

GAVIN SMITH

THE AGE OF SCORPIO



KILLER SF FROM AN ACCLAIMED NEW VOICE

To Evelyn & Grant Smith (or Mum & Dad as I like to call them) without whom none of this would have been possible (though someone had better tell Mum about this as she doesn't like Science Fiction very much).

THE AGE OF SCORPIO

Gavin G. Smith

GOLLANCZ

LONDON

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A Long Time After the Loss

The deep-space salvage tug looked like it was made of hundreds of years of patched-together scrap parts. The original parts of the ship were buried underneath layers of barely functioning detritus. It was a scavenger ship, a space-going parasite that fed on the misfortunes of others. Just like everything else in Known Space.

Forward was Command and Control, the crew area, workshops and a small internal hold, but much of the rest of the craft was exposed to vacuum. The massive towing apparatus, tools for use in vacuum, rolls of high-tensile net to carry externally salvaged cargo, detachable boosters to attach to towed hulks and hangars for the various drones, including Nulty's own hangar. The rest of the crew had long since given up trying to guess Nulty's original race and gender. A long time ago Nulty had uploaded himself into a deep-space salvage drone and chosen to live in a machine body in the vacuum.

The tug was called the *Black Swan*. Few names could have been less fitting. None of its current crew knew what a swan was and none of them had the inclination to find out.

The oversized engines, used for towing hulks many times larger than the *Black Swan*, were old heavy-duty manoeuvrable pontoons that looked like muscular arms reaching out from the tug. The engines were old and didn't function optimally, like everything else on the *Black Swan*. Only the bridge drive was new. This was because of all the captains based out of Arclight, only Eldon Sloper was desperate enough to agree to a salvage job in Red Space.

'Where are we?' The question irritated Eldon. Most things had for many years now. It was the irritability of your life not working out the way you wanted it to. He hadn't asked for much, but he thought, just a thriving salvage business, but that had been too much apparently.

'Space,' the small weasel-looking man with the pockmarked face and thinning hair answered. Eden had often wondered why someone who looked like that hadn't had himself extensively redesigned a long time ago. Nulty, during one of his rare fallings-out with his captain, had suggested that Eldon had been sculpted, but his personality had bled out and turned him back to his original form.

Eldon didn't have to look at Eden to know his sarcastic answer to her question had irritated her. It had been designed to. After all, she'd had neurononic access to the co-ordinates since they'd left Arclight.

The tug was old enough to still have manual displays and controls, though it was, like nearly all spacecraft in Known Space, piloted via neurononic interface. The pilot and co-pilot/navigator's seats were raised to give a better view of the subjective front of the tug, which the hull's smart matter had rendered transparent, providing them with a panoramic view of outside. Information cascaded down the vista of black and pinpricks of light. The view was repeated in the minds of each of the crew along with pertinent information for their specific job roles.

'We're not quite off the charts but this is pretty much the edge of Known Space. Much further and I expect we'd have to explain ourselves to the Church.' The cheerfulness, implying as it did that Brett felt this was some kind of adventure, further irritated Eldon. It was symptomatic of his overall irritation with the handsome younger man – life hadn't ground the hopes and dreams out of him yet. Well that and the way that Melia looked at him.

‘Eden, wake up Melia,’ Eldon said.

‘~~Oh, is kitty going to do some work for a change?~~’ Edon said, not even trying to hide the acid in her tone.

Eldon turned in the flight chair to look at the engineer. He had always assumed that the glorified mechanic was jealous of Melia, though why she didn’t just sculpt herself to look more pleasing to the eye he had no idea. It wasn’t as if he didn’t pay her enough and she didn’t have the crippling financial responsibilities of trying to run a ship, well, a tug anyway. Eden was neither one thing nor another. He was pretty sure that her base uplift was human, though she’d had some lizard DNA in her somewhere along the line as much of her visible skin was scaled. She’d obviously had both soft-machine biological and hard-machine tech augments, whereas most people tended to go for one or the other. Eldon wasn’t even sure of her gender: he was pretty sure she was base female but from one of the more masculine female genders.

‘Eden, just for once could we pretend that I’m the captain and we’re about to do something real ___,’

‘Fucking stupid?’ Edon asked. Eldon felt a vein on his forehead start to twitch as Brett laughed good-naturedly, of course.

‘Eden, Melia’s our bridge drive specialist – we’ll need her,’ Brett said. *Oh go and fuck yourself you supercilious little prick*, Eldon thought. But it didn’t matter, Melia was all his, a fully bonded concubine bought and paid for. He’d paid for her training and neuronics so she could help with the ship’s systems. So she wasn’t just an ornament and sex toy.

Eden glared at Eldon. He was just as capable of waking the fucking cat, she thought as she ran through the pod’s shutdown sequence on her neuronics. Strictly speaking, as the ship’s engineer the pod’s systems were her responsibility but Eden was pretty sure that Eldon had just got her to do that because he knew how much she hated the cat.

The pod creaked open. It needed maintenance but Eden was putting it off as long as possible in the hope that Melia died in a horrible cryogenic accident. Eden had sent the cursory, bordering on rude, wake-up call to the cat’s neuronics. Melia hadn’t responded but the pod’s systems reported that the cocktail of drugs required to bring the cat to fully functioning consciousness had been administered.

Melia sat up in the pod and made yawning a performance that allowed her to show off all her sculpted assets. Eldon turned to watch the show. Even Brett, healthy polysexual though he was, looked around briefly.

‘That is so fucking demeaning,’ Edon muttered under her breath.

‘And yet everyone does what I want,’ Melia said, smiling. The lightly furred feline humanoid smile was of course predatory.

‘Only because you pander to some xenophile pornographic fantasy hard-wired into the wannabe masculine since before the Loss.’

‘Come on, Eden.’ Brett said. Edon normally liked Brett, but his want for everyone to get on was starting to irritate her as well.

Eldon was looking at Melia with an expression that bordered on worship. His adoration was shattered by the grateful smile that Melia shot Brett.

It was short walk from the pod to Eldon’s flight chair, but the naked feline made a performance of that. Edon tried not to grind her teeth as Melia put her arms around Eldon and jumped into his lap.

‘We’re in space, baby?’ Melia said, rubbing against Eldon and purring gently.

‘Oh put some fucking clothes on!’ Edon said. Melia bared her teeth and hissed at the human mostly – woman.

‘Go and fuck yourself, you puritan bitch!’ Eldon snapped at the engineer.

‘Eden, you know that they have different social mores to us,’ Brett said in a conciliatory tone.

~~‘Would those social mores include manipulating the fuck out of every halfwit with a penis?’~~

‘They like being looked after,’ Brett said.

‘They like other people doing shit for them, you mean.’

Eldon’s mood had improved with Melia waking up but was now beginning to sour again. He needed to replace Eden but needed to find someone of her calibre that came at her price. He tried his best to ignore her. Instead he focused on the wriggling naked feline in his lap.

‘Will we be docking soon so we can go and do something fun?’ Melia asked.

‘Baby Doll.’ Eldon ignored the gagging sound that Eden was making. ‘We need you to do some work.’ Melia pouted. ‘Did you look at the data packet I ’faced you?’ Eldon had to suppress his irritation as Melia shook her head.

‘I figured that if it was important you’d tell me when I woke up.’ Melia concentrated for a bit. ‘We’re in the middle of nowhere, baby. Why’d you want to go into the Red here?’

‘We’ve been given a tip on a some salvage, Baby Doll.’

‘In Red Space?’ Melia’s purring baby talk had gone; now she sounded more businesslike. ‘Isn’t that like, really dangerous?’

