. There was even a hair on the mole, a lone, mocking sentinel that by itself was more than Packie's entire face could produce.

Packie couldn't stand it any longer. He hit the mole as hard as he could, flattening the hair and incidentally, knocking Mickey back across the desks.

Fr. Cunningham appeared a minute later to pull them apart.

"You," he said to Mickey, "I know you started this, you wee scut. You just can't let the poor lad alone with his terrible handicap, can you?" His eyes drifted sympathetically over Packie's billiard ball head, "Go on home, boy. This fellah's going to be staying late after school for the next week. Go on with you."

Packie went. He knew by the look Mickey flung after him that his aul' fellah's advice was going to get him sent back to hospital some time in the not too distant future.

Mickey would be staying late after school until Friday. Then, Packie would have the weekend to himself. Come Monday, his aul' fellah would be paying for a new headstone out in Conwall cemetery.

"I have six days to live," he thought. "Better think of something fast."

Packie woke up with a head cold. His eyes itched and his breath whistled in his throat. He

coughed and coughed but nothing would dislodge the phlegm. A constant tickling sensation at the back of his throat made him want to retch.

"Better to catch cold now," he thought, "I'll be over it by Monday when I'll have to face Mickey."

His misery rose with the Summer sun. Every breath had to be forced through what felt like cotton wool.

Eventually, having blown his nose bloody through a whole box of tissues, he sent a finger on an expedition to see if it could sort out the trouble. It found no mucus. Only hair, wads of it, stuffing his nose. If he looked closely in the bathroom's one, filthy mirror, he could see it clearly.

His ears too, were clogging up, and when, with shaking hands, he investigated the itching in his eyes, careful study revealed fluff growing even on the insides of his eyelids.

He stayed home on Thursday and spent the day reaching into his nose with a small pair of scissors. He was beginning to have difficulty swallowing solid food, and small pieces of his last meal caught on the hair that was now growing on his tongue and the insides of his cheeks. He clipped that too, he clipped all of it, but he knew in his heart it would grow back. If that happened he would never be able to go back to school. Bald outside, hairy inside. He laughed at that for a while and then he cried, coughing in between sobs over the never ending tickle that lived in his throat.

By Friday he needed a doctor. He should've acted sooner, so he should, but shame had overcome him and he had kept hoping his affliction would leave him of its own accord.

The aul' fellah left for work that day without ever hearing Packie's muffled cries for help.

Packie fought through the morning for every breath drawing it through — it seemed — a dozen blankets. Every few seconds he gagged on hair but nothing could get out of his stomach.

"Sacred heart," he whispered, "I don't care if I die, only let it end quick."

In spite of his prayer, he decided to fight until the aul' fellah came home, hoping that even now, a doctor up at the hospital might save him.

Packie woke from sleep choking. Panic seized him. His mouth lay open and he couldn't have shut it even if he had wanted to with all the hair that grew there. Hair had also jammed open his eyes but it blocked most of his vision, leaving only a thin slit of light.

A full moon in the window meant that the aul' fellah had probably already come home and gone to bed without checking on him. As Packie thrashed and clawed at the sheets, a part of his mind told him that the full moon was the last thing he would ever see. Ironically, it was also the last thing he had seen the night he'd fallen out of that tree at the cemetery and hit his head.

A voice floated through the open window. Mickey's voice: "You in there, Shiny?" Mickey sounded drunk. Cider probably. Before Packie's accident the three of them used to get Bosco's older brother to buy it for them.

"I know you're there, Shiny head, I know y'are!"

A new voice, Bosco's this time, breathless with excitement.

"You have to fight him, Shiny! Come out and fight him, you coward! You'll have to come to school next week anyway!"

"Coward," said Mickey.

"Coward," Bosco agreed.

Packie had stopped his thrashing by now. His struggle for breath had failed. Nothing came in or out of his body but he knew that everywhere inside him, hair was still pushing into the remaining few spaces that lay between his organs.

Calm descended upon him. He wondered what his two ex-friends would think when they found out they had made fun of him on the night of his death.

Friends? They had *always* made fun of him. He had always been the smallest of the three, the butt of their vicious hilarity. No matter. Nothing mattered now. The hair was still growing inside him.

His body bloated with it, pushing at and bursting the seams of his clothing.

"Come out now, you gimp!" shouted Mickey. Something smashed against the wall of the house. A bottle? "If you don't come out..." a deep breath, "If you don't down this minute, I'm going out to the graveyard to piss on your mammy's grave! I'll draw stuff. You know what a good drawer I am! I'll draw her and your aul' fellah, so I will!"

The dying Packie shook with anger. A race was going on inside him between the bursting pressure of the hair and asphyxia. Packie didn't know which would kill him first. His struggles ceased altogether.

Packie shivered. He opened gummy eyes to see that the window to his room had been shattered sometime during the night. In spite of the breeze coming in through the window, the room stank of sweat. He rolled out of bed onto the floor and crawled over his shredded clothing towards the bathroom.

It was only when he was puking into the toilet that he remembered he shouldn't even be able to breathe. He pulled himself up to the mirror and almost fell back when he saw the new shadows that covered the top of his head and his jaw. Hair. On the outside. Packie grinned, revealing dried blood between his teeth. He must have bitten his tongue during his struggles to breath.

"Long time no see," he said to his new stubble, "Now, what the hell happened to the window?"

The parallel scratches along his shoulder had faded almost to nothing. Even now, he had no idea what could possibly have made them. He shrugged, his grin so wide it hurt.

"Hair," he said.

The aul' fellah wouldn't complain about a window, so he wouldn't, not when he saw his son shaving again. Nor did he, as it turned out. Although he said it was strange that most of the broken glass had landed in the garden as if it had been hit from the inside by a large object.

Packie's triumphant return to school failed to live up to his expectations.

"Where're Mickey and Bosco?" he asked one of the boys, the son of the Garda Superintendent.

"You didn't hear?" the boy's eyes widened in astonishment behind cheap spectacles. "How could you not know a thing like that? They're... well, they're dead." His voice dropped to a whisper, "I heard daddy tell mammy that their throats had been... had been ripped out."

Packie didn't believe a word until he read a sanitized version of it in the Donegal Democrat.

"Detectives found the bodies under a tree in Conwall graveyard outside the town [...] We believe an animal to be responsible, a large dog perhaps. We found vast quantities of shed fur at the scene and on the road back towards town."

"Not fur," thought Packie, and he shivered, "Hair."

Fairy Tale

I slew the dragon,
She married the prince,
They lived happily ever after

Where Beauty Lies In Wait

Darrak fell out of bed onto the straw, scraping the stump of his left arm. He cursed, and with his right hand, felt about in the dark for a spear. Outside the sleeping shed, the voice which had woken him continued to taunt his son.

"Parm! Pa-arm! Where are you, lover boy?"

Poor Parm! Darrak remembered what it was like to be an adolescent. He cursed the memory of his own boyhood; he cursed women in general as he stumbled into the night.

The sight of her, lit by the moons, brought him to a halt.

"Away with you," he said without conviction. His traitorous eyes were already trapped on her six lovely breasts, her skin shining like gray silk.

Cyreen turned to face him. Her gaze dropped to his missing arm and her glossy lips sneered. "I'm doing nothing illegal here; the boy's of age." Then she went back to shouting for Parm to come outside, and what she promised would have made the Goddess blush.

"Away with you!" he said again, more strongly this time, for he saw that his son, unable to resist the call, had moved to the window of his bedroom on the upper floor of the house.

Darrak advanced on the woman, feeling ridiculous because in the darkness of the shed he'd picked up a rake instead of his spear. He would use it if he had to, it could hurt her, scar that lovely skin.

She laughed, "Are you going to hit me with that, half-man?" Cyreen had two of her husbands with her but they stayed outside the garden for fear of hanging. She had no such qualms and stepped forward boldly.

Darrak's only hand shook as her scent rolled over him. He held his nerve. "I'm going to call for the City Husbands," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. "The boy is of age. Fresh, inviting. You cannot stop me. I will have him." She indicated the bulge in Darrak's loincloth, "If I have this effect on you, imagine what it must be like for him only months before the Change. You cannot keep us apart."

"I'm calling the City Husbands. Now."

"Useless half-man!" she gathered her husbands to her and stalked off. "I will have him!"

Darrak retreated to the sleeping shed he'd shared with his brother husbands before war had separated them. Parm no longer stood at the window above. At that age an erection could be powerful enough to knock you out with the pain of it. No wonder so few boys made it to the Change.

"Another year, son," whispered Darrak, "just one more year and oh, you will be beautiful!"

Angry clouds spat rain at the streets as the boys came out of school. Darrak stood with a gang of other husbands, ready with spears and pomanders, to take Parm and his friends home to safety. As boys and men hurried through puddled streets, women's heads appeared in doorways calling invitations. Some of the youngsters tried to turn back as if dazed, but the men shoved them into line and kept them moving.

"She came again last night," said Parm's friend, Rolfop. Darrak could hear the longing and fear in his voice.

"She came to me too," said Parm. The rain had soaked the boys through to the bone. Darrak hoped it would rob last night's memories of any heat.

"I tried to go to her," Rolfop continued. He lifted up a scab-encrusted wrist for inspection, "But the chain held."

"He should get that wrist bandaged," thought Darrak. But it wasn't his place to say so aloud. Besides, Rolfop's mother could no more afford new linen than Parm's could new shoes for her

remaining child. The war had raised taxes and stolen all husbands involved in non-essential activities. It had forced many women to pay the City to escort their children to school.

Darrak thought of his wife, the Matron, and how she'd allowed him to come home from the war in spite of his missing limb. Darrak was determined to be more than just another mouth to feed. He swore to see his son make it to the Change and become as lovely and important a woman as his mother. But the sight of a lithe female form nearby — all breasts and skin pearly with rain — stopped these thoughts in their tracks... He whirled in time to see Parm trotting off in the wrong direction.

"Back in line, you!" He whipped the spear around to catch the boy on the shoulder.

"You might need a chain of your own, Parm," said Rolfop fondling his wrist.

The boys' homes emerged from the drizzle one by one. Soon, only four husbands stood guard over the three youngsters who lived furthest from the school — Parm, Rolfop and Eglin. By now, even the men were exhausted with tension, for while the women they'd passed were only interested in boys, the adults were far from immune and had to press pomanders soaked in male sweat to their faces. Some of them directed jealous glances at the boys and the slaps they doled out hurt more than necessary.

The group soon came to Eglin's house, hunkered down at the bottom of a hill where other buildings clustered around it like pups on a she-dog.

"Perfect place for a snatch," spat one of the men. He was younger than the rest and still bitter at his failure to reach the Change.

"Matron's Council should make the City Husbands help us," said another man with such thin eye ridges he was constantly forced to wipe rain away from his face. Nobody answered. Men who hadn't had the decency to kill themselves when their wives died became City Husbands. They belonged to the community and kept its laws with brutal enthusiasm. Darrak would never trust them with his son.

He moved closer to Parm as the little group jogged down the hill towards Eglin's house. A commotion awaited them. Eglin's mother was weeping loudly while two of her husbands on leave from the war stood around in confusion. Chained he-dogs growled and strained in the garden behind them.

"My boy!" cried the tall woman, looking up, "My boy! You're safe! It was a lie!"

Her husbands raised a cheer, clapping each other on the back, pounding spear shafts against the wet earth.

"Nothing wrong with your boy—" began a puzzled Darrak as the woman pushed through the others towards her son. But she ignored Eglin completely. Striking like a snake, she grabbed Darrak's son, Parm, by the hand while her husbands plowed into the exhausted guards and barged open an escape route for her.

"Parm!" cried Darrak. His spear was taken from him in the fray, but he managed to leap and land with all his weight against the woman throwing both her and his son to the ground. She recovered her feet quickly even as Rolfop stepped forward to help Parm to his feet.

"Get back, you fool!" shouted Darrak, his heart hammering with fear. Too late.

The woman grabbed Rolfop by his scabby wrist and pulled him as far as her own property. She dragged her victim into the garden around her house while her husbands protected her retreat with lowered spears. Her son, Eglin, could only look on in shock.

Darrak had saved his own boy, but knew that his efforts had cost Rolfop, his future. "We too have spears," he said desperately. But she stood on her property and could laugh at his threats. One of her husbands unchained the he-dogs. They'd been trained to treat the men of the house as their pack and to protect Eglin's mother as their mate. They snarled and snapped at the strangers.

The tall woman held Rolfop close. His nose lay level with her upper breasts, one cheek pressed against them. His eyes had turned glassy beneath their ridges and the gray of his skin had deepened in color. He shivered all over.

"You must surrender the boy you have kidnapped," said Darrak, "The courts could have you flayed for such a crime."

"But I haven't kidnapped anybody," she protested with a laugh. She looked magnificent. She was not as beautiful as Cyreen who came nightly to tempt Parm, but her body curved sweetly. Her

scent floated through the rain to affect even the older men so that they were forced to breathe deeply through their pomanders.

"This boy," she said, "this... this man, wishes to be my husband. Do you not?"

Rolfop blinked slowly, unsure of what was being asked of him.

"You want to stay here and lie with me, pet? You want me to take you in my arms? Take you downstairs?"

His shivers grew more violent.

"Come back, boy," said Darrak, "It's not too late until you sleep with her. Do you want to spend your life as a man? It'll be the war for you for sure." He waved the stump of his left arm, his tone bitter, "You want this to happen to you?"

Rolfop spoke in a thick voice: "I want to stay."

And that was that. The next time Darrak saw him, he was just a man, waiting to pick Eglin up from school with the others.

Darrak spent longer raking up the grass than a normal man would have. He remembered planting it the year before with his fellow husbands. Later, — just when the first green shoots arrived and it turned into the pleasing carpet of summer picnics, — war had arrived.

The stalks were red now. Darrak swept them into a corner where he might collect the seeds for next year's planting. He'd be on his own this time. Two of his brother husbands had been killed trying to kidnap boys from a neighboring city, while the others were either on the front lines or tilling public fields for supplies.

The great roundhouse looked sad. He remembered when all three floors had been filled with the laughter of boys. The Matron had borne ten children by her husbands, but they'd been captured one by one, until only the son she'd had with Darrak remained. Parm was the last chance of a once great family to produce an heir. Other important families had failed to do so and their houses lay empty, gates swinging in the wind, grass blowing where it would.

Darrak began piling the stalks into a basket, "I'll protect you, son," he muttered, "I'll see you make the Change."

He spent an hour shucking spare seed from the red, prickly grass into a basket. Poor eating, but times grew hard. When the grass cut his hand he watched his blood disappear into the red husks.

A movement by the gate snapped him from his reverie. A thin man stood outside, one hand clenched, the other leaning on the fence near a basket of grass that Darrak had yet to shuck.

"May the Goddess bear your child, Darrak," said the man.

Darrak squinted, unsure how this man, whose very limbs shook, knew him. "Armon?" he said, at last.

Armon bowed his head revealing a scar on his scalp where a spear had nearly finished him. Darrak went to the man and they clenched fists as only soldiers or brother husbands could.

"Your matron..." Darrak asked.

Armon shook his head and Darrak knew then, that broken in the war, Armon had been thrown out. The man shook so much that Darrak doubted even the city husbands would take him now. "I live under a bridge," Armon confirmed, "I should die but, that monster Cyreen took my child and I won't rest until I... I-"

"Don't say it!" said Darrak, scanning the streets, "Why monster? Why do you say that?"

"She has twenty husbands," said Armon, "and her allure never weakens!"

Darrak blinked. "Of course, it weakens. Each husband will give her children, and each child weakens the allure. She is fertile, that's all."

Armon appeared to be struggling with some awful thought. Then he sagged. "I am so hungry," he said.

"Sorry, brother," said Darrak, "times are hard and my Matron permits no charities. But I will go

behind the house and fetch you water." He took his time finding the cup and working the pump behind the house.

"I'm on my way back!" he shouted.

By the time he'd reached the fence, several handfuls of unshucked grass had disappeared from the basket, but Darrak said nothing. Armon didn't even pretend to drink the water. "You're a good man, Darrak," he said. The visitor held out his hand. Darrak put down the cup and clasped it. He felt something sharp cut his palm and he thought it a piece of grass.

"She made me do this, brother," whispered Armon. His face had grown suddenly large and his voice sounded as though it came through a tunnel. "I always knew she was a monster. Nobody's ever seen her children. Nobody. Oh, Darrak, forgive me. I'd have starved otherwise."

"Forgive what?" asked Darrak. Then he fell over. This didn't alarm him. He kept thinking: "No children! How, Cyreen, how?" He imagined her scent, her lovely gaze upon him. "Where are your boys?" he asked her. He could almost hear her laughing in reply.

Strange dreams ended in sudden pain. The first blows fell on his left hip and the stump of his missing arm. "My son! Get up you sack of filth! They've taken my son!"

His eyes opened to blurry torchlight. Then a sandal buckle scraped his cheek and a tooth splintered. Darrak cried out, tried to jump up and cover his face. The Matron must have come back from Council during the night. Her voice whipped him with a fury equal to her fists.

"Find my son and don't come back here without him!"

"When—", he managed to ask.

"Now," she screamed, voice hoarse, "just now! I saw Cyreen slip away with her husbands. Who else could it be? Who else? She locked you into your shed and you slept right through it!"

"Drugged!" he thought, remembering the loss of consciousness after a jab to the palm of his hand. He squeezed past the distraught woman, careful not to touch her elderly frame. He ran through the gate and looked up and down the street but if Parm's abductors had carried torches there was no sign of them now.

"Where does she live?" he asked The Matron.

"How should I know?" she hissed, "The city has eight hundred houses. Nearby, I would imagine. Ask! Find him!"

Darrak felt tears coming to his own eyes. He turned and turned uselessly, rubbing at his stump and grieving for his son's ruined future.

"Goddess, oh Goddess, how will I find my boy?" As if in answer, the wind carried dried husks of grass to brush against his ankles. Armon! The old soldier had mentioned living beneath a bridge like the troll-lady of legend. Darrak knew of only one big enough to shelter a grown man. He left the matron in his wake and ran as he'd run in the war when great rocks burst nearby with a hatchet rain of shards. Darrak planned to fall on Armon like such a rock, but when he reached the bridge he found the soldier curled in sleep around some lost boy's cloak and Darrak knew he couldn't hurt the man.

"You're too late," said Armon when he woke, "he's probably on her property by now."

"Where is her property?"

"You can't go there!" Armon whimpered, "She'd be within her rights to have you killed."

"Tell me!"

Armon told him and Darrak ran on with the soldier's pleas for forgiveness evaporating behind him.

He arrived outside an enormous, new house just as Cyreen lead his boy inside. A dozen heartbeats earlier and he might have got there in time to be speared in the streets by her husbands. His eyesight blurred with tears, but he pushed them back and forced a warrior's grin onto his face instead. "It's never too late to be killed!" he whispered. But he couldn't wish the belly fear away. He'd run away in his first real battle and had lost his arm hiding in a ditch. Already he could feel the rope Cyreen's

husbands would put around his neck when they caught him on her property.

So he lingered in the shadows with some foraging he-rats, his palm flat against a wall, as though ready to push him forward into the attack. He watched four husbands retreat into a shed, grumbling in hushed voices. None so much as glanced at the upper stories of the house where their boys must surely live. No light shone there, no laughter escaped. Had all her sons been captured?

"I could look," thought Darrak, "I'm dead anyway." But still he hesitated.

Darrak remembered his own wedding night with great clarity. He'd been caught away from home stupidly after a fight with his mother. The Matron, wasn't even looking for a husband that day, as she told him. She'd birthed many sons already and her attraction had diminished to a point where she had to be practically sitting on a boy to snare him. Darrak had obliged by running into her on his way home. Back at the house she'd had to get the other men to hold him while she bathed — for her allure wore off as soon as she left the room. He'd fought the older men, screaming for his mother all through her hours of ceremonial bathing. He'd changed his tune quick enough when the matron came back and smoothed the sweat away from his eye ridges...

