

MEDIUM LUCK



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Dedicated to my sister, Beth, for all her
invaluable help.

Chapter One

Never Put Off Until Tomorrow What Can Be Done in a Thousand Years Time

*One thousand years ago, give or take fifteen minutes,
Dùn Èideann, Alba (in English: Edinburgh, Scotland)*

The fight against Morrigan, the supreme Celtic goddess of war, had raged for over eight hundred years, cutting a bloody swathe across thousands of miles of mainland Europe.

At each battle she sat on her throne of human skulls on the high ground, always clad in hooded robes of a greenish hue. She had reptilian eyes, her teeth and bones visible beneath her translucent blue flesh. Her nose had been lost in the dim and distant past in a battle with other deities, taken in a way that would never regenerate, leaving only a fleshless hole in its place.

Her control over her own people, the Celtic race, was genetic, visceral and absolute, the closer they physically got to her the more power she wielded over them, in return she gave them superhuman strength, speed and endurance but left them as little more than mindless puppets who lived and died for her amusement.

For centuries her armies had been grinding the bones of her enemies beneath their boots as they marched ever onwards towards global domination, but with the war getting closer to them, the most powerful rulers of the mortal and magick realms decided that they feared her more than they despised each other and called a Crann Tara (a council of war).

Things had gotten so bad that it was not safe to travel for all but the mightiest and most powerful, so dream-casters hosted the meeting on the astral plane, a coven of thirteen witches held Morrigan's attacking nightmares at bay as slumbering monarchs forged alliances and made treaties.

Bitter enemies united against a common foe, fairies stood shoulder to shoulder with elves as non-Celtic humans battled alongside dwarves and trolls.

They vastly outnumbered Morrigan's combined forces, which they needed to, as the weakest of her thralls could pull a heavily laden cart faster than a horse

whilst shrugging off a sword or axe wound.

It took nearly five centuries to drive her back: from the Pontic–Caspian steppes, across Europe to Germania they fought and died in their millions, as they pushed her slowly, inexorably back towards the sea.

She looted longships and burned villages along the coast of Belgica before retreating across the Celtic sea to Éire. From there, it was a short but bloody trip to the extinct volcano of Àrd-na-Said, at the centre of Dùn Èideann in Alba, where she made her last stand.

She chose it because it was the greatest of the seven hills of power, and she could feed on the seven magickal ley lines that clustered at its heart, boosting her power.

It rained torrentially on the day of the final battle, water mixing with blood to make pink mud as thousands died trying to take Morrigan's throne on the summit.

Jagged bolts of lightning turned the night sky into day, illuminating the witch Agnes daughter of Angus and the warlock Donald son of Donald as they stood alone, impervious to the weather, their magick making them immune to the goddess's influence, corpses of fairies, elves, trolls and humans alike littered the ground around them.

Agnes was just over four foot tall and five hundred-years-old, but with her short stature, chalk-white hair and skin she looked like a child dressed up for Samhain eve. She had blue ink tattoos on her face, the same colour as her long dress. Vertical lines etched around her mouth added power to her incantations. She held a wand made of willow, as if she were about to conduct an orchestra.

Donald, by contrast, was two foot two inches taller and a hundred years older. Age spots covered his skin, just visible under his hood, his long grey beard almost reaching down to his waist. Embroidered on the hems of his brown robes were magickal runes and he leaned on a six foot long, oaken staff with the same symbols carved along its length.

When Morrigan spoke it was in a seductive, surprisingly nasal tone (given her lack of a nose) "Mages, a troublesome and vexatious breed that doth blight mine day," she said, raising a hand to summon the last of her troops, she was speaking in an older form of Gaelic, disdaining to learn the Scots version of the language for the brief time she intended to be there.

Twenty-nine large and brutal men crested the hill from the far side, battle-axes and claymores held high, their mouths contorted in incomprehensible war

cries.

They bounded down the steep slope, covering yards at a time, leaping over the fallen with superhuman speed and agility with the same hate-filled lizard eyes as Morrigan as they charged the enemies of their beloved goddess.

Donald waited until the soldiers were only a few feet away, then he drove his staff into the ground with a cry of, "Bluran!" green runes blazing along its length as strands of iron ore grew out of the ground, like plants, but infinitely faster, intertwining to form a crude cage, trapping the soldiers inside.

Cold iron silenced the goddess of war's thoughts in their heads and they reverted to being farmers, blacksmiths and miners, running around in a blind panic with no memory of how they got there. They bounced off of the bars, either knocking themselves out or collapsing in exhaustion one at a time.

As Morrigan rose to her feet, she hammered a fist down onto her throne in temper and threw her head back to let out a scream of frustration but what came out was a loud, buzzing noise as thousands of insects flew out of her mouth.

Tiny, dragon-winged creatures the size of midges swarmed towards their prey. Each demon bug had six clawed feet with faces that looked about as human as a Picasso painting.

