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# Lord of The Green Planet

**EMIL PETAJA**



Complete Novel

A custom-made planet for a self-made god



## THE DEVIL OF NEW TARA

Diarmid O'Dowd, space explorer, was suddenly an Off-worlder in an Old World legend. Since he had crashed his ship through the green barrier to this uncharted world, he found himself due to take a place in the Deel's song of ancient Ireland, living again on New Tara. Diarmid was scheduled to love the Lady and lose to the Lord, be the valiant Son of the Sun, and add a few heartsome verses to the legend—before being fed to Nacran.

But Astronaut O'Dowd wasn't pleased at the role cast for him, and with the help of Old Grane, the Wees, the *silkie*s, and Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips, Diarmid broke the pattern. He had to find and counter the self-established god who had populated the planet with pookas and peasants, fearless heroes and firewings—all to fit a madman's idea of a peopled poem.

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# Lord of The Green Planet

by

EMIL PETAJA

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**FIVE AGAINST ARLANE**

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## I

CAPTAIN DIARMID PATRICK O'DOWD of T.D.S.F. X-Flor, Magellanic Division, groaned. He hurt. His stunned brain groped to pull itself up by its bootstraps. His rolling tumble, when the seat ejector popped him up and out of his disabled ship (before in truth he must become a black chunk of toast which the lifesaving procedure suggested), had been inelegant in the extreme. He tried to lift up his battered body. He couldn't. He could only moan about his many hurts. For instance, his left leg was fast becoming numb; he couldn't even wrench a look to prove to himself it was still there.

He lay there for at least ten minutes, on the grass—  
“*Grass!*”

He snapped open his eyes. Yes. *Grass*. His nostrils whiffed in damp loamy soil, and his wondering eyes blinked at gold-lamina verdure brushing his chin. He refocused his wonder further out, beyond the yellow shoots and across a rolling meadow of the same, a wide sea of windbent flora that was interrupted at intervals by prickly mauve bracken. Small vales between the rolling hillocks still held water from a recent shower and these glassy pools mirrored a sky of bright green emerald—

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“Emerald! Of course!”

His misery was pricked through with sharp astonishment; he arched his gurgling gape upward, at the ribbons of cirrus clouds fleeing under a stiff afternoon breeze across that brilliant green backdrop. A single sun, a warm one, dipped toward a shaggy forest of blue conifers at the rising horizon. Everything—clouds, field, forest, sun—was washed over by that brilliant green web through which his miniscule X-Plor ship had plunged.

“Shades of Tuatha de Danaan and Great Cuchulain, himself! I’m *inside*—looking out!”

To his positive knowledge, Diarmid O’Dowd was the first. The befogged and green-black Web had long since been pronounced unpierceable and useless. The somber green mists surrounding an unknowable center, here in some forgotten side-pocket of the great Magellanic Cloud where Diarmid had been employed for most of his space life, seemed to be composed totally of a lethal, corrosive acid, an acid which ate through any manner of ship’s hull alloy. Those spacers who had tried to lunge through had died trying. This green-blurred web was categorized in Fleet records among the large number of plague spots which you steered clear of. What the hell! Deep space was one great big immensity of mystery inside of another; Man’s fleets were but fireflies scratching on the endless night. Nothing of importance could possibly exist inside of that inimical webbery. Forget it. There were far more interesting and worthwhile paths for the space-fish to follow.

“I did it! I pushed right through!”

Montages of memory charged across his mind, depressing, for the moment, his pain. He’d been returning, solo, from a routine probe in the crisscross pattern of exploration and charting relegated to him (among some two hundred minnows off the Magellanic mother ship) with nothing of much interest to report; as was his custom, he had steered a course that skirted the enigmatic Green Web. Why? He couldn’t have told his superiors or his buddies why, and he didn’t try. Only—*something* kept pulling him back to that somber gas-cloud. Something that fought its way up out of



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his bones, out his molecules. Something genetic, maybe. To the others, the Green Web was a shunned thing, as pointless as it was deadly. Not to Diarmid Patrick O'Dowd. His dreams, more and more, became saturated with fantasies that moved out of emerald mists. He told nobody, of course. Yet—it was as if from deep within that virulent green fog *something* called him. . . .

Today the call had been strong, compelling, irresistible. Impossible to ignore. Almost without his volition his hands maneuvered the small craft into the smoky green mist. He didn't even hear the sharp alarm buzz, when the ship's hull detected danger; he didn't even see the angry red panel light flash on. He moved deep into the spectral shroud. It was almost as if he expected to find a hole in the lethal froth; and he did find one. A mere pinpoint, but it funneled inward, became a widening tunnel that led him to the membranous web itself. Straight ahead the web gleamed and shimmered with an emerald's faceted fire; Diarmid shouted, raptured, like one who has at long last found the path to a secret dream. There was no hesitance, no hint of qualm; his hands shivered on the controls, in a kind of intoxication of ecstasy, as he sent the small ship plunging toward the green lodestone. It must have been this giddy light-headedness that made him careless in his landing, when the web shimmered and dissolved to let him through.

His countless hurts and achings drew him back to now. His mind teeter-tottered, battling oblivion. A booming roar of sound behind him clung him to consciousness. A groan escaped him when he struggled up to wrench back a look. Yes. It was the ship. Planetfall had come fast and hard, out of astonishment; the fuel system had been fouled up. A slow leak guttering along the ship's bowels had finally hit some point of vulnerability. White fires pillared up, tearing the green sky. While he watched, with seared eyeballs, his little ship and everything in it (everything that could help him on a strange planet or get him off of it) went up in a fury of combustion; in mere seconds what had been an expensive, sophisticated machine for carrying Man across

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the black deeps and teaching him to understand what he found was nothing but a melted mass of black char.

Here was what those nagging dreams of his had brought him. His "call" had been a death wish. Here he was, inside of the green membrane concealed by that lethal mist, forever. And from the agony his body was experiencing, forever was going to be damned short!

Diarmid's eyes saw nothing but circus lights from the searing they had endured out of masochistic horror. To see his pride and joy, his armor against nothingness, go up in smoke like that. He sobbed and babbled, chewing the dank clods under him. After a while came the pass-out.

Things happened inside of him while he lay there in his fit of agonized exhaustion. Things that helped. Adrenalin spurting into his bloodstream. Leucocytes got busy repairing cells. His youthful reserves began the patching-up process. His mental equipment rejected total despair. The survival syndrome won out once more.

He came out of the chasm with the pungent scent of earth and grass and vague animal odor on his nostrils. His tongue burned as if flayed; he gulped back the bile-retch that had rivered up into his throat. He still hurt. Every cell of him still hurt. All except that leg; to all intents and purposes it was no longer a part of him.

God, was he thirsty! His parched cells cried out for liquid.

After a while he hiked up on one elbow, squinting up and around him. Above him the green had deepened to an occult oceanic tone verging toward blue-violet; to the right the green-gold sun was touching the fringed tops of the conifers. The black outscop where the ship had gone up in a rage of fire still gave off a wispy tendril of smoke. Terra Deep Space Fleet property and worth a packet. Worth more than he was, all things considered. He grimaced and looked down at his long body, as if to assess the relative value of Diarmid Patrick O'Dowd, product of a long long line of Celtic and Irish forebears, held against what had once been a small, sleek, incredibly transistorized chunk of Fleet property.

Diarmid was not what you would call handsome. His

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face was an agreeable face. It wouldn't scare kids. Nothing like that. A little wide, with a generous full-lipped mouth, and a nose that matched it a little too well and tilted up. Perhaps his eyes, his green-brown eyes, were what got the second look from the girls in teeming Marsport. They were amiable and they cupped wide-swept dreams. The thick black patches of eyebrows overhanging them tended to pinch together, matched the shock of ebony curls, and there were thoughtful lines creasing his forehead and crinkling his cheeks more often than not. There was humor, but it was thoughtful, quizzical humor, not careless. As for the rest of him, Diarmid was thick-muscled enough to handle himself most anywhere; his legs were a trifle too short, his arms too long, and there was a lot of black shag on his chest which was however belied by the dreaming soul of him lurking deep within those hazel eyes.

There was no doubt that Diarmid Patrick's mother had come from Ireland, and most all the rest of his ancestors, too.

After a while he was able to flop-crawl, dragging his numb leg across the yellow sward, to one of those silent pools of rainwater, some fifteen yards downhill. He jammed his face down into it and slurped thirstily. The water had a faint briny taste to it, but he drank until he could hold no more. It helped.

Then he leaned back against one of the purplish bushes, avoiding the two-inch spikes on the lower branches, sighing, scenting the fragrance of the pale blue flowers among the thorns. It was a heady fragrance, like heliotrope.

The dripping sunlight that sidewashed the landscape of yellow rolling hills made deep shadows. The pastoral beauty of the scene was tinged with the ethereal, the magical. To his left was a lofty range of hoar-capped mountains; his roving look caught the silvery gleam of water, a sea or lake, perhaps. The yellows and mauves and russets with their overlay of emerald from the Web were suddenly muted when the sun dipped under. An evening breeze rippled the yellow hillocks.

Diarmid gulped, suddenly aware of how lucky he was—

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just to be alive and on such a planet. The deeps of space were alive with terrors of every kind imaginable; death was a spaceman's constant companion. Livable worlds were actually pitifully few and far between. Diarmid had soon learned that the "adventure" he had joined the Fleet for consisted mainly in endlessly long, bleak space treks in tight metal coffins in vain search of what usually ended up to be nothing.

Now. Now he had come home. . . .

The gloom deepened. The wind keened and souged. It was time to take decisive account of himself and of his environment. He had already wrenched off his cracked helmet and flung it away as useless. The airpack lay back there, uphill. He flexed his muscles and winced down at the torn and dirty gray uniform with the captain's stripes on the sleeve. Groping his hands along the wide brown beltline, he checked the tool kit. Intact but incomplete. Diarmid wasn't careless, but months and years without any kind of a landing between mother ships and ports had inclined him toward comfort. Luckily the survival food pack was intact.

But his hand-blast was missing. He could see it now, lying in the controls panel compartment where he had chucked it, along with the medkit and extra ammo.

"Damn!"

He munched proteids and vita-capsules and watched the shadows around him deepen. Choking over a strangled mouthful he slammed a fist on his chest, hitting cold metal under the blouse of his tunic. His dogtag. And something else.

Something new in the past year.

He unzipped the blouse and pulled it out. He let the double dogtag dangle, holding the octagonal piece of alloy in his palm, blinking down at it.

"Does it really work, I wonder?"

Not only had he never tried it, since there had never been the need, but he'd listened to the lectures that went with it with desultory ears. Some bright space psych had dreamed up this hunk of shiny stuff with its sealed-in magic as the ultimate weapon against an inimical environment. Every Fleet scout, every space sailor of importance, was expected to wear it at all times and guard it with his life, for it

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could very easily *be* his life. Its power was limited, of course. Limited by the capability of man's physical body to endure alien environments that did not contain the necessary elements to sustain man.

Still—

Diarmid O'Dowd's mind flashed back to the preliminary lecture. To the space psych's crisp penetrating words.

"What is it? We call it a *memory-pack*. What does it do? It ties in with the hypno-learner program which all of you have undergone during the past full year, during your sleep periods. How? It serves as a mnemonic release of this vast store of human knowledge which each and every one of you has stored within his unconscious mind!"

This small piece of subtly contrived metal was like a key, the psych had informed them—a key that would trigger any portion of the ocean-like encyclopedia of know-how, all that Man had learned about space and its thousands of forms of alien life, virtually the sum total of Man's accumulated knowledge since he had first learned to think. A man's unconscious mind was, even without the hypno-program, an incredible reservoir of all of his experiences, his reading, his action and reaction to all stimuli. And *with* it!

"We've had the memory-pack sealed so that nothing short of total destruction can affect it. What will trigger it to useful action? Two things. Your own pulse-rhythms—yours alone—plus a personal thought-code. A simple doggerel which you will repeat mentally, holding the memory-pack tight against your inner wrist. . . ."

Repetition of the thought-code would set off an in-built reaction within the user's individual brain-pan, making the fountain-well of knowledge engraved on the convolutions of his inner mind instantly available. Ask it any question within its scope and the answer popped up as from an immense computer bank. Knowledge which the user was not aware he possessed, painstakingly enscribed by sleep-hypnosis for use when needful.

But you had to have the key. The memory-pack. Lose that and . . .

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Diarmid's hands shook a little when he placed it against his wrist pulse and held it there, staring.

*O, sweet and far from cliff and star  
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing . . .*

The words he himself had chosen cracked out into the keening wind.

*Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying,  
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying . . .*

He waited, while the wind-tossed verses suited the text and died. The memory-pack—the modern amulet of magic!—seemed to burn into his flesh. Diarmid waited.

What came was unexpected and came not from within himself.

*"Ho! See the Off-worlder! Hear his warlock's chanting!"*

Diarmid's rapt concentration was shattered by the skurled yell from the top of the hillock; the amulet dropped on its neck chain and when it did the yelling became meaningless gibberish. Diarmid struggled to gain his feet, gaping up at the two figures limned against the sunset. One of them was tall, broad of shoulder, dominant and masculine in every swaggering gesture. The other was slim, girlish, her hair an auburn flame on the wind.

*"Hey!"*

Somehow the psych's talisman had released long-buried knowledge of the language the warrior on the hill had spoken, while it was yet active.

Involuntarily, dragging his numbed leg to a lurching stand, he lifted a pointing hand at them. That did it. With one swift movement the tall figure swept up the bow he held and let fly his notched arrow.

Pain seized Diarmid by the shoulder.

He fell.

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### II

SOME URGENT survival demand kept Diarmid conscious. The rolling landscape dipped and rocked under its green-black heaven; Diarmid lay there, staring stupidly at the warm blood gushing from between his fingers, as they toyed weakly with the arrow's shaft jutting from his bicep.

Voices moved downhill. The tall hunter squatted nearby for a closer look at what he had bagged.

"Fianna!" he called the girl. The archer's voice rang with self-satisfaction. He straightened, stepping forward to boot Diarmid's head up so he could get a look at his face.

Rage tore through Diarmid's veins, staring up at the twisted smile hanging over him. The man wore close-fitting hunter's clothes, buff leather and brown suede, well cut. His saffron shirt was open under the jerkin's lacing, displaying wheat blond hair that matched the crop of smooth curls on his head. The man was incredibly handsome. Every line of his face was molded to perfection. His eyes were of a startling blue; his nose delicately arched, his wide lips parted to display healthy white teeth; the curve of his bronzed throat and the tilt of that gently clefted chin would have sent Michelangelo into a frenzy of creation.

Yet the whole effect was spoiled by something behind that curving smile, behind those ingenuous blue eyes.

"Flann!"

The girl's voice was low and sweet as she panted up behind the man with the longbow. Diarmid caught one breathtaking look of a pale triangular face framed by waves of rich deep auburn hair and set with great eyes flashing like emeralds under long black lashes. Right now that gorgeous face was strained with emotion as Fianna's white hands raked Flann's arm in protest of what she and Diarmid both read in his white-toothed grin.

"Nay, Flann!" Her plea came rippling and fast, and something charged up within Diarmid's mind-depths, out of time itself, triggered by that one brief demand on the memory-

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pack. Something deep within him understood and translated! Some genetic thing swirling up out of his cells *knew!*

"You must not kill him!" she begged.

"No? Why not?"

"At least find out who he is!"

"I know who he is. A cursed spy of the Nords!" Flann spat and gave Diarmid's side a preliminary kick.

"He looks more like an Islander to me. Perhaps—" The girl's fear for her handsome companion committing a rash mistake, and getting himself in trouble, no doubt, engendered a creative ripple of urgent words. "—Perhaps he is of the Island Kingdoms, made captive by the Nords or the Shees even, striving to return now; older, changed."

Flan laughed. "You always were a softheaded little birdling, with a pudding head to match it, Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips. Nay. None of your pukey little wiles, maid. They just don't work on Lord Flann Eu-Ane. You should know by now that—"

"Lord Flann?"

"Lordling, then." Flann scowled. "Soon to be Lord."

"And what if Lady Fianna Eu-Ane should change her mind?" The green eyes flashed.

"You won't," he laughed.

"Are you so sure of yourself, then?"

Flann's wide shoulders shrugged impatience. "The Deel wills it. That's an end to the matter." But the girl's plea to spare Diarmid had backfired, somehow. The byplay had brought a flush of raw anger to the young Lordling's face. He whirled on her sharply. "Is there something about this oaf's offal that escapes me? You know him or—?"

He dropped his bow; his hand flashed to the jewel-sheathed blade at his gold-looped waist. Diarmid saw the steel catch twilight, struggled. His threshing about moved him a scant double-foot from the poised point.

The beautiful bronzed face moved down and the well-muscled arm even faster, with driving force. Diarmid yelled and made his pinned-down body roll, sweating blood. The naked blade struck sod where his heart had been a split second past.



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Flann swore. Diarmid's hands groped vainly for something to defend himself with. There were no stones; the best his grabbing fingers could rake up was a handful of damp earth. He flung it. Flann saw it coming, ducked, laughed.

"So there is spirit in the oaf, then!"

"Let him be," Fianna urged. "Look! The very ground is blasted by fire! One of the firebeasts, larger than any we have ever encountered on the hunt. Flann, the fellow is wounded sore. He will surely die in any case. Let it not be by your hand! This once, Flann! For my sake!"

Flann straddled Diarmid, blade in hand, considering. Before his pain, Diarmid suffered the agony of humiliation, as if the Cheshire grin meant slavish vassalage and untenably worse humiliations to come. The Lordling was clearly enjoying this moment. Stormy words boiled up in Diarmid's craw. He was venting them and flinging more useless handfuls of dirt when Fianna bent between them; her deep green hunt-tunic curved softly around her panting bosom; her silver girdle, with the emerald-studded dagger jangling on it, dropped close.

Diarmid made a wild grab for it.

Flann shouted and swept the girl away, tumbling.

"Now you will die, oaf! If only because Fianna takes your part and her girlish heart is not to be trusted." The blade dimpled his neck. "But first—your name? Where do you hie from? The Nords' black fogs?"

Diarmid sucked in a breath while the point of the blade drew blood.

"My name is Diarmid Patrick O'Dowd."

"O'Dowd is it? Liar! That is an Island Kingdom name and these rags are not of us. Where do you come from?"

"From out there. From beyond the Green Web."

Flann's laugh was thin and held warning. "Lies, as one must expect from a devious Nord spy! Everyone knows that beyond the Green there is nothing at all. The Green and what lies under is all that exists. That is the way The Deel created it and that is the way it must be."

"The Deel?" Diarmid gulped.

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Flann scowled. "Don't speak The Name in that blasphemous tone, oaf! Not on your dying lips! Don't speak the largest lie of all—that you know naught of The Deell!"

"But I—"

"Enough. You disgust me, oaf. Your lies and your foul person offend the Green itself. Die, then, and rid Eu-Tarah and The Deel of a scurvy louse who speaks the tongue in a manner to offend the very air of Eu-Tarah."

Fianna's sharp cry stayed the poniard's plunge with its banshee puissance. "Look! Look, Flann! Upon yon hill—in the direction of the Spael!"

Grudgingly the blade moved up and away; Flann's wide shoulders swung back and Diarmid strained forward to follow his shaded eyes. On a high knoll fronting the half-moon of conifers stood a dark figure, silhouetted against the sky, where it was yet light from the newly set sun. It looked like a great black stallion, yet there was something strange and neck-prickling about it. The brief-cloaked figure who first seemed to be riding it, at second look seemed to be *part* of it. Even from this great distance red eyes flamed out above the windwhipping wing of black cloak. A last leap of sunray cracking between black cloud bars made the strange creature's shadow crawl toward them across the rolling hills, as if reaching out to take them.

Diarmid's flesh crawled, too, at the sight.

"It's Himself sent his pooka—for a warning!" Fianna's whisper shivered, blurring the air.

Flann said nothing.

"He is watching us, Flann." Fianna shuddered. "You must not kill the stranger. It is Himself's sign not to do it!"

Flann was already slipping his blade in its sheath. Now he put his fingers to his lips and gave a shrill short whistle. Diarmid's eyes widened even further when two amorphous lumps he thought were prickly bushes loped up from a nearby hollow. He gave a cry when he saw that they were enormous cats, one tawny, one black, sleek-furred felines the size of steeds and saddled for riding.

Flann's mount spit and showed saber fangs when he ran and seized the jeweled reins with practiced ease. He leaped

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on the scarlet saddle-pad, gesturing for Fianna to follow suit. Fianna's eyes moved from the fearful figure on the headland, still brooding like a black patch against the dying wisps of sunset; but they moved to Diarmid, not to Flann.

"Hurry!" Flann cried impatiently. "You know what perils the dark brings, here on the mainland."

"I know. I'm coming."

But, when Flann reared up his cat-steed for the sinuous spring that carried them off into the dusk, Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips ran to Diarmid and knelt.

"We—I must remove the arrowhead!"

"Won't be easy." He winced. "It's scraping the bone."

"If I break the shaft off short—?"

Diarmid nodded. Fianna's small hands were surprisingly strong and deft. "Now. Can you make it up behind me on Kincora?"

"I'll sure try. But—"

"Never mind. I will help you up." Again Diarmid was made aware of the fragile-seeming girl's strength of back and arm, not to mention the determination and ardor splashing out of those great emerald eyes. With her to drag and him to lurch along on his good leg, he made it to the tawny animal; Kincora, the cat, crouched and endured his handgrips on his fur as he pulled himself up behind Fianna, clinging pleasantly to her waist.

"Hang on tight!"

"Where we going?"

"To the Spae." Her voice trembled on the name.

"What—"

"Never mind. Hang on!"

Kincora, the cat, balled muscles for the initial spring, then was off like a bolt of gray lightning, bounding from hill to hill and across the rain-pools in twenty-foot leaps. Diarmid all but fainted, gnawing his lips and hanging on with his good arm. His lopsided lurching made the huge animal spit in frustration, anxious as he was to get back to his cat-tender and evening food.

Diarmid clung and tried, above the blazing agony burning in his arm, his dangling numb leg, and the minor tortures,

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to concentrate on the desirability of his position, his proximity to such a rare and beautiful creature as Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips and his wonder in having her fight for him in word and deed. It must be some kind of a rare dream, to be riding the wind on a giant cat, his arm around the most radiant girl he could have ever imagined, under and inside the Green Web!

Obedient to Fianna's tight rein, Kincora made straight for the thick forest. But once he had reached the dark straight trunks and gnomish burls he pulled up, snarling. He would go no further and all of Fianna's whistling and shouting would not budge him into that brooding dark.

This was the Spae and, like any creature of wisdom and good sense, Kincora would have no part of it.

Fianna pulled out a small jeweled quirt and flicked it over the cat's pricked up ears. The beast only snarled and spat and gave the black forest a wary lidded look. Diarmid turned his eyes into the trees. It was pitchy between the lofty trunks, forbidding. Nothing stirred. Yet it didn't feel dead. Beyond that wall of conifers, within the skeletal bracken deeper in the Spae, seethed life of some fantastic kind, life that leaped into activity after the sun went down and the Green faded into moonless black.

Diarmid sensed the nameless terror of the Spae. It reached out with invisible fingers and scuttled along his spine. He shivered when he saw a faint blue light wink into being among the branches like a devil's candle. It darted nearer now, from bramble to bramble, from trunk to trunk.

Kincora saw it too and screamed.

Fianna's gloved hand reached out, as if to grab hold of Diarmid's tunic front, when his hold on her began to slip. Kincora screamed again, rearing.

"Go!" Fianna's low command was fierce with fear.

Kincora sprang. Diarmid made a wild clutch but now the girl pushed him away, sliding down the cat's great bush of tawny tail. He struck ground at the forest's edge, stunned by the jolt and by an inner surf of desolation. Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips was forsaking him, after all.

