

THE
BURNING
MAN

ALSO BY MARK CHADBOURN

The Dark Age

The Devil in Green

The Queen of Sinister

The Hounds of Avalon

The Age of Misrule

World's End

Darkest Hour

Always Forever

Kingdom of the Serpent

Jack of Ravens

Underground

Nocturne

The Eternal

Testimony

Scissorman

A KINGDOM OF THE
SERPENT
2

THE
BURNING
MAN

MARK CHADBOURN



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For Liz, Betsy, Joe and Eve

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THE FINAL AGE

My name is Jack Churchill, known to my friends as Church, and I am only a man. This is a story of gods, and powers higher than gods. I write these words in my head, and thus on a page, and thus throughout all Existence, as I stand here, at the end of the world.

From the first day that I accepted my role as a Brother of Dragons, I have struggled long and hard. At the time I didn't understand the full nature of the responsibility thrust upon my shoulders. Now I do.

Looking back, I can at least begin to glimpse the great, hidden pattern and how apparently random events came together, all the mysteries and secrets gradually emerging into plain sight.

But at the start I had no idea of the bigger scheme.

In my past life, what I used to call my "real" life, I was an archaeologist, but my days had been blighted by the death of my girlfriend, Marianne. I'd lost all hope. And then magic and wonder and terror returned to the world. The ancient gods of Celtic mythology—the Tuatha Dé Danann, who called themselves Golden Ones—invaded an Age of Reason unable to cope with their irrationality. Society creaked and groaned and collapsed in the face of such a supernatural force.

For more than two thousand years, Existence had always brought together five champions of Life to battle such threats, the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons. I was chosen to be one of the latest group, bound together by the Pendragon Spirit, the powerful spiritual force that runs through the earth in lines of Blue Fire, and through all humanity. As a war broke out between the Golden Ones and their ancient race enemy, the demonic, shape-shifting Fomorii, I was joined by four others: Ruth Gallagher, gifted in the ways of the Craft; Shavi, a seer; Ryan Veitch, a warrior; and Laura DuSantiago, who was radically changed by the god Cernunnos to become a powerful force for nature.

We overcame great hardship to win a significant battle against Balor, the terrible god of the Fomorii, but we paid an awful price. Ryan Veitch was manipulated by the gods to betray us and we thought him dead. And I was flung back through the ages, separated from Ruth, the woman I loved.

As society attempted to recover from that Age of Misrule, five new Brothers and Sisters of Dragons took up the struggle. There was Mallory, who trained in the art of warfare in the new order of Knights Templar in Salisbury; his lover Sophie Tallent, who also learned the powers of the Craft; Caitlin Shepherd, a doctor devastated by the deaths of her husband and son; Hunter, a Special Forces operative employed by the Government; and Hal, a clerk working for the same Government.

But their struggle was even greater than ours had been. Beyond the edge of the universe, a devastating force had woken and turned its attention towards Earth. Known in ancient myths as the Devourer of All Things, or the Void, it was the opposite of Existence, of life itself, and it wielded the unlimited powers of the ultimate creator. It could even alter reality itself, twisting it into new shapes that would help maintain its rule.

The new Brothers and Sisters of Dragons could not vanquish such a force, even when aided by Ruth, Shavi and Laura. At the point of defeat, Hal chose to sacrifice himself and become part of the Blue Fire so that he could seek me out in time, and guide me back for the final battle.

Secure in its victory, the Void changed reality to a very familiar construct: the age-old prison of money and power, devoid of magic and wonder; and it locked the remaining Brothers and Sisters of Dragons into fake lives, denying them their memories so they would never again attain their true potential and threaten its rule.

At the time, I knew nothing of these events. I walked out of the morning mists into an unspoiled world more than two thousand years ago, a huge part of my memory missing. Members of a Celtic tribe adopted me in their village at Carn Euny, in what would become Cornwall, and I lived a simple life with new friends. But the simplicity and beauty of that rural existence did not last long, for the Void still saw me as a threat. It despatched through time its supernatural agents, the Army of the Ten Billion Spiders, to prevent me and the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons from challenging it again.

Existence, however, had other ideas.

At the great stone circle of Boskawen-Un, I encountered Hal in the Blue Fire, who set me off on a quest across two millennia to return to my own time. And in a brain-twisting paradox, I became the first Brother of Dragons, initiating the heritage that would welcome me into its ranks two thousand years

in the future. My new friends Etain, Branwen, Tannis and Owein became the other four members of the first group.

