



THE
HOUSE
OF
STORMS

IAN R.
MACLEOD



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The House of Storms

Ian R. MacLeod



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PART ONE

WHEN GREATGRANDMISTRESS ALICE MEYNELL brought her son to Invercombe, she fully believed she was taking him to die there. Not that she had given up hope—*hope* was something she still clung to resolutely—but through the years of Ralph's illness she had discovered shades of meaning with simple words which, previously, she had scarcely known to exist.

She gazed from the car as it rumbled out of Bristol. It was a cold, grey morning, still cornered with night, and Ralph was shivering under his blankets, his breath as blue as his lips. That overnight train from London, and now they were being driven in this outwardly fine but actually quite freezing vehicle around the backs of yards which gave tawdry glimpses of a city which Alice had always felt to be more alien than many a far-flung reach of the Continent. The trams here went humming on high-backed wooden cradles which pressed their tips together over the streets like praying hands. And the buildings were festoons of coralstone which the master builders grew and mutated, and which reminded her of dough creatures shaped out of flour and water. Everything twisted and curved and looking as if it was still growing, and in pinks and blues, like an explosion in a nursery. It was all so different from Northcentral's orderly grid. Slowly, in the better districts towards the dam at Clifton, the fantastical houses were coming to life, and servants were hurrying along the pavements to their day's work as the street-lamps blinked out. Then, in that quick way which could never happen in London, they were out into the open countryside.

Ralph's first sight of Bristol, and already it was gone. Even though the city would be within reach from where they were heading, Alice wondered, as she often found herself doing whenever they saw any new sight, whether her son would ever see it again. She gave an inward shudder. The clock ticked fevered and quick as his pulse, was always ticking. London, then Bristol, and now this tumbling landscape which the dawn had yet to touch as the lights of the car shone on bare hedgerows.

Before this, before that. Baden and then Paris. That place in the mountains. And doctor's consultations and surgeries. The glow of their vials. The glint of their glasses. Whispered, useless spells. The months and the shifterms sometimes condensed in her imagination to that one single protracted moment from a summer's afternoon back in London up on the Kite Hills—Butterfly Day, it had been, and she had never felt the same about that particular holiday since—when Ralph had run up to her and he'd started coughing and she'd glimpsed flecks of blood amid the spittle in his palm. From there to now was like an endless fleeing, and the times they'd spent in so many admittedly pretty and interesting places seemed like nothing but pauses to catch their breath before they started running again. Even a healthy child would have been wearied, just as she felt wearied herself. And all to find that words like *hope* could be sliced into endless shades of nuance and grow so thin that eventually you could see right through them. But now, as they turned out from a valley and the rising sun suddenly poured from

banks of grey cloud and twirled through the patches of mist, they were heading for Invercombe, and there they would make their last stand.

Ralph's breathing was more regular now. The sun was in his face, and Alice saw with a pang that this new day's light was glinting on the thickening down which was now covering his cheeks. Even though his illness had prevented him from living an ordinary childhood, Ralph was already becoming a man.

Sensing some change in her gaze, he turned towards her. There was a line of sweat across his upper lip.

'Is it a long drive?'

'I don't know, my darling. I've never been there.'

'What's it called again?'

'Invercombe.'

He nodded and looked again out of the window. A ghost of his breath pulsed across the glass from his lips. 'So this is the west.'

Alice smiled and took her son's hand, feeling heat and lightness. Now that the sun was properly risen, she was remembering just how pretty this western landscape could be, even on a late winter morning. The way the hills never ceased unrolling. The sense that the next turn would reveal the sea. But she scarcely knew the west herself. Little more than honey-stoned towns in which she'd spent worthless half-afternoons in her younger, more difficult, days, sitting on a suitcase as she waited for a change of trains. But still, Ralph seemed happy as he looked out at the road angled down beside the huge estuary and the far hills of Wales. London, even the few days they'd spent there, and with its dense fogs and all the endless comings and goings, was unthinkable. Yes, for all the reasons she'd rehearsed, and for the odd, increasing sense that it had been calling to her in some vague yet significant way, Invercombe felt right.

'You really have no idea what it'll be like?' Ralph murmured.

'No. But...'

Ralph turned back to her, and together they chanted the phrase which they always did when they arrived at somewhere new.

'We'll soon find out ...'

Trees parted. There were tall outer walls, a small gatehouse, a long estate road with a glimpse of some kind of castle or ruin across the parkland on the right, and then the land was rising through perillind and evergreen plantation towards a stumpy lighthouse. No, that would be the weathertop.