‘Yes. There’s a reason the Church has us stay on the routes marked with the beacons,’ Eldon snapped.

‘They’re paying a lot, Baby Doll – they even installed a new bridge drive,’ Eldon continued. Greed and the need to be safe warred within the feline.

‘Enough money to have fun?’ she asked. Eldon nodded. ‘A lot of fun?’ Eldon looked pained but nodded. Eden groaned as she saw her bonus getting smaller. Melia smiled.

‘I’ll go and put some clothes on before what’s-her-face expires in a puddle of jealousy.’

‘While you’re at it, why don’t you fuck yourself?’ Eden suggested.

‘Only with Eldon watching, darling.’

Nulty didn’t want to miss this. It had been so long since the *Black Swan* had gone into Red Space. Her hangar door slid down as he disconnected himself from his immersion link. In aperture configuration Nulty scuttled out of the hangar on deceptively spindly looking insectile legs. Even living as a machine he felt the vertigo of being alone out in the stars and embraced it. He hoped he never grew tired of it. Though he had to cut off the comms chatter from the rest of the crew. He wondered how they could just bicker at times like this.

In front of the *Black Swan* space was ripped open, though Nulty did not appreciate it as violence. To him it looked like a tear lined with a silk ribbon of blue pulsing radiation. Through the tear it looked like space was bleeding, the bright crimson of Red Space. As incredible as this sight was, there was something about the fabric of Red Space that made him feel uncomfortable. He knew Red Space was dangerous. He knew much of it was uncharted territory, and in his several hundred years of spacefaring he’d heard all the stories, though like most people he’d never seen anything. Deep in his metal shell he just couldn’t shake the feeling that it was wrong at a fundamental level. If he were forced to put a word to it, the word would have been vampiric, though every time he thought it through the rational part of his brain scoffed at him.

As they moved through into the eddying, seemingly living crimson smoke of Red Space, Nulty retreated back into his hangar. Reconnecting, Nulty went looking for solace in immersion fantasies.

‘Sorry, boss. Nothing but glitches,’ Brett told Eldon.

‘Baby, I’m bored,’ Melia said. Her tone suggested that she wasn’t just bored, she was more than a little worried.

‘Wow, so this is what Red Space looks like,’ Eden muttered to herself sarcastically.

‘~~Everyone fucking shut up!~~’ Eldon shouted. He was trying to concentrate. He even ignored Melia’s pout, which this time wasn’t just for effect. They’d been in Red Space for the better part of twenty hours, running every conceivable sensor sweep they could. Different rules applied in Red Space, though none of them had ever thought to investigate those rules and find out how they worked. Normally it was just enough to know that some things worked, others didn’t, and stick close to the Church beacons so you didn’t get lost. Those different rules, however, were playing havoc with the sensor sweeps. They had been chasing glitches and sensor ghosts, some of them terrifying in scale, for the last twenty hours.

Despite the uppers, most of them were tired. Because of the uppers, most of them were jittery and even more irritable than normal.

‘What’s that?’ Eldon asked, sharing information with Brett.

‘Another glitch,’ Brett answered wearily. Eldon sighed and then highlighted more of the sensor information. ‘Okay, so it’s a repetitive glitch.’

‘If it’s that regular then there’s a reason. Nulty?’

Nulty had been quiet but he’d been monitoring the sensor sweeps through neurononic interface with his own liquid-software brain.

‘That’s called cause and effect,’ Nulty said over the interface.

‘The signal’s so weak,’ Brett pointed out.

‘Baby, are we moving?’ Melia practically mewed. She sounded frightened.

‘It’s okay, Baby Doll. The Red plays tricks with your perception, just like with the sensor sweeps. We’ve got the engines compensating for a stationary position.’

‘Does it play tricks on the bridge drive as well?’ the feline asked.

Normally Melia liked it when she was the centre of attention. She did not like it so much this time as they all turned to look at her.

‘What do you mean?’ Eldon asked. He wasn’t sure if it was his mind playing tricks on him, but now Melia had said that, it did feel like the *Swan* was moving.

Melia shared the pertinent bridge drive info over the neurononic interface.

‘Shit,’ Eldon said simply.

‘That’s weird. It looks like something’s pulling at it,’ Nulty said over the interface.

‘Ever seen anything like that?’ Brett asked.

‘No, never even heard of anything like that, and I thought I’d heard every bridge drive take off going.’

‘We could be about to start one,’ Brett said, his curiosity overriding his concern.

‘Maybe our mysterious benefactor gave us a dodgy drive,’ Eden said.

‘If something’s pulling at it, then there has to be some kind of measurable force or transmission,’ Nulty said. The rest of them just looked at each other blankly. Nulty had left human mannerisms behind a long time ago. He found himself missing sighing. ‘We’ve been looking for something solid, not a wreck. Reconfigure the sensors to check every conceivable spectrum capable of carrying a signal transmission, then check the rest.’

Much to Eldon’s irritation the others didn’t even check with him; they just followed Nulty’s suggestion.

Eden didn’t say anything, but her expression changed to one of shock.

‘What?’ Eldon demanded. Eden shared the link. Over the ’face the transmission took life in the centre of their minds. At first it just sounded like a deeply unpleasant discordant noise that put them all further on edge. Then with the help of their internal systems they started to discern a pattern.

‘Is that a language?’ Brett asked. Even his normally positive attitude was being overridden by

wariness bordering on fear. It felt like an ancient fear, like something he knew at some basic instinctual level as an uplifted ape. One thing was clear: if it was a language then it was from a species very alien to any of the known uplifted races.

‘It’s singing,’ Eden said. There was something about it, drawing her to it.

‘Turn it off! Turn it off!’ Melia all but screamed. Melia could break the link any time she wanted and had in fact already done so. Eden just shook her head at the performance, but the others had broken their link to the horrific sounding ‘music’. Eldon was hugging Melia.

‘Boss, this is getting a little fucking weird,’ Nulty said.

‘I don’t like this. Let’s go back,’ Melia said.

‘We can’t, Baby Doll. We need the payoff, we really do.’ Eldon’s tone was pleading for understanding.

‘Shine any light on this, Cap’n?’ Brett asked.

‘Just these co-ordinates. Find the hulk and take it to a rendezvous point.’

‘Not back to Arlight?’ Nulty asked. Eldon shook his head. Nulty saw the gesture through C and C’s optics.

Nulty ran some diagnostics on the signal, which was coming in from some exotic part of the EM spectrum. Eden had to scrub out the background noise of the Red to isolate it. Nulty shared the information and then did some further checking. That part of the EM spectrum matched some of the emissions produced by the bridge drive.

‘It’s talking to it?’ Brett asked when Nulty shared the information.

‘Don’t see how, it’s a drive,’ Eldon said. At this Nulty would have laughed but as an electronically uploaded consciousness it would have been an affectation.

‘No offence, boss, but the Church keeps their manufacture so secret we can’t really say anything about this for sure,’ Nulty said. ‘It might well be talking to something.’

Even Brett looked horrified. Melia bolted away from Eldon and hissed at him, all submissive coquettishness forgotten now.

‘No way! Fuck that! I am not getting involved in any Church shit! You can take my contract and use it to sodomise yourself for all I care.’

‘Are we working for the Church?’ Brett asked more reasonably.

‘I don’t know, not as far as I know,’ Eldon said, as confused and frightened as the rest.

‘If this is to do with bridge drives then more likely it’s a Consortium bid to break the Church monopoly on their manufacture,’ Nulty said.

‘You fucking moron!’ Melia screamed at Eldon.

‘I didn’t know,’ he said defensively. ‘We’re jumping to conclusions.’

‘But that doesn’t make any sense,’ Brett said. ‘I mean, why us? After all we’re a bit . . .’