Establishing the first of the Watchmen, a brotherhood that would grow over time into a network of spies who could help my cause, I felt ready to take on the challenge of the Void. But in that moment of initial success, tragedy struck. Etain and the others were slaughtered by a mysterious assassin, and I fell under the control of Niamh, one of the Tuatha Dé Danann, who took me back a prisoner to the Celtic Otherworld, known as T'ir n'a n'Og or the Far Lands.

Niamh was the cruel, capricious queen of the Court of the Soaring Spirit, and saw me as little more than entertainment. I became friends with another of her prisoners, Jerzy, the Mocker, who had been surgically altered at the grim Court of the Final Word to become Niamh's jester.

Yet during my imprisonment I discovered the route back to my own time. T'ir n'a n'Og was essentially timeless. I could while away my days there while centuries passed in the real world, and eventually return when my own age rolled around again.

But the Void was not about to let me go without a fight. First I was attacked by Etain, dead yet alive, now a Sister of Spiders. And then I encountered the Void's most lethal agent: the Libertarian, a sardonic, brutal killer with lidless red eyes who threatened to kill Ruth in the twenty-first century if I interfered with the Void's plans.

There was nothing I could do to warn Ruth, but I found a way to see her during a visit to another of the twenty great courts of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Court of Peaceful Days. A mystical object called a Wish-Post allowed me to see into the future, where I observed Ruth, Shavi and Laura, all living their miserable fake lives, lost without me.

When I returned to the Court of the Soaring Spirit, I discovered that Niamh's brother, the god Lugh, had gone missing. I accompanied her in a search to the last place he had been seen—Roman York in AD 306. There I encountered the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons of that era: Marcus Aelius Aquila of the Sixth Legion; Decebalus, a Dacian barbarian; Lucia Aeternia Constans, a practitioner of the Craft; the North African seer Secullian; and Aula Fabricia Candida, an agent of the powers of the natural world. And in that encounter I began to understand the strange, repeating patterns that underpinned all reality.

As Niamh introduced me to her set of Tarot cards with its mysterious fifth suit, ravens, only available to the gods and used to contact higher powers, another mystery was unfolding. The long-lost Ninth Legion had returned under the control of the Army of the Ten Billion Spiders. As I rallied the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons to defend the city, I was captured by the Libertarian and Marcus was killed. In an attempt to instil despair, the Libertarian revealed that many powerful human leaders were now being controlled by a single spider embedded somewhere in their skin.

I escaped, but during the battle with the Ninth Legion Secullian was also killed, this time by Etain and her fellow undead Brothers and Sisters of Spiders. There were only four of them—I should have guessed one more would be necessary to achieve the magical number. It was Ryan Veitch, resurrected by the Void and filled with bitterness over what he perceived as his betrayal. Veitch had loved Ruth, too, and in his twisted perception, I had allowed him to be sacrificed so I could get Ruth to myself. He was wrong, completely wrong, but he'd been corrupted by the Void—manipulated once again. Now all he wanted was revenge. He was the stranger who had murdered Etain and the others, but now, in their afterlife, he had struck up some strange, perverse relationship with Etain, both of them united in their hatred of me.

The extent of Veitch's desire for revenge was driven home when he vowed to move across the years slaughtering every Brother and Sister of Dragons he could find. He was going to strike a blow at the very heart of Existence for abandoning him.

Veitch captured me and took me to Rome where I was to be sacrificed to the god Janus, one of the great architects behind the mysterious unfolding struggle. But I was rescued by the remaining Roman Brothers and Sisters of Dragons, who accompanied me back to the Far Lands where I recovered from my ordeal. Though Lugh still hadn't been found, my relationship with Niamh had started to change. I didn't recognise it at the time, but she was beginning to fall in love with me.

Meanwhile, the Void had been establishing a fortress for its growing army on the edge of the Far Lands. The remnants of the spider-controlled Ninth Legion marched there along with an array of foul creatures—Redcaps, the Lament-Brood, the vampiric Baobhan Sith and more. The Void wanted to keep control of the universe, and the army and the spiders would ensure that any hope and resistance generated by Existence would be crushed.

Meanwhile, there was a new arrival at the Court of the Soaring Spirit: a human, Thomas Learmont, who had been transformed into the mythic hero Thomas the Rhymer by the prophetic powers given to him at the Court of the Final Word. Tom had become a great friend to me, but that was far in the future, when I had first become a Brother of Dragons. Here, in the distant past, Tom didn't know me at all, but his prophetic abilities knew I was vital in the coming war with the Void.

