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“*The Realms Thereunder* is a fantastically compelling novel mixing the best of fantasy, adventure, and intrigue. It’s one of those can’t-put-down tales you’ll be thinking about long after turning the last page. Fans of C.S. Lewis, the Inkheart Trilogy, and of course Stephen Lawhead will find much to enjoy in this well-crafted read.”

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THE ANCIENT EARTH TRILOGY

BOOK ONE:

THE REALMS THEREUNDER

ROSS LAWHEAD



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

FOR DRAKE—
WHO HAS BEEN ON OVER A HUNDRED
HERDIC QUESTS WITH ME.

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De Nideplonde



*“But whatso hap at the end of the world,
Where Nothing is struck and sounds,
It is not, by Thor, these monkish men
These humbled Wessex hounds—*

*“Not this pale line of Christian hinds
This one white string of men,
Shall keep us back from the end of the world,
And the things that happen then.*

*“It is not Alfred’s dwarfish sword,
Nor Egbert’s pigmy crown,
Shall stay us now that descend in thunder,
Rending the realms and the realms thereunder,
Down through the world and down.”*

—THE BALLAD OF THE WHITE HORSE:
VI - THE SLAYING OF THE CHIEFS,
G. K. CHESTERTON

PROLOGUE

1

The Swindlestock Tavern

20th April, 1524

“And I say that you’re a fool, Addison Fletcher!” the brawny man declared, striking his ale mug against the bare wooden table for emphasis.

“God smite me where I sit if I tell a lie, Coll Dawson!” Addison protested, his eyes flicking heavenward for the briefest of moments.

“Ah, *but*—did you not say,” declared Coll, cocking an eyebrow and pointing a finger. “Did you not say that you got this account from another—”

“From Rob Fuller,” piped a voice from the end of the table.

“Aye, from Rob Fuller. And who’s to say that a tale told by Rob Fuller is true or false? Swearing oaths upon secondhand tales is not wise.”

“Then tell me, is it wisdom or foolishness to trust honourable

men? I've known Rob this last twenty year and judge him to be a straight and honest man."

"Even so," continued Coll expansively. "An honest man may—"

"Enough!" came a shout from the table next to theirs. "You bicker like a pair of divinity scholars. I would hear the rest of the tale and judge for myself!"

"Aye, the tale!" came another shout from behind Addison, and the chorus was picked up by all of those in the tavern who were in earshot of the two men.

"Alright! Alright!" Addison banged his ale mug on the table. When a reasonable silence fell on the room, he drew breath to speak. "Where had I gotten to?"

"The blacksmith was working late on a moonless night when a man walked in . . .," a helpful listener prompted.

"Aye, aye, just so. And full old he was—with a beard, white as a cloud, down to his waist, and a red—"

"You described him already!" came a cry from another table.

"And a red robe!" Addison Fletcher shouted. "A red robe that was bordered with all manner of delicate and intricate designs! *Alright?*"

There was chuckling among the crowd.

"Anyhow," Addison continued, quieter. "This old gent comes up to the blacksmith—Sam, the blacksmith's name is—and bids him good evening. Sam bids him likewise and asks what service he can give the old man. The old man without saying a word hands him a bar of gold this big." Addison held his hands apart.

"What's this?" asks Sam.

"I need you to make a shoe from this strip of gold that would fit a warhorse," says the stranger, and gives him the size, which is large enough for a destrier. The blacksmith sets to work and—it being no especially hard task to shape gold—he soon has the shoe made. He hands it over to the old man along with the parts of the

gold bar that he hasn't used. He does this thinking that he'll get some of the gold in return and more of it if he's honest. For in working with the stuff, he's judged it to be proof pure.

"But the gent merely puts the gold scraps in a pouch he carries on his belt and asks the smith to pick up his shoeing tools and follow him.

"Where are we going?" asks Sam, and the old man answers that the job isn't finished until the horse itself is shod. With assurance that he'll be compensated for his time, Sam falls in step alongside him.

"Well, to hear Sam tell of it, they walk out of the town proper—this was all happening in Reading, by the way—and along the river Kennet past the abandoned abbey grounds and into the forest. They go about a mile inwards, until they reach a cave in the side of a cliff. The old man ducks his head and walks in without pausing and Sam's right behind him trying not to lose sight of him in the dark.

"It's not too long before they come to a small room carved out in the rock in the corner of which is a large pile of jewels—rubies, emeralds, diamonds, garnets, sapphires, and the like. There are two grand archways in this small room leading to two large halls like feasting halls. In one of them he can see men, warriors, all done up head to foot in armour, and sleeping, each laid out on the floor shoulder to shoulder, toe to toe.

"In the other room are horses, massive warhorses, all of them likewise asleep but upright and covered in fine blankets under which they wear armour. And each one of them is shod with four golden horseshoes.

"The old man enters this second room, but Sam is told to stay where he is, and not to touch the pile of jewels. As he waits Sam takes in all he can about the place. He ends up by counting the horses and reckons there to be about seventy or so.

“Well, the old man reappears, leading a listing horse down the centre of the hall and into the smaller chamber.

“Sam is told by the old man to shoe the horse and so he does, all the while eyeing the pile of jewels and asking questions—questions about where he is, who the knights are, and how the horses have been kept—but the old man doesn’t say a word, as if he can’t hear Sam.

“Well, Sam eventually finishes his work and puts his tools away. The old man studies his work, praises his handicraft, and then hands Sam a leather pouch. Sam opens it and finds it empty. He asks the old man what it is.

“‘You may fill this pouch with whatever gemstones you wish from the pile,’ the old man answers. ‘But do not put anything of value in your shirt, tool satchel, or anywhere on your person, else the knights will wake up and surely kill you. Fill it as much as you can but make sure that you are able to draw the strings shut, for if you leave with it open the knights will wake up and surely kill you and I won’t stop them.’

“So Sam goes over to the pile as the old man leads the horse away and he starts cramming the bag full of precious stones. He’s sufficiently scared of the old man’s tale about the knights killing him to not put anything on his person. But also he’s thinking that he’ll make a return trip here the next morning with the same pouch and carry even more away.

“Sam packs the pouch tight enough to just be able to pull the strings together, and the old man leads him out of the cave.

“Once outside the old man turns to him and says that he may return to his forge, but he is not to tell anyone of what he has done this evening. The old man then goes back into the cave and Sam walks home.

“Now anyone who knows Sam knows that it only takes a prod to start his tongue wagging and scarce has he crossed his own

door's threshold then he's gabbing to his wife about all that's just happened to him. She finds this all hard to believe—”

“She's not the only one,” Coll Dawson said to the man sitting next to him.

“*But,*” continued Addison, “he's got the bag full of gemstones that he carried out with him. He throws this on the table and says, ‘Here's the proof.’”

“The wife opens the bag and sticks her hand in and pulls out something small and hard and then lets go of both it and the bag. ‘What is this? A joke?’ she asks, angry.

“Sam goes over to the bag and tips out the contents onto the table. Instead of all his diamonds, rubies, and such, there's just a pouchful of old dried-up horse droppings. Sam tries to tell the tale again, but his wife has lost patience with him and makes him sleep that night in the forge.”

