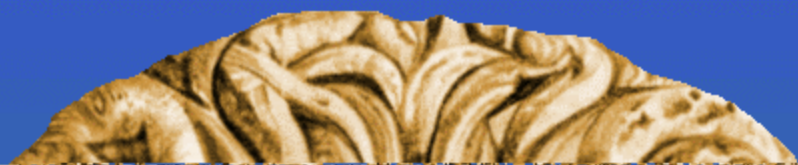


The Winged Man



THE WINGED MAN

MOYRA CALDECOTT

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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INTRODUCTION

There is a tradition that there was a king in ancient Britain called Bladud, son of King Hudibras and father of King Lear, who lived some time between 800 and 500 BC. His story even today is honoured in the Somerset area of England, where many of the dramatic events of his life were said to have taken place.

It is said he was descended from Brutus who, in turn, was descended from Aeneas, the Dardanian prince who fled to Italy after the Trojans were defeated by the Greeks in the war Homer describes in *The Iliad*. Brutus came to Britain (the Pretanic Isles) with his wife, who was a Greek princess, and together they founded the impressive dynasty to which, after several generations, Bladud belonged. As High King, ruling from his capital Trinovantum, New Troy, now known as London, he inherited the traditions his ancestors had brought from Troy, Italy and Greece, but he was living among and ruling a people who were a mixture of the ancient peoples of the land and Celtic immigrants.

It is not known exactly when the first Celts from continental Europe came to Britain, bringing with them

what has come to be known as the Iron Age – but it is usually assumed it was in the eighth to the seventh centuries BC. Artefacts have been found in Britain from this time, attributable to the Celts, which may have come in by trade or by immigration. But artefacts alone cannot give us a full picture of a period in prehistory. It is often necessary to look at the living myths and legends of a people handed down by word of mouth through generations to supplement the fragments found in the soil by archaeologists. The author of this book has looked closely at such myths and legends.

Chapter 1

The Game of Fidchell

The night was drawing closer. The birds winging home in flocks alerted the prince to the danger. Soon the western sky would be fired with glowing gold as the sun left the Lands of the Living and, in a blaze of regal magnificence, visited the Lands of the Dead. Left behind would be a cold, dark world where only malevolent beings, murderers, robbers, wolves and owls – the scavengers of the night – dared move about. All others would gather close against the hearth, with wooden doors made fast against unknown terrors.

Prince Bladud urged his tired steed forward, anxious to reach the hill-fort before nightfall and before the gates were locked and barred. He could see the hill now, rising high above the plain and topped with steep, smooth, man-made ramparts. The forests had been cleared in the immediate vicinity so that the watchman on the ramparts had a long, clear view of any enemies approaching. Bladud had no doubt that at this very moment he himself was being observed, the summer

dust from his horse's hooves drawing interested attention.

The shadows of the trees on the plain were stretched dark and long across fields unnaturally bright by contrast. He could hear the herd boys shouting to the cattle as they drove them in to shelter for the night. The first hearth fires were being lit, and thin plumes of smoke rose from one or two of the clustered homesteads on the plain. The lord of the fort, Keron son of Mel, was obviously not anticipating any attack or the alarm would have been sounded and these homesteads would have been deserted, their inhabitants already clustered in makeshift tents within the safe confines of the hilltop fort, their animals lowing uneasily in unfamiliar pens.

The strangely intense light of the evening seemed to isolate every blade of grass, every flower, every rock and bush. There was a splendour and a glory about more precious than the gold so coveted by kings and so laboriously won from the earth. At this moment of transformation from day to night, it was as though all things had paused – poised – breath-holding in awe at the delicate, fragile balance of mystery on which our lives depended. In this light small men were giants, birds were harbingers, and all were suddenly uncertain of their own role in the universe. Bladud wondered at himself. What was he doing so far from home? What was he seeking? Who, indeed, *was* he? A man awakened – or a man dreaming?

The watchman called to him from the tower beside the great wooden gate. Bladud felt it all unreal – and unreal his reply.

‘Bladud, Prince of Trinovantum,refl son of Hudibras the High King,’ he called back. But who was he really – and why did he feel that the name he gave was that of a stranger?

He was now on the steep incline rising up to the gate, and armed men were coming out to meet him. He was surrounded, challenged, greeted and accepted. Bladud of Trinovantum, son of Hudibras, rode in to the hilltop fort of Keron son of Mel. The huge gates of oak crashed closed behind him. The bolts were drawn against the night.

The prince noted the jumble of little hovels of twigs and straw that lined the streets winding up to the great house, the sullen people who drew aside and flattened themselves against walls to avoid his horse’s hooves. The place had none of the grandeur of his father’s rath. There seemed no order to it. Smoke rose through ragged and rotting thatch and hung in the air unwholesomely. The smell was foul. Goats and pigs and children ran in and out of the huts – occasionally pursued by an adult wielding a stick. *What kind of master is this who allows such filth and disorder in his realm?* Bladud could not help wondering, comparing it with his father’s fortified town where every house was in good repair and there was separate fenced space for the animals. The children back home would greet any strangers with bright and

curious eyes, and the smoke rose in neat columns from well constructed hearths to dissipate far above the town.

Leading his horse by the bridle, the young man plodded on, looking neither to left nor right. A woman leaning in the doorway of a hovel shouted something to him, and Bladud glanced with disgust at the creature, her hair a dirty tangle, her clothes stiff with muck. She made a rude gesture after his retreating back. Three children, so thin they looked ready to die of starvation, emerged from the darkness behind her and clung to her skirt, staring after him with hollow eyes. He began to wish he had not made such haste to reach this fort, but had instead spent the night in the fields or the forest. Wolves and night hawks would seem preferable companions, and one would as likely risk attack by robbers here as there.

Rounding a corner of the mean street, he found himself for the first time in an open space – and before him stood the house of Keron. What a contrast to the rest! Its walls were solid oak like the main gate, and it rose high above the untidy, sprawling village at its feet. Guards stood at the door and torches were already lit on either side, though the darkness of the night had not yet fallen. *This place feels as though it would be dark – even on the sunniest day*, Bladud thought, and glanced up at the sky. It was the colour of blood.

The guards exchanged words with his guide as he dismounted. He looked anxiously over his shoulder as his steed was led away, wondering if these men knew how to care for such a noble horse. But before he could

intervene, a tall, thickset man appeared – the lord Keron himself. Clad in fine linen and well decked with gold and jewels, he extended his hand in greeting. Bladud had met him before at his father’s court, for he was one of the many vassal lords who came to the High King’s castle to deliver tribute. Was that torc of slender yellow gold around his thick red neck the same one given to him only last year by King Hudibras? Bladud had not paid him much attention then – he was only one of the many who pitched their tents around his father’s rath at festival.

* * * *

Prince Bladud was weary and longed to retire to bed, but the Lord Keron was delighted with such distinguished company and was determined to make much of him. He insisted a feast must be prepared, which was not ready before midnight, and during all that time, growing hungrier and more exhausted by the moment, Bladud was forced to listen to endless anecdotes of Keron’s prowess in battle or in single combat; Keron’s cunning in dealing with his rivals.

Bladud soon learned a great deal about this petty ruler, and the more he learned the more he distrusted him; but, bound by the strict rules of accepting hospitality, he could not break away or speak his mind.

Casting around in desperation for something to distract him from the boredom that was beginning to smother him, his eyes fell on a young girl, Keron’s daughter Rheinid, whose duty it was to serve the

honoured guest with mead. Her hair was as black as a raven's wing, loosely bound away from her face but tumbling in a thick cascade down her back. She never spoke a word to him, but her dark and flashing eyes left him in no doubt that she found him desirable. He began to watch her every move, fascinated by the way she advanced and retreated – one moment boldly challenging him, the next, with long lashes lowered, playing demure and untouchable. She was dressed in fine russet-coloured cloth, with jewels on her arms and around her neck. Even her hair was clasped with gold. She moved with the grace of a cat and as the evening wore on, and as Bladud consumed more mead than he intended, he contrived to touch her arm and then her thigh as she leant over him to pour the heavy liquid. He did not notice the satisfied curl on Keron's lips as he talked on and on, watching every move and every changing expression on the young man's face.

At last the feast was ready, and servants entered the hall with plates and bowls and huge quantities of food. Bladud found the sudden smell of roasts and herbs almost unbearable; he had eaten little all day and was ravenous. As though Keron was deliberately torturing him he strung out the formalities of seating the various members of his household as long as possible, changing his mind several times as to where the honoured guest should sit. Eventually he decided that Bladud should take his own great carved chair at the head of the table, because, as son of the High King, he should take precedence over his humble self.

Bladud protested politely, but with no conviction – desperate to get the matter settled, and some food in his stomach. But Keron pretended to take his protest seriously, and once again the seating arrangements were changed.

Bladud bit his lip and moved his position once more. As he sat down, anger was forming a hard knot inside him and it would not take much more for him to forget the rules governing guest and host.

Suddenly he felt the cool and soothing touch of a hand on his neck, and turned his head to find Rheinid close behind him.

‘My lord,’ she whispered, ‘forgive him. He entertains few such honoured guests.’ *I wonder that he has any guests*, Bladud thought bitterly, determined never to set foot again in this miserable place. But the girl’s full lips were now close to his face as she leaned over him, her breast pressing against his shoulder . . .

‘Rheinid,’ Keron said smoothly, ‘sit now and enjoy the feast with us.’ He gestured her to sit at the prince’s left hand, the position usually occupied by a man’s wife. The look in his eye left no doubt in Bladud’s mind that Keron was throwing them together deliberately and he flushed. He felt tired, he was hungry, but he was also young and virile, and, at this moment, torn by conflicting emotions.

* * * *

First light was already creeping over the hills and the first birds were stirring in their nests before Keron at

last let Bladud leave the feasting hall. All stood up around the long table, eyes on the youth and the young girl, as their liege lord ordered her to show the High King's son to his bed. Dazed with exhaustion though he was, Bladud did not miss the ripple of lecherous amusement that passed around those present. Was he expected, after all he'd been through, to bed this woman?

Rheinid raised a lamp above her head and turned towards him, smiling. She looked beautiful and seductive, but he felt only a desperate urge to sleep. He followed her, staggering slightly with weariness and too much mead, and had to steady himself more than once against the walls. Later he could not be sure whether in reality he was led deeper and deeper into some labyrinth or whether he was dreaming. The sun's golden light might be unchaining the world from darkness outside and a million living creatures might be freely on the move, but inside Keron's castle no beam penetrated. The lamplight flickered in the stale, thick air while grotesque shadowy shapes clustered at his back. It seemed to Bladud that they walked and walked, twisting and turning down corridor after corridor, their footsteps covering an area that must surely be ten times the size of the whole hill-fort, let alone the castle. Staggering, he sank to his knees, determined not to move another step but to sleep where he was on the cold flagstones, greasy with dirt. He was vaguely aware of the girl kneeling beside him urging him to rise. He felt her arms around him, attempting to pull him to his feet. His

eyes seemed to close under lead weights, and he felt as though he was falling into a deep and bottomless pit. Her voice came to him from far away – hollow and echoing. Then he was aware of nothing more.

* * * *

He awoke to find himself naked on a bed in a windowless room, two lamps providing the only light. Beside him, curled against his side, lay Rheinid, also naked. He raised himself on one elbow to look down at her, struggling from sleep like a swimmer who had almost drowned.

Had they . . . ? He could not remember. Her cheek was flushed from sleep, her hair soft against his chest. Almost without meaning to he ran his hand lightly over the curve of her hip – his own body instantly fired by the touch. She stirred and turned and, half asleep, they made love.

