

With an elbow firmly planted on rough planking, chin resting in a cupped hand, Mannanan Mac Lir lounged at the head of the table and took a swig of his ale, not caring that a stream of the golden brew spilled free to run down his matted beard. He was beyond caring about such matters. He was well on the way to getting totally smashed and was enjoying every minute of the festivities.

The scent of roast suckling pig, herbs and ale hung heavy in the gloom of the smoky interior of his grand hall. Servants scurried about ensuring the hundred or so guests seated around the horseshoe table never ran dry, the minstrels were in fine voice, and laughter filled the air.

Beltaine was Mannanan's favourite feast day; the celebration of the long summer days to come, to be spent driving his chariot over land and sea, when he could be free from the day to day running of the enchanted land that was Mann. He sighed. He had ruled the fey for a long time now. Too long. He was tired of it all; the politics, the intrigue, the petty disputes, the ungrateful rabble that passed for his subjects. It was time he stepped aside and let one of his sons take over.

His eyes slid to the vacant seat to the left of the horseshoe, where Mongan should have been seated, and his lips curled into a half smile. The lad was just like he was at his age; all brute force and ignorance. But he would learn, just like he had, that sometimes you had to use your head and not brawn to win wars. Even so, it would not have hurt him to put aside his latest conflict for a day or two and attend the feast.

Without realising, Mannanan's gaze had slid to the scrawny figure sat slumped at the other end of the horseshoe. Despite all his efforts, his other son, Simon, failed to live up to expectations. He had yet to master the powers of the Royal ring and showed no sign of being capable of rule, and had botched every test set him. Just like his mother, he preferred his own company, and, just like his mother, avoided Mannanan like the plague.

Staring sullenly at the table, an untouched tankard of ale by his side, Simon looked totally out of place. Around him, fairy-folk laughed, cheered, and talked in loud voices, but Simon was oblivious. If Mannanan had not ordered his son to attend he very much doubted he would have turned up. His good humour began to evaporate.

Nearby, someone farted, loud and long, and Mannanan swung round, intent on giving the culprit a piece of his mind, or at the least a face full of fist for his rudeness, but the fairy was already away from the table, clutching his buttocks as he flew. Mannanan looked on in bemusement, then concern as more and more fairies took to the air, each clutching their buttocks and heading toward the Royal privy. Within minutes, the whirr of wings replaced the sounds of revelry. No doubt fearful they would be blamed for driving away their King's guests, the minstrels launched into a lively jig, which only served to add an air of comedy to the situation. An air that was completely lost on Mannanan.

A cold, hard anger began to build within him. He went rigid. Muscles bulged as he clenched his fists and surveyed the disaster that was meant to be celebration. His tankard crumpled under the pressure, its contents spurting out in an amber-coloured shower, and he growled an oath.

Something brushed past his leg, and he heard a snigger. Dropping to the floor, Mannanan dived under the table and grabbed at the trailing leg of a young fairy who was attempting to scurry away. The lad squealed in alarm and twisted round. His face blanched when he saw who had him trapped. His eyes widened in terror, before he glanced guiltily to the hide bag slung around his neck.

Anares tossed a stone at the strange black pillar standing in the middle of the grotto, and grunted in satisfaction as it pinged away to clatter on the rock-strewn ground. They had been locked up for three days now and he was bored rigid, and there was still another ten-day to serve. It was most unfair. Who would have thought Mannanan would accuse them of treason and incarcerate them in this dump just for sprinkling ground-up ploppy seeds in the curry powder? It had only been a prank, after all. Mind you, Anares had never seen a banquet table empty so fast, or the royal privy so full, so maybe the penalty was worth it – just.

Slumped on the ground around him, Cadiz, Erythia, and Igneas looked on in disinterest.

“How long we been down here?” Igneas asked, his deep voice loud and booming in the relative silence.

Erythia shrugged, and flicked a long strand of silver hair from her eyes. “Who cares, dude? We’re stuck here until Mannanan decides to let us out.”