## III

THE FACE that kept seething up out of his loss-of-blood faints had to be part of a nightmare. It was that ugly and improbable. Of a glaucous green that shaded into dung brown, it was warted, unhuman, batrachian; its mouth was a wide black-lipped toad's mouth; it rested on no manner of neck, rather on hunched sloping shoulders from which protruded skinny bare arms with skinny long pale fingers. What hinted at the quasi-human was the lank dragging hair, like seaweed, and the dirty jumper the creature wore to cover her froglike torso. It was as if some end branch of *batrachidae* had shambled up out of the swamp, tried to become human and failed.

"Awake is it, dearie?" the thing croaked, taking on some reality. "Here's some nice mushroom stirabout for yel"

Diarmid's openmouthed gape enabled the webbed fingers to poke porridge into him, hot porridge that stung his taste buds and brought stinging tears to his eyes. Yet, once he gulped it down, its nutritional value was instantaneous. Diarmid felt a thrill of new life surge through his veins, like a billion fiery pollywogs dancing in his blood. A few wooden spoonfuls and he sank back to sleep some more. Presently the somehow-motherly creature wakened him again, fed him more stirabout, then permitted him to lay back for more sleep. Just how long a time this went on was impossible to calculate, but from the length of the black bristle on his chin, Diarmid deduced a matter of four or five days.

"And how is it that you are, Off-worlder?"

Diarmid bolted up, blinking at the frog-woman and around him, at the hut in which he woke, a roundish cot fashioned out of bits of dried braken and reed and ill-smelling mud. The crone hopped closer, making a lap of her loose jumper when she folded her ranine legs and squatted by him.

"I don't know, exactly."

The warted face cracked a preposterous grin. "Better, I would think, now that the Wees have had at you for a spell."

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Diarmid ignored the enigmatic reference and proceeded to test his arms and legs for usefulness. They worked. Even the numbed one worked just fine. His senses sloughed off sleep, sharpened up. Now he saw that the hut was lighted by a crude fish-oil lamp on a muddy table of sorts and warmed by a rocky hearth to one side; a savory homely kettle smoked on the hob. His olfactory sense made his nose wrinkle up from the pungent stink of the mud, which was everywhere, including on the frog-biddy's person. Diarmid decided, all at once, that the hut was not dirty, after all. It was the mud and, since this frog-creature lived in, among, and with the malodorous fen stuff it was a natural concomitant of her environment. It was the iridescent patchiness of the mud, now wet, now dry, that made the hut seem messy.

"Well, dearie?"

Diarmid thrust back revulsion when the frog's face darted close, holding back the desire to retch from the smell.

"How come I to understand you?" he blurted.

The hideous mouth uptilted. "It is my guess that your ancestors at one time in the dim past spoke the Tongue."

"The language of frogs!"

The crone ignored his implied insult. "Nay. The tongue of the Island Kingdoms. The true idiom of Eu-Tarah, as pronounced and decreed by Himself, may he shrivel in his robes and dry up and blow away to where he came from if not further."

Diarmid decided to ignore Himself for now, too, to keep his puzzlement moving on a straight path.

"You aren't of the Kingdoms, then?"

"Hardly!" she croaked, hopping up and down angrily. "I am Old Grane-of-the-Spae, wisest of the fen folk. We are the original inhabitants of Eu-Tarah, to give our world the false name The Deel hight it."

"What is the true name?" Diarmid wondered, floundering for bits of knowledge. Everything seemed to elude him, even his own identity.

"This would be meaningless to you, son of Dowd. Our language here in the fen consists of whistles and subtleties passed on through the mud in ways that would confuse you

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to idiocy. Long ago, when I realized that the Island Lords were here to stay, I learned their Off-worldish tongue, in an effort to use it against them and Himself in any way possible. This was a difficult thing since we fen folk cannot leave the Spae and live, and the Lords and Lordlings of the seas venture into it seldom and only through the direst need."

Diarmid considered. "You have great powers, Grane-of-the-Spae. They fear you."

"And well they might!" Grane spoke fiercely, from the depths of a tormented heart. "We belong to this world, to the very mud of it. We fen folk are the progeny of the fire folk who live in the very heart of this planet. By slow steps we moved out of the molten core, through the slimes, and up into the Spae itself. Would you not say that this world belongs to us, not to The Deel and his prancing Lords and Ladies?"

"I would say so," Diarmid said. "But can't the fen folk of the Spae and the Islanders of the sea *share* Eu-Tarah? If you can't leave your forest swamps and live, what good is the rest of it to you?"

"We will change in time," Old Grane grumbled. "One day we would evolve to make good use of it. And we shall! We shall take it for our rightful own and spite The Deel!"

When the ancient eyelids closed over the bulging eyes Diarmid took time to consider all this. For countless eons this far-away planet had harbored deep within its fiery core a race of dragonish creatures in and of the flame itself; by a series of sport thrusts of evolution the fire lizards had produced the fen folk, who still clung to the swamp mud from whence they had sprung. The rest of the Green world, covered though it was with bountiful flora and life-giving oceans, bore no life of any consequence until The Deel—

"They came from somewhere else?"

"Aye. From some foully bright Off-world." The fen folk detested sunlight, lived aboveground only at night, it seemed.

"Long ago?"

"Long, long."

Diarmid scowled. "Who or what is The Deel?"

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Grane blinked puffed out eyes that smoldered with frustration and hate. "Who knows? They call him god-king and the rumor is that he lives in a great castle of marble and gold on the top of the highest mountain on Eu-Tarah."

"Has anyone seen The Deel?"

"No one *living*."

Diarmid's mind wrestled with vague images of a giant figure on a rocky outcrop, a creature like a black patch with terrible flaming eyes.

"The pookas are his servants?"

"Aye. And the flamewings. Servants and spies. They see to it that his whims and his demands are carried out to the letter."

Flann's flat scorn in answer to Fianna's hint of renegeing on their betrothal. *The Deel wills it. That's an end to the matter.* That Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips might change her mind about wedding the young god with the cruel ways cut no ice, it seemed.

"What if one of Himself's worshiping subjects decides to disobey his willed wish?"

Old Grane's cross-throat gesture was painfully clear. "There is an old saying among the Islanders and the Nords: *Needs must when The Deel drives!* Should his slightest whim be ignored by them, the culprits die and their whole Island Kingdom suffers for it. The Deel has grim outlandish weapons and curious means of effecting punishment, such as make Flann and his dungeons seem child's play."

Diarmid pulled in a long thoughtful breath. "Has he not tried his weapons on the Spae?"

Grane chuckled. "Aye. He has that. But we fen folk have but to move down into our swamp and call upon our little friends. Himself soon leaves off. He has learned not to move his war-creatures too close, just as the Island Lords have learned."

Diarmid wondered about the "little friends" and the sources of Spae magic, but his thought was deflected by the memory of a milky white face set with emeralds for eyes and framed in a deep sunset of tresses. The truth of Fianna's seeming abandonment of him was suddenly revealed.



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"She couldn't make her cat move into the Spael Fearful as she was, she waited until she saw your light moving among the trees before leaving me there at the woods' edge!"

His heart jumped for joy.

The fen witch's half-moonish mouth curved oddly. "Aye. Lady Fianna is a delightful eyeful to look upon and has a melting-kind heart. 'Tis said she ministers to the most humble of her vassals same as to highborn. No doubt she is over-kind betimes in an effort to offset Lordling Flann's careless floggings. Many's the time I have permitted Fianna to flit among the bracken, plucking the herbs she knows will assuage the fevers and wounds of her subjects, of an evening, though she knows not the why of it."

"And what is this why, Grandmother?"

"Never mind, dearie. Suffice that the Wees have worked away inside of you these many days and cured your grievous wounds. And that you have Fianna to thank for bringing you to Old Grane. She and I have crossed souls many-a-time, though she was aware of it but dimly; nor that I suffer the simpler among the Islanders to pluck a boon in the Spae only to learn what I can about the latest decrees and edicts of The Deel—for the purpose of Himself's ultimate defeat!"

Diarmid smiled thinly at her strident croaking and the air-flailing of her webbed hands.

"And what have you learned, Grane-of-the-Spae?"

"I have learned to despise the Island Lords for their hoity-toity ways and their mincing manners. All they care about these days, since the last attack by the horned Nords, is bedecking their towers with silks and fancies, and themselves as gaudy. Or hunting hind across the great meadows on their great leaping pussycats! Not to even speak of the starving and mistreatment of the lowly who keep them fed and toil over their pretties! Nay! My contempt for the Island Lords overtips my hate. It is in the direction of the icy Castle on the Peak that my vengeful hate swerves, as the needle on a compass swings north. Mine, and all my folk of the fen!"

Diarmid nodded. He got up now and paced, to try out

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his legs. He was restless to quit the malodorous hut—where, he was not certain, but now it was a pair of emerald eyes that beckoned.

“She only did it out of pity,” he muttered glumly. “The same as for any of her lowly subjects.”

Old Grane croaked a sharp cackle. “You have not looked down at yourself in a clear pool at midday lately, have you, son of Dowd?”

Diarmid flushed. “Compared to the golden boy—”

“Golden-schmolden. You are rangy-built and strong. Your black curls fall nicely over your broodish eyes. Aye. An altogether likely hunk of bed-fodder for any palpitating maiden. And then there is the legend . . .”

Diarmid blinked at that. Calling his attention abruptly to himself as a human being, with his own individual desires and requirements, brought up the question—who was he? Where did he come from? What was his part in all this? Where exactly did he—Diarmid Patrick O’Dowd—fit into this chaotic panorama of Eu-Tarahan sociology and sketchy historical referent?

“Legend?”

The frog-woman’s eyes lidded. “You are trying to remember back,” she countered. “Before you found yourself lying there bleeding on the brake with Flann’s foot on your neck.”

“Yes, I am.”

“But you can’t remember anything, can you?”

Diarmid gave his eyes a brush as if to remove the cloud that blocked off his mind. “No! Why?”

Old Grane hopped up; her claw stroked his cheek. It was cold and clammy, but he managed not to shudder. “Never mind, dearie. The Wees have merely built up a temporary dam, as I asked them to. You will remember everything in due course.”

“Who are the Wees?”

“Let us rather speak of Legend and of your *Geasa*.”

“What about the Legend?”

“Old Grane’s wise and Old Grane thinks you be it. The Legend sings of a son’s son of Inisfail (some call it Erin) who will journey to Eu-Tarah on a steed of flame. It shall

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be his *Geasa* to challenge Himself, to break the chains that shackle the Off-world folk to The Deel. Aye, old and threadbare though it be, spoke of in whispering corners, the Legend of the *Geasa* keeps faith."

Diarmid's head was whirling from the strange words and even wilder concepts they conjured up. He shook it savagely.

"You did pierce the Green," Old Grane pointed out. "And your forebears were Island-type folk."

Diarmid growled. "And how is this hero supposed to do this impossible thing? Overthrow The Deel's invincible power?"

"By a pureness of heart, think I," Old Grane said blandly. "And also by means of a curious eight-edged talisman he wears. A talisman which brings to the hero who wears it a key to power, power to match The Deel and to do battle with him on his own terms!"

Within him Diarmid felt an urgent involuntary knowledge spark up, a knowledge so immutably engrained within the cells of his brain that even the Wees could not wholly shut it off. It was the very core of his being from which his every thought must spring as from a bottomless fountain.

"A talisman!"

"Aye. A thing of infinite magic."

Diarmid shivered. His mind groped vainly to remember what the Wees had taken away from him; his hand moved, scrabbling to his throat, as if seeking for something.

It came away empty.

The talisman was gone.

## IV

TENEBOUS DAWN, fraught with glutinous mists and wet gray winding sheets, stirred uncomfortably across the wide rolling meadow as yet unseen. Diarmid turned to thank Old Grane-of-the-Spae, before he took his leave of her at the edge of the dark forest.

"Dwell not on it, Diarmid, son of Dowd. 'Twas the Wees, not I." Her ancient over-large eyes were strangely moist when

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he took her webbed hand gently. "But where will you go? Will you not stay in the Spae, will you not tarry with Old Grane, and learn the ancient sorceries of the fen folk?"

"Nay, valuable friend!" Somehow, olden words and olden ways seated themselves well; perhaps the talisman had opened some deep genetic well; perhaps it was the Wees. But, whatever, Diarmid knew himself to be now part and parcel of this misty-weird world under its fathomless Green. That Old Grane had grown fond of him was a boon indeed.

Or—was she only using him as a weapon against her arch-enemy, The Deel? Was there incalculable guile behind those tears?

"I must find the lost talisman," he said.

"Aye. But where to start?"

Diarmid's mouth was a grim line. "Where but to the Island Kingdoms and Lady Fianna. It was she who snatched it off my neck, chain and all, before she sent me to the sod tail over teacup."

"May be as may, son of Dowd. But take care. Flann is an adamant adversary, like unto Fionn, son of Cumhaill, when Grania—aye, but that is another and more ancient story." Her frog's eyes lidded thoughtfully. "How is your prowess with the blade?"

"Sword? I have never—"

"I thought as much. And Lordling Flann the dancingest darling with the claymore that ever trod the pike, who delights in nothing better than spitting a man on his blade like a lake fish for the cooking, unless it is making use of the sundry toys in his Tower Ane dungeons! Aye, it's between The Deel and the deep dungeons you are heading, son of Dowd! Take care, take care. And may the Wees stay with you to pick up the pieces!"

Diarmid stood there in the shadow of the dark trunks for a moment after Old Grane had hopped back toward the swamp and away from the breaking day, pulling in great drafts of winy air redolent of dewy needles and wet grass and heliotrope. Fear clutched at his vitals as he stared into the misted field he must cross on foot to reach the sea. For one melting instant of indecision he half-turned to follow

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Old Grane back to her hut in the fen; then, with a fierce shrug, he took up his journey with loping stride.

Old Grane had provided him with a worn suit of vassal's clothing, from some hapless escapee of Tower Ane misjustice trapped by the swamp. The brown hose and the reddish jerkin were all but rags, but there was a sharpened poinard dangling from his wide black belt and that was some small comfort.

He moved swiftly, never minding the brakes and tarns, splashing over hill and through water. The green-fringed sun lifted above the undulating horizon; the sky took on a patina of deep jade as the morning wind swept off the mists with its warm new brooms. Once he heard a far-off trumpeting, as of some great blundering beast, and that made him cautious, especially approaching the summit of each new hillock.

But he saw nothing except malachite sky and golden field until he made the headland, abruptly, and came in view of the wide sea.

He gasped.

Below him was a sheer fifty foot drop that beetled in sharp exactly where he was standing. He pinched his gaze out across the wind-shook blue water. Far, far, in the distance he could faintly make out the Towers of Ane, the first of the twelve Island Kingdoms. They were blue-violet and of unlikely proportions. Yet they were beautiful to make a man lose what breath he had left from his three hour trek. There were hints of odd curlicues and fretwork where the divergent and varied turrets touched turquoise heaven. As Old Grane had said, her frog's croak dripping scorn, the Islanders loved beauty with a great passion and created it to the detriment of the lowborn among them. They who ruled, ruled with a flurry of gaudy banners and a blare of trumpets and a good deal of whoop-de-do. They who toiled starved and died young.

Aye. They hung like crystalline baubles on the soft enchantment of the morning. They were dreams and dreams of dreams. It seemed as if nothing evil could possibly exist within the halls of those beauty-haunted castles.

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"Ho!"

The wind-drifted shout came from below. Diarmid's gaping look dropped from the Towers to the rocky waterline below, seeking its source. To his right was a sheltered cove, a three-quarter ring fronted by white sand. A small boat with a single faded orange sail rocked gently in the lapping waves. The voice came from a thickset man in baggy pantaloons and torn shirt. He'd been draping his seines across the boat's deck after an early morning's fishing when a glance upward had shown him a glimpse of peasant's russet on the headland.

"Ho, up there! Be you lost or in difficulty?"

"No," Diarmid called back.

"You are now!" the fisherman yelled. "Look behind you!"

"What is it, man?"

"Behind you! Behind you!" The sunblackened face was bleached gray by anxiety as he pointed.

The shrill triumphant skirl behind him spun Diarmid.

He gasped. The firebeast was long and scaly and deep scarlet, except for the lowslung belly, which was yellow as butter and as thick. There was a kind of charm to the toss of the bead-eyed head and the way the vast mouth opened and slavered expectantly between the rows of white knives set in blackish gums. Diarmid took but a brief drop of time to admire the firebeast's beauty, however. He became too absorbed in the knowledge that he was cut off from escape by the high cliff drop to his back and the fact that there was another dragon peeking from behind the big one's serrated tail, a small one.

Baby firebeast. And baby was hungry.

Mama dragon's skirling scream was one of triumph and to assure her darling that breakfast was to hand. . . . *Just a moment, babykins. This won't take long.*

Diarmid felt the blood in his veins congeal when mama swished her prodigious tail and sloughed two steps closer, flexing her jaw hinges daintily. When the long neck whipped out, instinct prevailed. He leaped in a great bound that carried him just inches to the right of the flame-hot breath

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and her descending tail. She didn't lash her tail because baby was right there, coyly waiting for dinner.

And Diarmid, poniard in hand, was now confronting baby and scaring him into a wild bawled-out panic. This was no time to consider the mother-baby aspects of the firebeast ecology nor to quote from Edgar A. Guest at great length. Diarmid's brief blade jabbed and lashed, nicking baby's nose and sending him wailing across the sward. It took mama a moment to reverse her lumbering torso, and Diarmid used that moment to good advantage. He loped in gazelle fashion down the rim of the cliff, with mama firebeast in pursuit. Once he thought to break for open field, away from the cliff, but the sight of other firebeasts browsing on the nearby hillocks changed his mind.

He spun like wind down the line of cliff, panting; when a snorting bellow from mama flinging herself after in a rage of determination not to lose baby's breakfast made him shoot a backward look, he plummeted into a purple prickle bush, a big one. The spikes tore his flesh. Diarmid screamed, floundering to rip loose. Then, when mama's hot bellow seared his back, he decided without cortical endeavor that it was all or nothing. Better a broken neck than baby food.

He grabbed at the highest branches of the prickle bush, in a straining leap, and swung himself out—down the side of the beetling scarp. Still a good fifteen yards drop and below him jags of black rock, he knew he must let go. But first, if he could swing himself out *beyond* the rocks . . .

Mama's baffled bellows echoed and reechoed, drawing other scarlet beasts to the scene.

Diarmid made his long body smack cliff, swung out, smacked, swung out—and leaped.

He scraped rock agonizingly, but most of him hit water, where the sea churned and eddied at the cusp of the cove. The sea was cold as ice and he plunged deep into it. His boots touched mud before he could flail his way back to the surface, gulping and sobbing for breath. He was shivering and gasping on the rock like a trout fallen from an angler's hook when the stocky fisherman scrambled up to see if he was dead or not.

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Diarmid waved a flipper to indicate not.

"Just lie still on your belly and let the seawater run out, lad," the horny-palmed boatman advised. "Jock son of Felim will set you right and I've what's to do in my boat."

He scampered off on thick splay-feet and returned a few moments later with a muddy ball of something carefully wrapped up in a hose-foot. Diarmid winced from the rapes of the prickly bush and the battering his knees and thighs had taken against the cliff.

"What is it, Jock son of Felim?"

"Mud." The pepper-bearded face looked down at what his calloused hands unwrapped with reverence.

"Mud!"

"Aye, lad. From the Spae. Lady Fianna gave it me when my son, Breg, caught the eye of a Flannish agent for holding out a fish or two from the impress and got flogged so cruel for it."

Diarmid's own pain dulled his sensibilities on the score of ill treatment of vassals, the way a severe toothache makes faraway earthquakes and famines unreal. With Old Grane's hints about the boons the fen had to offer and his own miraculous recovery to back them up, Diarmid permitted the old fisherman to smear his worst cuts and bruises with the malodorous swamp goo.

"The barbs of the prickles is poison, you know," Jock mentioned, by the way.

"That's a great comfort to know." Diarmid winced. "Especially now."

"Yet the giant salamander's is worse."

"True." Diarmid forced a sit-up out of himself and a wry grin. "You seem to be quite a philosopher, Jock son of Felim."

"Aye. My woman, Thin Bess, worked as char in Tower Ane itself and Lady Fianna's slavey, Aster—she's half Nord, you know—taught Bess to read and Bess brought home a book to read from when she took bad sick. A book with many words to it." Jock puffed up proudly. "I read that book clear through."

"Good for you, Jock. And has it helped?"



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Jock's leathery face sombered. "You might say it has. It shortens the long day, thinking of it."

With this gloomy observation on his peasant lot, Jock helped Diarmid up on his feet and to the boat, which he had hastily pulled back on the cove sand. Without waste of words, Diarmid sat himself where the nets and the morning's scant catch would permit and Jock heaved the boat off shore, leaping to the tiller.

The bleached sail slapped mast, then caught the forenoon breeze and bellied out. Under Jock's expert hands, the small fishing craft skimmed the cobalt surface out from the cliffs in the direction of the ethereally wondrous towers.

Jock's curiosity finally got the best of him. His deep squinting looks prefaced his opener. "Might a man ask—" He broke off with a brief shrug.

"Who do you think I am, Jock? A Tower vassal?"

Jock considered. "By your clothes, aye. By your face and hands, nay. I'm that puzzled, frankly. You are not one of the cat-tenders from the mainland caves. I have fished these same waters man and boy since before Lady Fianna was born, long before her goodling sire was killed in the hunt accident—so they told it—and I know you are no cat-tender. They smell of cat, for one thing."

Diarmid grinned. "Am I a Lord, think you?"

Jock scratched his chin. "Could be, with proper dress. Could be a spy from one of the other Kingdoms, come to see what devil's work Flann—" He broke off with a swallow of Adam's apple. His slate eyes flashed fear.

"Go ahead, Jock. Say it. Say what you will against Lordling Flann. I'm with you." While the old man dipped tiller to take more wind, he added, "I want to know all you can tell me about the doings of the high folk of Tower Ane. I must know, that is if I'm to do any good for Lady Fianna, who is a kind friend of the poor."

Jock nodded in deep thought. "Aye. She is that. And she's in a trap, what with her uncle, the rightful Lord of Ane sick to the dying—they say—and cousin Flann already taking over the run of things, with floggings and flayings for small

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cause, not to mention the screamings heard from the dungeons in the night."

Diarmid thought of the devil's light gleaming behind that angelic façade and the smile when Flann's blade nicked Diarmid's jugular. His hand moved to his poniard.

"Yet Lady Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips suffers him to do these things?"

"How can she else? When *The Deel*—"

"Yes. I know. *Needs must when The Deel drives!*" His eyes tightened, watching old Jock the Fisherman make an obsequious sign on the air lest Himself had heard the manner in which Diarmid had spoken the words. "How about the other Lords? If I am a spy from one of the other Islands—?"

"Then you are a dead man, sire." Jock's voice was sorrowfully blunt. "Himself and his Drudmen priests are fast bound to the oldest of our laws, save only that of Himself's godhead—that of noninterference among the Island Lords, one to the others, lest there be civil strife. It is true that spying among the Towers has been done, but solely in the interest of love and marriage among the Lords. This kind of hanky-panky *The Deel* looks on with tolerance." Jock sighed. "If one could but hope that you were young Lord Allen-of-Firbolg who, from the fishmarket gossip, is smit sore by Lady Fianna's beauties, and would marry her in a trice if *The Deel*—"

"How do you know I'm not Lord Allen-of-Firbolg?"

"I have heard him described and my good wife Thin Bess has seen him at the last Danian fête. Nay. Lord Allen is tall and his beard is alike to red gold." Old Jock's eyes pinched his eyes across the boat, sharply, and his Adam's apple moved up and down his turkey's neck in fearful gulps. "It is a fact that you look not like anyone from *any* of the Islands, sire. Yet you do not look like a Nordman." His deepset eyes flashed fear. "They say there are Others. High in the mountains to the south. Shees, they say. Dweragers. Skittish evil fellows who live in crystal caves, who eat flesh and have no poetry and make no signs to Himself. Then there are the *silkie*s deep in the *faem*—" His bony shoulders gave a great twitch and he stared yearningly at the approaching Island of Ane.

