

always forever

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# always forever

book three of  
**the age of misrule**

**MARK CHADBURN**



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Inquiries should be addressed to  
Pyr  
59 John Glenn Drive  
Amherst, New York 14228-2119  
VOICE: 716-691-0133, ext. 210  
FAX: 716-691-0137  
WWW.PYRSE.COM

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## all the news

by max michaelis

W e're a cynical race. With remarkable ease we manage to find the worst in everyone we meet. Charity workers selflessly slave amongst the poor in a disease-ridden quarter of some stinking tropical city. They get spotted kicking a dog or yelling at some unfortunate on a bad day that has somehow surpassed all the other bad days and instantly we're tearing them apart for being less than worthy. Where does that come from? Is it some kind of repressive religious thing slammed into us during schooling, where everyone is a sinner unless they're a saint? Look around—the world out there is a nightmare; the same as before, I suppose, only different. It's a struggle for anyone to get through it, but we carry on, trying to do the best we can under the circumstances. We're all deeply flawed—that's our nature. But if we fight to overcome those flaws, surely that's worth some praise, isn't it? The only time to make any judgment—and maybe not even then—is at the end of someone's life, when you can stand and look back, weighing all the good things and the bad things and the overwhelming majority of thoroughly mundane things, and decide whether it was a life well lived. Let me tell you now, you won't find many saints. I bet you won't find any at all. But you will find a preponderance of fundamentally good people striving to be the best they can. And isn't that the kind of thing we should be celebrating: not that someone is good, but that they're fighting to be better.

So let's talk about heroes.

The worst always brings out the best in people when they're pushed to the edge and find reserves they never realized existed in their day-to-day lives. And these are, indeed, the worst of times, so it's hardly surprising that in the midst of them we found the best of heroes. Just normal folk, like you and me, with the usual bundle of neuroses and weaknesses, but they've proved themselves to be champions. (Excuse the gushing language: it's not *modern*, and it's not *British*, and it's not *cynical*. But then, that's the point I'm making.) I'm writing this so the record of their deeds is preserved to inspire future generations. Is that a pre-ventitious hope? I don't know, but it's important to me that I do it.

If you'd met them on the street in the time before the Big Change, you

probably wouldn't have given them the time of day. Jack Churchill, Church to his friends, was moody and introspective, driven to the edge of despair by the suicide of his girlfriend, Marianne, two years earlier. That act had thrown his entire life off course. He'd been an archaeologist and a writer with massive potential, but he ended up going nowhere, losing his friends, his hope. Ruth Gallagher was a lawyer for some big-shot firm—sharply intelligent, as you would expect, but a little repressed, with a problem finding any relationship to match her exacting standards. Although she'd achieved a great deal for someone in her late twenties, she didn't feel fulfilled. She'd only taken on her career to please her beloved father, who'd died of a heart attack after learning his brother had been murdered in a bungled building society robbery. Laura DuSantiago was probably the most complex and misunderstood of all of them. By all counts, she was a sociopath and misanthrope with a past blighted by drugs and petty crime. Her acid tongue and sarcastic manner made it almost impossible to like her. At the same time she was brilliant with technology, and once you broke through the unpleasant exterior you found reasons for her attitude and the constant confusion that obscured her true nature: as a child she'd been to hell and back at the hands of a mother who used religious obsession to mask her growing psychoses; Laura's body and mind were left scarred in the process. And in a struggle with her mother in the family home she had woken from unconsciousness to find her mother dead, seemingly by Laura's hand.

Shavi—no one ever found out his full name—was certainly the most well balanced of the five. An Asian who grew up in a strictly Muslim family, he was eventually cut off by his father when he refused to accept his religion and traditional ways. A lifetime of searching followed, during which Shavi dabbled in every religion and explored every occult and New Age byway. It left him a deeply philosophical and spiritual man, and the solid moral core of the group. He was a neo-hippie, enjoying his mind-expanding drugs, espousing free love with men or women. Like the others, however, there was a darkness in his life. As he left a London gay club with his boyfriend, Lee, he was attacked by someone he couldn't identify in the dark. Lee was brutally murdered.

And then there was Ryan Veitch, a hard-bodied, hard-minded thug who grew up in a South London family of petty criminals. His childhood had been troubled by vivid dreams that he'd only been able to exorcise by having their images tattooed on his body. His mother died when he was young, leaving him and his brothers to make up for a father so traumatized by his wife's death he was unable to keep a job and barely able to hold the family together. It was hardly surprising that he viewed crime as the only option to survive. But then the young Veitches made the mistake of bungling a building society robbery. In



the confusion Ryan fired his shotgun and an innocent man died—Ruth’s uncle, one of the many *coincidences* that are thrown up in this new age. But, as we all know, there are no coincidences. Growing up under different circumstances, Ryan might have been a very different person. He showed great remorse for the murder, and from then on, every waking moment was spent trying to make up for his crimes, “to do the right thing” as he constantly told everyone. More than any of them he *wanted* to be a hero, to get the girl, the acclaim. To be good.

But that was their lives *before*. In the cauldron of hardship that came after the world changed they all found what their true characters really were. And in a way, that underlines the subtext of what I’m saying here: you should never judge a book by its cover, and although that’s a bit of a cliché, it serves a point. You can’t trust your perception at all; there’s always something going on behind the scenes. So if you can’t trust what you see, hear, smell, touch, taste, what should you do? Trust your heart, I say. Trust your heart. But I’m getting beyond myself. . . .