“If he ever does,” grumbled Cadiz. “The grumpy old sod’s probably sat on his throne and forgotten he put us down here.”

After tossing another rock at the obelisk, Anares strolled to where his companions lay. Squatting, he picked up a pebble and tossed it from hand to hand. “Someone knows we’re here because we get food and water every day. We’ll be out soon, you’ll see.”

“And then what?” asked Igneas.

“And then, my big, cumbersome friend, we carry on where we left off. Only this time we’ll be more careful. From now on, our tricks and pranks will be carefully planned, and, as penance for our unjust incarceration by the petty bourgeois, we’ll make sure they suffer great misfortunes.”

Cadiz lurched upright in excitement, and winced. He glared over a scrawny shoulder at his wings, securely hobbled against flight.

“Soon, my brother,” said Anares. “Soon.”

“Not soon enough,” said Cadiz, scowling.

Anares stared up at the dark maw of the tunnel leading out of the dungeon under Tynwald, Mannanan’s castle. Set halfway up the sheer wall, it was impossible to reach without flying. Pursing his lips, he vowed that once they were released the land of Mann would suffer. Only this time it would be something more disruptive than the petty games for which they had been jailed.

Rising, he said, “Come on. First one to break off a chunk gets first choice of today’s delicious offering.” Swivelling, he threw the pebble at the black pillar.

“First choice?” Igneas grinned and rose to his feet to grab the largest rock he could find. Muscles bulging, he lobbed it at the pillar. It struck with a mighty crash, but the black surface remained unmarked. “That’s my type of talk.”

Simon felt a shiver of apprehension ripple through him as he flew through the dark tunnel toward the cavern where Anares and his gang were held. He hated the dark. Always had. Dark was when Ogres roamed and bogey men came out, and everyone knew they liked eating small boys. And, as Simon was painfully aware, he was small, even for a fairy.

He toyed with the band on his ring finger, an image of a prancing deer etched onto its golden surface to denote his Royal lineage, and eyed the darkness ahead, half-expecting an Ogre to leap out and chomp him up on the spot. He wished he knew how to use the power of the ring to illuminate his passage and drive the imaginary beasts away, but he didn’t. He had never been able to use it. For some reason he could not link with its latent power, and had long since given up on trying to use its magic.

As his father had once told him, before he chose to treat Simon as though he didn't exist, it was all down to concentration and need.

It was the 'need' bit that got in the way, Simon realised. There had always been something else that demanded his attention; usually something far more enjoyable than sitting inside a musty castle trying to create magic. As far as he was concerned, magic was a tool magicians used to entertain children, and that is where it belonged. Aside from now, that is.

Sighing, he hefted the bag of goodies slung over his shoulder and flew on, his thoughts turning to Erythia. He felt his face redden. With her long silver hair, curvaceous figure and perfect features, she was every fairy's dream-girl, especially his. Just one kiss would make this journey worthwhile.

Her image flickered to life in the darkness ahead, and he increased his speed. Out of all Anares's gang, she was the one who acknowledged him the most. Well, once, to be precise. But she had definitely smiled in his direction, which was good enough for him.

The tunnel wound on, spiralling downward, dank and dismal, seemingly with no end in mind, but Simon knew it spilled into Mannanan's dungeon. He had been down there once before, when his father had shown him the black obelisk, and hinted at its sinister history.

Present at the sentencing of Anares and his gang, Simon had gasped when the decree had been passed. The dungeon below Tynwald had not been used for centuries. Erythia did not deserve such a fate, and he decided there and then to do something to help alleviate her discomfort.

The darkness began to lighten, and Simon knew he was nearing his goal. The dungeon was lined with foul-smelling, luminous lichen that clung to the rock; casting a green-tinged radiance over everything.

