Antony J. Farrell

MUSIC OF THE MUIRGHEAL

Sample Chapters 1-2

CHAPTER ONE

Brigid felt a shudder as the rescue helicopter lifted from what passed as the dock on Conlethe Island. It had nothing to do with the sudden lurch as a gust of wind caught the craft; Brigid had confidence in the crew, one of whom slid the door shut. To fly a rescue helicopter the crew had to be more than competent. It was something else, the feeling that Morrighan, even though defeated and pushed back into her own realm was not finished with them. She glanced alongside her at Maclery, he still looked like an ancient Viking with his twin forked beard. Either that or a member of a heavy metal band. He turned to face her and nodded. No words passed between them; it was perhaps not wise to speak of what had truly happened on the island, but the nod was enough. Maclery too had felt something.

Darkness had arrived early as it did in December in the Atlantic. It found the helicopter still flying eastward. The moon, now past its full still provided a good deal of illumination. Brigid glancing through the window stiffened. She could see something on the horizon to the north-west; it appeared to come roughly from the direction of Conlethe Island. She was not entirely sure but it looked to her like a great wave except that to her mind its shape was wrong. It seemed taller in the centre tapering down on either side. It did not appear to be very wide. It was also closing on the helicopter. Brigid gestured to a crewman near her, the tag on his clothing said O'Sullivan. He looked at where she pointed then yelled to the pilot. The pilot decided that some more altitude might be a good idea. The helicopter began to rise.

Brigid could now see that the stars above the wave were disappearing, hidden by clouds of dark purple and black, though previously the sky had been completely clear with no hint of a storm. Brigid did not believe it was a natural phenomenon. She turned back to Maclery who was busy tightening his seat restraints. O'Sullivan glanced at him and nodded approval. He leant over Brigid and helped her adjust her own. He had just completed the task when a great gust of wind struck the helicopter sending it rotating in a count-clockwise direction. From the cockpit the sound of swearing could be heard; the pilot fighting against the sudden blast of air to get the helicopter back on its proper trajectory. Slowly the helicopter turned back on to its proper heading and continued to climb. The turbulence easing as it increased altitude.

"Sorry about that" the pilot said. The co-pilot interrupted him,

"Look at that" he exclaimed. Brigid craned her neck to see what was going on. She could just make out the shape of the wave, still illuminated by the moonlight. It was passing the helicopter so had to be travelling very fast,

“An earthquake, a tsunami?” the co-pilot added.

“Could be” the pilot replied, “best let them know.” The co-pilot tried to contact anyone but only static came through. He reported clearly just in case it was the helicopter’s receiver was not functioning. He repeated this several times before admitting defeat.

“Don’t know if I got through to anyone. I hope so.”

“What’s that light up ahead” Brigid asked, spotting a light which appeared to flicker on and off at regular intervals. O’Sullivan, who was standing in the cabin, looked forward through the cockpit windows.

“That would be the Clochdorcha lighthouse. Don’t think there’s anyone working there now, automated.”

“That’s lucky” Brigid said. “that wave is heading straight towards it.” As she spoke Brigid knew that the lighthouse was not abandoned. It was almost a vision, she could feel, rather than see the presence of three men near the lighthouse.

The wave reached the light and both it and the light vanished. Brigid sensed that the men looking after the light were gone. More death following her. A parting gift from Morrighan she thought. The helicopter was buffeted again. A great gust of wind striking the helicopter spinning it around, wrenching it from the pilot’s control. Alarms began insistent warnings as the crew tried to fight against whatever had gripped the helicopter. Brigid did not think it was wind; it was something malevolent, something in a sense alive. Sounds of tortured metal filled the cabin. Something like a guttural scream crashed against their ears. The helicopter began to lose altitude, the crew fighting to control, or at least slow the descent. The lurches and spinning motion had nothing to do with the machine itself, the forces were all external, perhaps the Morrighan’s attempt at vengeance. This latter thought fired through Brigid’s mind, an arrow. But unless it was something the Morrighan had left behind it would imply that somewhere there was still a way, a gap or crack connecting the world with the realm of Morrighan. O’Sullivan who was standing was violently thrown across the cabin. His head smacking against a bulkhead with a thud that Brigid could feel. His helmet cracked as he slumped across Brigid before being again thrown as the gyrations of the helicopter continued. A bang, the sound of tearing metal and more alarms from the cockpit added to the confusion of sound as the helicopter tumbled from the sky. The pilot almost got the helicopter under control before it struck the ground. Almost.