It started one cold, misty night beneath Albert Bridge on the banks of the Thames. Church and Ruth came across what at first sight was a mugging: a minor Ministry of Defence official, Maurice Gibbons, was being attacked by a giant of a man. Then the attacker’s face appeared to melt. It changed into something monstrous, and Church and Ruth both blacked out at the sight. The incident turned their world on its head, though we all know what the creature was now—one of the unbelievably ancient race of shape-shifters that passed into Celtic myth as the misshapen, demonic Fomorii, things so alien to us our brain can barely give form to the signals it receives whenever we see them. Our mind fakes up the image the best it can, or it simply shuts down and buries the hideous experience in the subconscious, where it gnaws away like a maggot. Church and Ruth were so troubled by this process they were forced to delve into it further, eventually ending up at the studio of Kraicow, an artist who had seen the same kind of thing. He confirmed their worst suspicions.

The shock drove them on the road in search of Laura, whom Church had come across on the Internet and who seemed to have information which might help them; this was after Church glimpsed the ghost of Marianne outside the flat they used to share.

The Fomorii were on their tails immediately. The two of them were saved from certain death by Tom, on the surface a burnt-out hippie. It’s hard to believe, but he was actually the mythic figure Thomas the Rhymer, hundreds of years old, gifted with the curse of second sight and The Tongue That Cannot Lie. The old stories said he was taken into the Land of Faerie, where time passes differently from here, by the Queen of Elfland. And like all the old stories, it

captured the essence, if not the whole truth. He did spend time in that strange place, certainly, but no human could have come close to describing the extent of his experiences there. It was, by all accounts, a time of both pleasure and pain. He was “taken apart and rebuilt,” suffering so incredibly his mind was scarred. It gave him his strange powers but left him completely detached from humanity; the loneliest man in the world, of neither here nor there.

While traveling west, the three companions were attacked by a flying, fire-breathing serpentine creature from the storybooks. This Fabulous Beast drove them to take refuge at Stonehenge, where that site’s particular powers made them invisible to its attentions. And it was there Tom told them what was at first an unbelievable tale: of how myths and legends are the secret history of the world. Every creature that ever slithered through our dreams and nightmares into old stories actually existed, though perhaps not in forms we knew. And he told the oldest story of all, one that has become preserved in every culture: of a tremendous war between two opposing powers—the Fomorii, known as the Night Walkers, a force of entropy determined to drive all existence into darkness and chaos, and the Golden Ones, known by the Celts as the Tuatha Dé Danann, as hypnotically beautiful as the Fomorii were monstrous. Angels and demons, if you will. But the Tuatha Dé Danann were as alien to us as the Fomorii—unpredictable, unknowable, beyond all concepts of good and evil, and therefore just as dangerous.

The struggle between the Golden Ones and the Night Walkers almost devastated the world in antiquity, but at what the Celts called the second battle of Magh Tuireadh, the Fomorii were defeated. The postwar deal meant both sides vacated this planet for that strange place where the laws of physics don’t seem to work—Faerie, Otherwords, T’ir n’a n’Og, Heaven and Hell, whatever name you prefer—and they took with them almost all the other creatures of myth. The deal was that they would never return. But some of them managed to sneak back for brief visits through the liminal zones, the lakes, the hilltops, the stone circles, where the division between our two worlds were thinnest, explaining all our history of supernatural phenomena from ghosts to UFOs to lake monsters.

The deal held reasonably well for millennia, until, through some process no one quite understands, the Fomorii broke through once again. They unleashed a tremendous force, the Wish-Hex, which trapped some members of the Tuatha Dé Danann in exile and brought some under Fomorii control; only a handful escaped.

But our own world was not without its own defences. Running through everything is a strange energy that manifests itself as a blue fire. The Chinese know it as *chi*; other cultures call it something different, but every race has an under-

standing of it. It's the lifeblood of the planet, the lifeblood of *us*, an overpowering spiritual force that heals and uplifts. The Fiery Network is in everything, but it is most evident at certain potent sites which have become sacred down the years—the places where our ancestors erected stone circles, or our greatest cathedrals. Over the years we lost touch with this force, and became the worse for it. In all but the most powerful places it grew dormant. The Fabulous Beasts, as the ancient Chinese knew, were both symbolic of the earth energy and guardians of it, following the lines across the land, living on the energy it gave off. These remarkable creatures had awakened with the return of the Fomorii, but the one which attacked Church, Ruth, and Tom had fallen, briefly, under the power of the Fomorii; it was too powerfully independent to be controlled for long, though.

And, too, there were human avatars of the Blue Fire, the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons, humans within whom the spiritual force burned most brightly. In ancient times they helped defend the world, and now, Tom said, they had been resurrected. There would be five in total, and Church and Ruth were two of them. The five were found by the Blue Fire and it was up to them to defend the world, however reluctant they felt about this task. But their job wasn't just defence; there was another side to it too. Prophecies linked to the old Arthurian legends spoke of a king awaking in Britain's darkest hour to save the land. Like so many other aspects of myth, this was a metaphor. The king was the spiritual force in the land and it was up to the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons to wake it from its slumber. Those tales of King Arthur actually proved a secret guide; sites linked to Arthur were places potent in the spirit power. The stories themselves told in their complex code how the earth energy and its champions defended the land and how it fell into dormancy, waiting to be called back again at a time of greatest need.