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Diarmid laughed.

"I am none of these, Jock son of Felim. I come from far off, but I come as a friend. Be assured of this."

"I believe you, friend," Jock said in a moment.

"Then you will tell no one about my presence?"

"No one," Jock vowed fiercely. "Not even my Thin Bess nor my son. I will leave you off where you say and make a strong effort to forget that I ever saw you. Ayel! When you are flayed and flung to Nacran, or carried by the flamewings to Himself's high castle, let it never be written down nor sung that it was Jock son of Felim who breathed the tattle that sent you to your death!"

### V

WHILE JOCK MANEUVERED the bleach-sailed craft away from the gleaming white quays where the lavishly colored triremes and jaunty play-barges of the Lords were moored, at the foot of curving stone steps leading to Tower itself, away and around cliff toward the worn and humble wharves of the fishing fleet, Diarmid mused on what he had learned of Island intrigue.

Fianna's uncle was old and sick, unable to fight Flann on his own terms. There was no one else to dare the godlike cousin-pretender nor to take Fianna's part. And besides, The Deel favored their marriage and wielded his will through the voices of the Drudmen priests and the actions of Himself's flamewings on the Islands and his pookas on the mainland. As for Diarmid Patrick O'Dowd, here on Ane he would find himself "between The Deel and the deep," since Nacran and the deep *faem* served Flann for a disposal, after his dungeon games lost piquancy.

At Diarmid's signal Jock bobbed the little boat into a rift in the rock where the cliffline beetled and the brief landing was unseen by patrolling Tower guards above. Diarmid waved goodbye to his samaritan, then made his arduous climb up a tenuous trail across the face of stone, washed green by the warm midday sun.

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The great Tower of Ane loomed large now. Mauve and umber, its lively serrations were specked with gray by bleating gulls and fat cormorants waddling the guardways. Cliff gave way to stone and mortar, the spindly half-trail to stairs. As yet he was lucky not to meet up with one of the spear-carrying guards in ruff-necked velveteen and the hollowness in his own insides suggested a reason. It was lunchtime.

Diarmid had thought to fill a hopsack with gorse from the cleft and some fish poking out of the top, to match his vassal's clothes and provide a reason for his existence. Hiking it up on his bent back, he kept his tousled black head down in a toil-worn mien of humility, as he moved onto the scalloped-edge retaining wall that would take him to the gates of the Tower, which were open.

Open, yes, but well guarded.

Old Grane's scorned aesthetic bent was everywhere. Below him the silken sails of the perfumed barges were embroidered in intricate designs; the wide stairway curving up from the quays to the open archway gleamed with opalescent nacreous shell, a kaleidoscopic mosaic which must surely have taken several generations of sunup-to-sunset slaving serfs to execute; beyond the elaborate wroughtwork gate was a garden of emerald verdure and patterned flowers and shrubs.

One of the trio of guards at the gate challenged him with obvious contempt.

"Ho, village scum! Where do you think you're going?"

Diarmid set down his burden with a low bow. "I have some fresh fish for his Lordship."

"So we see." The stocky-legged guard winked at his fellows. "He brings Lord Flann a gift of stinking fish. He no doubt craves a boon, to be permitted the taking of some village trull to wife."

"Without the Lord's first night privilege, in the boot," guffawed one of the others.

Number three, the eldest, was granite-faced, serious. "And at the front gate, varlet?" he snarled. "I like not your face,

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lackey." He pulled out his thick sword. "In fact, I think a few changes would improve it and your manner."

Diarmid leaped to avoid the whistling *swoosh* and the two that followed in quick succession. That he had presumed to deliver his toady's gift at the main gate outraged the cranky elder guard with the white patches at temples. The others were all set to bait him and idle an hour away making sport of him, but not this man. Diarmid scrambled out of range of the flailing broadsword, then, when he could, nipped up the hopsack for a shield. When the younger two could not resist laughing at the nimbleness of this village oaf, the senior guard's initial design of only lopping off an ear or scarring Diarmid for life darkened to the desire for his death. Diarmid read it in the blaze of his scarlet face and the viciousness of stroke.

A wild breathy lash sent the swordpoint across his arm, drawing blood. When the next backhand showed that the sack contained mostly gorse, the three were on him, roaring. Diarmid danced his way around them within the gate, then flung the torn open sack full in their angry faces.

He loped full kilter down the mosaic flagging and around a high bottle green hedge.

"He's mine!" He heard the elder guard bawl the others back to their post and the heavy crunk of his nearing boots.

His half-turn, fleeing with a stag's speed, prevented him from seeing the young dandy moving toward him down the main walk, tassels abobble. He struck the bejeweled youth full and sent him back on his heels, shrilling curses at Diarmid's ancestry.

Diarmid sucked in a gulped laugh as he stared down at the girlish youngster with the long red tassels on his tam, his elbows, knees. Without thinking, he moved to take hold of a scarlet silk elbow and pull him back up on his feet.

The pretty face contorted as the young fop drew back from his touch. The guard with the broadsword ran up.

"Shall I kill him now?" the panting guard begged.

The delicately arched brows made thoughtful gyrations; the fine nostrils quivered.

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"No. Go back to your post. I'll take care of this—offal." When the guard bowed and moved away, the dandy with the girl's face reconsidered. "You may see us to the entrance, if you like. My master will take pleasure in giving this oaf what he deserves and *this* time I shall enjoy watching!"

With the guard's broadsword at his back and the young fop moving ahead of them, the boy's hand ornamentally stroking his jeweled rapier's hilt, Diarmid passed down the double line of dark cypresses to the pillared entrance of the Tower.

Inside the lavish rotunda foyer, the tasseled one dismissed the guard; he also dispatched a servant ahead of them to notify Flann of their coming. At the summit of the third swirling ramp, Diarmid waited until the servant ahead of them moved around a corner. Then he acted. His arm whipped around the dainty tassel-bobbler's neck, clapping a hand over his mouth, and divested him of his blade.

"Now. Suppose we go to Lady Fianna instead."

Gurgling protest, like the weapon, was largely ornamental. The blue eyes bulged with fright and the red lips pouted.

"Better take me there," Diarmid warned. "If you don't I will cut off both of your ears and ram them down your throat. Flann prefers pretty things around him and that won't make you so pretty, will it?"

His answer was a low moan. The shoulders slumped.

A succession of tapestried hallways and ramps brought them to a long white corridor set with onyx statues in triangular alcoves, depicting mythological creatures of *faem* and wild glen. At the terminus of this corridor there was a low green door. Diarmid allowed his captive to approach and knock.

First nothing, then a rustling sound, then the door came open a crack. A pale fluffy face flanked by flaxen braids peeked out, gray eyes wide with expectant fear. When she tried to shut the door Diarmid intruded a brogan in so that she could not.

"You're Aster, Lady Fianna's handmaid?"

The round face nodded. "My Lady is asleep. She is—uh—not feeling well. She—"

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"Tell her I have come for what she took from me," Diarmid said, loud, so that whoever was in the rooms would hear him.

Aster hesitated, still holding her slim weight against the door. The byplay, when Diarmid wedged a shoulder in, was what the tasseled one had waited for. An eely squirm and he was fleeing down the white hall. Diarmid swore, then turned his attention back to getting in to see Fianna.

"Fetch him to me, child." The mellifluous voice from behind had to be Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips. And then he was in and the door hastily bolted behind him by the handmaiden.

Diarmid's swinging look took in the feminine parlor and the bedroom and its arched balcony beyond; it was all cream white and turquoise with bits of coral for accent. Fianna stepped out from between filmy chiffon veiling, herself wearing a cobweb sheer shift with silver lacing at the high bodice, her hair a flowing flame across her milky shoulders. Behind her, between iridescent pillars, gleamed lake and sky.

To match eyes like this rendered him for the moment speechless. He forgot even his quest for the talisman and all the insipient dangers lurking among this paint box beauty. He swirled within those eyes as in an emerald pool.

"I see you have come, Diarmid Patrick. I've been waiting for you."

Diarmid grinned. "That's why you took my talisman."

She smiled faintly. "Sit here on the cushions and tell me about Old Grane and the Spae. Aster will fetch you some decent clothes. I don't much care for the smell of fish, and the fen stench is a dead giveaway."

Diarmid perched on the embroidered puff and dipped his hands into the food-vessels on the low table set for Fianna's midday lunch, without invitation. He was starved.

"Eat, by all means." Fianna nodded, sitting close by him. "But we must talk the while and plan. It was Flann's young popinjay who brought you here, was it not?"

Diarmid nodded, swallowing. "By request." He gestured at the jeweled sword which he still had. "He's no doubt

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on his way to Flann right now, or there, babbling the news. How long have we got?"

Fianna frowned. "Who knows? Not long. Eat fast and speak even faster. We will hide you in the village. I have friends. Aster will take you—"

Diarmid nodded and made the most of the savories on the silver trencher. "I'd like some information, Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips—"

She nodded. "I, too. Such as where you came from and what meant that great pillar of white fire that drew us to you. Is that how you came here, out of the Green in a bolt of lightning?"

Diarmid condensed his smidgin of autobiography into a few terse bursts, between mouthfuls. He told Fianna something of what she might not know about the Spae. "It was Old Grane. She deliberately blocked off my memory of who I am. Why?"

Fianna dipped down a shell-like finger and licked it thoughtfully. "Could it be so that The Deel won't find out?"

"Yes! That's it! However careful I might be not to reveal myself, any Off-worldly action or remark would put Himself on to my presence here on Eu-Tarah!"

Fianna shuddered. "Aye. In some way incomprehensible to us mere mortals, even a god fears legend."

"Legend?"

"You are legend, Patrick son of Dowd. You are the one. You came down to Eu-Tarah from beyond the Green like Cuchulain of old, from the sun itself. That is what the terrible bright light signified. Which makes you a god, too!" She stared at him as for the first time, her high cheekbones luminous with awe.

Diarmid seized her hands. "No, Fianna. I am no god and I'm beginning to wonder about Himself, as well."

The girl gasped. "Don't say such things! We know that The Deel is omnipotent. We know that he dwells at the topmost peak in T'yeer-Na-N-Oge, which sears the eyes with its alabaster and golden splendor, in halls made of precious stones behind golden gates. It is Ossian and Niam's Land of Never-Ending Youth and even Himself's servants never



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grow old. It was Himself who created the Green, in the beginning of time, to shield Eu-Tarah from the dreadful monsters that fly on flames across the black reaches. We know that The Deel created us, too; that he creates all things beautiful for us to admire and cherish. In return we must make up beautiful songs in his praise and create our own beauty in a paltry effort to match his. But we are in Himself's debt forever and should we disobey his commands and stray, we would come to be animalish outcasts, like the Shees and the dwerfers in the hill caves. Or else the Nords would be favored. Or even that the monsters who ride on fire in the endless black behind the Green would descend on us and pervert and kill us!"

Diarmid wiped his stubbled chin thoughtfully on a square of damask by his trencher. "That is your catechism."

"Aye. That is our very life and the perfection of truth bred into our bones."

Diarmid moved out to the balcony, squinting at the dark windtipped blue and the beryl sky that sheltered Eu-Tarah from—from what?

"Yet The Deel permits poverty and despair among the peasants?"

"Isn't that the way of the world?" Fianna countered. "Aren't there always rulers and ruled?"

Diarmid scowled. "I'm not sure." He whirled. "But he insists that you marry Flann against your will!"

She sighed and then, quickly, she moved and was in his arms. "It is something about the blood. Flann and I are predestined. Even before we were born it was sworn in the Song—"

"Song?"

"The Great Song of Eu-Tarah. The magnificent ballad of what has been and what must be."

"Writ by Himself?"

"Aye, who is immortal, who loves beauty, who knows all that exists, who shields us from the obscene."

"Beyond the Green?"

"Aye."

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Diarmid's hand stroked her flame of hair. "What about you and me?"

She shivered close against him, murmuring, "We can purely love one another, even if naught can come of it."

He took hold of her shoulders, held her at arm's length. His eyes became storms. "I'm not giving up that easy. The Deel might have the Islanders where he wants them, not Pat O'Dowd! Old Grane and the fen folk were here before Himself and she's got a trick or two up her sleeve. And speaking of tricks—where is the amulet you took from my neck?"

"A-Amulet?"

"Yea! The shiny eight-sided thing on the chain! Where is it?"

Her eyes brimmed. "I took it for a remembrance of you, my love. I knew that it was all I would ever have, yet, against my own will I prayed it would bring you to me, Diarmid Patrick. Forgive me!"

He kissed her gently. "Where is it? Hurry!"

"I didn't know it held magic."

"Just fetch it out, please. I don't know myself what manner of magic, but it's tied in with The Deel and his own power. . . ." He followed after her and through the diaphanous webbing into her dressing chamber. He watched while she whisked her hands across the arrayed perfumes and cosmetics and ebony boxes of fiery jewels. In a mirrored niche she found what she was looking for, a jade box with a hidden spring-lock. Fianna fumbled a thin silver chain from her bracelet and put it in the golden setting, then tripped the hidden spring.

They stared in.

"It's gone!" Fianna wailed. "Diarmid, what shall I do! I have lost your talisman of power with my maiden's whimsy!"

"Who could have taken it? Flann?"

"No-o." The emerald eyes flashed. "Nor Aster. My uncle saved her from death during the Nord wars. She would give her life for me. And Flann—wait! I know now! It's that simpering tassel-tosser, Glenmalure! He dotes on jewels

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and has stolen them from me before now. Somehow he wormed in here while I was on my sick round in the village and if he had given the talisman to Flann—"

While they stood staring at the empty jade casket, there arose a sudden loud drubbing on the hall door—then a crashing of wood.

### VI

FLANN EU-ANE, soi-disant Lord of the First Island, swaggered in; his royal purple harlequined with yellow diamonds was piped with gold braid at the puffed sleeves; he glittered where he trod. Close at heel were two men-at-arms with drawn broadswords; Glenmalure the tassel-bobber followed them, leaking a red-lipped smile of triumph.

Flann's dark eyebrows met and tilted at sight of Diarmid with his arms around Fianna.

"In bed already, I see. Move off, wench, while I run this rag-wearer with the ill-fashioned brogues through. The stench of him offends my nostrils."

Fianna cried out as Flann drew steel and made ready. Her protest was water on a duck's back; as for Diarmid, while stunned momentarily by the outward radiance, his mind raced over what he could read in Flann's manner. Flann loved Fianna in that he desired her body, no more. What he desired more than the girl was the certification of his Lordly position and beautiful sons that would duplicate himself and thus flatter his ego. Need for pretense was over, at this point.

"It's not what you think," Fianna flushed.

"Nay? A strange churl alone with Lady Fianna in her private apartments and four of us to bear witness to your harlotry? Well you know the Island law and that if you were any less than you are I could have you flayed alive and flung to Nacran, or divided up among my lackeys for their pleasure. As it is, my boy Glenmalure warned me in time, *just* in time, and I will be satisfied with this oaf's hidel"

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Diarmid edged toward the cushions and the tassel-boy's rapier, which was still there where he had laid it. Flann watched him take up the blade awkwardly and grinned a white-toothed grin. The show of contest pleased him well. It was no fun running through a whining bootlicker.

Flann danced out to mid-mosaic and Diarmid's blade rang against the flashing steel in formal manner. Rapiers clashed. Diarmid's parries were painful; the men-at-arms chuckled; Glenmalure tittered. Flann leaped in graceful ballet steps, circling Diarmid, now tickling an ear, now snipping off a leather button from his russet rags. He missed skin by design, first. Diarmid panted and sweated, striving to call up from within himself some shred of unpossessed talent. None was forthcoming and the finale to Flann's grinning charade could have but one possible thrust. The artful thrust of steel that would put an end to the Lughic legend and Old Grane's vengeful use of the Off-worlde against The Deel . . .

Flann toyed with Diarmid a while more. When Fianna cried out and leaped to put herself between blades one of the sword-bearers grabbed her roughly. Flann's agile blade ripped down the side of Diarmid's pant leg. When the next nip sent front buttons flying and Diarmid had to make a wild left-handed grab not to offend Fianna with what his falling pantaloons would reveal, his humiliation and Flann's contemptuous pleasure was complete.

"Kill him! Kill him!" Glenmalure shrilled.

"Nay!" Fianna sobbed. Then, when Flann seemed about to accomplish the *coup de grace*, she cried out, "You don't know how important he is! The Deel wants him alive! Remember?"

Flann's blade flashed out like a brittle snake to send Diarmid's rapier clattering across the polished white floor. "Now." He faced Fianna full, yanking up her head to see what was hidden in her eyes. "What is this churl all about? What do you know? Speak, trollop!"

"I—I know nothing."

"Your eyes tell another story, Lady Harlot! Unless you wish to be made to see your lover's body torn apart on the wheel tell me all that you know—and *quickly!*"

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Fianna faced him hotly, then her defiance crumbled. "I know only that The Deel wants the stranger alive. That was why he sent his pooka. Himself will be angered to the melting point with anyone who kills him before he has learned where he came from and what he is after."

Flann paced and considered, while his second man-at-arms took hold of Diarmid with ungentle hands, and the tassel-bobber retrieved his darling rapier. He paced to the flowered lip of the white balcony and back several times. "I find myself on the horns of a dilemma. I can't kill the stranger since The Deel forbids it. And methinks," he snarled slightly, "the lout would, from his rashness in even attempting to match me with the sword, take endless amounts of dungeon play without revealing himself, and probably die. However"—his glance went sharply to Fianna—"he might talk if it was you who got a taste of my toys. . . ."

Fianna's chin went up. "Then again, he might not. This grand romance you have dreamed up is but in your brain, Flann. Think! I've only met the man!"

"Then why did you bring him to the Spae to be saved by the fen witch?"

Fianna's eyes flashed scorn. "Do I not spend much time mending those poor creatures whom you have lopped and flayed? This one is no different!"

Flann's fine rage at a world that did not genuflect to him in thought and deed made his face crimson. He drew his sword and put it to Diarmid's hirsute chest. "Who are you? Tell me or I will kill you, Deel or no!"

Diarmid met his unreasoning anger with a wide grin. He was weary to the bone, weary of the charade and of not quite knowing what it was all about.

"I can't tell you," he said evenly, patiently. "I don't know who I am."

"Nor from whence you come, I suppose?"

"Nor that."

The crimson blotched purple; the blade readied for an aortal gush.

"It's true!" Fianna's voice was an octave high keen, it

was so desperate. "It's the truth! Old Grane did something to him that took away his memory!"

Flann chose to use Fianna's panic, smiled. Diarmid felt the tip of the blade cut his flesh at the rib cage center. "You say that the fen witch put a glamour on him. What else have you to say! *Quick!*" The last word was a doom-crack.

The girl's anxiety, knowing Flann, set her to babbling all she knew. It was as if her words would hold back the lunge of his sword into Diarmid's body.

"It is the Legend of Cuchulain returned!" she panted, at the end. "He has come to us from beyond the Green with his talisman of endless Power—"

Flann whirled, blade relenting. "Talisman? What talisman?"

"The one you stole from my jade casket, Flann!"

"The one *I* stole?" Flann left Diarmid in the clutch of the burly man-at-arms, strode to Fianna. His perplexity was obviously genuine. The girl's wide look begged Diarmid's forgiveness for her babbling tongue; Flann's pinched eyes caught the involuntary glances in the direction of Glenmalure the tassel-bobber.

"What is this?" he demanded.

With all eyes on him suddenly, Glenmalure bobbed his red tassels wilder than ever, tittering. What he saw within Flann's eyes terrified him. First he moved toward Flann, then back toward the hall door; but there was a man-at-arms guarding it and Flann was coming toward him. He hop-skipped through the rippling veil of gossamer onto the apron of gleaming white balcony.

"Master!" he bleated, backing toward the half-moon of shell-pink flowers at the lip. "Master! I—I found it hidden among Lady Fianna's things. I meant to give it to you before now, right away. But I—see how it shines, Master?"

That the tassel-bobber had not the wit to understand what had been said, that he stole the talisman as he had stolen other bits of gaud—because he had the furtive talents of pander and thief and because his feminine nature admired pretties—was evident to all. The sudden hush—Flann's angry face moving toward him—brought a trembling rush of terror

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up from the soles of his velvet slippers. He squeaked like a mouse, retreating from the wrath in Flann's face.

Diarmid watched the tableau beyond the filmy drapery with held breath. Somehow he knew what was going to happen. Flann had spotted the boy in the village market-place on some past occasion, plucked him to the Tower for his uses, forcing him to watch studied cruelties—for *small cause*, Jock the fisherman had said—and now all of this was coming home to roost. The boy's eyes were aglaze with unbridled horror at what would surely happen to him for having displeased his master. A gurgle of drool showed at his sagging mouth as he moved back, still holding out the talisman on its bright chain.

"*No!*" Diarmid cried out.

When the guard's grip relaxed he pulled free, leaping and sliding across the glassy mosaic floor. But he was too late. The look Flann pinned on Glenmalure was a knife, a knife that cut him off forever from lapdog favors and goodies and sent him back to squalor and disease and hunger, or to death.

Glenmalure screamed a last cry, torn from a bleeding heart that had adored Flann as a god. His cry was lost on the wind; the flat octagon of endless Power flashed in the bright sun when he fell. Diarmid and Flann reached the balcony edge together and their eyes followed the windflung speck of light until it vanished, with a final twirl, when the tassel-bobber's velvety body slapped the dark blue water five hundred feet below.

## VII

FLANN'S STUNNED GAPE down the purple wall suggested one thing to Diarmid and he did it, fast. He grabbed hold of Fianna's hand and propelled her back in the direction of the door. The men-at-arms were intent on the frozen scene.

"Get the deep-divers!" Flann bellowed. "Get them in the water and down there!"

Since he didn't specify who, both guards loped out. Diar-

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mid heard a fearful mutter about "Nacran" just before he pushed Fianna ahead of him, after the trotting guards.

"Where—" Fianna panted.

Diarmid elbowed her into a shadowy alcove, for a start. "I wouldn't know. If I can only keep these pants from falling—"

"Try this."

Diarmid took the huge diamond brooch she handed him and applied it where it would do the most good, grinning a wry grin at such a gaudy pin. It gleamed against the peasant's faded rust like a cat's eye.

"You know the Tower, my love. You lead the way before Flann shakes loose from his snit."

Indeed, the rageful Lordling was still striding and fuming; again his prodigious conceit was unable to grasp the fact that his sniveling toady had, through terror of him or whatever, done such a thing to *him*. That Glenmalure was dead was of less than no consequence whatever. As for Fianna and Diarmid, the surface of his mind vaguely registered the fact that they were missing, but no matter. They couldn't get far. His men controlled the castle. Maneuvering them to his side had been easy: men preferred a *man* to lead them, and what Flann did not gain through personal admiration he gained through cold fear.

From behind a giant neptunish sculpture, they watched the covey of servants converge and bustle past, drawn to the scene by Flann's bellows; now it was Fianna who pulled Diarmid to an upramp that narrowed in circumference as it spiraled toward what must be a veritable room in the sky. A small door was squeezed in at the terminus. Fianna opened this door onto a brief stairway still leading them up. Another even smaller door and they were inside a dim room and the girl shot the rusted bolt home behind them. While Fianna hung against it, panting for breath, Diarmid denied his own weariness of leg and soul and gaped about him in the gloom.

It was small and, of course, circular, being the very peaked top of the main tower. A whine of wind sucked through hidden vents and there was, despite this weary drag of air, the close uncomfortable aura lingering about it of a sickroom.



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It came from behind a limestone fretwork which half concealed a large bed.

The silence here was one of death.

It was this silence that sent Fianna flinging to the bed with a sharp cry. "Mananan Mclire! Uncle! Lord Anel! *No!*" She refuted what she feared most. Her hands trembled and little sobs escaped as she knelt by the bed and turned up the wick of a low oil lamp by the four-poster. Diarmid put a hand on her shoulder for comfort while they stared at the white-headed shape under the umbrous counterpane. The serrated old face was transparent from age and neglect and from the invisible Worm that flies in the night. The eyes were closed. Fianna cried aloud and stroked the matted dishevelment of white beard that lay across the old man's chest and the musty bedclothes.