Bladud had never experienced such ecstasy, but it was short-lived. When it was over he felt fully awake and sober, remembering the details of the night before. What kind of father would offer his daughter so blatantly to a stranger? *A scheming father*, he thought; one who wanted some advantage from the High King. Bladud felt sickened to think how easily he had fallen into this trap.

Had Rheinid knowingly played her part? Was the smile on her lips one of sexual satisfaction, or something more sinister? He could not read her expression.

They had been as intimate as only man and woman could be, but now they were strangers.

He drew away roughly and stood up, turning his back on her as he pulled on his clothes. Now he could not wait to leave this place! The exquisite pleasure of a few moments earlier was gone, and in its place was all the unease and disgust he had felt the night before.

‘My lord . . . ?’

But he could not bring himself to look at her. This liaison had not been of his making, and he was angered by his own weakness. If he looked at her now he would see her beauty and would feel unsure again. He would be once more vulnerable – out of control.

He felt a surge of anger, bitterness and, perhaps, fear. He had to get away from here. Far away.

He lifted one of the lamps from its stand and left the room without a backward glance. It was a very different young man who strode through the corridors now, demanding imperiously of the first servant he met that he be taken at once to his horse. When the man hesitated, Bladud drew his dagger.

* * * *

Bladud had intended to leave without a word to his host, but Keron appeared as he reached the great front door, and saw the unwilling servant still held at knife-point.

‘My lord prince, what is this? Stealing out like a thief?’ Keron’s voice was suddenly cold, his eyes narrowed dangerously as he looked from the dagger in

Bladud's hand to the youth's embarrassed face. Bladud sheathed his knife, but responded sternly.

'My lord, I had a dream that I was held prisoner in this place – that I was forced to play a role I had no stomach for.'

'And you would insult me and abuse my servants because of a dream?'

'The dream was most convincing, my lord.'

'But nevertheless only a dream,' Keron said.

Bladud lowered his eyes beneath the dark and penetrating gaze of the older man. Perhaps he had indeed imagined the sinister aspects of what had occurred in this place. It was natural for a host to feast an honoured guest until the small hours of the morning, so perhaps there had been no plot to force Rheinid upon him. Had he misinterpreted all the hints and looks that had so disquieted him?

Perhaps he himself had dragged the girl to his bed in a drunken stupor. After all it was he who had instigated the love-making on waking. He was suddenly ashamed – and Keron was quick to exploit his youth and inexperience.

'Prince Bladud,' he said quickly, the icy menace of his voice now overlaid by smiling obsequiousness. 'Your dream insults me, but I will not take offence. Come. A meal is prepared. Let us go in.'

'I . . . I am not hungry, my lord,' Bladud stammered. 'I thank you for your generosity, but I need to be on my way.'

'What! So late in the day?'

Bladud looked puzzled. Was it not morning?

‘The sun is already setting,’ Keron said. ‘You have slept the whole day.’

Another night in this place! Bladud thought in despair. Every instinct told him to flee, but the web encircling him was so subtle he could not even be sure that it was there.

‘I would prefer to go, my lord,’ he repeated, making an effort to be decisive. But Keron had already taken him by the arm and was leading him back into the great hall.

* * * *

That night Keron challenged the prince to a board game. At first Bladud wondered if this vassal king was regretting the previous night and trying to make amends in some way, for a man who played so ineptly should surely not wager such generous stakes. The young prince won game after game, and each time he was rewarded with gold and jewels, weapons and horses. At first there were only a few members of the household watching, but, as the evening wore on, more and more gathered round the table until a hedge of faces seemed to isolate them from the rest of the world.

Halfway through the evening Rheinid slipped in to take the place of the servant pouring the wine. Time and again he covered his goblet with a hand to indicate that he wanted no more wine – but no matter how often he sipped at it, his vessel was always full.

‘I am at a loss, my lord, to suggest what stake would be appropriate now, since you have all but ruined me,’ Keron said, at last.

‘Only on your insistence, sir, for I had no intention of doing so. I suggest we quit now. I am weary and I must make an early start in the morning.’

‘One more game, I beg of you, my lord. Just one more, and then we will all go to bed.’

There was a drunken murmur of assent from the men who were pressing close around them. Eyes red with wine and ale, Keron’s entourage had watched every move in silence. Bladud felt their hostility towards him growing palpably.

Perhaps one more game, he thought. The concession might pacify them.

‘One more game,’ he agreed aloud. ‘You choose the stake.’

Bladud fancied that a sigh passed through the watching crowd.

‘Will you abide by whatever stake I choose?’ Keron asked very quietly, and Bladud, if he had not drunk so much or felt so confident, would have been warned by something in that voice.

‘Of course,’ he said, anxious only to finish the game.

Keron stared at him closely.

‘If you win, a year from today you can come to me and demand anything it is in my power to give you. But if you lose, a year from today you will grant *me* what I ask of you.’

Bladud was already setting up the board.

‘I agree,’ he said wearily. ‘Your move first, this time.’

Up until now Keron had made foolish mistakes in the game, but this time – this time with such a dangerously openended stake – he moved decisively and with consummate skill. Within a very short time indeed, Bladud knew that he was in trouble and, struggling against the fog induced in his mind by too much wine, he fought to regain the ground he was so rapidly losing.

‘My game, I think,’ Keron said triumphantly, his voice barely disguising his feelings at having executed the plot so well.

As Bladud looked at the board in disbelief, he barely heard the wild and discordant cheering of the crowd behind him. What had he promised? He had hardly paid attention to the stake proposed by Keron, so sure he was that he would continue to win. But perhaps it would not turn out so ill: the man would doubtless demand gold and jewels, and although his father would chide him for his carelessness, Bladud did not anticipate his refusing to honour his son’s debt.

‘I see you are a better player than at first appeared,’ Bladud said ruefully. ‘I will gladly give you back here and now all that you have lost to me, and more, rather than have you wait a year for your prize.’

‘I am in no hurry,’ said Keron with a smile. ‘A year will suit me very well.’ And he rose and stretched as a cat does after a satisfying sleep, raising one fist on high to indicate his victory. As a roar of delight shook the hall, Bladud turned to go – and found Rheinid waiting at his shoulder.

Not again! he thought, but nevertheless he went along with her. And this night he made love to her knowingly before he went to sleep. She was passionate, and it was good, but he still could not shake off the feeling that somehow she, and not he, was in control . . .

When he thought it must be near morning, he rose, and, with determination, left the castle.

This time no one tried to stop him. The guards drew back the bolts without his having to instruct them. His horse was ready and waiting. It was so easy.

As he rode through the great oaken gates and into the golden, singing countryside, he felt uneasily that something had gone from him – that something of himself had been left behind as hostage . . .

Chapter 2

Journey Between the Worlds

Bladud soon found himself in a landscape of gently rolling chalk hills – of soft, feminine curves, where the forests had been almost completely cleared to make way for hamlets and villages nestling beside fertile fields of barley, wheat and rye. Many of the hills were crowned with grass-covered mounds – burials from the ancient days, and reputed to be haunted. Such was the superstitious awe they evoked that no one would build a house or grow their crops close to them, and so they remained for generation after generation, isolated and mysterious. As Bladud moved through the valley he could see them like a regiment of warriors keeping guard on an ancient secret. He was intrigued. He was fascinated. Yet as he had left the last village after rest and refreshment he had been warned not to approach them, and instead was directed round to the south, that would take him many miles out of his way. Watched by the villagers, he had set off as instructed, but once out of their sight he had doubled back so that his route took him close to an area

where there was a particularly impressive group of these mounds.

For a while he kept to the valley, looking up at them from a distance, curious and wondering. Then he could bear it no longer: he had to know more about them. He left his horse cropping happily below, and started to climb the hill towards a cluster of three mounds. The long grass, uncropped by grazing animals, swished against his legs. Yellow, white and blue flowers shook out their scent as he brushed against them. There was no sinister darkening of the natural world around these burial places; all was light and bright and burgeoning. But under the trees that topped the first mound he reached, the shade lay thick and black in contrast. At its summit he sat down to rest, propping his back against the trunk of an oak, and gazing out through the other tall trees towards the dazzling landscape he had left behind. He felt alert, but not afraid. He was prepared for any adventure.

To his disappointment nothing happened at first. He sighed – so many stories, so little substance. Drowsily he began to drift into reverie. And then it seemed to him that he was sinking back into the tree. That he was becoming the tree. He could almost feel what it was like to be a branch high in the air, bending to the wind. He could sense how it must be to live for centuries watching generation after generation of men and women live and die. He could feel how it must be to be rooted in the earth, forcing a path through soil and solid rock, holding the mighty empire of trunk and branch

and leaf steady against storm and tempest. All this now seemed natural to him. Suddenly his probing roots met no hindrance and dangled freely in a hollow space before finding purchase again between the square slabs of man-carved stones. At the centre of this empty space he became aware of the skeleton of a man – his legs entangled in the roots, his eye sockets filled with dust. In his mind's eye Bladud could envisage the burial quite clearly. There was an elaborate dagger at the dead man's side, its hilt studded with tiny golden pins. There was a great gold brooch at the shoulder which no doubt had once fastened a cloak long since disintegrated with damp and time. In the bony fingers of the right hand was still clutched a golden cup, curiously ridged, and ringed with jewels.

Startled at the vividness of this vision Bladud jerked upright from where he had slumped against the tree. His heart was beating fast. Was this a dream? It did not feel like one. He felt suddenly desperately thirsty, as though he had been asleep for a very long time.

He saw, or rather felt, a movement to his left. He glanced round quickly to see a huge man standing beside him. As Bladud looked up at him, the figure seemed as tall as the trees, but when he sprang to his feet in alarm, he found the man not much taller than his own father. Bladud's first thought was that he was seeing a ghost, but he then dismissed this, as the stranger seemed solid enough. Swallowing his initial panic, the young prince tried to sound unperturbed.

‘I hope, sir, I am not trespassing on your land. I intended no discourtesy . . . ‘

The stranger was dark-haired and bearded, and clad like a warrior king, though in clothes that would have been deemed eccentric in any court that Bladud had ever visited.

‘No offence has been committed, lad,’ replied a deep and pleasant voice.

The man appeared so suddenly and so silently that Bladud felt awkward. Had he been observing him for some time? And if no one ever came to these mounds, as the villagers claimed, why was he here?

‘My name is Bladud of Trinovantum,’ he said at last, trying to speak with the authority which his noble lineage entitled him to. ‘I am son of the High King Hudibras.’

Bladud expected the stranger to identify himself in turn, but was disappointed. Instead the man continued to look deep into his eyes.

Bladud cleared his throat. ‘May I have your name and lineage sir?’ he prompted, feeling uncomfortable under the shrewd and steady gaze.

‘You have come a long way to this place. Yet you have no fear?’

‘Should I fear?’ Bladud asked.

The man did not reply.

‘I have waited a long time for you to come. You are welcome.’

‘How did you know I was coming, when I did not know it myself?’

‘Do you know everything about yourself?’ The question seemed gently mocking.

‘I thought I did,’ answered Bladud uncertainly.

The stranger threw back his head and laughed aloud. Bladud flushed and began to resent the feeling that he was being treated like a green boy instead of a man. For a boy on the threshold of manhood this could seem intolerable.

As though he understood Bladud’s hurt feelings, and now regretted his amusement, the man held out his right hand.

‘Drink. You must be thirsty after your long journey.’

Bladud was about to refuse sulkily, but then he saw what the man held out. It was a cup of beaten gold, ridged and ringed with jewels exactly as he had seen in his vision of the burial inside the mound. He gasped and stared. His first instinct was to run away as fast as he could, and he indeed took a few steps backward. Yet something stopped him. Curiosity? For a long time Bladud stared at the cup, unmoving. Then he reached forward and took it, draining the clear golden liquid in a few quick gulps. It was strange and tangy to the taste, but quenched his thirst instantly. He handed back the cup, and the man took it, smiling into Bladud’s eyes.