There was a dull thud as the helicopter struck the black rock of a tiny island and changed from an aircraft into a battered pile of scrap metal and plastic. There was a brief flash of light and heat as the fuel from the craft

ignited. Then it was gone, there was no consuming fire. The body of the helicopter lay on its side partially submerged in a pool of icy water. Nearby other pieces of the craft lay scattered around. A hammer blow of silence fell upon the island. The blasts of inimical air which had brought the machine down had passed driving the piled up water of the Atlantic with them. For a moment silence ruled on the rocky outcrop. The sky, a moment earlier covered by violent cloud was clear with stars shining brightly on the scene below. Brigid briefly felt a sudden pain in her side as a portion of the helicopter struck her, then it was gone. She felt warm. Both she and Maclery were still strapped into the seat but leaned at an angle which put a great deal of pressure across them.

Maclery was conscious and had blood on his face, arms and legs. It was the same leg that had been broken and then healed following the confrontation with Morrighan. One of his legs had been caught by something and was obviously broken. Maclery seemed not to notice as he undid the seat buckle, falling into the icy pool. He remained oblivious and turned to help Brigid. She was glowing slightly golden and was full of energy. Though she had little control her awakening power over fire had somehow absorbed the fireball as the helicopters fuel exploded. She was uninjured. Maclery then noticed his leg. To Brigid he looked more curious and resigned than anything else. “I’ll need some help. Look for something I can use as a splint” Maclery whispered. As if he was afraid of drawing any attention.

Brigid brought pieces of metal and severed electrical cable along with a large roll of duct tape. “Now for the hard part” Maclery said, “I want you to grab my foot and when I tell you pull. Pull as hard as you can.” Brigid nodded agreement, Maclery was not one to be questioned when he was determined.

“Ready” she said.

“OK, now.” Brigid yanked as hard as she could without letting go of Maclery’s foot. She expected a sharp crack as the broken bone moved, instead there was a dull, wet sound. The loudest sound came from Maclery himself and that was an exclaimed oath. His face though was now covered in a mixture of blood and sweat. Maclery then got Brigid to bind the leg using pieces of metal and the duct tape to strap the leg up. It was a bodge job, but it would have to do.

Maclery used several more pieces of the wrecked helicopter to improvise a crutch and with Brigid’s help got to his feet. He grimaced as he tested his weight on the injured leg. Satisfied that it would hold he gritted his teeth and together the two began to look around. There was no point looking for the helicopters crew. The pilot and copilot were still in their chairs, but the nose of the aircraft had crushed them when it impacted the ground. O’Sullivan Brigid had found a short distance away his head at an angle the neck could not sustain.

The fourth member of the crew was nowhere to be found. He might have fallen into the ocean. Wherever he was he was nowhere near the bulk of the wreckage.

The island was tiny; and dominating it standing atop a hill of black stone which reminded Brigid of Conlethe Island stood the remains of the Clochdorcha light. It stood looking like a broken black tooth, illuminated only by the moonlight. Near the ruined tower stood more ruins, the remains of a building which abutted it. Accomodations? Brigid wondered. Helping Maclery the two of them carefully made their way across the treacherous ground to the partially demolished outbuildings. Maclery telling Brigid,

"It should not be too long before someone else comes. The helicopter probably had an emergency beacon and the lack of light from the lighthouse should also bring attention."

