

In the shower Luke turned up the heat and closed his eyes, eager to wash away all thoughts of his awful day. Once dry he scabbled on the floor for a t-shirt, flicking out the creases so that the smart fabric looked perfect. Drawers slid out from the wall as he pressed his palm to them. He grabbed fresh white boxers and jeans, pulled them on hastily and reached for the electrostat brush; a couple of strokes and the memory style that had cost him a whole month's allowance sprang into shape, a halo of perfectly spiked black hair floating upwards from his flawless side parting. Idiot, he chided himself, much good did it do you.

Luke sank into a deep chair, closed his eyes and stepped through a virtual door, expecting to find himself in a familiar art site, but the site's background page had changed out of all recognition, replaced by what looked like an old-fashioned nature photograph. As Luke peered at the page a wall of mist reared up to engulf him, so that the stream and mountains suddenly disappeared from view. Luke had a moment of panic, but the mist cleared as quickly as it had come, spiralling above him and melting into a blanket of low, brooding cloud.

Through the clearing mist a girl of about his age stepped. Luke knew she must be the virtual guide to the site, but there was something strange about her that

he couldn't immediately place. In fact the whole site looked odd, Luke thought. The girl's clothes weren't right for a start. She had on something bulky made out of a fabric Luke had never seen before, and her long red-gold hair was unkempt. It struck him as a bizarre way to construct a virtual guide. Who would want a virtual persona that looked like something from the Subs? She was pretty, though, Luke acknowledged, feeling another stab of regret about today's incident with Katie. Despite her odd clothes, Luke couldn't help thinking that there was something vaguely familiar about the girl.

'Cro-eh-so.' The guide said, or something like that.

'Sorry?' Luke's heart rate increased. Could he have stumbled into an illegal site from outside?

'Dim problem,' the girl returned. 'Sorry, I mean "no problem." I can speak in English. Welcome.'

The girl smiled at him, and Luke decided she was more than pretty. Get a grip, idiot, she's probably the virtual construct of some frumpy middle-aged woman from some backward country beyond E-Gov. She smiled again, waiting for a response no doubt. Luke tried to get his mind around the idea of a foreign site. She put her head to one side in a way that reminded him of Katie. He was sure he could feel the bruising on his ribs and legs more just thinking about Katie. He pushed the day's events out of his mind and smiled back at the girl.

‘Interesting hair,’ she said in English that had a lilt to it, some kind of accent. ‘Is that how you really look or is it your virtual image?’ she asked.

‘The real me.’ Luke grinned, regaining his composure.

‘“Croeso” is Welsh for welcome. I’m bi-lingual. This is the real me too.’

‘You mean you’re not... sorry I thought you were... Welsh? But that... Isn’t that a banned language?’

‘Not where I live!’ The girl laughed and flicked back a strand of hair.

Luke’s mind crowded with a million questions, but he only said, ‘Cool site.’

‘I think so too.’ Not one for false modesty then, Luke thought. ‘It’s taken me ages to superimpose it over some pseudy art site. I’m just squatting here,’ the girl continued.

‘Squatting?’

‘That’s right. I’m Alys by the way. Alys Eluned Selwyn, daughter of Geraint ap Tomas.’ She laughed again.

‘Right, pleased to meet you... er, Alys, I’m Luke. That’s quite a name.’ Luke felt his heart beating faster by the second. The girl had a way of holding eye contact that unnerved him. ‘So you’re saying this is an illegal site? How do you do that? Why is it illegal? What’s it got that’s so subversive?’

‘Slow down, Luke. Any site I put up is illegal. I don’t live under E-Gov. I live in The Standing Ground, Tir i Sefyll. Have you heard of it?’

‘No.’

‘Ha! Well, it’s in Cymru, that’s Wales to you. North Wales to be precise.’

‘Why do you call it The Standing Ground?’

‘Long story, Luke,” she said. Alys lifted both hands as though she was about to conduct a symphony and Luke noticed a ring on her right hand, a knotted red-gold band set with a red stone. There was something familiar about the ring. Luke opened his mouth to ask her about it, but a sudden sensation of the ground shifting beneath his feet made him lose his train of thought. He was on a hill overlooking what must be a battle field. Wrecked bodies in mud-spattered mustard and red tunics were strewn across a plain. Luke was grateful that he wasn’t close enough to see the details. ‘Wales is somewhere that’s been attacked and colonised for centuries, but there are always those who resist.’