Suddenly Bladud seemed to be high above the mound and looking down. The landscape lay below him in every shade of green, huge trees appeared as small as puffballs, and a river he had just had difficulty in fording, no more than the silver slime-track of a snail. Strange. He turned and the whole earth seemed to wheel

with him. *I am flying*, he thought. And then, with growing excitement, *I am flying!* The air held him. The air flowed around him like silk. Now the clouds were beneath him and the green forests above.

'I am flying!' he cried out loud – but from his throat came only a harsh and wordless sound. It frightened him. He had longed to be a bird when he had seen them winging so freely across the sky. But in reality to be a bird . . .

I don't want this, he thought. *I want to fly, but . . .*

He was suddenly no longer flying.

He was standing on the mound where he had drunk from the mysterious golden cup. And he was alone. There was no sign of the man who had offered it to him. He rushed in turn to each side of the mound, peering out across the landscape in every direction.

Now Bladud felt truly afraid. He had drunk from the golden cup: a magic potion strong enough to transform him from man to bird. What else had the stranger in mind for him? He felt weird, as though he were drifting between two worlds, belonging to neither.

In a panic he ran, stumbling, to where his horse was grazing at the foot of the hill. He leaped on and rode away from that place as fast as he could.

He had not gone far in his blind dash to get away from the mysteries of the mound when he found himself galloping down an avenue of standing stones. Alarmed after his recent experience he tried to rein in his steed, but the beast pursued his headlong course as though directed by a master greater than the human on his

back. On either side the grey shapes stood tall and sinister and, though they were spaced generously apart, it seemed to Bladud they formed a continuous wall of invisible force to hold him in and propel him onwards.

Suddenly the stallion came to a stop, and Bladud all but catapulted off his back. Ahead stood two huge stones much larger than any in the avenue, and on either side of them, curving away into the distance, loomed a defensive ridge crowned by yet more gigantic upright slabs of rock. He had heard of such places from his father's High Priest, the Druid Fergal. Great circles of standing stones erected by giants who lived so long ago that even the local races who had inhabited this land before his own people arrived did not claim lineage from them. Some of the mighty slabs were fallen down, and the whole place gave an impression of disuse and dereliction. Overgrown as it was with tall grasses, brambles and trees, it was not easy to see how far the great circle extended.

'They are gateways,' Fergal had told him. 'But don't be tempted to pass through!' Entrusted by Hudibras with his son's education, his mentor had recognised only too well Bladud's insatiable curiosity – particularly about aspects of knowledge that were forbidden.

'Gateways to what?' Bladud had insisted.

'Some say the Otherworld.'

'What do *you* say?'

'I say we do not know, so we should leave them well alone. There are stories of young men who have dared to cross the threshold of the Otherworld while still in the

flesh of this world, and they have never been seen again, or they have emerged a few days later, bent and old, white-haired and rheumy-eyed, so dazed and crazed that they were unable to remember a thing of what had happened to them. There are stories too of young men found wandering this world in search of their lost homes and families, which they claimed to have left only a few days before – but which proved to have been long since laid waste and perished.’

Bladud’s eyes grew big with excitement. To enter such a place – and come back knowing . . . !

But now his steed would not go forward.

‘One moment you won’t stop,’ the prince muttered angrily, ‘and the next you won’t start! Well, you can stay here. But I am going through.’

He swung off the animal’s back decisively. Gripping his spear and checking the dagger at his belt, he strode purposefully forward between the two great silent stones – the mighty gateposts of the gods.

He expected something dramatic as soon as he entered, and braced himself, but nothing happened. The grass within the circle felt just as springy, just as feathery and prickly as the grass outside. The buttercups and clover, plantain and lacy saxifrage were just as prolific. Alder and rowan and hawthorn trees grew peacefully. The only slightly unnerving sight was one of the mighty stones fallen on its side, riven in half by an oak whose roots were so closely entwined with the rock that it looked as though living stone was being strangled by a vast serpent. He could see other stones standing

nearby, almost totally covered with bramble, but clearly not forming part of the main circle. He wondered about the old tales. Could the spirit lands be entered through these ancient sites? Why were there no trees hung with crystal, golden men and women, music so unearthly and so beautiful that, once heard, a person was spoiled forever for the things of this earth? Part of him was glad that none of this was evident, yet part of him was bitterly disappointed. He decided to retrace his steps, to find his steed, and continue on his way. He had already suffered too many delays.

Returning the way he had come, he soon reached the stone which had been felled by the oak. But after walking some way beyond, he stopped and puzzled why he had not yet come upon the two gigantic portal stones, or the deep ditch and the ridge. There was no sign of them. Instead, in front of him, rose a much smaller stone. Glancing to his left and right, and then behind, he found he was standing within a lesser circle contained within the greater one. He did not remember seeing this before, and decided that he must have veered off his course without realising it. This circle was clear of undergrowth and bramble, as though it had been recently tended, and the stones shone silvery grey in the sunlight.

Beautiful, he thought, and went up to touch one, marvelling at the intricacy of light that sprang, sparkling, from a million minute crystals on the rock's surface. Suddenly he was not in such a hurry to leave, and began to experience a sense of peace such as he had

never known before. Restlessness and impatience had always been a feature of his young life. He was often bored with the continual daily round and priorities of his father's court. True he enjoyed the bardic tales, but not when they were no more than chronicles of bloody battles and cruel massacres of enemies. Many a time he had thought that there must be more than this to life: the giving of gifts to secure the loyalty of vassals, the killing of enemies, and the vengeance, jealousy and greed of those around the High King. He admired his father for the strength and order of his reign, but he could not talk to him about the strange stirrings of his heart – the yearning for some meaning to his life beyond birth, procreation and death, beyond the displays of gold and the gathering of tribute and tithes.

Nor could he talk to his mother, for she was dead. It was perhaps her death that had first alerted him to these feelings of dissatisfaction. He often had the impression his life was speeding by, and yet it felt as though it were somebody else's life and not his own. He did not know exactly what he hoped to learn from the oracle he was now on his way to consult, but, if nothing else, he hoped she would explain who he was, and why he was here, and where he was going. *Nothing else matters*, he thought as he leaned his head against the stone. *Nothing else*.

* * * *

'It is beginning,' Bladud whispered, and his heart skipped a beat. Something was different. He could not

define it but it was as though he was becoming aware of things he would not normally notice: the tiny creakings and chitterings in the grass of busy insects, the sound of wings in flight from birds so far away they were no more than faint specks in the sky. Similarly his sight grew more and more acute, till he believed he could see individual grass stems and the leaves of plants not only trembling in the breeze but actually growing. He watched a flower with intense concentration and saw it shake out its petals from the tight knot of its bud until it formed a blazing circle of yellow light and then – within moments – fade and droop and die. At first he felt elated by this strange sharpening of his senses, but then, as they became each moment more and more finely developed, he found the experience frightening and overwhelming. The faintest single sound became so loud that altogether the whole cacophony became no longer bearable. He covered his ears with his hands to shut it out. His eyes were dazzled by a blazing brilliance that, even with eyes closed, flickered through the lids. He crouched on the ground, his arms over his head, trying desperately to shut it all out: the sounds, the sights, the scents, the feelings . . .

And when he could bear it no longer, he lost consciousness, falling into silence and merciful darkness.

* * * *

When Bladud woke again he was thankful to find that his senses seemed to have returned to normal, though

now, for the first time, he realised how primitive and inadequate that normality really was.

He found himself lying on a couch in a light and airy chamber. As his eyes adjusted to waking, he noticed a young woman standing beside him. Her hair was loose, falling to below her waist in shining golden waves. Her eyes were the blue of the summer sky, her dress fern green. She was looking at him with close attention.

He was startled. Was it after all true what he had heard about the Shining Realms – the Otherworld that mirrored our earthly wishes and desires? She looked all that he had ever dreamed of or wished for . . .

Trying to sit up, he found his limbs so heavy he could scarcely move them. The woman smiled and leaned over him, putting her fine white hands under his shoulders and raising him to a sitting position as easily as she would a child. He wanted to speak to her but his tongue was too heavy. He found he could not move it to form words, but uttered only a kind of croak when he opened his mouth. He was shamed that he seemed such an ugly lump of clay against her ethereal beauty.

Drawing back she poured liquid from a tall crystal flask into a silver cup and offered it to him. When he could not lift his hand to grasp it, she raised the cup to his lips. He could feel the liquid enter his mouth and run down his chin. And then he felt that it was bitter and burning, and he tried to cry out and push it away.

Another touch of a cool hand and the burning ceased. He looked up to find another young woman at his side, identical in every way to the first. Unhurriedly

she poured some liquid from the same crystal flask, and held it to his lips. This time he tried to pull his head away in order to avoid drinking, but she persisted and he could feel it trickle down his throat. He braced himself, but this time there was no discomfort – and suddenly he found he could move his mouth more easily. Tentatively he flexed the muscles in his hand and found to his relief that they responded.

He looked from one woman to the other, marvelling at their likeness, puzzling that the liquid poured from the same flask should have such very different effects on him. Which of these two had given him the burning liquid, and which the cool? He could not tell. They were both watching him with amusement.

Suddenly he felt angry. Why was he, a strong and agile young man, being subjected to this humiliation? What did they want of him?

Then both young women offered him their cups together. No words were spoken but he felt he must choose between them, and that if he chose wrongly it would go ill for him. He looked from one woman to the other and could discern no difference.

‘I am no longer thirsty,’ he said coldly. ‘I want no more to drink.’

The women continued to watch him closely, and to his chagrin he found that he was thirsty after all: very thirsty, and growing thirstier by the moment. He also found that his limbs were again growing heavy and unmanageable.

He forced himself to speak once more, from lips that would now scarcely open.

‘Why are you doing this to me? Why . . . ?’

They came even closer, each offering him a cup – one of which he believed would save him, the other destroy him. With a tremendous effort he lurched forward, knocking both vessels from their hands, and reaching out for the flask itself. He strained every muscle in his body to grasp it, but could not. At least he must have touched it, because he saw it drop as he himself fell to the floor. The liquid splashed into his face, some falling on to his lips and into his open mouth. He swallowed.

‘Whatever happens,’ he thought, ‘I have made my choice.’

Two emotions were now in conflict: relief that he had outwitted his two beautiful tormentors, and fear of the consequences of his drinking directly from the flask. He closed his eyes.

After a moment, as nothing seemed to happen, he gazed around and found himself no longer in the chamber with the couch, but lying on grass in the open. Around him he could see the tall stones ranged as they had been before the strange incident. The sky above was blue, with drifting summer clouds. Buttercups and clover clustered close against his face. Cautiously he raised himself, finding with relief that his limbs moved easily. He stood up slowly and peered around in every direction. There could be no doubt that this inner circle had received recent attention, whereas the rest of the huge enclosure had not. Here the grass was shorter, and

all brambles and nettles had been cleared away. But now he did not feel the eeriness of before, and he wondered if he had merely fallen asleep and dreamed the whole incident. But surely it had seemed too vivid for a dream? He realised that it had some purpose, a meaning of importance for him – though at this time he could not think what. But, dream or not, this place had a power that could affect him against his will, and he would be wise to leave it. He strode out of the inner circle without further incident, and almost immediately located the two great portal stones he had experienced such difficulty in finding earlier. Outside his horse was waiting for him patiently.

Riding away through the tall, shimmering grasses, the seductive beauty of the two young women haunted him. He could not shake off a feeling that he had not seen the last of them.

