

The Seventh Circle

by

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Chapter 1

Adrina

Eleventh day of the Moon of Morning Mists. Shrine of the Holy Mother. Kingdom of the Catti. Realm Beyond the Seventh Circle.

The sun slipped towards the horizon and the hillside was bathed in a warm glow. As day gave way to night, the shadows lengthened and revealed the contours of the land. Sensuous ridges stretched out like thighs and mounds poked up like breasts. It was as if an immense female presence lay below the ground.

On that pleasant summer evening, a young woman strode along a narrow path. She wore a white dress and carried a woollen shawl. Her long black hair hung lazily down her back and she hummed a little tune as she made her way past fat sheep and cows suckling their young.

She went between the mounds and followed the path down the slope to where the two ridges met. A dark pool nestled there below a triangle of golden bracken. She reached it and sank to her knees.

'Holy Mother, hear my prayer.'

Her hands slipped inside her dress and clasped the image that hung there on a leather cord. Painted in bright colours, it represented a pregnant woman with huge breasts and extended buttocks.

She kissed the image.

'Blessed lady, I come not for myself but for my dear mother. Many moons have passed since you honoured her with your divine favour. You entered into her when she was young and worked your purpose through her. In sickness and in health she has been your sword and shield ... now she has grown old.'

Her voice fell to a whisper.

'Great Lady, my poor mother is tired. Her old bones ache. I beseech you. Let me take up her burden. Enter into me as you did to her. Let me serve you as she has done.'

She gazed into the pool as if waiting for a sign. A long time passed. Then a full moon rose. Its silvery rays struck the pool and a swirling vortex of white water sped towards her.

'Holy Mother. I am honoured by your trust.'

She bared her breasts.

'I, Adrina of the House of Cronwyn, make this pledge: I dedicate my life to you and I shall serve you well.'

Her dark eyes flashed.

'But I cannot serve you alone. I need a champion. Send me one, Great Lady. Send me a man skilled in the arts of war. But do not send a dull man. Send a cunning man. A wild and fearless man who will excite our deepest passions and put the plans of your scheming enemies to nought.'

Chapter 2

Tom

19 June. Beside a pond in a field near Cheltenham, England. Realm beyond the Sixth Circle.

Clouds rolled over the hillside and it began to rain. Two men stood in the wet grass unloading equipment from a van. One had white hair and was neatly dressed. His younger companion had light-brown hair and wore scruffy denims. Every few moments the older man glanced up the slope.

'There are people up there watching, Tom.'

'Relax, Colin.' Tom took a computer from the van. 'There are always people watching. It's the price you pay for being on TV. They know they can't come through the gate. Stop worrying.'

Colin continued to fret.

'You know what I think about this whole crazy operation ...'

Tom connected the computer to a coaxial cable.

'What do you think, Colin?'

'It's totally illegal. I should never have agreed to it. There are strict protocols on experimentation with live animals. I have my reputation, as a surgeon, to think about. You should see the guidelines that Brussels puts out.'

'Stop worrying ... they're just bureaucrats.'

Tom leaned into the van and removed a wicker basket.

'We could be heavily fined, Tom.'

'Or receive a Nobel Prize.'

'What do you mean?'

'If Galileo had worried about the law, he'd have been too scared to observe the moons of Jupiter and we'd still think the sun moved around the earth.'

'It's more complex than that, Tom. We could be accused of black magic. Think what that would do to our reputations.'

'I wasn't accused of black magic when I used divining rods.'

'No. You were labelled a crank.'

'Absolutely. When I use a magnetometer, I'm being scientific. When I use divining rods, I'm a crank.' Tom leaned into the van and removed a wicker basket. 'People won't believe you unless you feed your observations into a computer and display them on a screen ... and that's what I'm going to do.'

He opened the basket and a cat peered out. The animal's head was shaven and electrical wires protruded from a teflon plate attached to its skull. He connected one end of the cable to the cat and the other to the computer.

'People expect to see apparatus with wires sticking out. Well, they've got it now. Pussy's wired up and no one's going to accuse him of faking the results.'

Lights on the computer flashed and the animal purred.

'There you are,' Tom grinned, 'he's enjoying it.'

'The law doesn't care about that ...'