As he flew closer he heard the sound of laughter and cheering, and scowled. He had expected to find forlorn and desperate prisoners when he arrived, not a party in progress. His heart sank. Instead

of arriving as their saviour, he would arrive to become the target of another of their pranks. He had not forgotten the time they swapped his bar of soap for a block of gummy tree resin and ended up with his hands stuck to his face. It had taken hours to free them, and when he did, his face had resembled a smacked arse. Being the butt of their antics held no appeal, and he almost turned back. In an uncharacteristic moment of bravery, or stupidity, he decided to continue with his mission, albeit with a little less enthusiasm.

In spite of being the target for many of their jokes he wanted to join them. They were the only ones that treated him as just another fairy, not a prince of the realm, and he envied their camaraderie. A sensation he had never experienced. And there was also Erythia. Being close to her every day held a certain amount of appeal.

Decelerating, he eased his way toward the circle of light. When within spitting distance of the opening, he descended to crawl the rest of the way on his hands and knees and peer down.

Below, in the dungeon, Anares, Igneas, and Cadiz were tossing rocks at the black obelisk while Erythia looked on. She was sitting on a slab of slate, her back to him, her finely chiselled chin resting in cupped hands, the very picture of boredom. Long silver hair spilled down her back and he could see the pointed tips of her ears poking through. Her wings, parting the silver flow like rocks in a river, were hobbled. Simon winced, and gave his own a nervous flutter.

A sharp crack shook the grotto, followed by much cheering and laughter.

Erythia leapt to her feet, and Simon switched his gaze to the boys. A huge slab of the black obelisk had sheared away and was now rocking gently on the ground. He watched as Igneas walked over to it, a grin splitting his simple features, and hefted it in huge hands. His deep voice then boomed around the cavern.

“First choice, you said.”

Anares laughed. “You have it right, big guy.”

While they were talking, Erythia walked over to the obelisk. Once there, she prodded the spot where the piece had sheared off, then screamed and stumbled back, a fist flying to her mouth.

“What is it?” asked Anares, rushing to her side.

Simon felt a pang of jealousy as Anares threw a comforting arm around her shoulder.

Erythia pointed to the obelisk. Even from his vantage point, Simon could tell she was shaking.

“It – it – it’s alive! Look! You can see pink skin and – and – an eye.”

Cadiz sneered and swept past her. “Since when have rocks had eyes?” He halted by the pillar and peered in, twisting his head this way and that as he studied it. “Hmmm. It’s probably a fault in the stone. Does look like an eye, though.”

Removing his arm from around Erythia’s shoulder, Anares stepped forward, closely followed by Igneas. Together, they looked over Cadiz’s shoulder. Raising a thick, stubby forefinger, Igneas reached across and prodded inside the rock, then squealed and jumped back, barging past Anares.

Anares glared at him. “What did you do that for, you great ignoramus?”

“It was squidgy. Just like a real eye.”

“A real eye, my arse,” said Cadiz. “Since when have rocks had eyes? I told you, it’s just a flaw.”

“Then why’d it squidge when I poked it, fool?” Igneas moved from behind Erythia, opening and closing his fists as he strode purposefully forward.

“Hey. Cool down, dudes,” said Erythia. “There’s no need to go fight about it.”

“Yes there is,” growled Igneas. “He called me... er, an arse.”

“You’ve been called worse, big guy, so leave it out.” Anares stepped back to the obelisk and inspected it. After a moment, he raised a hand and poked at whatever lay within, pulling his finger

back out far quicker than it went in. He turned to the others, his face ashen. "I think there's someone in there."

"Basalting!"

The boys turned to look at Erythia, who stared at the obelisk in horror.

"What did you say?" asked Anares.

"Basalting," Erythia repeated. "In ancient times they used to Basalt criminals." She shook her head. "No, not criminals, really bad dudes who were plotting to overthrow the king." She shrugged. "That's what I read someplace, anyhow. Like, it was the ultimate deterrent. Know what I mean?"

"Never heard of it," said Cadiz, taking a step away from the obelisk and casting it a nervous look.

"Only one way to find out," said Igneas, grabbing a large rock from the ground. "Unless you're chicken." He gave Cadiz a look of contempt and raised the rock above his head.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Erythia. "Put it down, dude."