Chapter 3

The Oracle of Sul

In the region he entered next, the hills were high and the forests thick. To guard its secrets the very earth itself seemed to place obstacles in the way of the casual traveller. Only those who were serious seekers it seemed might penetrate to the deepest mysteries, and the directions given to him at Trinovantum were too vague to be reliable at this stage. Bladud reflected on the noise and bustle of his father's court, the endless comings and goings, the pressure on him to conform to his father's ideal of the heir to the High Kingship. He knew that his younger brother, Liel, passionately wanted the throne, and with his prodigious warrior skills he would no doubt be the people's choice. But Bladud remained his father's choice and, being the elder son, would have this advantage when the councils met throughout the land to elect a new High King at the death of Hudibras. How much time had he spent in his short life learning to kill? How often had he balked at the days and nights spent with the warrior bands listening to their boasting of

conquests past and to come, while stirring up conflicts for the present as though they knew of nothing better to do with their lives than butt their heads against a fellow man or drive a dagger into his heart? Sometimes he wondered if there was something wrong with him that he lacked enthusiasm for the heroic pursuits of his fellows. He was never happy riding into battle, though the eyes of others glowed with excitement at such a challenge. He preferred galloping alone on the hills with only the sun and wind as companions, and nothing at the end of the ride but a pleasant weariness and a memory of joy. He preferred the songs and stories that told of magical journeys and exploits, of mysterious and shining beings, of monsters defeated by cunning, and beautiful women won by love.

On this journey, he had felt happier than he had ever been, cherishing the solitariness of his days, exhilarated by the challenges of his quest. Many tales had been told of the Oracle of Sul – but not many men had ever encountered her. Was she indeed as frightening as they said? Did she curse as readily as she blessed? Did she truly know the future and foretell the minutest detail of one's life? Could she read the thoughts buried deep in one's heart, even those one refused to acknowledge to oneself? Would she be able to cure him of his restlessness – that inner itch of dissatisfaction that bedevilled him? He knew he was seeking something, but he did not know what. The constant fear that haunted him was that he would die an old man looking back on a life that he had wasted.

He was near his destination now. He knew it. But not wanting to arrive weary and in the shadows of evening, he chose to spend one more night in the open.

He left the tangled forest in the river valley and climbed one of the many hills that guarded the entrance to the oracle's domain. He reached the top just as the sun set: the whole sky was suffused with a pale glow ranging from delicate pearl green to gold and ultimately, nearest the sun itself, to red. In the valley below, the curve of the river he had left behind blazed like a polished copper sickle among the darkening foliage. Wild geese flew above him: black ciphers on the tablet of the sky – black sparks in a dying conflagration. Ah, to be able to wing it like the birds! Bladud watched them longingly as they covered in moments wide distances that would take him a day of exhausting effort to traverse. For a moment they were silhouetted against the vast red-gold ball of the sun, and then they were gone. Soon the sun, too, was gone, sinking into the blue distance on its mysterious journey into the Otherworld, leaving the earth without light – life barely tolerable in the dark.

Bladud stood on the top of the hill and watched the great drama that never ceased to amaze him, no matter how often he saw it.

'Sul,' he prayed. 'Mighty goddess! Guide me. Help me. Protect me.'

He had known of her long before he set out on this journey, but had never experienced her presence before – as now he did. In the cool breeze of evening he felt her

breath; in the blue and gathering dark he saw the drawing of her cloak over the land; in the hush of all nature preparing to sleep he thought he heard her whisper his name. He knew now it had been his destiny to come to this place. He had thought it was his own decision to leave home and embark on this journey, but he had been wrong. She was drawing him to her. She was calling to him. She was guiding him, preparing the way for him, preparing him to meet her.

He watched until the daylight was gone, and then he lay down. But above him the mighty procession of the stars was in progress, and that night – the night before he reached her oracle – he could not sleep.

* * * *

He had seen stars before but never so brilliant, so intense. They seemed much closer as he lay flat on his back and he had the distinct impression that he was moving, wheeling with them; that he was amongst them, no longer separate, no longer apart. He was on a journey passing through them, as easily as a boat passes through water-flowers on a still pond. He stared in amazement as the ground dissolved beneath him, as he hovered bodiless in an immense space – as filaments of light floated past him, from darkness . . . going into darkness. Strange how on earth one lamp can illuminate a huge chamber, but here in the night the powerful light of the stars made no impression on the blackness of the spaces between them. He had never been so aware of the contrast between dark and light – nor so little afraid.

What was he as he moved through the stars as freely as a bird moves through the air? For he could not believe that he was still the man he had once been. He remembered how, as a small child, he had leaped off a high rock, shouting to his companions that he was flying. He could still see their faces looking up at him in that long moment before he crashed to the ground – some with awe, some with hope, some with scepticism, but all with close attention. For the brief moment when he was not attached to the earth or anything on it, he really believed that he was flying. He strained every muscle in his small body to lift himself up. In his dreams it was so easy, and often he dreamed he was flying over hills, over forests.

He had dreamed once that he soared above his father's rath in the city of Trinovantum, looking down on the great White Mound in which his ancestors were buried and at the High King's great house from which his father controlled the lives of thousands upon thousands. They had seemed small and insignificant from that vantage, his father's formidable warriors no more dangerous than ants. But what was so easy in a dream was not so easy in reality. His child's body, light as it was, was too heavy for the air. He could feel himself falling. He could feel his bones crack against the rocky earth, and he screamed and screamed with pain and frustration. The other children laughed and mocked, all the more so because for one moment he had led them to believe that they too were not bound to the earth but could fly like the birds if they so willed it.

Bladud remembered, clearly as yesterday, the face of Fergal, his father's Druid priest, who had been watching the whole humiliating incident. The man looked down into the tear-stained face of the hurt and disappointed child, and there was something in his expression that came vividly back to Bladud at this moment. At the time he could only wonder why the priest did not pick him up and comfort him, as grown-ups usually did. Now it seemed to him the Druid had been in trance, as he had often seen him since, and was seeing not the weeping child but something else, something extraordinary.

Suddenly Bladud felt afraid. Was it some memory of the pain he had suffered as a child that day – the shock of falling? Or was it rather the Druid's strange expression that made him feel he faced a destiny that was too difficult for him – a task for which he was not yet ready?

He found he was no longer moving through the stars. He was back on earth, where the rough grass of the hilltop pricked his skin and made it itch. But was it the cold night breeze alone that made him shiver?

Above him, immensely far away, the stars were again minute points of light in a solid black dome, as remote and unattainable as they had always been.

With a start he turned his head at hearing a movement near him on the bare hilltop. As though to mock him, a huge owl flapped over his head and winged away into the dark – a hunting owl seeking earth-bound prey.

* * * *

Dawn came at last – the sky at first a pale translucent grey. He watched the stars disappear one by one until only one was left, and that seemed loth to go. It shone like a shoulder brooch on a cloak of fine grey silk, focusing the eye and holding all together. It still remained like a faint flush of gold as the east prepared the world for the return of the sun. Stiff from the long hours on his back, Bladud hauled himself to his feet. His clothes were damp from the dew and he shook and rubbed off the stray grasses clinging to him before he looked around. It seemed the world had disappeared behind a white mist, and he alone was there to celebrate the first rays of sunlight. He was awed by the magnificence of what he had been shown.

‘I will be worthy,’ he whispered.

He could now feel the sun’s warmth loosening his stiff limbs and bringing him comfort. He watched the world gradually reappearing: the trees at first like faint smudges – and then like delicate black filigree – until at last they blazed in every shade of living green. Birds were on the move high in the sky, pulling the luminous curtain of day across the earth.

As hill after hill appeared he counted. He had been told the oracle was guarded by seven hills. This was the place.

When the whole emerging landscape lay bathed in full sunlight, he left the hilltop and made his way down into the valley which lay to the west. He thought about Fergal, and wondered why the Druid priest had been so hostile to this pilgrimage, doing everything short of

casting spells to prevent the young prince setting off. He could picture him now standing tall and lean and disapproving beside the gate, to deliver his last dire warning.

‘Your destiny is to be High King of this mighty and civilised land. Meddle with the superstitions of savages at your peril!’

But Bladud was not prepared to listen. He had learned about this oracle from his friend Yaruk who was one of those very ‘savages’, one of the race who had inhabited this land long before Fergal’s Celtic people had arrived – even before Brutus, descendant of that great Trojan Prince Aeneas, forefather of his own royal line, had come ashore on this island with his stolen Greek princess, to seek sanctuary. How many times had he been told that his ancient and noble family was far superior to all the local races – even superior to the powerful warrior Celts who imposed their will upon the indigenous population with such arrogant ease. He did not know what skilful and cunning manoeuvre his father’s people had used to achieve this liaison with the Celts, so that Hudibras, with blood from Troy and Greece and Rome in his veins, held the most coveted throne in all the land.

But, growing up in the town founded by the Trojan Brutus and called at first New Troy, then Trinovantum, Bladud was not unaware of the tensions that often threatened that royal position. On the whole the Druids served his father’s dynasty loyally, and over the generations any differences between the two so-called

‘civilised’ races had become minimal through intermarriage since both united in despising the ‘savages’. Occasionally however one of the despised race was given a place at court to help keep the peace, and Yaruk was such a one. The boy had caught the eye of the High King on one of his regular royal progresses, because of his skill in carving.

There was scarce a place to put one’s hand in the palace that did not boast a carving. The pillars holding the high roof were alive with images of animals and birds emerging from foliage. The roof beams were carved with heads and faces of every type and every expression, staring, leering and glowering from every angle. The throne itself was a masterpiece of wood-carving, and Yaruk could make from the trunk of a dead tree a world of living creatures so cleverly executed that what one saw at first was only a fraction of what would emerge on closer inspection.

Bladud had been drawn to Yaruk, not only because they were the same age, but because Yaruk shared interests unconnected with warrior skills. Bladud had been trained as hunter and warrior; it was essential that the eventual leader of his people should not only master these skills, but excel. He was fit and agile, and did what was expected of him, but whenever possible he would escape to where Yaruk squatted in a pool of silence, exercising his craft. At one time he had pleaded with Yaruk to teach him how to carve, but although he learned some skill he found that the genius for making the carvings rival life itself was beyond him.

Nevertheless the two became firm friends, and it was only to Yaruk that Bladud dared confide his inner restlessness – his feeling that there was something special waiting for him, though he did not know what. It was Yaruk who told him about the goddess Sul and her oracle, and it was not long before Bladud decided that only she could answer the questions that troubled him.

Himself a seer and a prophet, Fergal was angry when he heard about the boy's intention, no doubt resentful that Bladud preferred to consult an alien oracle rather than himself. He had been given charge of Bladud's education since birth and had high hopes for the boy under his own influence. Fergal had made it his mission in life to ensure Bladud's skills on the battlefield were matched by his scholarship. If he had noticed the restlessness in Bladud he had thought it but the pains of a youth growing faster than his peers. He had prophesied to Hudibras that the boy would make a great and extraordinary king and that the land would have many golden years during his reign. But he had not warned the king about the shadows he also foresaw hovering over his son's life.

What would this shaman tell him? And how would what she said affect him? Fergal realised he could not keep Bladud forever at his side, preventing the influences of the rest of the world from reaching him, but the moment of parting had come sooner than he had expected. It was with only the greatest effort that he had prevented himself setting out to follow the youth. Instead he recognised Bladud's right to independent

decision, and accepted unwillingly that the time had come for the fledgling to leave the nest. This would be the first of many tests Bladud could only face alone. Fergal had made his protests – but let the youth go on his way.

* * * *

Bladud made his way down into the valley, where the river wound peacefully among the reeds. In many places trees leant over the water as though to peer at their own reflections. He was dusty and dirty from his long journey, and decided to bathe. Leaving his clothes on the bank, he waded through the water-weed and plunged into the coolth.