“Women are unreasonable like that,” said a man at the next table.

“The next day,” Addison continued peevishly, “Sam goes back into the forest to look for the cave but he can't find it. He finds a cliff face that he thinks is the same place, but it is just a blank wall of stone. He keeps hunting around and finds a few caves but none of them go back very far.

“He's gone back every day since, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the night, but he has never found the chambers of the sleeping knights again.”

Addison Fletcher had finished his tale and marked it by taking a long drink of his ale. “So now,” he said, wiping his moustache. “What do you say to that?”

“I've heard it before, told just that way,” said one man from the back of the crowd.

Addison's face brightened. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, only it wasn't just an old man in red, it was Merlin

himself!” Addison’s face fell. “And it wasn’t just any knights the blacksmith saw, but the Knights of the Round Table. Waitin’ for judgment, they were.”

“When I was on tour in the Freincs’ lands,” said a grizzled man at the next table, “I heard a man tell it as with Charlemagne who needed a golden spear. But he was sleeping under this famous mountain, like.”

“Lies, that is. It’s *dragons* that live in mountains.”

“But what about *my*—” Addison tried to break in.

“Nay, ye daft bugger, they lie on top o’ them,” argued the war veteran. “They fly about above the clouds in the day and sleep atop a mountain of nights.”

And they all fell about to arguing over these and related matters until the bell rang for closing.

CHAPTER ONE

Oxford Is Not Safe

1

Eight Years Ago . . .

FOUND!

Manhunt for missing kids ends in Scotland.

Daniel Tully and Freya Reynolds, the two schoolchildren who went missing 72 days ago, have been found near Kilmarnock, in East Ayrshire, Scotland. Alex Simpson, the son of a farm owner, discovered them yesterday at 5:04 p.m. Both were covered in mud and displayed signs of severe shock and were disturbed mentally but were otherwise in good health when examined at St. Bride's Hospital by Peter Tavish, MD. No statement has yet been made by the children. A joint statement by the parents and the police describe themselves as "joyful and relieved" at the return of the children, who will be driven to Glasgow to undergo further examination.

Daniel Tully, 13, and Freya Reynolds, also 13, went missing

on a class trip to a church in Abbingdon in the British Midlands over two months ago. Criminal experts are at a loss to explain.
(continued on page 5)

2

Now . . .

Daniel Tully sat unmoving and unnoticed—just another gargoyle on Broad Street. A paper cup in front of him held fifty-six pence in small coins and there were two pounds in his pocket. That meant either a proper meal or a bed in the night shelter. He really wanted both. He could try blagging his way into the homeless café—the Gatehouse—even though he was too young at only twenty years old. That would give him a meal and he could buy the bed and keep the fifty-six pence for tomorrow.

“Spare change, mate?” he asked a pair of business trousers.

The legs continued without breaking stride. Two other pairs of legs coming the other way stopped in front of him and he looked up.

Two girls, students, stood in front of him and one of them was digging around in her purse. She hastily fished out a couple of coins—her friend gazing sourly at her all the while—and dropped them into his cup.

“God bless you,” Daniel said. “Both of you, God bless you.”

They hurried away, the sour one berating her friend for—what, exactly? Daniel sat stoically until they dashed between the columns of the Bodleian Library. Then he leaned forward and inspected the latest windfall. There looked to be seventy-eight pence now. That meant she only gave him twenty-two.

Sighing, he got up, shouldered his overstuffed rucksack, and started walking to St. Michael’s Street. The bodies in front of him shifted, opened, and closed in their usual manner. And through

the ebb and flow, a figure was suddenly revealed and then hidden again—a small, lean, heavily tattooed figure that walked with an animalistic gait, wide and lurching.

Daniel froze, his heart racing. He pushed his breath out in a low whistle, his hand instinctively rising and clutching at an object hanging under his jacket along his rib cage. He gripped it so hard that his knuckles went white.

With an effort he opened his fist and started walking again.

He strode quickly this time, weaving deftly through the crowd, trying to close the gap between himself and the tattooed head. He still had not caught sight of it by the time he stood underneath Carfax Tower, the intersection of the town's busiest foot traffic. He stood, turning slightly as he rapidly scanned the faces of those approaching from four directions, hoping—but dreading—to see the squat, hairless head.

Underneath Carfax Tower was another homeless man selling magazines—Scouse Phil. Daniel approached him with a nod. “Alright, Phil?”

“Eee, our Dan. How's yourself?”

“Yeah, not bad, not bad. You ain't seen a short bloke, kind of thin, shaved head, tattoos, that kind of thing? Passed by about ten minutes ago?”

“That who you were looking for over there? Can't say I've seen him that recently, but yeah, I've seen him about. Tattoos all swirly like, but with lots of edges. Nasty business he is. Largin' himself up, throwin' it around like God Almighty. Violent. Got thrown out of the Gatehouse a few times. You got business with him?”

“Not as such. He was at the Gatehouse? He's on the streets? Where does he hang out?”

“Dunno. I've seen him a few times around the canals down near Hythe Bridge Street. Doesn't keep regular with any company I know. Independent like.”

“Name?”

“Don’t know a name. Best left well alone in my opinion. Wide berth, Danny, wide berth. Listen, if it’s some *horse* you want—”

“Nah, see you around, Phil. Cheers.”

“Cheers, then. Be well.”

Daniel turned and joined the crowd. A glance up at the clock tower showed the time to be twenty to five. The Gatehouse would be open now. He stroked his beard and turned his feet in that direction.

It was the busiest time of the day. People crisscrossed in front of him, ducking into shops, doing after-work errands before going back to their homes and dinners with their loved ones. Groups of tourists—students on school trips, all of them with matching yellow backpacks—stood in clusters outside the fast food restaurants, yelling at and flirting with each other. And for the second time that day Daniel caught a glimpse from within the swarm of faces of someone he recognised.

He stopped in his tracks. “It can’t be . . .”

He turned and looked at the sea of people. She wasn’t there anymore; the tide had closed. Lurching forward, he ducked into Ship Street, a long, narrow, fairly empty side road. There were two people at the far end and a solitary one walking away from him. This person was young—his age—female, slender, with black hair that was tied up loosely—and she carried a bag that looked to be bulging with books. A student, then. One hand dangled at her side and he could see that it was a light creamy brown.

He found his voice and shouted, “Freya!”

She didn’t turn around or even break her stride but kept walking. He shouted her name again.

“Freya, come back!”

Without turning around she broke into a run, sprinting away from him.

He chased after her. He was only halfway down the street when she had reached the end, and by the time he finally made it to Turl Street, she was out of sight.

For the second time that day—that hour—he stood bewildered, searching the faces in the crowd. He wasn't surprised that she ran. If she was a student, then it may not be too hard to find her again, but what did it mean? First one of those creatures, and now Freya—two people he'd nearly given up ever seeing again. The fingers of his right hand stroked the edge of a notebook that was tucked in his jacket pocket. He would have to record these incidents later. No time now.

He retraced his steps and cautiously approached the Gatehouse, spending a futile ten minutes trying to convince the lady at the door that he was over twenty-five when they both knew he wasn't. In the end he asked for a plastic bottle he had to be filled with water and then he went across the street and waited, slunk against a low brick wall. He passed the time by trying to get his nerves under control but was unsuccessful in doing anything more than slowing his breathing.