"There were men here" Brigid said, "I felt them." She paused, "Now I don't." Brigid paused again, "If you can get a fire going I'll have a look through the wreckage. Hopefully there will be something we can use."

To the surprise of both Brigid and Maclery it was not the authorities who reached the tiny island first. They could hear the sound of a boat engine purring in contentment. Maclery nodded his head in appreciation of a well kept engine. "There's only one boat I know that sounds like that." Maclery said. Brigid looked towards the isles partially wrecked dock and there, clearly pulling alongside was the boat christened years ago Réimse Draíochta, or the Magical Realm. Brigid broke into a run heading for the boat. She arrived in time to catch a rope thrown by Cullen. The boat already stationary. She deftly wrapped it around a wooden post. Cullen stepped lightly ashore.

"How?" Brigid asked.

"The moment I saw that wave begin to form I knew something was wrong. We set out immediately to follow." Brigid noticed that when he spoke 'we' he meant himself and the boat. The Réimse Draíochta technically was owned by Brigid, it had been her families, but the boat had chosen Cullen as its partner. Things from Conlethy Island had a habit of being more alive than anywhere else she had been.

"I've contacted the authorities. Another rescue should be underway shortly." He noticed Maclery and his injured leg, "again?" he asked.

"Again." Maclery replied.

Cullen inspected the splint and crutch, "that's a good job, must be all the practice we've had recently." Brigid and Cullen then began to search the island, it did not take long, looking for any sign of the missing lighthouse keepers or the missing crewman from the helicopter. They found no sign of any of them.

Brigid found herself drawn to a large boulder on which deep scratches could be seen. They made no design that she could see, instead they appeared to have been put there by giant claws, but from what she could not tell. Beyond the boulder there was a small pool of water partially filled with rotting weed and the decomposing body of a gull. Partially submerged she could see a bowl. It was largely covered with a black lacquer. But in a few places patches of the covering had flaked off revealing a metallic dark bronze colour beneath. Brigid did not think it was bronze, it did not look quite right, but what the metal was none of them could tell when she showed them. It reminded her of the copper bowl they had left behind hidden on Conlethy Island. Under the black coating she could make out similar symbols: stars, strange animals, and people.

CHAPTER TWO

This was to be their last day manning the light on its small rocky island. No relief crew would be on its way; they were its last crew; the lighthouse built more than a century ago had finally been automated. Principal keeper O'Kelly took a long slow look around the machinery room, his two assistants standing silent beside him. He took a step forward and performed his final duty, one by one he threw switches. Far above in the lantern room the great lamp illuminated and began to turn on its mount. "That's it then. I think we can safely say we're all unemployed now." No one else spoke; there was no need to. They had served together on and off for years, now they would be heading for the mainland going their separate ways. They were tired, they all had mixed feelings, O'Kelly especially since this was his final posting; he would be retiring from the service. He knew that all would be glad to return to their homes on the mainland, but what then.

The three men had already packed, the mechanics and electricians who had automated the lighthouse had already departed the island and the three keepers were now waiting for the final ferry that would carry them away. Why they couldn't leave with the technicians O'Kelly could not fathom, something to do with their contracts he imagined. They all knew that the Atlantic was an unpredictable, fickle mistress so they were not unduly surprised when their ferry failed to arrive. It was delayed, it was always delayed, O'Kelly could not remember when it had last been on time. This was the nature of the Atlantic. He had worked most of his life with the lights and had learnt to read the sea. He was stoic. Standing nearby, the youngest of the three keepers, a lad of about twenty-three called Bannon was looking out of the accommodation shacks western window. To O'Kelly he seemed frozen in place, and he moved closer to see what had caught the boy's attention. O'Kelly looked out of the windows and could find no words for what he could see. He could read the sea, but what he saw had no words. What he could see was black. It was death, and it was coming straight for them.