Returning to the bank refreshed, he looked up into a willow that overhung the river just before climbing on to the land. He was bemused by the play of light as every ripple on the water danced a mirror counterpoint in its leafy branches, transforming the substance of trunk and canopy into spiritstuff as insubstantial as a dream. In the dazzling, glancing, dancing light he thought he saw the long, lithe body of a woman half turned from him. He stood still, up to his knees in the water, scarce daring to breathe lest she become aware of him and take flight. The curve of her breast and thigh followed the lines of the tree and he could not be sure whether she was a separate being or part of the wood itself. At last his urge to know if what he saw was real or not impelled him to wade further towards the bank. In the flurry of reflected light that shimmered through the tree as he disturbed

the water, she vanished, and he was left with uncertainty: had she been there or not? If so, of what realm was she – spirit or flesh?

On the mossy bank beneath the willow he found no marks to indicate a physical presence. The grey roots twined and twisted like sinuous serpents, then disappeared underground to hold the gigantic tree firmly to the earth. He touched the bark and it was solid. He reached up to a fan of leaves, and they felt firm and leathery to his touch. A bird took wing from an upper branch with a screech and a whirr. He heard it flapping away above the forest, calling in agitation to its mate.

He shivered, aware that he was naked and cold. He reached for his clothes, drawing them on like another skin. Now with his breeches on, he paused to look over his shoulder, having the feeling that he was being watched. Yet he could see no one, though he stood still a long time, staring into the deep green depths and shades around him, turning his head slowly so as to miss nothing.

‘If you are here, goddess,’ he said at last, aloud, his voice sounding harsh and out of harmony with the natural music of wind-hush, insect buzz and water-lap, ‘show yourself.’

And if I am not here? The thought in his own mind seemed to have a voice, low and amused and mocking. *And if I am not the goddess you seek . . . ?*

Impatiently he pulled on the rest of his clothes, anxious now to leave the place. Had he not been warned that in these wild regions of the west, in these forested

hills, dark and secret places hid all manner of beings inimical to man? Had he not as a child listened, fascinated and terrified, to the story-tellers of his father's court in the dark of the winter, the hearth fires throwing great shadows on to the walls so that he seemed to hear the wolves howling in these very distant forests, as though the beasts were circling close around him in the shadows just beyond the circle of light the fires threw? Wolves he could face now that he was grown, with his dagger at his side, his spear in his hand. But there had been other things hinted at by the story-teller as he lowered his voice to speak in a whisper that made one's blood run cold. These other things could not be fought off with bronze or iron.

These other things would not answer to a human challenge, no matter how heroic, but picked their own time and their own place . . .

Prince Bladud gripped his spear and checked that his dagger was safe at his belt. Squaring his shoulders, he set off alongside the river. At every scuttling sound his head turned until he felt ashamed of himself. What kind of warrior prince was startled at water rat or vole? At last, some distance further on, he began to relax. It seemed that he was alone again.

* * * *

It was noon when Bladud heard the sound of rushing water and knew that he must be approaching the oracle's sanctuary. An overgrown path, roughly marked

out with stones carved with mystical and magical signs and symbols, led him further.

Bladud shivered. He had been a long time reaching this point and now he was not sure that he wanted to go on. Fergal had tried to dissuade him, and even Yaruk, one of the so-called 'savages', who revered this oracle, had warned him to be careful.

Yaruk had told him to leave his horse behind as he drew near the sanctuary. 'You must go alone and on foot,' he had urged.

The first two carved stones he did not touch. But when he reached the third, he ran his fingers over its surface, tracing the curves of a spiral. Subsequently he touched each new stone with similar interest, noting how his fingers tingled.

The path began to twist and turn and he had the impression that he was passing the same landmarks several times over, but each time was seeing them from a different angle. It seemed, too, that he was somehow gradually losing all sense of his past. Thoughts, memories, the busy images that normally crowd the mind and interfere with spiritual vision, were being left behind. He was now aware only of the moment he was currently experiencing.

The forest thickened. The path climbed. The noise of rushing water grew louder, and suddenly he faced a low cliff almost hidden by the heavy boughs of trees leaning over it and the ferns and creepers growing from it. Halfway up was a gash from which issued the waters of the stream he had been following – leaping from

darkness into light. A cloud of steamy mist swirled around the entrance to the cave. Bladud had never seen anything like it: the stone alongside where the water issued was stained rust red. He recalled that Yaruk had mentioned 'blood' and 'smoke that thunders' and 'a hole in the earth which leads to perpetual fire'.

What now? There was no sign of any temple or shrine. A huge boulder rose from the cauldron of water swirling at the base of the cliff and it was carved even more carefully than all the rest: three perfect interrelated spirals. By using rocks and the protruding roots of a huge tree he was just able to reach the cave. He climbed carefully, his feet sending slivers of loose stone and twig skittering down below.

Close at last to the issue of water, he reached out gingerly and touched the flow. He drew back, startled. It was hot! He wiped the sweat from his face with one arm, and looked around for a way into the cave. At one side he found just enough room to squeeze through without having to pass beneath the scalding water. He took one step forward, and nearly lost his balance. The rock underfoot was as slippery as the outcrop he grabbed to steady himself. For a moment he could go neither backwards nor forwards. Ahead lay darkness. But then his desire to know became stronger than his fear. Carefully he took another step on the slippery surface, feeling the hot spray on his face, its steam almost blistering his skin. A few feet into the cavern itself he suddenly reached a ledge behind the fall and found he could stand more safely.

He peered into the murky darkness. Beyond the dense cloud of sulphurous steam, he sensed that there was an open space. He eased forward and the swirling mist clouds almost suffocated him. Yet he persisted, and he was rewarded. For suddenly there was light in front of him. Only a blur at first, but with every step it grew brighter.

Clinging to the cave wall, he edged his way alongside the mysterious rushing stream, and came out at last, his lungs almost bursting, into clearer air. Above him could be seen the sky through a jagged hole. Scrambling up the rocks until he reached the lip, he then hauled himself over it. Thankfully he found himself standing upright on firm ground. Below him the steaming water disappeared into the depths of the earth. Ferns grew thickly around the edge of the hole, luxuriating in the warm steamy atmosphere. Bladud flung himself down on the springy turf, shaking with relief and wiping pouring sweat from his face and neck. His skin was red from the steam and, in contrast to the heat underground, he was now shivering with cold.

After a few moments of recovery, he gazed around, noticing that the forest grew as thickly here as down below the falls.

Suddenly he realised he was not alone; he was being watched from the shadows. For a moment he thought it might be the same young girl he had fancied watching while he bathed, but this time it turned out to be an old, old woman, gnarled and bent, her skin seasoned so brown by the sun that it looked almost indistinguish-

able from the tree bark. Her head was practically bald, but what hair remained fell in white wisps and untidy strands over her bony shoulders. Her eyes, however, were large and bright.

For a seemingly long time they stared at each other. Bladud felt ridiculously like a deer caught in the beam of some predator's eye, poised and ready for flight, but unable to make a move.

At last the old woman broke the spell. She turned very slowly and began to hobble away.

'Wait!' Bladud cried out. He had not come this far and endured so much to return without achieving his objective.

But the old hag did not turn back.

'Wait!' he called again louder. Still she paid no attention, so he set off after her. She had not seemed very far away but, as fast as he moved on his young limbs, she seemed always to be ahead and out of reach. He was soon more annoyed than afraid, and pursued her with grim determination, impatiently dodging overhanging branches and tangles of thorn bushes, amazed that she could negotiate the forest's obstacles with such agility.

At last, almost out of breath and in despair of ever catching up with her, he stopped his pursuit and stood still, looking after the retreating figure with deep disappointment. 'I need you,' he whispered. 'Why do you reject me?'

She could not possibly have heard him, yet at last she stopped and turned to face him. Now she beckoned him

to follow her, and this time he found himself keeping pace with her quite easily.

After a while they came upon a round construction of wood and thatch deep in the forest. She disappeared between portals carved with signs like those he had encountered on the way, the device of three interrelated spirals most prominent. She had indicated that he should follow, and after only a momentary hesitation, he did so.

Inside he found a dark interior filled with the same sulphurous steam as in the cavern. There was a small hole at the centre of the floor, where normally the hearth would be, and it was from this the steam was issuing. Directly above it was a round hole in the ceiling, from which the steam could escape. All around the walls were ranged the paraphernalia of a shaman: feathers and furs and masks. Bundles of dried herbs hung from the rafters, while every nook and cranny was piled high with bones and skulls both human and animal.

Something moved in the shadows at the far side of the chamber and Bladud struggled to adjust his eyes to the dim interior. He then met the gaze of a pair of eyes low down, as though a man were crouching there. But these were not the eyes of a man. They were the eyes of a wolf. Involuntarily Bladud took a backward step.

The old woman saw his fear and signalled the wolf to her side. As obedient as a dog the creature moved to her, but its eyes never left Bladud's and Bladud's never left the wolf's.

She indicated that Bladud should sit. Reluctantly he sat down cross-legged on the floor. She reached up and took down a cloak of wolf's skin from the wall and wrapped it around her. Then she took a wolf mask and placed it over her face.

She began to move in a slow and rhythmic fashion, forming the steps of a ritual dance on the other side of the steam-hole. The wolf never took his eyes off Bladud for an instant, though the body of his mistress often came between them. As she danced, she began to hum, and the humming grew louder and more unearthly as the steps of the dance became faster and wilder.

Bladud could hear the rushing of water under the earth providing a kind of counterpoint to the sound she made. Just as the humming reached a climax, the wolf moved at last, lifting its head to howl as only a wolf can howl, recalling to Bladud all the night fears of generations of humans who have lived on the edge of dark forests and dreaded the wild denizens that stalk at night.

He clenched his fists, determined not to give way to overwhelming instinct and flee the place, giving up any chance of learning what the oracle might have to say. He had no idea if she knew who he was or why he had come. He could only hope that this frenzy of hers would lead on to something meaningful.

Suddenly the humming and movement stopped. Not gradually, as it had started, but so suddenly that Bladud was left with a deafening silence, though the sounds he had heard seemed to continue in his head.

Two sets of eyes were staring at him now – the woman’s as inhuman as the beast’s.

Bladud waited, longing to speak, to explain himself and his presence in this place. But the atmosphere was so charged with tension, he did not dare.

Suddenly there came a sound from above, and through the hole in the roof flew an eagle. Bladud stared with terror as it swooped around the room. He ducked, covering his face with his arms as it passed close. For a moment it paused to perch on the bony shoulder of the wolf-woman, and then it lifted off again, flying straight as an arrow out through the open doorway. Its mighty wing brushed against Bladud as it did so. He was astonished by the accuracy of its passage.

The wolf-woman lifted an arm to point a long finger at Bladud.

‘You are the eagle’s kin,’ she said, ‘and he has claimed you.’ She paused, and in the room the silence was broken only by the rumbling of water under the earth. ‘Like the eagle you will fly. Like the eagle you will see things that others who walk on this earth cannot see. You will be a great king. Your story will be told thousands of years from now.’

As she lowered her arm, the energy seemed to drain out of her so that now she looked no longer the formidable wolf-priestess, but more like an ancient totem stick with a moth-eaten cloak of wolf-skin hanging and sagging from it. The wolf turned and slunk back to its place in the shadows, dropping its head on its paws, ready to sleep.

Bladud felt as though released from some spell. That magnificent experience when the space all around him was filled with eagle wings and wolf magic was over. Instead he was a tired and hungry youth squatting on an earth floor in a smelly hut, with only a tame beast and an old crone. There was nothing more for him here.

At the door he paused and pulled from his neck the golden torc he wore as sign of his princely status. He tossed it at her feet.

‘You will come back,’ she rasped, not even glancing down at the priceless treasure he had given her.

‘Never!’ he muttered under his breath. And he meant it.