Colin continued to fret but Tom wasn't listening. He picked up the basket and carried it towards the pond, playing out the coaxial cable behind him. Colin glanced toward the gate and saw that the crowd of onlookers had been reduced to two. He guessed the others had retreated to their cars when it started to rain.

He returned his attention to Tom and the cat. Against his better judgment, he had agreed to implant electrodes in the animal's brain. The pond had been sacred to the mother goddess in ancient times. Cats were her familiars. Her followers thought they could use them to communicate with her. That was why Tom had picked a cat for his crazy experiment.

Right now, the cat was sending signals down the cable to the computer. Points of light flashed around on the screen. Colin pulled a face. There was nothing surprising in that. The animal was probably thinking about his next meal or some female he planned to visit. He guessed he would get the same result if he implanted electrodes in Tom's head and shut him in a basket.

Then, everything changed. The pleasure zones in the cat's brain stopped responding and others kicked in. A pattern of lines formed. Colin had seen them before. They were the same as those Tom had plotted with divining rods.

Chapter 3

Alison

Molly Campbell swept into the dining room and removed her daughter's books from the table.

'Your father's guests will be arriving soon.'

'More of daddy's boring friends,' Alison moaned. 'I suppose they work at the hospital with him.'

Molly picked up a duster. 'Dr Duncan-Brown is an important person in the medical association and he's got something to do with Tom's university.'

'I know I won't like them,' Alison pulled a face.

'Now you listen to me, young lady,' Molly wagged a finger. 'I want you to be on your best behaviour. We'll have none of that silly sulking we had last time.'

'Stop treating me like a child.' Alison threw her books into a draw. 'I'm eighteen. You should have noticed that I've grown up.'

'Almost eighteen,' Molly corrected.

'It's not fair.' Alison pouted. 'Just because I'm small, people think I'm not grown up. Some boys at the dance said I looked thirteen.'

Her daughter's outburst struck a sympathetic cord.

'Och, lassie,' Molly placed a comforting hand on Alison's shoulder. 'Don't fret. I was small too but that didn't stop me marrying your father and he's over six foot.'

'I should have taken after daddy's side of the family,' Alison moaned. 'The boys don't want to go out with me. I'll never get married. It's not fair.'

Molly showed Tom into the dining room and introduced him to the Duncan-Browns. She felt more than a little apprehensive. Tom had a genius for offending people and Theo Duncan-Brown was easily offended. He and his wife, Patricia, had spent the afternoon, huddled under an umbrella, watching Tom and Colin conduct experiments. Patricia had enjoyed it. Theo said he had wasted valuable time and wouldn't have gone if his wife had not insisted.

Patricia was one of Tom's many admirers. She claimed to have watched all his TV-shows and clung onto his hand when they were introduced.

'I've so wanted to meet you in the flesh.' She gazed into his eyes. 'Your views on the old religions are so exciting. I've been dying to ask you about them.'

Molly saw the expression of deep disapproval on Theo's sallow face and tried to separate the pair ... but without success. Patricia plonked herself down beside Tom at the dining table and bombarded him with questions. Tom reacted predictably, expounding his latest views on mother gods and father gods and how one displaced the other.

A certain kind of female found Tom irresistible and Patricia was clearly one of them. She hung on his every word, eyes fluttering, fingers caressing the stem of her wineglass in a way Molly found disquieting.

The first course was soup. Alison cleared away the dishes and returned with plates of salmon and asparagus. Tom produced more bottles of wine and filled the ladies' glasses. Theo insisted on water and Colin followed his example. Tom refilled his own glass and sat down.

Molly hoped he would turn his mind to eating and stop talking. It worked for a while but he was soon chattering between chunks of salmon and gulps of wine. The conversation turned from religion to sex-and-religion and then switched to the seemingly innocent subject of transport technology.

'The Celts were particularly skilled in the manufacture of carts,' Tom announced. 'Our word for car comes from their word for a wheeled vehicle via Latin.'

'That's so intriguing,' Patricia downed the contents of her glass.

'They even dropped their word *feles* for cat in favour of the Celtic *cattus*,' Tom continued.

Molly watched as Tom refilled Patricia's glass then glanced at Theo Duncan-Brown who looked like he was about to explode. To her relief, Alison brought the exchange to a close.

'That reminds me ... there was a cat in the kitchen.'

'A cat?' Molly asked.