‘Crap?’ Melia suggested.

‘Rough and ready, I was going to say.’

‘Deniability and expendability,’ Nulty answered.

Melia turned on Eldon. ‘That’s it. Contract’s null and void. Get us out of here.’

‘But, Baby Doll—’

‘Don’t Baby Doll me, you repellent, cockless fucktard. Get us out of here before a Church cruiser turns up, kills us, destroys our backup and murders everyone we ever met. I may be the cheapest clone possible of the original, but I have no wish to wake up in one of their immersion interrogations!’

Eldon seemed to deflate. He’d lost his big score, through that probably the *Swan* and his only real pleasure in life in one brief moment. Brett’s look of sympathy wasn’t helping either. Then he realised that Eden had been uncharacteristically quiet throughout Melia’s outburst.

‘Are you still listening to that noise?’ he asked. Brett turned to look at Eden. Melia did as well.

an expression bordering on horror across her feline features.

Eden just shrugged.

‘Shut it off, now,’ Eldon said. Eden did so.

‘There’s another signal,’ Eden said. She tried to share the second signal. She found that the others weren’t so swift to interface with her.

‘You’ll want to hear this.’

‘She’s right,’ Nulty said over the interface. The others relented. This message was much weaker than the first. ‘What the fuck is this? A radio wave?’ he mused to himself.

‘What’s a radio wave?’ Brett asked. Nulty ignored him.

The language was unknown but sounded like one of the uplifted races, probably human. Eldon started to ask if it was live but stopped as it repeated itself. It was some kind of recording. He had the neunonics searched for a translation program but came up with nothing despite the thousands of variant uplift languages and dialects in his systems.

‘I’ve got it,’ Nulty said over the interface. His voice didn’t sound right. ‘It’s a mayday signal, the most human common.’

‘Bullshit,’ Eldon started.

‘From before the Loss.’ The four of them on the bridge just stared at each other. Eldon was the first to smile. He looked over to Melia to see the cash signs mirrored in her eyes.

Nulty lived for extravehicular activity but he still wasn’t loving Red Space. Space should be real big. Somehow the strange gaseous-like nature of his surrounding environment seemed to be bearing down on him, making him feel claustrophobic. The living smoke effect of Red Space that he was used to was so much thicker here than on the normal Church-approved routes.

‘You got it?’ Eldon asked as Nulty scuttled over one of the detachable boosters, sending a diagnostic check as he did so. He’d sent some of the vacuum drones out but didn’t want to let them get too far from the drifting tug as he wasn’t happy with the ’face connection.

He reached the final spotlight and snaking tool limbs rapidly began repairing the ‘non-essential system’, as Eldon had called it when Nulty had suggested repairing it the last time they were docked at Arlight. He jury-rigged it and then stressed the repair by increasing the power output. The billowing red clouds were so thick here that the sensors were now next to useless, too much interference. It had to rapidly come down to just what they could see with the optics.

They were letting the bridge drive pull them to wherever it was apparently going. Melia was running complex intelligent navigation programs that they hoped would be able to take them back to their initial position, or close to it, because they had no idea where they would end up with even a small amount of movement in Red Space.

The spotlight’s beam stabbed out into the living smoke with enough power to put some laser weapons to shame, illuminating swirling eddies in the red gases.

It appeared through the smoke like some primal leviathan.

They weren’t used to Nulty screaming. He just didn’t emote that much.

‘Turn on the engines! We’re going to hit it!’

Eldon and Brett reacted with a thought. It was a simple matter to swing the engine arms around a point subjectively forward and trigger the engines, halting and then quickly reversing the gentle forward momentum of whatever had been attracting the bridge drive.

Eldon was about to reproach Nulty for his overreaction, but Nulty chose that moment to trigger the rest of the spots and bring them to bear. Eldon saw just how close they had got to the other ship – whatever it was.

‘How did we miss that?’ Eldon asked in awe. It was at least the size of a capital ship. He was pretty sure he’d seen smaller habitats.

‘Even now it’s barely there,’ Eden told him. She was just staring at it through the transparent smart-matter hull. All of them were using the ship’s sensors and feeds from the drone, Nulty and the external optics to get a more complete picture in their minds via their neurononic interfaces.

It was massive, dwarfing the *Black Swan*. The smoky Red Space seemed to stick to it somehow helping to conceal it.

‘That’s not right,’ Melia said.

Eldon and Brett worked in conjunction to manoeuvre the *Swan*, tilting it subjectively downward so they could get a better look at their find as they travelled down the length of it.

‘Can you clean up the resolution on the lenses?’ Eldon asked Nulty. ‘I think the gas is messing up.’

‘No, you’re seeing what I’m seeing,’ Nulty said.

The hull of the ship, if that’s what it was, seemed to be made out of some kind of thick heavy-duty material which looked like the rubbery flesh of some sort of abyssal sea creature. It was so large that it was difficult to get an idea of its shape but it seemed aerodynamic enough for atmospheric operations. What he could see of the shape reminded Eldon of marine life, or maybe a seed pod. Then he saw the hull of the ship move. Like it was breathing. Melia, noticing this through one of the drone optics feeds, let out a little gasp.

‘I don’t like this,’ the feline said.

‘Can’t you say anything else?’ Eden demanded. ‘Very little heat bleed. If its internal systems are working then they are very efficient – fuck all is penetrating its hull. Also getting some very strange energy readings from it, in weird spectrums. Like it’s generating a field of some kind.’

‘Be more specific,’ Eldon snapped.

‘Can’t,’ Eden said, sharing her readings with the rest of the crew.

‘It’s a Naga spore ship,’ Melia said.

‘There’s no such thing as Naga,’ Eden scoffed. Melia looked like she was about to argue.

‘You know what it looks like, don’t you?’ Brett asked. ‘A colonial carrier.’ Eldon started laughing; he liked it when Brett said something stupid.

‘Except they were made of metal. We’ve all been in one: they’re museums and churches now.’

‘Actually I grew up on habitats,’ Brett said. Eldon rolled his eyes as if that explained everything. ‘But I’ve seen pictures, and if they had been made of some kind of flesh then that’s what they’d look like.’

‘He’s got a point, boss,’ Nulty said over the interface. ‘Knew this guy once who claimed that all the museums and the churches that we supposed were in the hull of old colony carriers were actual fakes. ‘Course he also said he used to be one of the Lords of the Monarchist systems.’

‘Nulty, what do you make of the composition of the hull?’ Eden asked. She knew but she didn’t want to be the one who said it.

‘That hull’s alive,’ Nulty said, the first to give words to what they’d all been thinking. ‘That’s Seeder biotech, that is.’

On the bridge the four of them glanced at each other. They knew that managed correctly they could be worth a fortune, if they could hold on to their claim. The Seeders were the semi-mythic progenitor species of the uplifted races as well as the inspiration of worship for the Church. Most of the uplifted races having long abandoned the idea of actual supernatural gods.

‘Why’s it speaking monkey if it’s Seeder tech?’ Melia asked before remembering everyone else. ‘The hull on the *Swan* was either human or started off that way. Brett looked at her reproachfully. Eden just glared.’

‘I don’t know. I’m not getting anything through the hull. Eden?’ Nulty said.

~~Eden went through the sensor suite, but a combination of the Red Space environment and the craft/thing’s hull/skin was blocking even the harshest of active scans.~~

Something occurred to Brett. ‘Was this the area where the glitch was coming from?’ he asked Eldon.

Eldon considered this. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘So what? We tow this to the rendezvous and get paid?’ Melia asked, undisguised greed in her voice. She was not very interested in sensor glitches. Eldon seemed reluctant to answer the question.