In seconds the insects were on them, clawing and biting, only the spells woven into their clothes keeping the hideous creatures from burrowing beneath them instead they went for any bare skin they could find.

Agnes and Donald slammed their eyes and mouths tight shut and pinched their noses. But, with no way to cast a spell, that just made them sitting targets. The hellish insects bit and clawed at their hands and faces as the pair stood helpless to protect any uncovered flesh.

Agnes collapsed into unconsciousness as her small lungs ran out of air, but before she could hit the ground Donald caught her, covering her face completely with one hand. Spots floated in front of his tight-shut eyes with the effort it had cost him. He was wondering how long he could hold Agnes like that before he accidentally smothered her.

In a last-ditch, desperate move, he opened his mouth, knowing that if he made a mistake, it would be his last one, and with all the breath he had left roared, "Thort!" blowing the creatures back, sending them tumbling end over end as the runes along the hem of his robes flared.

He sucked in a lungful of air and bellowed, "Fusada!" his staff leaping from the ground into his hand. He put one arm around her waist and pulled Agnes to his side, as she stirred, and slammed his staff down with the other hand as he yelled, "Drah!"

A blindingly bright beam lashed out with a sound of howling wind and swept from the ground to high above them, forming a glowing, green circle out from just beyond where they were standing squeezed together.

As the demon bugs swarmed in flight, trapped inside the beam, their bodies started to lose all cohesion, their mouths contorting in torment. With joints no longer knitting together, their limbs rained down into the mud, black blood spewing out of severed veins and arteries.

Body parts lay on the ground, breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces with each passing second, unmaking their very atomic structure, until they disappeared, with no sign they'd ever existed, the entire time there was a rotting smell of decaying, then there never had been.

Agnes regained consciousness and stood unaided as Donald staggered with the effort the spells had cost him. He leant against his staff, gasping for air. Although it was a piece of wood only three inches in diameter and despite just being stuck in loose mud, it still supported all of his weight without budging.

"Thine end approacheth, Morrigan," Agnes said, stepping well away from Donald.

"Thou art no more to me than a troublesome tooth! Joineth mine army or thine bones shalt moulder neath this very hill."

Donald gave a barely noticeable nod to Agnes, who replied with an almost imperceptible dip of her head, he pointed his staff horizontally at Morrigan and cried, "Scort!" over and over again as short bolts of green light spat out like machine-gun bullets.

Morrigan blurred with speed as each one missed her. Even though exhaustion threatened to rob him of consciousness, he kept the pressure on. "Thou canst not lasteth much longer, Warlock," she laughed as she zigzagged down the hill towards him, "then I shalt add thine skull to mine throne."

Donald was keeping her so busy that she never even noticed Agnes, who was now standing directly to one side of her. The witch raised her wand and cried, "Caddal!" yellow light engulfed Morrigan and she stumbled as exhaustion hit her like a freight train. Sluggishly, and far too late, she realised that she was being trapped in a sleep incantation.

She fell to her knees, then rolled on to her stomach, and screeched at Agnes in wordless, raw hatred as she crawled desperately towards the witch on her belly.

“I condemn thee to ten centuries bound by a slumberous spell,” Agnes said, followed by a cry of, “Prosan!”

Igneous rock rose up, strands intertwining to form a stone cradle around her, “No! I shalt drink thine blood and eat thine heart!” She sobbed, trying to lift her head off the rock as it dragged her beneath the earth, the ground thudding closed, leaving no sign it had ever been open.

The rain stopped, like turning off a tap, and the clouds opened to show a weak, watery moon.

Donald waved his staff with a whispered, “beart,” and the cage disintegrated, leaving the men to make their own way down when they woke up, “Tis a pity thine spell be not eternal,” he said.

“Aye, ten centuries be its limit, but no doubt those who follow us, all those years hence, wilt have refined their craft and wield mightier magick than we canst command, and shalt vanquish her with ease,” Agnes said with a shrug as she looked at the long walk down the hill, “I shouldst have brought mine broom.”

Chapter Two

It's Not the Fall That Kills You...

The Middle East (exact location redacted)

six months ago at 4.19 pm local time

The old DC-3 flew at six thousand feet under the radar, bucking through turbulent air. Inside Callum Cooper was holding onto the netting covering the wooden crate he was sitting on. He was forty-three-years-old, six foot tall with short, brown hair and a runner's build.

Three men dressed in fake American army uniforms sat on crates opposite him. Two of them had big guns and low IQs, always a bad combination, he didn't know what their names were, but the middle one who was a lot smaller and considerably brighter, was Jackson Smith, an ex-CIA agent whom Cooper knew from his previous career. Smith was a stocky man of average height in his early fifties with spiky blonde hair and a ginger beard.

The four of them were sitting on over ninety-million dollars' worth of "ghost money" which is what the CIA calls cash used to bribe regimes and insurgents, sometimes both sides at the same time, Smith and Cooper were planning to split the proceeds fifty-fifty when they got to a country with less than stringent banking regulations.