The Gatehouse closed at six, its patrons trickling out singly or in pairs. If the tattooed man was in there, Daniel knew that he would be noticed but almost certainly not recognised. He hoped that would be enough of an edge.

Fewer and fewer people were coming out now and Daniel was about to get up himself when the tattooed man appeared. He got a good, clear look at him this time. Hairless, dressed in a loose-fitting T-shirt and black leather trousers. It didn't look like he was carrying any weapons except perhaps a knife in his pocket. Swathes of ink covered his body so broadly it was possible to think that he was naturally blackish-blue with only patches of white. His face was lumpy and swollen in the way that a continual scrapper's usually are; his features doughy and slightly formless. His lips were

curled into a thin, cruel line and his ears were ragged, torn. He wore sunglasses that comically humanised him, like a dressed-up pet; for there was now no doubt in Daniel's mind about the creature's true identity.

It walked towards him on the opposite side of the street. Although Daniel couldn't see its eyes, it must have spotted him, though it gave no sign. It continued walking and turned the corner.

"Okay, okay . . ." Daniel rose and followed but kept to his side of the street. He didn't know how ruthless the creature would be, how heedful of public places it would be, so it was best to keep his distance for now.

He caught sight of his quarry again as it turned down George Street, towards the canals that led to Jericho. Daniel followed, lagging far enough behind to keep the thing in sight, not caring if he was seen. Although it never turned or threw a glance behind, *it knew* it was being tailed.

The sky had dimmed but it was not yet dark. This was a time of the day that excited Daniel, but he willed himself to stay calm. He tried to turn that nervous energy into a taut, controlled tension and awareness. If it was to be now, then it was to be now. Whatever must follow, must.

He stepped into the doorway of a boarded-up corner shop to quickly adjust his clothing. He unzipped his coat so it was just done up about an inch and hung loosely together in front of him. He pulled his arm out of its sleeve, which he tucked into its outer pocket. Shrugging and hunching forward, he tucked his forearm into his stomach and gripped the handle of the thin, cold object that hung at his side.

If he walked carefully enough, he'd give the impression of having both hands tucked into his jacket pockets. It wouldn't fool anyone who looked closely, but it would do for someone who was only giving him the briefest of looks.

Stepping out from behind the abandoned shop, he saw the shadow creature crossing the bridge ahead of him, still en route to the canals. He walked as quickly as he could without giving himself away, briskly crossing the street and cresting Hythe Bridge.

He was just in time to see the thing take a right turn along the canal, passing through a cycle gate. It took him some time to get across, due to traffic, and when he did, the tattooed man was nowhere in sight.

He slowed his pace and scanned the area. The canal ran just a few feet to his left. Houseboats were moored intermittently along the side, and to the right was wild scrubland, not very deep, but thick enough with brambles and tall grass to adequately hide someone in this low light undetectably. Right now Daniel's best shot was to keep himself out in the open and wait to be attacked. He kept walking.

"Steady," he whispered. "Steady now." As he inched forward, he tried to hide his fear, but then decided that it would be better for the one hunting him if he didn't hide it. He tried to keep his breath even.

The seconds dragged on until he heard, with a relief that nearly chilled him, a faint scuffle on the path behind him. He turned carefully, keeping his left shoulder most visible, and saw the creature standing off at a distance of about thirty feet. It had discarded its sunglasses and T-shirt and was crouching on the footpath, half naked and wreathed in shadows, leering at him.

"Lonely little light," it said. "Dim light, faint light. All alone in a city of one hundred and fifty thousand. A fraction so infinitesimally small, it's hardly worth expressing. Statistically insignificant, equivalent to nothing."

Daniel wanted to reply, to try to deflate its gloating pride, but he was depending on the creature's conceit to survive the

fight—he had to play the role of unsuspecting prey. He set his jaw and narrowed his eyes, bracing himself for the attack.

The thing opened its lips in a sneer, revealing teeth sharpened into spikes. “It has been eighty-one days,” it said, “since I’ve had a decent meal.” It raised its hands to show that it gripped two spring-loaded knives in its hands. “Eleven and a half weeks; one thousand nine hundred and forty-four hours. I will savor you, I guarantee.”

It licked its lips and then broke into a low, frantic run. Daniel crouched, waiting for it to leap. It had to leap; they always leapt. If it didn’t leap, he wasn’t sure of his chances.

Daniel crouched even lower as the creature drew closer, and just when he thought it was too late, it pounced nearly twice its own height up into the air where it arced perfectly, on course to land right on top of him.

He waited until it reached its peak, perfectly silhouetted against the evening sky, and then with a smooth, lightening-fast motion, Daniel’s right arm came up through his open jacket, grasping the hilt of a sword with a wide blade just a few feet long. It stuck in the air, unwavering, perfectly placed to pierce the creature’s chest as it fell.

The thing had only a fraction of a second before it descended upon the blade. Its eyes widened in surprise while its mouth was still twisted in hate. As the sharp, thin metal penetrated its torso, the beast spasmed and dropped its knives. In a smooth movement Daniel brought his left hand up and struck the creature on the pelvis, using its own momentum to carry it up and over his head, flipping it over onto the pathway behind him.

It fell squarely on its back, and as it fell, Daniel moved his arm in such a way that his sword was pulled automatically out the thing’s chest. He held it poised for another strike but one was not necessary. There was a gaping, steaming wound in the thing’s chest

that gurgled and spewed thick, black lifeblood. Its throat worked, desperately trying to breathe. Its eyes gazed distantly into the sky.

Daniel kicked it in the head with his foot and then crouched down, pressing his left hand on the side of its skull and putting his mouth near the creature's tattered ear.

"Listen to me carefully," Daniel said in an even, clear voice. "If, when you reach the dark, smoky pit where you will surely burn in unending agony, you are able to send a message to your friends through whatever infernal back passages exist, tell your vile brethren this:

"Oxford is not safe."

He stood and with his free hand grabbed his slain victim's leg, dragging the body into the tall grass, far enough so that it almost certainly wouldn't be discovered until the next day, if not much later. Once hidden he bent and slit its throat, just to be certain. He wiped his sword as much as he could on the weeds around him—he'd have to go into a toilet somewhere and clean it more thoroughly when he had the chance—and replaced it in its sheath underneath his shirt. Then he went back and kicked around the dirt and gravel on the footpath to mask the blood.

All that done, he walked briskly back the way he came, feeling himself still glowing with adrenaline and triumph. Not too far from where the killing took place, he found the thing's discarded T-shirt and sunglasses, which he casually kicked into the dark waters of the canal. Then he stepped out onto the busy pavement and the flickering yellow light of the street lamps, which were just coming on.

When the body was discovered, he thought, they would not be able to identify it, "it" having no identity. The weapon that made the wounds upon the body was odd enough to be unique, and unknown to anyone but himself, so no one could possibly connect him to it. The business looked fairly airtight.

Still, it was prudent to keep a low profile the next few days and

perhaps steer clear from the night shelter, where enquiring minds usually dropped by at some point. His stride broke slightly as he recalled that he had talked to Scouse Phil about the thing, and he chided himself. But there was little he could do about that now.