‘What?’ Melia demanded.

‘We need to go on board,’ Eldon said. Melia looked at him like he was insane. Brett was nodding eagerly.

‘Fuck that!’ Melia said.

Eden was irritated to find herself forced to agree with Melia. ‘Go inside what? We don’t even know if it’s a ship! It could be a fucking animal for all we know, and I don’t want to get swallowed. If it is a ship, the environment might be completely inimical to human life.’

Melia was nodding in agreement.

‘Then why’s it broadcasting in human common?’ Eldon asked.

‘I don’t know, a caught transmission? A lure?’

‘How dangerous can they be if they’re transmitting a mayday?’ Brett asked. Eden just looked at him as if he was a moron.

‘He’s right,’ Nulty said. ‘We want to salvage this, we have to check to see if it has crew.’

‘The crew of that thing can’t be subject to Consortium salvage laws,’ Eden said, getting more heated. ‘If that’s Seeder tech, what if the whole thing is filled with servitors? Have you thought about that?’ They gave a shiver. All of them had seen the wedge-headed, multi-limbed, armoured carapaced effigies of the last living remnants of Seeder biotech, crucified on the X-shaped crosses in churches.

‘Then we can’t take it back into Known Space,’ Nulty said.

‘Look, this is a big fucking score—’ Eldon started.

‘Yeah, for you. Even with a bonus it’s not worth the risk for the rest of us,’ Eden said. Eldon was less than pleased to see Melia nodding in agreement.

‘But, Baby Doll, you’ll get to share in my fortune,’ Eldon pleaded.

‘Uh uh, not this time. I want an equal share. When I agreed to our little arrangement you misled me into thinking that you were a ship’s captain . . .’

‘I am.’

‘No, you’re owner of a piece of shit. I want an equal share.’

‘Equal share? Are you actually going to do something or just hide in your cryo-pod until it blows over?’ Eden asked.

Melia turned to glare at the more masculine, scaled woman. ‘I’ll do my bit,’ she answered haughtily. Eden just raised an eyebrow.

‘Look. I am the captain, and you will fucking do as you’re told or you’ll be out that airlock for mutiny!’ Eldon screamed at them, visions of his fortune slipping away. Melia, Eden and Brett just looked at him sceptically.

‘And how do you intend to enforce that?’ Eden asked. Eldon turned to look pleadingly at Melia. He couldn’t believe she’d turned on him after he’d treated her so well.

‘Oh, grow up,’ the feline snapped.

‘I think it’s time to negotiate, boss,’ Nulty said.

‘This is mutiny,’ Eldon said weakly. The rest of them ignored him. ‘We don’t even know how to get in.’

Eldon had finally admitted how much his mysterious contact was paying him after Eden held him upside down and Melia threatened to torture him. To make matters worse, Brett had had to intervene on Eldon's behalf, further adding to the humiliation.

Brett was piloting the *Swan* steadily nearer to the craft/thing, trying to get close enough for the active scans to work, when it happened. During a very slow pass, something seemed to grow out of the craft. It looked like a tunnel made of the hull's rubbery flesh.

'What is it?' Melia asked. There was something obscene about it, Melia decided, and it wasn't if she had terribly delicate sensibilities. 'Some kind of defence system?'

'I don't think so,' Nulty communicated over the interface. 'I think it's a docking arm?'

Brett swung the engine arms around to bring the *Swan* to a halt. The tunnel seemed to be swaying in the cloudy Red Space in front of them.

'You're going to let that touch the *Swan*?' Eden asked doubtfully, looking over at Eldon. Eldon was crouched in the corner, sulking. He had been trying to work out how get the money for the ship/thing and then burn the rest of the crew. He looked up at the sound of Eden's voice.

'Oh what? Am I captain again? Is there actual work to be done?'

'Take it easy, Cap'n,' Brett said good-naturedly.

'Go and fuck yourself, muscle-head,' Eldon muttered. Brett just laughed as if it was friendly banter.

Eldon had seen the thing in his mind but he walked over to look through the transparent hull.

'Nulty, if it goes badly do you reckon you can cut that thing?' Eldon asked.

'Er . . . yes,' Nulty said. He did not sound very sure of himself.

Eldon turned to Eden. 'Sure, why not? A fifth of something is better than nothing and you got to take risks if you want the pay-off. Besides,' he stabbed a finger at Melia, 'maybe then I can get rid of this bitch and get a decent concubine.' Eldon glared at her. 'You're coming. None of your bullshit. I've got the contract. You don't come, you don't get paid, understand me?' Melia looked like she was about to argue. 'Besides, if it all goes horribly wrong I want to make sure that you die as well as me.'

Melia hissed and made an obscene gesture.

Brett pushed both hands into the ball of semi-solid liquid. The spacesuit started crawling up his arms covering them and then growing down his torso. He held the visor in front of his face and the liquid suit crawled over his head to connect with it. The armoured environment bladders on the suit inflated as they took gas from the surrounding atmosphere. The suit had already connected to his neurons and Brett adjusted the gas mix with a thought.

He had already adjusted his nano-screen, brought it in close to his body, only leaving a little outside the suit. Whenever he did this it always made his skin crawl but he knew this was psychosomatic. A screen of nanites surrounded Brett, like everyone else in Known Space, everyone who didn't want to quickly sicken or die and could afford it. The screen prevented him from being attacked by rogue nano-swarms, provided him with a degree of privacy and stopped him from coming down with all but the most sophisticated advertising nano-viruses. Nanite pollution was so extreme in all but the most expensive enclaves in Known Space that without a screen you would be dead within days, or at very best sporting a colourful rash advertising the latest soft drink.

However, for cultures that did not have such a high level of nanite pollution exposure, the nano-screens themselves could be potentially harmful.

'First-contact protocols?' Brett asked. He had just realised that he'd always wanted to say that.

Melia and Eden stopped and looked at him as if he was mad.

'What do you think happens if there's a crew on board, asshole?' Eldon demanded. Brett was taken aback by the anger in his tone. Eldon was just pissed off that he had to spell this shit out

Brett. 'We get nothing. Reining in our nano-screens is the least of our issues.'

~~Brett just stared at Eldon as he lifted one foot and then the other so the spacesuit could assemble the hard-wearing soles.~~

Eldon was holding the quick-release holster for his double-barrelled laser pistol to the thigh of the suit so it could bond, as Eden handed out the double-barrelled disc guns. The disc guns were basically electromagnetic shotguns. It fired solid-state cartridges of smart matter that split into multiple razor-sharp aerodynamic discs. Designed to be fired semi-automatically, the disc guns had a pump-action mechanism to help clear the inevitable jams. Like most brutal close-quarters weapons they had been designed by one of the tribes of lizard uplifts. Eden held out one of the weapons to Brett. He eyed it through his visor for a while and then took it from her.

'Just so you know,' Eldon said, holding up a hardened biohazard container. 'Just so you're in just as much trouble as the rest of us if this screws up. Just so you can't claim you had no knowledge or no way out, this is a bucket of the most potent virals I could lay my hands on. If we get in and there's crew, this is for them.' Brett stared at it. He looked like he was about to object but he caught a glimpse of three hard faces watching him through darkening visors. 'In fact, I think you should carry this.' Eldon held the canister out. Eldon was enjoying this, starting the boy down the long road of more compromises and disappointments that was life. He also thought he was doing the boy a favour. You want to prosper, then people are going to have to die; it was an important life lesson.

'I don't want to—' Brett began.

'Just fucking man up,' Eden snapped at him. Brett had thought they were friends.

Brett swallowed hard and took the canister from Eldon.