Invercombe, Alice knew from her researches, had been here a long time. The Romans had possibly fortified this seaward command of the Severn Estuary, and there had certainly been a small castle here before it was sacked by Cromwell's armies. Then had come the years when the English

landscape erupted once more into bloodshed after a lonely and obsessive man named Joshua Wagstaffe extracted a hitherto-unheard-of substance from the rocks he had spent a lifetime collecting. He named it aether after the fifth form of matter which Plato had surmised, and dowsing for it soon became the obsession of the Age. Aether persuaded corn to grow into bushel-sized heads on lands which had furnished little but chaff. Aether made frozen axles turn. Aether bent the very fabric of the world. Aether, above all, was power, and the trade guilds understood that better than anyone, and, in their battles with the king and the church, took it as their own.

After the bloodshed of the so-called Wars of Unification, as the first of the Ages of Industry began, Invercombe was rebuilt, no longer as a castle, but, infused with new wealth and the abilities of aether, as a fine house on this precarious promontory; a veritable jewel of stone. A family by the name of Muscoates lived there for generations until their power waned and it was finally made part of a bankruptcy settlement, and drifted like so many things into the ownership of the Great Guilds. It became just one of many investments and holdings which were passed forgetfully from will to will, from marriage to marriage, until it reached the hands of the Guild of Telegraphers towards the end of the Third Age, although it was doubtful if any of its greatgrandmasters ever visited the place. Still, the place meandered on, and a use was found for it as a base for the development of a technology which was to become the wonder and wellspring of this current Age. The old water race was cleared, and a generator, new in itself, was built to feed Invercombe with electricity. A reckoning engine, also advanced for its time, was then installed, and a small but functional transmission house was constructed on the boundaries of the estate. From this early work, a new kind of electric telegraph came through which it was no longer necessary for skilled telegraphers to commune mind to mind, but through which ordinary guilds-people, at least if they were rich enough, could simply talk to each other as if they were face to face, was developed. It became known as the telephone, and by this great invention, the entire world was changed. But, and once again, Invercombe retreated from fame and from memory. It drifted, its halls abandoned in the chaos of the end of the last Age of Industry, until it was granted in a life lease to a certain Greatmaster Ademus Isumbard Porrett.

Invercombe by then was half-ruined and seriously undermined by the swell of the sea at the cliffs beneath its foundations, but Greatmaster Porrett threw himself wholeheartedly into its repair. There were century-old records which Alice had studied recording how Invercombe's roof was remade, its generators repaired, and the re-establishing of its terraces, and of many gardens newly landscaped. Greatmaster Porrett even shaped an ugly transmission house into the battlements of a folly-castle so as not to spoil the view. All, to Alice's mind, a strange amount of effort to put in as a mere life tenant, but Porrett's most extraordinary improvement was a weathertop, the brassy dome of which she could now see placed like a squat lighthouse atop a brick tower on the south side of the hill above the water race. On the decks of sail-bearing craft, master mariners employed such devices to make the best of the winds, but the idea of a landlocked device to control the climate of an entire valley struck her

ambitious in the extreme.

The car swished to a halt on a semi-circular sweep of mossy gravel. With the quick eye of one who has long grown used to new arrivals, Alice appraised the tall windows and chimneys, the elegant gables, the stone-chased intricacies of glass. The house was even prettier than she'd imagined.

Signalling the driver to wait and glancing at her wrist-watch—it was quarter to eight—she strode up to the front door and pulled the bellchain. She'd sent word a shifterm or so ago that she and Ralph were coming, but, as was her usual practice, she'd hadn't mentioned the exact time and date. Normally at this point the shocked face of some half-dressed maid would poke around the door. In the years since she had married Great-grandmaster Tom Meynell, she had made it one of her many small personal crusades to ensure that all the properties their guild owned were properly maintained. That, indeed, was why Invercombe had first come to her attention. A relatively small estate, but the rows of figures beside it had indicated that it was sucking in money. It was that landlocked weathertop, which, it was explained to her, was too powerful to be fully decommissioned without ruinous expense. For whatever reason, for that odd device, or for a situation which seemed to guard the Bristol Channel, for the sense of a story which she didn't fully know, Alice had decided against condemning the place. And now she was standing at its door and Ralph was getting cold in the car and nothing was happening as the weathertop's greenish-gold dome glowed through the bare trees. She sighed and kneaded a twitch beneath her right eye. She was about to pull the bellchain again when she heard, or rather sensed, a presence behind her. Slowly, she turned, fully expecting to find nothing but the illusions of her own tiredness. But a large Negro woman stood there.

'Welcome to Invercombe, greatgrandmistress,' she said, and made a curtsy. 'I'm Cissie Dunning, steward of this house...'

THE FIRST PRIORITY, ALWAYS, WAS RALPH. She found him the best and the airiest room, fitted with bare used but century-old furniture and fine, sound-looking wood panelling. Even to Alice's eyes, the green and gold four-poster bed's huge mattress looked reasonably hygienic, and there were French windows to a southwest balcony with no appreciable draughts overlooking the fine gardens, and a decent fire already crackling in the grate.