"What has the monster done to you!" she moaned.

Diarmid drew her up and close to him. Fianna, dry-eyed, kept staring down at the limp figure as if to deny the Worm his due. And, to their surprise, the deepset eyes opened. Life behind them was but a twinkle, yet the pale lips contrived a faint smile at seeing Fianna.

"Child. How have you come?"

"The guards were drawn away from their post. Never mind! Why hasn't the fiend taken care of you as he kept telling me he did? Where is the physician who is always in attendance? And the nurses to wash you and change this foul linen?" She knelt and stroked his hands fiercely. "What can I do, Uncle?"

"Nothing, child. I am gone. All you can do is promise me that you will not wed your cousin. His god's face hides the heart of a fen serpent. If only I had recognized the evil behind those disarming manners of his when he was still a boy and sticking pins in your songbirds, and you breaking your heart every time he did one of his tricks!"

"Don't blame yourself. It was his valor, his brashness, that charmed us all, besides those gold ringlets and robin's egg eyes."

"Aye. Flann is brash and fears nothing. He has the leadership qualities of a true hero, yet there is a canker eating

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away at him which even The Deel himself—" A cough spasm from over-effort drove him shuddering into the musty pillow.

"As you can see for yourself," Fianna told Diarmid, "all of Flann's daily reports to me about how well my uncle was being cared for were foul lies. They were whole cloth; there has been no physician taking care of Lord Ane and—see! his food has been carelessly pushed through the door by some slattern of a maid and left there after my poor uncle could no longer crawl from his bed, to be eaten by the spiders and rodents."

Diarmid's nose wrinkled at sight of the rat-gnawed food on the oblong trenchers on the floor to either side of the bolted door. He thought about Old Grane and the Wees, yet a reprise look at the shrunken bone-sack under the counterpane made him sigh. It was no use. The old man was too far gone. Yet—he must try for Fianna's sake.

"Look! Old Grane gave me this strange metal packet of pastilles. She said they belonged to me, that they were food, and would lift my spirits when I wearied. Take them! You, too, Fianna!"

Fianna did as she was told and fed the dying Lord as well, over his protests. "It is too late. Nothing can help me. You two will need sustenance; aye, and all the magic in the Spae to defeat Flann and The Deel."

Diarmid nibbled some of the concentrates, too, at Fianna's insistence; his strength was flagging and if they were to somehow elude Flann's guards and lose themselves in the village food must take the place of rest. As for Lord Ane, the pastilles would hold back the Worm a brief time.

Fianna told him about Diarmid; the deepset eyes leaped to life. "Aye. You are one with us in some queer way, as if you had actually come from the Island of Destiny, Inisfail itself! These legends of a new Cuchulain and his *Geasa* have nagged at me all my long life. There have been others like me who have wondered silently if the Green were not some false bemusing thing, indeed. And that if what's beyond it is not all evil. In our secret thoughts we have even dared question The Deel's right to godhead. Even the

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Song itself!" He closed his eyes, vibrating a willowy sigh.

"Rest now," Fianna urged.

"No, child." The eyes forced open. "I must say my say. I will be silent for a long time hereafter. If indeed Old Grane's hints be true and the murmurous legends of great silver ships that fly across the black beyond the Green to world after world which we can only dream on, then perhaps there is hope after all!"

"But these are fairy tales to frighten children, Uncle," Fianna protested. "The fire monsters beyond the Green, who spit flame and death on everything they find, can't be real! Or if they are, then we must cherish The Deel and his ways, for protecting us from such horror!"

Lord Mananan McIre Eu-Ane sighed. "Mayhap. Yet, is it not for we of the Islands to decide for ourselves if we wish to have truck with the outer demons or not? Must we be slaves to Himself and the Song forever and ever?" He trembled up a spindly arm, pointing it at Diarmid. "Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd, I am dying and a dying man sees the clear bright. If you came from outside the Green, then that's proof that not only fire demons dwell there but proper men and women, too. And it is for you to take hold of our people and set them to changing their namby-pamby ways—starting with Flann!"

Diarmid smiled crookedly and worried his black curls. "Where do I start? I can't battle an army single-handed! As for The Deel, my one chance to outwit him on his own terms is lost forever in the *faem*."

Fianna explained about the lost talisman and how Flann was even now sending his shellfish divers down along the deeps surrounding the tower in an effort to recover the Power thing.

The old Lord closed his eyes painfully.

"Aye," he said after a moment of hard breath. "If Flann should hap to recover this magic thing it would be a miracle of miracles. I sorrow for the divers, who have never been sent to such depths as this, what with Nacran and—"

"Who is Nacran?"

"Who indeed. A great kraken creature, the Drudmen say

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it. A sea-thing who lives in some leviathan's cave down there where the water is so cold and black that neither the *silkies* nor the *moruadh* will abide there."

"*Silkies? Moruadh?*"

"Sea folk, lad." Even Fianna's eyes flashed surprise. "They are seen mostly of a misty morn, floating and sporting on the *faem*. The *moruadh* are more grumly, they say; but the *silkies* are fair and sweet as the steeds they ride on when they come up out of the sea and gallop through the foaming tide. Aye. Witchy-folk, brought here like us by The Deel, but strayed from the Song through many many years; for Himself has nay a pooka nor a flamewing who will dare their briny haunts."

Diarmid whistled. Then—

"What if—?"

"If what, lad?"

"What if some of these strayed sea folk could help us find the talisman? Is such a thing possible?"

"True it is they've strayed from the Song yet"—Lord Eu-Ane shook his head painfully—"there's Nacran to consider. Even the black *moruadh* fear Nacran's size and his strength, and seldom venture off the rocky coastland to the north—"

"It's a start," Diarmid insisted stubbornly. "My guess is that the talisman is the *only* thing we have to hope on. Without it—" He shrugged and scowled up at the keening cracks through which the latening wind dirged. "I'm for trying that tack. It's all we've got."

The dying Lord's eyes watched him shrewdly and with flickering shafts of satisfaction. When the dulling lids fluttered and the bony fingers scratched the counterpane Fianna gave a sharp low sob. A moted tendril of greenclad light from above touched the clamp-jawed face and when Lord Eu-Ane tried to speak only a dry moan escaped.

"What can we do!" Fianna's hands moved over the bed like doves uncertain in lighting.

"All we can do is work toward what he wanted but had no means of accomplishing."

"How can we overcome The Deel?"

"It's that or give up and knuckle under to Flann." Diarmid

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bent down close to the bed. "Lord Anel! I will do it! I will try and die trying. But—listen!—these sea folk; how do I go about making contact with them?"

A desperate surge of unnatural strength galvanized the body figure to a stiff corpse's sit. "The sea folk swim deep. Their caves at the ocean floor touch Spae. Go back to Old Granel! Use the fen folk as they would use you and to the same end!" The rasped whisper died as the dregs of old life surrendered to the Worm.

### VIII

THE CLUMP of kitchen brogues and a dispirited complaint in singsong drew their eyes to the bolted door. The food fetchress was on her way up about her indifferent task of bringing the dying man his evening trencher. Diarmid took Fianna by the arm urgently and drew her to the hind side of the door, where they would be hidden when it was open. He reached across it and slid the bolt.

They waited while the doleful caterwaul neared.

A freckly nose poked in when the door creaked open. In the crook of one arm the slattern held a trencher of doggish scraps and a bowl of stirabout. Her other scratched at the straw-dry hair and what lived at its roots. When she saw the lamp lighted high and flickering over a cavernous face that now bore the unmistakable stamp of death, she gurgled and made a sign to The Deel. Curiosity and what she had been bidden watch for drew her closer to the bed.

Diarmid took this frozen moment of morbid fascination as a signal to pussyfoot Fianna and himself out of the open door and down the brief flight of stairs. The door was open and he pulled the girl behind it. "She'll come galloping down for the guards in a minute," he whispered. "Unless I miss my guess they will have to trot up for a look before reporting to Flann. That's our chance."

"Where—?"

"How about Aster, your maid?"

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"Of course! Her room is near mine. Flann will have mine well guarded but he might not have thought of Aster."

Sure enough, in another moment the kitchen drudge's heavy clods came racketing down the stairs. She banged Diarmid's nose with the door in passing but he managed not to yell. Down the spiraling ramp she loped with her news that the old Lord was dead at last and wouldn't that make Lor' Flann happy! Diarmid sweated that one guard might remain behind; then, again, one of them might be dispatched to bring the new master the pleasant tidings. And—ironically—the to-do the death would cause might be just the distraction they needed to cover their escape from the castle. Such a death was no small matter.

They waited in the stifling dark. Presently came the expected rush of footsteps and voices upward and past them and Diarmid made his move.

The coast was clear. Lord Eu-Ane, in dying, had served to hie them toward the direction he had pointed.

Aster's round face lost its weeping to see her mistress alive and well. Diarmid hustled them into the tiny but pin-neat room and bolted the door hastily. The hallways were filling up with amorphous sounds of gossip among the servants and the ring of sword on chain mail was all too frequent for comfort.

"We've no time for ecstatic byplay," he told the clinging females. "We've got to quit the Tower while the going's good!"

"What can I do?" Aster asked meekly.

"Clothes! Look at these pants. I have no wish to advertise my manhood with sparklers the size of goose eggs!" When the girls giggled, he growled, "Get fogging, girl. Fetch me a hunting costume, a getup such as a prowling spy might wear on a Flann's errand in the village."

"And I?" Fianna wondered.

"You shall be my page boy, with that red hair of yours well hid under a feathered tam-o'-shanter. How does that suit my Lady?" He gave her a courtly bow.

Fianna laughed. "Well enough. No trouble there, as I

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wore such a green velvet and fawn outfit at the last Grand Masque."

"I know it well, my Lady," Aster cooed. "And a lovely boy you made, with the vivid yellow satin hose and—"

"Forget the satin hose," Diarmid scowled. "Less gaud and more dispatch!" He gave her a swift slap to speed her on her mission. The flaxen braids swished, the china blue eyes leaped, and with that slap Aster bounced away.

Aster went ahead of them, after Diarmid had donned his brown hunter's tunic and Fianna her dark green page boy garb (with beige linen hose to cover her luscious legs, not satin), to forewarn them of danger. Diarmid kept his hand on the hilt of the shortsword the handmaiden had purloined, and which a man-hunting spy would be wearing; he ordered Fianna two steps behind him when she tended to move abreast out of habit.

"Keep your face down!" he muttered. "You're the one they all know, stupid!"

They moved down ramps and through back halls with agonizing slowness, so it seemed, in the direction of a side entrance that opened on a bowered garden. It was through the high but inconspicuous gate at the far end of the maze that Lady Fianna went, heavily escorted, on her errands of mercy in the town; and it was by this means, too, that much of Flann's unsavory business with the townsfolk was effected.

Aster darted into the green concealment some yards from the gate. They skirted the twilight shadows to join her.

"There's three of them on the gate!" she wailed.

"Usually there is but one or two," Fianna whispered. "It's because of you, Diarmid Patrick."

"And you." Grimly, he turned to Aster. "Would it be possible to draw at least one of them away?"

"I?" The blue eyes quailed.

"Yes. Toss them the news that Lord Ane has just died. See what happens. And—yes!—add that you hear there's a bit of a celebration going on in the kitchen or wherever. Just a hint so you won't have a cropper later on. You might add that Lady Fianna is reported to have swooned at the news and taken to her bed."

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Aster gave them a swift do-or-die look and swung down-path to perform her hystrionic task; it must have been good because from concealment in the oleanders they saw two of the guards tramp after the girl and vanish along the pillared portico that led to the side door.

Diarmid kept a tight grip on his sword hilt, moving out with Fianna close at heel, but he wished not to use the weapon unless absolutely necessary. Not only was he clumsy with a sword but a death or disappearance on this particular gate would surely leave a trail.

"Ho!" The lone guard leaped before them.

"Let me pass." Diarmid kept his voice testy. "I'm on an errand for you-know-who."

The bristly face grimaced suspiciously. "What errand and who do I know?"

"It's this trull. She won't do. I'm fetching her home. Snivels and cries for her whorish mama all the time."

The piggish eyes squinted and thick lips grinned. "Looks more like a boy to me. but that's to fool the rabble, eh? Let's have a look at 'er."

Taking her cue from Diarmid, Fianna screwed up her face as ugly as she could manage and went into a silent hiccuping bawl. Diarmid flung her to the ground and kept himself between the guard and her. "Unlock the gate. Quick!" he barked.

"There's a loose stranger about," the guard objected. "His Lordship had him in a pretty fight but the churl slipped away. I'm not to unlock this gate for *nobody* until—"

"Have you not heard about the old Lord's death and Fianna wailing herself into a fit when the news reached her where she skulked in a closet with this same pantsless knave?" He grinned in deprecating fashion and whipped out his sword. "Lord Flann took pleasure in cutting down the lout in front of the Lady, but un-manning him in his pantsless condition before dispatching him. It's my guess *this* is what made Lady Fianna swoon!" He burst into a hearty laugh.

The guard joined him, slapping his knee. His key jangled in the gate's lock. "Bring one back for me," he chuckled after



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Diarmid, as he hustled Fianna ahead of him down the twisted path leading to the village.

"You shouldn't have made it quite so vivid," the girl panted, when a curve took them into trees and out of sight. "When he tells that story to the others—"

"He'll keep his mouth shut when he realizes what he's done. He knows well what happens to Flann's men who make a mistake."

He put his arm around the girl and congratulated her on her performance. As they wound down the hill toward the winks of light and the double street of tottering gambrel roofs, he blinked up at the sky. With the coming of dusk clouds of an ominous verdigris hue had formed on the horizon and a distant roll of thunder spoke from the barely visible range of skyflung mountains to the north. Fianna followed his glance toward the highest of these peaks; Diarmid felt her slim body shiver against him. He understood. Like all of the Islanders, Fianna's awe of The Deel and her dread of his displeasure was inborn and ingrained through generation after generation. Her uncle had questioned, yet no doubt like others with keen minds and imaginations he had kept his questions to himself. It was his proximity with the Worm alone that permitted him to voice such heresies, boldly and with intent.

"They'll be abroad soon," Fianna murmured.

"Who's that?"

"The flamewings. The Drudmen have commune with Himself. I don't know how, but they do. Soon as The Deel learns about you and about Milord's death, he will have them here to investigate and to make sure his designs are carried out."

"How come they haven't shown up before now? He already knows about me, remember?"

"The flamewings can only fly by dark, like the pookas can only ride the fields by night. That means he only has the Drudmen to keep tabs during the day."

"If he is so omnipotent, how come he hasn't figured out a way to check up on the Islands night and day? And how come he let so many of his creatures slip through his fingers,

like the sea folk and the hairy ones in the mountain caves?"

"We must not question the ways of gods."

"The old childlike faith. I get it." When a clap of thunder shook the sky and lightning presaged a wash of rain moving on Ane across the half-dark, he put an arm around Fianna's slim waist and moved them into the first of the sod and wicket and clapboard houses at a brisker clip. Perhaps, he hoped, the coming storm would prove a boon.

Nightfall and the patter of rain had the peasants hastening to shutter up their mean stalls of fish and dry goods and baubles; Diarmid and Fianna were given swift glances but no one made an effort to bid them a good-morrow or so much as smile. Fianna had taken her place two paces behind her "master" from fear of their meeting a legitimate spy. Diarmid threaded their way through the narrow alleys in the direction of the fishing quays. Where the markets and the leprechaun shops ended an abrupt dip brought them to the small ancient harbor of wooden floats and rows of fishing boats tied to them. The pungent odor of fish cleanings and brine wrinkled their nostrils; cormorants and gulls and stranger birds lined the docks or wheeled across the sulfurous sky.

Diarmid stopped a grizzled old man with a net on his shoulder and an underturned clay pipe in his mouth. "Do you know where Jock son of Felim lives?" he demanded.

Fear jumped into the rheumy eyes; the brown crevices deepened and the pipe dropped into his hand.

"Nay. I know no Jock son of anybody." The man with the net was old and, while he feared Flann's spies as all did, he would not give him away for flogging or lopping. His tone was servile, yet defiance lurked there.

Diarmid pulled him under shelter. "Old man, look at me. Look well. I am the man Jock the Fisherman befriended this day and this boy with me is no boy—"

"You know me, Old Breas Breg son of Dunlang." Fianna took hold of the horny net-cut hand. "I visited your hut twice—no, thrice. The last time was when your son Young Breas Breg caught his hand between boats and mashed three fingers. . . ."

"Lady Fianna!" The old head dipped low, trembling. He

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sobbed for breath as he kissed her hand, then stared up at Diarmid. "Then this is—"

"Don't say it, Old Breas Breg. Do not even think what you are thinking. Just take us to Jock and out of the street before the storm and the flamewings are full upon us."

They followed his hasty dogtrot down the alley and through, close to one of many bleak doorways. Old Breas Breg's knock was a signal and it was Jock himself who opened the door. When his anxious peer saw who it was he beckoned them in and Old Breas Breg hurried on his way. The narrow room's ceiling was so low Diarmid's head bumped rough rafters; from a lamplit corner came a low stifled moan.

"It's my woman, Thin Bess."

Their eyes went to the straw pallet and the woman on it, covered by a rag of sacking. Fianna clucked and went to her.

"Why, she's—"

"Aye, Lady Fianna. In labor and hard pressed. Three stillborn behind her and now, without the wish of it . . ." Despair brought a rack of sobs as he flung himself away from misery which he could not assuage.

"I'll see to her." Fianna moved deftly, demanding necessities from the huddle of gaunt wide-eyed faces. "You make your plans with Jock and leave us to our women's work."

Jock led Diarmid into a back cubicle. After Diarmid had briefed him, the tormented fisherman turned his worry in the direction of Diarmid's problem.

"I must get to the Spae," was the crux.

"Aye. But it would not be wise to go abroad further till dawn."

Diarmid's face was grim in the sickly tallow candle's flame. "As you say, Jock. You will take your boat out then, as usual, and you will have a helper. You will leave me off where you found me—or closer to the Spae, if possible."

"Yet not too near the cat-tenders' caves," Jock warned.

"Still—" An idea of how to reach the fen sooner and without worry of another encounter with Mama firebeast tickled his mind, but that was still as may be. He gestured toward the front room where Thin Bess' cries indicated that

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she was about to deliver herself of a child. "Lady Fianna will stay here with you. You have someplace where she might be hidden until my return?"

Jock nodded. "Aye. A cave in a cleft where many have sought sanctuary from the new Lord's brand of justice. Jock son of Felim will take precious care of the Lady. Aye, and none in the town will breathe a word of any of this, even among themselves, lest unkind ears hear the tattle."

A sharp poignant cry, a spate of silence, then a low murmur, brought them to their feet. Diarmid winced at the raw pain in Jock's drawn face. The ancient hands hung limp. It was as if he dreaded the knowing. . . .

Diarmid waited another moment, then edged open the inner door. Fianna was sitting on a three-legged stool, holding something that squalled to beat the storm which raged above the faggot rooftop.

"Look, Diarmid Patrick! Look, Jock son of Felim! Thin Bess is weak but, with care, she will be fine. And you have yourself another son after nineteen years. Alive and healthy!"

The sunstruck sail dipped and bobbed across the rich azure in that hour just before true dawn, leaving the great triangle of Tower Ane and the tattered town huddled at its gardened feet far behind it. All of the Islands relied heavily on fish for protein and one boat among the many that daily fanned out from the floats was nothing to excite comment.

Diarmid's eyes drifted back across their rippled wake. He was thinking about Fianna, whose skill had saved Thin Bess' new baby; about Flann's prowlers who would be busy this day, seeking her out in every nook and cranny. He prayed to whatever was the true god that the cave where she had been taken would miss the eyes of Flann's searchers, that someday—someday soon—he might look into those emerald eyes again.

The ragged white line of familiar mainland cliffs drew nearer as Tower Ane became again a thing of artful fantasy. Diarmid wisely kept silent as Jock skirted the shore, keeping a comfortable distance from hidden coral reefs; after all, Jock's hands were born to the tiller and he knew every trick

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of current and winddrift these waters had to offer. Even when Jock sent the saffron sail flapping wildly and the cockleshell craft yawing and floundering toward an outspit of knifelike crags. Last night's rain rage had been tossed away by a stiff wind that sucked up eddies of spray atop the whitecaps; when Diarmid stood up and leaned to keep the boat from capsizing a slaving torrent struck and all but flung him into the foam.

The black knives of rock hung over them like doom, then, miraculously, a tide's vagary slid them down into a churning, slaving pool behind the jut and onto sand as if to spit out a pip.

Diarmid climbed out, rueful to be skin-drenched; with brief words he thanked Jock for the small matter of saving his life and watched the little boat vanish around the rock. His fish breakfast had not quite satisfied him and he thought about the energizing pellets in the hunter's pouch at his waist. Wetness had got to them from careless closing of the metal box, but he downed the half dozen that were left and started up the bird-whitened skitter of path upcliff. Minded of the firebeast herds that browsed the wide yellow fields mornings he kept just under the cliff's brow whenever the quasi-trail would permit.

It was well into noon when he met the catkeeper.

Luckily he spotted the wide-faced peasant with the hunched back first. The cat-tender was down on the sand itself, apparently gathering mussels or clams or some such, mindful of boyish starvation rations on the Island and compulsively hungry. He was ambling and watching for telltale bubbles, then kneeling for the quick dig. His prize claimed, he would pop it into a gunny sack slung over his crookback. He was a squat hairy fellow, wearing the usual homespuns tied about with hemp, and brogues caked with dung of the great cat-steeds.

Diarmid moved himself to a position just above the intent clamdigger, then, sucking in a great draft of air while the man dropped to his knees for a dig, he leaped. He landed with a jolt ten yards behind, in shadow; he ran in leaps and caught the cat-tender's neck in the crook of his arm.

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He dragged him back into the shadow lest there were others about.

"Now, man." His hunter's knife tickled the turkey-red throat. "Tell me about the cat cave."

"Spare me, my Lord!" the cat-tender gulped.

"I am no Lord. Leastwise, no Flann-lover." It was in Diarmid's mind to make a friend, should it be possible. Killing the dirtyboots would serve no useful purpose.

The cat-tender breathed hard a few times while he considered Diarmid's words ponderously. "Aye. I believe you, sire. Be it not said that Robin son of Robin is a Flann-lover, either. I have seen too many flayings and nose-loppings altogether. If it's against Flann you are, stranger, then Robin is your man."

"Good! Now, are there others than you on the beach?"

"Nay. They're a lazy lot, when there's no work."

"How far is the cave?"

"Some league and a half, sire."

"No need to call me sire, Robin. My name is Diarmid Patrick, but you had best forget you ever saw me or heard it."

"As you wish it, Diarmid Patrick."

While they skirted the cliff in the direction of the cat cave where the Island hunters kept their feline mounts, Robin son of Robin waxed garrulous, pleased at the new company, especially of one who was no churl nor villain yet treated him on terms of equality.

"Aye, if it could be that Lady Fianna should marry a commoner, that might be the first step. The Lordly blood on the Islands grows thin and perverse. Some of us lowborn dare to dream when we see our comrades get flayed one-stripe, two, three, or their ear or nose lopped for small cause."

"Tell me about the cats," Diarmid said, from need for haste.

"The cave is rightly an ancient marble quarry that petered out. The roof is of sod, shored-up. It's hid to keep the Nords from spotting it when their fearful long ships with the beasts' heads on the masts are prowling the coasts. And the dragons are partial to man meat, too, though they steer clear of the cat's sharp claws."

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"Robin, do you know aught of the sea folk?"

"Some. I've caught the sight of a *silkie* in the mists of a winter's morn, riding his *faemy* white steed out of the tide, and just looking. It's my guess they retreated entirely into the deep to shake away from the domination of—" He choked over the hallowed name but Diarmid understood, all right. He understood the furtive look Robin cast over his shoulder upcliff, too.