The sky had given no warning; one moment there had been a faint cloud moving in from the north-west, the next the sky had darkened. First grey, then purple, finally an intense black with heavy all-encompassing cloud. Small flashes of reddish lightning could be discerned originating from within the clouds. It came with wind. Wind which struck the lighthouse with a blow so hard that the reinforced glass around the light far above shattered into tiny shards. If any of the men had been in the lantern room, they would have been speared by thousands of lethal darts. The light itself was consumed by the sudden destruction and extinguished. If there were any ships nearby they were on their own. It was the heavy shutters on the shack which saved them, the wind

swung them violently closed with a series of great booms which they could hear even above the roar of the wind. O'Kelly had pulled Bannon down below the window they were looking out of before the wind and an accompanying wave struck, while the third man Byrne had already dived for the floor.

Getting to their feet the three men ran from the shack to the lighthouse, it was not a great distance, but the shack was beginning to shake and come apart under the battering ram of the wind. The tower that held the light was the strongest building on the island. They bundled through the door and closed and barred it taking refuge as best they could near its base. This was the thickest and strongest part of the centuries old structure. The wind had become a great scream, loud enough that they could not hear themselves shouting at each other. There was no real need for words. All they could do was hold on. Their view of the sea before it had become too dark to see anything, revealed a doom hurtling towards them. Atlantic breakers could be frightening to those not used to them and some waves even to those who were experienced of the vagaries of the ocean. The three men had seen many in their service and viewed them with a profound respect rather than fear. They were afraid now. What the wind was driving before it was not breakers; it was something much greater. Sailors and those who worked the sea told tales of rogue waves; what they had seen hurtling towards the island was not that. It was a literal mountain of water, tall, peaked, coming from the Northwest. It towered above the tower, above the rocks on which is sat. None of them had ever seen anything remotely like it.

The three men held hands, heads bowed. There was nothing else they could do. The floor of the lighthouse began to tremble. They were deafened. Unseen by them the island vanished under the water as the great wave swept across the tiny piece of land. It struck the tower. Water poured into it through every window, the last of the glass pushed in to the interior. Cold, salt water poured down the spiral stair pouring onto, drenching the three men. Something heavy struck the walls of the tower. Stones which had not moved since the lighthouse had been constructed, and which had withstood everything the Atlantic had been able to throw at them began to shift. The tower screamed and the three men heard the sounds of its collapse over everything else. They knew it was their time to die.

The lighthouse collapsed. Its stones mingling with the inrushing sea fell upon the three men trapped in its lowest level. A monstrous beast of prey looking for a meal. A great boulder struck Byrne on his head, instantly he was gone. The three men's hands were torn apart in the cascading flood. O'Kelly was washed away, while Bannon had a final thought that amidst all the noise he could hear singing. It was a sweet, sad sound. Then darkness fell.

Outside the great wave continued Eastward leaving behind a broken tower, a shattered rotted tooth poking out above the rocks. Water streamed from

the island back into the Atlantic. The accommodation shack was mostly gone. There was little debris on the island apart from some remaining stonework which had been part of the lighthouse, and a few timbers, part of the accommodation shack. As an arrow the wind and wave continued east, the wave finally striking against the western cliffs of the mainland. Here it was defeated. A strange sound a mournful wail, arose with the percussive crash of the wave against the cliff. Here and there portions of the cliff crumbled away and fell into the churning water beneath. But the wave was stopped, the wind was not. The night along the coast became quiet, still, stars appeared. To the west a blood moon faded, the eclipse over, and far on the horizon tiny specks of flame jumped across the sky then they too faded. An echo of the violence remained. The wind carried on Eastward leaving behind the vanquished water which without the wind fell back into its normal rhythms. As it faded a song faded with it, a lament to the fallen. The wind passed on continuing towards its destination, leaving behind mostly silence broken only by the sound of the quieting waves breaking upon the rocky shore of the coast.