'Yes. It had a sort of tin hat and was trying to get at the salmon.'

Theo Duncan-Brown looked up from his plate.

'You should have told your mother about this.'

He gave Alison a disapproving stare.

'We cannot eat fish contaminated by cat.'

He pushed his plate into the middle of the table.

Alison pushed it back.

'I stopped it before it got to the fish.'

Theo turned to Colin.

'Speaking of cats ...'

'Yes,' Colin said nervously.

'We were up at Tom's latest dig. I think that's the word these people use. Tom had a cat in a basket. I saw it clearly. I'm sure I'm not mistaken.'

Tom rose without a word and left the room. Alison followed. They went into the kitchen and shut the door. Paw marks testified to a cat's recent presence. Tom wiped them off and looked around.

'There's no sign of it.'

'Perhaps it went back to the lab, Alison suggested.

'You could be right,' Tom nodded.

'I know where daddy keeps the key.'

Alison climbed on a chair, grabbed a key from a shelf and jumped down. Tom followed her into the garden. Colin's laboratory was in a converted stable. It was

where he did experiments that were too risqué for the research hospital where he worked. Alison unlocked the door and they went inside.

A scene of devastation greeted them. A window was broken and surgical implements littered the floor. The wicker basket lay in a corner. There was a hole in one side and a strong smell of cat.

'It gnawed its way out,' Alison whispered.

Tom looked around. It was scarcely believable that such a small creature could cause so much damage. He picked up the basket as if expecting to find something inside. All he found were bits of straw and chewed-up electrical cable.

Alison interrupted his thoughts.

'It's the cat Dr Duncan-Brown was talking about?'

Tom nodded.

'I shouldn't have said anything about it?'

Tom shook his head.

'He's rancid.' Alison prodded Tom's chest. 'You should have seen the looks he gave you when you were priming up his wife.'

'I wasn't priming her up.'

'Yes you were.'

Tom decided that little Alison Campbell had suddenly grown up. He tapped her arm. 'We'd better get back. Play it cool ... don't say anything about the cat.'

Alison wheeled in a trolley with plates of desert. Tom followed with port and brandy. Patricia looked up longingly as he filled her glass.

'Tom. Do tell us about your latest project.'

Theo gave his wife another look of extreme disapproval.

'It's about the mother goddess ... isn't it?'

Tom returned to his seat and launched forth on his standard lecture about the goddess and how she was the personification of all things female. He said her followers saw her everywhere.'

Molly had heard it all before and wasn't impressed.

'Tom. Wasn't there a male god?'

'There certainly was,' Tom slurred his words.

'What happened to him?'

'He came and went.'

'Aye, Tom. He came at the start of each season, had his way with the young women and was put to death at harvest time.'

'That is roughly correct,' Tom agreed.

Molly cast a dark eye on him.

'I fail to understand your fascination with those times.'

Tom downed his glass and an alcoholic haze enveloped him. 'You have to understand, Molly, that much of what you accept in the Christian religion comes from those older times.' He did his best to concentrate. 'The early church went out of its way to absorb what was best in the old religions. The mother goddess was reborn as Mary. Jesus is the god who had to die.'

'That is simply not true.'

Theo Duncan-Brown rose to his feet.

'I have heard enough of your ridiculous nonsense to last a lifetime.'

He strode across the room and reached for his wife. Molly ran after them as Patricia was marched to the door. Tom sank back and reached for the brandy.

He was slipping into a contented sleep when Colin strode into the room.

'You've really done it this time.'

'Done what?'

Tom scratched himself.

'You tried to seduce his wife then you made offensive remarks about the Virgin Mary and the Early Church.'

'I did nothing of the sort.'

'That's not how it seemed.'

'Things often aren't as they seem.'

'You said that at your court marshal ... Major Carter.'

Mention of his past caused Tom to sit up. Colin was a colonel in the medical corps of the same regiment. He supplied character references when he was hauled before the court.

'I was cleared,' Tom protested.

'They found it convenient to conclude that you had not taken a shortcut across a neutral country in order to attack the enemy in the rear, Tom. That way they avoided a major diplomatic incident.'

'I received a glowing testimonial.'

'Aye, Tom. Your commanding officer said you were a fine soldier but he wrote it after you had handed in your resignation.'