A man left the shed to pee in a corner of the garden and Darrak suddenly realized that if he came back here in a few weeks, he could watch Parm pissing his own life away, guarding Cyreen's gate until she sent him to the war. Now the tears came. Darrak left the shadows and ran to the back of the house. He squeezed over the fence and sidled around the perimeter until he reached the front door. Darrak heard no alarms. He wondered how Cyreen could possess so many husbands and yet be so arrogant as to post no guards. It was almost as if they had no fear of a drugged, one armed coward locked in a shed two miles away. Then his fear returned. He didn't want to be here. Everything was happening too fast — his heartbeat, his breathing, his approaching death. He fell to his knees in front of the door and pressed his damp forehead against cold wood. He could always go and join Armon under the bridge.

The weight of his body pushed open the door. It had been oiled by an army of husbands and failed to creak. No he-dogs waited behind it, nor guards of any kind.

Darrak tiptoed inside. It was only the third house whose interior he'd ever seen. He found himself in a hallway where torches revealed mirrors, tapestries and the expected staircase leading down to the wedding rooms and bathhouse. From upstairs, only silence. But he knew she wasn't up there with her children. Her scent lingered like a beautiful cloud trailing down the stairs and he followed it as quietly as he could.

To the right, he heard the sounds of water pouring into a bath. Men were speaking over it although he couldn't make out the words.

From the left, the soothing voice of a woman: "I won't keep you long, sweet one. It is a fraction of the night before we lie together, no more." The answer was a low protest to which she responded with a laugh.

"Soon!"

Darrak almost forgot to duck under the stairs when he heard Cyreen's footsteps approach and had to fight against an urge to crawl out of hiding to throw himself at her feet. He tried not to look as she passed, naked, but his eyes trailed after her and caught on a pale, puckered line running down the side of her stomach. "A scar?" he wondered. If so, he'd never seen its like before. Nor had he noticed it when she came to his house to taunt Parm. How could she have kept such a thing hidden?

When Cyreen had gone, he forgot the scar and ran down the way from which she'd come and into the wedding room. It was a mess. Cushions, towels and sheets lay higgledy-piggledy about the room, submerging overturned chairs and empty plates. "A lair," thought Darrak. He had no other word for it. Lanterns burned here rather than torches, but even so, every flicker caused a mad dance of shadow and hid Parm from view for several anxious heartbeats.

The boy was lying naked on a pallet in the corner. Perspiration beaded his brow and his eyes fluttered beneath closed lids.

"Wake up, son," whispered Darrak, crouching down beside him, "Time to be off."

"Not leaving," said the boy. Darrak took his eyes off his son for a moment as he tried to figure out a quiet way to get him moving. As his gaze wandered over the chaos, he spotted something strange and shiny among the shadows. It was a small ceramic container full of dull grey paste: skin colored. Darrak forgot his terror long enough to wonder what Cyreen, or any woman could want with such a thing. Maybe she used it to rub over the scar?

That gave him an idea.

Using a foot and his only hand, he tore away a piece of sheet. Then, he rubbed it against his sweaty armpits. He sat on his son, pinning the boy's arms with his knees. The boy made no resistance until the reeking cloth was shoved over his nose and mouth. He bucked and tried to cry out, but Darrak held firm until Parm opened his eyes, blinking up at his father.

"Better?" asked Darrak.

A nod. Darrak relinquished his hold. "Keep that over your nose," he told the boy, "we've got to get you out of here before she comes back."

Parm didn't answer. Children didn't like speaking to their male parent. They even avoided the word "father" where possible. Darrak didn't mind — he'd been no different himself as a boy.

They stood up and clambered back towards the stairs.

Splashing sounds reached their ears, and words too, as Cyreen sang to herself, her voice innocent. Both men stood stock still listening to her. She was so near that a dozen footsteps would have brought them within sight of her loveliness. Half a dozen more and they could have shared her bath.

With a shock, Darrak realized that the two of them had already moved to the bathhouse entrance and his son, sweaty cloth fallen from his face, was reaching for the door.

He grabbed the boy and wrenched him away, grateful that Cyreen's own voice covered the sound of their footsteps. He made his son put the smelly cloth back over his face and together they climbed the stairs.

At the top, a pair of husbands, one burly, one a bag of bones, stood with their backs to them: probably the same two who had filled their wife's bath returned now to guard the door against just such intruders as Darrak. He grinned to himself. At last, with nowhere to run, he would be a warrior.

The stairs did not squeak as Darrak stepped up behind the chatting husbands. He grabbed the larger man by one ankle and yanked with all his might. His victim came crashing down onto the steps to lie stunned between Darrak and Parm.

Downstairs the singing stopped.

The two visitors ran for the door, but the skinnier of the two husbands blocked their way with a dagger.

"We'll string you up for this, half-man!"

"There are two of us," said Parm, surprising and delighting his father. As if they'd trained together for years, Darrak and Parm moved to circle the skinny husband. He lunged at Darrak who leapt backwards to avoid the blade. The bigger man lying on the stairs, began to stir and Cyreen's voice floated up to them, "What's going on up there?"

Parm pulled a tapestry from the wall and flung it over the head of his father's assailant. With his attacker helpless, Darrak spun just as he'd been taught and shot his right foot into the man's kneecap. Something snapped.

Wet footsteps began climbing the stairs.

"Out!" hissed Darrak, "Out!"

They kicked open the door and ran into the garden. A husband came sleepily from the shed, wondering perhaps if he'd heard a commotion or only dreamed it. He carried no weapon so the two of them barreled into him, knocking him over. They both fell too, onto the man, pinning him with their combined weight.

The gate lay undefended before them.

But as they climbed to their feet, Cyreen's voice called out, "Parm! Pa-arm! Please stay!"

"Don't look back!" cried Darrak. But Parm had already turned his head. Darrak followed his

gaze and saw her, standing in the doorway, lit half and half by moonbeam and torchlight. Wholly conscious of her naked beauty, still dripping from the bath, she walked towards father and son.

They wrenched their eyes away but three more of Cyreen's husbands had come out of the shed to bar the gate with leveled spears. Another pair ran out of the house, one of them the burly man Darrak had yanked onto the stairs.

"Leave my son alone!" shouted Darrak.

Cyreen ignored him. The moons picked out the scar on her side and Darrak knew then with certainty she must have been covering it before. A thought, even more horrible than his approaching death crossed his mind, an appalling possibility. Cyreen stepped over dying grass towards his boy, but Darrak couldn't keep his eye from that scar and what it must represent.

"You want to stay with me, Parm?" asked the monster. The boy could only nod. It, Cyreen, smiled and stroked his heaving chest. "I'll have to go and finish my bath first, as well as the other rituals."

The man whom Darrak had pulled down the stairs approached with a knife. "Allow me to kill the half-man, Matron."

Darrak almost fainted at the sight of the wicked blade, but he held his feet and even his voice seemed steady. "I'm not the half-man, here," he said, "I have a child." A look of anguish passed over the man's face, over the faces of all the husbands present.

"You can kill me," said Darrak, "but there'll still be no boys in your house, nor space for your seed in that monster's womb. For she has none. She ate your lives and now you are nothing."

Cyreen pushed the dazed Parm away from her. "Kill the half-man!" she shouted at her weeping husbands, "Kill him now!" Perhaps if she hadn't been bathing for the ceremony, if her allure had been at its usual virginal strength, the outcome might have been different. Darrak removed the knife from the limp fingers of the man in front of him. He took a solid step forward and made a new scar in Cyreen's empty belly.

Her eye-ridges arched, and a little gasp escaped from her mouth. "An accident," she whispered, though whether she referred to the first scar or the second, Darrak couldn't tell. Her blood washed warm over his hand and he thought, "I've killed a woman." His actions were almost as unheard of as Cyreen's. But afterwards, when she lay on the grass, her blood mingling with it, the husbands made no effort to stop him leaving with his son.

Halfway home it started raining. "Parm," he said. His boy didn't look up, but leaned heavily on his father as though woozy. "The city husbands won't believe my story about Cyreen. Who would? Who'd want to? Are you listening, Parm? I can't protect you any more..." But even as he spoke, he saw that as often happened, the shock of the evening's events had triggered something in his son; something as yet invisible, but irreversible. A sudden rush of joy filled him, happiness as he hadn't known it since boyhood.

Parm left him at the garden gate — of course! A used up husband and criminal like Darrak wouldn't be welcome there now. She slipped through the front door without a backwards glance.

"Oh," Darrak whispered to his departing child, "Oh! You will be so beautiful!" Then he turned his back on the house and headed for the bridge.

Three Hearts

When the wind stops dead in the middle of a storm and the creaks of my dusty house fall suddenly quiet, I know she is there, watching me.

"Have you reconsidered my proposal, Friedrich?" she asks.

I laugh — just to hide my terror. I'm thinking I'll take her up on the offer. That's the worst part, really. My long life I've fed myself this story that I'm some kind of good man, that I would share my last crust with the next beggar or fight corruption even unto death.

"You *have* considered, Friedrich. You *are* considering."

Needless to say I won't look her in the eyes. Instead I whisper, "Tell me... again."

She is right at my back now and I can hear the smile in her voice and feel her breath on my neck, so hot, so damp. It smells of licorice to me and almost I make the mistake of sliding my eyes over towards the mirror that will have her image in it.

I stop myself just in time.

"Three hearts," she says, drawing out the 's' with relish. "Your wife's — an easy one for you, Friedrich. You'll be happy to be rid of it! A stranger's heart next. And then... that of your only child..."

I shiver. She says, "You can use no tools. Tear them out with your bare hands."

"And if I do this thing for you?"

"No, Friedrich," a chuckle, "it is I who do it for you."

"And tell me..." I say, "Tell me again what- what-"

"Oh, I will," she purrs. And she lays it out for me in the quiet at the heart of the storm. "You didn't ask me for much, dear. Not at all. I could give you wealth-"

"No," I say, shaking my head so that my hair brushes against her... her face.

"You could have a woman or women, so beautiful that-"

"No!"

"No," she agrees. "You have little need of these things now. Three hearts and all you ask in return is that you don't get caught and that you may serve me again in the future."

I moan, hugging my nausea to my chest, which pounds with terror and excitement.

"Are we in accord, then, Friedrich?"

My mouth opens, yet I cannot answer her. I let my eyes close and twist my face further away. "I am a good man," I cry. "Am I not a good man?"

But she is gone for another night and the storm has returned to take her place.

The Mourning Trees

Moya's husband pulled the strap from its hiding place in the thatch above the door.

"Lazy," he whispered and turned to face her, feet scuffing the dirt and rushes.

Moya clenched her teeth. He always beat her worse when she fought him. She raised her little fists.

"Lazy," he said again, but got no further for that was when they heard the screaming.

As one, they pushed through the wattle door into autumn sunshine. Women poured out of houses where they had been weaving to surround the bawling little girl.

"What happened?" asked the Headwife, "where are the other children?"

"A tree!" she wailed, "flowers..."

Moya did not understand, but many of the others turned pale. She felt a cold lump settle in her belly. Owen, whose birth had almost shattered her thin frame, beautiful Owen, was nowhere to be seen.

The bawling girl led the villagers towards the spot where the children had been sent to stack turf while men ran in from the fields to join them with worried questions. A little way onto the bog, the first cries carried to them. Moya broke into a run along with the rest.

"Please, gods," she begged, "please let Owen be all right.. The gods had never listened to her before, "Please, oh gods, please, please!"

A strong smell of honey filled the air of the bog and a tree rose over the last hill that separated the villagers from the cries of their children.

Moya, at the back of the group heard Kwiveen the Headman's voice raised above the screams, "Back, sink you. Stay back you all or I brain you myself!"

They flowed around him to where the tree stood, tall and graceful, with red, tear-shaped blossoms hanging towards the ground. A group of children huddled together around the lowest flowers, clutching them and writhing. Other little ones, also in obvious pain held onto their fellows in a chain of suffering.

Owen was last in line, furthest from the tree. He held his friend Enya by the sleeve and both of them screamed with voices already becoming hoarse.

Moya ran to pull her son away, but a blow from Kwiveen's staff knocked her to the ground.

"I told ye!" yelled Kwiveen, his voice shaking, "I warned ye. We can't help them now. Any as touches them, joins them. Nothing we can do: this here's a Mourning Tree!"

A great wail rose among the parents.

Moya tried to scramble towards Owen again, but her husband caught her up in his arms and head-butted her twice until she fell. He threw her over his shoulders and carried her off towards the village.

"What about Owen?" she asked, or maybe just thought she did. A fog seemed to fall over her eyes.

A Mourning Tree. She remembered the story now, about the last days of the War between the University of great Rosaveel and the jealous Hospitallers of Kinvarra. A sob escaped as she realized, that if they couldn't find a way to save her son, his suffering had barely started.

Her husband forgot to beat her when they got home. He tied her up as he used to do when he had first bought her. He had not done that since Owen's birth.

This time, the old brute had been sloppy with his knots, and as he tossed in his sleep she slipped easily out of the rope that bound her wrists. She gathered some barley loaves together in a cloth and stepped outside.

In the moonlight, she came face to face with the Headwife who was leaving her own hut. The Headwife had openly hated Moya in the past, but now, as she looked down at the wrapped bread, she spoke only as one mother to another.

"They cannot take food on a Mourning Tree, or so the tales say."

"Then why have you come?" asked Moya.

"I will not let my Niamh die without my arms around her."

"Then you will die too."

"Yes," said the Headwife, "Are you coming?"

"I am going to live," said Moya, "and Owen is going to live with me. I have heard there is a great reservoir of magic in the city. They store it under the University in a ball of yellow glass. Somebody there will know how to save my boy."

The Headwife sneered. "Run away then, little slave. The Magicians couldn't save their own people when the Trees came to them during the war. You think on that as you chase your ball of glass. Your son will die in agony and you far from him."

The Headwife turned her back and strode off into the night. Moya, resolve shaken, almost went with her. But then she turned the other way, towards the coast and the city of Rossaveel. The Headwife's words ran around and around in her skull along with the image of poor Owen, last in a line of children.

He would live longest of them all. From the stories she remembered, the tree would enfold the closest children in its branches and slowly digest them while their screaming friends would be drawn nearer to the centre.

She would only have a few days in which to save him.

The next day, Moya saw the sea for the first time since she had been stolen from her parents. Wind scattered the wave tips as it tossed her black hair and scented the air with salt and kelp. To the East she spied sails. "Pirates!" she thought, frightened, remembering the night she had been stolen. But the ships ignored her and ploughed onwards to the dot on the horizon that could only be Rossaveel.

It grew in size and magnificence as she approached. Copper domes glittered in the thin sunshine and deep red sails fluttered in the breeze like so many moths about a candle. The track she walked upon became a crowded road.

"Surely," thought Moya, "there will be power enough here to save my boy."

A wall surrounded parts of the city. Houses had sprung up outside it in astonishing numbers, but they could not hide the cracks and burns inflicted during the war with the Hospital of Kinvarra.

A river of people dragged Moya through the same gates where Mourning Trees were said to have first appeared in the last days of the conflict. Raindrops started to fall among them, glistening on the skins of apples, dripping through baskets of potatoes and turf.

"Where's the University?" she asked a woman next to her in the crowd. The woman failed to reply and Moya thought she might simply be deaf until the next three or four people ignored her too. Finally, in anger, she grabbed a boy who was hurrying past with an armload of cabbages. "Where's the University?" she shouted full in his face.

"Ten score steps East," he said, "but don't think they'll let the likes of you in!"

"Why?" she demanded, but the boy had already wriggled himself clear and run off.

Moya wandered the city, past brand new temples, incense floating through the rain, past thousands of peasants and craftsmen constructing and expanding mansions, tearing down the shacks in their way.

The University, when finally she saw it, dwarfed all these other constructions. From a base of no more than a hundred paces, it rose gracefully into the sky, widening the further it got from the ground, windows of red glass bright against the rain.

A wall surrounded it at the base and everywhere, young men in blue robes jostled each other under the downpour, rushing for the safety of large houses where music spilled through open doorways and painted women beckoned.

Burly men guarded the ornate metal entrance to the University. They threw her into the street when she tried to saunter past them. She landed in a freezing puddle.

"Please," she said, "I need to speak to a magician.. She explained about Owen in great detail,

but none of them seemed to so much as notice her or the dozen other supplicants hanging around the gates.

"I've been here a week," said a woman to Moya, "My food is gone."

She coughed blood into a patch of cloth already stiff with it. She wouldn't last much longer. Nor would Owen before the Tree killed him.

An hour passed, then two. The rain stopped, but Moya and the others shivered in the breeze that sprang up to replace it. Most of her companions were ill or missing limbs. So much suffering! But she could not help herself, let alone them. When hunger came she turned her body away and ate her loaves.

Then, with no warning, the guards ran forward and pushed everybody back. A carriage emerged, pulled by five white ponies.

"Now!" thought Moya. She ducked between a pair of soldiers and shoved herself into the animals' path, waving her arms and shouting so that they reared in fright and tried to back away.

Something pricked Moya between the shoulder blades.

"Wait!" called a voice from within the carriage, "don't kill her!. The sharp point pulled away.

Her body broke out in a sweat despite the wind.

"Approach," said the voice.

A thin face poked out from behind curtains in the carriage window.

"Are you a magician?" she asked.

"A straightforward wench," he said. "I am the Gardener."

The coughing woman behind Moya gasped, but she herself said nothing. The Gardener looked disappointed. "You haven't heard of me? You came looking for a magician and you have found the best. So, speak, my pretty, speak!"

"Can you save my son?"

"If he lives and," he looked Moya up and down, "and if it pleases me to do so."

"He lives, sir. He is caught on a Mourning Tree"

"Ah!" He frowned, but then his face lit up again. "Come back with me to my house, pretty one. I swear to you, an hour in my arms and you will forget you ever bore him. It is the least I can do to console you for your loss!"

Moya bit down hard on her lip to stop herself from flying at him in rage. "Please save my son, great one, Gardener sir."

The head pulled back into the carriage. "Move on," she heard him call, "she will think better of my offer when her wretch is dead."

The guards threw Moya aside and the ponies resumed their journey.

An hour later, Moya found herself wandering through a huge market. There would be other magicians in this city so famous for them. There had to be.

"Impossible tricks!" shouted one man above the noise of fishmongers to either side, "Impossible tricks for your coppers!. He wore blue robes but they were faded and torn. Moya wondered why he didn't perform a few of those tricks on himself. She moved on.

"Excuse me, miss. Excuse me?"

She jumped at the hand that touched her shoulder. It was a huge, hulking man in students robes. He was hunched over, as if ashamed of his height. Balanced on his nose was a pair of the new seeing lenses that aided those of weak sight. In spite of his size she thought he could be no older than her own eighteen years of age.

"I thought, miss, we might have a bowl of stew at—"

Moya punched him on the nose. Doing her husband's farm work had made her strong in spite of a slight frame. She turned away from her victim and moved deeper into the din of the market.

"Miracles!" screamed a fat woman. "Miracles! Silver buys you a night with the one you love. Gold makes them your slave! Miracles!"

"My son is stuck on a Mourning Tree," said Moya when she caught the woman's eye.

"Have you silver?" Moya nodded, not trusting her tongue with the lie.

"I can sell you a potion to get you with child again," said the woman, "even if your husband gets hisself as drunk as the god o' screams!"

"I don't want another child," said Moya, "my son is still on the Tree-"

"Miracles!" shouted the woman, "Miracles!. She ignored any further attempts by Moya to speak to her.