The confidence trick Cooper had devised had gone smoothly and according to plan earlier that day, when they'd impersonated an armed escort picking up the money from the US consulate to take to a local warlord.

They delayed the real escort until after they were long gone by paying mercenaries to puncturing their tires with sniper fire and block their radio transmissions as they entered the middle of nowhere.

He yawned and shivered with the cold as he zipped up his fur-lined, leather jacket over his US army Colonel's uniform, resting the back of his head against the bulkhead. The steady thrumming of the twin propeller aircraft lulling him to sleep as it entered calm air.

He had the same recurring dream (which was really a memory) he'd had, on and off, for the five years since they'd thrown him out of the army.

It always started in the operations centre, a sizeable room filled with dozens of desks staffed by soldiers busily working on computers and talking on phones. Giant, wall-mounted screens showed satellite imagery of various trouble spots around the globe overlaid with scrolling data.

In the dream he was still a lieutenant in British Military Intelligence, he was standing holding a cup of green tea and talking to an eager, young private who thought she'd identified a credible threat, "Good work," he said, "kick it up the chain and CC me in on the email."

As he walked back to his office, a squad of military police entered the room, tall, stern-faced men with their red-peaked caps pulled so far down they had to stand bolt upright just to look straight ahead, they were fanning out to cover all the exits and every instinct he had screamed that they had come for him, an eventuality he'd spent a long time preparing for.

He took his phone from his pocket and triggered the electromagnetic pulse generators in both of his homes (the one the army knew about and the one they didn't) to erase the hard drives in all his computers and tablets, then he started a wipe running on his phone and took a sip of tea as his commanding officer, two military policemen and a major he'd never seen before, hurried over to arrest him.

A tap on the shoulder startled him awake and when the sleep cleared from his eyes, he saw Smith pointing a Beretta M9 pistol at him, "Sorry to wake you up, Coops," he said, "but I didn't want you to miss your stop."

He sat bolt upright, suddenly wide awake, "We're landing already?"

"No, but you are getting off, so let's concentrate on the big picture rather than thinking about the niggling details," he stepped back keeping the gun aimed for a heart shot, "put that on," he said, nodding to a parachute in the middle of the floor.

Cooper looked about warily as he fastened the straps around his waist, "I should've known better than to work with you, sociopaths are too hard to read," he said.

"Oh, and I should mention that the parachute doesn't work, and you know how they say you can't take it with you? Well, I'm giving you a million dollars to see if you can prove them wrong," Smith said nodding to the smaller of the two thugs, who handcuffed a silver attaché case to Cooper's left wrist as he kept out of the line of fire.

"Now be a good host, Mr Outhouse and show Coops to the door," Smith said

to the bigger of the two thugs, as he took his seat again, the man was five feet wide and seven feet tall.

“His last name’s Outhouse, what’s his first one, Brick?” He said sarcastically, as the giant stood up and grabbed his left arm, steel-like fingers crushing his bicep, pushing him towards the hatch that the other man was sliding open. He unleashed a flurry of punches and kicks, but whether it was because of Outhouse’s muscles or body armour, the blows had no effect.

As he was being pushed towards his certain death, the world around him seemed to slow down and his senses heightened as adrenaline flooded through his system. In those few seconds he heard everything: the howling of the wind through the open hatch, his own breath rapid, rasping with effort and fear, in contrast to Mr Outhouse’s normal, calm breathing. Then the ringing of a mobile phone cut through it all, which, with no reception that high up, was impossible... unless it was over Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, and he knew that could only mean one thing.

He spun around as fast as he could, burying his face in the startled Mr Outhouse’s chest, thrusting his arms into the large man’s bullet-proof vest and pulled his feet up so the body armour shielded him just as an explosion ripped the side out of the plane.

The rear fuel tank erupted, a gout of flame and black smoke belching out of the aircraft as it broke in two, the tail section tumbling towards the forest below as the front went into a nosedive.

The blast blew them clear as he clung desperately onto Mr Outhouse; the flames licking around them as the wind howled deafeningly in his ears. He nearly vomited when he saw that the back of the corpse’s head was missing, the expression on the face strangely serene. He lay flat, pressing his head into the chest and used his arms and legs to force the body into as much of a spreadeagled, skydiving pose as he could manage. The forest below was coming into sharp relief, a wide, fast-flowing river turning and twisting its way through thick woodland.

The attaché case was swinging about wildly, slamming bone-crunchingly into his side over and over again as the handcuff rubbed all the skin off of his wrist. He buried his face in the corpse’s chest as they hit the trees at over a hundred miles an hour, the breaking branches slowed their descent with twigs flying like shrapnel. A piece of splintered wood hit the corpse and slowed considerably, but still smashed into him hard enough to break the few ribs on that side the case had missed.

They crashed into the undergrowth with a terrible snapping of bones (from

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