Using his visions of the future, Tom guided me, Niamh, Decebalus, Aula and Lucia back to Earth, to Venice in 1586, to locate a magical item that Tom knew was required by the Void's agents—the Anubis Box.

While retrieving the box, I encountered Will Swyfte, Elizabethan England's greatest spy, who took me to meet the court's mystic, John Dee. He directed me to a secret Templar store beneath London Bridge where another magical item was hidden away—a crystal skull that had to be used in conjunction with the Anubis Box.

But the skull and the box were stolen by the Void's agents, Lucia was murdered and I gave pursuit across the Atlantic to the new English settlement at Roanoke Island, in what would come to be America.

In a ritual in the new colony, Janus and the Army of the Ten Billion Spiders utilised the Anubis Box and the crystal skull to attempt to bind two gods—Apollo and the missing Lugh. Apollo was corrupted by the power of the Anubis Box and joined the Void's forces in the Far Lands, but with Will Swyfte's help I saved Lugh.

The colonists were not so lucky. The small group, including Virginia Dare, the first child to be born in the New World, were stolen from Roanoke and transported to the Void's Otherworldly fortress.

Back in the Court of the Soaring Spirit, while Niamh celebrated the return of her brother, I saved Jerzy from committing suicide. He was terrified he would betray me. During his surgery at the Court of the Final Word, a Caraprix had been inserted into his head so that he could, at any time, be manipulated by the gods. The Caraprix, I had discovered, were mysterious, shape-changing creatures that all the gods carried with them in some kind of symbiotic relationship. No one appeared to know their origins—they were simply *there*.

I was determined to seize an advantage in the ongoing fight and petitioned

Niamh to allow me to move back and forth between the worlds at will. My plan was simple: to locate as many Brothers and Sisters of Dragons as possible before Veitch found and killed them, and to bring them back to safety at the Court of the Soaring Spirit where they would form the basis of an army that could challenge the Void's own forces.

In 1851 at Stonehenge, Jerzy mysteriously disappeared from our group. Unable to find him, we proceeded to the Crystal Palace Exhibition at Hyde Park where I encountered the Seelie Court, a travelling group of Tuatha Dé Danann who were very friendly with "Fragile Creatures," as the gods call us. Veitch, in the grip of his desire for revenge, tried to kill me, but I was saved by an uncanny creature who called himself Spring-Heeled Jack.

It was not until 1940, when London was in the throes of the Blitz, that I discovered his true identity—the shape-shifting trickster Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow, "the oldest thing in the land." It was he who had kidnapped Jerzy, for reasons I didn't discover, and who had been manipulating me for his own undisclosed ends. In the middle of the Blitz, I fought Loki, another god corrupted and controlled by the powers of the Anubis Box. Janus was drawing gods from a variety of pantheons to the Void's cause, creating what would eventually become an unbeatable force. More by luck than skill, I forced Loki to flee and managed to retrieve the Anubis Box—only for the Puck to steal it for his own devices.

Back in the Far Lands, I journeyed to the sinister Court of the Final Word, which appeared to be behind so much of the misery I had seen—the place where Tom, Jerzy and even Veitch had been so altered. What I discovered there was beyond any horrors I could have imagined. The court squatted on a river of blood, and in its secret confines the god Dian Cecht conducted sickening experiments on humans stolen from our world. Through his studies, he believed he could divine the true nature of Existence and thereby give his people complete control over all that was, guaranteeing their survival in the face of the Void, while at the same time ensuring that they would not be supplanted by Fragile Creatures.

Dian Cecht also revealed that reality was fluid, and that it could be altered by someone in whom "the Pendragon Spirit burns brightly." At the time, I didn't understand what he was really saying. He also allowed me to look into my own time through another Wish-Post—more from cruelty than kindness, I think. And there I saw Veitch terrorising Shavi, Ruth and Laura, who had

all started to awaken from their fake lives. But, separated from them by time, there was nothing I could do to help them.

Devastated by what I'd witnessed in the court, I fled to Earth with Niamh and Tom, shirking my responsibilities for a nomadic life in America during the sixties. There I discovered that the spider-controlled people were attempting to destroy a resurgent hope that had gripped the world, through a series of political assassinations, repressive actions and war in the Far East. The Void was creating the kind of world in which it felt most comfortable.

Some of the secrets of the Void were revealed to me by an unlikely source—the LSD prophet Timothy Leary, the so-called “most dangerous man in America.” We talked about the Gnostic secrets John Dee had first hinted at three hundred years before—that when the universe was created, the organising force split into two parts—the Light, or Life, and the Dark, or Anti-Life—the Void. And the Void had been running the show ever since, causing all the suffering in the world—for how could a benign god allow such terrible things to happen?

