

*“Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.”*
William Wordsworth

Prologue

The scratching of pen on paper gave sound to the feverish turnings of her mind. Dr Sarah Moriarty looked up and saw the peaceful snow fall through the darkness, flakes coming to rest on the sill of her mullioned window. She sensed a presence out there. Something that was a stranger to the world.

The boiling kettle clicked and she turned her head from a table laden with open books. She instinctually looked to the cot beside her and the sleeping, six-week-old baby that lay snug under a blanket. Sarah bent forward and kissed the brow of the child and breathed in the newness that came from the baby's cradle.

Pouring boiled water into the mug, the teabag coloured the water as she dunked it slowly. She stood in the studio kitchen of her apartment in Oxford, just a stone's throw away from the Celtic studies department. It was big enough for Sarah, her studies and her newborn. There was little room for extravagance, but it was warm and homely.

Taking the teabag from the cup she turned and froze. In front of her was the massive form of a black Grizzly bear standing as tall as the ceiling and as wide as the doorway. The monstrous animal was blocking the way to her child. Sarah's only thought was that of her baby, who lay in the room next door. On the Grizzly's head were the massive horns of a ram. The kitchen light bounced off the sheen of the animal's mane.

'Hello, Sarah' the animal said, in a deep sonorous voice.

Briefly rocked onto her heels, Sarah spilt some tea as she leaned against the sink. Behind her, she located a carving knife and held it tightly in her hand, unseen to the animal. It stared in silence, yellow eyes in which swirled the colours of moving lava, its canines proud from beneath lips on the side of its mouth, curved out like tusks. Sarah kept the tea in her hand and didn't move a muscle.

'Pejanen Tyger,' said Sarah, with a smile, holding the knife tighter still. 'It's been twenty years.'

The giant beast gave a deep growl.

'Many lifetimes for me,' he replied, as he scratched his massive chest.

'Are you alone?' Sarah asked.

'Yes. We need to talk.'

'If you'll excuse me.' Sarah nodded and moved past the animal to her baby, the knife shielded by her hip.

The animal climbed down onto all fours. Its gnarled claws tapped on the parquet floor as they landed.

'Would you like a cup of tea? It's juniper,' said Sarah, over her shoulder, still holding the knife.

'Yes. A cup would be too small, would you have a bucket?' said Pejanen Tyger, as he tried to turn in the kitchen, knocking his horns against cupboard doors and fridge magnets.

Sarah sipped her tea and looked on as the giant bear lapped up the juniper tea from the biggest saucepan she had. His tongue was vigorous and his teeth clinked against the side of the saucepan. She held her child tightly in her arms.

'Nice place,' said the horned bear.

'Perfect for us.'

He licked his saucepan clean, leaned back and stopped suddenly when he heard the crack of the chair frame. It was clear that this ancient animal was far too big for the room and its furniture.

'Sorry about that,' said Pejanen, embarrassed by his clumsiness.

'It's ok,' replied Sarah, 'it was old anyway.'

'Do you know why I'm here?' said the bear.

Sarah nodded as she softly rocked the baby.

'You knew this day would come,' he added.

Sarah nodded again, not taking her eyes off the animal.

He opened his massive claw and presented a blue vial. Even in the half light it glowed, filled with a liquid. Placing it on the coffee table, he glanced to her with deep intent in his eyes. She looked to the vial.

'The Skiah?' Sarah said, inquisitively.

'Yes.'

'Why do I need the shield?'

'To protect you.'

'From what?'

'From who? Is the question you should be asking Sarah.'

Pejanen Tyger repositioned his ample rump on the floor. 'Mustela grows stronger with every moment. He chases the secrets you have, searches for you and will probably find you. It's time to pass them on.'

The bear didn't finish his sentence and just looked at the child in Sarah's arms. He peered in closer and saw one of the baby's feet appearing from underneath the swaddling blanket. It was an unusual shape. Sarah saw this and looked directly at him. The bear raised his head and nodded.

'What is her name?'

'Boudicca.'

'Strong,' the grizzly growled. 'You must take the Skiah and sleep next to her and as you sleep, the secrets will pass between you.'

'I don't want to bring her into this.'

'You have no choice. You are Ullanite. I wish it to be different, but the future of all depends on it.'

There was an uncomfortable silence between them. The bear got back on all fours and took a step toward Sarah; he lowered his head presenting his forehead in reverence. Sarah lowered her head too, leaned forward and placed her forehead against his. The moment hung there and the baby looked up, raising her hand and touched the tusk of the mighty beast.

'Somnia Sine Metu,' the animal said, in a low voice. It took a little time for him to leave, as the door was too tight. His hips bumped on the framework, shaking pictures on the walls, his rump moving the baby's buggy a few inches. Once out though, the door shut quickly behind him.

From behind her back Sarah took out the knife and placed it on the edge of the coffee table. She picked up the vial and then whispered to the child.

'Somnia Sine Metu.'



'You've reached the voicemail of Dr. Sarah Moriarty, Professor of Celtic studies, Oxford University. I'm afraid I can't get to your call right now, but please leave a message and I will get back to you as soon as possible.'

BEEP

'Mum, pizza or pasta, let me know, byyyyye.'

BEEP

'Mum, where are you? I've put on a pizza, don't be surprised if it's finished when you get home.'

BEEP

'Mum, where are you? I'm getting worried. I've finished the pizza. Told ya!'

BEEP

'Mum, I've called the police. I'm getting really worried. Please call me immediately.'

BEEP

'Sarah this is your father. Just got a call from Boudicca, she's worried about you. Call her as soon as you can, or call me too. You know the number.'

BEEP

'Dr. Sarah Moriarty. This is Police Constable Akton. We are looking to locate your whereabouts. Your daughter and parents have expressed their worry. Contact us as soon as you can.'

BEEP

'Mum. Mum! Please pick up.'