Chapter 4

The White Mound and the Island of Thorns

During the Festival of Lughnasa, Keron arrived with his daughter Rheinid. It was a year since Prince Bladud had spent those two nights in their rath on his way to consult the oracle.

Trinovantum was crowded with visitors. Those who could not find shelter for the night in the houses of friends and relatives were encamped in makeshift tents around the outskirts. Nearly every piece of land between the river Tain and the fortified hill where the great castle of Hudibras stood was occupied. The weather was at its hottest and the smell of so many families and animals gathered together was overpowering.

Bladud stood on the watchtower rising above the ramparts to witness the travellers winding towards the town. He enjoyed the excitement, the change in routine, but it was fortunate that only a select few would actually come through the gates into the hill-fort itself. If he

wished, he could go down on to the plain and mingle with his father's subjects, clad in peasant clothes, his priceless rings, armbands and torcs left safely behind. Thus unrecognised he could participate in just as much as he wished of the bustle and excitement. Equally at any point he chose, he could leave them and once again enjoy the privileges of a wealthy prince.

The crowds were gathering for a celebration of the god Lugh, the Shining One, the Many-skilled, the god of Light and Knowledge, the god who had come over the seas from lands so distant that most men there that day had not even heard of them. During the time of the festival the ancient tales of the god's prowess were told by many a skilful wordsmith. Even the young bloods of the court paused sometimes in their drinking and carousing to listen to the poems and songs that told of the 'Bright Phantom', Lugh of the Shining Shield, who came from his mysterious realm in the east guarded by a golden tree, to defend this very land against the giant Balor and all the dark forces that beset them.

This year Bladud chose not to mingle with the crowds, but concentrated on practice for the games to be held in the great god's honour. His brother Liel was favoured to win the longest footrace, but Bladud was determined to beat him. The oracle had said he would be a great king and to be that he had to excel at everything.

He left the tower and headed towards the higher ground, where the White Mound crowned the hill on which the fort itself was built. He turned his gaze to the

river, the broad Tain which carried the big ships from faraway places to the safety of his father's harbour, now in full salt tide and flooding the marshlands to the south. One day he would sail away in one of them. One day he would explore other lands, other cultures. If he was to be a true king, he owed it to his people to see the whole shape of the world and all its potential. For how could he lead them wisely if he could see no further than his own nose? When he became king he would not want to perpetuate only what had gone before. He felt sure there were other ways of doing things. He wanted to bring his people forward into a better world; a wider, more satisfactory state of being.

As he stood beside the White Mound, the burial place of ancient kings, he reflected that here his ancestors, the Trojan Brutus and his Greek wife Imogene, had lain while generations of their descendants had allowed their cultural heritage to disappear, mingling their blood with the fierce Celtic warrior tribes that had overrun the country. There was Celtic blood in his veins too, for his Trojan ancestors had not wed their own race exclusively, but in his dreams he always harked back to that Greek princess, torn from her home and all that was familiar, to sail the wild and stormy seas with her exiled husband and land at last upon this shore and live out her life among alien people. She must have stood where he was now standing, looking over the broad sheet of silver water, longing to take ship and sail to her family and hear her own language spoken again, her own songs sung. *One day, he thought, I'll go back to her land and*

seek out the burial places of her family and tell the ghosts that linger there that I, one of their own flesh and blood, have cared for her and have brought her spirit home.

He reached out and touched some of the white crystals that covered the great mound. They were cold and sharp, transported on that very river from far afield, and so white the mound shone in the sunlight that travellers could see it gleaming and glinting from a very great distance.

Tradition had it that this was not only the burial mound of early kings and queens of his dynasty, but contained the head of Bendigeid Vran, Bran the Blessed – the head that had been severed in Ireland centuries before but which still gazed out towards the east from its burial place in the White Mound, giving protection to all the land, and wisdom to whoever had the courage to consult with it. The White Mound was an extremely sacred place, and for any man to touch it who was not a priest of the very highest order was taboo.

Bladud could hear the distant hubbub of the preparations in the fort and in the town below, but up here he was alone. Looking around himself cautiously to make sure he was not observed, he carefully prised a piece of crystal from the mound's surface. *I will take this and lay it upon the graves of Imogene's kinsfolk*, he told himself, but his heart beat faster at the sacrilege it would appear he was committing. The crystal fragment was small and fitted easily into the palm of his hand. Suddenly he looked up to witness three huge ravens

coming to land on top of the mound, and his mouth went dry. The raven was always associated with Bran.

As they shifted about to find a comfortable perch on the rocky knoll, their wings spread out like great black shadows over the white stone. He could swear that their yellow eyes bored accusingly into his. He thought of putting the crystal back, but decided against that. Instead he lifted his chin and stared defiantly into the eyes of the raven closest to him.

‘If you come from Bran the Blessed, you will know why I have taken this,’ he said, holding it up for the bird to see. ‘I swear on oath by Lugh the Light that I will surrender my life if I do not take this crystal to Queen Imogene’s family tomb in the land of her birth.’

One of the ravens gave a raucous cry and lifted off the mound, its great wings flapping like unsecured sails in a storm. It rose high and circled three times before flying away.

Bladud turned to face the other two, which were still staring at him.

‘And I swear an oath by the goddess Sul that I will give my life if I do not bring joy to the heart of the great Queen Imogene by doing thus.’

The second raven shrieked and left the mound, flying low along the river course towards the sea.

For a long time Bladud and the third raven stared at each other in silence. The young man could feel the crystal clutched in his hand grow warm with his body heat.

‘I cannot put it back now,’ he whispered hoarsely. ‘I have sworn, and must honour my oaths.’ But what had he done? Why had he sworn such fearsome oaths? What if he could not carry out what he had vowed?

The raven moved down the side of the mound towards him, walking awkwardly, clumsily, nevertheless menacingly. It reached out its beak and pecked at a ring on the hand that held the crystal. It tugged and jerked at it as though trying to pull a worm from the ground. Its sharp beak cut into the prince’s finger and drew blood. Terrified, Bladud pulled the ring off and offered it to the bird. The raven seized it and flew off at once, rising high, high into the air until it seemed to dissolve into the blue.

Bladud sank on to the grass trembling and sweating. The mound beside him no longer looked merely a heap of earth studded with chunks of white crystalline rock. It had become a place of power, of mystery, of terror. The long-dead eyes of Bran could see.

But if Bran could see what Bladud had done, surely Queen Imogene could see it too? Surely she could feel the reverence he held for her, and the purity of his motives in taking this piece of crystal? Surely she would protect him from any harm that might befall him due to his sacrilege?

He bent his head and shut his eyes and prayed for her help and her forgiveness. In his mind’s eye she stood beside him, her hair bound in long, thick golden plaits falling from beneath a golden circlet studded with gems. Her white hand reached out to him, and on her

wrist shone a bracelet of gold with a pearl shaped like a swan. Her eyes were like the sea, and she gazed at him as she would at a lover.

Bladud caught his breath, his heart missing a beat.

But as he opened his eyes and reached out to her, she was gone, and he was alone again beside the ancient mound, and the sounds from below, of shouting and clattering, of bustling human life, had returned in force to dispel all magic.

* * * *

Early on the morning of the day of the great race the runners, both men and women, gathered. Around the perimeter of the field in which the race was to take place an unruly crowd jostled, shouting for their favourites, whistling and chanting.

It was with surprise that Bladud recognised Rheinid standing in the line-up. He had almost forgotten her. But now, remembering, he stared at her. She looked across at him and met his eyes. It was clear from her expression that she had not forgotten any detail of the time they had spent together.

He studied her body: her bare feet and limbs were more sun-bronzed than when he had seen them last. She must have been training for this race. She was certainly beautiful: raven black hair plaited and bound, limbs supple and strong but not over-muscular like some of the women, back straight, head held high. As one of her neighbours joked with her, she laughed and he could

just catch the melodious sound and see the flash of her white teeth.

The marshals were beginning to order the competitors into place. Bladud took one last look at Rheinid, then decided that he must have no distractions, and shut her out of his mind.

Liel yelled something to him and he knew their personal challenge was on. For either of them to win the race would not be easy. For months young warriors in training had competed amongst themselves for the privilege of running at the Lughnasa, so those that were gathered on the field were fit and ready and raring to go. All knew that if they could beat the two princes of the royal house, they would win more than just the race.

For a moment, Bladud caught sight of Yaruk waving and shouting before he was pushed roughly back into the crowd by the marshals. The prince waved to him and grinned. It was well known that Yaruk's people wanted Prince Bladud to win this race, for they realised Prince Liel had no love for the 'savages', and it was only Bladud's continuing patronage that allowed a few of them any kind of honourable position within the privileged society of their conquerors. He hoped he would not let them down. His succession to the throne did not directly ride on this one performance, for it was an accumulation of victories over the years that raised the prospects of the crown, and every individual contest was important. Inevitably the people would judge their leaders by their ability to win, their physical strength and fitness. They believed the land itself would bear

healthy crops and support healthy livestock only if its king was strong in wind and limb.

Bladud looked towards his father who stood on the wooden dais, his sword raised above his head. When that sword was lowered the race would be on. Hudibras remained tall, muscular, powerful, with no unwanted flesh on him. His hair was greying, yet no youngster could challenge him to battle and hope to win. His rule was firm and respected, and in his time the land had been relatively peaceful. If the subkings grew restless and ambitious, Hudibras would know of it almost before they did themselves. And if gold could not settle them down, the sword soon would. Hudibras was undisputed High King of a mighty land and any heir of his would have a hard task to follow him. Nor would the people tolerate a weakling in his place.

Suddenly the sword flashed down, and the whole field was on the move!

Bladud paced himself well, as did Liel. Neither sought the forefront at the beginning. The course was long and the contest was rough. In the jostling for position many were hurt and forced to leave the field. Seen from above it would have appeared more a battle than a race, and not even princes of the royal household were immune to injury.

Bladud saw a promising youngster tripped up; it being his first Lughnasa, he had not yet learned to concentrate on survival first and speed later. But as the numbers thinned out, the race started in earnest, and it was then the survivors concentrated all their efforts on

speed. Knowing he was flanked by formidable rivals, Bladud was far from complacent. He wondered briefly if Rheinid had survived the initial challenge, but dared not spare a moment to look around.

As he stretched himself to the limit, the roar of the crowds was almost indistinguishable from the pounding of blood in his head.

At the very moment when he believed he would die if relief did not come, he found himself lying prostrate in the dust at the feet of his father. Hands were pulling at him, lifting him, raising him up on shoulders. Eager faces were thrust into his, voices shouting. He was the victor!

But over the heads of those who carried him in triumph he saw his brother Liel similarly borne aloft. It was clear the two had won the race together, and the watching crowd was mad with excitement. For a brief moment he looked into his father's eyes, and he saw there the trace of a shadow: the realisation that on the king's death the succession might be disputed and his people divided in their loyalty. But the moment of insight was over almost as soon as it was born, while Bladud and Liel were jostled and back-slapped and almost drowned in ale.

Long into the night these celebrations continued, and many a fight broke out between the rival factions supporting one prince against the other. Bladud endured it all as though in a dream, his head swimming in the ale and the great hall revolving sickeningly. Grinning faces came and went. Ribald songs rose in a

crescendo. Occasionally he remembered Rheinid and once he thought he saw her across the hall, but almost instantly she disappeared behind another group of lurching revellers.

* * * *

The following day saw the climax of the festival, when the winners of the great race were presented to Lugh. There would also be the offering of sacrifices, the presentation of gifts, the granting of petitions, the settlement of debts.

Bladud slept late and was woken roughly.

‘Prince!’ Yaruk urged him. ‘Wake up! Wake up!’ He was clearly afraid that Liel would have the advantage if Bladud missed any of the big events of the day. Bladud opened his eyes gingerly, then shut them at once as the light cut into them like a knife. As Yaruk shook his arm, his head thumped with a dull but persistent ache, his mouth feeling full of sand.