A man coming towards him on the pavement fixed an odd stare at Daniel's forehead as they passed, and then quickened his step. Daniel slowed and put a hand up to his face, then held it out.

Blood. Not his, but the creature's.

He turned to the wall and rubbed every inch of his face with his palms, drying them in his hair, until he judged that he had probably removed as much of it as he could, or at least smeared it to a thin red film. Yet another reason to find a stall in a toilet soon.

Then he had to find a place to sleep that night.

Then he had to find Freya.

And above him, from the rooftops, dark eyes that had seen the city when it was just a wooden fortress and a church watched—cold and passionless.

3

She used the glove trick to get into the coffee shop. The practiced motion of pulling her hand out of her pocket to push the door open brought Freya's woollen out as well. She went through the door anyway—pass one—and then put her hand back in her pocket. Her face registered puzzlement for a moment and then she turned and saw her gloves. She went back outside—pass two—bent down and grabbed a glove without really looking, pushed back hurriedly through the door—pass three—looked down to her hand and realised she had only picked up one glove, went back outside—four—picked up the second glove, and came back inside—five.

Five passes were enough in a place like this with lots of people, but there were some places she tried very hard to avoid and some

streets that she wouldn't even walk down. Being back in Oxford made her nervous. There were too many old doorways and arches. The bricked-up ones she came across—in her college's hallways, in the sides of buildings and churches—made her especially nervous and she gave them a wide berth. She was going through her medication faster than she'd like. She'd have to talk to her psychiatrist about that, but that would have to wait five weeks until the end of term. What would she do if she ran out before then?

She ordered a latte and took a seat. It was overcast outside and she couldn't see the sun—definitely a day to be cautious. Her watch said she had about forty minutes until the lecture. She had started chapter five of her *Introduction to Moral Philosophy* book three times. Her mind kept racing ahead to the lecture at ten a.m., and she hoped she could control herself this time. The medication would take the edge off at least. Maybe.

Leaving places was fairly safe, especially with a lot of other people milling around, so she didn't have to test the doorway leaving the coffee shop like she had to when she entered it. From St. Aldate's it was a short walk down Blue Boar Street to Merton Street and then into the exam schools. She circled around and entered via the main doors on High Street, which meant that she only had to deal with one set of doors to get into the building and then one more set to get into the room the lecture was in. For both of these, she pretended that she was waiting for someone to meet her; checking her phone and looking around allowed her to repeatedly duck in and out of the doorways. People would think she was lost, maybe, or a little ditzzy, but they wouldn't think that she was crazy at least.

The monitor in the entrance hall informed her that Textual Histories of Pre-Arthurian Britain was in the large lecture theater called "South Schools." She followed the signs that led her up a wide stone staircase with a bannister made of rose marble. Then she took a right into a large wood-paneled, L-shaped room

and found a seat, third row from the back. Scanning the room as students continued to file in, she didn't find a single familiar face. Eventually the lecturer, a fortysomething woman dressed completely in black, came to the podium and cleared her throat, a cough that reverberated from the speakers and echoed off the walls.

"Good morning, everyone. I'm Dr. Fowler," she said when the chatter had died down. "We've got a lot to cover this morning, so let's get started.

"'The Matter of Britain' is the name that we give to the works that form up the early pseudo-histories of Britain, as told by the Anglo-Saxon settlers, orally, and recorded by monks in the ninth and tenth centuries. It should be noted as being separate from Celtic legends—in this context predominantly Welsh, Irish, or otherwise Gaelic legends, although there was quite a lot of crossover, as we shall see."

The professor tapped a few keys on her laptop and the board behind her displayed an image of an ancient piece of paper with nearly indecipherable text printed on it. "This," she continued, "is the first page of the *Historia Brittonum* written around 870 Common Era by the scribe Nennius. It is perhaps the oldest English account of the settling of the British Isles—and the originator, perhaps, of a lot of the confused and conflated myths traditionally associated with the settlement of Britain, myths that initially branched out of the Trojan tales of Greece, which were also very popular in Rome. It is thought that the work was created for wealthy Welsh families in the fifth century as a way to justify their claim to nobility and to cement their position as a ruling class—and obviously has little relation to objective fact. The tales centre around the legendary Brut, a son of—yes?"

Frey's arm was in the air. Her heart was pounding partly with anxiety and partly with anger. "Wouldn't it be more reasonable

to assume that those accounts are objectively true? Seeing as no other accounts disagree with them?”

Dr. Fowler shrugged. Interruptions were rare in this type of lecture, but she was professional enough to take it in her stride. “There may be certain grains of truth within the various accounts, but were you to read them closely—as I’m sure your tutor will insist you do—then the appallingly fabricated fantasies within them will show quite apparently.

“Now, this Brut,” Fowler continued, “was a hero of Troy—”

“I’m sorry,” Freya said amid a swell of groans from those around her. “We know that Britain must have been settled at *some* point. Why is it unreasonable to believe the tales which state that it was a group of exiled soldiers—veterans of the Trojan wars—and their families?”

“I thought *I* was scheduled to give this lecture,” the professor replied. The other students in the auditorium chuckled pointedly. “I’ll gladly change places with you—I did quite a lot of this during my doctoral thesis so it’s old hat to me.”

“But why not take the account at face value?”

“Because it’s completely unverifiable—fanciful even. Why—”

“Just because something cannot be *proven* true doesn’t mean it *isn’t* true—even if its claim to truth is unlikely. In fact, it’s more likely that an improbable truth would be recorded than a probable one.” This provoked more groans, and more than one request to “shut up.”

“But, *reasonably*, it is unlikely that an account of settlement could have survived two and a half thousand years to be recorded by an obscure Welsh monk.”

“If there *were* an accurate relation of settlement,” Freya said, her voice rising, “how else would you expect it to be recorded? Besides, the fact that there are many other surviving, corroborating, independent reports—”

“Not independent—*derivative*.”

“You say that they’re derivative of a lost source because they’re similar, but why can’t they be similar because they’re all true?”

The professor sighed and took a moment to collect herself. She shouldn’t have allowed herself to be drawn in; she was falling behind schedule. Was this some sort of gag? “It makes no sense to spar with me about veracity when I have an entire section dedicated to authorial ‘tricks’ or ‘stunts’ of authenticity. You’ve obviously read some of the material, but if you *understood* half of what you *know*, then you would realise how outlandish your claims are.

“Why,” the professor continued plaintively, “on the same grounds, you could argue the case that Britain was populated by giants as was also popularly believed and recorded.”

“I *do* argue the case on the same grounds,” Freya said. This brought shouts of derision from the other students, and a couple of them slipped out of the hall to fetch the porter. “The history of giants in Britain is too independently supported to argue credibly against. Accounts of giant occupation are recorded in nearly all of the Brut legends, as well as Irish tales and sagas, such as the Fenian Cycle’s *Acallam na Senórach*, and Scandinavian histories like the Vafnsdal Saga—let alone those recorded in the Bible and other Middle Eastern histories as well as Slavic traditions.”

Dr. Fowler snorted and then smiled. “This is a joke . . .” she murmured.