They moved in silence a while. Diarmid mused on the oddly artificial social strata extant on Eu-Tarah. Artificial because of The Deel. The Islanders fought the Nords, in great heroic sea battles. The feudal society prevailed through century after century after century with no change whatsoever. This was surely an unnatural situation; there had to be some social progress. Truly it was the *deus ex machina*, Himself, that kept the planet from normal change and development. The only changes evident were among the rebels. The sea folk had fled to the deep floors of the oceans; the dwerfers and Shees to mountain hollows. There they skulked, away from The Deel and his Song, creatures shunned and despised out of what might well be a kind of envy, beings whispered of and only half-real.

Which left Old Grane and her fen folk, the planet's original owners; and even they, in a manner of speaking, must submit to the ironclad yet capricious rule of The Deel.

Strange!

### IX

"KEEP CLEAR of Anton, our catmaster," Robin warned, stopping Diarmid near the cave's concealed entrance. "He is pure thickhead brute, that one. Misbegot of a tavern slut by a Nord father in the last landing the horned men made on Ane. The old Lord permitted him to live out of natural charity and his giant size and strength. He tames the cats like they was songbirds. The beasts see the kill in his brute's eyes and know his whip'll tear them to ribbons be-

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fore he'll give up on a cat. His body's a mass of claw scars, still."

Diarmid shot a last look at the rich green sky and the great golden sun wheeling toward the meridian. He wanted to reach the Spae well before dark, if possible, and mounted on one of the high-leaping beasts he could do it. Then there was the likelihood of chase by Flann and his warriors to consider. Moving his glance down to the muted blue-crimson beauty of Tower Ane he thought he glimpsed a fleet of three boats, war triremes, headed for the mainland. Smashing down his fears for Fianna, he turned to Robin.

"Can you get me to the cat pens, unseen?"

"With a kiss from Lady Fortune, aye. But can you handle one of the cats? That's something else."

Diarmid grinned. "I can try. How about Fianna's mount? The cat called Kincora?"

"If he knows your scent 'twill help, and Kincora is none of your buckers," Robin approved. "Shall we have a go at it, Diarmid Patrick?"

Diarmid paid close heed to the catman's final suggestions, watched him move then into a hole concealed in prickly bushes, the foot tunnel into the cave proper. Already he could smell cat as he followed, alert for Robin's hand signals from the mustiness ahead. Avoiding the living quarters and giant Anton's booming voice over the cat-tenders' breakfast, Robin led the way to the rear outscopes where the animals were penned behind fences of wood and vine and fibrous kelp, all braided together. The cats were sleeping and purring like steam kettles, but two or three woke at the furtive crunch of their shoes on the rank floor. Robin made soft soothing sounds while he searched for Kincora.

Diarmid, meanwhile, found the weighted spring at the top of the rear ramp where the mounts were led out for the hunt. He waited, sweating. It seemed an eternity and every moment he expected Anton's great booming voice to move on him; then, there came Robin, leading Kincora.

But Kincora was spiteful and snarling at having been awakened and his angry burring cries brought Anton and others on the run to see what was amiss.



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"Open the hatch!" Robin whispered tautly.

Blinding light blazed in when Diarmid yanked out the peg and the roped rock pulled up the door. He didn't need Robin to tell him what to do next. Anton was bellowing like a bull and charging up the ramp to stop him, as Diarmid leaped into the saddle. Robin managed to make it look as if he were trying to prevent Diarmid, while helping him seat himself on the squirming spitting beast.

"Strike me, then gol"

Diarmid almost lost his hold on the reins out of momentary distaste, but Robin held his face up for the blow and smiled. There was no time to dwell on it. Anton was at the cat's tail and he must not know the truth of it. Diarmid's fist went out and Robin toppled, bleeding at the nose.

Whether it was the bellowing agitation from behind or, as Robin had put it, a kiss from Lady Fortune, Kincora leaped away into the greenwashed sunshine like an arrow from a yeoman's crossbow. Anton's outcries were lost on the whipping wind.

Shadows crept long and sinister at the forest's edge when finally Diarmid approached the Spae on his leaping cat. Lack of skill in handling the beast and Kincora's inclinations to go where he wanted to instead of where he was told had made the journey twice as long. Kincora rumbled in his throat, pricking his tawny ears at sight and scent of the thicket.

Finally he would go no closer. He crouched, snarling and trying to sink his fangs into his halter or into Diarmid.

"All right, boy." Diarmid slid down out of the saddle and loosed his hold on the reins. That was as much by-your-leave as Kincora needed. With a demoniac scream the animal gathered up his muscles and sprang away, bounding across the windflung fields in the direction of food and warmth.

Diarmid sighed and turned his attention to the shadowy trees ahead of him. The tall dark trunks were broody with eldritch secrets and the sougling of the branches was the

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keening of an army of flitting banshees, loosed from their graves by the setting of the sun.

Diarmid looked in vain for Old Grane's witch-lamp.

It was a lonely spot, the Spae's brink. The wind mourned and, counterpointing, from the depths of the unseen came an eerie hopeful howling. The overlong hairs on Diarmid's nape tingled. Overcoming the primitive fear warning that urged him away from this place, he stepped onto the dry crackling needles and into the dark.

He moved fast, never minding the unseen sounds. He egged his memory for landmarks where Old Grane had brought him that misty morning just two days ago; but it was too dark and the way too devious. Presently the conifers diminished and twisty-armed bracken took their places, looming grotesque and inimical in the rising night-mist. Dark roused strange life forms here in the mysterious Spae and made of it a labyrinth of shrieking terror.

Again that baleful cry. This time closer, echoing from copse to copse, from brake to brake. Again, until the clutch-fingered bracken shook and the ground itself vibrated from the cacophonous sounds. The sod under his boots seemed to shift slyly.

Diarmid tried to take a step forward but his muscles refused. He stood there, waiting, while the mist shivered up about his legs in ghostly roilings.

*Come on, something!* he urged, when the tension was too tight to bear.

Something came. Out of the cracked bog itself. A huge dark head, a serpent's head, flat, fanged, white-eyed, set parallel on a flexuous roping of neck. The cold white eyes athwart the yawning puce mouth regarded him calculatingly and those white fangs slavered just a bit. Hopefully.

His first impulse was to flee back but when he swung a look behind him he saw that there were other serpents, dozens of them, poking up out of subtle rifts in the fen, weaving their necks and staring silently at the intruder in the Spae.

When the biggest of the lot, the one facing him, began to insinuate his cordage closer, Diarmid pulled out his blade

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and shouted at the same time, "I've come to see Old Granel Can you understand? Old Grane and the Wees!"

The names brought a halt to the onslaught.

"*Wwwweeeesssssss . . .*" The word came out of the many mouths in one great concerted hiss. Then, abruptly, the thick black rope dropped sinuously back into the mist-shrouded fen and the others along with it.

Diarmid stood a frozen moment, blinking at the unseen orifices in the quaking surface, then turned on his heel and fled. He was careful to keep to the path by which he had blundered out here into mid-swamp, such as it was, noting that the brittle bracken was thicker here and healthier. Also, the tule mist seemed to draw apart from his loping path, almost to make a way, as if riven by unkenned forces.

*The Wees, again?*

It was pitch dark now and there were no friendly stars to shine a flint spark of light through the mists, thanks to the Green. He began to blunder into trees, trees hung with mosses cold and slimy to the touch. The wood thickened and the dank webs crisscrossed his path so that they had to be, at times, hacked away if he was to continue.

Then he saw light. It wasn't much. It was tenuous, blue, on-off; but it was something to follow, at least. If it only be Old Grane . . .

It wasn't. The howling started up again and now, with a chill of primitive fear, he knew that it was *they*—not the serpents, who had made that echoing chorus of wailing menace. He couldn't quite see *them*, only the ragged circles of effulgence surrounding them where they darted between the moss-webbed bracken. Their anthropoid shapes moved in rapid brief scampers, and closer every time. Their baying cries grew louder and more frequent.

What were they? Why did they howl? Was it a preface to attack, a bolstering up of courage? Were the howlings signals one to the other, talk? While he moved on grimly and watched the supernal blares of blue light flash closer and closer, Diarmid decided on at least one thing for sure: *when the howling stopped, look out!*

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He squinted his eyes to see what the apish patches really looked like. Finally he caught one between bracken and gasped. It was more like an apparition than a thing of substance. He could see right through it! The skittish howlers were gaseous, then, creatures that rose up from puckers in the false-faced ooze at night to take on viscous shapes, mocking the above-dwellers. The stench they carried with them stung Diarmid's eyes and set him to hacking and retching.

Still he moved on. What else could he do?

They flitted closer.

*What do they want?*

When they showed themselves brazenly now, panic seized hold of Diarmid and clawed at his throat. The smell of the creatures was too much to bear now. His eyes streamed from the gases they exuded and when he blundered against a trunk out of dizziness he had to hang onto it and vomit.

He managed one last spurt of defiant run. Then he collapsed. He couldn't see. The acids were tearing at his eyes, at the nerve endings in his open skin. The best he could do was to rise to his knees and claw the quaking ground on all fours.

"Old Granel!" he bawled up, sightless. "Granel! *Wees!* Help me! *Help!*"

The howling stopped.

They were on him, sucking and draining, and now he knew what it was they wanted from him. That was what gave them quasi-substance, what they were able to drain out of his body with their foul-smelling acids. His hand wheedled out the broadsword and made futile swipes on the air and through *them*. It was no use.

*"Diarmid Patrick."*

The throaty croak had a familiar ring.

"Granel!" he moaned.

It might have been a barren hope wrung out of his being at the moment of his death, but it was not. It was Old Grane herself and she had the magic to send the howlers packing. More of her sorcery produced great whiffs of pure oxygen for Diarmid to slurp in, in great lungfuls while the

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fen witch slapped his face and his arms with slick gobbets of mud. This mud stank, too, but different. It smelled of Old Grane's hut and of what had cured his wounds those long hours and days. He was beginning to like it.

"W-what are the howlers?" He clutched her webbed claw as if it were the petal-soft hand of a princess, gaping up at the mottled blur of batrachian face that was beginning to focus in.

"They're new ones and whether they make it as individual life forms or not is still in doubt. We suffer them, however, since they and the black worms keep the Spae free of riff-raff and trash."

"Such as Islanders and Nords?"

Old Grane showed the muddy roof of her great mouth when she laughed. "Them and more. We Wise Ones have more to do than take care of rubbish." She helped him up on his feet, as the searing penetration of the howlers' gases had weakened his nerves and muscles painfully. "The Wees will soon put you right, Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd, and you can tell me what *Geasa* brings you lolloping through the Spae, when we are safely back in the Circle."

In the crone's hut at the bubbling ring which formed the geometric center of the wide Spae itself, Diarmid told the fen witch all that had occurred since last he saw her. Old Grane fed him stirabout from the great pot and kept him from scratching the mud as it dried on his face and his members.

"It itches," he interrupted his story.

"So? Every time you rake a hand across your cheek you destroy a universe or a dozen."

Diarmid withdrew his nails hastily. "It's the Wees—"

"Never mind the Wees now. They have done far more than their share. It's for you to find a way to recover the talisman Flann's toady lost in the *faem*."

"Fianna's uncle thought you might take me to the sea folk and they might—"

"Aye. If the Spae Council permits, I can send you on your way. But the *silgies* are shy and it is up to you to persuade them that you mean them no harm."

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"They have no use for The Deel," Diarmid pointed out. "I'll explain that the talisman is needed to best him."

"Best-schmest. *Equal* Himself's wicked Off-world powers, if you are lucky. No more than that. Remember that The Deel has lived many centuries and that he has assessed a potful of heathen magic to himself in all that time. It won't be an easy matter, your *Geasa*."

"A *Geasa* is like a vowed quest, a task one has undertaken to perform, and one dare not rest until it has been fulfilled."

"Aye. If it mean his death." When Diarmid's hand drifted to rub the blue mud off absently, she slapped it away. "Sleep now, Legend's son. Dream of your Fianna and Inisfail, the Island of Destiny; leave the armies of the Wees to heal your great hulk of a body and prepare it for the terrors of tomorrow."

### X

IT WAS not quite dawn and the slate blue circle of ooze was overhung with a dreary pall; still and all, Diarmid must step out of the hut and rub his eyes for a final look at the bruised sky and then do what he must. The Circle's edge quaked under his feet when he lagged slowly to the lip of turgid wet, his mind churning with abrupt loathing for his task. Especially this part. Old Grane had gone, some time since, while he slept. Staring down at the gently seething blue-black, he knew that it was alive. Alive with Wees. . . .

Galaxies of invisible folk who had attached themselves to the fen folk as friendly symbiotes, extruding their wants and needs directly out of the mind-cells of their hosts.

And Diarmid Patrick had become a host, too.

He shivered. Every molecule of his being resisted what his brain told it to do. He hung there, sweating.

*Jump.*

*Don't think about it. Just jump!*

Yet he lingered, thinking. About the Wees. It was as if they themselves thrust knowledge into his cortex, along with

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a knife to cut his surface-dweller's balk. Far more ancient even than the fen folk, the Wees had drifted here from incalculable distances that outreached Time itself; when others became large, they became small. When others took to saurian and simian paths, they took to microcosmic dwindling; the rich blue mud of the Spae was just what they had been looking for and instead of thrusting out what was there already, they made friends and granted vast boons. The wise fen folk understood, accepted, nurtured the Wees and partook of their incredible gifts. It was only away from the blue Spae mud that the Wees lost their power and died by the countless billions. Stick to the Spae, as the fen folk did, and—

*Jump!*

Diarmid sucked in a last gulp of fetid air and leaped.

The sensation of being smothered just didn't happen. Why? The Wees, of course! Here in their bountiful true home they were strong and multitudinous beyond dreaming. They created a membrane of oxygen around Diarmid when his muscular body shot down through the slickness. It was as if he were a newborn babe; they forced him to breathe and by their incredible numbers and strength precluded his human horror of entombment.

The mud flowed past him, fore and aft, like a fast-driven flood. He knew this was illusion; it was Diarmid who sped. By now the magic mud was like perfume, an amalgam of indefinable scents that haunted him with the sensation of universes of microforms burgeoning and growing to maturity, then dying, all in the moments of his long fall into the bowels of the Spae, where Old Grane and her folk had had their beginnings.

Was there no end?

He tried to concentrate on the rising and falling of microscopic galaxies. The awe which this diversion engendered was too much for him, so he sent out a silent urgent plea to the Wees for light. Something to reassure him that there was indeed a world existing outside of himself.

Light came. A vague blur of light within the loose wet atomic structure of the mud itself. It helped. Not enough,

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though. He yelled out in panic and his own voice screamed back at him as if his head were in a plastic bucket. He squirmed, struggling to move his arms and legs. Yes! He could, now. The mud was loosening to dirty water, then to heavy cloud, then mist, then air! When his flailing legs struck solidity he knew his plummeting journey was over.

Pulsating light, courtesy of the Wees, showed him that he was in a cave-like tunnel that snaked sleekly to front and back. The mixed air bag around his head was no longer necessary, although it seemed as if the Wees saw to it that the atmosphere in his vicinity remained agreeably right for him.

He chose the tunnel to the front, since the Wees made the light pulse brighter that way. His body was slick with wet mud but, heeding Old Grane's implications of last night, he made no move to remove any. He needed the Wees now as never before. The circumference of the tunnel he strode in expanded and presently he was aware of voices.

"Come in, lad! Come in!"

Old Grane's frog-mouth split wide her head in a congratulatory smile. He had thrust back his repugnance of the unnatural (for him) environment and jumped! He had made it to the matriarchal council room of Wise Women!

Diarmid moved into the circle, gaping at the others. They varied in size and shape but all had mottled skins and popeyes and wore muddy aprons over their folded spindle legs. Diarmid heard names like Widenose and Great-warts, Ambry-eyes and Splayshanks.

"Sit there on the stool and let us have a look at you," one bid politely.

Diarmid sat. They refrained from comment on his odd contours.

Out of respect for her sister members, Old Grane asked Diarmid to put forth his plea in person; she had already briefed the Circle on his presence and her previous doings with him, leaving only his mien and his attitude while he spoke to them to convince them of his earnestness of purpose. The bulbous eyes studied him carefully and now and then



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one would nod to another or make a *tschhhikk* sound to indicate that his point had struck home.

Diarmid spoke first of his gratitude to Old Grane and his sympathy toward the fen folk as original inhabitants of Eutarah until The Deel had interrupted the natural course of life here. He stressed Lady Fianna's kindness of heart, and the indignities and privations endured by the vassalage of the Islands. "All of this springs from one source—The Deel. He dislikes change and progress, so he stifles it at every turn. Those Lords who would work toward changing the status quo dare not speak up. With the old Lord's death, Flann can now take over and spread his sadistic philosophies to all the other Towers. Which he will! Along with his cruelty, Flann is insatiably ambitious."

"Slay him," one of the Wise Women suggested.

"That wouldn't help. It would anger The Deel and bring down his wrath on the others. No! It is Himself who must be destroyed!"

There was a shrill chittering of satisfaction among the women, until Old Grane held up a webbed claw for silence.

"Truly it may be said that Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd is the Legend's answer to The Deel and his Song, is that not so, sisters?"

The "ayes" rang out to fill the cavern.

"Well and good. But first things first. For his *Geasa* to stand a chance he must first recover the talisman of Power which was lost through the girl Fianna's whimsy. But never mind all that. The question is, shall we help him?"

"How?" Great-warts asked. "We can't leave the Spae. You know that. And The Deel has the sense to keep away from us."

Old Grane's loose forehead puckered. "Of course we can't help him *personally* and our friends, the Wees, atrophy and die by the cosmos away from the beloved Fen! But we have had some polite chit with the *silkie*s of the *faem*, and if the magical talisman is to be found—"

"Aye! Of course! Take him to the sea folk and bid them help him to locate this power talisman! After all, they bear

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The Deel little love since breaking loose of the Song. . . .”

It was Old Grane herself who led him forth from the Circle and down many volcanic labyrinths toward a place where a meeting with the *silkies* was most favorable. While she hopped briskly through corridor after corridor, holding up her apron daintily, the better to accomplish her prodigious leaps, Diarmid half-ran after and while he ran he thought.

No use patting himself on the back at this point. His *Geasa* still had a long way to travel before he could rest, and most of the journey was his alone. As for Old Grane and the fen folk, they were polite enough and anxious that he should overcome The Deel, but it was out of old enmity, not out of selfless altruism. Should he succeed, what then? Must the Islanders and the Nord and all of the worshipers of Himself be destroyed along with him?

He fought back the desire to scratch off the caked mud that was well-nigh unbearable at elbows and knees and where his brown hunter's tunic fit snugly. Then he thought to beg the Wees the boon of creating an emollient against the chafe. No sooner said than begun! The agony subsided before the next wind in the downward path! The Wees, alerted, had sent hordes of physics and chemical wizards to his sweat glands, to manufacture a balm that soon thrust itself out of his pores and lay like a cushion between the blue mud and him.

Diarmid grinned thanks. Wily Old Grane had implanted the thought into the Wees that this one was to be helped as if he were one of the fen folk. Yet—by that same token—could she not later on bid withdraw—or *kill the organism*? After he had accomplished his *Geasa* might not this infinitude of friends turn into an infinitude of enemies?

A rushing roaring noise ahead of him brushed off these incubus notions. Old Grane had stopped on the brink of an underplanet stream gushing out from a black hole and vanishing into another larger one.

“Is this where—?”

“*Ssst!*” She gestured for silence.

The spring slavered and churned, but nothing came. The

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wait seemed interminable. When Old Grane wagged her mottled head and made to leave, Diarmid stopped her with a wild look. Something of substance was swimming whitely toward them, upstream. Something with incredibly powerful muscles.

Old Grane hopped to the brim and waved at it.

The whitish thing swam nearer; Diarmid saw now that it was horse-shaped, but gilled, that its mane was greenish seaweed and its hooves were of shell.

It bore a rider and what a rider!

She had long hair that shimmered like sunlit amethyst, her body was wand slender, her pale face drifted out of some pastel dream; her great luminous eyes brimmed with some ache of inner sorrow as if the universe were about to crumble and vanish; as she stepped lightly off her sea-steed, Diarmid saw that she wore no clothing, only her swirls of silken hair. She faced Old Grane shyly, ignoring Diarmid as if he did not exist.

"Hail, Fenmother!"

"Hail, Aillel of Sulkeril!"

"I was swimming nearby. I heard a call—"

" 'Twas me, child. Old Grane; I summoned you, with the help of the Wees and their watery friends." She waved a claw at Diarmid who knew, from the creature's diffidence, better than to move a step closer until bidden. "This human is here because he is in grievous need of your assistance."

The *silkie* turned her large eyes on Diarmid. They were palest green and phosphorescent from a lifetime in the dark deeps. Her beauty made his pulse jump.

Diarmid nodded gravely and essayed a courteous smile. He still didn't move. She stared at him widely, as if reading his thoughts. Moments slid away while she stared.

"Will you help me?" he asked at last.

Aillel turned to Old Grane, who croaked a hasty explanation. The *silkie* stared at Diarmid for more moments, then, "I can only take you where you want to go. No more."

"That's a lot," Old Grane put in. "The *silkies* never venture that close to the Islands for fear of the deep-divers and the nets."

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"And Nacran," Aillel added. "Nacran has grown to fantastic size, thanks to all the wastes and the human debris that are flung to him from Tower Ane." She studied Diarmid carefully. "Do you wish to put yourself in the path of such a monster? Is there no other way to fulfill your *Geasa*?"

"There is no other way. If you will take me to the spot where the talisman fell, I will be in your debt."

Aillel gave her long hair a toss. "You will never succeed, but you are valiant and we of Sulkeri will remember and sing of your bravery in the long tides to come. Let us go."

Diarmid took hold of Old Grane's clammy claw in wordless thanks, then mounted the sea-steed in front of Aillel. The instant before the *silkie's* steed plunged into the fast-moving stream was a long one, and heart-stopping.

Clinging wildly to the corded neck of the beast as it plunged through the currents that led to the great seas, Diarmid begged the Wees for, not only air, but for the stamina to endure the shattering pace. He braided his fingers under the white neck and forgot everything else but his survival demand. He forgot that Aillel's beautiful body was close to his, he forgot his *Geasa*, forgot there was such a thing as time; all he was aware of was the agonizing lurch of every muscle in his straddling body.

But an end came to all this, and fast.

From whatever rapport existed between horse and rider, Diarmid found himself tumbled off suddenly, the steed executing an improbable about-turn and there he was, threshing around in deep weighty ocean—alone. While his body somersaulted slowly toward a dark coral cliff, Diarmid asked himself, *Now what?* He was where he had been asked to be taken. That was as much as the sea folk would do for him. Now what?

He yelled when he bumped an outjutting spine of reef and the Wees were hard put to membrane his mouth against airless death. *Careful*, he thought. Floundering against a spongy bank of weed he warned himself that his invisible helpers weakened quickly away from the Spae and that the blue mud was all washed off him. He had very little time.

Where? What? How?

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Wees' magic enabled him to see darkly. He avoided the serrated shards of coral and the larger fish moving across the gloomy underseascape. Now that he was actually at the place where Glenmalure had sunk with the talisman, the whole thing seemed hopeless and futile. How could he possibly find a flat bit of metal two inches in diameter in this muddy kelp-and-rock-haunted wilderness? The talisman was lost forever, hidden coyly under some growth of coral or slipped down a crack in the ocean floor and covered by black silt!

*Where?*

No answer. The Wees functioned only within the organism, and there was nobody else to hear.