"Do as she says, big guy," said Anares. "You know she's usually right about these things."

"Sure!" With a mighty heave of his arms, Igneas crashed the rock into the obelisk.

Time slowed, eyes widened, and hearts beat faster as a crack appeared, gradually expanding as it spread down the obelisk's length. Complete and utter silence cloaked the grotto as all eyes stared at the ever-lengthening split.

The smile faded from Igneas's face and he took a hesitant step back.

A sound like thunder erupted from the pillar. Simon clapped hands to his ears and squeezed his eyes shut as dust and stone rained down. The ground shifted, and it felt as though the whole dungeon was about to collapse around him.

After what seemed like an age, the rattle and clatter of falling rock and debris stopped, and the ground ceased to move. Even so, he waited a while longer before daring to open his eyes. And when he did he could see nothing. A cloud of dust smothered his view of what had happened below. Gradually, the dust began to settle, and he made out the four prostrate forms of Anares and his gang. For a moment he thought they were dead, but then Anares, coughing and choking, rose to his feet on unsteady legs and began to shake his companions.

Simon's gaze fixed on the obelisk, or rather, on where the obelisk had been. In its stead was a darkly shrouded form. Tall, stooped and sinister, it loomed over Anares and the others. Too intent on their own wellbeing, they did not notice it, until it spoke.

“Who wakens Apocalypse?”

The voice was hoarse and raspy, but there was no mistaking its power. Overcome by limb-numbing fear, Simon pressed himself flat to the ground.

“I say again, who wakens Apocalypse?”

This time the voice was more powerful.

Stepping hesitantly forward from the huddle of terrified fairies, Anares faced Apocalypse. “We did, your... Apocalypse?” Anares's voice wavered. “It was an accident. Honest! He” - he glared at Igneas - “threw the rock too hard and...”

“Rock?” The voice, no longer formal and commanding, sounded relieved. “No wonder my head hurts.” He raised an arm, the sleeve to the robe falling free to reveal a pasty white hand as Apocalypse rubbed at his head through the cowl. “Doesn't explain my throbbing eye, but that one can wait.” Raising his other arm, he pushed back the hood.

Simon gasped as androgynous features were revealed. Long yellow hair framed the most exquisite face he had ever seen.

“That’s better, now I can see you more clearly.” With a dazzling smile, Apocalypse stared down at his saviours. “And who is it I have to thank for my headache?”

Without hesitation, everyone pointed to Igneas.

“And my eye?”

Again, everyone pointed to Igneas.

A nervous laugh escaped Igneas’s lips, and he reddened. To his credit, he remained unwavering under intense scrutiny.

A frown tugged at Apocalypse’s brow. “I see you have been hobbled.” He fixed each of them with a brief, penetrative look. His own wings unfolded from slits in his robe, to briefly flutter before laying flat against the dark material. “Well, well. It seems I am not the only one to have offended Mannanan.” Swivelling, he stared up to the ledge where Simon lay. “What about you?”

Stifling a squeal, Simon attempted to burrow into the ground.

“Do come down. I know you are there.”

Come down? Simon couldn’t move. Fear had turned his limbs to jelly.

“Oh dear.” With a snap of Apocalypse’s fingers the hobbles confining the wings of Anares and his companions dropped free. “Be good chaps and go and fetch him, will you? I hate it when I am ignored. It makes me feel... unloved.”

The fairies cast each other anxious looks, but did not move.

Apocalypse frowned. “Are you about to ignore me too?”

There was an underlying threat to his words that was not lost on Anares. Pursing his lips, he shrugged and then launched himself toward the dark opening, closely followed by the others, who cheered and whooped as they flew to the ledge where Simon lay.

“It’s that idiot, Simon,” yelled Igneas, swooping down to grab for one of Simon’s arms.

“Come on, idiot, let’s be having you.”

Rough hands dragged Simon upright.