“I’m talking about human interaction with giants in each of these cases,” Freya continued. “Not creation myths or rationalisations about the acts of nature. These are one-on-one encounters.”

A man in a blue uniform was now standing at the end of Freya’s row, beckoning furiously at her. The class had dissolved into noise—much of it directed at Freya. The professor seemed to be in a mild form of shock. The porter leaned into the row and called to her. “Miss, could you come with me please?”

“If giants *had* existed,” Freya continued defiantly, “in the way that they are reported to have been, they would have left *exactly* such an imprint on history. There are too many disparate sources, all with the same interior logic.”

“No, it’s impossible,” the professor replied, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “There is no archaeological evidence for—”

“That’s irrelevant!” Freya shouted. “There’s no archaeological evidence for anything until someone finds it! Absence of evidence isn’t the same thing as—”

“Miss,” the porter urged. He had now come partway into the row and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I *must* insist that you come with me!”

Freya gathered her bag and rose. “That’s no argument at all! If we were having this conversation two hundred years ago, you’d say that Troy didn’t exist either, but they found *that*, didn’t they? Then they thought twice about the so-called Myths of Troy!”

The professor stood silently and patiently as Freya was led out of the room in the company of the porter, and then she resumed her lecture with the legend of Brut. She had to run very quickly through, rather ironically, textual variants in Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, but she came through the ordeal in the end.

Outside, Freya was enduring another stern and predictable talk that referred to the student code of conduct and the privileges and responsibilities of studying at Oxford. Her mind was racing and she was angry, though mostly at herself. Idiots. They didn’t understand. Things weren’t “true” or “not true” just because they wanted them to be. History didn’t follow the rule “the most convenient is true.” But it was impossible to explain to anyone who didn’t want to listen. Why did she even try?

That was the real question: why did she even try?

“This is your second warning,” the porter was saying, not unkindly. “The next time I come in to remove you may be the last.

This is the sort of discussion that you should be having with your tutor.”

Freya nodded. That was something else they wouldn't understand. She couldn't talk to her tutor because her tutor wouldn't know what Freya was talking about. She wasn't reading English. She was reading philosophy and theology.

“Okay,” the porter continued. “I can allow you back in if you promise not to talk or make a fuss. Can you do that?”

Freya turned without saying a word and went outside. She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she was a good way down High Street before she realised that she'd only gone through the doorway once on her way outside. She stopped immediately, paralysed by a building tidal wave of panic. She braced herself against the wall and watched the people pass her on the pavement and the traffic rattling up and down the street, oblivious of the terrible chaos that engulfed them—that existed in all things.

She needed order; she needed to know that things could make sense, that she could enforce her will upon the storm of existence. She crossed the street twice, and then four more times. This calmed her and she kept crossing the street as she made her way into town.

Why did she do it? What did it matter what people thought and believed, even if it was a lie? What right did she have to burst the fragile bubble of unreality that people surround themselves with? So long as they live happily, what does it matter if they live a lie? Ignorance is a blessing. It was futile to try to wake people up, so *why did she do it?*

Freya sighed. She knew exactly why she did it.

She was so wrapped up in these thoughts that she almost walked right into Daniel Tully, the one person in the whole city she was deliberately trying to avoid. She held her breath and saw that he seemed to be so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he didn't notice her either. She walked closely by him, very nearly

brushing his shoulder, and then took an immediate turn down a side street.

She forced herself not to break into an immediate run. If he didn't notice her by now, he didn't have a reason to come after her. Freya's heart felt like breaking, though, seeing him like that, clearly living off the street. She had spotted him yesterday, sitting outside the Sheldonian Theater, begging. She was in a bookshop café across the street and must have stared at him for almost an hour, not sure if she should go to him or leave him alone. If she did, what would she say? What could she say? Did it matter if she said anything, and if it didn't, then why should she put herself or him through the torture of awkwardness. And so she just sat there, oscillating between action and inaction, and doing nothing, on the verge of tears.

"Freya!" came a shout from behind her. It was definitely his voice even though it was deeper—a man's voice now but unmistakably his.

Her heart nearly stopped but she kept walking.

"Freya, come back!"

That was too much for her; she broke into a flat-out run. She made it to the end of the street and did a quick turn left and then right, not stopping until she reached the Bodleian Library, which was students only—they wouldn't allow him in there. She managed to keep herself together until she found an unoccupied study desk, sank into it, head in her arms, and started sobbing silently.

4

Alex Simpson of the Northern Constabulary pulled out of the Muir of Ord police station and started the drive back. He was tired to the bone, but there was an electric ball of energy in his gut that pushed him on. He had changed out of his uniform, naturally, but

he had pocketed his notebook. It lay on the passenger's seat next to him almost radiating weight and importance.

He pulled into the small driveway of his small cottage and let himself in, going straight into his back study and sliding the elastic band off the cover of the black notebook. He thumbed to the last page of writing. He studied it for a few moments and then turned to the wall map. It showed all of Scotland, took up most of the wall, and had cost a fair penny. Today it would be working for him.

For the first time in several months he had managed to get some time alone on one of the office computers, where he could access the NC's intranet. Until today, he had been unable to peruse Scotland's crime and misdemeanor reports for anything that looked—well, suspicious. Suspicious to him, that is. And finally he had found something. Missing livestock, even killed and mangled livestock, was no novelty in the highlands, but that, coupled with a 27 percent bump in area crime, and a 300 percent rise in unnatural deaths in the last nine months—that was suspicious and worth sticking on the map.

Running his eyes over the blue pins already spread across the wall, he started to put red pins into the map around the Highlands Council area. Seven sheep reported missing and remains found on the farm of Robert Corbet near Kildonan. With no information on where the animals were found or known to be missing from, he stuck three pins around the farmstead. Two cattle killed and found near the farm of Mactire at Braemore—two pins. Nineteen more reports in the last four months—a couple dozen more red pins.

Next, violent crimes and robberies. A couple hundred of these, in black pins. It took the better part of an hour to mark them all. Next, suicides. Perhaps the most depressing. And again, far more common than one would hope in rural Scotland. In the last six months, *forty*. Fifteen minutes later forty more pins, these ones yellow, stuck in the map.

It was certainly painting a picture. Stepping back, he looked at the nebulous whole of incidents spread pretty much at random—except for a massive cluster of pins to the northeast, in Caithness. It was a sparsely populated area, which made the number of crimes even more remarkable. The haze of red, black, and yellow—at least half of the yellow pins—were clustered there, around a mountain called Morven, which had a bright-blue pin sticking in it. Alarm bells rang in his head.

He phoned his associate and asked him to come over. It was important. His associate was also a member of the Highland Constabulary and the only man in the world besides his father—who was now very old and of diminishing faculties—whom he could speak to about these matters.

He put the kettle on and had just made a pot of tea when his associate knocked on the door and let himself in, walking straight through to the kitchen.

“Ah, tea,” he said. “The drink of the English, of my people—right? What have you got to show me?”

Alex took him through and showed him the map on the wall and briefly explained the pins.

“Then it is clear,” his associate said gravely. “You must go and investigate. Make sure you go fully equipped. It could be anything—remember that cellar full of hobgoblins we found?”

“I must go? But you’re coming with me?”