'What's this got to do with that snotty-nosed squirt, Theo Duncan-Brown?'

'The snotty-nosed squirt is chairman of the medical association's ethics committee. I invited him to dinner because his wife wanted to meet you. He knows about the cat. That could spell disaster.'

'But, we don't need the cat.' Tom yawned. 'While you were stuffing yourselves with Molly's cakes, I got thinking. You could wire me up with that gear you use to measure brainwaves. If I can sense those lines with divining rods then something must be happening in my head.'

'Are you totally mad?' Colin exploded. 'I've just told you that Duncan-Brown is chairman of the ethics committee. This whole stupid business could spell disaster for both of us.'

Chapter 4

Balduur's Head

Thin columns of smoke rose above the rooftops, wispy and white in the early-morning light. In the narrow alleys below, barefoot boys ran yelling, trying to round up the cattle that had escaped from their charge. They wore short leather cloaks and, despite the cold, this was their only garment. Armed with sticks and throwing stones, they did their best to drive the reluctant beasts to the slaughter yard at the end of the market place.

The buildings were of stone and timber. Most had two stories. The ground floors were for animals and the upper for people. Here and there, larger structures poked up above the roofline. The Great Hall was one of these. A massive wooden building with a towering shingle roof.

In the market place beside, the Great Hall, women in brightly coloured dresses crowded against walls and sheltered in doorways, trying to avoid the stampeding cattle. As the pandemonium died down, they made their way back into the open, carrying baskets piled with produce: cheeses, bundles of herbs, freshly ground flour, small birds trussed on sticks, onions, beans and other vegetables. They exchanged their wares, haggling over the number of hen's eggs to a hare and how many marsh fowl were needed for a suckling pig.

Through this seething mass of humanity, an old woman walked, flanked by two heavily-armed young women. The crowd parted and hands reached out to kiss the hem of her flowing cloak and touch the image of the mother goddess that hung about her neck. She made her way forwards with the aid of a stick and came to the centre of the market place where the herdboys were gathering to warm themselves around a fire.

She halted and one of the girls of her guard banged her sword on her shield and told the boys to be quiet. The old woman looked from one to another and waited for the boys to fall silent. When she had their attention she spoke.

'May the Holy Mother be with you, my children.'

'May the Holy Mother be with you, Majesty.'

The boys returned her greeting and waited for her to continue.

Her eyes wandered amongst them.

'How many of you are preparing for warrior training?'

Some of the older boys stepped forward.

She called out their names and tears formed in her eyes.

'You remind me of when I was young. I and my companions were cursed by being born in a memorable age ... and this is your fate.'

The boys exchanged glances and waited for her to continue.

'I was born when Balduur was War Master of Gorm. It was he who invited the Duideth here. The foul priests came into our land, bringing the images of the one they call the Lord Sun. They destroyed the shrines of the Blessed Mother and murdered the Sisters of Rebirth. They sowed their poisonous seed and what they could not gain by sorcery, Balduur took with the sword, laying waste our land and killing our people.'

The boys hissed.

'Then my father gathered together the defeated warriors and took them into the marshes to lick their wounds and grow strong again.'

The boys cheered.

'Balduur brought a great army against us. My father prayed to the Holy Mother and a cold wind ripped through the marshes. The ground froze and land that had been impassable could now be crossed. As the sun rose the wind died down. The Grand Master of the Duideth was conducting the dawn ceremony. All of Balduur's army was gathered about the golden disc. Their drums beat to welcome their Lord Sun ... and that was our signal.'

She pointed to one of the boys.

'What happened then?'

'The chariots drove over the marshes and killed all the Gorms.'

'Not all of them,' the old woman said. 'Some ran away.'

'But you killed Balduur and cut off his head.'

'That's right,' another boy said. 'You keep it in a box.'

'Why do you do that?' a tiny voice asked.

'Tell him.' The old woman pointed to the older boy.

The lad stood rigidly and began to recite. 'The heads of our principal enemies are removed and preserved by smoking and the application of special oils. They are taken to a place of safety and closely guarded. This is done to ensure that their soul lights do not escape and enter the bodies of the unborn.'

'How might they escape?' the old woman asked.

The boy stiffened. 'The soul light remains trapped so long as the head does not decay or be consumed by fire.'

'Very good, Dugan son of Dugan.'