Understandably, Church and Ruth found it difficult to assimilate all this new information, especially when it went against the way they had been taught to see the world since childhood. But how could they deny the evidence of their eyes?

As they slept in Stonehenge that night, Church was visited by the spirit of Marianne once again, and this time she left him a gift: an unusual black rose, the *Roisin Dubh*. He took it, not realizing what it meant.

In Salisbury they encountered Laura for the first time. But they were also pursued by frightening aspects of the supernatural: the demonic black dog, Old Shuck, which acts as precursor to the Wild Hunt of legend, fabled for hunting down lost souls, as well as the Baobhan Sith, ghostly, bloodsucking creatures of the night. And Ruth had her first encounter with the goddess who would eventually become her patron, the mysterious triple nature deity that manifested as maiden, mother, and crone.

They also had what would prove to be a fateful encounter with a strange wanderer who called himself Callow. On first impression, he seemed merely eccentric, speaking in a theatrical manner, constantly trying to wheedle free drinks and food; harmless enough.

Laura took Church, Ruth, and Tom to a depot on an industrial estate where she had had a life-changing experience. The place looked mundane, but the depot was being run by the shape-shifting Fomorii for distribution of canisters filled with a foul black gunk. Church and Laura plunged through a hole in the air, finding themselves in the Watchtower, a structure suspended in space and time, somewhere between our world and the Otherworld. Here Church experienced several troubling, prophetic visions before encountering Niamh, one of the Tuatha Dé Danann who had escaped the Fomorii's Wish-Hex. Beautiful and enigmatic, Church felt he knew her instantly, which in a way he did. She had been visiting him at night throughout his childhood, preparing him for his role as a Brother of Dragons, although he had always thought her a dream. She told him everything about the Tuatha Dé Danann and what was expected of him: to find four mystical objects of power hidden for aeons. They were the sword, spear, stone, and cauldron—or Grail—which had played such a part in all our legends, and they were the only things that could free the exiled Tuatha Dé Danann. And *they* were the only ones who could repel the Fomorii; humanity stood no chance alone, she said. She gave him the Wayfinder, a magic lantern with a flame of the Blue Fire that would point him in the direction of the artifacts.

Church and Laura returned to Earth, only to find the depot in flames and Tom disappeared. They picked up Ruth and headed to the first location: Avebury. There they met the strange, old man known only as the Bone Inspector. He was caretaker of the country's ancient sites and the last in a very long line of wise men driven underground at the time of the Roman invasion. He led them beneath the stone circle to the main source of the Blue Fire in the south, and the home of the oldest Fabulous Beast. There Laura reclaimed the first of the artifacts, the Stone of Fal, rumoured to be able to recognize the true king of the land; it screamed when Church touched it, the first sign of his destiny.

Leaving the Bone Inspector behind, they headed east. They were halted by the inexplicable failures of technology that had been happening randomly since the change came over the world, stranded with their useless car just outside Bristol. After making camp, Church encountered a young girl named Marianne who gave him a cheap locket containing a picture of Princess Diana. Church felt a connection to the bright, optimistic child, not in the least because her name was the same as his dead girlfriend.

That night Ruth encountered the goddess again, who asked Ruth to look

for the missing other half of the nature deity. Ruth fled in terror, but not before the goddess gifted her a *familiar* in the form of an owl.

The next day they were forced to rush the now-comatose Marianne to hospital. She had been living for months with a blood clot close to her brain. Before, it had been too dangerous to operate, but now only a touch-and-go op could save her. Not long after she went into the theatre, another technology failure struck and the hospital was plunged into darkness and chaos.

But then a remarkable thing happened. Somehow Marianne made her way from the operating theatre to cure an entire cancer ward with some power from within her. It manifested as a brilliant white luminescence, like a lightbulb burning itself out. She died immediately afterwards. It was almost as if she had wanted to commit some last act of goodness before moving on. This affected Church deeply. It showed that the change wasn't all bad; miraculous, wonderful things could happen too. He kept her locket as a reminder of that day.

They followed the lantern south until they came to an inn in the centre of Dartmoor where they planned to stay the night. But as they rested, the terrible, otherworldly Wild Hunt attacked. This shadowy troupe on horseback was led by the goblin-like Erl-King and was accompanied by a pack of devilish hounds. Many people at the inn were slaughtered by the Hunt's cruel weapons. Church fled across Dartmoor on a motorbike to try to draw the Hunt away, while Ruth and Laura drove off in the opposite direction, but Church hadn't gone far before he plunged into one of the abandoned mineshafts that dot the moor.

Not long after, Ruth and Laura encountered Shavi for the first time, and the three of them embarked on a desperate race across the countryside, with the Hunt in hot pursuit. They escaped only with the coming of the dawn, eventually winding up in Glastonbury.

Meanwhile, Church found himself imprisoned in a Fomorii den, deep beneath Dartmoor. His cellmate was Ryan Veitch, who had been captured earlier, and soon Tom was brought into the cells too; he had suffered greatly at the hands of the Fomorii since his capture in Salisbury. It wasn't long before Church met Calatin, the Fomorii half-breed and leader of one of the main factions, or tribes, in the Fomorii hierarchy. If you can attribute any human abstract to the Fomorii, it would be Evil, but Calatin was worse than the others, somehow. Perhaps it was just the fact he looked less twisted on the surface, so that whatever lay beneath was amplified. He put Church through appalling torture in search of information, but Church gave nothing away.