“No, I must go south. I may already be too late. But call me if you really need my assistance. I don’t think you shall.”

And that settled it. He had four more days until his break, but he might be able to move that up. He would have to call the sergeant tonight.

And he would have to get an early start.

CHAPTER TWO

The Sleeping Knights

1

Eight Years Before . . .

At seven thirty a.m. the clock radio dragged Daniel Tully out of a deep sleep. Just another ordinary day. Ordinary and dreadful.

No, today was different—something happened today. It was his birthday. This woke him up. He turned off the radio alarm and climbed out of bed. Hunting around his room, he searched for the cleanest and least-wrinkled shirt and trousers he could find and put them on. Then he pulled his school jumper over them and went downstairs.

He was the only one awake, as usual, and the kitchen table—where he had once seen presents piled on top of each other several years earlier—was empty. He wandered into the living room and saw nothing on the small dining table either. He went back to the kitchen, kicking his feet.

He put some bread in the toaster and started making coffee.

Wrinkling his nose at the earthy smell as he spooned the raw, dirt-coloured grounds into the percolator, he vowed once more to never drink coffee as long as he lived. He flicked the power button on, wondering if his mum would think about him when she drank it and if she would remember what today was. Maybe he'd get some extra presents out of guilt. It was possible, but unlikely.

He ate his toast and looked out of the kitchen window into the tiny sliver of a garden. It was still quite dark. He didn't like this time of year—he had to go to school in the dark, and also come home in the dark.

It's not fair, he thought. And then, because he could and he knew it'd make him feel better, he said the words out loud. "It's not fair."

He wondered what sort of day it was going to be. And then, with a flash of dread, he realised that today was also the field trip. He also realised that he hadn't handed in his permission slip.

He went into the hall and rummaged around on the side table. It must be here—he remembered seeing it. Yes, stuck underneath a strata of bills and junk mail was the blue, wrinkled permission slip with a blank space where his mum's signature should be. He hurried back into the kitchen and looked at the clock on the oven. He had about five minutes. Plucking a pen from the mug on the counter, he rushed back upstairs and stood in front of his mother's door and listened. He could hear faint breathing. He gently knocked on the door, which was open slightly.

"Mum?" he said.

There was no reply.

"Mum?" he said, louder.

There was a very muffled and tired moan. "Whuh 'zit?"

"Mum, I need your signature on something for school. There's a class trip today."

Silence.

“Mum?”

“I’ve it d’nstairs. Uh’ll sign it when uh get up.”

Daniel stood quietly for a moment. He needed the signature now, not later. He thought about the first of the two options now before him. He really didn’t want to go into the bedroom and try to persuade his mother to sign the slip now. He would probably have to actually push the pen into her hand and if he didn’t handle it right, there would be a “scene.” Also, he was starting to think that there was someone lying next to her.

No, it was far easier to do the second thing. He hurried back downstairs and put the slip on the kitchen counter, then uncapped the pen he was holding. He looked at the paper for a second and then exhaled. In a quick, confident burst of motion, he wrote his mother’s name in a suitably grown-up and illegible manner: *Elaine Tully*. He regarded the slip. Not his best work perhaps, but it would do. The trick was not in trying to make it look exactly like her real signature, but in making it confident.

He folded up the paper and put it in his pocket. No, he reflected, the real trick isn’t the signature—it’s in making all the teachers believe that you were the sort of boy who would never even *think* about faking his mum’s signature. And that meant, as so many things in life, keeping your head down.

He picked up his school bag, fished out his gym clothes (wouldn’t need those), and thought about signatures and permission slips. Where did they all go? What happened to them? Were they all put in a file somewhere? Did anyone really check them? Would this little scrap of paper be scrutinised against all the others—checked for authenticity by a man in a white coat with a giant magnifying glass in a brightly lit room? By now there must be more of his fake signatures on all these different slips and documents than his mother’s real one. To the school office his forgeries were more authentic than the genuine article.

He was just checking that his keys were in his pocket when his eyes fell on something unusual. He and his mum didn't get a lot of mail other than bills, but there, on the floor beneath the front door, was a red envelope. He was so surprised that he actually took a half step back and then bent down to pick it up.

He turned it over and looked at who it was addressed to—it was to him. Someone had remembered his birthday.

There wasn't any sender's address on the envelope, and he didn't recognise the block capital handwriting on it. Quickly, he thrust it into his jacket. It felt like a secret, and he wanted to keep it to himself as long as possible.

All the way to school he thought about the envelope. It might be from Nan, his mum's mum, but she didn't really go in for that sort of thing—she was more forgetful than his own mother. It could be from Grandma and Grandpa Tully, but he hadn't seen them in three or four years, since the separation.

He could see that the coach was already waiting when he got to school. He sighed. He'd actually prefer a day of the ordinary routine rather than having to navigate the chaos of a field trip. For a moment he considered not going, but last time that meant he'd had to join another class for a day—a dangerous and unknown social minefield. He handed his permission slip to Miss Singh and got on the bus, sitting down in the first pair of seats that weren't occupied and sliding over by the window.

He sat there unmoving, trying to be a part of the background, holding his breath when anyone passed by. Eventually the coach was nearly full and he thought he'd gotten away with it, but just as Miss Singh had crossed the last name off her list, a group of girls—who had already passed him—came back up the aisle and stood at his seat.

“Look,” said one of them. “If we get *him* to move, we can all sit together. Hey, Daniel.”

He pretended not to hear.

“*Daniel!*”

He turned and saw Callie Johnson bending towards him. “Hi, do you mind moving so that we can all sit together?”

“Where to?” he asked, playing for time.

“I don’t care, you little freak,” Callie said in a low voice, leaning towards him. “Just leave.” The girls behind her giggled. He heard one of them mutter the word “outrageous.”

Daniel wasn’t fazed. “I’m fine here,” he said.

“Find a seat, girls,” Miss Singh called down the aisle.

Callie Johnson leaned closer into Daniel. “Move,” she growled, “or I’ll sit next to you and pinch your arm till it falls off.”

Daniel turned to look out the window.

“Girls, find a seat,” said Miss Singh, coming towards them.

“*Move!*” Callie growled under her breath.

He didn’t. Callie couldn’t do anything else until Miss Singh reached them. Her last chance would be to protest the unjustness of Daniel’s attitude and try to make the teacher move him—which she might.

However, as Callie turned towards the advancing Miss Singh, someone pushed past her and slid into the seat beside Daniel.

“This seat free? Mind if I take it? Thanks.”

“Freya?” said Callie, appalled. “What the—? *I* was going to sit there!”

“If you were going to, you would have already,” Freya replied curtly.

Miss Singh had reached them. “Okay, girls, find a seat. Now.”

With no hope of being able to shift *two* people from their seats, the group of four was forced to disperse with groans of annoyance.

“Thanks,” said Daniel to Freya, once the coach had started and they were on their way.

“No problem,” said Freya. “Callie and her posse are acting like real cows these days. I can’t stand them. Besides,” she said, giving him a wide smile, “I know a secret.”

“I know you do,” said Daniel.

“It’s your birthday,” Freya said in a low voice.

“I know.”

“Do you know how I know?”

“Yes.”

“Because it’s my birthday too,” Freya said, her smile widening even further.