'Fuck up, you get left. Don't hold up your end, you get left. Understand?' Eldon was starting to feel more in control again. Also, he was never going to get tired of making this kid miserable. Brett just nodded.

With a thought Eldon fired the *Swan's* engines gently to spin the ship slowly and match up the end of the tunnel of flesh with the *Swan's* crew airlock. Compared to the jarring impact of most docking arms, this felt like a kiss.

Eden checked the readings from the sensors on the outer airlock door in her neurononic feed. 'We've got a seal. Atmosphere looks fine, all within uplift tolerances, no discernible exotics, no discernible nano-activity, but I'll run a more thorough check when we're through . . .'

'What?' Melia asked.

'Nothing, just it looks a bit moist is all.'

Eldon tried not to think that he'd let his clone insurance lapse. He transferred command protocols to Nulty.

'You've got the *Swan*, Nulty,' he said across the interface.

'Okay, boss. Go careful.'

Eldon sent the command to open the airlock.

Northern Britain, a Long Time Ago

The sound of the water lapping against the rocks at the mouth of the cave had pushed through into her dream and gently woken her. Britha opened her eyes. Her lover's silver skin reflected the sunlight that had managed to penetrate the sea cave. The selkie's fine scales turned the light into a glittering rainbow pattern.

'You slept,' Cliodna said.

Cliodna was sitting next to her, naked as she always was, gently stroking the border where the shaved stubble on the side of Britha's head met her long dark-brown hair.

Britha rolled onto her side to better look up at the other woman. The muscles on her back flexed, making the tattoo of a Z-shaped broken spear entwined with a serpent move as if the snake lived. 'More like passed out,' Britha said, smiling up at Cliodna, who smiled back, but the smile looked sad.

The dark pools of her lover's eyes were impossible to read, so different were they from those of Britha's own people, the ancestor folk, the Pecht as they called themselves.

Britha propped herself up on her elbow. 'What's wrong?'

'I . . .' the selkie started and went quiet as if she was searching for the words. The last few times Britha had visited her, Cliodna had seemed even more quiet than normal. Britha felt an ache in her chest.

'Cliodna . . .' Britha reached for her. The change was instant. Cliodna hissed, the nails that Britha liked to feel across her skin suddenly looked like claws; needle-like teeth were bared, and the selkie bolted for the back of the cave. Britha started away from her lover. She knew that the other woman shared ways with the animals, as Britha did if the ritual required it of her, but Cliodna had always seemed so gentle. Britha angrily suppressed her moment of fear. She bore her scars well. Fear was not something she could entertain even in the face of the Otherworld.

Britha pushed herself up onto her feet and made her way into the darkness at the back of the cave. She was still naked; it did not occur to her to clothe herself. Like many of her people she was more comfortable naked, she was even prepared to go to war like this. Intricate interwoven tattoos of animals whose traits she wanted, or symbols of power that could armour her, covered her upper right arm, across her muscular shoulders and down her left arm to her fingers. More tattoos curled down onto her breasts and ran up her right calf. All of them were various shades of blue, from the darkest midnight to the brightest summer sky. The woad had taken her to many places and shown her many visions when they had pierced her skin with it. She had lost days travelling beyond this land in the waking dreams it brought on.

Cliodna was crouched down hugging her legs, her long dark hair covering her features. Britha crouched down and reached for her, but Cliodna flinched away from her touch.

'Cliodna, what's wrong?' Britha asked.

'I . . . we're not like you.'

'Selkies?'

'That's just what you call me. To give me a name, so you can understand . . . We have to do things – we're governed by different laws.'

'What are you telling me? That your people wouldn't approve?' Britha asked. She didn't think

that the rest of the Cirig would like what they were doing either, but none would dare challenge her and after all, one of her responsibilities as *ban draoi* was to treat with the Otherworld. Though that probably wasn't what they had in mind, Britha mused.

Cliodna's laugh was short and bitter. 'My people . . . they would not understand but nor would they care.'

'Then what?'

'I can't explain . . . my responsibilities – things that I have no choice but to do . . .'

'What are you telling me?' Britha all but demanded. She was not the most patient of people and she was beginning to feel exasperated. Britha felt she was already being a lot more patient than she would have been with a male lover but then something about their pricks turned them into lack-wits.

Cliodna looked up at her, her long black hair parting. The selkie's eyes had never looked so alien to Britha. She could see herself reflected in those deep black pools.

'I'm leaving. I have to go south. I have no choice.'

It was the pain – she actually felt it physically – that made Britha realise just how much she loved Cliodna. At first it had just been for the thrill of it. Then her visits had become more and more frequent. They had swum together. Cliodna had taken her far out into the cold sea on warm days. Guided her through the dangerous currents and fierce tides. The selkie was much more at home in the sea than on land.

Britha hated the tear that ran down her cheek. She could never show weakness. Tears were for the men in their cups listening to laments of ancestors long gone.

'I don't want you to go,' was all she managed.

'You will. I'm changing. Who you know will soon be gone.'

'What do you mean? I don't understand.' Britha hated the desperation in her voice.

Cliodna cocked her head to one side. Her face crumpled with emotion but no tears came. Britha wanted to hate her for the lack of tears.

'I have to go south, far south. The waters have been poisoned. There's something . . .'

'I'll come with you,' Britha said, knowing she couldn't even as she said it. Cliodna shook her head, looking frightened. She grabbed Britha's arm, her nails digging in.

'Promise me you won't!' Cliodna all but hissed. Britha looked down at her arm, blood flowing from five wounds where Cliodna's nails had broken the skin. She looked back up at Cliodna. 'See?' Cliodna asked desperately.

'I'll not go where I'm not wanted,' Britha said evenly, trying to compose herself, trying to wrap her pride around herself like armour.

Cliodna took Britha's head in her hands, leaned forward and kissed her. Britha wanted to resist but she couldn't. She wrapped her arms round her lover and reciprocated. Cliodna tasted the salt of her lover's tears.

'No matter what happens, please remember that I love you, that I loved you,' Cliodna said when they finally broke apart. Britha just stared at her, her face stained with tears.

Cliodna stood up. She jumped from the rock. Powerful legs propelled her through the air and into the pool at the mouth of the cave. Sinuous movements carried her rapidly through the water, helped by the webs of skin between her long fingers and toes.

Britha watched her go.

'Loved?' she asked an empty cave.

Britha cursed herself and turned to look out at the sea. Hoping that the wind and salt spray would explain her red eyes. Normally grey and rough, the sea was bright blue under a cloudless sky today, an otherwise beautiful day. Talorcan was waiting for her. The finest tracker in the tribe, the short wind

man was considerably less full of himself than the rest of the *cateran*, or warband. Even so, Britha did not wish him to see her emotion. She looked out at the sea making sure she was fully composed.

‘*Ban draoi?*’

‘Do you know what happens to the curious who follow too closely dealings with the Otherworld?’ Britha asked.

‘The *mormaer* bid me fetch you – it’s starting,’ Talorcan said. His expression was difficult to read but he seemed to be looking at her as if searching for something. His beard was trimmed, his long dark hair let loose and blowing in the coastal wind. He wore no treads, just his *blaidh*, which came down to just above his knees. Tattoos spiralled up both legs and also ran down from his temple, across his cheeks to his chin. He had his bow with him, but no weapons of war, just his dirk at his waist.

Britha smiled.

‘More like Cruibne’s worried that I’ve run off with his horse.’

Talorcan nodded but kept his peace. Britha looked at him a while more; he held her look. There was little scar tissue on him: he fought quickly and cleverly when he had to.