"Please, miss!"

The hulking student she had hit earlier stood beside her again. His nose was bleeding and someone must have stood on one of the lenses before he could pick them up.

"My name is Owen, miss," she had raised her hand to strike him again, but the sound of her son's name stopped her from completing the motion. Big Owen kept talking, blood drying on his lips and on one sleeve of a dirty blue robe. "I didn't mean anything improper, miss. I frighten people sometimes with my bigness, I know I do. I'm sorry."

She was crying now. He seemed to think it was his fault, unaware of the coincidence of names.

"Please, miss. I need to talk to you. That's all. If you could... Even, in a tavern. You'd be safe in a tavern, wouldn't you. We could sit right out where people could see us and you could talk to me, right?"

Moya allowed big Owen to lead her across the square to a public house crowded with students and women. The pot slave brought mugs of beer, barley loaves and baked trout. Moya could think only of her son and the Tree that might, even now, be ending his life.

"No," she thought, "I still have a few days."

But, really, she had no idea how long a tree would take to digest one meal before moving onto the next and for all she knew, he was already dead.

In the tavern, the student took a parchment and began sketching on it with colored chalks. Every now and then, he'd squint down at her and go back to his drawing.

"What are you doing?" she asked, dully.

"Sorry. It's ehm... It's a detailed description of your aura, you see?"

She did not.

"Well, miss, I'm doing a study on auras. On a special type of... of... Oh, Lug help us! Look:" he reached out timidly towards her.

She let him take her hand in his. It was soft, and dry. He squeezed his eyes shut, and with his free hand, picked up a quill and drove it into his forearm. His eyes positively bulged with the pain, but he kept his mouth shut and allowed the blood to flow down his arm onto her hand. She gasped. His body glowed from head to foot with leaping colors. Her own skin glowed too, her legs, the tip of her nose. It was—

He broke contact. "Sorry... I get weak, you know?"

He wiped the blood away with a corner of his filthy robe. "But you see what I do, don't you. Those lights. That's what I'm after. Auras. Particularly auras of despair. Easy to find in the city, but yours, ah! Never have I seen such an urgency to go with it. Priceless. I could find a cure, someday. I could be rich, and then maybe..."

"Can you save my child from a Mourning Tree?"

"Ah! A Tree!" he seemed fascinated.

"Can you save him?" she asked again.

"Nobody can do that, miss."

"What about the University. What about the reservoir of magic all say is under the bottom of it?"

"I have never seen the reservoir, miss. The lower levels are not for students. Besides, some of our greatest magicians lived at the time of the War. And they couldn't help those of our people who were caught on the Trees. We couldn't even kill the poor flicks, let alone save them. I heard Old Magnor had the guards pepper the victims with arrows, but they just screamed worse and wouldn't die. Bad magic, that."

"Why would anybody make such a thing?" asked Moya.

Big Owen rubbed condensation away from his remaining lens. "Those Hospitallers must have known they were going to lose the war. The Trees were their last chance to scare us into surrender. So they made the suffering of the victims as bad and as obvious as they could. Didn't work, though. In the end, Magnor had some men spray the trees and the people they'd snagged with pitch. He ordered the whole lot burnt."

Owen didn't stop sketching for a minute. "Just made the situation worse. We have these parchments in the College that describe the thing. The burning trees started humming and humming. It got really high, and then, suddenly they exploded and all these bright colored points shot off into the sky. People at the time thought it was beautiful. They thought it was the souls of their loved ones, or something. But it was just seeds, miss. Mourning Tree seeds. And they spread everywhere."

Moya shivered. She refused to believe the College had learned nothing new since the war, but nobody in this city of magic cared enough about her son to save him. She wished now she had listened to the Headwife and had gone to comfort Owen with her own death.

Then she thought of something.

"Where do you live?" she asked big Owen.

He blinked, "I have rooms in the University, of course."

Moya bit her lip to stop smiling. "I will go now. Thank you for the bread."

"But— but your aura!" He jumped to his feet, spilling beer over the calf-skin he had been sketching on. "I need more time!"

"I'm off home in the morning," she said, "if you wish to make a picture of me, it will have to be tonight. I will stay with you in the University."

He paled, "But the rules..."

"If you want to study me further, you will take me. I only need shelter for one night, then I will go to my village. If you draw or not, I don't care."

Rules or no rules, big Owen wasn't the only student to leave the public house with a woman. They followed a few others to a postern gate where a guard looked the other way for a silver coin. Suddenly the racket of the city died down and they were on a path surrounded by trees and lined with rows of flowers drinking in the thin drizzle that had sprung up. Men of all ages hurried past them in both directions, many dressed just like Owen and carrying scrolls and ink pouches under their robes. This then, was the University to which she and all other petitioners were denied entry.

"That fellow," big Owen was saying, "is using magic just to stay awake long enough to finish a project. I can tell, miss. It's one of the things I've learned from my studies. And that one... No, over there..." Moya continued to look straight ahead, "well, that's Adal. The red light I can see about his fingers is the heat magic he's been using in the prison to try and keep the Mourning Tree alive there. And the gentleman in the hat— Miss! What's wrong?"

"Why.... she almost strangled on the words, "why a... a Mourning Tree in the prison?"

"Miss, I thought everybody knew. But then, by your accent, I suppose you haven't been in the city too long and—"

"WHY?"

"Go easy, miss. It's how things are done these days. With the prisoners. Throw them to the Tree like they deserve. That's how it's done. They confess quicker if they're promised a drowning instead. That's all. Please, go easy. It gives us a chance to study them. Someday, we might find a way to kill them without hurting the victims. Like your son, miss."

"It will be too late," she said. "I will save him, or no one will!"

In his private cell, she sat quietly in the corner while he made what he called an aura map with chalk and parchment. Light entered through a small window. Some students, he said, were not so lucky to have even that much, for a great part of the building was below ground. She hunched her shoulders in the draft, listening to the scrape of chalk and the patter of rain. She began to fear he would finish his drawing too early and send her out of the University.

"Owen?"

He squinted up at her, a red chalk stick held aloft.

"What does my despair look like?"

He put the stick down carefully.

"It's a thing all of purple, miss. With flashes of red inside, like when wood has burned low on the fire.. His face screwed up as he peered at her. "For some reason, your despair is not as strong here as it was at the inn."

"Do you think I could see it?"

"I tried to show you already when we were back in the tavern. Remember. But you saw how the quill hurts. And the loss of blood... Well, as I said, I get weak."

"Then, use a knife!" she said impatiently. "If it was sharp enough you wouldn't feel it!"

"That's the point," he said, sadly, "it's not the blood like people think. It's the pain. When I qualify, I'll be able to use the University's reservoir of magic, I won't have to hurt myself ever again, but until then I would be expelled if I even tried."

Moya heard the tremor of fear in his voice and tried not to feel sorry for him. Tonight, she intended to find a way to use that reservoir to save her son. Whether or not she succeeded, she would bring disaster down on her poor host.

Later, she promised him that she would not leave the room and even insisted he tie her up for the night so that his own sleep might feel secure. He didn't want to accept, but it must have reassured him because he slept like a man after a feast. She escaped easily.

The corridor floors were cold on her bare feet but it was quieter that way. Sometimes students passed, or masters, but the clump of their boots gave warning long before they arrived, and there was always time for Moya to pull into the shadow of a doorway. At first, she worried that her aura would give her away, but she remembered the concentration in Owen's eyes as he had studied her, and she realized with relief that it was something that must be searched for with deliberation.

Downwards, she moved downwards in search of the deepest levels of the College where Legend said the magical reservoir was kept. Her only weapon was a meat knife she had taken from Owen's cell and used to cut free of his shoddy knots. She passed dozens of closed doors, and walls covered with furs or tapestries. She ignored all, seeking out instead stairs and ladders. The corridors began to change the lower she went. She found herself shivering in the colder air and instead of stone, her feet walked on packed earth, coming away damp.

Sounds echoed all around her, distant moans, strange cries of pain.

"It's just my imagination," she said to herself.

She had been afraid all her life: of her father; her husband; of giving birth; of not being a good mother for little Owen... She had never run away from any of these, but sought to fight them at every turn.

"And always got a good hiding, too," she thought. But that had never stopped her. It never would.

Finally, there were no more stairs and no more rooms. Her last descent brought her to a large cavern whose walls glowed and glistened. Spikes of rock that dwarfed Moya covered floor and ceiling.

"Looking for something, my pretty?" The voice seemed to come out of nowhere, "My spike is even bigger, I think you'll find."

She spun in a panic, bringing up the meat knife. The Gardener stood there, his thin face orange in the glow from the cavern walls. He grinned.

"You are so determined to save your brat, I really don't think I should stand in your way."

Moya raised her knife. "Don't try and stop me!"

He grinned at that. "I already said I would not. On the contrary. It is always the Gardener's job to help such as you get what they deserve.. He looked her up and down, "Although in your case it seems like such a waste." A shrug. "What you seek, is behind me, sweetling. Go on. I promise you will find no guards."

He stepped aside to reveal a narrow break in the cavern wall. More light glowed from within. Red this time.

She climbed through into another, larger cavern. Rocks and small stones carpeted the floor. And bones too, and the skulls of men and beasts. Moya could discern a flash of glass somewhere at the back of the cave. As the Gardener had promised, there were no guards here whatsoever.

Instead, the space between her and the glass was filled with dozens upon dozens of Mourning Trees, each pushing up against the next, filling the air with the delicious smells of honey and cinnamon. Her limbs shook with fear. Her eyes strained for a way through. But everywhere, leaves and roots and branches, drooping red blossoms, blocked the route.

She flopped down among the bones and wept in frustration. To come so far for this!

Then she noticed something. Very few of the branches reached down as far as the earth. Most were at waist level, stretching in vain towards the mottled light given off by the cavern walls. Moya was small, very small. If she were careful, if she did not breathe out at the wrong moment, she might be able to crawl in between the tightly packed trunks to reach the other side.

She tore two strips of cloth from the hem of her smock, and used them to bind the loose folds of her clothing more snugly against her body - the last thing she wanted was to have it snag against a branch. She tied more cloth onto her elbows, and then, with her belly and breasts so close to the ground they trailed against it, she began crawling carefully between the trunks and roots of the mourning trees.

Broken bones and skull fragments cut gashes in her skin as she moved. She thought the trees sensed her blood, and were dipping lower in response. Moya struggled on, a hair's breadth beneath them. Was it worth it? she wondered. Surely she was bound to touch one of the branches sooner or later, and her death then, would take many, many days.

But her doubts had come too late. Already she had reached half-way, scrape by painful scrape, and the way back was just as fraught with danger as any progress she might make.

Or so she thought.

Several times Moya came up against a branch barely a hand's span off the ground and she was forced to pass carefully over it without rising so high as to touch the ones above. Her muscles shook with the effort. Her sweat dripped onto the bones of those who'd failed before her.

Often, blossoms dangled right beside her face, almost touching her, filling the air with their sweet scents. Her mouth watered with it, her belly now a constant rumble.

And finally, shaking with nervous exhaustion, Moya was almost close enough to touch the thick yellow glass of the magic reservoir. There seemed to be shapes inside it, swimming, or floating, she could not be sure. Thousands of shapes. Birds perhaps, or jelly fish. She knew she had to break the glass to get at the magic inside. She had an idea that she could drink it, like goat's milk, perhaps. And when she did, she believed she would know what to do with it. It was magic, after all.

Unfortunately, the branches clustered even more thickly around the glass than anywhere else. It took her another twenty minutes of crawling before she could find a place where she might bring a rock to bear against it. It wouldn't be easy. To gain access to the target area she would have to place her feet carefully under some low lying blossoms, and strike with the rock just so...

Her first blow left little more than a scratch. She tried again, harder this time, and was rewarded with a few tiny splinters. However, before her eyes, the glass started to repair itself.

Moya began to pound at the reservoir, but she could not get proper leverage to hit the glass hard and it was healing more quickly than she could damage it.

Every muscle shook with exhaustion. She stopped to rest for no more than a minute and watched in despair as the glass returned to a pristine condition.

She knew then, she would never save Owen from the tree, and knew she was unlikely to have the strength to crawl back the way she had come without being caught by one herself.

Some of the shapes inside swam close to where she had been hitting. Little faces peered at her through the glass. They seemed familiar, but could not distract her from her fear and despair.

She decided to at least try and escape. She pulled herself around carefully until she was facing

the entrance.

She took one last look towards the glass and froze. The faces were still watching her, and suddenly she knew who they were. The children of the village. Or rather, their spirit forms. The faces were blurred. They shifted slightly with whatever currents were in the jar, but they were quite recognizable: Enya, Ultan's youngest, Berry, the Headwife... Angle from the far end of the village, and of course, Owen, little Owen, dead already, hands pressed against the glass, mouth working soundlessly.

Her vision blurred and she choked back a sob. "My little boy, oh my boy. I should be in there with you."

Did he even know who she was. Did any of them? Of course, they did. Why else had these few spirits come to stare at her and none of the others. Suddenly, the Headwife's lips parted wide in what could only have been a scream. Her tattered spirit was jerked away from her companions as if on a rope. She flew up towards the top of the giant jar and disappeared.

Moya felt a chill run through her. Somewhere, somebody had cast a spell, and the reservoir had provided the energy for it. Big Owen had said it wasn't blood, but pain that powered magic. No wonder criminals were always executed on the Trees nowadays. No wonder the University of Rossaveel had won the war against their rivals so soon after the appearance of the first Trees had devastated the city. The plants had never been a creation of the enemy, but of the University's own professors.

She looked through the glass at the ghost of her son. The decision was agonizing. In the end, Moya, though terrified, knew what had to be done. She may have failed to save her Owen's life, but it was not yet too late for his soul.

She would need better leverage to smash the glass and there was only one way to get that.

She grabbed another rock, and before she could regret it, she surged to her feet and was immediately caught on a tree.

"My bones!" she cried. That was all she could feel at first. They had declared war on her flesh, cutting and gouging and sawing at it. But beneath that pain, her blood had already begun to warm. It became hotter and hotter, until the bones were forgotten altogether in a searing fire that gushed through her heart and boiled through every vein in her body. Hairs bored through her scalp like drills; ribs pressed in against her lungs to rob them of air; fingernails rebelled, tearing inwards.

Moya thrashed like a hooked fish in the greatest agony she had ever known. In the midst of it all, while her tongue tried to burrow its way down her throat, while her skin felt like it was ripping away, a small corner of her mind remembered a rock, and the hand that convulsively gripped it.

"Smash!" she thought. "Smash!"

She swayed with each wave of pain, ending it with a scream and a sharp blow to the reservoir beside her. Splinters came away, shards flew and cracks appeared. Finally, there was a small hole, and the spirits poked at it, trying to find a way through.

Then, a final blow and it split open completely. Spirits flooded into the room in an enormous wave. They swarmed over the Trees in their thousands, clinging to the branches like flames, biting and sucking at the blossoms.

The trees withered under the assault. Great cracks filled the air as trunks shattered and sap sprayed.

Moya woke on a bed of withered leaves and branches. A child nestled in her arms.

He grew lighter and lighter in her grasp until all she held were a few old sticks. She did not feel sad, however. When she had broken the reservoir the agony of thousands had washed over her and through her. Her body glowed with power.

"My trees!" The Gardener's voice echoed around the cavern. "You!"

Moya raised her head to watch him approach. He too held sticks in his hands and some pods that might have been seeds. She thought he might try to kill her, but eyes that had once lingered over

her body, now cared only for her aura.

"Who are you really?" he asked.

Her stare met his.

"Oh," was all he said. He dropped the sticks and ran for the entrance, feet plunging among the bones. Halfway, he began wailing, as first one foot and then the other, caught in something on the ground. He reached with both hands to free himself, cursing all the while.

By the time Moya passed him, his legs had turned to wood from the knees down. His toes sank deep into the earth. "Don't leave me like this," he begged. "I'll die!"

"You won't die," said Moya. "Not if somebody loves you enough to water you every day."

The Gardener's pleas followed her up flights of stairs into the chill night beyond the building.

Everywhere, men in blue robes were running around in a panic. Moya knew what they had lost and she intended to give it back to them. Every little bit of it.

She raised her little fists and set the power free.

Winter In Japan

A snotty head cold
Makes all poetic sneezes
Sound like this: HAIKU!

The Bag

The young man untied the strings of the Bag. It shifted slightly in his hands.

Gertrude took the rag doll from its rocking chair and clutched it to her chest, her breath coming too fast. She knew there was no point in prolonging the agony, especially at her age. But the fear was too much and she blurted, "I— I could pay more."

His hands froze over the drawstrings, while the Bag itself continued to stir.

"How much more?"

"A thousand? N-next week?"

The Bagman looked at her steadily. Gertrude could feel her armpits sticking to the cloth of her dress. The muscles in her legs twitched and she squeezed the doll ever more tightly to herself.

He said, "This is more of your delaying tactics." But he was already replacing the squirming Bag into a large pocket on his coat. He smiled, and she realized then he knew she didn't have the money, but that he too, preferred to wait, enjoyed it, even.

He stood and took his hat.

"Until next week then, Mrs. Q.," he said. He was really quite handsome. He had pitch black hair and a neatly trimmed moustache. A nice boy, just doing his job. A job he happened to love.

She rose to show him out, careful to stand on the side of him furthest from the pocket which bulged.

"What's this?" he said standing at the door. He was fingering the mask Peter had brought back from India when they had first been married; painted eyes, wide and staring, angry mouth below. Gertrude had taken it out of the attic because she was thinking of selling it.

"It's a demon," she said, "or maybe a king. I don't know."

He took it from the wall and tried it on. Taking it off again, it caught in his hair and he had to tear it angrily from his head. He flung it to the ground and stamped on it. He glared at Gertrude. Then, he reached out to a Waterford crystal vase and stalked from the house with it under his arm. She didn't try to stop him, although she cried a little, thinking of what Peter would say if he were here. Twelve years without him. Twelve years with only a shrinking pension to pay the bills so that now a perfect stranger could just walk out of her home with anything he fancied.

It was an hour before her cat, Eunice, dared come out from the kitchen. The Bag had that effect on the poor creature. She moulted terribly with every visit, whole clumps of fur coming loose.

"There, there," said her mistress, "we have another week before he comes back." The cat looked at her as if to say she'd never find the money in only seven days. Gertrude had no answer to that.

Eunice followed nervously all day long as Gertrude wheeled the doll about the house, talking to it. Peter had given her the toy to make up for an argument they'd had.

"She'll be our baby," he'd said, unaware there would never be another. He had made a good choice: Baby was a miniature version of her mammy with big blue eye and thick red curls. Except that Baby's hair had been cropped short, while Gertrude's, though still long, had since turned white.

To a stranger, the doll's expression would have seemed unchanging, but Gertrude had become expert at reading it. Today it was saying: "Do something! Don't just wait for him to come to you! Do something!"

Gertrude was about to reply when a banging sound interrupted her.

She limped quickly to the front door. The young man was hammering boards across the window of her sitting room.

"There you are!" he said, before she could scamper off. "I'm real sorry, missus, for my temper this morning. They work us hard, you see. I was fierce tired, so I was." As if to emphasize the point, he wiped a hand across his brow, pushing sodden hair away from his eyes. "Any chance of a cup of tea there?"

She realized her mouth was hanging open and closed it.

"Why are you boarding up my house?" she managed to say.

He waved vaguely at the other side of the street half-hidden by mist, "All the others are boarded. They couldn't pay either."

She felt the beginnings of panic. The rest of Redmond Close had been empty for two years. Gertrude's neighbours had disappeared one by one during the recession as their debts had grown too large. Now their houses belonged to the Bagman's bosses. Just the one to complete the set and they could begin redevelopment.