A cup was held to his lips.

‘Prince . . . my lord,’ Yaruk whispered, ‘it is noon. The sacrifices are due to start. The King and Prince Liel are already in place. They are waiting for you . . . but they might not delay much longer.’

Bladud struggled back to full consciousness, pulled on his clothes and drank the foul-tasting liquid he was presented with. Then he left his room and with Yaruk at his back urging him on, hurried through the narrow streets to the open space which lay in front of the White Mound. Here the main ceremony was traditionally held,

and he could see the King and Prince Liel and Fergal the Druid all in full regalia. As rowdy and undisciplined as the race had been, so this event would be stately and orderly. Lesser priests and nobility were carefully ranged in hierarchical ranks, and as Bladud passed the rulers from outlying sub-kingdoms he spotted Keron with his daughter Rheinid. She was now dressed from head to toe in yellow, with gold in her sloe-black hair and wound about her tanned arms. He caught the flash of her dark eyes as he passed.

King Hudibras had reserved the place to his right for Bladud, as an indication to the people that Bladud was his chosen heir. Liel stood on his left.

One by one the pure white animals were sacrificed and the smoke of their burning rose to Lugh's shining orb. Using the language which his dynasty had brought from Troy, through Rome and Greece, to this grey island, Hudibras spoke a prayer of dedication, of praise, of hope for help and guidance and protection in the future. Very few of the spectators could understand the words, but Bladud could, for he had made a point of learning the ancient tongue of his forefathers. When it came his turn to present himself to Lugh, to vow service and ask for protection, help and guidance, he spoke it clearly and with conviction. Looking up into the infinity of blue above, he knew that Lugh heard him, and believed that the light pouring from the sun at this moment was only a shadow of the light that would sustain him in his long and dangerous journey through the many realms of life.

But when Liel's turn came to dedicate himself to Lugh, he stumbled over the words as though he had learned them by rote and understood nothing of their meaning. He blurted them out so fast it was clear the whole ritual seemed nothing to him but a waste of time.

* * * *

A special day was set aside for the settlement of debts, the payment of blood-money, the exchange of contract vows, and it was then that Keron made his move.

Hudibras was seated in the great hall on his throne, a huge chair elaborately carved by Yaruk from an oak tree felled by lightning. His two sons were seated on either side of him on lesser chairs, and Fergal the Druid stood slightly behind him, his hand resting on the back of the king's throne in symbolic gesture.

Bladud had been watching and listening intently to everything that occurred, his mind actively participating in every word, every judgement, but now he had begun to tire, and the last two cases that had come before the king he had barely noted. But suddenly he was all attention, for Keron, leading his daughter by the hand, was now standing before them. Liel, too, straightened in his seat and looked at the beautiful girl with lively interest. Her hair was combed down around her like a fine black cloak, falling from a crown of red flowers in her hair. Her arms were bare and her dress the colour of ripe corn, but she wore no jewellery. Her father, on the other hand, was clearly wearing every piece he possessed, taking no chances that anyone might overlook

the fact that he was a man of substance. As Bladud remembered the poverty and degradation of Keron's subjects, his lip curled.

Keron bowed low before the dais. Rheinid, too, inclined her head and bent her knee. Hudibras noted her pride, her confidence, her grace, and wondered how such a daughter could belong to such a father.

In the silence the herald announced that the lord Keron son of Mel had come for settlement of a debt incurred in the game of fidchell.

Bladud started. Until this moment he had forgotten the stake he had foolishly agreed with Keron. The intervening year had been eventful enough to drive the details of that unpleasant night from his mind. So here he had come to claim his stake! What treasures would he demand? He wished he had had time to warn his father.

The memories came crowding back. As he looked at Rheinid, his blood stirred in memory of what they had done together in her bed. But with those erotic memories resurfaced his anger at having been tricked and manipulated.

Keron spoke for some time before Bladud began to listen properly. The first part of his speech consisted of boasting about his own prowess and that of his ancestors, which proved an exhaustive inventory.

'Yes, yes, enough!' Hudibras at last said impatiently. 'Why does your private game of fidchell concern the crown? Has someone dishonoured his pledge? Get to the point. Name the pledge. Name the debtor.'

‘Your son Prince Bladud is the debtor, my lord,’ Keron now declared in loud and ringing terms that no one in the whole court could fail to hear. ‘And my daughter here is the pledge.’

Hudibras stared, as did everyone, at the young woman standing beside Keron.

Bladud was shocked.

To the furthest corners of the great hall a buzz of voices spread until the noise was almost deafening. What was this? What had he said? Was Prince Bladud refusing to pay some debt? Who was the girl? Had anyone ever heard of this Keron?

The King glared at his favourite son.

‘What is this?’ he demanded.

Bladud flushed.

‘I – I am not sure, my lord . . . ‘ he stammered.

Keron seemed unperturbed by the commotion he had caused.

He was smiling smugly at various acquaintances in the crowd now pressing closer to the dais.

Bladud looked at Rheinid and thought he saw in her eyes a certain satisfaction and triumph. It did not look as though she had been forced into this against her will.

Hudibras fixed Bladud with a questioning glare.

‘I – I did indeed play fidchell with this man, father, a year ago. But there was no mention of the girl as stake.’

Hudibras turned to Keron.

‘My lord, our agreed stake was that whoever won could ask of the other what he wished a year from that day.’

A gasp went around the assembled throng, and then there was silence, no one wanting to miss a word.

‘Is this true?’ Hudibras asked his son.

Bladud nodded dumbly.

‘Did the lord Keron win?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Hudibras turned back to Keron, his face an iron mask.

‘What do you ask for, sir?’

‘That the Prince Bladud should marry my daughter Rheinid.’

The silence in the crowded hall was palpable. It was as though every man and woman in the place was holding breath. All eyes were fixed on the face of Hudibras.

For a long, long moment he stared at Keron’s mean, smug face.

‘Then my son is honour bound to marry your daughter,’ the great king said coldly but firmly.

The hall exploded into sound once more. Everyone was shouting, everyone trying to be heard above the hubbub. Who was this unknown girl? Who this upstart, petty lord? Why should their favourite, their loved and honoured prince, heir to the throne of the High King – why should he marry this nobody, this trickster’s daughter? Why had their prince laid himself open to such a situation? But he was young. Surely the king could . . . ?

But the High King's expression was implacable. His son had given his word, and now there was no way out of it – as well Keron knew.

Bladud felt he was falling into some deep quagmire. Surely his father would extricate him? It was not that Rheinid was undesirable – it was just that he had been tricked. It was just that he was not ready for marriage . . . it was just that marriage was the last thing on earth he wanted at this time. He wanted travel, adventure – he wanted choice! At this moment he hated Rheinid. She was no innocent counter in this cunning game. She was a willing player, and she was dangerous. He looked into her dark eyes, and what he saw there chilled him.

He leapt from his chair.

'My lord . . . ' he began passionately, determined to plead for his release from the pledge.

'You have given your word and you must honour it,' Hudibras said icily.

Bladud turned to Keron. 'Ask anything else: any jewel, any amount of gold, horses, cattle, land . . . Name it and it is yours.'

'I have named the stake,' Keron said, well knowing that, through his daughter's marriage to the crown prince, jewels, gold, horses, cattle, land would become his anyway.

'What kind of man are you that you give your daughter away on a game of fidchell?' Bladud shouted furiously. 'What kind of woman allows herself to be treated thus!'

The crowds murmured angrily in agreement.

Suddenly Liel spoke, rising to his feet beside Bladud.

‘What kind of man are you to insult a woman so?’ he demanded, gazing at Rheinid with deep admiration. ‘You are a lucky man indeed to be offered such a prize, and gladly would any man here take your place!’

‘Would you take my place, brother Liel?’ Bladud asked bitterly.

‘Gladly!’ he repeated.

Keron stepped forward hastily, afraid to lose the advantage of the situation. Everyone believed Bladud would be king after the death of his father, for Hudibras made it no secret that he intended Bladud for the crown. Keron wanted his daughter to be queen.

‘It was Prince Bladud who gave his word, my lord.’

Bladud looked desperately at Rheinid.

‘My lady. It is not that you lack beauty in my eyes, but it is not my wish to be married at this time. I am a restless man, so you would be better off with my brother Liel. Take him in lieu of me.’

‘You insult me, my lord,’ she said smoothly, ‘if you think I am so desperate for a husband that anyone will do. I have no doubt Prince Liel is a worthy man, and I am grateful for his courtesy’ – she threw him a glance as appreciative as the one he had given her – ‘but it is you whom I hold in my heart, and have done so since you came so passionately to my bed a year ago.’

‘Enough!’ Hudibras said sharply. ‘The pledge is sealed. The marriage will take place. Sir, take your daughter away and prepare her for the wedding feast. This assembly is concluded. Any further matters must

wait for another day.’ He stood up irritably and strode out of the hall, the crowds falling back on either side before him.

Bladud sank back on his seat, stunned.

Liel stepped down and took Rheinid’s arm, and ushered her and her father protectively through the hostile crowds.

* * * *

Bladud could not persuade his father to release him from his pledge, no matter how hard he tried. For, as Hudibras said, how could the people trust a king who broke his word and would not honour his debts? That Keron had made his announcement in front of the maximum number of people was not an accident. He knew very well that no matter how the king and the prince might feel about the proposed marriage, there was no way they could wriggle out of it when their claim was witnessed by the whole court and all the sub-kings of the country. Whatever hostility was now aimed towards himself and his daughter – for marriage to Prince Bladud was a prize coveted by any young woman and there were many noble families vying for the honour – he would risk it. Keron took the precaution of not appearing in public from then on without armed guards. Within days the Festival of Lughnasa would be over, and Bladud managed at least to persuade his father to delay the marriage.

‘Everyone is tired of feasting, father,’ he said. ‘It is time for them to return home and attend to their own

affairs. Why not plan the wedding for the spring? The feast of Beltain would be appropriate for a wedding.'

Hudibras looked at him thoughtfully. 'Is this some ruse to escape this marriage?'

'No, my lord father. I will not go back on my word, though I bitterly regret having given it. But the delay will give our people time to get used to the idea, and for the feast to be prepared properly. It is surely not meet that the son of the High King should be married in haste, or his guests fed on the scraps and dregs from a previous feast?'

At last Hudibras grunted his assent. He himself would dearly like his son to find a way out of his commitment without sacrificing honour. Time might well give them an opportunity. If not, at least his people might settle down to the idea. He had observed the resentment clear on the faces of many of his nobles, and if the wedding was held now, it might well end in bloodshed. Besides, much as he despised Keron for pulling this trick, the girl seemed fair enough. She was in fact, he learned, the daughter of a distant kinswoman of his own dead wife.

So it was announced that the wedding of Prince Bladud and Rheinid daughter of Keron would take place during the Beltain festival of the following year.

Keron was not pleased with the unexpected delay, but could do nothing about it.

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Finding his father adamant on the question of his marriage to Rheinid, the young Prince Bladud turned to Fergal the Druid for help. He was a thin, spare, sallow-skinned man with eyes that seemed much larger than they were because of the dark smudges that habitually ringed them, for Fergal rarely slept. Bladud knew that the best time to consult him on any private matter would be late at night.

‘This girl. This Rheinid. What are your feelings about her?’ Fergal asked severely as they settled down beside a little flickering lamp in Fergal’s chamber.

Bladud was at a loss what to say. What did he feel about her? He was not sure.

‘You hate her?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘Does she repel you?’

‘No.’

The thin line of Fergal’s mouth lifted in a half-smile. ‘Then do you desire her?’

There came no reply, so the question was repeated.