*What to do?*

*What to do?*

While he worried himself about it, he moved his hands in aimless circles around the bottom, sending up clouds of silt like smoke. In the middle of one of these churning clouds his probing hand played over a new horror; when he moved in for a close look he saw a bloated face, a human face set with bulged eyes and twisted gaping death. Now he saw that one of the ears was eaten away and undersea scavengers had nibbled into hands and legs as well. Fighting a retch, he assured himself that this was not Glenmalure. From the pathetic empty air sack strapped to his back and the tools at his waist, Diarmid decided that it was one of Flann's deep-divers. Doubtless, others had fared as ill before he permitted them to abandon the search. Without benefit of Wees the task was impossible.

Even with . . .

Pursuing his search elsewhere, Diarmid struck a current of icy water moving out of a ragged hole in the cliff. When the Wees took hold and he stopped shivering he took account. A thought that chilled him more than the cold zone seized him. That great hole. It must be where Nacran lived.

While his eyes gaped into the dark, Nacran showed. The crustaceous monster had had much of divers lately and remained alert for tidbits. Now he propelled his incredible

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bulk out in the belching stream to take care of this new presumer.

Exhaustion, cold, and the weakening power of the Wees produced an inner tide of utter despair. For countless centuries this kraken creature had lived down here in his black cave, feeding on Ane's garbage and the dismembered corpses out of the torture chambers of the dungeons. Nacran was a terrible sight to see, by size alone. The live ones skittering about his cave mouth during the past few days had made him cranky; he was a scavenger and preferred them nicely dead and in bite size chunks. Here was another of those kicking ones.

Diarmid screamed inwardly, floundering to escape the rubbery tentacles. Darting into a narrow crevice his post-thought registered something odd. Something about Nacran that didn't fit the rest. Something that gleamed near the great oval eyes just under the mold-green carapace. The glint of *metal*.

He had to move out to see what it was. He had to.

Within sight of the mountainous amalgam of sea-stuff, he skirted the coral hillside for safety, while the winking gleam drew him like a magnet. Triumph of a macabre sort raced through his blood when he saw that it *was* the talisman! Nacran's carapace was huge and round and just below it and above the swirling ropes of tentacles was a fringe of cilia; the shiny talisman had tangled in several of these when the creature had poked Glenmalure, flailing his arm up futilely, into its maw.

Diarmid's astonishment made him careless; one of the beast's long floor-sucking tentacles crept slyly along and behind him. Its whip end flashed and lassoed him, dragging him toward the cavernous mouth.

And the talisman!

The Wees kept him from being instantly crushed while the tentacle, leisurely now, dragged him toward the death Flann's tassel-bobber had found. Diarmid's agony knew no bounds, seeing the thing so near for which he had dared the deeps! He could almost reach up and grab it, now!

Time took a breather before eternity gulped him up.

Diarmid reached up. *If only . . .*

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Some desperate knowledge insisted that if he could only just touch it—

Battling his wave of desire to let go of life and forget the whole thing, he strained every muscle toward the talisman. When his body brushed cold rubbery lip above the gape he bunched himself into a ball, shrunk himself to less than he was, set his feet against the lip and shoved with all of his power.

He did it. He popped out of the tentacle like a pea out of a shooter. He shot up and now he was tangled in the sticky cilia. But the talisman was in his grasp!

He hung there, shivering.

Nacran made reverberant sounds of anger, but ironically Diarmid was too close for the giant eyes to see him and the flailing tentacles were awkward at immediate range. Sobbing in his throat, Diarmid forgot that he dangled above doom; he slapped the octagon to his bare wrist, clinging to the cilium crotch by an underarm.

Words poured out.

*"O, sweet and far from cliff and star—"*

The power litany came out in a scanless rush. The magic went to work. It reached down into the knowledge fountain in his mind, selecting. It said, from his leaped demand:

*The crustacean is a quasi-arthropod, encountered on many saltwater planets; it possesses a shell-like carapace for defense. On the home-planet the true arthropods include lobsters, crabs, and other shellfish, considered a great delicacy by—*

*"Big one!"* Diarmid yelled. *"It wants to eat me!"*

*Giant forms have been met with in the constellation Lyra, particularly in a system known as Abraham's Kidney which—*

*"No time!"* Diarmid yelled. *"I'm all stuck up and the tentacles are grabbing my feet! How do I get out of here?"*

*Crustaceans are best killed by heat. On the home planet these tasty food sources are flung living into pots of boiling water until—*

The Wees! Call on the Wees and hope that their power is still strong enough! *Heat it. Project heat into the creature. Get me out of here!*

The shock waves of intensely high temperature that struck

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out sent steam bubbles gurgling up from the tentacles, searing cilia. Diarmid felt Nacran's scream of pain as a washboard vibration when he let go. Up he went, clinging fast to the talisman of power.

### XI

DIARMID SPRAWLED, indifferent to existence, at a rocky cliff base some mile or so from the limestone escarpment that provided Tower Ane proper's cannoned defenses from attack by sea. His exhaustion was too complete for worry or anxiety. All he asked for the next few hours was to lie there, to sleep or not, but to bring his flagged muscles and nerves back to something like normal. When one of Nacran's smaller cousins crabbed up to nibble at his leg, he started up with a yell. He seized a rock and smashed it in a fury, sending its fellows scuttling toward the water.

He sat up, shivering. It was early morning, pre-dawn. The sky was satin malachite. There was no wind and the only sounds he heard were the bleating of curlews and the gentle droning of the tide against the rocky seawall.

*I'm hungry.* His innards gurgled hopefully.

If only he had some of those energy pellets left, but he didn't. And somehow he knew that the Wees within him were dead or dormant, unable to help. Diarmid was on his own.

The tide began to lap at his feet; he scrambled up over the algae-slimed rocks to a niche which commanded a view to both sides. He plunked down on a round boulder and unslung the talisman from its unbreakable chain around his neck.

Maybe the power thing could feed him. Anyway, he would take advantage of his lonesomeness to examine its abilities further. In the brightening of dawn he turned it over and over between his fingers. Such a dainty bit of alloy to hold within it such sorcerous power! He studied it. Of diamond hardness, the eight-edged metal had an emblem engraved on it, nevertheless, although what manner of precision tool could



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have done the delicate work was impossible to imagine. The design suggested a two-wing grouping of sky fish shapes among a constellation of flint bright stars and there were letters curving around top and bottom forming two words:

TERRA SIEMPRE.

"Truly, this is a thing of great magic." Diarmid whistled out of awe. "Old Grane was right."

Alone, he would try it again. What had happened while he was locked in Nacran's tentacles, down in the deep, was impossible to wholly believe up here. What else could it do? What was the limit of its knowledge power?

With the triggering Tennyson verse (which no manner of sorcery, Spae or otherwise, could quite expunge) to set it off, and his heartbeat as catalyst, the Knowledge Storehouse was again open for business. . . .

Diarmid asked it his number one question:

"Who am I?"

*Diarmid Patrick O'Dowd.* The answer was quick.

"I already know that much. Who else?"

*You are a captain in the Terran Deep Space Fleet. You sail one of the thousands of small X-Flor ships in the Magellanic Cloud. It has been your whole adult life.*

"That's outside the Green?"

*Of course.*

"How about that! Then the fire demons of the Eu-Taran legends are actually ships that move across wide spaces beyond anything the folk here can imagine! Where—where did I originate?"

*Terra is your mother planet although you have never seen it except on the vis-tapes. You were born in Alpha Centauri.*

"What do you mean, 'mother planet'?"

*Terrans are true humans, although there are many humanoid races in the galaxy. Terra has maintained her supremacy through many fleet-destroying wars. Her treaties are for the most part respected. We are going through a quiescent surge of prodigious exploration of our galaxy. You are one of the microscopic cogs in a great thrusting machine.*

Diarmid frowned. The concept "machine" bothered him, and along with it "complex" and "computer" popped up out

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of the unconscious; somehow all of them bugged him. He wasn't sure he liked being a cog.

"Tell me about Terra. I've dreamed about it—"

*All Terra-seeded spacemen dream of Terra. Some make it their driving ambition to visit the planet where the Terran Empire was born. As for you, Diarmid Patrick O'Dowd, it would be best for you never to go back.*

"Why not?"

*The Terra of now is not the Terra you have dreamed about, nor the Terra of the old books you have read on your long lonely runs. You are an avatar, Diarmid Patrick O'Dowd. Your dreams are of what once was; they compelled you to venture through the Green. . . .*

Diarmid puzzled this over a while, then:

"How come I made it through and others couldn't?"

*The answer to this question does not easily compute. It may be that some genetic force within your cells—some throwback's desire so intense that it became must—opened the way. Or some force that exists here on this Green-enclosed planet directed you in and opened the way for you.*

"What kind of—!" Diarmid whistled. "I know! The Deell Yet—according to Old Grane and the others, Himself doesn't know who I am or how I got here!"

*Are you sure? Lights flashed. Bits of isolated knowledge blended toward a pattern. The Deel originated outside of the Green. He may not know what you are all about personally, but he is aware of your Off-world origin. The races which he dominates on Eu-Tarah know Outside as obscure legendry and terror-myth, but The Deel—*

"I know, I know. Himself rules Eu-Tarah because of his Off-world knowledge. How great is his knowledge? How much magic has he?"

The inner voice was silent for a long moment. *We can only assume that it is very great indeed. To have become a god—*

"Greater than ours?" Diarmid used the editorial plural out of vaguely stirring realization that this was really himself answering his questions—himself and the Terran Empire, at least the aggregate knowledge deemed useful to spacemen

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by generations of Terran Space psychologists, biologists, and ologists *ad infinitum*. "We" indeed!

*We can only discover this after we have encountered him in person and had a personal taste of his power.*

"I know we can't provide me with information that's beyond what Terra has ever brushed up against, but how about adding up what *I've* learned about The Deel since I came here, plus hints and legends and whatever, and maybe coming up with some pregnant deductions? We've got to have more information about Himself and what he is all about if my *Geasa* is to stand a chance! Okay?"

*Okay. We will digest every fragment of the available knowledge. Every intimation. Every nuance. But this will take time. It is a complicated jigsaw, involving early Terran history, mythos, psychopathology, et cetera. Dig me later.*

"I'll do that."

Reluctantly, Diarmid dropped the talisman off his wrist. He started to replace it around his neck; then, on second thought, he twisted it high up around his left shoulder under his damp tunic with the octagon hidden in the hollow of his armpit.

The cliff trail led in the direction of the village fishing pier; it looked to have been crossed over the years by adventurous bird-trapping boys, but it brought him eventually to a sloping walk of cobbled stones fronted by a low limestone wall. In the argent wash of day's break Diarmid moved up cautiously to where he could see the purple Tower spearing into the warm green sky and, strolling along the sinuous downslope, a castle guard.

He ducked back into the bushes, waiting. The thickset guard wore the usual dragon leather skirt and beaten metal breast-plate; he uttered a yelping yawn, as if at the end of a dull night's watch. Diarmid looked in vain for another way, a path around him. There was none. The cliff dropped sheer at this point.

The yawn suggested that the fellow was about to be relieved and the guard's hut twenty yards uphill suggested that this is where the switch would take place. Diarmid waited hopefully. Sure enough, the great lout presently seized

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a lantern from the wall, blew it out, and moved up to the guard's house. With luck there would be byplay and castle gossip between the two of them before the day guard began his patrol.

Diarmid waited no more. When the black head vanished into the hut, he hoisted a leg over the low wall and darted across. A wind in the slope took him temporarily out of sight but he fought an urge to lope full kilter. He could almost feel a spear's point between his shoulder blades, but he didn't look back or increase his pace. Lady Fortune and the bright sun to cause the guard's eyes to squint saved him from such a fate. Smoke was sifting out of the peaked rooftops and the market stalls were beginning to stir with life when he lost himself in the twisty ways, striding toward the fishing rafts.

The cave where Jock son of Felim had secreted Fianna was accessible only by water and at high tide the entrance was completely hidden. Diarmid snuggled down among the seines to conceal himself when the last of the fishing fleet bobbed out across the sun-painted water.

Jock pushed aside the artful shrubbery and downed sail and mast to move into the niche.

"Diarmid!"

Fianna had been resting fitfully on a sacking pallet (an unwelcome novelty to one accustomed to pale pink satin) but the uneasy scraping of oars on rock had brought her stiffly alert. She swept herself into Diarmid's arms, sobbing to see him alive and well.

Diarmid kissed her several times, grinning joy at such enthusiasm.

"Your clothes are damp!" Fianna cried. "Did you—"

"Yes. But see! Jock has brought some wherewith and I'm starving." He added, to her blank hurt, "Don't tell me you can't cook, woman!"

"I can cook!" she returned sharply. "And while I make your cakes and fry your fish you must tell me all that happened. Everything."

Jock the Fisherman left them to their devices, chuckling;

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Diarmid plunked himself down on the pallet and watched the girl hustle up a scanty breakfast with a peasant deftness that surprised him. She hardly coughed at all over the fire-smoke, as it lost itself among the high crevices; before long he was chomping grilled fish and scones.

Fianna listened gravely as he spun his tale between huge bites; her eyes went wide when he slipped the talisman down his arm and held it out to her.

"The Gramarye Stone!" she cried, awed.

"Aye! It's got magic in it, well enough!"

"Shall we not try it again, Diarmid Patrick? Shall we not bid it provide us with terrible weapons that will prevent Flann from taking—"

"It can't create weapons," Diarmid laughed. "It can only instruct us how to make them ourselves. And for this we must provide our own raw materials and tools." His glance roved over the sooty cave thoughtfully. There must be metals here, as elsewhere on Eu-Tarah. The Islanders were skilled makers of swords and spears and hunting bows. Still, the peripheral information that had leaked through when he had made use of the knowledge-key before suggested that it would take better weapons than these to overcome even Flann, powerful as his driving ambition had made him. Off-world weapons. Guns that paralyzed or killed at long distances. Demon-things used by the ships that scouted the stars beyond the Green.

"What are you waiting for?" Fianna's eyes flashed. "Be about your magic at once!"

Diarmid tried to explain but, oriented to instant sorcery, Fianna was bewildered, first, then scornful.

"What good is it, then? Old Grane's Spae magic is of more consequencel!"

"The Spae magic is limited, too." He told her about the Wees. "They have no power at all outside of the body they inhabit. And unfortunately the ones inside of me are of no use whatever, now. They die away from the Spae. And the fen folk do, too. So you see—"

"Then we are lost!" Fianna cried, flinging herself down on the rough pallet. "There is no magic at all!"

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He stroked her auburn hair. "Yes, there is, Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips. There's magic, all right, plenty. Only it is different than you've been taught. You don't just snap your fingers and things happen. Press buttons, maybe. . . ."

She sat up straight. "But The Deel—he's got magic powers! Look at all he does. How he sends his creatures flying through the air and talks to the Drudmen without them ever once seeing him!"

Diarmid nodded. "Maybe we can do these things too, some day. And maybe this talisman is the key. . . ."

He placed the metal on his inner wrist, where the pulse leaped, and thought the litany. Fianna watched, breasts heaving, emerald eyes childish with wonder.

"Have you investigated The Deel?"

*Yes. We have plumbed deep.*

"And—?"

*We have studied all suggestive information available and have come up with some very interesting—if confusing—ideas.*

"I'm waiting," Diarmid told the knowledge bank in his mind.

A moment's hesitation, then the cerebral machinery went to work rapidly. The picture it presented was sketchy and incomplete—a swift montage of provocative implications tumbling across Diarmid's conscious mind, teasing it with encyclopedic facts and surmises and pure myths that reached back into the shadowed mists of Terra's earliest days. . . .

It seemed that once, incredibly long ago, there lived on Mother Terra a race of gods known as Tuatha de Danaan. These divine beings inhabited a beautiful island that was forever green and fruitful. Later, so sang the bards, came others—demigods and mortals. There was Nuada, son of the god Dana; there were Brigit, Angus, Mider, Ogma, and Bod the Red—all god-seeded, sired by Dagda, god of the Earth who played his harp and so brought the seasons. There followed many generations of great and powerful heroes on this small green island, all of their magnificent adventures dutifully set down by the great bards in heroic songs, so that for all of Time the harpists and singers that came after

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could play and sing this great tapestry of Gaelic Song in the pillared halls of Tara, the place of Kings.

"Tara?" Diarmid put in.

*Eu-Tarah could signify New Tara.*

"Aye. And The Deel?"

*There are innumerable references to an antichrist called Satan, or the Devil. Among the early Gaels and Hibernians he was frequently call The Diel. The Diel was worshiped by the downtrodden serfs and peasants of this medieval master-slave era because he was identified with the free elements of nature and paganism; also because the ruling Lords were Christ-lovers and to worship Christ's enemy was a form of rebellion against oppressive tyranny.*

Diarmid scowled. "Somehow that doesn't sound like—"

*No. The analogy is dubious. There could be a tie-in, however, and we were urged to explore all possibilities.*

"By all means!" Diarmid grinned wryly. "Stir the spoon deep!"

*We have and are. Moving down the eras of Terran history we concerned ourselves with all races of man, both on the mother planet and on all of her colonies, seeking for a god symbol that would relate to The Deel.*

"And what have we found?"

*Nothing yet. In the bewildering complex of deities from Baal and Moloch to Odin and Thor, from Ukko and Ilmatar to Quetzalcoatl and Omecihuatl, from Vishnu and Jagannath to Jupiter, Tonans and Hephaestus, from Iggil of Alpha and R'neth of Otava, the Bear, to—*

"That'll do." Diarmid winced. "How about non-gods?"

*Mortals? It is a prodigious undertaking and we have only sparse information on those human beings who have in some manner gained widespread publicity, whether as distinguished men of space science, creative geniuses, or multicides. The human race has exploded onto some fifteen thousand planets in the past twenty decades so we could hardly be expected to pinpoint one individual who may or may not have—*

"I know, I know!" Diarmid interrupted emphatically, while realizing that he knew hardly anything, at least in the sense of ready-to-use knowledge. All he wanted to do was to

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stop the flow. He *did* realize all too well, however, that looking for any trace of The Deel within that seething mess was looking for a needle in a haystack. And what if The Deel was not Terra-related after all, in spite of the Celtic angle? "Anyway," he sighed, "*try*. Try harder."

*We will try very hard.*

Fianna needed him about what he had learned about The Deel; Diarmid made some effort to collate, for his own benefit as well as hers, but he didn't get very far.

"Your legends tell you that your ancestors came to Eu-Tarah from some other world, outside the Green."

Fianna wrinkled her nose at him. "Did they? Isn't that just a chimney tale? I always thought it was."

"I've read a lot about the ancient Irish, from McMillan's histories to Croker's Legends, from Lady Wilde to William Yeats and Padraic Colum. I know something about Tuatha de Danaan and the Fomors and Firbolgs; about the little people—the Shees—and the great heroes, Cuchulain, Ossian, and Finn MacCoul. I know about Sinn Fein and the wars with the pesky English, too—but I like the older stories of the mountains—and T'yeer-Na-N-Oge, where—"

"Where no man grows old, unless he leaves the marble pillared halls and rides out beyond those gates of gold." Fianna frowned. "That is where The Deel lives. In the alabaster halls of T'yeer-Na-N-Oge. That is where the Song is conceived!"

"What *about* the Song?"

"The Song is All. The Song has no end. The Song is the totality of Eu-Tarah; all must abide by it and contribute to its beauty and truth."

"And who writes this Song?"

"Himself, of course. As for all those other names—they're in our legends, all of them. They're in the Song—Cuchulain, Ossian, Finn MacCoul. The one-eyed giants are the hairy rebels in the frightful ravines and Deirdre was my great-grandmother, who—"

"Prototypes!" Diarmid climbed to his feet and strode the cave floor, clenching talisman and chain hard in his fist.



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"The universe is wide and fantastic, but coincidences that complicated just don't happen!"

"I don't understand," Fianna objected tartly. "We have our lives here on Eu-Tarah, and our fathers before us had theirs; and do not be trying to tell me that we don't exist or that we're only verses in a—"

Diarmid's sudden explosive laugh was a shout of triumph. He dropped the talisman down in his boot for safekeeping and grabbed the girl, whirling her round and round before kissing her very soundly.

"Listen!"

"I'm listening, Diarmid Patrick."

Words trembled on his tongue, then, facing those clear emerald pools, he scowled and changed his mind. No. Best to keep his tattling tongue still in his mouth. What he had bursting inside his mind would trouble her, make her uneasy and indignant—and why not! Besides, he didn't really know. . . .

"I must learn swordsmanship if I am to fight Flann again," he about-faced.

"True." Fianna laughed and kissed his nose. "And here is a blade Jock gave me for my protection, to match yours. *En garde!*"

Diarmid drew his rapier doubtfully. Fianna, steel pointing at his heart and hand on hip, was formally at the ready, narrow-eyed and earnest.

"You will teach me?"

"Why not? I have been instructed in fencing by masters. Furthermore, I have fought many mock duels with Flann, ever since we were children. I know all of his tricks."

Diarmid grinned and sweated at his awkwardness; it seemed that Fianna's sword-tip was forever touching his chest or nipping his arm or tickling his chin; but after two hours of instruction the rhythms of her parries and attacks began to make some sense, and the touches were fewer. Diarmid worked and sweated until he gained touches, too, and Fianna was driven back into the gloom by the singleminded fury of his attack. When the girl tumbled back over a boulder and he realized that the mocking familiarity of her technique

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had set his brain on cold fire, Diarmid sheathed his weapon and picked her up, laughing.

Fianna's eyes blazed; her hand slapped lightly across his face. "Aye, my love! A few more lessons and—"

"Shh!"

Clinging, they were statues, listening to the muffled lap of oars at the cave's entrance, then the scrape of wood against rock as a boat was brought to moor within the stony arch.

"Jock!" Fianna's whisper was a breathed prayer.

"It's not time. He said nightfall."

No voices, but the noise of boots leaping onto the rock edge was of several men. They stopped breathing and waited, backs to the wall of this offshoot to the cave proper. Diarmid was aware suddenly of the still smoking fire wisps and of a lamp-lighted figure moving toward it. Lamps and figures moved into view and the dapper figure laughed.

It was Flann.

## XII

FLANN'S APARTMENTS were much larger than Fianna's and flamboyantly appointed in maroon and rich gold. Even before the old Lord's death Flann had appropriated all but the great throne room for his own; now it too was being refurbished to suit his lavish taste and decorated for the coming nuptials. Flann waved all but two of his warriors out of the room, whirling on Fianna for his opening shot.

"The wedding takes place before midday tomorrow." His crimson boots made upside-down reflections in the crystal luminescent floor as he paced; his heroic face was stern with righteous anger. "No matter that you have wallowed in sin with this—this slave's offal like a very trull. He will soon be dead and, distasteful as it is for one of my aesthetic sensibilities, I must endure your company for at least one night, to fulfill the Song."

Fianna's face was white as a swan's wing. "You need not trouble your aesthetic sensibilities in the worry that

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anything has occurred between Diarmid Patrick and myself. You know well it has not. Nor is your preoccupation with the Song less than transparent. Marriage with Lady Ane will confirm your cousinly coup and, with my alleged trullery as an excuse, you can continue about your curious pleasures."

"Then you will make no demur tomorrow? You will cause no embarrassing scene?"

"What matter if I do or not?" Fianna's eyes flushed, her tone was throaty and bitter. "You have not allowed time for most of the other Island Lords to attend the ceremony, much less even a decent funeral for my-my—" She broke off but let no sob break through.

"Your uncle is buried."

"Buried? Without due respect? Without—me?"

"He is buried," Flann snapped impatiently. He turned to Diarmid, lips curving a faint smile. "You may attend this one's funeral later tomorrow, if it pleases you."

Fianna's paleness vanished in a warm rush of panic. "No! You must not kill him!"

"Why not? If there is, as you say, nothing between the two of you—"

"The Deel wants him alive. You *know* that!"

Flann paced grimly. The way his hands moved and from what Diarmid read in his gimlet glances he knew that killing Diarmid was a heart's delight which Flann had long savored. Yet, the edict of The Deel stayed him. The Deel wanted the stranger alive for some reason or other. At least for now.

"Doubtless Himself has something special for this black interloper. After The Deel has heard the whole story perhaps he will answer my prayer to be allowed some few small loppings and flayings for the trouble he has caused me." He gestured to the guards. "Take him away and guard him well. Let him spend this night with the rats, musing on how Fianna and I will be spending the night to follow."