"But... but you said I had another week."

"Of course." He smiled handsomely, dimples appearing on either side of the moustache. "It's a precaution until you can pay up. I take two sugars in my tea, Mrs. Q. You look like you could be doing with some yourself."

He went back to hammering.

He came in for a while to drink his tea, driving Eunice back to the kitchen. As he sat in front of the television, his mobile rang.

"Of course, you can have a loan Mrs. Sullivan!" Gertrude heard him say. She wanted to grab the phone from his hand and shout at the woman on the other end to find some other way of paying the mortgage.

"I'll be needing some security," continued the Bagman. "Not your house, madam! I wouldn't dream of it! No," and Gertrude felt a familiar chill settling on her shoulders, "all I need is a lock of hair from you, and one from each of the members of your family. That's all the security we could want."

Gertrude spent a frantic week trying to sell the furniture in the house. She rang people she had once known. She begged perfect strangers to take a sofa off her hands, or a bed. Nobody was buying.

She regretted now the loss of all her friends after Peter's death. She had turned strange, they told her. And she had, she knew she had. She was afraid to leave the house, except for the briefest of shopping trips for bread and cat food.

Eventually, people had stopped visiting. Even the Bagmen hadn't started coming yet in those days, and in her innocence she had thought that Peter's dying had somehow cancelled out the debt she owed them.

Then one morning the young man had turned up on her doorstep and demanded payment of interest on the loan. Ten years worth of it.

"Of course, Mrs. Q.," he had said, gently squeezing her shoulder, "if you can't get your hands on that kind of money, my employers would be willing to accept the deeds of your house in lieu of payment."

Her face had dropped.

"Oh, don't worry, Mrs. Q.! It's just temporary. It's just until you can make it up to us."

So she had handed over the deeds. The following week, the young man had returned. He was looking for rent now. And it was high — roughly equivalent to her widow's allowance. She couldn't bear to leave her memories of Peter behind, so she paid it every week after that. And still, the original loan was outstanding, with interest due every month. She had ended up pawning most of Peter's prized possessions at ridiculous prices just to stay afloat.

Now she had nothing of value left to sell.

The house had become a miserable place with all the windows covered. Every room smelled of must. Soon it would be as empty as the rest of them.

She tried to phone the police, of course. Everybody tried that sooner or later on the reasonable grounds that loan sharking was illegal. The officers told her they didn't believe in Bagmen. But there

was a hint of fear in their voices when they said it: policemen had families too, after all.

Peter had always refused to show his fear. She remembered how he had broken into the Murphy's house on the night following the last visit of the Bagman there. The family had not tried to run off as some had before them: they knew there was no point. The Bagman had locks of their hair, and once those locks had been dropped into the Bag, it didn't matter if you ran south of the Liffey or as far as China.

Peter had found nothing in the house except for five neat heaps of ash in the middle of the floor. Of the Murphys there had been no sign.

After six days the young man returned for another visit.

"How's it going," he asked Gertrude with a ready smile. He looked around at the gaps in the room where there had once been pieces of furniture. He seemed disappointed. "You have the money then?"

"Some," said Gertrude, reaching for the comfort of Baby.

"Some?" His eyes glittered.

"I have sixty Euros... So far, that is. I have people interested in — in things I keep in the attic."

"Sixty? Sixty Euros?" He shook his head. "It was supposed to be a thousand!" He reached into the pocket of his coat and withdrew the Bag. It had swollen to the size of a man's head and it jerked spasmodically in his hands. He seemed short of breath and in the murky light of the table lamp, he looked almost radiant.

"I don't think you're taking me seriously Mrs. Q." he said in a tone that implied he didn't mind at all.

He crouched down to examine the ground.

"Filthy creatures," he said, picking something up off the floor. It took Gertrude a moment to realize that it was a patch of Eunice's moulted fur.

"But I still have another day!" she shouted.

"You have indeed, Mrs. Q.," He unlaced the strings of the Bag which seemed much more agitated than usual, heaving in his grasp, "but I said nothing about the cat."

He dropped the fur into the Bag, which he then laid carefully onto the carpet. The leather seemed to boil and then to change colour — no! it hadn't changed colour, a grey, mostly transparent film had spilled over it and now moved onto the floor like a tiny cloud.

Gertrude stared; more in fascination than fear, for nobody could be afraid of a mere cloud.

It contracted, expanded and stretched before her eyes, like an animal in silent pain. A smell filled the room.

"Matches," thought Gertrude, "it smells like lit matches."

The cloud seemed somewhat disorientated. Rather than heading anywhere in particular, it first made a lazy circuit of the room. Then, it turned quickly for the kitchen. Too late, Gertrude remembered that that was where Eunice hid during the Bagman's visits. She dropped Baby onto the nearest chair and limped quickly after the cloud, unsure of what she would do if she caught up with it. It was moving towards the table at the far end of the kitchen. The cat was crouched under it in a pool of her own urine.

Gertrude opened the utility cupboard in search of a weapon. Eunice, meanwhile, had snapped out of her terror and begun running from one end of the room to the other while the cloud drifted after her. The animal reached the back door and started scratching furiously at the cat-flap. It had been nailed shut.

Gertrude found a broom and tried to place herself between the cloud and her pet, without thinking what might happen if it decided to take her instead. Part of her was worried, but another part still couldn't take the situation seriously: the enemy looked no more threatening than a puff of dust. She swiped at it. The cloud simply opened as the broom passed through: the plastic of the handle charred; the bristles melted. Suddenly, she was afraid.

The old woman's heart began to hammer in her chest. She went back to the utility cupboard just as the Bagman entered the room. He was sweating heavily and seemed to find it difficult to stop grinning.

"Looking for something?" he asked, but he made no attempt to interfere with her efforts.

She ignored him because Eunice had begun emitting a high screech such as Gertrude had never heard from any of the dozen cats she had owned in her lifetime. Something was burning. She plugged in the Hoover, breathing far too hard, and turned towards the cloud. She screamed at what she saw there: the cat was writhing against the door. Her fur seemed to be completely gone and most of her skin too. There was soot everywhere. Gertrude held down the bile that rose to her throat and turned the Hoover's nozzle against the cloud. She was amazed to see how easily it was sucked in.

The Bagman was laughing to himself behind her. "Now there's one I haven't seen before!"

It was too late anyway. Eunice was already dead.

Gertrude collapsed to the floor beside her pet. The room seemed to be spinning around her and she had been sick on herself. Her breath was coming in great gulps and her chest felt ready to explode.

Darkness came.

She awoke where she had fallen. The young man was crouched down beside her holding a glass of water to her lips. She looked around. The vacuum cleaner had been melted to slag and there was nothing left of poor Eunice but a pile of ash.

"Spontaneous feline combustion!" said the man, delighted with his own humour. More seriously, he added, "I thought we'd lost you Mrs. Q. You still have a whole day left. T'would be an awful shame to waste it now, wouldn't it?"

He stood up. "A thousand Euros tomorrow, Mrs. Q. I look forward to it."

He left her. She watched his back and realized she had come to hate him. Before, he had just been doing a job. But after his... his murder of Eunice...

"Oh, poor Kitty!" she whispered and began to cry. She went to Baby for comfort. The doll's expression told her to snap out of it. "Do something!"

"I can't!" What was the use? A day to find more than nine hundred Euros? No one was buying and she had nothing else to sell, except maybe the Indian mask. But the Bagman had stomped on it when it had hurt him, and she doubted it would be worth more than a tenner now.

Peter would have known what to do. He had always seemed so strong to her. He had never been handsome, not like the Bagman was. His eyes were small and drab, stuck to his face under a single eyebrow that stretched from one end of his forehead to the other. He often joked that if you were to shave away the brown locks at his temples you would find the same eyebrow underneath, marching right the way around his skull. No, he had never been pretty, but he had been strong and had had courage enough for both of them.

Peter had worked in journalism. He had studied the Bagman loan sharks more than anybody else but had never been allowed to write about "such superstitious nonsense" in the papers.

"Poor Peter," she said.

He had told her that whatever lived in the Bag was cunning. It rode the winds like a balloon, rising and falling in search of currents that would take it the direction of its prey. Once it had your "scent", it would follow you right around the world.

The two of them had often sat up late into the night, discussing what they would do if a Bagman ever came for them. That was before she was ever in their debt of course; with Peter's salary it had never been necessary to borrow from them.

Ironically, his search for a scoop on these loan sharks was what had lost him his job and his self-respect. The recession was biting hard and they had desperately needed money to avoid destitution. So, the first Bagman had come to visit with a wad of cash and a pair of scissors to take a lock of hair from each of them. Peter had hit the Bagman when the stranger had insisted on taking some of Gertrude's hair as well. The two of them had rolled together on the ground, before she had finally stopped them. She apologized to the Bagman and handed over a lock of red hair. He was fuming, but

tried to pretend otherwise. He took the hair from her grip, grabbed back his scissors, and left. Gertrude and Peter held each other for a long time afterwards. Her husband hadn't been a handsome man, but he was all she'd needed.

"You shouldn't have hit him," Gertrude had said.

"It doesn't matter," his voice had been utterly calm, "as long as you did what I told you, everything will be all right."

The next morning she found his ashes in the kitchen. A cup of tea on the table was still warm.

Gertrude felt overcome by her memories but Baby told her to snap out of it.

"Try," said the doll, "try for Peter. And Eunice."

Nobody could resist a child. Gertrude hugged her protectively.

The knock came two hours later than she had expected. If the Bagman had wanted her to stew in her own juices a bit before moving in for the kill, it had worked. Sweat had soaked its way into every fibre of her clothing and she was worn out with nerves.

The knock again.

"C—coming," she managed to call. First, though, she dropped Baby into the downstairs bedroom.

"Goodbye," she said sadly, and kissed the doll on the forehead. Baby looked back at her as if puzzled. Only then did Gertrude make for the front door.

Sunlight streamed into the house. The Bagman was waiting for her on the step looking very smart. He was wearing a new suit, and he carried a briefcase she had only seen on a few previous occasions. His other hand held the Bag by its drawstrings.

"May I come in?" he asked politely if a little too eagerly.

She stood back. He stepped into the sitting room and installed himself on the remaining chair. He opened the briefcase.

"The money?" he asked.

"No," she said, wringing her hands. She wished she had Baby to hold now, but that was impossible.

His lower lip began to tremble. He reached into the suitcase and removed a small plastic container. There was a lock of hair inside. It was red.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Do you?" she retorted, surprised at herself.

He grinned. With great slowness, he placed the Bag in the middle of the floor and untied the drawstrings. Gertrude felt her heart begin to pound again but she managed to keep from panicking as the young man removed the hair with a tweezers and placed it into the mouth of the heaving Bag.

As on the previous day, the Bag vomited a cloud into the air of the room, and the cloud, once free, circled the room as if trying to orient itself.

Gertrude stepped forward quickly and picked up the Bag. The young man laughed delightedly.

"Again you amaze me, Mrs. Q., but whatever it is this time won't—"

She ignored him and limped across the hall as quickly as she could go, and into the downstairs bedroom. She thought she had seen the cloud begin to follow.

She locked the door and wedged a small wooden table against the handle.

"It won't do you any good!" she heard. Sure enough, she noticed the air change colour slightly as the cloud passed under the door and into the room.

The man wanted in too. "Open up, you dried up cow! I can't see! What's the point if I can't see?" He threw his shoulder against the wood as the cloud moved closer. So close the stink of burning matches it gave off threatened to make Gertrude sick. It ignored her of course. It made straight for the

doll and began to dissolving it immediately, starting with its cropped, red hair. Baby's expression was now one of betrayal.

"The doll's hair is made of natural fibres," her husband had said when they had first made their plans, "it's probably just as delicious as yours to whatever lives in the Bag."

It had also been the same colour as Gertrude's own hair. Peter had distracted the Bagman who had come with the contract by starting a fight. He had died as a result, but his sacrifice had given Gertrude time to substitute the doll's hair for her own. Of course, Peter hadn't intended for things to go this far. He had known his death was inevitable but he had wanted his wife to use the money the Bagman had lent them to move somewhere the loan sharks wouldn't find her. But she had never left.

The door was beginning to splinter now under the constant assault of the Bagman. He would break it down any second. No doubt he had some scissors with him in order to secure another sample of her hair.

The cloud finally finished feeding on the natural fibres of which Baby was made. It returned to the Bag just as the door flew open, knocking the table to one side.

The man was dishevelled and sweating after his exertions. He was probably shocked to see her still alive. Gertrude saw him look down at the object she held in her hands. It was the Indian mask. Her body shook all over as she lifted it up to show him where some of his hairs had caught when he had ripped it from his head.

"I never did get your name," she said.

He could only gasp as she dropped his hairs into the hungry mouth of the Bag.

Fantasy Tongue-Twister

You must say this quickly, three times in a row, to be allowed to pass on to the next story...

Thirty-three trolls threw three thumb-tacks through the trees.

The Evil-Eater

The bell rang, and Toby snapped awake. Two a.m. said the clock. A guest stood in front of him. A VIP, and Toby struggled through his funk to remember who it was.

"Mr. Schneider!" he blurted. The German minister for finance, furious about something. Toby began an apology for sleeping on the job, but the man ignored him. He slapped ten euro onto the desk along with a piece of paper.

"This reservation for tomorrow night, I don't need. Cancel it," he turned away, "then get my bags. This evening, I leave." He stalked off.

The young man glanced at the name of the restaurant and froze. It was printed on golden paper: "Ahriman". He almost ran after the German to ask him if he was sure he wanted to cancel.

Then, a delicious, terrifying idea came to him. So, Marie wanted a bit of excitement, did she?

Deep down he knew they'd never get away with it. He should just pick up the phone and do as he'd been asked.

He looked furtively around the lobby. Maybe, just maybe he'd pull it off with his acting ability. And Marie would be *so* grateful she mightn't break up with him after all.

Nobody was watching. Toby slid the page into his pocket with shaking hands.

—*Waste not, want not.* Excited and afraid, he ran off to collect the minister's bags.

Even Marie had heard of Ahriman's.

"That's it, Toby," she screeched, her rough accent a contrast to a perfect face, "Ya can't find a real job now ya think I'll fall for yer lies!"

"I'm tellin' the truth this time," the reddening of her face worried him — it meant she was about to smash something, something of his.

"Ahriman's," she repeated, "The place nobody can go 'less they own six yachts and a small, bleedin' country! Ya expect me t' believe—"

He went for her weak point, "Film stars, Marie... All the rich an' famous... An' they have to *fight* for reservations like the ones we got."

"Why'd they bother," she asked, still glowering, but listening now.

"Ya hear things about the food," said Toby, "mad stuff. I heard once it makes ya smart!"

"Smart!" Marie was already smart enough to know you could never have enough brains for this world. She'd been lazy at school and regretted it bitterly.

"That place is so amazin'," he continued, "they don't even let ya take photos. We'd make a fortune just by sellin' our story! The two of us stuffin' our faces with the bleedin' Queen of England! Think about it!"

He could see she wanted to believe. Marie needed more from life than Toby could offer. This might be his last chance to get it for her before she left him for someone more used to giving tips than getting them.

"Yer just makin' this up 'cos Pat's invited me to Gallaghers again," she bunched her fists. "Well, this time I will go — at least *he's* got a future!"

"Yeah?" Toby had expected such a threat ever since his acting work had dried up, "Well, I bet Pat doesn't have one of these!" With a flourish he produced the invitation.

Deep, brown eyes widened. "Gold leaf," she whispered. Her hands were already reaching for it.

They borrowed clothes from some actors Toby knew. Marie looked stunning. She made the absence of jewelry seem like studied elegance. Toby drank in the sight of her creamy skin and charcoal

hair. He knew himself to be handsome in a foppish kind of way, but she would surely have been a model had she been taller. He prayed his new scheme would prove impressive enough to keep her a little longer.

Marie's eyes widened when she saw their transport.

"A limo," she breathed, "a bleedin' limo!"

Toby had convinced a driver from the hotel to drop them outside the restaurant. If Ahriman's security saw them getting out of a cab or — God forbid! — walking, they'd never even get past the front porch.

"I hope yous know what yer playin' at," the driver told them. He was staring at Marie's cleavage in the mirror, but he needn't have bothered — limo drivers didn't earn much more than porters. "Who cares if the food makes ya smart? What use has a receptionist for more brains, anyways?"

"Toby's an actor," said Marie putting her arm around him. His puny chest swelled with pride. He almost was an actor. He'd starred in a cola commercial. But since his moment of glory — over a year before — the only roles he'd won had involved the hauling of suitcases.

"Well, you'd better be a brilliant bleedin' actor tonight. A meal in that place'd buy a house in Blackrock." The driver shut up after that, but his words had already brought butterflies out to play in Toby's stomach.

They found the restaurant hidden in the back streets behind Dublin Castle where a thin layer of asphalt covered broken cobbles. The entrance boasted no lights and might have been that of a warehouse. A pair of huge men in suits stood outside, but Toby and Marie waltzed through past them as though by divine right.

They stepped into a dark hallway. A remarkable voice stopped them dead, resonant and pure: "May I help you?"

A middle-aged woman was waiting there. She had dressed in robes of white linen, which contrasted sharply with her deep-olive skin and eyes black enough to fall into.

"Your name?"

Her dignity so impressed Toby he almost forget to use the German accent he'd been practicing all day.

"Toby," he said, "uhm, Toby Schneider. My father regrets his absence, and instead sends me with the most beautiful woman I have seen in your country. An Irish rose!"

Marie obliged him by blushing.

The woman studied the golden paper Toby had brought. "I am pleased to meet you, Herr Schneider," her mouth smiled all by itself, "you look much like your father." Toby smiled back wondering if his luck was finally on the turn.

"I am the Hurani," the woman continued. Then, she added something in German, a language of which Toby was completely ignorant. Without missing a beat he said, "Yes, I believe so," and nodded wisely. It seemed to do the trick.

Toby wondered what his real father would think of him bluffing his way into a restaurant he couldn't possibly afford. He managed to keep the brief wince of shame from showing as he and Marie followed the lady down an ugly corridor of broken columns and torn hangings.

"What do you think of our lobby, Herr Schneider?"

"Uhm, well..."

The Hurani smiled. "I see your father hasn't told you much about us. The tables you will dine at this evening, the couches you will lie upon, are almost as rough as this hallway. But then, there is nothing in this building that is less than 2,000 years old." Toby's jaw dropped, and Marie let out a faint "oh!" Her eyes began paying more attention to what she was seeing. Toby knew she was wondering if she'd get a chance to slip any of it into her purse. She did that with ashtrays when she came to see him at work.

"Every footstep you take in here is beyond price," said their hostess, "for now you walk in the Persia that once was. Come."

She pulled open a wooden door, but carefully, so as not to damage it. Beyond lay a room of low tables separated by fiercely burning braziers. Shadows leapt and men dressed like biblical shepherds served diners reclining on couches.

Toby and Marie followed in awe as the Hurani brought them to their table. Under her urging, they slipped out of their shoes and lay down head to head.

"I can't see the other guests," blurted Marie, "with the fires..." the Hurani looked at her patiently. Marie continued, "I mean, what if there's someone famous here?"

The hostess nodded, and her beautiful voice affected a reassuring tone, "Don't worry, my dear. If there are famous people present I will make them respect your privacy." With that, and with Toby laughing, she left them.

Marie thumped her boyfriend. "I hope yer so smart when yer tryin' to get us out of here without washin' the dishes."

That sobered him quickly. But he put it to the back of his mind, determined to enjoy himself until the time came for them to fly the coop.

A wine steward arrived at their table with metal goblets for each of them and a skin of wine which he poured expertly from a height. He was olive skinned with bare arms that would not have shamed Cassius Clay at his peak.