She patted his head. 'You have learned your lessons well. The soul light remains trapped and will not escape to cause further pain so long as the head does not decay or be consumed by fire.'

For a moment it seemed she would continue the discussion. Then she turned abruptly and strode towards the Great Hall with her guard as if a thought had suddenly entered her head.

A covered flight of stairs led up the outside of the huge wooden building. The old woman plodded up it, followed by the girls of her guard who kept close, ready to catch her if she fell, but not daring to offer assistance. After many stops for breath, she halted before a massive door and took a key from a chain about her waist. After several attempts, her arthritic fingers managed to engage the mechanism. The bolt slid back and the door opened.

Inside, the air was thick with the rancid smell of burning fat. Tallow lamps hung from iron hooks. Their feeble light illuminated the blackened walls and arching roof of a long chamber. Grotesque faces peered down. Carved into the wall panels and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, they shimmered in the darkness as if suspended in space.

A table stretched the length of the chamber. The surface was polished with fresh beeswax and covered in wooden boxes. Some were of plain wood. Others were carved. She sank down on a bench and cast her eyes amongst them. Her gaze flitted back and forth and finally fastened on one that stood out from the rest.

A black box with a golden disc.

'Balduur ... Balduur ...'

She muttered the name softly and removed the lid.

A dark face stared up at her. The close-cropped hair retained some of its ginger but little else remained. Mould covered the lips and eye sockets. Decay was evident throughout. She picked up the head and held it in her hands.

'Balduur ...' her voice fell to a whisper.

The tallow lamps flickered as if in recognition.

'Balduur ...' She repeated the name. 'You who called yourself High King. For all these many years I have held you captive. Now, by some trick, you are slipping away. Soon your soul light will escape into the Void, ready to be reborn. No one can foretell what misfortune that will bring.'

Her mind strayed back to when, as a young girl, she had plucked the head from the frozen ground on Baddon Plane and fresh blood had sprayed onto her white dress.

A knock interrupted her thoughts.

'Majesty, Thunder son of Lightning is here.'

She returned the head to the box and replaced the lid as a sandy-haired man was ushered in by the girls of the guard. He was dressed as a warrior: blue cloak, red

tunic and tartan pants. When the door was securely closed, she pushed the box towards him.

'Take a look at that.'

Thunder scrutinised the contents.

'Maggots, Majesty ...'

'Aye,' the queen grunted. 'They're eating away at the back of his skull. His soul light will soon escape.'

Thunder pointed a finger at a gaping eye socket. 'With any luck he'll be reborn as one of those nasty little creatures.'

'That's not what the oracle foretold.'

'But we don't believe in oracles, Majesty'

'What we believe doesn't matter. It's what the people believe that counts.' The queen adjusted her shawl. 'At the battle of Dunavon, it wasn't force that defeated our enemies. They weren't beaten when my father met Balduur in single combat. But, when they saw their War Master struck down and his head in my hand ... they lost heart.'

She pointed to the box.

'For these many moons we've held Balduur prisoner. Now we've failed in our duty. What alarm will that breed in the hearts of our people when they next see him?'

Thunder fingered the waxed ends of his moustache.

'We'll have to make sure they don't.'

'There's no way.' The old woman banged her stick on the floorboards. 'At the next moon, at the Festival of Rebirth, we'll have to exhibit the head as we always do.'

'Then we'll get a repair job done.' Thunder grinned. 'I know a cobbler who can do very clever stitches. We'll kill the maggots and let him have the head.'

The queen nodded ...

'Very well. That's the first thing. The next is to find out how the maggots got into the box. You had occasion to question the loyalty of our Head Master ...'

'I warned you not to raise Red Hand son of Red Cloud into that esteemed position, Majesty.'

'Aye. So you did. And I explained that I did it at the insistence of my clan chieftains. Anyway, your doubts were based on rumour ...'

'I have further evidence, Majesty.'

'Hgh.' the old woman grunted.

'Your daughter, The Princess Adrina, has supplied useful information.'

'That black-haired vixen.'

'The princess has a young friend who encounters Lord Morgon when he visits Gorm.'

'Aye. Morgon likes young boys. What's new about that?'

'What's new is the company he keeps when he likes them, Majesty. The princess claims that Red Hand joins Morgon in these little get-togethers.'

