

TEN

Herbert was staring out of the east windows in the sitting room, the shadows having finally gathered outside and taken them far into the night. Admitting defeat after his long afternoon at the hands of Llewellyn, Derek had retired before the night retired him. Benjamin had joined Herbert in the sitting room, keen to ask questions that he had felt prudent to keep back until the witching hours. He started with what he felt was the easiest to confirm: how long had Herbert thought he was in the air? That question had started Herbert's staring out of the windows, and he had stayed looking there for the last five minutes.

'Why do you start with the tough questions, Ben?' he wondered aloud finally. 'Everything is just different up there, it feels like it was a long time. I don't quite feel like I'm back in my body yet, and I've still got to do the salt circle around the house before Flick comes tomorrow.'

Thinking it likely that this was the best answer he would get for now, Benjamin sat down on the sofa and tried something else. 'Who is it that your sister is bringing with her tomorrow?'

'Sophie, I think, her old friend from school,' Herbert told him and looked to Benjamin with something more to say before disregarding it and turning back to look outside again. 'Brian Bates was right, Ben,' he said idly.

'Who?' Benjamin asked with a frown.

'The Wyrd Sisters . . .'

'Who?'

'Brian Bates was right about the Wyrd Sisters, Ben, the Saxon weavers of the world.'

'I didn't think the Saxons thought much of Wales?'

Herbert took a long breath and began pacing about the room. 'Different tribes, Ben . . . different times but the same characters for different names. The Wyrd Sisters is just what I know them as.'

'And you met up with them?'

'Well I don't know,' Herbert said, heading around the back of the sofa. 'I don't know that you can meet them as such – it's not like a date – but I did see one of them and she did talk to me.'

'That sounds like a date, a good one by your count.'

Herbert stopped roving and remembered something else from his day. 'I haven't even told you about this afternoon at the garden centre, Ben, what went on there.' He stopped in front of the sofa and looked at Benjamin with clenched teeth.

Benjamin leaned forward. 'You saw a girl, Herbert, at the nursery?'

'Well, I met one.'

'How did that go?'

'I didn't bring any plants back, did I? So . . . ?'

'That's not even an answer, Herb, but forgetting that, what about the sisters?'

Herbert took a wooden chair and pulled it up next to the sofa. 'Can I give you an explanation by way of sensation, Ben?'

'Well, not really. Try to imagine that you're not talking to yourself and that you are, in fact, having a rational conversation with someone else. Explain it like that.'

Herbert went quiet until that bored him. 'It was like a lost garden, Ben, like something from Moomin Valley. It pulled away forever to a single vanishing point . . . I saw a Wyrld Sister there.'

'And?' Benjamin pressed.

'She says that we're doing really very well indeed, but we need to be serious about where we are going, what we are bringing and who else is there. I'm going to have to say straight away I didn't finance all this to be serious.'

'Perhaps she just meant to be responsible?'

'Yes that's better, Ben. You're good at this.'

'Well, let's not get over-excited. Did she tell you anything immediately tangible, though? Something we might be able to use or measure?'

Herbert seemed perplexed at this. 'She said that I was good at dowsing; she might have even said terrific.'

'Okay, Herb. So we know she has a sense of humour.'

'And she was really tall. It's a difficult thing to properly remember because it was so close, it's left me at a distance. I'm going to have to pound the acid tomorrow to even come close to getting that back.'

Benjamin took a pause and looked through into the kitchen. 'Would you like a cup of coffee?'

'No, it's been a long enough day as it is. I'm going to get up from this chair and go to bed.'

'I should go to bed too but instead I might confound myself again and try to identify things that I don't have the equipment to measure or confirm. So definitely coffee for me. That said, Herbert, this is the best day's results that I have ever been a part of, academically and maybe emotionally. It's disconcerting to even admit that.'

There was a pause then; the conversation between breaths.

'I know what you mean, Ben. If I admit how much of a rush that was up there this evening, I think I'll pop or something worse. So much sensation, Ben, from all angles. Then

calm and no tension between the two. And that's just day one of success. How far do you think we could travel on these lines, Ben?'

'I don't know, but it is one of the things I keep thinking over. We should give it a little while, get used to what we're doing and then go for a day trip up there. I don't doubt that the craft will carry the pair of us.'

Herbert made a face. 'I thought that we weren't getting excited, Ben, that we had to pretend to be rational?'

'Maybe we should be honest and try to let the rational take care of itself, at least between us and after hours, when Derek has gone to bed. I'll start work on a new seat, or a proper first one. We should fly around Wales, Herb.'

'I don't have the maps for that!' Herbert said and stared at the ceiling. 'It's going to be work enough updating the ones that I do have.'

'You mean that if I managed the controls up there, you couldn't dowse ahead for the energy lines?'

'You know that I could, but it's a pretty big step isn't it?' Herbert admitted and then thought of his meeting with the Wyrd Sister – that she might encourage this. 'I think it's a good idea, Ben, just bold enough. When should we go?'

'Well not tonight, but sometime a little before dusk whenever we do it. And we'll have to try to be inconspicuous.'

'Even then that's no cure for the unexpected,' Herbert warned him and prepared to make a serious point. 'Say we go flying around Wales on the lines, we might be aiming for a pub but the line takes us away somewhere and we end up parking on top of a council building. We should be careful, Ben, cautious.'

'You can as good as chant it, Herb.'

There was another pause and they looked at each other, Herbert wondering at what point they had passed from being friends to accomplices.

'I like the way we're thinking tonight, Ben. I'm probably not going to be able to sleep now. We should take the craft out tomorrow.'

'No, we've got to entertain your sister and company tomorrow, haven't we?'

'Oh yeah . . . forgetting. Let's get that out of the way then.'

'Shall I do the cooking for us tomorrow?' Benjamin asked, straining at the credulity of himself.

Herbert looked him up and down. 'Very well . . .' he said before adding 'eager beaver' and heading out of the room and upstairs to his bed.

Benjamin took his coffee to the barn, replaced Herbert's Mother Earth CD in the player with Metallica and stood in front of his flying machine, remaining there for some time.

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