"What's on the menu tonight?" asked Toby.

The waiter laughed, teeth flashing in the firelight. "What's on the menu?" he mocked in accented English. "What's on the menu is what's always on the menu: Erta."

"Or...?" prompted Toby.

"Why did you come if not for Erta? Erta or nothing, my young friend. Finish that wine so I give you more. Look — your waiter comes."

The giant left them to be replaced by a man bearing a pair of earthenware bowls containing a dark, lumpy substance. Marie watched it warily, and Toby knew she was already thinking of leaving. She had expected champagne and chandeliers; a feast of caviar and lobster while famous men took time out from their wives to steal glances at her across the room. Her dreams did not include the absence of a menu, brown lumpy stuff and a waiter who who looked like he'd eaten bad chicken the night before. In fact, Toby noticed, while the wine stewards were all fine, strong men, the food waiters who passed through the flickering firelight were frightening to behold. Their faces shone with a veneer of sweat which beaded and ran into the rough spun tunics they wore. They shook as though palsied, and each of them moved as slowly as possible, hurrying only under the glare of the wine stewards. Not one of them looked Irish.

"What is this bleedin' crap!" hissed Marie.

"Er-Erta," said the waiter. He looked terrified. "Erta."

She grabbed a bowl and thrust it under her boyfriend's nose. Its scent was pungent though not unpleasant. "Would you eat this? Would ya feed it to your bleedin' dog?"

Toby winked at her, and in a very exaggerated German accent said, "We might as well try, dear. Since we are for it paying."

She scowled. The evening was not proceeding at all as he'd hoped.

"The stingy wasters didn't even give us a feekin' spoon!" hissed Marie.

Toby ignored her outburst. He took the bowl and popped a lump of the sticky paste into his mouth. But he didn't get to taste it, for the very second the Erta touched his tongue he was distracted by a memory.

He saw Eloise, a girlfriend from a time before he'd met Marie. They'd broken up because of his stupidity, but the memory was unspoiled by this fact, as if he lived it now for the first time with no knowledge of what was to come. It was February, and Eloise had snuck out of bed, thinking him asleep. Ten minutes later, curiosity overcame him, and he followed her. He stepped quietly out of the bedroom and saw Eloise sitting at the kitchen table in a baggy tee-shirt. A shaft of sun fell through the skylight, picking out the red in her hair and running over a bare shoulder where the collar had stretched

too far. She was wrapping a fine watch in colored foil. It must have cost her several week's wages. He was filled with a wave of tenderness for her such as he'd never felt before. He'd warned her not to bother! Nobody cared about 22nd birthdays! But he was simultaneously delighted and moved.

Carefully, so as not to destroy the moment by alerting her, he padded back into the flat's only bedroom, and lay there grinning at the ceiling until sleep overtook him.

"What's it like?" asked Marie.

"Hmm? Oh! Yeah," he smiled, "Beautiful."

Perhaps Marie blushed at that, perhaps she thought he'd meant her. But Toby was already reaching for another bite.

Dozens of memories followed. They appeared in triumph from out of the nooks and crannies he'd thought he'd lost them in. The best moments in his short life paraded before his eyes, hitting him in a flood: his first beer with dad, sitting proudly among the men; six candles on a cake, the doorbell ringing and presents arriving; Eloise again, Eloise... And then...

And then his fingers were rubbing desperately at the rough bowl in search of more crumbs.

He looked up for what felt like the first time in hours. Marie's bowl was empty and her face bore all the hallmarks of stunned bliss. "Jaysus, Toby. Jaysus! And we thought it made you smart!" Her hand snaked over to ruffle his hair. Eloise used to do that. A deep sadness filled him.

Marie was beginning to recover her composure. "How're we gonna get out of here?" she said. Toby had thought of that earlier. He'd planned to complain about the food and refuse payment. Now, the best solution would be to make a run for it. Who was going to stop them? They should wait for the big wine stewards to move to the far corners of the room, and then head for the exit, bursting out of the building into the darkness, laughing and happy. Then they could go home to Marie's place; he could rip that lovely dress off, kiss the white skin of her neck while his hands... his hands...

The thought left him cold.

"You go on home," he said to her. "If anyone asks, just say yer off t' powder yer nose. They'll not be worried since it's me who's payin'."

She didn't wait to be asked twice, seemingly unconcerned as to how he would make his own escape. Perhaps she was right. After all, what were they going to do to him? Make him wash dishes? Dust the antiques?

Marie disappeared into the shadows. Toby sipped his wine and tried to come to terms with the sadness that seemed to be drowning him. Eloise! The best memories had been of her. Why had he been so stupid? Why?

He was still there an hour later when a couple of the wine stewards came for him. They were most polite.

"Would you like the bill now, Herr Schneider?"

"I have no money," he said.

"We know."

They brought him to a windowless office which smelt of must, lit by a single candle. The Hurani was waiting for him with a pair of heavies. Toby feared she would have them break his legs.

Her marvelous voice spoke: "I think this one will work in the kitchens."

One of the heavies sniggered, his skin as dark as hers, but pocked. "Won't last! Ahriman will shit him out inside a day!"

"Oh, I disagree," she smiled. "You're a good boy, aren't you, Toby?"

Toby was dumbfounded. Who did she think she was? His mother? His mother had thrown him out. The Hurani continued, "You lied to us, Toby. Lies are the beginning of rot."

He knew she was right, had known it ever since he'd consumed the Erta. His stupid lies had cost him Eloise and the love of his parents. And Toby had lied to himself too, pretending he was going to be a famous actor, pretending he wanted Marie when all he really needed he'd destroyed by his own hand.

"I'm sorry," said Toby, meaning it.

"See?" said the Hurani, smugly, "This young man will last. We'll get good work out of this one."

An alarm bell began to sound at the back of Toby's mind. "What do ya mean I'll 'last'? What's that supposed to-" Strong arms were already grabbing him by the elbows. The heavies moved him aside to let the Hurani pass and then they dragged him along after her. Within seconds they'd arrived in an alleyway behind the building.

The Hurani turned to face him in front of a pair of double doors. Light flickered inside and steam escaped intermittently. He heard sounds too; banging and scraping and clanging, as if a steel foundry waited on the other side.

A high pitched squeal erupted from within. Toby clutched his ears and thought he felt the ground shake beneath his feet.

"What the hell is that?" he said, "I'm not goin' in there with that!"

The Hurani stroked the young man's shoulder, "The Evil-Eater is hungry, Toby. If you're not evil, you have nothing to fear."

The guards laughed again.

"I'm not goin' in there," Toby babbled, beginning to feel panic, "I'm not goin' in!"

Once past the doors, they waded through a wall of heat into a huge room. Beads of sweat formed on Toby's skin and rolled into his eyes while every breath tasted sour on his tongue.

The little group stopped at the edge of a white line painted on the ground parallel to the wall. The heavies shifted nervously.

Beyond the line dozens of sweaty workers heaved coal barrows through billowing steam. Waiters weaved among them with bowls of Erta, their footsteps and voices lost in the echoing sounds of bangings and hisses. Everyone here, from the filthiest coal man up, wore delicate silver bracelets and they all twitched and jumped at every unexpected sight or sound.

In the middle of the warehouse, in a huge pit of fire where sweating men and women were constantly pouring coal, Toby saw something impossible, something that couldn't be real. Waves of heat shimmered from a huge body the color of fire, all reds and mottled yellows on industrial rubber skin. The monster's form changed from moment to moment like an enormous sack in which some heavy liquid boiled and seethed. Bubbles constantly poked at the surface, never bursting but pushing hard.

Toby's knees gave way, but the heavies kept him upright. "No eyes," was all he could say.

"There is no need of eyes," said the Hurani, "in the molten seas around the Earth's core."

Thick, orange colored cables radiated out from the Evil-Eater's pit to all corners of the room, reaching, though not crossing, the white line. Waiters stepped over them carefully.

A squeal erupted, shaking the building. A waiter dropped and smashed his bowl. Immediately, one of the orange cables twirled around his leg and slowly dragged him towards the pit.

He kicked and screamed, calling out the names of those around him, but they looked away, and when he'd slid past, they went back to work, some filling the pit with coal, others carrying bowls. The tentacle lifted its wailing victim into the air before dropping him onto the body of the creature itself. *The heat!* Toby thought. He watched in horror as the victim began to smolder like meat on a griddle. And suddenly, he knew where the cloying smell came from.

The man got up, burning his hands in the process. His feet blackened beneath him as he tried to run. He stumbled and fell, and even then, didn't give up, but instead tried to roll himself into the pit.

The fire colored skin of the Evil-Eater folded around him and he was gone.

"Beautiful!" said the joyful Hurani, "Now watch the miracle!" She pointed Toby in the direction of a group of waiters converging on the pit with empty bowls. Here, a part of the Evil-Eater hung over the edge. It expelled brown lumps which the waiters collected before rushing off.

"Don't be disgusted, my young friend," said the Hurani, "Erta may be shit, but it is the shit of a God! Think about it. The Evil-Eater, Ahriman, takes a man. It digests him, removing the evil it needs to

live and excreting the rest. Oh think about it!" she said again, eyes shining. "A perfect ecology! We provide Ahriman with food — illegal immigrants, well paid for the risks they take and never missed. Then, we remove the shit which disgusts it. In return for this act of charity, we have Erta! The very essence of goodness. All that is left of a human being when the evil has gone."

"But the clients..." blurted Toby, his skin prickling with the awful heat. "Do they know what?"

"Of course they don't know!" The Hurani laughed. "Not even the Shah knew how we made Erta in the days before the ayatollahs drove us out."

They got a silver bracelet for him and put him to work hauling coal with an Armenian who could barely move with the shaking in every part of his body. The man, Levon, babbled constantly in a voice that barely carried over the din.

"You are an Irish? Not pay bill?"

Toby was too shocked to reply, but Levon didn't seem to mind. He showed his new colleague how to slit open the sacks of coal.

"Don't bother," said Toby. "The Hurani an' her guards are gone. There's no way I'm stayin' roun' here."

"Can't go!" hissed Levon urgently. "Ahriman — the Evil-Eater get you!"

"He's just eaten!" Toby was already heading for the swing doors the heavies had brought him through. His wrist began to tingle under the silver bracelet. The further he walked the stranger the feeling became. He noticed other workers were staring at him, some changing course to stay out of his way.

Short bursts of pain began to shoot up the nerves in his arm. His spine itched and burned. He ignored the sensation, determined to reach the door.

Instead he stopped. His feet refused to move forward at his command. They turned and brought him to a halt near one of the tentacles. Then, although it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do, Toby lay down on the ground beside the hot skin of the Evil-Eater and curled into a ball.

He tried to get up but could not. A terrified thought ran through his mind: "If I'm still here when it gets hungry again..."

His chest struggled to draw breath and even blinking took so much effort that a whole minute went by between one closing of his eyelids and the next. Only his heart moved freely and it took full advantage, hammering against his sternum, pumping terror into every part of his body.

Time stretched. How long had he lain there already? How long before the beast got hungry?

Then, his wrist tingled. Pain burst forth all over and he was free. He ran back to his post and started to work again like a madman.

"You there five minutes," said Levon. Toby barely heard him. "Sometimes they lie thirty or more minutes. You can't leave during shift."

"When, when can we leave?"

"You, when pay your bill, I think. We," he pointed at the others who heaved bags of coal around them, "when fear is too much. But never during the shifts. I here two day already."

"Two days?" Toby couldn't believe anyone would stay longer than a single shift.

Levon laughed. It sounded bitter. "2,000 euro a night. Good money, very good. but your Western hospital cost many, many euro." The Evil-Eater screeched in hunger and killed their conversation.

Three times over the next hour the god, Ahriman, screamed. Three times victims were picked from the crowd. After a night of toil and fear, a bell sounded, and everyone began to file from the room through a door at the rear. Toby hurried to catch up with them, terrified of being left behind. A queue of nervous workers formed at the exit. Toby found himself at the back. It had been almost an hour since the monster had last fed. Men and women pushed at those ahead of them making it harder to get through.

The Evil-Eater squealed. A dozen workers in front of Toby had yet to pass beyond the door. Some started fighting with those in front of them, others pleaded with increasing desperation as the orange tentacles writhed.

It became too much for a Rumanian who had labored near Toby most of the night. He pummeled a small, black man immediately in front of him and shoved him towards the nearest tentacle. Almost quicker than the eye could follow, the monster struck. It knocked over the terrified Nigerian, but stole the Rumanian instead.

A hush descended. Toby had already learnt to savor the calm that followed feeding. He stopped to help the Nigerian but the man's back was bent in the wrong direction and he'd stopped breathing.

A new set of workers was already shuffling in for a night of horror. 2,000 euros a man they were getting. 2,000 euros. Big money for anybody. For illegals, it must have seemed unimaginable.

But Toby would need weeks to pay off his debt to the restaurant. More if they expected him to pay for Marie's food too.

He left the dead Nigerian and stumbled out the door.

He followed the others into a large room of drab walls where fluorescent bulbs buzzed and popped. Men and women lay higgledy-piggledy on piles of clothing that could only have been left behind by ex-workers. Some gulped down water from buckets in the middle of the room, some scratched calculations on the walls as if trying to decide how much money their stay here had already earned them. Some prayed in a variety of languages, but nobody talked.

Toby looked around. The only person he knew was the man he'd worked beside all evening, Levon. He went over to join him. The stocky Armenian still shook. He sat with his back to the wall, red-rimmed eyes peering intently at a passport sized photograph in his hands.

A woman, Toby guessed.

The two sat in silence for some time while others fell asleep around them. Mutterings came from every quarter as sleepers tossed in the pale light of the fluorescents.

"I'm a liar," said Toby at last. "It likes liars, doesn't it? That's what it eats."

Levon stared at his photograph, rubbing it repeatedly with blocky thumbs. He'd lost his earlier loquacity. Instead of answering he put the picture away and produced some stale bread which he tore in half.

"From the morning," he said.

Toby refused the bread but Levon made him eat for they would get nothing except water for another few hours.

Toby slept badly with the Evil-Eater so close. The monster had a great power to concentrate a man's mind on his own failings.

He realized he was far from the worst of men. But Toby grew to rejoice in the Evil-Eater's feeding. Every death kept him alive longer; screams became the trumpet calls of his own salvation.

"These thoughts are a rot on the soul," Levon told him one night after work. "Sooner or later the smell will attract the monster, make hunger for it."

"I know," Toby whispered. "The tentacles twitch now when I step over them. Ahriman knows I'm happy when the others die."

He took to praying again. He spent his time at work, running his life through his head as it should have been. How he should never have sneered at his parents. How he should have married Eloise instead of abandoning her when she most needed him. At the very least he should have apologized. To her. To everybody.

He hoped desperately that Marie would start looking for him. But he knew she wouldn't try too hard. She'd only ever gone out with him because of that one TV appearance. As time went by, as one casting agent after another rejected him, her interest had waned.

No, Marie wasn't coming. He would have to escape by himself or die here so the rich might feast.

Four evenings after he began working at Ahriman's he and Levon took the place of a couple of

waiters whom the God had called to feed some guests. Toby preferred it to shoveling coal. A waiter got to leave the presence of the Evil-Eater for several minutes at a time.

Toby served Erta that night to the world's top football player, the President of the UN and an obese rock n' roll star, supposedly dead since 1977. He didn't care: every minute outside the kitchen was bliss. However, once he'd handed over the warm bowls, the walk back hung over his head like a noose. His limbs shook from fear, and though it was far cooler in the dining room than in the kitchen, the shepherd's costume hung heavy with sweat.

Once back inside, tentacles twitched more than ever before as he stepped over them and he knew death would pounce within days, "More likely hours," he thought.

Towards the end of the night, as Toby and Levon were filling bowls from the creature's foul backside, it screamed in hunger, and he knew his end had come.

A tentacle curled back from the edge of the room towards him, scattering any who stood in its path. He fell to his knees, cowering behind the bowl of Erta, as if it could shield him from his fate. But the tentacle had not come for Toby.

Levon screamed.

The Armenian fought as no worker had before him. He ducked and weaved when the hot flesh tried to close, and incredibly — for a moment — he broke free.

"Help me!" he cried.

How many times had Toby heard those words as victims slid past him to cook on the monster's back? He'd always looked away, always. Nobody could help them. But this time his eyes would not close; this time it was Levon.

A tentacle inched playfully towards the Armenian, forcing the man backwards towards the pit until his heels hung over the edge.

"Oh God," thought Toby. "If he falls in, he'll burn up before the Evil-Eater has a chance to feed. Then it'll be me!"

His free hand rose, but whether he meant to help his friend or wave good-bye, he didn't know. Nor did it matter: the tentacle shot forward and grabbed its prey just as the man fell backwards.

From there, it was no more than a few meters to the monster's back, but the beast first dragged the Armenian through a crowd of co-workers to show him off.

Toby's legs turned to jelly. In an hour he would suffer the same fate, and nobody would help him either because they were worms just like he was. He'd die a worm's death without one good act left behind to show he'd ever existed.

He rose and started after the tentacle. The jerky footsteps of a body that wanted only to cower. He clenched his teeth and ran.

Toby could never drag Levon free of the burning coils that enclosed him. All the workers together would not have had the strength. Waiters scattered from the madman's path as he picked up pace in pursuit of the tentacle.

When Toby caught up with it he was still holding his bowl of Erta. He smeared the paste over Levon's face and shoulders and any other part of him that showed from beneath the burning skin.

With a roar of what might have been disgust, the Evil-Eater dropped its shit covered dinner. All of the tentacles at once swept towards Toby, knocking workers from their feet, flinging barrows of coal into the air. Toby shut his eyes tightly. He wished he'd saved some of the Erta for himself. The temperature around him rose with the unbearable heat of the creature's skin. He felt like he was being cooked, his breaths searing into his body.

Mere inches from his face, the tentacles began to writhe.

Toby's body gave up and he collapsed.

He woke in a cool office. The Hurani sat behind a desk, watching him over steepled fingers. "Your time of service with us is at an end, young man," she smiled coldly. "You were only

required to pay for one meal, after all."

"No," he protested, "there were two of us."

"Yes there were. Your girlfriend didn't last five minutes in the kitchens, but then, the way she informed on you like that, I didn't think she would. You," she shook her head in disgust, "you are no longer wanted."

"I'll tell," said Toby, his voice shaking with an anger he was only now beginning to feel, "I'll tell everyone what you did to Marie, the Press, everyone."

"No, you won't," the heavies appeared at the door. "Good-bye."

They took hold of him, big hands pulling him away. He had a horrible thought. "What about... what about Levon?"

"He has asked to stay," she said. "His wife is still in hospital, no?"

"But he won't last another day! He can't, he-"

They threw him out.

Toby had almost finished work for the day in the offices of Refugee Action. "All right, Mr. Tihina, I have your details, I—", he stopped speaking in surprise. The asylum seeker's sleeve had fallen back revealing a flash of silver.

"What is problem?" asked the man.

Toby showed him his own bracelet. He'd never been able to find a way to remove it.

They smiled at each other with great sadness. Toby wanted so much to talk to the other man about what they'd been through and he could see that Mr. Tihina felt the same. Neither of them dared.

Toby had tried once before.

Shortly after escaping from the restaurant he had attempted to explain to Marie's parents what had happened to their daughter.

Before he'd even reached the part about the golden invitation, pain shot up his arm from the bracelet. His body stood up of its own accord and walked towards Ahriman's.

He'd been helpless to prevent himself. His legs had stopped only when he'd stood in the alleyway behind the kitchens where steam hissed through the crack between the double doors.

The message had been clear. He ran all the way home again afterwards and threw up in the bathroom repeatedly.