“Easy, dude,” admonished Erythia. “It’s not his fault his old man is a bad dude.”

At that moment Simon could have hugged her. Instead, confined by two pairs of arms, he settled for smiling her way; a smile that faded as he was swept off the ground and taken down to face Apocalypse at a speed designed to bring up the contents of his stomach.

“Mannanan’s son, hey?” Apocalypse stepped down off the plinth, grimacing at the unaccustomed movement, and rubbed at his chin as he studied Simon. With a flick of his head, he gestured for Cadiz and Igneas to let go of his arms.

Apocalypse’s eyes were the deepest blue Simon had ever seen, and they held him fast.

Clapping his hands in delight, Apocalypse said, “Excellent! And what brings *you* down here, Mannanan’s son?”

Released of the gaze, Simon cast a swift glance to where Anares stood staring at him, and patted the bag slung over his shoulder. “I – I – I came to give them these.”

“Give us what, idiot?” Igneas snatched the bag from Simon’s shoulder, snapping the thin cord that strapped it in place.

Simon winced, and watched in dismay as Igneas tore open the fastenings and spilled the contents to the ground. There were the snips he had put in to cut free the hobbles, the pies he had brought to feed the gang and the jars of dwarven ale he had brought for them to drink.

“Looks like the idiot was coming to help us,” said Cadiz. Sneering, he stepped forward to poke Simon in the chest. “And what makes you think we needed your help, idiot?”

The injustice of their comments caused Simon to redden. He should have known they would have reacted like this. Just like his father and everyone else, they despised him and thought him weak and stupid.

“Leave him alone, dude,” snapped Erythia. “At least he came down to try and help, not like the rest of those uncool types.”

“Good point,” said Anares. He clapped Simon on the back. “Thanks, Simon.”

“He’s still an idiot,” Cadiz mumbled, moving to stand beside Igneas.

“Enough!”

The irked tone of Apocalypse’s voice ceased all chatter.

“Well, then. Now I have a dilemma.” Apocalypse tapped at pursed lips as he studied Simon. “It would seem that the other four and I have something in common; a score to settle with Mannanan. But you? What score have you to settle, Mannanan’s son?”

Seizing his chance, Simon said, “To get my own back. My father hates me because I keep messing up the stupid tasks he sets to prove I am worthy of succeeding him, and I’m fed up with being treated like an idiot. Oh, and I want to be in their gang.” He reddened and shifted his feet in discomfort as four pairs of eyes stared at him in disbelief. In a low voice, he said, “They’re the only ones who take any notice of me.”

“But we use you to try out new tricks,” said Igneas. “Why should you think we like you?”

Simon shrugged. “Because at least you treat me as if I’m there.” He knew it sounded lame, but it was the only reason he had. One he could voice, anyway. He very much doubted whether love of Erythia would go down too well in the current climate.

Apocalypse laughed, light and tinkling. “Well, it would seem I now have five fairies at my disposal.” He laughed again. “Five fairies of Apocalypse, it has a nice ring to it.” Staring intently at Anares, he said, “You are with me, are you not?”

Anares avoided his gaze, and stared at the ground. After a moment, he looked up, shrugged, and flicked a glance to his friends before answering. “Seems like it. What is it you want us to do?”

Pacing before the plinth, Apocalypse rubbed at his chin. Suddenly, he stopped, the gleam of an idea showing in his eyes as he looked their way. “Mayhem and madness. That is what I want.” The gleam turned manic, his gaze far away. “And for that, you shall be well rewarded. But first, you will need some help.”

Cadiz snorted in dismissal. “We managed well enough before, so why should we need help now?”

A twisted smile marred the perfect beauty of Apocalypse’s features. “Because I say so, and because I have in mind something far more intricate for Mann than you could ever hope to dream up. Believe me, I have had plenty of time to” -- he paused to cast Simon a thoughtful look -- “plot my great trick.” Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, he said, “With the help of my powers, you will spread panic and mayhem through Mannanan’s seat, and then, when all seems lost, I will appear to undo all that you have done, and petition for a pardon.”