“Happy birthday,” Daniel said miserably.

“Remember when we were in First Year together and they threw us both a party?”

“Barely.”

“Well, I remember it.” She smiled. “Did you get anything nice?”

“Sure, lots of stuff.”

“Did you bring anything with you?”

“No, of course not.”

“I did. Look . . .” Freya pulled a silver necklace with a teardrop-shaped pendant out from beneath her school jumper.

“It’s nice,” Daniel said.

“Thanks. It’s from Mum and Dad. What did you get?”

“What is this all of a sudden? You haven’t talked to me in a year, and now we’re best friends?”

“If you don’t want me here, I’ll switch seats with Callie . . .”

“No, it’s fine. I’m just saying . . .”

“So what did you get?”

“I told you, lots of stuff. Look.” Daniel pulled out the red envelope from his jacket pocket.

“Who’s it from?”

“Don’t know,” said Daniel. “Haven’t opened it.”

“Well, go on then. What are you waiting for?”

Daniel shrugged. “You do it,” he said, chucking the card into her lap.

“Okay,” she said, sliding her finger underneath the envelope’s flap and ripping it open.

Daniel watched as she pulled out a shiny card that had a brightly coloured picture of a dancing clown on it. It was a kid’s card, not a card for someone who’d just turned thirteen.

“Do you want to read it or shall I?” Freya held the card up, and Daniel watched a crinkled slip of heavy, rectangular paper slide out the bottom of it and onto her lap. She picked it up and passed it to Daniel. It was a ten-pound note.

“You read it,” he said, folding the money and sliding it into his shirt pocket. Freya opened the card.

“To Daniel,” she read. “Happy birthday, from your dad.”

“That’s it?” Daniel said, leaning towards her.

Freya handed the card to him. “Doesn’t say much, does he?”

Daniel gave a jerky shrug. “The last time I heard from him was three years ago. Today he sends me a card with some money in it.”

Daniel heard himself say those words and felt wretchedly sorry for himself. Three years—three whole years, and then what? Ten pounds and a crappy card with a stupid clown on it with a mocking, leering laugh. His hands clenched and he tore up the card, dropping its twisted pieces on the floor beneath his feet.

He turned his face to the window, eyes hot, tears threatening to drip down his face.

Freya sat quietly next to him and didn’t say a word until they reached the church.

2

Daniel turned and walked down the church aisle, stopping at a short wooden railing that ran wall to wall just before the altar. His

head was tilted as far back as it would go so that he could stare straight up at the ceiling. Behind him he could hear Miss Singh droning on about some stained glass window just around the corner—no one could see him here.

There were stone carvings everywhere—on the walls, on the ceiling, on the arches, around doorways, along the columns—carvings of animals, plants, people, and mythical creatures. The arches leading up to the chancel were lined with dozens of carvings of sunflowers—stacked row upon row like strings of rising suns. On the large archway over the church entrance there were a mermaid with a sword, two battling centaurs, a roaring lion, a king with a crown, a face with a leaf in its mouth, weird zigzag patterns, and other bewildering designs.

Daniel walked up the aisle towards the altar. He felt peaceful here. The anxiety and emotional chafing of the bus ride was becoming less painful, gradually washing away. Marveling at this amazing building, he felt part of something much, much bigger than himself, and he knew he was the only one who felt it. It was like he understood what the church was feeling—an old, proud indifference to the chattering, squabbling children who were walking inside of it. It was as though all the shoving and pushing and jockeying for attention and importance—all these things that affected him so much—were irrelevant to the enormous, beautiful building. It was created for something else.

Behind the altar there was a small arch, partially hidden in the shadows. For a moment he thought there was a passageway underneath it, and hearing the call to adventure, he intended to follow it, but when he got closer he saw that it spanned just a blank wall of stone.

The archway oozed antiquity and was crammed with interesting figures. It must have been a doorway to something at some point. On one side there was a knight wearing a pointed helmet

and a thick beard. In his left hand he held a round shield, and in his right was a large axe with a long straight edge. Underneath him was a horse, a dragon, a lion, and an ox. Opposite him, on the other side of the arch, was another knight, a lot like the first, but this one held a spear. Beneath him was something that looked like a dog, or maybe a lamb, a woman with a staff, and then an eagle and an angel.

He sat down in an uncomfortable wooden chair beside the altar, opened his sketchbook to a clean page, and started drawing the figures on the arch. He had just finished tracing the shape of the axe in his book when he heard a rustling sound behind him, like the flapping of a flag. A shadow fell across him and then quickly lifted. Startled, he twisted around and looked up into a plain gothic window. Something had passed next to it—flickered across it from outside. But it was gone now. He turned back to his sketch.

The light in the church was growing dimmer. The December sun was setting now, even though it wasn't very late at all. He finished drawing the first knight and quickly moved on to the other. He heard his class moving across the church—probably to another window—and slouched back closer to the altar so no one would see him.

“What are you doing?” a voice asked him, making him jump. He twisted around, his eyes wide.

“Freya!” he exclaimed in a whisper. “Flip! Don't sneak up on people like that!”

“Sorry,” Freya answered automatically. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Daniel said, moving his pencil carefully across the page. “What does it look like I'm doing?”

“You'll get in trouble for wandering off,” Freya said, coming to stand behind Daniel.

“Yeah? Then so will you. Why are you hanging around me so much?”

She ignored him. “Not bad,” Freya complimented. “You’re good at that.”

“I’m not, really,” Daniel said. “It’s just that I like knights. I draw them all the time.”

“You’ve got the arm wrong just there.”

“It’s fine, just a little long, that’s all,” he said, reaching for his eraser. “Anyway, that’s what it looks like on the arch.”

Freya sniffed and straightened up. “Where does the tunnel lead to?”

“What tunnel?”

“Haven’t you looked down it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“That tunnel, there.” She pointed. “Where does it go?”

“There’s no—” Daniel looked up and then jerked his head back in surprise. There *was* a tunnel underneath the arch. “That wasn’t there before.”

“Good artists need to notice everything,” Freya said crisply. She walked up and poked her head through the arch. “The wall’s curved, I can’t see around it. It’s odd, though, usually churches from this period don’t have catacombs. We should ask Miss. I wonder if it may have been made—wait.”

Daniel brushed past her, having packed up his sketchbook, and walked into the tunnel.

“Where are you going?”

“It sort of spirals downwards,” he said, stopping a short distance in. “There’s some kind of light coming from farther on. A glow.” He took a couple more steps forward.

“I don’t think we should go down there. It don’t think it’s allowed.”

“I don’t care,” Daniel said. “I want to explore.” He took a few more steps and put his hand up to the cold stony wall.

“Daniel, stop,” Freya said, moving towards the dusty archway. “It’s getting dark—we’ll be leaving soon.”

“One more reason to check it out—when are we ever going to come back?” Daniel said. He turned to Freya and saw her worried expression. “Come on, it’ll just take a second.”

Freya ducked under the small archway and they both started down the long sloping tunnel.

The walls were solid rock with little divots in them, evidence they were made with a chisel.

“We’ve been slowly circling around,” he said when they had been walking for a while. “If we go much farther, we’ll end up right underneath the church.”