But the Light had planted the seeds of the Void's destruction: shards of itself embedded in all humans—the Pendragon Spirit. And the aim of all Gnostic teaching was to awaken that Spirit so that Fragile Creatures could rise up to achieve their true potential.

Much of what I'd experienced suddenly became clear, and the true mountain I had to climb was revealed—to overthrow the dark god that ruled the universe! How could I, or any mortal, achieve that?

In 1967, on the West Coast of America, events were escalating to a climax. Veitch and the Libertarian were working together, and the Army of the Ten Billion Spiders was searching for the insanely powerful Extinction Shears, a tool that could cut through all reality. The spiders wanted to use the Shears to sever the Blue Fire from Existence, and thus cut off the power of the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons.

And once the Shears had been recovered from the Tuatha Dé Danann's travelling Market of Wishful Spirit, that's just what they did. In a cavern beneath the jungles of Vietnam where the Blue Fire poured into our world, the Shears were activated and the flow stopped. The Fabulous Beasts that lived in the Fire were threatened with extinction. Though the Shears were once again lost, all hope was vanishing fast.

At the Woodstock Festival in 1969, the Libertarian came to me and offered me a deal—if I gave myself up to the Sleep Like Death, locked for ever in a casket in the Far Lands, Ruth, Shavi and Laura would not be killed. I'd reached my lowest ebb—I could see no other option, and at least this sacrifice would allow me to hold on to the hope that Ruth and the others might find some way to continue the rebellion. I agreed.

But the Libertarian had one final surprise for me. When he locked me in the casket in the Far Lands, he filled it with spiders.

The potion I had taken threw me instantly into the Sleep Like Death, and I was unaware that both Tom and Niamh visited me to offer their respects—and each left me a vital gift: Tom a sacrament from Timothy Leary, and Niamh the Tarot cards she used to contact the higher powers.

The power of the two gifts combined to transport me, in reality or in my mind, to another place. In that dreamlike state, I encountered a past or future version of myself, and then met the Caretaker, an intermediary between humans and the higher powers. He led me to a cavern where two more intermediaries waited—a strange, frightening man and woman looking into a bubbling cauldron.

In the cauldron, I watched events unfolding in the real world—the return of the Celtic gods and the Fomorii during the Age of Misrule that my younger self had experienced; the deaths of Niamh and Tom, sacrificing themselves for the greater good; and the events that had awoken the Void.

Afterwards, the Caretaker led me past a cavern where the three Daughters of the Night unravelled, measured and cut the threads of human life, and then to another cave containing the Axis of Existence. By shifting what I perceived to be a lever, but which was truly something incomprehensible, I could alter reality, as Dian Cecht had hinted. Still believing it to be a dream, I moved the lever and thus saved Tom, Niamh and the Tuatha Dé Danann, unaware that there would be repercussions for my action.

While I slept my restless sleep, Ruth, Laura and Shavi escaped Veitch and made their way to the Far Lands, where Ruth woke me with a kiss. After more than two thousand years, I was finally reunited with the woman I loved, and with my friends and comrades. The reunion kindled the embers of hope I needed to pick up the fight.

I knew we had to relocate the Extinction Shears, the only thing with

enough power to destroy the Void. But first we paid a visit to the Eden Project, the environmental site in Cornwall, where the Seelie Court waited, and where I knew a great Fabulous Beast was hidden. If we could awaken it, we could release into the land what meagre Blue Fire still existed.

The Army of the Ten Billion Spiders did everything in its power to stop us reaching the Eden Project. Once there, we faced one final battle with Veitch and the Brothers and Sisters of Spiders. At the last, Veitch threw himself onto his sword, which he'd thrust into my hands. It looked like a last, desperate act of suicide when he knew he was beaten, but at the moment he died, mysterious black lightning flashed between him, me and Ruth, all of us joined in one moment of searing cold.

I had no idea what that had done to us, if anything, and in the midst of victory gave it little thought. The Fabulous Beast was awakened. Magic returned to the land. As Veitch's body was reclaimed by Etain, Hal manifested in the resurgent Blue Fire, my own genie in a bottle, offering me guidance regarding the way forward. The first thing he suggested was that we free Mallory, Sophie, Caitlin and Hunter from their fake lives so that we would have a strong force of Brothers and Sisters of Dragons.

And after that? A long, hard road lay ahead . . .