A furrow creased Anares’s brow. “But what about us? If we cause all this mayhem, we’ll end up back here quicker than a dwarf can down an ale and belch in appreciation.”

Apocalypse smiled. “I knew you were the leader. Intelligence oozes from your every pore.”

Anares reddened and looked to the ground.

“You will not end up back here because you will be disguised – by me. And soon after I appear to rectify the damage you have caused, I will change you back and no one will be any the wiser as to your involvement. Happy?”

“How do we know we can trust you?”

Apocalypse stretched forward an index finger, from which gleamed a golden ring, the image of a prancing deer on its surface.

Simon gasped, and looked to his own ring finger, where the exact same ring glistened under the green-tinged light. Fear gripped him. He had an awful idea of where Apocalypse’s powers came from, and again he wished he knew how to summon his own.

Features composed, Apocalypse placed a hand on his heart, and said, “I, too, am of royal stock, and I do not lie.”

“That’s good enough for me,” growled Igneas, pushing past Cadiz, “even if I can’t stand Royalty. I’m fed up with being down here. I need to be out. What do you want me to do?”

Anares made to speak, but Apocalypse cut him off with a wave of a hand, then smirked and said, “Why nothing, except to stand there and receive my gift.”

Placing his hands on Igneas’s shoulders, Apocalypse closed his eyes and mouthed words semi-familiar to Simon. He knew they were ancient, but for the life of him he could not remember what they were. The ring on his finger began to vibrate as Apocalypse spoke.

Finishing his incantation, Apocalypse removed his hands from Igneas’s shoulders and stepped away. A momentary gleam entered his eyes.

“Welcome, War. Where you tread, angers will be raised and battles will ensue. Your task is to bring mayhem.”

All eyes were on Igneas, who stared at Apocalypse as if he had gone mad.

“Huh?”

A frown marred Apocalypse’s features, which disappeared when Igneas groaned.

Then, to Simon’s disbelief, Igneas began to change, and the vibrations from his ring grew stronger.

Igneas’s already broad shoulders filled out, his chest expanded, his features took on a more rugged cast, his skin lightened through light brown to pink to white, his wings whitened, and a whopping great sword appeared in his hands. The transformation was over in seconds, and when complete, War stood before them, tall, muscular, and downright menacing.

Looking up, War met Apocalypse’s gaze, and said, “Your enemies are mine, Master.”

“Wow!” Cadiz stepped in front of Igneas and prodded a finger in his chest, wincing as it buckled on bugling muscles. War never flinched.

Turning, Cadiz said, “Me next. I want to be like him, big and full of muscles.” He pulled back the sleeve of his tunic and flexed his biceps, his arm resembling a piece of string with a knot in it.

Apocalypse stepped forward and grasped his shoulders. “I cannot promise you that, but I can promise you more power than you ever thought possible.”

Cadiz grinned. “That’ll do for me.” Closing his eyes, he said, “Do your worst, boss man.”

In moments, Cadiz too underwent a dramatic metamorphosis. His skin darkened to a deep red, open sores appearing on its surface, his wings turned scarlet, and his clothes became rags.

“Welcome, Pestilence. Your role is to spread plague and disease wherever you tread.”

“As you say, it shall be done, Master.”

Gone was Cadiz’s cocky brashness, replaced by a voice devoid of emotion. Simon blanched. Something was not right, and the ring on his finger was busy trying to saw its way

through flesh. A worrying thought struck him. If Apocalypse was a member of the Royal Household, why had he been incarcerated in Basalt? As Erythia had said, that was only carried out for plotting against Mannanan. A feeling of dread engulfed him, causing him to tremble almost as much as the ring on his finger. The reason Apocalypse had been incarcerated was because he *had* plotted against Mannanan. That was the great secret his father held from him, about the obelisk. Fear gripped him. Turning, he tried to catch Erythia's eye and warn her of the danger, but she had already stepped forward, as though entranced. Standing beside him, Anares, too, looked ensorcelled. His eyes held a vacant expression and he did not acknowledge Simon's tugging at his sleeve.