There seemed little hope for them until Niamh appeared in the cells, identifying herself firmly as Church's patron. She helped them to break out into a maze of tunnels with the Fomorii hot on their heels, and finally they made their

way out across Dartmoor. Soon after, Church made the shocking discovery that his girlfriend, Marianne, had not committed suicide; she had been murdered. He vowed to find her killer.

Glastonbury turned out to be the location of another talisman, so Ruth, Laura, and Shavi continued the search. In the grounds of the Chalice Well, they encountered a man of the cloth named James, who doubled up his job with the Christian Church as a member of a secret society called Watchmen. The group had existed for centuries, perhaps millennia, with members drawn from various religious orders, generally operating independently of each other. Their role, I suppose, was as some kind of body to organize a defence against the supernatural powers represented by the Fomorii and the Tuatha Dé Danann, if they ever decided to return to our world. They were keepers of vital information that could be used in any coming fight, while at the same time overseeing important sites in the landscape, particularly areas where the Blue Fire was strongest; they all characterized that energy as their own religion's spiritual vitality. Perhaps it is.

James told them of the mysteries surrounding Glastonbury and of how the Grail was hidden beneath the Tor; not in an earthly space, but through some gateway into another place: T'ir n'a n'Og.

While this was happening, Church, Tom, and Veitch were trekking across Cornwall to Tintagel, the legendary home of King Arthur. There they found the mystical Sword Caledfwlch, but before they could get away, they were trapped on a cliff top by a Fomorii force led by Mollecht, the leader of another tribe. Mollecht was a sorcerer, but his experiments to gain greater power had done something terrible to him. His body had completely disappeared and the only thing preventing his life force from dissipating was a murder of crows constantly flying in a tight, ritual pattern around it. A figure made up of swirling crows must have been frightening enough, but then the crows parted to allow a burst of that awesome power. With no way to turn, Tom dragged the other two over the cliff into the churning sea below.

On top of Glastonbury Tor, Ruth, Laura, and Shavi were shocked to see Church and the others fall out of the sky, heaving up sea water at the highest point in the surrounding landscape. In a last desperate act, Tom had summoned up all his power and knowledge and moved the three of them along the lines of earth energy between two potent nodes, Tintagel and Glastonbury. It showed the potential of what they all could achieve if they learned to master the Blue Fire, but even Tom said he didn't know if he could repeat the act without the pressure of death at his back.

Introductions made, they opened the doorway and crossed over to T'ir n'a n'Og, where they recovered the cauldron—the Grail—from a mysterious structure.

Their next destination was South Wales, where they found the last of the artifacts, the Spear of Lugh. With all four talismans, victory was within their grasp, but they still had to face up to the awful threat of the Wild Hunt. After a terrifying confrontation on a storm-swept night, it was Ruth who saved the day, showing a depth of character she hadn't before exhibited. She plunged the Spear into the chest of the Erl-King, the two of them rolling down a hillside out of sight. There Ruth witnessed an astonishing transformation as the Erl-King became Cernunnos, another nature deity; this was the "other half" for which the triple Goddess had been searching. Like all of the gods, Cernunnos had different aspects, and he had been trapped as the Erl-King by the Wish-Hex, becoming a tool of the Fomorii. He thanked Ruth for freeing him by burning his brand into her hand and promising to aid her if she ever needed him.

With the Wild Hunt departed, everything was in place for the return of the exiled Tuatha Dé Danann and the defeat of the Fomorii. But the next morning, while Laura guarded the talismans, she was attacked by Callow, who had been secretly stalking them since Salisbury. He had thrown in his lot with the Fomorii for the promise of greater power. He took the artifacts, but not before leaving Laura at death's door, one side of her face carved up by his razor.

After getting her barely adequate hospital treatment, they raced across country in pursuit of Callow and the talismans, eventually ending up in the Lake District. Here Tom revealed himself as an unwitting Fomorii tool, giving the group up to Calatin and Callow. While in the Dartmoor cells, the Fomorii had inserted a Caraprix into his head, one of the small, shape-shifting, symbiotic creatures which all the Fomorii and Tuatha Dé Danann carry. The Caraprix allowed Tom to continue his normal actions while subtly bending him to the Fomorii will and preventing him from revealing the truth about what had happened to him.

Escaping capture, Ruth hid in the house of a woman who showed her the potential of the powers promised by the Mother-Maiden-Crone. Ruth led the way in freeing the others from the Fomorii, aided unconsciously by Mollecht, whose desire for supremacy in the Fomorii hierarchy led to conflict amongst the opposing powers. Callow was left behind to pay the price of his failure.

The Brothers and Sisters of Dragons made their way to Melrose in Scotland where they crossed over once again to T'ir n'a n'Og, seeking to save Laura's life and free Tom from the Caraprix. They were aided by Oigma, one of the Tuatha Dé Danann, at his immense library that contained all the secrets of existence. It was here that Church finally consummated his doomed relationship with Laura.

With time running out, they returned to our world and set off for Dunvegan Castle on the Isle of Skye, where the ritual to free the Tuatha Dé Danann

had to take place. Naturally the Fomorii did everything they could to stop them: the Skye bridge was destroyed; the Kyle of Lochalsh was in flames, their dark forces massed on the island. But the companions commandeered a boat to sail to the castle, where Church and Veitch guarded the approach while the others carried out the ritual.

Church, however, was severely debilitated. The Roisin Dubh gifted him by the spirit of Marianne was actually a mystical Fomorii item called the Kiss of Frost. Its icy power crept into his veins.