Britha went to one of the powerful heavyset ponies that the Pecht favoured. She called it Dark Cloud because its near-black colouring reminded her of storm skies. Britha wrenched the spear that Dark Cloud had been tethered to out of the ground. She retrieved her iron-bladed sickle. Clodhna didn’t like the cold metal anywhere near her. Britha pushed the sickle through the belt that held the rough-spun brown wool robes of her calling closed and then swung up onto the pony, riding bareback, her legs against the horse’s flanks. She pulled her fringed hood up to protect her eyes from the sun and headed south and west down the coast. Talorcan broke into an easy run to keep up with her.

Ardestie was on a flat plain that looked down on the silver water of the mouth of the River Tatha where it emptied into the cold harsh northern sea. It was a large settlement of about twenty or thirty roundhouses, wattle and daub structures with conical thatched roofs, surrounded by fields of speckled bere barley, flax and fat hen. The fields had been hacked out of the soil generations before. Fields not used for crops were grazing for horned Soay sheep and the hairy cattle, not all of which they had stolen on raids. Beyond the cultivated fields were the thick woods that covered all but the most mountainous or boggy parts of the land. In the woods the wolf, lynx, bear and spirits from the Otherworld ruled.

The roundhouses lived in the shadow of the broch, a circular tower of stone blocks at the summit of the Hill of Deer. The broch was a watchtower and place of refuge if they were attacked. From the broch they watched for raiders from the Fib, the rival Pecht tribe across the river, and the blonde sea devils from the sea and ice far to the north. It also provided them with sight up the river over the thick woods to the hill fort some five or six miles to the west. From the broch they could see when the traders came down from the crannogs on Loch Tatha in their log canoes to trade with the foreign merchant ships that came from hot lands far to the south.

The broch was also where the Cirig stored the parts of their war chariots. The small cart-like vehicles could be assembled rapidly for battle. Each chariot was pulled by two of the small, rugged ponies that belonged to the horse-rich Cirig. The chariots’ lightweight construction meant that they were capable of considerable speed and were very useful against the northern tribes, who did not use chariots as the mountainous terrain of their home made them useless. They were also useful on the long coastal beaches when the blonde sea demons from the ice raided.

The largest of the houses was the meeting place as well as home to Cruibne MaqqCirig, the *mormaer*, or sub-king, of the Cirig. Ardestie was the capital of the Cirig, one of the seven tribes of the Pecht, descended from the seven sons of Cruithne.

Britha passed the forge set apart from the village, ignoring the fire watcher who gazed longing towards the village. ~~Britha, like all women, was banned from the forge. It was where the men did the ritual sex magic. As a child in training she had sneaked into the forge, eager to learn the secrets of their magic as well. She had watched them stoke the belly of the furnace, watched the molten metal pour hot from the men's metal vagina. She had not been impressed. They could keep their magic. Later, when she had learned her own sex magic, she had thought it more fun. Yet, like her, the metalworkers wielded magic and like her had to live outside the tribe to serve it.~~

As Britha rode towards Ardestie, the sun had not yet turned the sky to blood on the western horizon but the feast was already under way. As she rode by the grain pits, already sealed after the harvest, she saw the body. The powerfully built and scarred man had been opened across his chest. Britha did not recognise him but thought him one of the Fib from across the river. She did recognise the cut. Nechtan, Cruibne's champion, had done this. Presumably the man had challenged him for the hero's portion. Britha's smile was without humour. She understood the need for this but always found it wasteful. Still, the ravens and crows deserved a feast too, and he would have died well with a sword in his hand.

She could hear the sound of voices raised in jest and laughter, accompanied by the *crwth* lute, the *bodhran* drum, the *feadan* flute and the triple pipes, though they were playing softly. People would be relaxed now. Cruibne would have displayed his largesse but there would still be business to discuss.

Britha rode to where the rest of the horses had been tethered. She did not like that there were not nearly as many guests as she had expected. She dismounted Dark Cloud and slipped the rope off his neck. Talorcan watched impassively as Britha whispered into Dark Cloud's ear. Then she slapped the large pony on her flanks. Dark Cloud was free to roam. She knew to come back close to Ardestie one night finally fell. Even a pony trained for war by the Cirig was no match for a pack of wolves or a bear, both of which lived in the forest to the north and east of them.

Britha turned towards the feast.

'Why haven't the others come?' Britha asked Talorcan, seeking as much information as she could find before she had to join the feast and play her part. Talorcan just shrugged. 'Do you receive many compliments for the way you use your tongue?' she asked. Talorcan finally smiled but didn't answer. Britha sighed and turned, heading towards the feast.

'Look at the size of this head!' Cruibne said. The hulking grizzled old man held up a massive misshapen skull that had been embalmed in cedar oil. Rents and cracks in the skull had been filled with pewter. 'This one gave me no end of trouble, I tell you!' The *mormaer* was wearing his best plaid trousers – well, his only pair but it looked like he had dunked them in the river – and a new *blaidth*. He had iron rings in his beard made from the blades and spearheads of dead enemies and a thick white gold torc around his neck as befitted his position in the tribe. Similar torcs, also of white gold, were wrapped around either arm. Because of his advanced age – he was in his late thirties – most of his skin was covered in the tattoos that told his story, armoured and protected him. What skin that wasn't tattooed tended to be scar tissue. He was missing three fingers from his left hand and two from his right. Part of his skull was misshapen and no hair grew there due to a blow from an axe swung by a sea-raider not three years past. 'A sea demon! Allied with the Goddodin!' The Goddodin were a tribe of Britons to the south, constantly warring with the Fib and the Fortrenn.

'Or another small man with a huge swollen head!' Britha smiled. It had been Ethne who had shouted. She was Cruibne's oldest and fiercest wife, a heavyset woman of an age with Cruibne and just as scarred and tattooed as he was. In battle she could be looked for standing next to the *mormaer* or driving his chariot. Like the rest of the *cateran* she wore a thick silver torc around her neck. Ethne had killed more than one of Cruibne's other wives whom she had felt was getting above herself. There was laughter at Ethne's comment.

Good. They were already in their cups. Britha had brewed the heather ale herself, an old and secret recipe. Cruibne had made sure that there would be more than enough of the *uisge beatha*, and he was not drinking as much as he appeared to be.

‘Och woman, you spoil all my stories. Well I tell you, it was worth taking his head. Look how much drink it holds!’ Cruibne tipped the massive skull and drank deep from it, much of it running down his neatly trimmed beard to the sound of more laughter. Cruibne had a hundred skulls and a hundred stories.

Some of the guests at the feast were starting to notice Britha’s quiet approach. Her hood was up. Much of what she did was about performance, a lesson she had learned early in her training. Her hood spread across the feast. She had timed it well: the sun was bleeding into the sky and the light was changing. The time between times, a good time to evoke the Otherworld.

The quiet was broken only by the sound of one of the landsmen, who had not noticed the *ban draoi*’s approach, dropping a red-hot stone from the fire into the cauldron. There was a *crack* as the stone split. People would be having stone with their stew, Britha thought. The landsman Britha recognised as Ferchair, a crofter from land to the north of the woods. Britha had delivered his first child, a daughter, in the cold winter. The child had survived, she knew. Spring was the best time for birthing, but at least Ferchair knew his daughter would grow up strong now.

Ferchair turned to see why it had gone quiet. He saw Britha, averted his eyes and made to sit down again far behind the inner circle of the *cateran* and their noble guests.

Looking round the inner circle, Britha saw missing eyes, ears, fingers and a lot of scar tissue. All were ugly enough to be warriors; there were few who looked blade-shy around the fire.

Cruibne looked up and smiled. His two massive deerhounds, lying close by and sporting nearly as many scars as their master, got up as Britha entered the circle and wandered over to stand by her. Absently she scratched behind their ears.