'My daughter is claiming that our Head Master goes into the camp of our enemies and meets their War Master ... that is high treason.'

'It is, Majesty.'

The old woman sat in silence. Thunder stood beside her, staring at the crawling maggots, waiting for her to speak. When she did, her voice was hushed.

'Do you think my daughter is telling the truth?'

'Aye, Majesty.'

She nodded thoughtfully.

'Adrina is sparing with the truth. Have you any idea why she might be telling it now?'

'There can be only one reason.'

'And what is that?'

'It is in her interests to tell the truth.'

The old woman's face wrinkled into a smile.

'Aye, Thunder son of Storm Cloud. You have the measure of my daughter. She is telling the truth because it serves her purpose. When we know why it serves her purpose, we shall know something of the plot the little vixen is hatching.'

Chapter 5

Talisman

Alison arrived at the restaurant and found a place by the window. Tom had asked her to help with his experiments. He wanted the gear that her father used to study brainwaves. Colin had refused to provide it and Tom had asked her to sneak into his laboratory and get it for him.

Tom was staying in a pub. She'd phoned and suggested they meet there but he said it would be better if they didn't. Alison knew why. They would think she was a thirteen-year-old and Tom was a paedophile. It made her so angry. She was almost eighteen. Why couldn't people see that she was just small?

She nursed her coffee and waited for him. Tom was *persona non grata* at home. Her mother had thrown him out and her father wasn't prepared to defend him. Tom spent the night in his van and moved into the pub the next day.

At thirty-five, Tom was twice her age. Alison's first memories of him were when he was still in the army. Her father was a colonel in the medical corps and Tom was one of the youngest majors to have been appointed to that rank in peacetime. For some reason, he resigned his commission, went to university and got a job as a

lecturer in archaeology when he graduated. His talent with words captivated TV audiences but did nothing to endear him to his colleagues. They never lost an opportunity to ridicule him. Alison guessed the incident with the cat would put an end to his career.

The door of the restaurant opened and he entered.

'Have you seen this?'

He sat down and pushed a newspaper in front of her. There was a photograph of a cat on the front page. It had wires sticking out of its skull. Another photograph showed Tom beside a pond with a wicker basket. The caption said the cat had been found dead in a ditch close to where he had been conducting experiments.

'It's that Dr Duncan-Brown,' Allison whispered. 'He's out to get you. Daddy said he took photographs of you and the cat. That will be one of them. We spent all morning taking his laboratory apart and loading things into the trailer.'

'Did you get the helmet?'

Alison tapped a bag at her feet. 'I've got it here. We're not going to let that snotty-nosed Duncan-Brown win. I'm going to help you fight him. The best way is to prove you've discovered something really important.'

Tom picked up the bag and looked inside.

'It's not all here.'

'I'll bring the rest with me, Tom. I'll let you have it when you've agreed to my terms. I want to be part of what you are doing. If I let you have it now, you'll leave me out.'

It wasn't what Tom had expected. Perhaps it was Alison's small size. He reminded himself that she was almost eighteen. At that age she could join the army. Eventually he spoke.

'All right. We'll go this evening. Make sure you have everything we need. I want to try out some ideas on the pathways.'

'What are the pathways?'

'They're the lines I mapped with divining rods.'

'Do you think they have something to do with the old religions?'

'I do,' Tom nodded. 'That's why I want to be there at sunset. It is a time of transition between day and night ... a time when one state passes into another. According to ancient tradition, it is the time when one can make the passage between realms.'

Alison gazed into his eyes. 'Oh, Tom, it's so exciting.'

At a neighbouring table, a middle-aged man opened his newspaper and glanced at the photographs on the centre page. He returned his attention to Alison with an expression of growing concern.

They arrived at the pond towards nightfall. Alison helped Tom unload the equipment from the van and watched as he laid the coaxial cable over the grass.

She handed him the helmet.

'It measures brain waves ... is that right?'

Tom nodded.

'Do you think it will work?'

'Dunno,' Tom shrugged. 'But I'm not going to let anyone insert electrodes into my brain like we did to the cat.'

He put on the helmet, attached the cable to it and sat cross-legged on the ground. Alison returned to the van and adjusted her binoculars. Tom was vulnerable. Photographs of him with divining rods had appeared in the national newspapers. What would people think if they saw him, sitting in a Buddha pose, wearing a helmet with wires sticking out of it?