Toby often dreamt of the kitchens: of Levon, Marie and the others. On such nights, he would awaken, bathed in sweat, his wrist stinging under the bracelet. At first, he would see only darkness and in the darkness, the faces of men and women who'd had the evil sucked out of them.

But then, the sound of Eloise's breathing beside him and the stirring of their daughter in her cot, would bring him back to himself and he'd realize that the dead weren't the only ones who'd been purified by the creature.

Toby got up to show Mr. Tihina to the door. They shook hands and then, although they'd never met before, embraced.

"Sometimes," Mr. Tihina whispered, "I even feel grateful to it."

Toby, thinking of his young family, understood the man completely.

A Screen Play: The Boy Who Cried Wo—

FIRST TOWNSMAN: Did you hear something? A... a cry for help?

SECOND TOWNSMAN: Nope.

FIRST TOWNSMAN: Oh good. I must have imagined it.

Fairy Fort

"I'd prefer we fought it out like two men." I said, "like the King and the Kaiser." Kevin and I leaned on each other. Neither of us had drunk before, but we'd earned a month's wages and had spent the money as wisely as our mothers had feared.

"Sure you would, Paudy!" Kevin's splotchy face spun slowly in my vision, "you're twice the size o' me! This way is more fair."

And in the whiskey haze, it all made sense. The braver of the two would ask Peggy to dance at the end of harvest, the coward would renounce all interest in her.

The moon hung low in the sky, illuminating the mound. Fruit trees grew atop it, but neither man nor bird had touched them. We called such mounds *lios na Sidhe*, — Fairy Forts. They cover the Irish countryside and no farmer will put them to the plough. But my heart beat steadily and unafraid.

"Where's the music?" asked Kevin and stamped his feet. "Stupid stories! No dancers. It's just old folks' superstitions like the priests say." He turned to go, but I held him fast. My heart quickened *thump, thump, thump*.

"Who has fear on him now?" I asked. My English was poor despite years away from the Gaelic speaking part of Ireland I called home, "Is it me that has the win?"

"There's nothin' there, Paudy! Use your eyes." But I held him fast.

Although Protestant, and therefore above peasant beliefs, the farmer had built a stout fence around the mound to keep his beasts off. He'd gone to the expense of hammering iron nails closely together 'round the top of the wood so that the head of each nail touched its neighbour and formed a closed ring. We looked each other in the eye and it was like being friends again, like we'd never seen Peggy Mahon.

The moment ended. Kevin climbed the fence and I matched him step for step feeling the rough grain of the wood, the chill of the iron nails. We landed together on the far side. At once the music began, wild and beautiful, played faster than mortal hands could dream of. I gasped. The hill had changed, become larger and steeper. More trees grew there now. At the top, figures danced, kicking and leaping. Their feet tapped the ground so hard we felt the rhythm *thump, thump, thump* in our own bodies. Kevin gripped my hand. I didn't shake him off for a coward — I wanted to run too, my heart wanted it. I felt it like a sheepdog in my breast, dragging me backwards and whining. Then Kevin let me go and began crawling up the slope. If I stayed behind now, I'd have to hang back at the harvest dance too.

So, I followed, clinging to the cover of bushes. Now I could see the dancers, though not the musicians. Men and women of perfect form, giving every appearance of joy. Kevin's feet were tapping and I realised my own were doing the same. I'd danced every winter of my life and had always loved it.

The *Sidhe* smiled widely and glowed with sweat. Dawn was near. The dance must have gone on all night. Some, like a blonde girl in a squirrel fur kilt looked exhausted, but never faltered in step or smile. I felt terrible staring at her bare limbs, but couldn't take my eyes away.

Beautiful, I thought, beautiful. I longed to join her, — to forget for a while my life of toil, — until one of the dancers switched partners and I saw his empty eyes, large and glassy like a dead bull's. I shivered, and began moving backwards down the hill, keeping my eyes on the *Sidhe*.

And then, the blonde girl stumbled.

The music halted and dancers froze. Nobody stopped smiling, not even the girl. Then all of them ran at her and flung themselves upon her, and clamped their mouths to any part of her body they could find.

"No!" I screamed. What possessed me? I ran forward, and Kevin, every bit as drunk and stupid, joined me. I lifted bodies up by their scruffs and flung them away, their smiling faces now bloody. Holes the size of my fist covered the blonde girl's body. She had stumps for legs and one of her arms

lay chewed to the bone like an apple. Worst of all was the fact that even when the rest of the *Sidhe* had been pulled away, she continued to worry gobbets of flesh from her own shoulder.

"*Ná deán sin!*" I blurted, too shocked to remember my English. "Stop that!"

"Paudy!" Kevin screamed. I turned to see a half dozen *Sidhe* leap upon him. A sharp pain ripped through my calf. What was left of the blonde girl was sinking its teeth into me, and others joined her, lots of others, biting hard with their blunt little teeth, each bite burning like the fires of Hell. I flung them off me and started rolling down the hill. Ferns slapped me in the face, furze ripped at my skin and the remains of my clothes. I had to keep rolling at any cost.

I hit the base of a birch and stopped. I looked up, thinking to see my death, but instead I saw the dawn.

I used the trunk of the birch to help me to my feet. The great hill they'd danced upon had shrunk back to the size of a mound. Little red marks, no bigger than the bite you'd get from a horse fly covered my hands. I felt woozy and wondered if the whiskey that had brought me here had planted dreams in my head too.

"Kevin?"

I found him curled into a ball and weeping. Dried blood covered his clothes, but he too seemed unhurt when I pulled him, at last, to his feet.

"They tried to drag me in there," he said, pointing to a rabbit hole. "It was big as a tunnel under the moon."

We helped each other over the fence, and you'd think that would be the end of it, that we'd have learned our lesson.

Around the fire, with old Mahon torturing the fiddle, the younger Mahon talked up a storm, "Why should we do their fightin' for them?" he waved a clay pipe towards the Protestant farm, "The Kaiser's never done us no harm, but them English! We all know what they done for us!"

Murmurs of agreement.

I kept out of the discussion. I lay on my back chewing a stalk. I'd worked two full days with only a night of terror in between them to rest. It was backbreaking work too: cutting rye with a sickle and piling it into stooks to keep it dry. Every muscle ached and I wished I'd more of last night's whiskey to sooth the pain and the thought that an endless succession of such days stood between me and my grave.

Peggy Mahon bent close to her father with a mug. blonde hair fell over her face and reminded me of the fairy dancer the others had attacked and all but eaten. Her left hand carried tea for her father; her right held the old rosary that never left her sight.

"God protect you, Peggy Mahon," I whispered, "and if He won't, I will!"

I suspected Kevin lay in the darkness nearby plotting his own way into her heart and I wondered if our friendship could ever be mended.

Fresh lines creased Peggy's brow. I dreamed I could smooth them away, that I, Paudy, from the back of beyonds, with no land and broken English, could stand with her before a priest. In the firelight, my mind drifted and I imagined she might kiss me.

Abruptly, Peggy straightened. She strode over to my side and knelt next to me. Before I could splutter, she pressed her lips to mine.

Old Mahon gasped. "Peggy!"

A look of confusion crossed her face, followed swiftly by fright. "Not again!" she whispered and ran from the fire with everybody staring after her. Old Mahon threw me an angry look.

"I didn't do a thing!" I said.

"You'd better not, Paudy Sullivan," his voice rasped like an old millstone, "or I'll have you out of here quicker than scour from a sheep's backside!"

He went into a huddle with his bewildered son and a few of the others. They probably couldn't

understand how a religious girl could commit such a sin and so publicly. I decided to sleep away from the camp until they cooled down.

But I needed the cooling more than they! My lips burned and my heart beat even faster than it had when the *Sidhe* had attacked me. Her lips — the curve of her chin in the firelight — tormented me.

A hand grabbed my elbow as I moved away from the fire. I felt a moment of panic.

"It's me, you big lummock!" laughed Kevin. "Did you think the *Sidhe* had come back for you? They might as well now after what you did with Peggy!"

"You sound happy about it! I think you want old Mahon to send me home." He knew how to hurt me, my ex-friend.

"You should have kissed her out of sight, when you knew you could. Like me. I kissed her first!"

"What do you mean?" And then I remembered Peggy exclaiming, "Not again!"

"Oh, you know my meaning, Paudy!" His eyes glinted in the moonlight, "So easy, it is! I was after takin' a little rest behind the cart and I... ha! I just, I dunno, I just called her to me... *I touched her chest.*"

No wonder Peggy had seemed so upset earlier! I flung myself upon him. Poor Peggy! I punched him a few times in the ribs, before he wriggled away. I ran after to hit him some more, but stopped when I saw he was crying.

"I know I did wrong," he said. "But what chance has the likes of me with the likes of Peggy Mahon? Beautiful-"

"Kind-" I added.

"With a dowry?" He sat down on an overturned bucket and I moved to stand beside him, "One kiss, in my whole life. It was over in a minute, but..."

He'd no need to finish the sentence. Not for me who felt the same.

"When I saw you kiss her too," he continued, "I wanted to kill you. But then I knew you'd never be able to do it again and so-"

"Wait," I said. "How did you know I wouldn't be able to do it anymore? How could you know that?" But when he wouldn't look me in the eye, I realised *he* must have tried again and again to make her come to him after the first time.

I didn't want to hit him, so I left. I tossed for a while. I tried not to imagine Peggy coming to me in the night, and then I begged God's forgiveness, because I couldn't stop doing it. Did the *Sidhe* feel guilt when they took what they needed?

God must have heeded my prayers for I fell asleep all alone on the far side of the byre.

Nearby fields held a rival team working just as hard as we. All knew the terrible luck that befell the last labourers in a district to finish the harvest. So we had to work harder now, faster, backs doubled and in such pain we feared they'd never straighten again. Stroke after stroke of the sickle, three handfuls of grain to the sheaf, ten sheaves to the stook and the sun watching all without mercy.

Peggy came from time to time with a ponger of cold tea. She always seemed to miss me, although I knew exactly where she stood in the field without looking. Kevin went thirsty too. "I can't stand it," he whispered, "she won't even look at me."

"With your face so spotted, 'tis no wonder," I said.

"Shut up!" said Kevin, "shut up!"

"Back to work, you two!" shouted Old Mahon from the far side of the field. "Ten minutes more and we're done here."

But it was already too late. Whoops erupted from a neighbouring field and laughter. A voice called over the hedgerow: "Mahon, me boyo! Mahon! We're after chasin' her over the hedgerow," — by 'her' he meant the bad luck, — "Ye hear me, Mahon? We're after chasin' her over to ye!"

Many of our gang flopped to the ground.

"What do I care," Kevin spat, "sure wasn't I born with bad luck already wrapped 'round me neck? I'll tell you this, Paudy Sullivan, I've had enough of it."

"You can do nothing for it," I said.

"No?" said he. He straightened and waved his sickle at me, a shocking breach of manners that could get you thrown off a team, "I'll have that woman," he said, "and not God nor the saints nor old Mahon himself will stop me!"

The gang acted even colder towards me that evening, especially Peggy, as if it was me that had lost them a year's luck. Maybe Old Mahon would give me my marching orders the next day and that would be that. No money for the winter. I was sorry now to have spent the little I'd had on whiskey.

I slept alone again, tortured with the idea that I'd leave Peggy with hatred in her heart. I tossed in my blanket. I wondered what would happen if I explained the whole, mad thing to her. She might forgive me. She might — dared I dream it? — she might confess a love for me too! Madness, of course. But her lips had been so soft. Maybe the magic had only freed her to do what was already in her heart.

I decided to risk it.

I left my blanket and moved 'round the byre. The protestant dogs came sniffing after me, wagging their tails. I'd made friends with them early on and they rewarded me now with licks and silence.

I could see blanket-wrapped bodies in the light of the embers, but I couldn't tell which was Peggy. What if Old Mahon woke as I picked my way among them? Or worse, what if Peggy called out in fright?

While I struggled to come up with a plan, the dogs began hopping with excitement. Then, I saw it too. A figure was moving away from the camp towards the fields. I knew that shape, that mincing walk.

Kevin!

But what could he be up to? His form crossed the first field heading north. Towards the lios.

I hid my blanket and tools beneath bushes at the base of a wall. Then I followed his purposeful form over dry stone walls for two more fields until he stood at the fence around the lios. Now he hesitated. I saw him get to his knees as if to pray, but then he shook his head and stood again. He put something heavy in his pocket and climbed the fence as though it were a mile high and made of sickle blades. I knew how he felt. The terror of the Fairy Fort already gripped me.

I caught him perched at the top, shaking like a leaf. He nearly jumped out of his skin when I gripped his arm.

"This is madness, Kevin," I said.

"Then why did you follow me, Paudy Sullivan?" So bright shone the moon I could see his face as clear as carrots on my spoon.

"We were only in their presence for heartbeats," he said, "and heartbeats is all the power lasted."

"You will not live this time, Kevin," I said.

"And you think you will, Paudy?"

"I didn't come here for that, Kevin, it's wrong, it's—" But he wasn't listening.

"Well, I don't care if they kill me, you hear? Better I never kissed her. But I did kiss her and I won't live without it again." His sweat gleamed in the moonlight. I knew how he felt and tried to lay a comforting hand on his elbow, but he shook me off, "You're worse than I am, Paudy Sullivan. You pretend you have honour and religion, but they're no deeper in you than the scum on boiling porridge. May God strike me dead if I live to see Peggy Mahon in your hands!"

With that, he leapt to the other side of the fence. I knew then, that if I stayed behind, either he would die, and die in sin! Or worse: Kevin would be the one to taste Peggy's kisses, and I the one to live without.

My limbs shook as I climbed the fence. As soon as I set foot on the far side the music began and

trees that had been small were mighty oaks.

"God save me and guard me!" I whispered, but I knew that by my own will I'd stepped beyond His reach. I moved up the hill in search of Kevin. The music grew ever wilder and more beautiful. Halfway, I espied leaping shadows that turned my tongue to a dry lump of old oatcake in my mouth. There seemed not enough air in all the world to fill my heaving chest. I wanted to turn back, but I glimpsed Kevin some way ahead, fondling something in his pocket. A rosary? I wondered. Much good it could do him in a place like this. I stumbled after him. Soon, I was close enough to see the *Sidhe* at their graceful, grinning dance.

Kevin moved behind a tree and I behind a bush no more than five yards to his left, both of us closer to the dancers than to each other. I couldn't move to him without crossing open space, nor could I call out, though I heard breathing even more ragged than my own, which I thought came from him. I tried to wave to him, but he had eyes only for the dancers.

Kevin pressed his forehead against the trunk of the tree. The ragged breathing grew louder. I heard it even though his lips were pressed together. Could it be coming from someone else?

Then he stepped into the clearing and the music stopped. He took a shiny new horseshoe from his pocket and raised it over his head. The *Sidhe* seemed to freeze.

"Now," said Kevin, voice shaky, "now we'll see how you like my iron, eh?"

They pulled back, grins gone, black eyes fixed on the horseshoe.

"Ye have something I want. Not your gold! Ye can keep that!"

They stepped farther back as he advanced to the centre of the clearing at the summit of the hill. Some of them moved to the edges. I heard the ragged breathing again, in the undergrowth. No matter how I looked I couldn't find its source. My eyes turned back to Kevin.

"I'll not burn ye if I get some magic. Ye hear?" Kevin had always been smarter than me, but now he revealed himself to be braver too. Brave enough to win the greatest prize of all.

The *Sidhe* had pulled around in an arc. I feared they would spot me, or hear the terrible breathing nearby. But all continued to stare at Kevin: beautiful women with dainty features, handsome youths, staring, staring, some with mouths agape, some with strands of saliva dribbling down their chins like threads of moon drunk silver. In moments a full circle would form about my friend.

I wanted to run. I *would* run, but first, I'd call out a warning that might give him a chance to flee before the circle closed. The breathing stopped. I opened my mouth to shout at him.

Instead I screamed. Claws tore into my calf and I fell to my knees, while some creature behind me slobbered and bit. I reached back, almost fainting with the pain, all spines and fire. In the distance, I heard Kevin cursing and shouting. Sounds of frenzy filled the glade.

My hands fixed on a neck and squeezed. I pulled the beast away, feeling a chunk of my flesh tear with it. I swung the thing around to smash it against a nearby trunk and stopped. I recognised her blonde hair. The others had eaten parts of her face and one of her breasts. Her body ended at the ribs, the last of which lay exposed and alive with maggots. Her chest heaved for breath. She fixed me with her remaining eye and wheezed: "*Le'd thoil, a thiarna...*" Please, lord. In my language, Gaelic. The speech of old people and yokels. It sounded more like the moaning of wind than a human voice.

"What do you want of me?" I asked in the same tongue. Her lips were smeared with my blood.

"*Feoil*," she replied. Meat.

I threw her from me and turned to flee. But a dozen of the *Sidhe* had appeared on the hill beneath me. The music began again and they took to grinning as they drove me up to the top. I heard Kevin weeping and hope filled my heart. Together, maybe, we could make a stand.

But I arrived in time only to see him dragged feet first into a burrow little wider than his body. Kevin's hand, chewed off at the wrist, remained outside, clutching the horseshoe.

The iron had hurt them: gashed and smoking bodies lay scattered about it. I moved towards it, but a princess, lovelier than Peggy Mahon would ever be, blocked my path. Others followed until I stood alone in a circle of grinning *Sidhe* with only the music for comfort.

I could feel blood ooze from the back of my leg and sweat drenched my brow. Some of the

Sidhe bore injuries worse than mine from Kevin's iron, limp arms and legs where the bones shone through. They all looked hungry.

I grinned at them. What else could I do? Then I laughed and began dancing in time to the music as my mother had taught me. The grins of the *Sidhe* widened. Perhaps this was what they'd always wanted from me. I leapt into the air, arms perfectly by my side. I spun and capered, fighting exhaustion, fighting the pain of every landing on my injured leg. Then they joined in, all of them at once, even the wounded.

Hours seemed to pass. I never felt more alive, more beautiful. I was one of them, truly one of them. At times, my gaze met that of the fairy princess who promised things Peggy Mahon couldn't name. And I wanted those things. More than anything, more than I wanted a lifetime of toil with every Sunday on my knees.

The moon lowered in the sky. And then, one of the injured ones, gasped and collapsed. The others fell on him and began to feed.

I woke on the small mound with blood on my lips and tatters of flesh between my teeth. I swallowed them. I would live now as the Fairies did, free of saints and shame.

The dogs whined and fled from me when I came to collect my blanket. Only Mahon and Peggy watched me go, he with a frown, she with bowed head and rosary.

"Good riddance!" he shouted after me, "my daughter wants no part o' ye!"

I laughed and skipped down the road. I stopped in the shade of an apple tree where Peggy joined me after an hour, her possessions all packed up in a blanket of her own.

Later, tangled in that same blanket, she asked me if I was as surprised as she was that she'd chosen to run away with me.

"Not at all," I said with a yawn, "it's just as I imagined it." Her plain, human face already bored me. Soon, I promised myself, soon I would take her dancing.

The Inferior

(Excerpt)

In that people the most natural and honest of virtues and abilities are alive and vigorous; those same virtues that we have warped and adapted to our own twisted tastes.

Michel de Montaigne, *On Cannibals*

And they said: "Father, it would hurt less
if you would eat us: you dressed us
in this miserable flesh, take it off."

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

Chapter 1

Brothers

The rule was to keep running — *Don't stop, don't die*. The Tribe needed its strongest to survive. So Stopmouth fled for his life through the streets of Hairbeast territory, while its non-human inhabitants looked on with indifference. Already the cries of his brother were fading behind him.

"Please, Stopmouth!"

The Armourbacks preferred living prey. When they caught Wallbreaker, they'd drive him home with spears to feed their young. The screams of such captives lasted for days, echoing down streets and over rooftops.