In a grim battle with Calatin, Church was slain, but his sacrifice allowed the completion of the ritual and the missing Tuatha Dé Danann returned. The Fomorii, sensing potential defeat, fled the scene. Beseched by Ruth and Tom, Nuada, one of the Golden Ones, allowed the cauldron to be used to bring Church back to life. And so he was reborn, like one of the heroes from legend, with the taint of the Fomorii and the power of the Tuatha Dé Danann coursing through his veins.

As before, the victory that was so firmly in their grasp was snatched away. They had achieved everything expected of them, but still the returned Tuatha Dé Danann refused to help them to drive out the Fomorii, even though the two groups of gods were bitter enemies. The reason: the Fomorii corruption within Church made him a lesser person in their eyes, too tainted to be an ally.

And then the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons were hit with the bitterest blow of all: since birth they had been manipulated by the Tuatha Dé Danann to achieve their potential, so they could aid the Golden Ones in just such an eventuality as the one that had transpired. The key to making the five companions true Brothers and Sisters of Dragons, with all the power that entailed, was the firsthand experience of death. And so the Tuatha Dé Danann had caused Veitch to fire at Ruth's uncle, had used an unidentified human agent to murder Lee, Shavi's boyfriend, Laura's mother, and Church's girlfriend, Marianne.

In all their dealings with the higher powers, the theme was constant manipulation. The Fomorii, too, had directed them like rats through a maze, allowing them to escape from the Dartmoor cells so the other talismans could be recovered; transforming Tom into an instrument to keep track of events; holding Callow in reserve to strike when their defences were lowered. At that moment, the five felt they had badly failed their calling as the champions of the land.

Devastated, they watched as the Tuatha Dé Danann rode away, knowing they had made the situation much, much worse: another alien force was loose in the land with little respect for the lives and values of humans. The season had turned; humanity's rule had passed to a higher power.

At this low point, the fibre of the five Brothers and Sisters of Dragons, and



of Tom, their guiding light, came to the fore. Many would have given up in the face of such an overwhelming force, but the companions shouldered their responsibilities well; they decided to fight on. Church vowed to free the spirit of his dead girlfriend, Marianne, and to gain revenge on the Fomorii human agent who had made them all suffer so much. They knew their only option was some kind of guerrilla action, but time was short. The four ancient Celtic festivals—Imbolg, Beltane, Lughnasadh, and Samhain—marked periods in the great cycle of existence when the powers behind the gods were at their peak. Lughnasadh lay three months away, and that was the day that would mark the beginning of the end; what would become known as the End of Everything: for the Fomorii had set in motion their scheme to bring back the greatest danger humanity had ever faced, the ultimate urge to entropy. The Celts had characterized it in their myths as the Fomorii leader Balor, the one-eyed god of death, otherwise known as the Heart of Shadows, believed slain at the second battle of Magh Tuireadh when the Tuatha Dé Danann had driven the Fomorii from the land. But none of these gods ever truly died; they could never be described as truly living.

Somehow the five had to find a way to combat this tremendous power. Tom led them to a lonely spot on the west coast of Scotland, where they performed a ritual to summon the spirits of long-dead Celts, the original Brothers and Sisters of Dragons. The ghosts gave them guidance, but like all information offered by the dead it was couched in such vague terms it was easy to misinterpret. Yet three vital nuggets shone out: to prevent Balor's rebirth they should travel south to Edinburgh and the *Well of Fire*; to defeat the Fomorii they needed to find the *Luck of the Land*; and one of them was a traitor who would betray the rest.

Armed with this knowledge, they set off for Edinburgh, pausing at a small island in the middle of a loch to make an offering to Cernunnos, a likely ally in their struggle. In strange circumstances, Laura was given the mark of Cernunnos—the same one Ruth bore; the reason was never explained.

Back at the van they made a disturbing discovery: a severed finger was left as a warning to them.

They broke their journey in Callander. That night Niamh appeared to Church once more, and it was apparent her interest in him was much deeper than he had imagined; love lay there, certainly. All such considerations were driven away by a shocking discovery—Ruth was missing, and in her room was another severed finger: hers.

Laura had an inexplicable vision of Ruth being taken by an enormous wolf. Yet after a fruitless search, their only option was to continue to Edinburgh—but not before the local police put out an alert for them.

In Edinburgh, the source of the evil was unmistakable; the Old Town was shrouded in shadows that were almost alive. The Brothers and Sisters of Dragons made their base in the sunlit New Town and set out to investigate the ancient quarter that night. In a pub, they met a rogue member of the security services who suggested everything they had experienced was a great lie, masking the truth of a coup by dark forces in the Establishment. Drugs, psychological manipulation, and disinformation had served to present a picture of supernatural powers so the real social upheaval could continue unhindered. While discounting his story, it touched several deeply held fears that they could no longer trust their perception in any encounter with the gods.

Leaving the pub, they came face-to-face with the tremendous power the Fomorii had somehow managed to shackle to protect their plans in the Old Town. The *Cailleach Bheur*, or Blue Hag, was a nightmare out of ancient myths that carried around with it all the force of winter. The companions fled back to the New Town, realizing now the terrible extent of the struggle lying ahead.

It would be wrong of me to give the impression that this was simply a tale of tremendous forces; human emotions were just as important. Indeed, they set in motion events that would have powerful repercussions. Against the great backdrop, the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons were riven with loves and jealousies, petty dislikes and deceptions.