Once in Apocalypse's clutches, Erythia underwent her transformation. Her skin and wings turned the colour of the deepest night, her hair turned black, and her clothing would not look out of place at a funeral pyre.

"Welcome, Famine. Where you tread crops will fail, hens will cease to lay, and cows will dry up. Hunger shall be your companion."

"As is your will, Master."

Sweat beaded Simon's brow. Why was he not under Apocalypse's spell like the others? Was it to do with the ring? And, if so, why had Apocalypse not realised?

Anares was the next to receive the blessing, and soon joined the others, his now sickly, pale skin repulsive.

"As Death, your role is to spread fear, sickness and decay, and the army of the dead will be at your disposal."

Apocalypse turned his gaze on Simon, and gave a mocking smile. "And what shall we do with you, Mannanan's son?"

Inside, Simon was quaking, but knew he had to feign being under Apocalypse's power if he was to escape the dungeon and warn his father before it was too late, and he could not do that if he were dead. Hiding his ring with his other hand, he stared straight ahead, hoping he looked ensorcelled.

Apocalypse walked around him, rubbing at his chin in thought. Stopping, he snapped his fingers and said, "I've got it." He leaned in close and stared into Simon's unblinking eyes.

"Smog!"

Grasping Simon's shoulders, he began his incantation for the fifth and final time. As soon as he had finished and stepped away, a cloud of noxious gasses coalesced around Simon, so thick he could barely see through. Aside from feeling slightly nauseous, there was no other discernable difference.

"As Smog, your role is to pollute the very air that breathes life into Mann. Where you tread, people will suffer the coughs, the tight chests and the asthmas."

"As is your will, Master," said Simon.

"Excellent!" Apocalypse clapped his hands in delight. "Now, let us go forth and spread mayhem, my fairies. To the castle we go!"

In a flurry of wings, Simon followed the others up and out along the tunnel by which he had so recently entered. In no time at all they emerged into an enclosed courtyard. Sunlight bathed the empty grassed squares set to either side of the path leading through to the castle itself, but Simon could see little, if anything of his surroundings. He knew the grass should be a vivid green, the paths yellow stone, and that the walls should be glowing pink from the sun, but everything looked brown and dirty to his distorted vision. The smog cloud obscured everything but the sharpest colours, and then muted them to various shades of sludge.

In a moment of perspicacity, he realised he would not be able to forewarn his father after all, because his father and the Royal Household would be the first ones to suffer. And then Apocalypse could emerge and lay claim to the crown. Who could stop him?

A voice sounding remarkably like his father's whispered into his head.

'You can!'

Simon gasped. The thought was ridiculous. How could he, as Smog, hope to smother War, Pestilence, Famine and Death in one fell swoop, and then marry Famine as his reward? Some relationship that would turn out to be. At the first sign of consummation one of them would starve to death while the other died of asphyxiation.

'Stop dithering, idiot, and do something!'

By the darkening of the light, Simon knew they had entered the corridor leading into the castle proper. It was too late. His father was doomed, and the rest of Mann when Apocalypse took control. He realised that for all his father's many faults, he actually cared what happened to him.

'The ring, idiot. Use the ring. Apocalypse has no more power than you or I. He just knows how to use the ring.'

"But I don't!" wailed Simon, his cry muffled by the smog cloud.

'Bollocks! I'd forgotten about that. Time for a crash course.'

Mannanan sat sprawled on his throne. With one leg hooked over a gilded arm, the other swinging free above the steps leading down from the dais, he ignored the five fairies arrayed before him

and continued to fiddle with the scrap of paper in his hands. Simon stared through the smog cloud at the arm of the throne. His father must have been at it for ages because a fair flock of them lay balanced on the red velvet of the padding beside his leg.

The sound of slow handclapping came from behind the five fairies. Turning, they split aside as Apocalypse glided across the white marble floor.