Britha took her time looking around the circle. She nodded to Nechtan and Feroth, the war leader of the *cateran*. She did not like Nechtan – he was as sly as he was violent, a careful bully – but she had to admit he was a more than capable champion. Feroth was even older than Cruibne and many times over. He whispered that his place at the ravens’ feast was long overdue. Britha, however, liked the canny old warrior. The tribe would miss his clever stratagems when he was gone and she suspected more would die on raids and in battle. Most of them were too caught up in thoughts of their own personal glory to appreciate what Feroth did for them, but Britha understood.

The meat on the spits was mostly gone but the cauldron still looked full. Still not speaking, Britha made her way to the cauldron, removing her meathook from her belt. She leaned in and hooked a choice piece of mutton from the thick stew. She left it to cool it for a few seconds, then took a bite and chewed slowly and then swallowed.

‘Cruibne, I think the belly of your cauldron is pregnant with more meat than you would see on lesser *mormaers*’ spits.’ There was laughter from the Cirig and most of the guests. Some, however, had heard a slight in Britha’s words and were less pleased. ‘I also hear that your heather ale is particularly fine.’

‘You should know – you made it,’ Cruibne said. He then made a show of serving her himself, as he had done with all his guests, including the landsmen and women. However, the skull that Cruibne served the ale in had been taken by Britha. It was not the way for the *ban draoi* to take heads, but Britha had insisted on it. Killing someone in battle was a quick and easy way to get the warriors to listen to her when she spoke.

‘Will you sit by my left side?’ Cruibne asked her formally. Britha looked to Ethne, on Cruibne’s right, for her permission – she didn’t need to but respected the older woman. Ethne nodded. Then she looked to Feroth, on Cruibne’s left. Feroth moved over, always glad of Britha’s counsel and company.

‘I’d say you’re late,’ Cruibne spoke to her quietly, ‘but I think you know exactly what you’re doing.’

‘Don’t speak out of the side of your mouth – it makes them think we have something to hide.’ Britha admonished him.

The inner circle consisted mainly of the chieftains of the Cirig loyal to Cruibne. He had invited the *mormaers* of all seven of the tribes, but by the looks of it only Finnguinne of the Fib, Deleroith of the Fortrenn, both southern tribes, and Drust of the Fotlaig to the west had come.

None of the northern tribes, the Ce, the Fidach and the Cait, had sent anyone at all. The Cait Britha could understand – it was a long way to come – but the absence of the rest of them worried her.

Britha saw Finnguinne talking quietly with one of his men. This was a breach of hospitality but Britha let it pass. She assumed that Cruibne, Feroth, Ethne and Nechtan would have noticed as well. They had not achieved their positions without being canny, but they chose not to challenge it. Britha hoped that none of the more hot-headed members of the *cateran* had seen.

‘Cruibne MaqqCirig of the Hundred Heads, meat giver, ale provider,’ the man Finnguinne had been talking to started formally, ‘all of us stand in the shadow of your generosity, but if you will indulge me I have a question.’ Britha took a sip of her own ale from her skull. She was pretty sure the man was called Wroid, an average warrior in the Fib *cateran* but known for his way with words. He was called Wroid the Provoker.

Britha cursed the Fib. Cursing the Fib was common among the Cirig, as was the reverse. Living across the river from the Fib meant that the Cirig were the most likely targets for Fib raids. Of course the opposite was true as well, and this summer, as it had been for many summers now, the Cirig were the stronger tribe.

Cruibne’s look of irritation was obvious to all. Trying to have the patience to put up with the provocation he knew was coming was Cruibne’s least favourite part of being *mormaer*.

‘We came because we hoped to see the other descendants of Cruithne. Where are Fergus of the Ce, Oengus of the Fidach and Calgacus of the Cait? I hope it was no mere boast that they would be present,’ Wroid said, a smile on his face. There was muttering from the younger warriors in the Cirig *cateran*. Boasting was an inevitable part of being a warrior but Wroid had stopped just short of calling Cruibne a liar.

Britha glanced over at Nechtan, who was still lying looking relaxed, but she noticed that his skull was full of ale. *Drunk champions don’t live long*, she thought.

‘No boast, lad,’ Cruibne said. ‘Messages exchanged, they said they were coming. If you look at our cattle pens you’ll see more than enough beasts to feed more than twice this number. The Fib can take some home with you if it’ll stop your teeth rattling around in your head.’ There was laughter from all but the Fib. That was good, Britha thought. *Put him in his place but do so with an act of generosity*.

‘They were probably yours to begin with anyway,’ Nechtan said, his tone relaxed but promising easy violence as well. Britha guessed that the body she’d passed had been an example to drive the point home earlier in the festivities. This time the laughter only came from the Cirig. Wroid continued smiling but Finnguinne did not look happy.

‘Then might I ask where they are?’ Wroid continued. Britha could all but hear Cruibne grind his teeth.

‘I can think of no reason why they are not here,’ Cruibne answered.

‘I can,’ Finnguinne said. All faces turned to him. Even Nechtan sat more upright. ‘Because they will not be ruled by a high king and neither will the Fib,’ he spat.

‘Who will stand as a champion for the Ce, the Fidach and the Cait, who are slandered when none are here present?’ Britha asked.

‘What?!’ an obviously startled Finnguinne demanded.

‘You think if my spearbrothers thought that I wanted to be high king they’d be too afraid to come and tell me no to my face?’ Cruibne said, trying to sound fierce and not smile into his beard.

‘No, that is not—’ Finnguinne started.

‘Then do not split you tongue; speak clearly!’ Britha demanded. Already warriors, and not just those of the Cirig, were offering to stand as champions for the three absent tribes. ‘We are not southern southrons who require wriggling serpent words. Say what you mean!’

‘I meant no offence,’ Finnguinne muttered.

‘Good,’ Cruibne said, smiling before getting up and grabbing a large earthenware jug of *uisge beatha* and handing it to Finnguinne. ‘Drink this and then we can be really abusive towards each other.’ There was more laughter as the atmosphere relaxed.

Good, more generosity, Britha thought as she drank more of the heather ale from the skull. *Shame that we have nothing to fear and all to give*. Finnguinne hadn’t been too far from the truth. Cruibne did not want to be high king. There was no need, no external threat sufficient to require it, and the other tribes would never accept it. What he wanted was to make clear his position as first among the *mormaers*. He wanted to assert the strength of his tribe, their supremacy. He wanted to say that challenging the Cirig, even raiding them, was far more trouble than it was worth. Then he wanted to get on with his real ambition of growing old and fat.

Britha largely agreed with his plan but needed to make sure that the rest of the tribe did not grow fat, lazy and unused to battle. Britha let the circle around the fire lapse into easy conversation. She remained aloof from it, only saying something when directly addressed and then as little as she could. This was a necessary part of her role: it helped promote the mystery and respect required to do what she did, and she found that the people who spoke the least were often considered the wisest and actually listened to.

When she was able, Britha slipped away from the fire. Walked into the night and looked down at the moon reflected in the Tatha. Looking at the water made her think of Cliodna. Wondering where she was. Had she returned to her cave? Britha was already trying to think of excuses to return there and then cursing herself for her weakness. She could not explain the sudden change in the other woman. Britha knew she was being foolish. Her mother and her grandmother before her, when they were teaching her the secrets that the male *dryw* could not, had warned her against becoming involved with those from the Otherworld.

She felt a large strong hand grab her buttock. Her elbow flew backwards with a satisfying crunch followed by a series of curses. Britha swung round to see which drunken fool wanted to be cursed until his testicles made acorns look large.