There were photographers who hid in bushes. People called them paparazzi. Alison looked around and didn't see any. The only sign of life was a hot air balloon. She tried to relax. The sun sank. The shadows lengthened and the balloon disappeared. There was something peaceful about the place. The pond, the stream and the undulating ground were comforting. It was like being small again, lying at your mother's breast, feeling her warmth and protection.

Tom said that, in bygone days, people venerated the pond as sacred to the mother goddess. Young virgins came to places like this on summer evenings and prayed to the goddess. They came when the sun was low and magic hung in the air. They said prayers then wandered off and found somewhere to lie down.

Alison felt like one of those girls. They didn't know what life had in store and prayed for the assurance only a divine mother could give. They sought it in a dream. If they were lucky, their future lover would appear. But, if fate was unkind, there would be no man in their dreams.

A powerful force propelled her to her feet and she set off down the slope. Bats flew overhead and she heard the neighing of a horse. The sun sank and two small mounds appeared, scarcely visible before. They now poked up like breasts. Allison unbuttoned her blouse and sank between them.

Tom felt certain that something profound would happen. He sat cross-legged beside the pond, helmet on head, eyes directed at the computer balanced on his knees. As the sun edged towards the horizon, the familiar pattern of lines appeared and the noise of traffic was replaced by the neighing of a horse.

Everything was going according to plan. The sounds of his old realm were giving way to the new. He felt sure he was making contact with a different level of existence. The important thing now was to harmonise. He guessed it was like surfing. The trick would be to catch a wave ... and surf to another realm.

He sensed the wave coming and prepared to make the journey of a lifetime. Then the sound of the horse drifted away and he heard the cars again. It was totally mortifying. Everything appeared to be going so well but nothing came of it.

He waited for a while then a passing Airbus convinced him he was wasting his time. He'd failed to catch the wave. The sun was now set. The crucial time between day

and night had passed and there wouldn't be a second wave that day. The window of opportunity had gone.

He got up and gathered his equipment together. Despite his disappointment, there was still magic in the air. Moths fluttered about him and settled on his clothes. He felt their furry bodies and heard the shrill cries of bats. The moths exuded an odour to attract lovers. As a child, he had been attuned to these calls of nature. Now, he was aware of them again.

A movement caught his eye. A creature, half-man-half-goat, was crouching in the bushes. It had to be a trick of the light. His military training had prepared him for such aberrations. But his thoughts were not on men with guns. He stopped thinking about the love life of moths and started to worry about Alison. He pulled a torch from his belt and flicked it over the ground.

Where was Alison?

The marks of her wanderings were visible in the long grass. He followed them and found her lying on her back in a small hollow. Her blouse was open and her face flushed. At first he thought she had been violated. Then he realised she was merely asleep. He buttoned up her blouse and carried her to the van.

Getting Alison home involved climbing through a window. Tom accomplished the task without awakening her parents. The experience was unnerving. Colin and Molly were amongst his oldest friends. It would be unbearable if they thought he had taken advantage of their daughter.

He got back to the pub with his nerves on edge, downed half-a-bottle of whisky, and slumped into bed. Sleep came immediately but it was not the pleasant alcoholic haze that usually accompanied his drunken soirées.

Dreams invaded his mind. He was back beside the pond. Dark shapes hovered at the edge of his vision. Bony fingers pulled him down and a board was placed on his chest.

'Tomas son of John.'

It was like being back at military college ... taking tests. But the tests were more demanding than at Sandhurst. There was no written paper. Questions were asked in a croaking voice and came in the form of riddles.

The first involved double negatives.

Tom answered without difficulty.

The next was more difficult.

He hesitated and a stone was placed on the board. He tried to rise and bony fingers held him down. Another question followed. He answered quickly ... got it wrong and another stone was added.

The interrogation proceeded relentlessly. He continued to make mistakes and the stones piled up. The pressure was unbearable. He summoned all his strength and was ready to give up when a female voice drummed in his ears.

'Nonsense ... nonsense ...'

It sounded like his mother.

His relations with her had never been smooth but the message came over loud and clear. The questions were trivial. They only gave trouble if you thought they were clever. When you knew they were stupid ... you could handle them.