Ignoring him, Mannanan finished his bird and laid it on the arm of the throne with the others, then picked up another paper from his lap to begin the next.

Apocalypse stepped forward to halt before the steps leading up to the throne, one foot resting on the bottom step as he gazed up at Mannanan. "It will be no great loss when you are deposed." He looked over his shoulder to where his five fairies stood. "And with my new commanders, Mann will soon be bowing to a very different type of king, my brother." His low, manic laugh was filled with menace. "It is a shame you cannot stick around to witness the fun times ahead. But" -- he shook his head in mock dismay -- "only one may rule. And, as we can plainly see, your mind is not quite in it. So, brother, what is it to be? Basalting? Or something more terminal?"

Resting the sheet of paper on his thigh, Mannanan proceeded to make folds, giving no indication he had heard a word.

Apocalypse growled low in his throat, and swivelled to stare at Simon and his companions.

"Make him suffer before he dies."

Stepping aside, he made room for them to move past and onto the dais.

'*Now!*' the voice in Simon's head commanded. It still sounded like his father, but it couldn't be, for the King still folded paper, ignoring the advancing threat.

Grasping his ring finger with his other hand, Simon stared through the murk at the paper birds on the arm of the throne, and willed them to fly to protect their King.

Nothing happened.

Keeping up with the slow, steady pace of the others, he tried again. This time there was a flutter on the chair's arm, as though a breeze had wafted across the room and disturbed the paper birds, and his ring began to tremble. Beads of sweat formed on Simon's brow as channelled his concentration and need.

In blissful ignorance, the king continued with his folding.

The fairies were abreast of Apocalypse now and Simon could see the twisted snarl on his face. The look spurred him on, and he sent a massive mindblast at the paper birds.

'Fly! Fly like the wind! Protect your King!'

The paper birds fluttered again, and then began to shake. To Simon's amazement, they rose from the arm of the chair, expanded, grew larger, and became brightly feathered. Cawing and shrieking, they hurtled down at Mannanan's attackers.

Startled by the unexpected flurry of wings, Simon's companions halted.

"Kill them!" shrieked Apocalypse, staggering as the flock descended on him, driving him back from the dais. Arms whirling, he batted at the birds to no effect. They ducked and dived out of reach, herding him away from Mannanan, who clapped his hands in delight at the spectacle.

Apocalypse glared at him in hatred, and raised his arms to deliver an attack of his own.

Realising that Apocalypse thought his father to be behind the assault, Simon wracked his brain as to how he could save him. In his mind, he imagined a huge vat of bubbling basalt, buried beneath the floor of the throne room, and pictured Apocalypse being driven into it by the birds.

The ring on his finger vibrated and a dark tile appeared in the white marble floor behind Apocalypse. A dark tile that had not been there when they entered.

But it wasn't a dark tile, it was a hole, and when Apocalypse's foot came down on nothing and his wings snapped closed, his eyes went wide in terror. His arms wheeled and, for a moment, he stood balanced between earth and a fall. In sudden realisation, his gaze locked onto Simon's, radiating hatred. But before he could redirect his attack, gravity took over and he dropped. His scream of terror faded as he fell, then cut off altogether when he landed with a dull plop. The acrid scent of Basalt filled the room soon after.

The smog surrounding Simon dispersed and, to his amazement, he could see clearly again. Turning, he gasped as Anares and the others turned back to ordinary fairies and then slumped to the floor. Fearful Erythia had been hurt, he ran to her and knelt down to lift her head and rest it on his lap. Her eyelids fluttered open and she smiled up at him.

'Well done, my son. I am proud of you. You mastered the ring like a King.'

At the sound of the voice in his head, Simon looked up and met the intent gaze of his father, whose paper birds once again rested on the arm of the throne.

Grinning, Mannanan held a fully-formed paper bird in his hand. Tugging on the tail, he laughed as the beak opened and closed, then winked at Simon, and said, "We may make a Ruler of you yet."

Ends