The disorienting motion gripped Luke again and he found himself blinking into the murk of some kind of underground cavern. He shivered. Beneath his feet was the same black-grey rock that soared overhead; an immense cocoon of cold slate.

‘When E-Gov came we vanished into the slate workings. There was an old saying. “Dal dy dir” It was revived as a kind of rallying call.’

Luke shot Alys a puzzled look. ‘Literally “Maintain your land”,’ she explained, ‘but more like “Stand your ground.”’

‘Ah, so The Standing Ground,’ Luke said. ‘So you don’t live under E-Gov? Incredible! How come no-one

knows about you? How do you live? Why don't they wipe you out? Do you learn history?'

'Slow down, Luke!' Alys laughed and flicked a strand of red-gold hair from her face. Luke decided instantly that Alys was not only vastly prettier than Katie, but perhaps the most beautiful girl he could imagine. Something in the pit of his stomach knotted and leapt.

'Sorry about all the questions,' he said, 'it's just... Crap!'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Sorry, I didn't mean you, Alys. My father's calling me for dinner. I must have been here longer than I realised.'

'Your father?' It was Alys's turn to look puzzled. 'I thought you lived in... those places with guardians instead of parents... what do you call them?'

'Pods. Yeah, we do. But we get to make visits to parents if we want to. I've got to go. Will you be here later?'

'The site'll be here as long as I can manage it, but that might not be for long. Depends how long it takes the owner to evict me. We have to keep moving our sites around anyway, to avoid being found by E-Gov, but even they can't be everywhere.'

'So why do you bother?'

'To let people know it can be different. We drip old knowledge into your world. Sometimes we manage enough maths and magic to sabotage minor E-Gov sites

for as long as it takes them to put up defences. One day I'll crack their encryptions.'

The mist swirled around Luke again so that he felt dizzy. Strings of formulae formed in the mist. Through the haze he could hear Alys laughing and speaking words he couldn't understand, a musical torrent of hypnotic sounds. The mists cleared, and he was with Alys by a mountain stream, looking down on a tree-circled lake.

'I hope you'll come back, Luke. I'm not implanted like you, so I'm not always online, but you can wander through my pages. Visit King Arthur when you come back.'

'King who?'

'Come and find out when you've eaten.'

'Right, yeah, as soon as I can. Oh and ... can I ask?' Luke began to frame a question about the knotted gold ring, but felt suddenly awkward and changed direction. 'Er... What's that top you're wearing?'

Alys laughed, 'It's a jumper, Luke. We don't have fabrics with memory or heat retaining properties.'

'What about antibiotic properties?'

'No, not that either and before you ask, no we don't smell. This is wool. We get it from sheep.'

'Amazing!' Luke felt like a wide-eyed five-year old, 'I mean it sounds really cool.'

Luke could hear Nazir calling more loudly from the kitchen. 'I've really got to go, but it's been great. I hope I'll see you again.'

Myrddin Emrys

Druids learn by heart and slowly, a lifetime of heart-learning. And above all we learn the strength of the human spirit. Tyrants come and go. They use the same weapons: fear, repression, lies, even death, but when we refuse to be afraid, when our souls are not destroyed, they wane. Druids are strong because we know that the human spirit is indomitable.

Where do I come from? From the mists of myth and history? From magic? From Carmarthen: the child without a father or the child whose father was called the Devil? From the wild woods, a prophet drunk on grief from all the violence I witnessed? I am all of this and none of it. Ambiguity has always been my fate.

I am not the king, but I am seer to kings: to Gwrtheyrn, also called Vortigern, the fool and the fox; Aurelius Ambrosius, who held back the darkness for a little while; Wthyr, his brother, whose lust was as violent as his sword, but who served his purpose; Artur, who like me, returns again and again, a light shining in the darkness.

They have all used my magic and now it will be used again and in new ways to let the tyrants know that our spirits cannot be quenched.