Of them all, Laura was undoubtedly the most unstable. Her paranoia brought about an argument with Church that drove her to storm off. She attempted to lose herself in hedonism at some seedy nightclub, only to encounter the *Cailleach Bheur*. Reeling under the influence of some drug or other, she managed to escape only after a discovery that drove her to the edge. A minor wound bled green blood that had a life of its own, destroying the bars on a window so she could flee.

Desperate, she had no choice but to return to the others. However, her unreliable actions had convinced Veitch that she had something to do with Ruth's disappearance.

With the strain telling, they made plans to investigate the Well of Fire beneath Arthur's Seat, an extinct volcano overlooking the city. Tom told them it was once a tremendous source of the Blue Fire but over the years had grown dormant. Somehow they had to find a way to reignite the Well so the spiritual energy would spread out across that part of the land, weakening the grip of the Fomorii.

Once again they decided to consult the spirits. Shavi visited one of Edinburgh's most haunted locations, where the dead revealed Ruth was still alive, imprisoned beneath the castle where the Fomorii had made their den. Other answers were typically cryptic: the Well of Fire would not be enough to help them

defeat the Fomorii. To halt the Cailleach Bheur they would need an extra power, something called the Good Son. There was also a price to pay for the answer—the dead sent the spirit of Shavi's murdered boyfriend, Lee, to haunt him.

Tom knew exactly who the mysterious Good Son was—the Tuatha Dé Danann god Maponus, missing for millennia. Tremendously powerful, he was the son of Dagda, the Allfather, yet the Golden Ones always refused to speak of what had happened to him. Tom, however, knew Maponus had been imprisoned at nearby Rosslyn Chapel, a mediaeval sacred site renowned for its Celtic and Masonic iconography.

Researching this new information at the Central Library, Church and Laura were attacked by whatever had been stalking them since Loch Maree. After a failed attempt to sever Church's finger, it fled before they had a chance to get sight of whatever it was.

During all this, Ruth was undergoing terrible torture in the secret Fomorii burrow beneath Edinburgh Castle, but while trapped in her cell, a strange thing was happening: her familiar manifested as a voice in her head, teaching her the great secret knowledge that was her heritage. Eventually, Calatin made her suffer the worst torture of all, forcing a large black pearl down her throat.

Finally it was time for the companions to go their separate ways: Church and Tom to find the Well of Fire, Laura and Shavi to seek out Maponus, and Veitch to launch a desperate attempt to rescue Ruth.

At Rosslyn Chapel, Shavi and Laura encountered another Watchman. The chapel's carvings pointed to something terrible hidden there, but although Laura was open to the warnings, Shavi appeared under the control of some spell, driving him onwards. The Bone Inspector was also drawn there by what they were attempting. He tried to prevent them, but they locked him outside the chapel so they could continue. While Shavi and the Watchmen dug into a secret chamber beneath the chapel, Laura listened to the Bone Inspector's warning.

He told her Maponus was struck down by the Fomorii as he attempted to cross over to our world from T'ir n'a n'Og. Whatever the Fomorii did to him drove him mad, so that when he arrived in our world he was an uncontrollable force, slaughtering hundreds and laying waste to many villages. Only a ritual enacted by the Culture, the Bone Inspector's people, could stop him, and then he was not destroyed, only bound in the sacred spot beneath the chapel that was raised up as both a marker and a warning. If he was freed, the Bone Inspector warned, devastation would be laid on the land once more.

Before Laura could act, Maponus was freed, slaying the Watchman on the spot. Laura and Shavi escaped as the mad god stalked out across the countryside. It appeared to be yet another of their great failures.

Back at Arthur's Seat, Tom helped Church through his first steps in learning how to perceive the Blue Fire in everything. The energy guided them through a magical doorway into Otherworldly tunnels beneath the volcano where the two were separated. In a massive cavern where time and space had no meaning, Church experienced visions of the past, present, and future. Reuniting with Tom, they came across an enormous hole plunging down into the bowels of the earth—the Well of Fire—ready to be reignited by what Tom called a leap of faith. Church decided to use the locket given to him by the young Marianne; he had always believed it was a powerful symbol.

Before he could act, Church glimpsed a giant wolf, the same Laura witnessed before Ruth was taken, the thing that had attacked him in the library. Tom told him it wasn't really a wolf; once the old gods had *tampered* with someone, the results confused the mind's perceptions; the real person lay somewhere behind the perceived image.

The two of them edged out around the abyss to hide, but their pursuer followed them. Church slipped into the well, dropping the locket into the depths. Somehow this created a tear in the fabric of reality. Blue fire licked out, the energy carrying Church, along with Tom, out to the foot of Arthur's Seat, where they could see Fabulous Beasts moving towards the Old Town.

Veitch, meanwhile, had entered the Old Town, where Maponus was already in conflict with the Cailleach Bheur. Making his way past the Fomorii defences into the burrows beneath the castle, he stumbled across a strange ritual where the Fomorii gathered before Calatin and a warrior, bigger and more frightening than all the others.

After rescuing Ruth, the two of them escaped the tunnels to discover the Fabulous Beasts destroying everything corrupted by the Fomorii evil, while the Blue Fire ran out from Arthur's Seat in a lattice of reinvigorating energy; the land was beginning to come alive. Maponus and the Cailleach Bheur were both forced to flee in the face of the Fabulous Beasts. And then, finally, the castle and the burrows beneath were destroyed in the conflagration.