He answered the next one correctly. A stone came off. After that it was easy. More correct answers followed and more stones were removed. The last came off and he guessed he'd passed the test.

Alison stretched and looked around. She was lying on her bed fully clothed apart from her shoes. On the ordinary plane of existence she remembered very little of the previous evening. But, on the plane of dreams, her recall was total.

She remembered sinking into the grass and closing her eyes. Moths flew about. She became drowsy and the dream took hold ... if it was a dream. Everything seemed so real. The boy wore old-fashioned clothes and smelt of wood smoke and bracken. At first he just looked at her. Then he came close and reached out a hesitant hand. Alison felt his soft touch and looked into his light-blue eyes. He was only a little bit taller than herself. Beside him she did not feel small.

After a while, he began to sing. He told her she was beautiful and sang about his homeland, about the animals, flowing streams, woodlands and grassy meadows. He said he wanted to take her there. Alison let the words flow over her. A great weight was lifted from her mind. Things would work out all right. Her perfect lover was waiting for her somewhere in the future.

As the song continued, a note of sadness entered the boy's voice. He said they lived in different realms and would forever remain apart. Just this once they had come together. Tears formed in his eyes and he reached for the small carving that hung about his neck. He told her it was his talisman and very precious to him. He gave it to her and she gave him her necklace: a stainless steel cat on a stainless steel chain. They talked for what seemed a long time. Then Tom's voice intruded and the boy faded away.

Lying in bed that summer's morning, Alison reached for her necklace and found it gone. In its place there was a carving of a bear on a leather thong. She held it in her hand and fell back to sleep.

The bear plodded up the slope, following a trail of honey. His face was marked by scars, the product of fights with males of his own kind. Now, in his twilight years, the old animal sought the company of a young cub of a different species. Treading cautiously amongst the fallen branches, he stopped to sniff the breeze. His eyesight was failing but his sense of smell was still good. He caught the air in his nostrils and formed a picture of what lay ahead: honey, fresh rabbit droppings, nectar-laden flowers, a fire, and the reek of human kind.

The presence of humans would normally have sent him into the safety of the thicket. But he recognised the smell as belonging to a harmless individual: a young male who had befriended him when he was ill and given him honey.

'Brother.'

He heard the boy's familiar greeting and quickened his lumbering pace.

The boy held out a sticky hand. 'Come, Brother. Look what I have for you.'

The bear reached the circle of firelight and halted. The stench of canine presence filled the air and he drew back ready to attack or take flight if the murderous beasts appeared. He grunted fiercely and heard the boy's calming voice.

'Peace, brother. There is no one here but me and our good friend, horse.'

'The stench of dog no longer seemed so fresh. The bear moved forward into the firelight and watched through his one good eye. The boy held up a bulging leather bag. His fingers slipped down and he pulled at the string that secured the neck. A gush of amber liquid flowed onto a slab of stone. Abandoning caution the bear ambled forward.

'I have much to tell you since we last met.'

The boy watched the big animal lick up the precious liquid.

'I have found a friend. She is gentle and modest ... not like the girls in my mother's village. We have exchanged talismans. I gave her mine, which is made in your likeness, and she gave me hers.'

The boy reached into his tunic and pulled out a chain.

'Look, brother, her talisman is a cat.'

The bear looked up but his eye was on the bag. He stuck out a huge paw and the boy responded swiftly, squeezing more honey onto the stone.

'We have tied our soul lights together,' he said. 'We have exchanged our talismans as an expression of our love. We are united but apart.'

He began to sing and the bear was distracted by the mournful sound.

'We are separated by a vast abyss. We belong to different realms. It is not like she is in one wood and I in another. We cannot walk across a meadow and be united. A Void lies between us.'

The wailing put the bear in a bad mood and he would have wandered off but for the honey. He growled and the boy squirted a few more drops on the stone. The meagre offering did nothing to pacify the big animal. He bared his claws.

'Peace, bother.'

The boy held up a hand as the bear lurched at him. A paw struck out and he suddenly realised how big and powerful the animal was. Claws ripped through his cheek. He dropped the bag and the bear made off with it. Blood ran onto his tunic. His cheek was cut through and he felt faint. The wound needed dressing but he couldn't go back to the priests of the Duideth. They would want to know how he

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