Diarmid paced the small cold stone chamber into which he was pushed until the guards tired of taunting him and

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watching him through the miniscule iron grill window. Their derision told him what had happened. Flann's village spies and the pitiful desperation of a widow woman who lived at the end of Jock's alley, had spilled the beans. Jock had not been harmed, no. He had been followed secretly, rather, and random bits and hints had led Flann finally to the cliff cave. As for the taking, the skirmish was brief and one-sided. Diarmid's sword was scarcely out of its sheath before they were surrounded.

When night closed down in earnest and he could hear the guards outside his cell snoring, Diarmid took off his boot and fingered out the memory-talisman. Perhaps the "we" of the knowledge storehouse locked within the unused portions of his brain had learned something!

It was a chance. His only one.

Diarmid stroked its surface thoughtfully. **TERRA SIEMPRE.** Terra was the planet of his forebears and for this he owed allegiance to what the name Terra now signified. Would he ever go back into that strange black universe of shining ships? Did he want to?

With a shrug and a noiseless yawn he went to work.

"What have you found out about The Deel?" his mind asked his deeper mind.

*This much. A human named Albert Ossian Deel was born in Belfast, Ireland in the year 2070—Twelve hundred years ago.*

"Wow!"

*If we may continue without interruption—?*

"Sorry. Go ahead. What kind of a man was this Deel with a heroic middle name?"

*While little is known of his early life, from what followed we assume that he was a studious, lonely boy with a passion for early Irish legendry and myth that was practically psychotic. He soon became the authority on Gaelic literature; he taught bardic verse at Hibernia University for more than twenty years, translated and retranslated many ancient works in the genre. His many idiosyncracies made his students laugh at him, and embittered him toward the whole computerized*

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*world. He never married and, year by year, he retreated further and further back into the era he loved. . . .*

While the encyclopedic fountain sputtered on, giving statistics and listing the array of scholarly works to which the name Albert Ossian Deel was associated, Diarmid's imagination patched in a vivid image of him, faceless, yet three-dimensional all the same. Albert Deel was probably small and hunched from poring over his books. He lived alone in dusty bachelor chambers whose shelves could not contain the wealth of old volumes that constituted the reality of the balding recluse's existence far more than did the noxious mechanical world outside. Books were stacked up in all the corners and there was an ancient Irish harp next to the inkstand and steel pens on his desk, a harp which he had stolen from the British Museum because they laughed at him when he tried to buy it.

Albert Ossian Deel. Derided by his colleagues. Played tricks on by his students. A true kook. . . .

"What happened to him?"

*First we must consider Albert Deel's only friend.*

"Besides the heroic army of gods and demigods and all the other legend folk?"

*A live friend, yes. A man named Radcliff Jones-Parkin.*

"Another legend-lover?"

*No. A chemical scientist.*

Diarmid's ears pricked up when the triggered memory-bank went on to delineate Jones-Parkin, as listed in the *Who's Who* of the scientific world for his early work in cybernetics and the creation of artificial chemical men. . . .

At first Diarmid thought it odd that these two dissimilar humans could have become fast friends; then, little by little, the fog cleared. Dr. Radcliff Jones-Parkin was in his way as much of a fanatic as was Dr. Albert Ossian Deel. His fantasies were of a burgeoning space-world peopled with his chemical creatures who could fearlessly travel where Man could not. In that time such cybernetic creatures were only being dreamed of; Jones-Parkin was laughed at for being as far ahead of his time as Deel was behind his. Both drudged at the University and dreamed their dreams, until—

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*In its secret files, the Terran Space Agency has a record, incomplete unfortunately—Dr. Jones-Parkin was afraid somebody would take away his glory before his final experiments—but such as they are, they are quite remarkable. . . .*

*“And—?”*

It seemed that Dr. Radcliff Jones-Parkin claimed to have created an android with more-than-human capabilities. Far more. Because he had no other model, or, out of a god-complex, he fashioned his android in his own image. Jones-Parkin's egomaniac ambition (which was mainly to blame for his unpopularity) drove him toward the genius-maniac fringe. His android was to loom far beyond Man. It would make Man obsolete. It would be a god and it would look like *him*. It would be a god because it could bend the chemical spectra to unheard-of paths; it would feed on itself and grow more godlike and invincible until the virtually limitless power within its brain would encompass the totality of all knowledge.

*Incidentally, some of Dr. Jones-Parkin's monographs led the way to Us. As for his god-android, it seemed to be the end result of a dream gone too far. His mind had wound itself up so tight around this obsession that something snapped.*

*“Are you sure?”*

*We can conclude so, from the evidence. Before Dr. Jones-Parkin committed suicide by hanging, he systematically destroyed every scrap of material related to his super-android, including the android itself. When the police broke in and the legal science departments examined the place with a fine tooth comb, they postulated logically that Dr. Jones-Parkin's final experiments had failed and that he was unable to bear failure so he removed all trace of it before removing himself.*

Diarmid mulled a moment.

*“And Albert Deel was his best friend?”*

*His only friend.*

*“Did he know about the android?”*

*We can assume so. There is no manner of telling.*

*“Yet it begins to add up.”*

*Especially when we find, from the Hybernia University*

*records, that Albert Ossian Deel disappeared into thin air—the same night Dr. Jones-Parkin hanged himself.*

The bare stones were clammy and sleep was impossible; Diarmid stretched out, after hiding the talisman in the toe of his boot. Sleepless, he thought about what he had learned.

Albert Ossian Deel. *Ossian*. The son of Finn MacCumhall (MacCoul). The greatest of the Fenian poets. Unlike Albert Deel's crass world, where piped-in computers did practically everything, the Fenians revered poetry and song. A harpist singer was a man of great importance in Connaught and in Leinster. It was Ossian who sang the noblest of the Fenian songs; Ossian, also, who journeyed to T'yeer-Na-N-Oge, to the Land of Never Dying, to the hallowed alabaster halls beyond the gates of pure red gold. . . .

Something, some small purposeful sound had brushed across the malodorous blackness of his cell. He plunged his hands behind him onto the slimy stones, lifting. The blackness churned; unseen wings, satin-black like the night itself, fanned the closeness.

Blinking, gaping this way and that, he discovered the source of the dry rustling. Out of the wall itself, out of nothingness, stepped two flamewings. His heart hammered, his throat blotted out of primal terror. These vast shadow-shapes seemed to fill the rocky room with their eldritch presences. No wonder the Islanders feared them and obeyed! Diarmid's fear, as he clawed the wall behind him for an out, precluded ideas like "teleportation" and "hypnotic aura." This was pure sorcery, black witchcraft from out of the forever-unknowable.

Now, carmine eyes aflame, they moved on him. Silently, for they had no mouths—only great pointed cat's ears for hearing and remembering—they moved on him. Diarmid's abortive scream was diminished to a child's wail in nightmare when, with a snappish rattle of those enormous dull-shine wings, they enveloped him.

Their claws were most efficient; they took hold of him, stifling his yells and his panicked flailings, in just the right places.

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The trip was short.

There was no time to think. And, blanketed as he was in the icy black membranes of their wings, there was no chance to see the gates of red gold nor the splendid white turrets of T'yeer-Na-N-Oge, blending into the eternal snow of the highest peak on Eu-Tarah.

### XIII

WHEN VERTIGO PASSED and the little bits of Diarmid flew back together to form a shaking, trembling whole he stood up to see what life was all about *now*.

He stood shivering in a metal room like an inverted cup. The flamewings were gone. He was alone in the universe and very, very afraid. He rasped in great gulps of air in an effort to reorient his lungs and his cells to the facts of organic life. He waited.

Presently the room that was a windowless, doorless cup lifted. It whisked up beyond his sight. He was in a larger chamber now, a shining clean vastness of metal oblongs and cubes and trapezoids which hummed so faintly that it was more like a subtle rhythmic vibration inside his head.

The stark cleanliness, the prosaic orderliness (like the computer-banks on the Magellanic mother ship) made him bold. No flamewings. No pookas. No thaumaturgy.

"I'll try the memory release," he decided, unconsciously reverting to the parlance of his X-Plor captain's life. For the moment he was back there; magic and all things illogical and fanciful were swept away.

He took the memory pack out of his boot and did the thing.

"What is this place?" he asked bluntly.

*Describe it, please.*

Diarmid walked around and consciously thought what he was seeing. His space training did a fair job of it, although much of what he saw was, functionally, light-years beyond him.

*Sounds to us like a power-amplification and power-correla-*



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tion complex. Something that is tied to a directive core, a Mind, you might say, which tells it what to do—to create other lesser minds and hands that are mobile and directed to specific tasks. We have things like this, many of them, but none quite so—so—

“Omnipotent?”

*It is certainly versatile and vast, if—quixotic.*

“By quixotic you mean designed to do wacky things.”

Yes. Woolly and wacky.

“What mind controls it? Albert Deel’s?”

No. *It would have to be a super-mind, beyond the human. Effective as we have made our minds, implanting banks of knowledge into the unused cortical areas of the brain, we have not as yet arrived at the point where we can match—*

“Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd,” a mellifluous voice interrupted, startling him so that he dropped the talisman from his pulse and broke the link. “Come you up the stairway directly ahead of you. We must talk.”

The voice was low and sweet, like singing. If there was affectation to the manner in which it intoned each word, giving it archaic inflection, there was also bardic majesty and thrilling music to the ring of it.

“Why must I come up there? Can’t you come down here?” Diarmid’s hesitance was rooted in a fear and awe that took hold of his insides and squeezed.

It was *The Deel Himself!*

“Nay, son of Legend. I never come down there. I want none of that claptrap.”

Diarmid grinned, relaxing. His palms stopped their sweating. Albert Ossian Deel detested machinery and everything that bespoke the world he had been born in and shunned. He made use of all this, yes. He created his own world of Song with it. Yet he despised it and pretended it wasn’t there. Diarmid thought, *Look who is calling what claptrap.*

An invisible sigh breathed down the long stairway.

“Are you coming, Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd? Or must I send Luga down there to fetch you?”

*Luga. Master smith. All craftsman. Prince of all Sciences.*

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"But you are not Nuadat, King of the de Danaans!" Diarmid needled impulsively.

"Nay. But Luga lived through many ordinary lives, you must know, attaching himself at last to Ossian, the Bard of Bards. Indeed, such a master of All Science can never die. Nor can Ossian in T'yeer-Na-N-Oge."

"Not unless he leaves. And I know who your Luga is. He is—"

"Luga is Lugal!" The voice was less sweet and organ-deep with anger. "Are you not coming?"

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

The great pillared halls were indeed of alabaster and they were magnificent to behold. Stepping out of the antiseptic gloom of the stairway from the machine-ridden bowels of the castle on the Peak and around a curved marble fronting which concealed the detested reminder of power sources from poetic eyes, Diarmid gasped and forced back the tears that blurred his first view of such haunted beauty. He stared up at the great pillars that seemed to touch heaven itself. He looked across the polished field of snow-white floor, toward a raised *pièce de résistance*—a graceful pillared alcove with green gardens floating mistily behind the pillars. In the center of the alcove was a silver and white chaise lounge and a long delicately carved table.

A figure holding a harp, wearing a loose girdled robe, sat on the chaise lounge.

"Come to me, Diarmid Patrick, son of Dowd! Approach!" The music was back in the voice as it echoed with godly timbre across the snowy surface; there was a quaver of eagerness to it, beneath the patronizing air, as if even a god might enjoy an occasional visit from a mere mortal.

Diarmid put one foot ahead of another until his boots touched the curving stairs to The Deel's virginal sanctum. The patterned greenery beyond the pillars shimmered and twinkled in the new sun; the mountain air was thin and clear; the man with the harp gave him a bittersweet smile, as if the slight of Diarmid's black curls and green-brown eyes and the perceptive curve of his wide mouth reminded him of far-off days.

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Albert Ossian Deel was short and his shoulders, under the snowy robe, sloped with the weight of incredible years. His hair was worn long, in the manner of the ancient bards, and it was pure white. His face was lined, his eyes pale gray as wintry clouds; yet the centuries he had spent in T'yeer-Na-N-Oge had erased most of the petulance and crankiness and hostility toward a world in which he had never belonged. Here on Eu-Tarah he had known a joy most men only dream about; it had taken Albert Ossian Deel, the hermit Professor of Celtic Verse, a long time to become The Deel—god of a whole green planet—but he had accomplished it.

They stared silently at each other, Diarmid and The Deel. There was no derision. There was, instead, sympathetic understanding. What was wicked and selfish was forgotten.

Such empathic harmony could not last.

The moment was over. There were too many unpleasantnesses and evils to cloud it, to stifle Diarmid's urge to believe in the poetry and nothing else. Albert Ossian Deel's songful rule was too ruthless in its demands.

The man with the harp did not realize this yet. He sighed and gave Diarmid a smile touched with tears.

"At last, Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd! After so many years and so many verses Luga found me a mortal worthy to become part of the Song! Not just a hero, mind you—not just another Lord Cuchulain or Flann—but a true Danian, a demigod! In my verses that sing of Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd I shall refer to you as Lugh, Son of the Sun—for you came to us in a thing of fire, sun-fire, from out of that ache of black emptiness where evil demons rove and rape!"

"That's what you have taught your people. That the Green your Master of Science cased Eu-Tarah in protects them from terrible monsters who devour everything they find."

"And do they not? Is this not true?"

Diarmid scowled, shrugged. What could he say to that? Terra's policies were not studiedly inimical, yet what its Fleets wanted and needed they took. . . .

"Are you any better, Albert Deel? Your heavy hand is on

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everything the Islanders and the Nords do. You manipulate; your pookas and flamewings spy on their every action; your Drudmen priests advise them on your demands after you have informed them telepathically or by some kind of concealed radio—”

“Stop!” The man with the harp held up a remonstrative hand, shuddering. “Such terms are an anathema to my ears!”

“You prefer sorcery and phylacteric?”

“Why not? ’Tis but a semantic expression of thought. As for my ‘manipulations’ as you call them, I assure you, Diarmid Patrick, that when Luga first brought their ancestors as children here to Eu-Tarah, to become heroic figures of my immortal Song, I helped them to start their lives here—yes—but for the most I stayed apart but to watch over them and allow them to fulfill their own destinies.”

“With some coaching from the sidelines.”

“Some,” Albert Deel admitted. “I gave them their early legends and histories from the great and beloved poetry of the first Tarah to build upon.”

“Where did Luga get them? The first ones?”

“From colonist ships gone astray. Most of them would have died had I not saved them. Naturally I was careful to choose, from out of Luga’s profound knowledge of genetic heritage, those children with the proper ancestral background and heroic potential.”

“Naturally,” Diarmid frowned. “And those on the lost ships you didn’t want were left to die.”

“They would all have died, would they not? Even if I had wanted to, Eu-Tarah would not hold all of the humans from all of the ships that joined the great outward rush, when the curious insistence on preserving each life, worthwhile or not, exploded the population to unbearable proportions.”

“Many of the first pioneers died,” Diarmid mused.

“Millions.”

“As for you, you had an ace in the hole. Dr. Jones-Parkin’s super-android. *Luga!* Somehow you diverted the android’s loyalty to you. Perhaps once Jones-Parkin was dead the creature had attached itself to you to survive mentally,

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or in his enthusiasm your *best friend* told you what it was that made Luga identify with his creator and before you killed him you made the transference."

The mild gray face tightened, blushed. "The man was mad! Genius, of course. But completely mad! And that other forlorn creature, Albert Deel, was desperate, suicidal. When he found out that Luga was a creature of infinite power who could literally work miracles with time and matter—"

"Luga got you here, set up the machines that would create the Green shield and all the other things you demanded of him, then set about prowling the galaxy for heroes to populate your New Tara. How he did it was of no interest to you—just so he did it and you could sit up here, plucking your harp and singing your Song!"

Diarmid's burst of scorn made the man with the harp turn away and blink back tears. He stared with wistful eyes into the green mists, then down; when a morning breeze rivened the milky mists behind the verdure, Diarmid saw that he was gazing down at patches of yellow fields muddled here and there with the purple bracken, and far off in the distance gleamed the sea. Following the sweep of his look, like a father hungering after his heroic sons gone into battle, Diarmid's blazing contempt ebbed. How often had The Deel stood like this of a morning, yearning toward the Islands where his children toiled and laughed and cried, hoping greatness for them! Centuries had flown by, generation had followed generation, while the gentle poet stood there looking off at the Towers that were too far away to see.

And, for all the pookas and the flamewings and the Drudmen priests, Albert Deel *had* kept out of their lives as much as he could. Mostly, the evil was as everywhere else, in the people themselves.

"But they might have changed!" he said aloud. "They might have shown progress if it hadn't been for the shadow of Himself hanging over them night and day to stifle their incentive!"

"Progress? You mean like that other world back there, with its vicious political machinations and warped minds? You call that progress?"

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"At least nobody starves," Diarmid grunted. "You suffered because your instincts are poetic, but you lived in a shell. How about the lowborn of the Islands? The vassals? How about Flann's flayings and loppings?"

Albert Deel's eyes sparked fire. "I had nothing to do with the social structure. It came about naturally."

"And stayed that way, thanks to the Song!"

"There have been great wars—"

"Manipulated by you for the heroic passages of the Song!"

"Not so!" The poet's protest was vigorous, yet somehow it had a hollow ring. "Heroic peoples have a great hunger for adventure and conquest. That is what life is all about. That—and beauty. My people have both. They admire courage as they admire poetry and music."

"How about the lowborn?" Diarmid taunted. "It's all very well to titillate your aesthetic inclinations if you live in perfumed rooms and wear velvet—how about the thousands who wear rags and die in childbirth?"

Albert Deel frowned down at his harp. "It is within themselves to raise the general level. I cannot spoon-feed my people or make Eu-Tarah into some repulsive kind of welfare state. They must fight their own way toward the sun. Then indeed shall their victories be glorious!"

"But you could—"

The man with the harp lifted an imperious hand. "Silence, Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd! Enough of this byplay. You seem to expect to change the pattern of a thousand years in a few fleeting moments! Let us rather be the friends I would have us be. Sit you there on the stool in front of my couch and I shall sing to you a fragment of the Song!"

## XIV

THE TRULY ANCIENT BARD, Albert Ossian Deel, beamed approvingly as Diarmid sat down on the low cushion before him, hugging his legs like a boy, and listened.

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*Delightful was the greenclad world they found  
For eyes of humankind had never seen the like  
Nay. Not since Ossian Elder sent his steed  
Upon the mountain path to T'yeer-Na-N-Oge. . . .*

*Here seas of sapphire glimmered by the golden  
Fields, where giant cats and scarlet dragons roamed;  
Where roe and hind leaped free across the brakes,  
Where flowers bloomed for every day and all.*

*When Ossian, the Bard, surveyed this honeyed land,  
He spake, while tears flowed fast and song took wing,  
"This! This bright land shall born the Song!  
My Eu-Tarah shall carve out bright romance!"*

Choked by fragrant memory the harpist drew his hand from the songful strings to brush a tear away on his milky sleeve. Diarmid sat silent. The enormity of what the little bookish professor had bumbled and done, out of his fierce passion for ancient ways, shut away anger. For the next hour, while the buttery sun melted the peaky mists and limned the deep valley with emerald-washed color, he sat in a spell, listening to the Song. The bard's rich voice rolled out the pentameters with passionate fervor, while the ancient fingers touched the harp strings, now grandiose and dramatic, now sweet as new love, now elfin and haunted. And the incredible thing about the Song was that it was true! It scarcely needed fanciful coloring, either, for the elements of fantasy did exist on Eu-Tarah.

When Albert Deel's human throat commenced to rasp, he reluctantly set by his harp. He sighed.

"Now you understand all."

"Not all," Diarmid said slowly. "For instance, what about the *silkie*s and the Shees—and the one-eyed giants?"

The bard frowned faintly. "Aye. They were nice in the beginning. True fairy folk out of the ancient verses. They were brought here by Luga, not just as they are: nor are they human. He found them for me on far planets and

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revised them to suit, over generations. But they proved ungrateful and obstinate."

"In other words, they wouldn't fit themselves into the Song the way you wanted them to."

Albert Deel's mouth pouted up. He shrugged. "I permit them. Doesn't that satisfy you about my beneficence?"

"The Nords are human?"

"Of course!"

"Brought here so that the Islanders would have equals to battle with, after the Islands stopped quarreling among themselves." Diarmid smiled faintly. "That leaves only the Spae. I imagine that you didn't even realize that there were intelligent inhabitants at first, not until some of your folk wandered into the Spae and gave Old Grane the word."

"They kept themselves well hidden." Albert Deel's voice was tart and fretful for the first time. "All I ask of them is to mind their own business, as we mind ours."

Diarmid decided to mind his, by refraining from any discussion of his dealings with Old Grane. It would only increase the bard's poetic petulance and lose him the ground he had gained in winning Albert Deel's confidences.

"What about Fianna?" It was a gnawing thorn that had to come out sooner or later.

"A lovely child, Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips. Reminds me of her great-grandmother, Deirdre. The same compassion for the downtrodden. All heart. Still, there's a bravado to the maid, which likes me well. She will mother valiant and beautifully heroic sons for my Flann."

"Your Flann?"

"Flann, as you must know, is my eye's apple—the very golden lad in brashness and beauty for which all of the generations of doings and dying have trembled in the waiting. He is the very pinnacle of herohood for which I have waited so patiently for a thousand years!"

Diarmid strode roughly between the garden's columns, staring storms at the bright green day.

"And Deirdre's beautiful great-granddaughter is the ideal mate for such a paragon."



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"Paragon! Don't you know about the tortures and all the rest?"

"I know." Albert Deel shrugged placidly. "But heroes are not made of tinsel and paste. Strength and relish for battle demands lusty behavior, or misbehavior, in other departments. Flann demonstrated his heroic ambition by battling his way up—he, a minor cousin to the old Lord of Ane—with not one whit of help from me or anybody else, and plenty to oppose him, never you fear!"

"But he doesn't love Fianna, nor she him!"

"No matter. These things were handled more sensibly in ancient times, as the bards tell us, and thus they are handled here on Eu-Tarah. She will come to love Flann or, at the least, she will love their children. She has the heart for it and—well, if there is an occasional tear shed, 'twill but add poignancy to the Song."

Diarmid's thoughts darted back to an earlier song, the romance of Fionn, favored son of Ossian, who wished to marry Grania, and yet Grania loved another—a man named Diarmid.

"Aye." It was as if the bard's mind had tuned in. "There is heartsome tragedy in the Song, too. How can there help but be when heroes clash and one must die!"

"Then your mind is set on Fianna and Flann marrying?"

Albert Deel sighed and smiled. "What have I to do with it? It is already destined—in the Song. Fianna and Flann. Flann and Fianna. It has a pleasant cadence, has it not? It sings well, don't you think, Diarmid Patrick?"

Diarmid whirled from the mocking sun.

"Except for one thing, Albert!"

"Oh?" He forgave the familiarity, but his tone was frosty.

"I love Fianna!" Diarmid ground out hotly. The words spun across the alabaster halls unbidden. "I will never permit her to marry that—that—" His blind anger couldn't find a word that would sum up the golden boy's character properly.

The bard stood up to full height; his hands moved and fluttered about in dismay and mock sympathy. "I had no idea it was that serious."

"It is that serious and more."

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“And Fianna?”

“She loves *me*. She will obey you, because it is tattooed on the cells of her body and her brain that she has to, but she loves *me!* *Me*, Diarmid Patrick O’Dowd! How does that fit into the Song?”

The ancient bard lifted the silver-embroidered hem of his white robe carefully so that he could pace. Pace and sigh mellifluously, and say “*Ochone! Ochone!*”

Diarmid was swift to regret his bluntness, yet—what else? When the chips were down . . .

He waited stiffly for what he knew was coming.

“If what you say is quite true, Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd, then there is but one possible thing that I can do.”