Stopmouth tried not to think about it. "K-keep running," he told himself. He leaped barrels of flesh and sprinted into an alley narrow enough to give the pursuers some trouble if they were still on his tail.

Stopmouth realized he couldn't hear his brother any more. He skidded to a halt. The hot air of mid-afternoon stank of blood and rang with the booming howls of fighting or mating Hairbeasts. He could feel his heart battering against his ribs and he leaned his tall frame for support against a crumbling wall. *Don't stop. Don't think. Keep running*. He wiped his stinging eyes and whispered the name, "Wallbreaker." Humanity might survive without his brother, but Stopmouth knew he could not. Wallbreaker had always been the darling of the Tribe. He'd been a sweet child, grown up to be a great hunter, and people would forgive him anything, even a half-idiot brother. And they had forgiven always, smiling indulgently through the younger boy's stammers in order to please his handsome sibling.

And yet, if Wallbreaker failed to make it back, Mossheart would have to marry somebody else and that would mean... Stopmouth pushed the thought away with a shiver of self-disgust. He forced himself to turn round. He tried to spot his brother, but crowds of burly Hairbeasts blocked his way. The creatures filled the market place with the sharp stink of their fur. They bartered for flesh in high gabbling voices and sometimes the larger males would push against each other, chest to chest, until one gave way.

He shoved sweaty brown hair out of his eyes and marched back the way he'd come. The councillors would be angry if they knew what he was doing. "Suicide!" they'd cry. "Waste!" He didn't even have a spear to defend himself, having abandoned it in his flight.

He reached the last place he'd heard his brother's voice: an alley flanked by tall buildings where light from the great Roof struggled to penetrate. He found some traces of blood here, but they were old. Stopmouth tiptoed to the far end, his muscles trembling with exhaustion, his body and loincloth dripping with sweat. Here at last he heard the tones of human speech: a whimpering, pleading voice so unlike that of the great hunter Wallbreaker was becoming.

This can't be my brother, Stopmouth thought.

The alley opened onto a small square, where incomprehensible murals covered the walls with swirls of dried blood. A few Hairbeasts watched curiously as Wallbreaker, his fair hair streaked with filth, retreated before the spears of the Armourbacks. He made no effort to take one of his attackers into death with him. Instead, tears flowed freely down his handsome face, shaming him and his family.

Even as his heart swelled with pity, Stopmouth began having second thoughts about a rescue. How could two humans hope to defeat five Armourbacks? The adults reached chest height on a man, but they were broader, and a rock-hard shell made them tough to kill.

Stopmouth gritted his teeth. He wasn't ready to die, but he refused to let these beasts keep his brother. And he still had time — they preferred live prisoners to quick kills.

He swallowed his fear and jogged back to the mouth of the alley. Then he took a quiet lane running parallel to the one the Armourbacks would probably follow to their territory. He'd need to find

a place where he could come out ahead of them. And a plan — he'd need one of those too. He'd have to think one up as he ran.

He passed open doorways where lonely Hairbeast females boomed with song. He leaped old drains and clattered over wider stretches of water on metal bridges. All around him the ancient buildings of the city echoed his footfalls or muffled them in carpets of ragged moss.

Far enough, he thought.

A shaky tower stood nearby with a grey-furred Hairbeast snoozing in its doorway. The creatures were larger than humans and he clipped this one slightly as he jumped over it. He pounded up the stairs, ignoring its bellows. He had no idea what it was saying. All he knew was that the creature was unlikely to break treaty to hunt him.

Three floors later he reached the roof. The surface creaked underfoot and cracks snaked all over it. The whole building looked ready to collapse. Maybe that was a good thing — he might be able to turn the bricks and loose lumps of concrete to his advantage.

Stopmouth walked over the rattling roof to the waist-high wall that bordered it and looked down. Almost immediately he saw his brother's blond head. The Armourbacks pushed him in front of them with jabs of their spears. Humans would have surrounded their prey, but Armourbacks preferred to drive theirs. Perhaps they feared to leave a desperate enemy within striking distance of their backs.

As the pack moved up the street towards his position, Stopmouth carefully pried rocks away from the wall of the tower. He heaved and strained until a few of the larger ones were balanced on the edge. He wiped sweat from his eyes and tried to ignore the thumping of his heart, which had started up again at the sight of the enemy.

"Come on! Come on!" he whispered. He rarely stuttered when talking to himself.

Wallbreaker passed beneath him. Stopmouth held his breath, waiting for the first Armourback. The moments stretched, measured in beads of sweat and a frantic hammering in his ribcage.

Suddenly a flash of light blazed in the sky above him. Heartbeats later a boom followed that shook Stopmouth's tower and rattled the roof beneath his feet.

The Armourbacks lowered their spears and stared up in what might have been astonishment. But they weren't watching Stopmouth — their eyes, and even the eyes of their prisoner, were fixed on the great Roof above. Stopmouth didn't dare follow their gaze. Whatever was happening up there, he wouldn't let it cost him his brother.

He leaned against the largest of his rocks and sent it plummeting towards the Armourbacks. Before it reached its target he grabbed another and flung it after the first. Just as well: the early attempt missed, but the second smashed an Armourback to the ground and snapped the hind legs of another.

"R-run, Wallbreaker!" he shouted. "R-r-run!" And Wallbreaker did, finding the energy somewhere. Stopmouth had expected the remaining Armourbacks to pursue his brother or tend to their injured. Instead, he saw them dart into an alley flanking his tower. He knew that they were heading for the ground-floor entrance and that they'd reach it before he did. He paced around the roof, looking for a way down, for another building to jump to. Too far! At best he'd end up in an alley with a broken leg, and treaty or no treaty, any Hairbeast would be well within its rights to claim him for the pot. No, he'd have to make a last stand right here. He grabbed stones for his sling while something clattered up the stairwell towards him. Death was coming. He backed away from the doorway, knowing he couldn't hold them there without a spear.

Moments later the creatures burst onto the roof of the tower. They didn't shout as men might have: if the Armourbacks had speech, the human ear couldn't hear it. They advanced through a hail of slingstones with no apparent discomfort and spread out. Stopmouth had never seen living Armourbacks so close. They had flat faces, mostly made of earth-brown shell with gaps for a pair of red eyes.

"C-come on!" he shouted at them, terrified now. "W-what are you af-fraid of?" He flung another stone and unsheathed his bone knife. If he could get past one of their spears, he might be able to cut an Armourback between the plates of its shell before they killed him.

One of the creatures charged. The spear-tip tore through Stopmouth's loincloth as he dodged to

one side. Another spear flew towards his ribcage and drew a red line there before clattering into the wall. Stopmouth lunged after the weapon, but two Armourbacks herded him off as the third retrieved it.

He backed away until he felt the parapet behind him. He could throw himself over: better a Hairbeast should have him than the Armourbacks.

Suddenly a roaring sound filled the air. Something huge and blazing flew over the heads of the combatants and streaked through the sky to crash into some distant part of the city. The ground shook. The wall behind Stopmouth's back groaned and a hole opened in the tower's roof. Two of his opponents disappeared into it, leaving only a rising cloud of dust to show they'd ever existed. Stopmouth and the last Armourback shared a moment of shock and silence. The human recovered first. He screamed and charged his enemy. The creature dropped its spear and ran back the way it had come.

Stopmouth gave chase. Rubble covered the stairs, and rocks large enough to kill hurtled past with every step. He charged into daylight and found his enemy already dead beneath fallen masonry.

In the distance a column of flame and dust was rising into the air. Stopmouth looked up. There was nothing to be seen but the Roof of the world and the fading light.

Chapter 2

The Volunteers

Stopmouth reached Man-Ways just as Roofglow faded to the weaker light of evening. "Hey!" Rockface was on guard in the tower, a big hunter with a bigger voice. "Heard you were dead! Wallbreaker says he saw them get you!"

The young hunter's spirits lifted with the thought that his brother had made it. But why had Wallbreaker said that he was dead? Had he seen the Armourbacks heading for the tower and kept running instead of attempting a rescue?

"That can't be true," Stopmouth said to himself. "It can't."

He was too tired to think about it now. So he hefted the limbs he'd cut from his kill onto his shoulders and stumbled into friendly territory.

But Rockface hadn't finished with him yet: "You know, Armourback flesh is a lot lighter if you take the shell off." Stopmouth felt stupid as the older man laughed, but at least he could use the armour as a plate. Nothing would be wasted.

People murmured greetings as he passed into the dozen criss-crossing streets that made up human territory. 'Man-Ways', it was called; or more often just 'the Ways'. Everyone looked surprised to see him except for a small boy too young to know better and eager to help with the kill. Gratefully Stopmouth passed over an arm crusted at one end with dried blood, and the pair trudged together to Centre Square, where fires burned and voices rose in song.

The wedding, of course. He'd forgotten. The singing died at his approach. Most of the crowd knew Stopmouth and an excited whispering rose among them. However, no one addressed him until his mother burst from their midst and ran towards him.

"Dearest Stopmouth!" she cried. "Oh, my Stopmouth!"

He dropped the Armourback flesh and put his arms around her thin frame. He pressed his face into her hair as he'd done as a child and felt warm tears against his neck.

"Wallbreaker said they'd killed you," she said. "He himself got three of them. Says he crushed them with rocks, but then the others trapped you in a house and he couldn't get to you."

Uncles and aunties and cousins now felt able to approach. He tried to smile at them, but his eyes caught on Wallbreaker emerging from the crowd. He broke away from his mother. He'd never felt so betrayed in all his life.

"Y-y-you..." he said. His tongue refused to co-operate and Wallbreaker had all the time in the world to step up to him and hug him close as their mother had done. He whispered directly into Stopmouth's ear. "Later," he said. "Please, brother. I told them what I had to."

Then Wallbreaker turned to the crowd. His blond hair had been cleaned and threaded with carved bones for the wedding. "My brother is alive! He's alive!"

The celebrations must have been muted until then, but now everybody cheered. Wallbreaker showed the crowd his fine teeth and a pair of dimples. "Tonight I marry!" He held up one finger to forestall another cheer. He'd always been good at winning hearts. Many thought he'd be chief some day. But to Stopmouth's eyes, he was sweating more than usual. He saw a slight shake in his brother's arms that had never been there before. Wallbreaker kept talking. "You won't be seeing me or my wife tomorrow' — laughter — "or the day after, or the day after that! But from the fourth day on, I will devote what little energy I have left' — more laughter — "to finding a bride price for dear Stopmouth!"

The cheers were deafening this time, and now everybody surged forward to hug Stopmouth and kiss him. Even Chief Speareye approached and threw heavily tattooed arms around the young hunter. "Glad you made it," he said. "We can't afford to lose the likes of you! Now, for the love of the ancestors, do as your brother says and find a woman to count your days for you!"

His mother took over and sat him down by a fire. She brought him steaming broth in a Flim-

skull bowl.

"Your favourite," she said.

The smell made his head spin and his mouth fill with saliva. He found his strength barely sufficient to lift the bowl high enough to drink, but the first slurp was delicious and he buried himself in it. Afterwards, when his belly was full and warm, his mother came and took his head onto her lap and the whole world seemed to darken around him.

He woke hours later to the sound of drums. Here and there little drops of roof sweat plinked onto the ground or fell hissing into the fires. Nobody noticed; it happened every night when the air grew cooler. He felt a frigid droplet rolling off his face and realized it must have woken him. He'd slept through most of the wedding ceremony.

Delicious smells filled the air. Men from nearby streets were dancing and leaping over cook fires and he knew he should have been with them. Beside him, Uncle Flimnose alternated between rubbing his joints and licking Stopmouth's empty bowl. Flimnose's dancing days were over, the scratches on his Tally — one for every day since his naming — almost beyond counting. The younger man shuddered and looked away. Instead, his eyes wandered over to another fire where his new sister-in-law, Mossheart, held court for the last time among the unmarried girls. Their eyes met and she smiled. He smiled back, his heart a stone in his chest.

"How did you get out of the tower?" asked Flimnose.

"The w-w-walls f-f-f—"

"The walls fell," said Flimnose.

"The fl-fl—"

"Ah! The flash? You saw that? And something crashed to earth! The Tribe talks of nothing else. Somebody said it was a Globe that fell out of the sky."

Stopmouth stared at his uncle in astonishment, but the old man grinned, as if to say he didn't believe it either.

The drum beat came to an end and men wandered back from the dance, laughing and wiping sweat from their brows. High above, the Roof lay in darkness except for lines of tiny lights that covered it and allowed a man to see maybe fifty steps around him without a torch.

Uncle Flimnose pointed up at them. "That's where the spirits have their streets," he said, "until room is made for them to come down again as a new species."

Stopmouth nodded politely and clenched his jaw against the stink of his uncle's rotting teeth. Flimnose had helped teach him and Wallbreaker to be men, but lately hunting parties were reluctant to take him on lest he slow them up. Stopmouth felt sorry for him. There was no fate more cruel than to live beyond usefulness without even realizing it. The younger man remembered all those stories of the Traveller's adventurers they used to share after Father had died. Nobody told them like Uncle Flimnose, and who knew how many tales would be lost when he left to join his ancestors? Stopmouth found he had to turn away. He looked over to where married women toured fires with baskets of sizzling flesh. They chanted in time to the music about how the bride would provide many children, how the groom would feed them, how the children would live. Stopmouth buried his face in a hank of Hairbeast pup so he wouldn't have to look at his uncle and think about the man's fate. But Flimnose wouldn't leave him alone. "Will you chew some of that flesh for me, young man?" he asked. "Otherwise I'll be sticking to broth and roof sweat at my own nephew's wedding!" Stopmouth obliged, feeling ashamed for not offering.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the drums took up again. This time it was the turn of the unmarried women to dance. A murmur of anticipation ran through the men, but Stopmouth turned away. He knew his eyes would only be drawn to his new sister-in-law and he didn't want the others to catch him staring.

Instead, he lay back to watch the lights glittering on the Roof. He imagined the lonely spirits there looking back at him, eager to take his place among the living. As he watched, a Globe floated by overhead, its metal shell glittering with lights of its own. Stopmouth wondered idly if it was a living

creature and what its flesh might taste like if he could get close enough to crack it open. Men had harboured such vain hopes for all the generations. And yet, if the rumours were true, at least one of them *had* fallen today. If it hadn't... He shivered. The miracle had saved his life — balance for the betrayal of a brother who'd not only abandoned him, but had even claimed Stopmouth's kills as his own. He ground his teeth. He'd expected sorrow for the day of Mossheart and Wallbreaker's wedding. He hadn't expected to be so angry.

"Keep it to yourself, son," said Mother from where she sat nearby, although he hadn't said a word.

He nodded to reassure her. He was nothing without Wallbreaker. Who else would take him seriously with his lazy tongue? No, he'd find his brother soon after the wedding and tell him he wasn't angry, even if it still burned. And so for the rest of the feast he did his best to join in the laughter and the dancing, clapping to the songs he couldn't sing.

At the end of the night Mother handed Wallbreaker's Tally stick over to Mossheart, who would count his days from now on. Then Wallbreaker took his bride's other hand and led her off to bed in the Wedding Tower. Stopmouth tried to cheer with all the rest and forced a smile when other men slapped him on the back and said, "Your turn next, boy!"

Mother understood. After the festivities she took him home and put him to bed as if he were still a babe.

Stopmouth shielded his eyes and stared out towards the horizon. There was little to see beyond the human streets as morning mists still rose from the trees in the no-man's-land beyond. Then his gaze was drawn to the Roof as eight Globes swept past, for all the world like a hunting party. He heard shouts from others who were watching too. Old-timers couldn't remember such behaviour from their youth, nor from any legend of the Tribe. Globes were supposed to hang in the sky, or to drift slowly by. Their new speed stirred fear into people's hearts like an augury of disaster.

On the ground, life went on much as it always had. Beasts of various kinds who kept treaty with humans walked the streets. Sometimes they hunted each other or traded for flesh and weapons. Wallbreaker said these creatures should be observed, even the friendly ones.

"S-so m-m-many kinds," Stopmouth had said the first time they'd talked about it. Back then he'd been barely old enough to have a name.

"Yes, little brother, and I can see it's confusing. But you can never know them well enough. Father would have told you that. Friend or foe, their smells, their strengths, their habits. Study them right and they'll all meet your spear in the end."

So now Stopmouth watched a pod of Clawfolk skitter down the road on bunches of skinny legs while a multi-coloured Flyer surveyed them greedily from a tower, chewing on flaps of its own dry skin.

Human children played at stalking in the bright light of noon. Their mothers looked on, some anxious, some smiling, while others scolded any child too close to supposedly friendly beasts. Women only carried knives, but their ululations of alarm could pass from street to street over the flat roofs of the buildings until hunters came running from every direction.

Stopmouth was relaxing on the roof of his house while Mother scraped moss away from the parapet with an old shoulder-blade. *Scratch, scratch, scratch.* "It grows so quickly," she muttered. *Scratch, scratch.* And nobody liked the way it smelled when the juice hadn't been pounded out of it. "What a nuisance." She stopped abruptly at the sight of Uncle Flimnose limping by below.

"I heard he hasn't h-hunted in f-fifty days," said Stopmouth.

"No," said Mother, her face formed into that mix of affection and sadness she mostly saved for her younger son. "Even then, he went with a large party and his spear stayed dry. It won't be long now for him."

As Flimnose's only surviving female relative and marker of his Tally, Mother alone knew

exactly how old he was. She rested a hand on Stopmouth's waist. "When his time comes, I want you to go with him. For the family. Will you do that?"

"W-what about W-Wallbreaker?"

"Wallbreaker won't go."

"B-but—"

"Hush," she said.

Stopmouth hadn't seen his brother in a few days. As promised, Wallbreaker had been spending all his time with his new bride. Stopmouth passed his own nights staring at the ceiling, trying his best not to think about that. During the day he distracted himself with foolish efforts to make spear points from the Armourback shell he'd brought home with him. Mother's visitors laughed at him for this — bone was so plentiful, so easy to shape, that none could understand why he bothered. "If it's such good material for a spear," scoffed Uncle Flimnose, "why don't the Armourbacks themselves make weapons of it?"

Stopmouth had no answer to this. After an entire quarter day he'd succeeded in rubbing a dent no bigger than a finger-joint into a piece of shell. The rock he'd been using came off worse. Still he worked at it, using the rhythm to send himself into a painless trance where Mossheart and Wallbreaker had never married and his brother hadn't abandoned him.

Mother took her gaze from the street and sighed. "You'll have to speak to him sooner or later," she said, and Stopmouth knew she didn't mean Uncle Flimnose.

He looked into her pale eyes and saw how the skin crinkled with worry at the corners. She must have hated to see her sons at odds. How old was she now? How long before he and Wallbreaker must lose her for ever? He could deny her nothing.

He nodded and left her alone on the roof. He collected a spear and his old bone knife and set out for the rooms Wallbreaker and his bride had taken after they'd left the Wedding Tower. On his way across Centre Square he smelled the sharp stink of Hairbeasts, like a mix of metal and human sweat. Five of the creatures strode by, dressed in what might have passed for finery among them: coloured shells, necklaces of human bones (in honour of their visit?) and their clawed hands dyed red. He knew what it meant and felt a moment's fear for his mother, although she still had many days left, being useful and healthy.

Chief Speareye had turned up to meet the Hairbeast delegation. In spite of the heat radiating from the Roof he wore a fur mantle made from a patchwork of the hides of every creature humans hunted. Four wives accompanied him. *See what a provider I am!* he seemed to say. *I can feed them all and their children too!*

The Tribe's fiercest hunters guarded the chief's party. Wallbreaker stood with them, as did the brute, Crunchfist. Rockface waited nearby, healed of the wound that had kept him on guard duty. A crowd was gathering to witness the trade and Stopmouth tried to edge through it to the front.