The companions were finally reunited in Greyfriars Kirkyard, but their joy was short lived. The spirits of the dead rose to drive them out, saying they were "unclean." Weary but elated, they fled the city: not only had they rescued Ruth, they had also stopped the plan to bring back Balor.

That night, while they rested by the campfire, they met two minor members of the Tuatha Dé Danann pantheon who were wandering the land in search of experience. Cormorel and Baccharus told Church if he wished to remove the Fomorii corruption within him he should visit something called the Pool of Wishes in the Western Isles, a fabulous place in T'r n'a n'Og where the home of the Gods lay.

Heading south they came to a strangely quiet village—*my* village—where people refused to answer their doors after sunset. A few of us were gathered in the local pub and I remember how I felt the moment they wandered through the door. I was a rough and ready journalist. I'd met people from all walks of life, but I'd never met anyone like them before. They were apart from everyone else, as if they'd witnessed things none of us could ever dream of; which, of course, they had.

We rarely saw strange faces in that haunted place so I went over to introduce myself, and to tell them what kind of hell they'd wandered into. For weeks we'd been the prey of strange creatures we couldn't identify. They roamed the lonely fields during the day, but under cover of darkness they came into the village, looking like nothing more than sheets flapping in the wind—but one of our local farmers had seen them reduce a sheep to bloody chunks in seconds. Some people died before we learned they couldn't get into houses past locked doors. But even though we'd warned everyone to lock their doors at sunset, people were still getting killed in their homes. It was a mystery we couldn't understand. Naturally, those six brave people agreed to help us solve our problem.

After Shavi expressed his guilt at freeing Maponus, Church summoned Niamh, who agreed to marshall the Tuatha Dé Danann to bring back their errant god on one condition: that Church broke off his relationship with Laura so that he could learn to love her. Although it confirmed what Church had suspected about Niamh's feelings, it was still a shock. His relationship with Laura was in a state of flux, and he had no idea how he really felt about her, but to put her on one side seemed so callous. Yet the burden of responsibility proved too great. How could he set their petty emotions above the chance to prevent Maponus murdering more people? He agreed, reluctantly, and though he didn't recognise it at the time, his decision was swayed by that strange emotional power the Tuatha Dé Danann held over mortals.

Ruth was concerned that she had had no contact with her familiar since her imprisonment. She embarked on a tantric sex ritual with Veitch, during which the familiar came to her to tell her she was tainted—she must seek help or die. Tom obviously feared the worst; he told her she had to be examined by the Tuatha Dé Danann.

I drove Church, Tom, and Ruth to Richmond in Yorkshire, where a path was found beneath the castle to T'ir n'an n'Og and the Court of the Final Word. This was a disturbing place that claimed to be dedicated to healing but where much darker probings into the mystery of existence continued away in the shadows. Here they met the god the Celts called Dian Cecht, the master healer, who agreed to help them. I don't mind admitting he terrified me. He prepped

Ruth for an op and set his Caraprix free for an internal investigation of her head. It didn't last long. The Caraprix erupted out of her head like it had been fired out of a gun. "The Sister of Dragons has been corrupted beyond all meaning of the word," Dian Cecht said to us. "She is the medium for the return of the Heart of Shadows." It didn't sink in straightaway, but when it did, I felt like throwing up. The Black Pearl she'd swallowed back in Edinburgh had contained the essence of Balor. It had been distilled from all that black gunk Church and the others had found in Salisbury and beneath Dartmoor. Ruth was to be the receptacle that would allow its rebirth, but that doesn't begin to illuminate the true horror of the situation. In a matter of weeks, Balor would burst out of her, fully formed, killing her instantly. They'd obviously chosen her because she was powerful enough to cope with the rigours of what lay ahead. The pearl wasn't actually, truly, inside her, I don't think; I'm no good at getting my head around the physics of this.

Naturally, Dian Cecht refused to help her further. The Tuatha Dé Danann had a problem in dealing with anything corrupted by the Fomorii, and here was the corruption to end them all. So they threw us out, consigning Ruth to the worst fate of all. She took it well, under the circumstances, but it wouldn't be wrong to say we were all devastated. The others thought they'd done their bit to stop Balor being reborn, and all along they were doing the things that would make it actually happen. And there was the ultimate moral dilemma: could Church kill Ruth to prevent Balor from coming back into the world, even knowing she would die when the birth happened anyway?

On the way back from Richmond we encountered the terrifying Fomorii warrior Veitch had first seen beneath Edinburgh Castle. It was like a tank, enormous, unstoppable, ploughing through cars at a phenomenal speed. We escaped—just. The Fomorii had obviously unleashed it to retrieve Balor. That was the one bright spot for the companions, that the Fomorii must have been tearing themselves apart to know their supreme god was now in the hands of the enemy.

Meanwhile, Veitch, Shavi, and Laura continued to investigate the deaths in the village. It was Veitch who made the big discovery: the doors of the latest victims had been forced open, allowing the predators in. The trail led back to some of our supposedly friendly village's more well-heeled residents. They'd been sacrificing those they considered *undesirable* by breaking open their houses so the creatures could get in, leaving the rich free to carry on with their lives and businesses. Veitch dragged off the ringleader for summary punishment, much to the concern of Shavi and Laura.

I waved goodbye to them that day, not quite realizing how much they'd changed my life. For the first time I'd seen some hope in a world that had gone

mad. Right then we desperately needed heroes, and I was determined to tell everyone who they were. That was *my* calling in life.