She found Cruibne holding his nose and cursing. He was obviously the worse for drink but not insensible. A champion needed to remain sober, a *mormaer* just needed to hold his drink.

‘My nose! You scabby—’

‘Choose your words, Cruibne. *Mormaer* or no, I will not be manhandled.’ She respected the king and would not have struck him in front of others, but at the same time that did not give him licence.

‘Ha! I just came to see if there was a ritual we could do to ensure the success of the gathering.’

Britha could not help but smile. She knew exactly what kind of ritual he had in mind. Britha guessed that chancing like this to get what he wanted was probably a useful, if at times irritating, quality in a *mormaer*.

‘That is for very specific situations and only with Ethne’s blessing. Unless you think I enjoy lying with a stinking sack of pus like yourself?’

Cruibne’s expression darkened at the insult. Britha was not terribly worried, but fortunately the *mormaer* rediscovered his sense of humour quickly.

‘You always seemed to,’ he said, reaching up to stroke her hair. It was true to a degree. Cruibne was not an untalented lover, which was important for the success of the rites, the sacrifice – his sacrifice – the seed they returned to the earth. He’d had to be trained of course. However, all the magic in the Otherworld could not have compelled her to tell Cruibne that.

‘Don’t make me hurt you and then ask Ethne to come over here and hurt you as well,’ she told him. Cruibne gave this some thought. He stopped stroking her hair.

‘It worries me that the Ce, the Fidach and the Cait did not come,’ Cruibne said, changing the subject, seeming almost sober. Britha nodded. She had been thinking the same. When not thinking about Cliodna. ‘Finnguinne’s a serpent-tongued sheep rapist, but do you think he’s right? That the king think I mean to rule them?’

Britha shook her head. ‘Can you see Calgacus of the Bitter Tongue not coming here to tell you what he thought of that?’

‘Do they plan war against us?’

‘Maybe Oengus, for the sake of harvesting heads, but he would tell us to our faces. Besides, things are well now. Why risk that in war? And there are easier prey than us.’

‘I do not like this. Have they fallen to war among themselves?’

‘It seems unlikely that we would not have heard about it, or that one or more of them would not want to ask for our aid. Besides, even at war they know they could come here safely under our protection.’

‘What then? Famine? The Lochlannach?’

Britha just shook her head. Cruibne was more than capable of speculating on his own. He was saying this because he was drunk and wanted to hear a voice. ‘I think we should send a—’ Britha began, knowing that she would have to repeat herself the following day. She was interrupted by a clamour from the circle around the fire. Both of them headed back.

A landsman stood in the circle of flame-shadowed warriors. Britha did not recognise him but he looked ill-used. He had been beaten and cut. He would have been terrified if he had not been so fatigued that he swayed with the warm summer breeze.

‘On your knees!’ one of the Fib warriors yelled. Britha was pretty sure he was called Congus and unlike Wroid he could fight. He was Finnguinne’s champion and known as a dangerous man. From where he sat Congus knocked the landsman’s legs out from underneath him. Britha strode across the circle and kicked Congus in the face. She was not expecting to get away with it but angry and overwhelmed better judgement. To her surprise her foot connected and spread Congus’s nose across his face. He reeled back even as his hand went to the sword by his side.

‘What are you so frightened of that a landsman has to kneel?’ Britha demanded. Congus, seeing that it was the *ban draoi*, did not draw his blade though he had hate in his eyes.

‘There are *mormaer* present,’ Finnguinne said angrily.

‘So? We’ll make our landsmen go on their knees when we learn to eat swords,’ Britha spat at him.

‘Besides, this is my fire. I decide who gets mistreated,’ Cruibne said from behind her as he knelt to cradle the man and gave him ale from his own skull in a bid to revive him.

‘The man’s clearly a thief,’ Finnguinne said. ‘He came in riding a horse.’

Cruibne glanced at Talorcan, and the tracker went to check the horse.

‘It’s a brave woman who strikes a warrior knowing he cannot return the blow,’ Congus said. In theory there was a ban against striking a *dryw*. There was also, in theory, a ban on *dryw* taking part in combat.

‘It is true,’ Wroid said. ‘Poor hospitality is this. The *dryw* are not meant to strike warriors.’

‘Ours does,’ Nechtan said.

‘What’s your name?’ Britha demanded of Congus. ‘I do not know you. You could not have done much. Are you sure you received your first meat from the tip of a blade?’

‘I am Congus, champ—’ he began angrily.

‘Are you known as Congus the Timid? Congus the Abuser of Landsfolk?’ Britha demanded. It was hugely rude to interrupt a warrior formally introducing himself. There were sharp intakes of breath from all around the fire. Britha knew she was pushing the man hard, but his was exactly the sort of arrogance that she despised most among the warriors.

‘You go too far even for a *dryw*,’ Congus said dangerously. Behind her she could hear the warriors in the Cirig *cateran* shifting, readying themselves.

‘Well, Congus the Timid, you have my permission to return the blow,’ Britha said. ‘No ban, no boycott or satire. I promise you the only consequences that you will reap will be those wrought by the Flesh Render.’ Meaning her spear. Then she looked Congus straight in the eye. Britha was a fair fighter but she had grown up training to be a *ban draoi*. Congus had spent his whole life training to be a warrior. She was pretty sure that in a straight fight she would lose, but first Congus had to overcome every bit of inherited dread about crossing a *dryw*. In many ways, to humiliate him publicly and challenge him was not very fair at all. The two of them stared at each other. Congus looked away first.

‘Is this the brave Cirig? Hiding behind a woman?’ Wroid demanded.

‘We are stronger than you because our women fight,’ Cruibne said distractedly while he looked over the newcomer’s wounds.

‘And any one of us will fight you at any time,’ Nechtan added quietly.

‘We are stronger than you because we know enough not to fear our women or our landsmen,’ Britha told him.

‘The horse is almost as ill-used as he is,’ Talorcan said, appearing out of the darkness. ‘It’s a warrior’s mount, but it has been ridden long and hard and I don’t like the look of its wounds.’

‘See!’ Finnguinne spat. ‘A horse thief!’

‘Hold your tongue, sheep king!’ Cruibne spat. There was deathly silence around the fire. Britha closed her eyes and cursed Cruibne for allowing Finnguinne and his people to bait him. ‘You should consider yourself lucky I don’t take your head for breaking my hospitality. Get from my fire and do so now. Think hard if you want to war with us, and I will think hard on the right compensation for what you have done here.’

There was lots of shifting and muttering from both *caterans*. ‘Sheep king’ was not an easy insult for a *mormaer* to walk away from. Finnguinne stared at Cruibne.

Cruibne ignored him. ‘Britha, he needs your healing ways.’ Britha moved to kneel by the man’s side.

Finnguinne stood up and stormed away from the fire. Congus accompanied him, quickly followed by the rest of the Fib, Wroid at the rear, raining insults down on the Cirig, many of whom were cursing their feet.

Feroth prevented the Cirig from responding to Wroid’s words with violence. It would look ill if they fought the Fib after inviting them to share their fire. ‘They’ll have a hard time on the Tatha the amount they’ve had to drink,’ Feroth said. It was a weak jest but he was trying to lower the tension.

Britha was all but oblivious to this. Instead she was cursing Congus’s arrogance as she peeled away the landsman’s *blaidh* to reveal a horrible-looking wound. She exchanged a look of horrified surprise with Cruibne, who was holding the writhing man.

It was a sword wound. She had seen many before. Except this one looked wrong somehow, too wide even for the thickest blade, and too ragged. Something about it put in Britha’s mind that the sword had been hungry.

‘That’s not right,’ Cruibne said. Britha nodded. She had seen wounds this bad, just not on anyone

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