‘Yes,’ admitted Bladud unwillingly.

‘You hate her, yet desire her?’

‘N-no. Not exactly.’

‘What then?’

‘She has been forced on me . . . She has forced herself on me.’

‘And if you had met in some other way, you might have wanted her as your wife?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so.’

‘You must confront your feelings, boy. I cannot help you if you don’t know yourself what it is you do want.’

‘I want to be rid of her.’

‘You are sure?’

‘Yes.’

Fergal looked at him hard.

‘Yes,’ he repeated defiantly, and at that moment he was sure that was what he wanted.

‘So be it,’ said Fergal, and stood up.

Bladud stared at him in some surprise.

‘Do you never sleep?’ Fergal asked brusquely. ‘Go to your bed, boy, and sleep.’

‘But . . . ‘

‘The matter need no longer concern you. Go sleep. Leave everything to me.’

Gratitude flooded Bladud’s heart. He almost wanted to hug the old man, but Fergal was not a man you hugged no matter how grateful you felt. The prince left the room with a lighter step. His troubles were over. Fergal would deal with everything.

* * * *

Curled among the luxurious furs of her bed in the great house of the High King, Rheinid stirred uneasily. As she opened her eyes, above her a great shadow seemed to be forming. She called out to the guard her father had posted at her door on this last night before they set off for home. But he clearly did not hear her.

* * * *

Bladud slept long and deeply, and was woken at last, when the summer sun was high in the sky, by a louder than usual hubbub in the courtyard. He could hear voices raised in anger.

‘What now?’ he muttered impatiently, dragging himself sleepily out of bed and into his clothes. He had been in the middle of a beautiful dream, a recurrent one in which he travelled on a ship sailing between deep red cliffs and up a shining river. A woman stood at his side; he could feel her thigh against his, her hand in his. He could see the wind blowing out her golden hair. He could feel the eagerness with which she gazed on the green, richly forested hills either side. He could sense her relief after so many stormy days at sea after all the uncertainty as to when they would ever make landfall. He tightened his other hand on the hilt of his sword. Who would they have to contend with for this beautiful land? Who might they have to kill? A giant of stone had guarded the river mouth, and it had taken all his skill at persuasion to urge his men past it.

But then he woke. He always woke.

Muttering a curse he flung the door open and strode out into the blazing sunlight of the yard. The guards had Keron firmly in their grasp, and when he saw Bladud his shouting grew louder, his struggles to escape more desperate.

‘What is this, my lord Keron?’ Bladud snapped. ‘Have you not caused enough trouble here already?’

‘Where is she?’ screamed Keron. ‘What have you done with her?’

Bladud stared at him in surprise. This man, whom Bladud had come to see as a master of cool and calculating cunning, was now passionate with rage, hatred and sorrow. This was no act or pretence.

‘Release him,’ he commanded the guards. As they hesitated, he repeated the command. Keron shook himself free and stormed towards Bladud. The guards watched him closely, ready to move.

Perhaps it was because Bladud looked genuinely puzzled that Keron stopped a few paces from him.

‘I don’t know where she is. I swear it. Did you not have guards?’

‘Yes, I had guards,’ shouted Keron, ‘but who knows what sorcery was used! I’ve had them tortured but they swear they heard and saw nothing. Rheinid would not have gone anywhere against her will. She could defend herself against any man – except perhaps one she loved and trusted.’

‘I swear I know nothing about this! But if anyone has harmed her I will see that they are punished in a way that will satisfy even you.’ Bladud spoke with such conviction that Keron began to believe him.

Fergal! Bladud was thinking. *Fergal, what have you done? Lugh, great god of light, show me where she is. Let her not be harmed!*

* * * *

But Fergal was nowhere to be found. His chamber was empty and his servants insisted they had not seen him leave it. When the distraught prince sought out his

fellow Druids, they too had no idea where the High Priest had gone.

The court was soon in a furore. Luckily perhaps for Bladud, the High King had ridden out of the rath early in the morning and could not be immediately recalled.

It was not long before Liel came storming after Bladud demanding to be told what he had done with the girl. He clearly believed his brother responsible and found Bladud's protestations unconvincing.

If this could be proved against him, Liel thought with bitter satisfaction, Bladud would be finished as the golden boy, the natural heir, the favourite of the people! He secretly rejoiced at the turn of events, and determined to establish his brother's guilt.

Bladud refused to be drawn into a quarrel and strode tight-lipped away. It seemed to him that already those who had previously been on his side over Keron's trick were now turning against him. He did not know where to begin to look for Fergal or Rheinid.

Giving Liel and the others the slip he found his way up through the narrow streets to the White Mound where at least he would have a chance to think. There, as a child, he would communicate with the spirits of his ancestors, and particularly with the beautiful queen of Brutus, Imogene the Greek. She had seemed more real to him than his own dead mother. Part mother, part lover, part goddess, she would comfort him when he was truly in trouble. As he grew older and busier, perhaps more rational, he had turned to her less and less – but

this day he knew that he needed her again. There was nowhere else he could go.

The river below was full of boats riding on a silver tide, and beside them, swimming with quiet elegance, were five and twenty pure white swans. As he whispered his prayer to Imogene, the swans lifted simultaneously off the water, making a thunderous noise as their feet beat against the surface in the effort to lift their bodies into the air. At last, necks stretched to their limit, they broke free and, resembling a graceful flight of arrows, headed towards the Island of Thorns.

* * * *

Thorn Island. Bladud remembered the times he had spent with the priest Fergal on Thorn Island. It was a place of extraordinary sanctity since the very ancient days. On the high ground stood a circle of tall standing stones that must have existed since the beginning of time. Even Yaruk's people had no memory of its building, though they had used it for their secret and sacred rites until the new rulers of the land forbade them access, fearing that it gave the rebellious population uncanny powers.

Below the hill, to the west, spread a grove of oak trees, sacred to the Druids, to which Fergal and his fellow priests would frequently retire in order to commune with their gods.

On an area of flat ground to the east had been built a labyrinth of dry-stone walls, barely higher than a tall man. This was the work of Bladud's Trojan ancestors,

who in turn had descended from the Minoans of Crete. So in this place, not far from the city of the White Mound, and embraced by the two streams flowing into the Tain, the three mystical centres of three different races stood side by side.

Imogene had often come to Bladud in visions and dreams associated with white swans. In one recurrent dream of great clarity both he and she, as swans linked by a golden chain, had flown together over a still and silver lake, and he could yet remember his joy and exhilaration as they winged it high in the air. He could still recall their reflection in the mirror surface of the lake below, the thrill of recognition as he realised it was he and she reflected there. He longed to fly again as he had flown that night, and he could never see a swan without thinking of Imogene.

Now he had asked her for help in finding Rheinid and, as if on cue, the swans on the river had taken off in flight towards Thorn Island.

Kissing his hand in gratitude to the invisible Lady of the Mound, Bladud turned and ran down the hill. Dodging and darting, he retraced his steps to his home, where he pulled a grey cloak over his shoulders and a hood over his head. He did not want to be followed, and the Golden Prince could not pass unnoticed through the town gates. He confided only in Yaruk, who hired him a mangy horse belonging to a merchant. His own stallion, Lightning, would be swifter but too easily recognised.

With Yaruk seated behind him, together they made what progress they could. But when they reached the

island, Yaruk was left behind with the horse and the cloak. Since the tide was in, Bladud was forced to swim across the shallow river. If Fergal and Rheinid were indeed there, they must have crossed at low tide, when the ancient stepping stones rose above the mud flats. Bladud could never suppress a shiver of apprehension when he set foot on this island. The tales of ancient magical battles involving beings from other worlds, which excited him in the safety of his own hearth, now came to terrify him. There was an atmosphere about the place which he could not define, but he sensed he was standing on the threshold of other and unfamiliar realms. For a moment he felt like turning away.

‘How stupid to assume a flight of swans could be a message from the dead,’ he chided himself, swinging, as he often did, between belief and doubt.

Nevertheless he would look for Fergal in the grove, the sacred place of his people.

He entered the leafy shade under wide-spreading trees, moving respectfully as if aware that he was trespassing. At first he encountered occasional pools of sunlight between the trees, but as the grove grew denser, sunlight merely flickered and flashed until, deep within, it almost disappeared. These inner regions were dim and difficult to penetrate. He had started by following a broad path which soon divided and sub-divided until he was walking on a track he could barely discern. Following instinct, pushing aside undergrowth, he searched for the clearing where the rites and rituals took

place, but although he could not have gone far astray, it was nowhere to be seen.

He stopped. What now? If Fergal and the girl were on the island, it was clear they had not come this way. No sign of broken twigs, or of bramble branches or bracken fronds thrust aside.

Peering up into the branches of a huge beech tree, he was startled to meet the gaze of a horned god. But looking more closely, he found it was no more than the distorted shape of knots and branches in the bark, creating the illusion of Cernunnos.

He shrugged and walked on a pace or two, then heard a twig snap somewhere to his left. A mature and antlered stag was there, its head lifted, sniffing the air. For a long moment they stared at each other; Bladud had an uneasy feeling that there was something unnatural in the animal's gaze.

At that moment the stag moved off, and Bladud followed him.

The stag led him deeper and deeper into the forest, always keeping just out of reach. It showed no fear, and frequently looked over its shoulder as if to ascertain that the two-legged creature was following. Bladud became surprised at the size of the forest. He knew the size of Thorn Island, and this grove was only part of it, yet they walked and walked and never seemed to reach the end of it.

* * * *

Just when Bladud had decided he would follow the stag no further, they came upon the sacred clearing of the Druids, where stood the stone altar used for sacrifices. There he saw Fergal in front of the altar, both arms raised above his head. One hand held a sprig of mistletoe, the holy plant of the gods, fallen from heaven and grown on the sacred oak without contact with the earth, the other a golden knife with an obsidian cutting edge. On the altar he could make out the figure of a young woman, her long black hair falling like a curtain over the cold stone.

‘Fergal!’ he screamed, but to his horror no sound came from his throat. He tried to rush forward, but his limbs seemed rooted to the ground. As helpless as a tree, he knew he was about to witness something he could not prevent. His rage almost choked him. He had always hated the Druid propensity to blood sacrifices, but this was murder.

In the old days stories were told of prisoners piled high in wicker baskets and burned alive as sacrifices to the gods. Sometimes, even today, when disasters threatened, it was said a human being was offered to the gods, but in Bladud’s lifetime the only sacrifices he knew of had involved animals. The prince could still remember once two white bulls bound by golden chains and crowned with mistletoe. As a child, then, he had been sickened by the gush of blood as the axe fell – the sudden contrast between the powerful living beast and the ugly, lifeless carcass. Far from filling him with

religious fervour, the sight left him feeling disgusted and depressed.

'No! No! No!' he screamed now, but still no sound came from him.

The stag had disappeared, but as he cast his eyes about in desperation to find some help in his predicament, he noticed that the grove all around the clearing was crowded with shadowy figures.

The gods themselves are gathering to watch this ghoulish act! he thought bitterly. *How could they allow this young and vibrant girl to meet such a death!* He remembered her breast against his shoulder as she stooped to pour his wine in her father's house. He remembered her bronzed limbs ready for the race. Passion at last broke him free of his invisible bonds and, with a shout of fury, he raced into the clearing to seize the upraised arm which held the knife.

But there was nothing . . . there was no one there! He stood alone in the Druid's clearing, in the sacred grove beside an empty altar. No Fergal. No Rheinid. No shadowy figures among the trees.

He was astonished and bewildered. It had all seemed so real. On the cold stone of the altar lay a single red flower.

Wearily he turned to go, but then swung back to the altar again. Surely this flower was one from the crown Rheinid had worn in her hair on the day she had been brought before his father at the great assembly.