They continued south along the Pennines, with no idea what they were supposed to be doing anymore. Meanwhile, Ruth was growing sicker and sicker. Finally they sent out two missions to seek help for Ruth: one to Cernunnos and one to the Queen responsible for Tom's suffering. Church and Laura would stay to guard Ruth at Mam Tor in the Peaks, a place saturated in the earth energy which would blind the searching Fomorii to their presence.

Shavi went south towards Windsor Park where Cernunnos could be summoned, eventually hooking up with a group of travellers. But he woke one morning to find a woman murdered, her finger missing. Whatever had been pursuing them since Loch Maree was now after him alone.

Tom and Veitch headed north, through several adventures, including an encounter with a race of manwolves, the *Lupinari*, and the discovery that the Tuatha Dé Danann nature gods were reforesting the land. Finally they arrived at Inverness, where they were taken by the Queen's guard to the Court of the Yearning Heart.

The Queen proved an expert at manipulation. She focused her attention on Veitch, but Tom had already warned him to obey the rules of T'ir n'a n'Og: not to eat or drink anything there or he would become a prisoner of the Queen forever. She agreed to help if Veitch undertook one mission for her: to kill or capture the Questing Beast, a mysterious but fierce primaeval creature that had escaped from the Court into our world.

Veitch hunted the creature down, but he was almost killed in the process. As he was close to death, the Queen tended to his wounds, eventually tricking him into drinking a single droplet of water. He was forced to remain there, with the threat of undergoing the same terrible experiments that had so traumatized Tom.

On Mam Tor, Church, Ruth, and Laura discovered a deserted cottage where they could hide out. On one wall there was a mass of writing impossible to decipher. Church, who had continued his relationship with Laura, was confronted by a furious Niamh, who came close to slaying him for breaking his promise to her. Instead of helping capture Maponus, she had brought the mad god to the vicinity of the Tor, to wreak his vengeance upon Church.

In a moment of staggering revelation, Church deciphered the scrawling on the wall to read a message for him from his dead girlfriend, Marianne. He had no idea how she had managed to contact him, or why he was only aware of it at that moment, but it was a transcendental experience that gave him a glimpse of the meaning behind everything. Infused with this understanding at his lowest ebb, he found new strength to fight on.

With a half-formed plan in mind, Church crept through the Fomorii-infested countryside in search of Maponus. He found him—and the Bone Inspector, who had been tracking the insane god. Church explained his plan and the Bone Inspector agreed to help, but on his way back to the cottage, Church was finally brought face-to-face with the Fomorii warrior. The battle was short and brutal, and Church was left broken. But before the warrior could end his life, the beast was itself killed, by Mollecht, freed from his imprisonment at the hands of Calatin by the devastation in Edinburgh. Instead of slaying Church, he departed, leaving behind a mysterious black sword, obviously for Church's use. Church took it back to the cottage, attempting to recover from his wounds before the Fomorii's imminent attack.

In Windsor Park, Shavi summoned Cernunnos, who gave him a strange potion to help Ruth. The essence of Balor could not be destroyed, but it could be removed, Cernunnos told him; like everything connected with the gods, a price would have to be paid, a sacrifice made.

As Shavi made his way back, he was attacked by the pursuer they perceived as a giant wolf. It was Callow, hideously transformed by Calatin for his part in the débâcle that led to the freeing of the exiled Tuatha Dé Danann. His suffering had driven him insane and he had been stalking the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons as architects of his pain, cutting off fingers in a ritual that only he truly understood. He murdered Shavi with one blow of his knife, then loped away in pursuit of the others.

At Mam Tor, on the eve of Lughnasadh, the Fomorii attacked in force. Church sent Laura to stand guard over Ruth in the cottage while he faced up to Calatin in a mirror image of the confrontation on Skye that had led to his death. Although badly injured, this time Church had an advantage: the black sword bequeathed him by Mollecht. It had a life of its own, shaping his attack, then plunging into Calatin's heart of its own volition. Calatin was eradicated on the spot, a fate beyond imagining for a god unable to be completely destroyed. And then the sword revealed its true form: it was Mollecht's shape-shifting Caraprix.

Before the Fomorii could seek revenge, the Bone Inspector led Maponus into their midst, where the mad god wreaked vengeance for his suffering. When the carnage was finally over and the Fomorii fled, the Tuatha Dé Danann reclaimed their insane kinsman.

Then, in the middle of victory, there was only one last, terrible act for Church: to kill Ruth and prevent Balor from being reborn. As he approached the cottage with a heavy heart, Ruth stepped out, seemingly freed from the corruption of Balor. But nothing is ever that simple. Cernunnos had appeared during the battle and offered his potion to Laura, who accepted the sacrifice to save



Ruth. The essence of Balor was transferred from Ruth to Laura, an act of spiritual redemption that would mean her own death. As Ruth gradually came round, Mollecht and his loyal Fomorii broke in and took Laura; the crow-creature's supremacy in the Fomorii hierarchy was now assured.

Unable to come to terms with the act of sacrifice from a woman they had both considered beyond saving, Church and Ruth waited for Lughnasadh to dawn. There was no fire from heaven, nor instant destruction, just a sense of sadness in the air, a darkening of the sky and the smell of ashes in the wind. Somewhere distant, Balor had been reborn, and the last hope for the world had been extinguished.

But the one message the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons instilled in me was that there is always hope. It's a message I'm going to keep circulating to bring us through these dark times. A new dawn will come. We just have to believe.

Until next time.