“It doesn’t smell old or musty,” said Freya. “It’s sort of cool and fresh.”

“The ceiling’s getting higher,” Daniel said. “And the walls are moving out. Feels like we’re shrinking.”

Freya forced a short laugh. “Come on, let’s go back.”

“But we don’t even know—hey, look at that.”

Freya leaned closer to Daniel to see around the bend. On a ledge on the cave wall was a silver lamp that emitted a pale, bluish light. It was thin and cylindrical with a wide round aperture. Freya gave it a tap. “Where’s its fuel?”

“It’s electric.”

“No, there’s no cord.”

“Battery then. Come on, there’s an archway up ahead.”

“There’s writing on it,” Freya said.

Daniel tilted his head back and saw carved above the archway the words:

Ic wordcenne æt Niðergæard
 Giefe a ælch wha boga niðeward
 Gifu spreca freolice
 If beo he soþlice freondlice

“Do you think it’s Latin?” Daniel asked. “It’s really old looking.”

“No, my sister’s studying that. This looks nothing like Latin. Those two letters—the *p* looking thing, and the *d* with the line through it—I’ve never seen them before.”

They gazed at the words, trying to puzzle them out, and as they did Daniel was aware of a soft sound that he hadn’t heard before—a gentle rhythmic sigh, the sound of breathing. “Do you hear that?” he whispered.

“What?”

“Shh.” Gathering his courage, Daniel stepped through the arch and found himself in a perfectly square room with a very high ceiling made of rough natural rock. In the centre of the room stood a stone dais holding half a dozen of the silver lamps.

And what the lamps threw their light upon made Daniel’s jaw drop. In the centre of the room lay two low, stone slabs and lying on top of each was a knight in full battle gear—not carvings this time, but genuine, authentic, larger-than-life men encased head to foot in armour.

They were dressed exactly as the knights from the archway in the church behind the altar. In their left hands they held round shields made from some sort of animal hide stretched over wood; in their right they gripped weapons—one held a spear, the other an axe. Each knight was dressed in a chain-mail shirt with long sleeves that fell low to cover the upper legs just above the knees; each shirt was cinched at the waist by a stout leather belt from which hung a short but wide sword. Their lower legs were wrapped in rough cloth and skins, joining dark, coarse-woven breeches at the top of their shins. Pointed helmets, polished to a shine, crested their heads and long beards flowed down almost past their belt buckles.

“Wow!” Daniel exclaimed.

Freya gazed around the chamber with wide eyes. “What *is* this place?” she asked. She walked closer, between two of the figures.

“I don’t know,” Daniel said. “It looks like some sort of display.”

Freya stared hard at one of the knights. “Their faces look really real—really lifelike. I can see the pores. Are—are they dead?”

“No chance,” Daniel said, looking down at the knight in front of him. “Nah, they’re just models. Got to be.”

“They’re really good, though. Look really authentic.”

“Maybe they’re for a movie, like *Lord of the Rings*. They made models like this for that. I saw the special features.”

Bending closer, Daniel gazed at the one with the reddish-brown beard and the axe, looking closely at his nose and mouth. He thought he saw the whiskers tremble around the nose. Stooping closer, Daniel reached out a hand and touched the sword at the knight’s side. It was cold, like it was made of actual metal.

“Come on,” said Freya, taking a step towards the archway. “We’ve had a look around, so let’s go back now.”

Daniel was still hunched over the knight.

“Daniel, come on.” She moved towards him and put a hand on his shoulder to try to pull him around. “Let’s go.”

“Alright,” Daniel said reluctantly. He knew that they were pushing it now. This was definitely flying in the face of “keeping your head down.” He turned to leave.

“Look, what’s that?” he said. Hanging on the wall was something he hadn’t noticed when they came in—a curved horn with an ornate silver mouthpiece.

Freya rolled her eyes. “Daniel, come on . . .”

“Hold on, I just want to give it a toot.”

“No, leave it.”

“Freya, you have no sense of adventure.” Daniel went to the wall and pulled the horn off of the hook it was hanging on. He pressed his lips together, put them to the mouthpiece, and gave a strong blow.

The horn let out a thin, drawn-out *parp* and had no other

immediate effect other than to turn Daniel's face red. The reedy buzz knocked around the chamber, echoing, reluctant to die. Daniel and Freya froze—waiting expectantly. But for what, they didn't know. Maybe for some caretaker to come and tell them off.

"Satisfied?" Freya asked. "Can we go now?"

"Yes, fine," Daniel said, sighing. He placed the horn back on the hook.

"Strange . . ." he said, "sounds like it's still going. No, hold up—"

There was another sound in the chamber—one that was growing. A deep, rumbling groan.

"What is it?" asked Freya nervously.

Daniel crossed back over to one of the knights. It must have been a trick of his eyes, or the light, or something, but it looked like it was breathing. He raised his arm and was just about to brush his fingertips against its cheek—which looked more than just "lifelike"—when the knight's eyelids snapped open.

Daniel was so startled that he let out a shout and jumped backwards, colliding into Freya, who also screamed. With a creaking of leather, a rattling of metal, and a groan, the knight sat up and turned his head stiffly towards them. Dust cascaded from his chest, billowing into a cloud.

Daniel felt something snake around his wrist and then tighten. He looked down and saw that the hand of the knight behind him was gripping his arm. He leapt away, trying to jerk out of its grasp, but it felt like it was made of iron. "Freya! Help me!" he cried.

Terrified, Freya backed into the corner by the archway. She opened her mouth to call for help, but no sound came out. Then the first knight rose from his plinth.

The knight holding Daniel's arm shook his head and turned to the other knight. "*Cól þe, cnihtas. Liss,*" he said. "*Cól þe.*"

The other knight said something in more strange words, and Daniel felt his wrist come free. But before he could make a move

or even draw a breath, the knight lurched forward and hefted himself to his feet. Daniel, startled, lost his balance and fell backwards. “Don’t hurt me!” he blurted, and began scooting his way closer to Freya.

The knight took a gigantic step forward and now stood directly above them.

The towering knight stretched out his hand. “Calm yourselves, children,” he said in a clear, commanding voice. “Peace!”

3

Daniel and Freya, frozen in terror, could only stare at the knight. He, in turn, gazed down at them cautiously and curiously, as if they were cornered birds that might fly away at the slightest movement.

The knight with the axe, still sitting on his bier, lay down his weapon, removed his helmet, and put it to one side, bending his neck first one way and then the other. “Faith, it’s enough to wake the dead, their screaming,” he said, rubbing his head, his voice a soft rumble. “Oh, *Meotodes Meahte*, my blessed bones,” he muttered. His joints popped and cracked as he let out a bellowing roar. “*Ngya-aa-argh!* Has one ever been so stiff?” He patted himself down and coughed a few deep coughs as clouds of dust billowed around him.

“*Hweat, brođor!*” The knight with the spear spoke, reading Daniel’s and Freya’s terrified expressions. “Would you kill them with fright?”

“Beg pardon, brother,” said the axe-knight, stretching his arms back to expand his chest, which caused a loud popping sound. “I am thoughtless on waking.”

The spear-knight took a very small step backwards and also removed his helmet. “Ah, there now, children,” he said, relaxing