“Remove me?” Diarmid’s smile was a grim twitch.

“I’m afraid so.” The ancient white head wagged unhappily. “And we were to be such great friends. In spite of my power, I am lonely sometimes and you seem so—how is it the Firbolgs’ forebears had it?—so *simpatico!*”

“I might even fit into the Song,” Diarmid said bitterly.

“But you will! You will, of course! Let me think on this.” The long hair wagged thoughtfully. “No matter. We must give such an important hero as Lugh, the Sun’s Son, all due consideration.” Albert Deel moved to the long table and quaffed from a silver chalice on it. Diarmid took one step toward him, behind, but the poet’s hand came up abruptly, palm forward chidingly. “Nothing physical, please. I know that you are young and brash and overwrought. But spare an old man, please.”

“Why should I?” Diarmid took a second step.

Albert Deel sighed. “Do you see the silver curtain at the end of the alcove, there?” He pointed gracefully.

“I see it.”

“That is where Luga lives. Luga is constantly at my side, as you see. The servants he creates to do my bidding live out of sight below, but Luga himself never leaves me. And, as you can well imagine, Luga has the power and cunning of armies within his own humanoid body.” He clucked and murmured “*Ochone! Ochone!*” lifting his skirts to move slowly across the nave of the great hall.

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"Where are you going?" Diarmid called.

"I never like to watch. I'm squeamish, you see, and I've come to like you a good deal, Diarmid Patrick." His silver sandals padded away a few steps, then he turned. His gray eyes were infinitely sad. "Poor Lugh! To venture through the Green so valiantly, only to fall hopelessly in love with a maiden who is foresworn beyond hope. Aye. How can even a demigod battle against destiny!"

"How—how will Luga kill me?" Diarmid's voice was raw and limp, like his muscles. His cells screamed toward action, but it was useless.

"Oh, but he won't! Not Luga! You will waken in your cell tomorrow morning—"

"It's already morning."

"Illusion. My T'yeer-Na-N-Oge is forever bathed in fogs and mists, but sometimes I enjoy the warmth of the sun on my old bones, even in the middle of the night. Nay. Beyond the green garden is naught but Luga's illusion. It is still night."

"I see. And when I wake up?"

"Flann will feel more secure if he kills you himself, rather than that you simply disappear. You might come back one day to challenge him again. Flann is destined to rule all of the Islands. A magnificent sea war with the Nord Folk is brewing and there must be nothing in Flann's mind that will ruffle the heroic banners of his ambition."

"That's nice."

The bard's nod was pensive. "But you must not worry, Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd. Your own verses in the Song shall be gloriously heroic, too. And—I'm afraid—sad. Lady Fianna, daughter of kings, will have fallen in love with this stranger from the stars and he will have fought most bravely for her, and died in the fighting. Whenever I sing these verses, recalling your dark Gaelic features and that quirkish smile, I shall fight to hold back my tears. But I shall not be able to, Diarmid Patrick son of Dowd. Nay. I shall weep and weep again, for the memory of the legendary stranger who loved and lost will be a sword's thrust straight into my heart."

## XV

DIARMID WATCHED the ancient's lagging progress alongside the pillars, the length of the immense hall, heart in boots. This, then, was the end. Like so many Eu-Tarahan heroes before him, his life was already over; it would be summed up in a brief iambic pentameter ballad for Albert Ossian Deel to weep over while those ancient fingers plucked dulcet notes from the strings of his Gaelic harp. And there was nothing he could do about it. Luga, the god-android, whose personal god was Albert Deel, waited in silent quiescence behind that silver curtain across the curved alcove; quiescent—yes—but charged with immortal powers. And when the bard's halting steps had taken him to some private apartments for his belated night's sleep (where he need not wince to see Diarmid's futile struggles against an omnipotent being), then Albert Deel would give some mental signal to his servant-god to take care of the situation. Diarmid would be fetched back to the cell by the same flamewings who brought him to T'yeer-Na-N-Oge, and Flann would have his long-savored revenge after all. Flann would marry Fianna; his triumph would be complete. There would be no shadow to stir up self-doubts behind that beautiful blue-eyed mask.

Diarmid groaned, staring at the silver curtain. Waiting for the first rustling that would betoken Luga's coming to life. Then—

"Hell! What am I waiting for!"

His heart was in his boots, sure. But so was something else. The memory pack!

He whipped off his right boot and shook it out; his hand trembled so that he could hardly hold it to his pulse while he raced through the poetic key. Irony, there. Tennyson's horns of elfland and all that. But this was no time for fancies; leave those to Albert Deel. They were his specialty, and how!

"What shall I do?" he demanded of his deep brain. "And make it quick!"

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*The key is in the old legend. . . .*

"Don't give me any double-talk!" Diarmid yelled aloud. "I've had enough legend tonight to last me quite a while. I'm sick of the whole bloody rigmarole, from the Partholans and Tuatha de Danaan down to Albert Deel son of a—a—a long line of blatherskites!"

*The legend of the golden land of T'yeer-Na-N-Oge. His memory-computer was calm and imperturbable. Surely you realize the significance? The Land of Never Dying?*

"I realize that, all right. Albert Deel's been singing a Gaelic hootnanny solo up here for the last twelve hundred years!"

*And what keeps him alive. Some supernatural power?*

"Hell, no! Professor Jones-Parkin's super-duper android; Albert Deel's boy, Luga! And any minute now—hey! Wait a minute! You mean that *Luga* follows the Song, too?"

*Why not? Is it not compatible with the totality of Albert Ossian Deel's obsessive penchant for Gaelic legendry? Anyway, there has to be something—some physical-chemical phenomenon within these hallowed halls themselves—that keeps Albert Deel alive. You have noticed, of course, that The Deel never ventures beyond the Golden Gates of T'yeer-Na-N-Oge. Nor does his Master of All Sciences, Luga. All manipulations and tasks are performed by lesser creatures; pookas, flamewings, and whatnot. Perhaps it is something in the very atmosphere itself, fed in from below—*

"I'm up with you and ahead of you!" Diarmid shouted, dropping the memory key back in his boot and leaping out like a gazelle between the pillars into and across the green garden.

His headlong rush ended in an abrupt smash against nothing. An invisible wall—beyond which lay Luga's sunny illusion. Picking himself up off the grass, Diarmid grinned. No wonder Albert Deel's poetic sanctum looked out on fantasy; the whole Castle of T'yeer-Na-N-Oge was surrounded by a force field to hold in what kept the bard ticking!

Legend, indeed!

Diarmid was loping and skating across the smooth alcove when his glance showed movement in the crisp corrugations

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of the silver curtains. Nape-prickling suspense and blatant curiosity caught him in a net and wouldn't let him move another inch.

He must see what Luga looked like. And when the silver curtain whisked suddenly to either side, he saw.

Luga looked exactly like Albert Ossian Deel.

There was logic to this, as well. When a man has a super-servant and that man is a one-track-mind egoist, the natural thing to do is mold that servant (or have him remold himself, casting off the form of that other one-track-mind egoist, Professor Jones-Parkin) into the likeness of himself. This might seem to be confusing, but it kept Himself foremost at all times. Albert Deel was Eu-Tarah's god, and Luga was his god's god, created in Himself's image.

The duplicate Albert Deel stepped out, smiling gently. But what lurked behind those cloud-gray eyes was anything but gentle. It was immobilizing Diarmid, under the cloak of that kindly smile, drawing him toward the outstretched hands. . . .

Diarmid stifled an angry sob, fighting the compelling velvet smile; he wrenched away and jumped down the convex steps in one giant leap; he ran down the hall between the alabaster pillars, in the direction Albert Deel's pattering sandals had taken him. What the memory key had given him, besides the jolt of common sense thinking, was confidence. Confidence that he was not fighting a god-in-residence—but a human being, long-lived it is true, but human nonetheless. And vulnerable. The breathtaking awe of what Albert Ossian Deel's psychosis had flung him into was swept aside, at this point.

While he ran, his mind ran, too. Luga, Master of All Sciences (as the giant-mind of Gaelic legend was named) was limited in power, too. For one thing, he had a *man's* shape and a *man's* functional body. When Albert Deel told Professor Jones-Parkin's stolen android, "Make yourself like me," he did just that. His not to reason why. And Albert Deel had not one whit of scientific knowledge. Not one. Poetry-oriented, he thought in terms of pookas and flame-

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wings and the magic of the Old Ones—so whatever Luga created for him came out *in those terms*. Herein lay the vulnerability and Diarmid must play it for all he was worth!

The power lay in Luga's eyes—his hypnotic eyes. Diarmid had wrenched his entrapped look away in time. But, Luga had servants—and here, at the archway through which Albert Deel had passed, were two of them!

Flamewings.

His wild lunge surprised the first, used as the flamewings were to cringing knee-quaking terror. Diarmid's emotions were boiling over at this point; adrenalin was pumping through his blood like a fever. Physical action was a must. His balled fist caught the rubbery cold face just where a mouth should have been with a fury that sent them both lolloping and sliding through the archway. The flamewing went down under him flailing like an oversize umbrella in a high gale. When Diarmid felt clammy claws grabbing him from behind before he could turn, he back-kicked. He hit something because there was a battish flopping and the clawhold relinquished itself.

Diarmid whirled and lashed out in all directions. His jolting jabs found the pectoralis which controlled the second flamewing's right alate appendage, tore into it savagely; then, with both of them momentarily out of the running and only Luga's fast-pattering feet approaching the archway to Albert Deel's private apartments to worry about—only!—he took no time to think where he must go. He went. He plunged through draperies into a darkened room beyond this foyer.

Albert Deel's bedroom, no doubt.

His spinning glance took in the sparsely furnished chamber, stopping at the druidic couch dramatically placed under high windows that overlooked a benighted garden and moonlit towers of surpassing beauty—another illusion.

Diarmid took no more than a split second to admire the view; stealthy footsteps were crowding toward the small foyer door. He whipped to the couch where Albert Deel slept, dreaming of Flann's heroic conquests and how Fianna's children would be even more heroic; he caught the recumbent

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figure up in his arms just as the alternate Albert Deel burst through the curtains and light flooded the room, causing the ethereal moonlight scene "outside" to vanish.

Luga and more flamewings.

Albert Deel was surprisingly light; under the flowing robes were spindly bones and not much else. But, sputtering indignantly as he woke, those old bones and the muscle strings appended thereto did quite a lot of squirming and twisting. Diarmid held on tight, keeping Albert Deel in front of him and his eyes away from Luga's.

"You have sullied my exalted person!" the bard screamed. "Let me down!"

"Sorry, Albert. But you and I are going to take a little journey."

The sleep-puffed face sagged. "Journey?"

"Um. I think it is time for you to go outside and see what Eu-Tarah is really like. How long has it been? Twelve hundred years, give or take ten?"

"I—I never go out," Albert Deel said, his voice cracked with fear. His eyes, turning to his alter ego, were a trapped bird's. "Luga! Do something!"

"What do you suggest?"

"Kill him, of course!"

"Flann?"

"Forget about Flann! Kill him at once!"

Diarmid slid the bard's bare feet to the floor; keeping one hand tightly around his chest, his other put Albert Deel's skinny neck in a suggestive vise.

"He will kill you first, master. Don't you see that?"

"Nonsense! Nobody can kill me! I'm a god! I am immortal!"

"I'm afraid—"

"Think, Luga! There *has* to be a way!"

"He's so vulgarly physical. And he will do it. He has no compunctions, no sensitivity for our magnificent Song—not really. No compassion."

"Damn little at this stage of the game," Diarmid admitted grimly. "You two have had it all your way, inventing heroes and setting up battles for them to fight, so that you can sit up here playing double solitaire and sing songs about them.



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No matter to you who gets swept aside on the periphery, or how many. You, Albert Deel and Company, have had it."

Luga's deep-throated chuckle stiffened the hair on Diarmid's neck; his grip on Albert Deel's neck relaxed a little.

"You've thought of a way out?" the bard choked.

"Don't have to," Luga laughed. "It is intrinsic within this Irishman and his heavy protestations."

"What is?"

"He can't do it. You're a defenseless old man, when all's said and done, and *he can't kill you.*"

Diarmid groaned. Whatever else Luga was, he was an astute master of psychology. During the conversational by-play, he had been sizing Diarmid up and, from the duality of their personalities, he knew all that had occurred previously. He knew Diarmid was outraged by the bard's assumed godhead, all for the Song. He knew that Diarmid would do anything to prevent Fianna marrying Flann. Almost. Anything except choke or otherwise deliberately bring to his death a quixotic and (sort-of) lovable old man!

What? What?

His grip tried to close in but what was behind it wouldn't let it.

*What?*

In a trice, Diarmid knew. He couldn't kill Albert Deel but—

It was a fantastic chance, but if he was to take it, it must be now. At once. This second. He moved fast, holding the real Albert Deel close; he swept around the couch toward Luga, and on his path, still clutching the bard, Diarmid grabbed up a piece of jade sculpture and brought it down on the pseudo-Deel's head. With emphasis.

Luga crumpled.

"You've killed *Luga!*" Albert Deel squeaked.

"Why not? He was only a machine. A marvelous machine, but an invidious one, for all that. I couldn't kill you—not even by toting you out beyond the force field that keeps you alive—but I could destroy your god-android. *You* made it possible, Albert."

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"I?"

"By duplicating yourself too closely. Luga's body was humanoid, destructible. I wasn't sure, but I had to chance it."

Free, the white-haired bard straightened the folds of his robes as he moved apart from Diarmid, and pulled himself up with regained dignity. Meeting the vehemence of Albert Deel's retrieved displeasure, Diarmid had a pang. The poet didn't quite realize the enormity of his defeat yet. He was alive and would be, until the machine below ran down from want of Luga's tending. But the days of the Song, the epical sovereignty of The Deel, these were severely numbered. . . .

"We will rule Eu-Tarah together, you and I," said Albert Deel. "Here in T'yeer-Na-N-Oge you will never grow old. Forget about Fianna! How important can a slip of a colleen, however beautiful, be, taken against what I can offer you?"

Diarmid didn't tell him. Let him discover for himself, when the machines stopped and the cold of the mountain snows began to creep in.

"Let's go back to the alcove, Diarmid Patrick," the poet suggested. "I'll sing you some more of the Song."

"Good enough, Albert." Diarmid's voice was oddly gentle. "But later. I've got something to do first."

## XVI

THE MEMORY talisman assured him that the transmitter which had brought Diarmid to T'yeer-Na-N-Oge was still in working order and would get him back to Tower Ane. But, first, Diarmid found himself a sword. . . .

Diarmid would never forget the bewilderment stirring in the bard's ancient eyes, the unbelieving mental anguish after twelve hundred years of being godhead; he left him there at the top of the long stairway to the machines, clutching his harp. Already some of the machines were beginning to falter. The black flamewings' eyes had gone out; the pookas were giant statues. Epic legend, like Tennyson's elf-horn, was dying, dying, dying.

## LORD OF THE GREEN PLANET

The nuptials were underway when Diarmid burst in, blade hot in hand. It had taken him a while to dispatch the guards and fight his way up to the throne room. But Fianna's lesson with the rapier had had its effect; surprise and resolution did the rest.

His brash entrance was unnoticed, at first. All eyes were on the ceremony taking place at the improvised virgin-white Druidic altar. Some of the highborn from the other Island Kingdoms were present, those who had been notified in time. Flann had been careful to see that at least a handful of the less troublesome Lords and Ladies were present to witness his first step toward total power. And he had made the affair most impressive.

The banners of all the Islands graced the side walls, but those of Tower Ane—scarlet dragons on shining gold—were triple-size, almost as large as the silver harp on bright Celtic green, The Deel's own emblem, above the altar.

There were no less than twelve Drudmen to lend Himself's holy sanction to the event.

Lady Fianna knelt with Flann before the snowy white altar, with the clusters of tall flaming tapers to either side. Her pale blue gown shimmered with diamonds at shoulders and bodice, but her face was a mask. The diamond tiara denoting her queenly rank which ought to have graced that wing of auburn hair was purposely absent. It was as if, forced to this marriage as she was, she refused it the mockery of pretended joy. Her eight honor-maidens glittered brighter than she; the emerald lights in Fianna's eyes had gone out forever.

Flann was, as usual, radiant as the sun's self. His creamy hose seemed to have been glued to his well-formed legs; the scarlet stripes of his loose-sleeved doublet were modestly tucked with cloth of gold. His golden curls caught the flame of the tall candles, while Fianna's hair was a red fire.

They were beautiful. Both of them. The curve of Flann's bronzed profile against the carved ivory of Fianna-of-the-Dreaming-Lips made them seem to be godlings who had been predestined for one another.

Which they *had*. By Albert Deel. He had yearned toward

them since birth and before, watched them grow from beautiful children into radiant adolescents; no wonder the bard shut his eyes to Flann's misadventures. His prowess with sword and bow, his caginess and ability to sway people, all of this matched his godly beauty. Flann was a doer. A taker. He had slashed his way to this throne and to Fianna. His was the pathway of true heroes!

Diarmid's grip on the pillar behind which he was half-concealed tightened so that the cords in his arm stood out bold. His eyes moved from those grimy spatulate fingers with the bit-off nails up that muscular arm, scratched by claw and bramble and brushed with dark hair; his look swung down to his matted chest. It was bare. One of his knotty legs was bare, too, from his bout with the flamewings.

Nope. Here was no godling. A man. A fighter. A lover. But no god-kin.

The Drudmen chanted the ancient litany.

While the a cappella droning rose and fell over the harsh Gaelic sounds Diarmid saw Flann turn for a possessive look at Fianna. Even from a distance of twenty yards the vainglorious cunning was palpable, in the pinch of the eye pockets, in the curve of red lips. He was wordlessly calling Fianna trollop and worse, delighting in covert sadism. His own corrupt morals must be magnified in others—Fianna above all—for self-justification. But Fianna knew. She had read Flann's true nature right from the first time she saw him tear the wings from a butterfly when they played together in the Tower gardens.

The silence took on a nervous murmur and creak of shuffling boots from impatience in standing so long.

Suddenly Diarmid knew this was crisis. Flann must not gain control of the Islands; he would pervert them and probably destroy them. As he would most surely destroy Fianna, after killing her soul.

He stepped out jauntily.

"Good morrow, friends! And how is my beautiful Fianna this morning?" His greeting filled the throne room.

The stunned gasp in concert gave way to a wave of low voices, a flutter of gay colors when they all turned.

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*"Diarmid!"*

The girl's calling of his name in that breathless happy sound made Diarmid Patrick grow tall; it sped the juices of confidence and infallibility through his brain and his bones. Even the dormant Wees stirred from the impact.

*"Diarmid!"*

Her dreaming lips called his name again while color came to that swan-white face once more; she was on her feet, holding up her satin brocade so that she could run to him.

Flann leaped up, too.

"Where did you come from?" he rasped.

"From The Deel. Only he isn't The Deel any more. So your Drudmen can stop the ceremony. Sung in Himself's name it isn't worth a tinker's dam!"

"You killed The Deel!" Fianna cried. "You did it!"

He held her to him, grinning. Then he faced the tableau and Flann's rage. "No. I didn't kill him, but he is no longer a god. Just a dying old man. There will be no more pookas or flamewings to worry about. The Islands can begin to rule themselves for fair and the Drudmen can chose another worthier deity."

Unbelief began to waver among them in the face of such presumption. Nobody had ever dared to speak such words as these before. *Something* had happened. Something important.

"I don't believe you!" Flann cried. He snapped his fingers for one of his men to fetch his sword. Its blade flew to his grip like a thing of magical light.

He moved toward Diarmid.

"Ask one of your Drudmen to run to the place where The Deel speaks to them. See what happens this time."

Already two of the priests were on their way. Diarmid eased Fianna away and stepped toward Flann with drawn sword. This wasn't going to be easy but it was something he had to do—himself. Not Old Grane and her Wees. No memory key. Just he and Flann and two sharp lengths of polished steel between them.

Flann had twelve years of practice in the fine art of sword-killing to give him edge.

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Diarmid parried his first savage thrust, sucking in a sigh. It would have been so easy to ask the memory key how to do it, then, instructed by the army of unknown experts from the encyclopedia of weaponry knowledge within his deepest brain, to have built himself an infallible weapon from Luga's materials down in the basements of T'yeer-Na-N-Oge. No doubt that was what he should have done. But somehow—no. It had to be Flann's way to give it teeth.

He moved to avoid Flann's deft blade, in uneven circles, as Fianna had taught him. The nuptial guests made a wider circle around them, nodding to one another; they knew what the result of this duel would be. What it always was, with Flann on one end.

Diarmid winced when Flann's blade took blood from his upper arm. He leaped away from death, sweating. He heard the girl sob in her throat, trying not to but petrified with fear. Fear for him. To have got him back only to seek death at the point of Flann's malevolent blade!

Flann's smile grew into a laugh. The Off-worlder had won a trick or two and it had made him overconfident. It would have been better for him to have flown the coop while he had his freedom. As for his wild tale about The Deel . . .

Diarmid put all the tricks Fianna had taught him about Flann's fencing technique to work; it kept the damage down, but little by little, as the attacks strengthened and his ability to parry them was less than educated, he knew that it just wasn't enough. He wanted to be all that Flann was, at least all the hero that Flann was. Jealousy burned and rankled in his blood; he wanted Fianna to see that he was all the man Flann was. But against such insouciance, such trained coordination of every muscle, how could he do it?

He was losing.

Flann's leer was death's own.

Whirling back, churning, he was aware of buzzing shouts near the altar, where the two Drudmen had come back into the throne room. The agitation caused by their news was spreading across the floor in a torrent, becoming panic. They

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knew! The Deel had not answered, or had somehow revealed the truth!

"You see?" Diarmid flung at the smiling killer. "Your promoter is dead! There's no Himself to back you up now!"

The pitch of the voices rose and some of the shouts were anti-Flann. That did it. The smile dropped. The careless rapture of Flann's thrusts was not so careless now. The anger around them was aimed his way. Diarmid knew he must take full advantage of this moment of truth. And he did. He parried; he kept out of range of the sweeping death wand until Flann made his first faltering move. He saw the weakness. When the opening came, he attacked, hard. It was almost as if his sword knew its way through the jewel-encrusted doublet into Flann's heart.

Diarmid drew Fianna out onto her mosaic balcony. It was the evening of the wedding, only this time the choice had been hers. He looked out at the last trailing ebb of emerald light on the ocean's horizon, sighed, curling the girl to him in his arms.

"What's to do now, my Diarmid Patrick?" she asked dreamily.

"As if you didn't know."

"Nay! I mean, The Deel's gone. The Island Kingdoms will find it hard to take hold without some kind of a father-image to look up to, after so long."

"Aye. I know all about that. There will be a period of bewilderment but they will adjust, sooner than you think. What will happen is everything will be better. Flann's gone and we will rout out the other fops and evil Lords eventually. There'll be internal strifes, bound to be. But now the choices are all ours for good or bad."

"If there's a battle with the Nords?"

"I shall lead it."

"But you don't know—"

"I can learn. Better still, we'll work toward a truce, with trade and barter between us."

"And if they insist on fighting us you can build some of those terrible weapons you told me about in the cave, using

this." She held up the memory key on its chain around Diarmid's neck.

Diarmid smiled and lifted it over his head. He moved with her to the balcony's lip, staring down at the space-fish and the legend *TERRA SIEMPRE* for a long moment. He sighed.

"Nay!" Fianna cried out. She snatched the talisman out of his hand. "This thing binds you to the world you came from and it has the power to take you back, away from me!" With an impulsive cry of protest she flung the talisman far out into the night. "Give it back to Nacran and the deep!"

Diarmid's laugh was quizzical, first; then, kissing her, it rang true. They listened for the small splash, but it was lost on the night wind and the cry of the seabirds wheeling across the unseen Green. Listening, it seemed to Diarmid that—from far, far on the foggy peaks, from the silenced halls of T'yeer-Na-N-Oge, came the faint plucking of a harp's strings and a quavering voice singing the last heart-some verses of the unfinished Song.



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