The head of the Hairbeast delegation boomed something at Chief Speareye. Humans couldn't speak Hairbeast, or any language other than their own. Every generation or so, somebody would try to learn some non-human tongue, but of all the ancestors only poor Treatymaker had ever succeeded. However, one word of Hairbeast understood by all was the coughing grunt that signified 'flesh'.

The Hairbeasts made that sound now, one after another. Then their leader placed ten human fingerbones on the ground before Speareye.

"Ten!" shouted Speareye. "They'll give us ten pups!"

"Yes, and they'll take ten of us in exchange!" yelled a woman in the crowd.

Speareye glared in her direction.

"Anybody who doesn't like to eat can say so now." He waited, but nobody else objected.

"Do we agree?" shouted Speareye. "Do we agree to ten?"

The people muttered in assent, even the woman who'd complained. Ten was an unusually large number for the Hairbeasts to ask. Stopmouth wondered if they'd begun a war with one of the species that bordered them — the Armourbacks perhaps. Absurd rumours were flying around that

Armourbacks and Hoppers had been seen hunting together. Stopmouth shook his head. Of course that couldn't happen. Creatures would need a common language to co-operate in something as complex as a hunt.

The chief accepted the ten fingerbones, and the Hairbeast delegation turned round and left immediately. The crowd began to disperse, muttering in excitement and fear.

Stopmouth took his chance.

"Wallbreaker!"

"Stopmouth!" His brother seemed uncomfortable. He kept scratching his ribs as if they itched terribly. "It's good to see you. Don't think I've been avoiding you — you'll know what I mean when you're wed yourself someday!" He winked, but the lie hurt anyway. Besides, what Wallbreaker and Mossheart got up to was the last thing Stopmouth wanted to think about.

"We need to talk."

"You're angry at me," said Wallbreaker. He was still keeping the palm of his left hand over his ribs. "You forget to stutter when you want to kill me."

"I d-don't!"

"Look' — Wallbreaker gripped him by the arm — "I really thought you were dead, all right?" At last, the truth. "I saw them follow you into the tower and I hadn't a scrap of strength left in me. I'd have been worse than useless to you. But I've big plans to make it up to you, all right?"

"N-no n-need! I f-forgive—"

Just at that moment a careless group of people departing the gathering bumped into the brothers. They knocked Wallbreaker's left hand away from his ribs, revealing the new tattoo that had been placed there. Only the chief could award tattoos, and only for outstanding bravery. This one showed three Armourbacks being crushed by a rock. Wallbreaker caught Stopmouth staring and folded his arms again to cover the tattoo.

"I'll make it up to you," he whispered. Quickly he turned away, and Stopmouth saw scars from Armourback spear-points dotted around his spine. He was headed for the chief's house, where the tattooed warriors would be holding the flesh meeting. They'd never let Stopmouth in. So he wandered home, angry all over again, and set to work at more mindless rubbing of the Armourback shell. He kept working after dark, unable to sleep, with only the cook fire for company. But his hands were tired now, even if his mind was not. The shell slipped from his fingers and into the flames. He cursed and poked it out again with a stick. But his cursing changed to laughter as soon as he got back to work. He laughed so loudly, he woke his mother with it. "What's wrong, son?" she asked. "I see you smile for the first time in days!"

"F-fire!" he said. He held up a piece of brown shell as large as his hand. One end of it had been worn away to a perfect point.

Most people got nervous on the night of a flesh meeting. They tossed in their sleep and in waking hours regretted enmities made with the tattooed hunters who could vote. Stopmouth was no different. He worried for Mother in spite of her obvious vigour. He'd heard from some of the women who'd seen her Tally stick that she wasn't that old. But youth was never sufficient protection. All must be able to serve the Tribe, either in life or death. So, knowing he wouldn't sleep anyway, he decided to keep working on his new spear-tips. He finally had the knack of it and made good progress.

By now, frequent handling of the blades had cut a grid of streets into his palms. He cursed as the larger piece of shell caught him again and again. However, eventually he succeeded in melting the tips onto a pair of straight shafts that Wallbreaker had given him for his first hunt. He still didn't understand why the Armourbacks wouldn't use their own shell for tools. But they were known for a fear of fire, so perhaps it wasn't so strange after all.

At last Stopmouth fell asleep gazing at the finished product, overcome by the beauty of the leaf-shaped blades. All thoughts of the flesh meeting, his fears for his mother, sank with him into the

darkness.

Thousands of charcoal drawings blackened the houses on Centre Square in the spaces between skulls and other trophies. And there was soot too, from the fires where people came to cook and tell the stories of the Tribe. These twelve buildings, three-storeyed and spacious, had seen John Spearmaker lift the first weapon. The sounds of the Traveller's farewell speech had passed through their curtained doorways, soaking into the very walls that yet other Heroes had given their lives to defend. The Tribe, whose heart this place was, had come again to fill it with life. Children watched from every rooftop or squabbled for a spot on the ancient fountain at the very centre.

Chief Speareye's wives had spread word of a Choosing. Extra guards manned the towers, but almost all the rest of the Tribe — perhaps as many as three thousand human beings, had turned up. Some people wouldn't come, of course; would prefer to bring shame on their families by hiding. Sweat beaded many a brow, and tense speculations passed from mouth to mouth. People jostled and hugged their families close. Speareye climbed onto a platform made of hide and bones that had been set up outside his home. He swept back the patched mantle to reveal a torso of wild tattoos. Each represented an act of greatness in the story of his life. Speareye still hunted better than any of his rivals, but men whispered that his arm was slowing. They said he was grooming his son Waterjumper to take over. The boy, born a few hundred days after Stopmouth, stood awkwardly at his father's side. He had yet to make a first kill, but his frame was filling out and already he had begun to take on the look of his father.

Nearby, tattooed hunters waited in case of need, all standing close to the platform. As Stopmouth pressed forward, he spotted Wallbreaker among them as well as the frightening Crunchfist, who was said to love Choosings and looked forward to them eagerly.

"My people," cried Speareye. He recited the meaningless ritual, as every chief had before him, winning instant silence. "I need ten of you to come forward now so that the rest of us can make it Home. Who will act to spare the Tribe?"

"I will." Stopmouth knew the speaker. Everyone had said Bonefire would volunteer this time. She no longer had a husband and her last son had disappeared during a recent hunt. Her daughter's man had been feeding her, but with another baby on the way... People applauded and here and there muttered the formula: "How brave! She still had a thousand days in her!"

Bonfire stepped through the crowd and climbed onto the platform. She accepted Speareye's kiss and the kisses of others who would miss her. Two more widows followed her into honour, along with a hunter whose broken leg had never healed properly. His young wife tried to stop him, screaming all the while. But the man limped onwards while others kept her back until she lapsed into helpless sobs.

"We need six more, my people!" shouted the chief. No one offered themselves. He seemed disappointed. The crowd grew restless. Some people looked around, others kept their heads down. Here and there, little groups hissed and argued. Stopmouth saw one frail woman being pulled in two directions by a family tug-of-war which ended with her staying put. Finally Speareye snapped his fingers. Hunters pushed into the crowd and grabbed several people. All were old or injured and all had been chosen at the flesh meeting the evening before.

"I can still hunt!" screamed one old man. It was Uncle Flimnose. Tears poured down his face, shaming the whole family. Stopmouth winced. The old man shouldn't be crying, he should have known; Mother would have told him. The Tribe didn't care how old a hunter was so long as his spear drank often. But the women who counted a man's days knew by his Tally when his arms would start to weaken. It was their duty to help him leave the world with dignity and honour.

Some of those who knew Flimnose patted him in sympathy, but most looked away in disgust. Crunchfist barged through the crowd, a big smile on his face. He grabbed the wailing Flimnose by the hair and dragged him to the front.

Now there were ten "volunteers" whose Tally sticks would be stored in the House of Honour. "Let's pick the escort," cried Speareye.

It was an easy mission, though a grave one: a simple exchange of loved ones for food. Stopmouth stepped forward as his mother had asked. Four other hunters joined him: Waterjumper, son of the chief and not much older than himself; Linebrow and Burnthouse, two men of middle age and experience; and Rockface, who would lead.

The volunteers and escorts ate a meal together of dried Clawfolk flesh. Stopmouth offered to chew Uncle Flimnose's for him but the old man refused to eat. Then, with those who could walk supporting the others, they set out for the Hairbeast district while the rest of the Tribe looked on in relieved, respectful silence.

Stopmouth spotted his mother at the edge of the crowd. He cut his thumb and carefully flicked a drop of blood towards her. She smiled. "Your blood has come back to me," she said, her face proud, "and so will you." People nearby nodded approvingly at the old ritual.

The first leg of the journey took the party to the perimeter of the Man-Ways. They trudged down one of the four great streets leading from the square, past crumbling houses that leaned one against the other for support. Most were empty, their only visitors patrols and naughty children searching for ancient spearheads and scraps of rotted hides.

When the group passed the towers, guards peered down to see who'd volunteered.

And others were watching too. In many areas of the city the streets were made of water — Wetlanes, people called them. Blurred shapes waited beneath the surface, shapes that lived in a world every bit as competitive as the one above, and would pull a human under, given the chance. Beyond a metal bridge lay no-man's-land. This was a wilderness between territories. Roads and knee-high walls slept here under blankets of thick moss, while fast-growing saplings defied human efforts to keep the area free of cover for hungry enemies.

Stopmouth's heart beat faster. He'd come back this way less than ten days before when the Armourbacks had almost caught him. He had to work hard to control his terror, wondering if more experienced hunters ever felt the same or were just better at covering it.

Soon, red and purple branches arched overhead to block the light and a thousand tiny mossbeasts buzzed around every member of the party.

As they approached the Hairbeast district, Uncle Flimnose began to wail again and tried to hang back. Rockface frowned and shook his big head.

"P-p-please, Uncle!" Stopmouth whispered.

"You just pray to the ancestors you never get old! So proud with your Armourback spear. Just you wait! I held you on my knee, I fed you and—"

"Oh, hush!" said Bonfire, the first volunteer. She was a tall, spindly woman and didn't have much flesh on her. But the Hairbeasts wouldn't mind: they prized human marrow above all other delicacies and would swap pups to get it. Sometimes they would even trade the flesh of rare and distant beasts that humans had never seen living.

"That boy can't be more than five thousand days old," Bonfire continued. "We had our chance. Let the young have theirs."

The party stopped within sight of the first Hairbeast guard tower. "Strange," said Rockface. He shielded his eyes with one heavily tattooed hand. "I don't see any sentinels."

They advanced more cautiously. No Hairbeast walked in the first laneways of the district, but in the distance, great booming cries could be heard.

"Never seen this before," said Linebrow, one of the other hunters. He was perhaps two thousand days older than Stopmouth. He had few tattoos, but a scar ran the length of his face, driving a wedge across the bridge of his nose. Rockface waved his spear at Stopmouth and Waterjumper, the youngest members of the party. "You two, move to the front! Use those sharp eyes of yours, hey? Waterjumper, if you see anything, call out. Stopmouth can't always get his voice working."

The streets stayed empty and the party's nervousness grew. Everywhere, barrels lay overturned;

pots of blood waited under half-finished murals. In one house they spotted a few mewling pups, without adults to look after them. The younger ones lacked fur entirely and still walked on all fours.

"We should take those pups now and run for it," said Waterjumper.

Rockface laughed at him. "And what if one of the Hairbeasts saw us, Little Chief? Are you going to put the treaty back together when nobody can even speak to them?" The hunter with the scarred nose sniggered too. Waterjumper blushed.

The booming sounds of Hairbeasts drew closer. Two large males ran past them. One of the creatures had blood streaming from its fur. They ignored the humans completely.

A few minutes later the hunters entered one side of a small square at about the same time as four brown-shelled Armourbacks entered the other, their red eyes glittering. Both parties came to a halt. Five human warriors versus four Armourbacks put the odds only slightly in the beasts' favour. Normally two well-matched groups would leave each other alone. Better to hunt weaker prey than risk heavy casualties, only to end up with more flesh than they could carry home.

However, something strange was happening in the Hairbeast district that day, and all the hunters knew it.

Fear grew in Stopmouth's belly. Only luck had saved him in his last encounter with these creatures and he didn't want to fight them again. But it shouldn't come to that. The Armourbacks probably wouldn't recognize the volunteers as non-combatants and would think themselves heavily outnumbered. They might run away. But, to Stopmouth's dismay, Rockface lacked the ability to see things from a beast's point of view.

"Volunteers!" he said. "Stay back, hey? Go into the laneway we just left. Stopmouth and Waterjumper, take the edges. Linebrow, Burnthouse, keep with me. Aim for the joints. If you get behind one, strike at the base of the neck. They hate that."

The hunters formed themselves into a line and stepped across to the middle of the square, where their longer reach could be used to best advantage. The four beasts got their backs to a wall, but instead of edging away, as Stopmouth had hoped, they gripped their spears and charged, concentrating their attack on the centre of the human formation.

Linebrow's spear snapped against Armourback shell. He had no such defence of his own and he cried out in terror and then pain, folding onto the ground like a dropped blanket. Rockface's weapon broke too, but he swayed aside at the last moment and used his knife to slice his attacker's throat.

At the edges of the line Stopmouth and Waterjumper escaped the charge by leaping away and keeping their distance. But when the three surviving enemies pulled back, Linebrow was beyond help and Burnthouse's right arm dangled at his side. He fell onto his behind, staring at his useless limb.

Rockface patted him on the back and took his spear for himself. "We can win, boys," he said. He had a manic grin on his face. He knelt next to the Armourback he'd killed and popped an eyeball free. He waved it at the enemy before eating it. "I'll eat you too!" he shouted, and to Stopmouth's amazement, he laughed. The pause in the fighting had given the young man's terror a chance to grow. His palms sweated on the shaft of his spear. He knew that if they stayed here, they'd die, and that he himself could escape only if he ran.

Too late. The Armourbacks were charging again. Stopmouth braced his spear against the ground and tried to aim the tip towards the neck joint of his attacker. His weapon hit armour instead. To his surprise, it crunched straight through the beast's shell and stopped it dead. The creature's arms twitched so fast they seemed to blur. And then it dropped, taking his spear with it. He tried to pull it free and panicked when the shaft came loose without the tip. But the other beasts seemed to have forgotten about him. Nearby, Waterjumper sat with bloody hands over his stomach and a look of surprise on his face. Only Rockface was still fighting. The two remaining Armourbacks had backed him into a corner and jabbed at him almost playfully.

With shaking hands, Stopmouth unhooked his sling and grabbed a few stones. He aimed for the base of the neck. *Crack!* A perfect hit! One of the creatures dropped soundlessly. His next missile hit shell instead, but now the last Armourback knew he was there, and when it half turned towards him,

Rockface shoved a dagger deep into its neck.

"Good boy!" he shouted. "They hate someone at their backs! They hate it!" Then he saw the first Armourback, which Stopmouth had killed by punching straight through its armour.

"How?" he asked.

"Th-the s-spear-p-p-point. Sh-sh-shell."

"Speak plainly, boy."

"Ar-Armourback sh-shell. I m-made it f-f-from—"

"Never mind," said Rockface. "You can tell me later."

Rockface walked over to the wall where Waterjumper and Burnthouse sat side by side in the dust. Waterjumper groaned and held his hands over his belly.

"Let's have a look there, Little Chief," said Rockface. He tried to pry Waterjumper's hands away from the wound. The boy resisted but had no strength. "It's not as bad as you think, Little Chief. Don't look at it, hey? I want you to watch the Roof while I bind it. Tell us if you see any Globes."

Without warning Rockface plunged his knife into Waterjumper's left eye. The boy twitched once and relaxed.

"I don't need any help like that," said Burnthouse weakly. He'd pulled moss from the wall of the building behind him to stem the bleeding in his arm.

"You'll hunt again, Burnthouse. Your wife will keep marking your Tally so long as we can get you home. What are you doing, Stopmouth? Get over here, boy."

"A m-minute." Stopmouth had been slicing fragments of shell from dead Armourbacks. He wrapped all he could carry in Linebrow's loincloth. The poor man wouldn't be needing it now.

Just then the hunters heard sounds of running feet. Before they could react, a dozen Hairbeasts loped into the square. They carried clubs with rocks tied to the ends — a good weapon for fighting Armourbacks if you were as large as they. Blood matted their fur. They boomed and hooted at the humans. One of them approached Rockface, bellowing their word for flesh. It butted him out of the way with its chest. Then it threw Waterjumper's body over its shoulder and loped off. Others stepped forward to claim Linebrow and, shockingly, the Armourback corpses too. Then they were gone again, running down the alleyway from which the humans had emerged.

"It seems," said Burnthouse, "the Hairbeasts are no longer at peace with the Armourbacks."

"Or with us," said Rockface. "They took our kills too. Let's get out of here."

"Wait," said Burnthouse as Stopmouth helped him to his feet. "We need to know what's going on. The Hairbeasts didn't seem too worried about the treaty. That's not like them."

"S-scared," said Stopmouth.

"What are you scared of, boy?" asked Rockface. "We won, didn't we?"

"N-n-no, th-th—"

"He means the Hairbeasts," said Burnthouse. His arm seemed to be causing him great pain. "Those big hairies were terrified. And so am I! I've changed my mind about finding the cause. Just get me home."

They went back to the alleyway where they'd left the volunteers, but found only blood and signs of a struggle. They could easily have tracked the trail leading away from the scene but knew that it was too late for the volunteers now anyway. The Tribe had to be told what was going on.

In the distance the men could hear a roar, as if giant hunting parties were clashing with each other. They ran until they came to a crossroads less than five hundred paces from the empty zone between human and Hairbeast territory. At the end of one of the roads they saw a group of Armourbacks and grey-furred Hoppers surround some Hairbeasts and spear them to death. The three men had heard rumours of this. But who could believe such a thing? It was as if two distinct races, Armourbacks and Hoppers, had found a way to talk to one another and had planned an invasion of the district together. Impossible and shocking.

The humans hurried on, hoping they hadn't been seen. They reached no-man's-land near the crossing over the Wetlane. A guard waved frantically at them from the first tower. Stopmouth turned to

look. Two hundred paces behind them, a troop of Hoppers burst from between buildings and approached at great speed. Powerful hind legs drove the creatures forward at twice the length of a man with every leap. Grey fur streamed behind them and long arms were constantly moving to keep them balanced. They were not strong, these beasts, but no faster creature lived in the city and few were more dangerous on open ground. Frantically Stopmouth and Rockface reached for weapons while the injured Burnthouse stumbled on alone. "Sling first!" said Rockface over the high, excited cries of their enemies. "We'll get a shot in!" And they did, both stones finding their mark on the lead Hopper, which fell back. Its fall tripped two others while the rest leaped over the pile-up and came on at speed. Their human-like hands held short stabbing spears; their little eyes glinted.

Stopmouth heard a horn blowing back at the guard tower. Shouts told him his people were coming. Too late, too late! Rockface flung his spear when the Hoppers were no more than twenty paces away. He wounded one and knocked another off balance so that its next hop took it into the Wetlane. It screamed in a high voice as the water around it thrashed and turned red. Another Hopper leaped at Stopmouth. He managed to push its spear aside with one hand while the creature's momentum carried it onto his dagger. The impact knocked him from his feet and pinned him under his enemy. He felt its hot breath wet against his face and heard thuds as more of its companions landed on the bridge.

I'm dead, thought Stopmouth. This time I'm dead. Nearby he heard laughter, then shouts and running feet.

The Hopper's corpse was lifted away. He blinked up at the face of Chief Speareye.

"Where's Waterjumper?" said the chief. "Where's my son?"