She found a comfortable couch and had it shifted into Ralph's room as somewhere for her to rest and, if need be, spend the nights. Everything had to be checked, moved, aired, settled, sorted, explained, organised. Not just hours of it, but days. But the steward seemed capable and was difficult to fluster, even if she was female and a Negro, and her staff seemed to know their work, although there was no detectable sign of any change to the frigid weather engendered by that weathertop. And those accents. Little aspects of their manner and clothing, and the odd, faint taste to the water, which was strangely pleasant, and even seemed to enhance the flavour of her tea. Nothing was quite the same here, and Alice almost hoped to find some severe flaw in Invercombe's outward efficiency so that she could impose herself more easily on the people who ran it.

'Well? What do you think?'

She was sitting on the side of Ralph's bed. It was mid-morning, Eightshiftday, the fourth day since their arrival, and the fire was gently sparkling. All the ordinary and necessary events which she had stipulated had seemingly taken place, and she was in the odd situation of finding that there was little that she needed to attend to. Outside, although they got the best of the light here, it was yet another grey day.

Ralph smiled. He was sitting up, almost fully dressed, and he'd slept through his third good night. 'I like it here. I like the feel of the air. When will you let me explore?'

'Soon enough.' Exulted, she gave his hand a squeeze. 'But we mustn't rush. Only two shifternights ago ...' That damn London air. Ralph muttering that his bones were burning. Even now, some of that weakness was still lingering. She leaned over and kissed his cheek, feeling the give of that new down. She smiled and sat back from him. 'I'll get you your books.'

Although many of the things she'd initially asked to be posted on from London had arrived, the textbooks through which she'd overseen Ralph's education hadn't. But long-dead Greatmaster Porrett had seemed to anticipate Ralph's needs in the surprisingly well-stocked library. The books were old but, breaking open their pristine spines, Alice had concluded that little of importance had been added to the sum of human knowledge throughout this Age. Studying the fine, hand-coloured prints of flowers, both natural and aether-engineered, with their detailed Latin descriptions, and the avalanching pictures of rocks, would stand Ralph in good stead when he began the proper work of his

induction into the Telegraphers, although Alice had never understood this male need to catalogue.

‘Why are you smiling like that?’ he asked.

Planning ahead. Thinking *when* instead of *if*. ‘I’m just happy that you’re happy.’

He studied her suspiciously. ‘As long,’ there was an up-down quaver in his voice, ‘as you’re happy as well.’

‘Of course I am.’ The local doctor, a character named Foot, had already called on her with his busy little wife, and so had the Reverend-Highermaster Humphry Brown, the parish priest. Of course she’d go to church on Noshiftday morning just like any other respectable guildsmistress, but over the years she’d heard the chant of too many prayers and spells. She understood the stages the mothers of consumptives went through. The frantic agony of first discovery was followed by willingness to go anywhere, to do *anything*. It was often years before the guilty realisation finally came that you were simply making your child suffer more. Yes, consumption sometimes faded, but the only known way of alleviating it was rest and fresh air. Yet still you travelled and still you worried and still you paid in a relentless pursuit of the finest kind of air, the purest form of rest. Your child’s crises and remissions became the star by which your entire life was navigated. In many cases, as Alice had seen in spa towns and sanatoriums across half of Europe, this pursuit lasted until the child’s death, or the mother’s infection with the same disease. But the impulse to come to Invercombe had been clear and irrevocable. She felt none of the usual doubts.

She plumped up an extra cushion to support a book on botany and left Ralph to his reading. In the corridor, she checked her watch. Already close to noon. Back in London, her husband Tom would be heading for lunch at his club. In that dense fug, which was like the London air outdoors but ten times multiplied, over red wine and snooker and endless courses of stodge, listening to the same lame jokes and smiling at the same weary faces in their high-backed chairs, much of the real work of the Great Guilds was done. She decided that she would telephone him there before he ate. But first she must make herself presentable.

She turned along the landing to her own room, which lay at right angles to Ralph’s, with window opening to a balcony which hung giddily over the sweep of a large, secluded bay. Invercombe was disorientatingly full of such surprises, with odd angles in corridors and unexpected views of land and sea, and the house was positioned so close over the sea on this side that the damage its constant onrush was doing to the foundations scarcely bore thinking about, but it was all undeniably pleasant. She was even starting to wonder if, despite the continuing frigid air and flat grey skies, the odd comfort she felt here wasn’t some initial symptom of the weathertop’s awakening. She and Ralph had been greeted so calmly here, whereas in other places she’d experienced ridiculous fussing only to end up in bed which reeked of urine. Her suspicions of whatever it was that she suspected of Invercombe remained unfounded and unexplained.

Opening her balcony doors to the salt air, she shrugged off her green silk dress. Almost all her

trunks had arrived now, and her clothes had been unwrapped and put away. Also here, a case of black lacquer set on the table beside the windows and glinting with the sea, was her gramophone. Setting the turntable spinning, she removed her earrings and waltzed, two and three, across the shining floor. She touched the steel locks of her portmanteau case and breathed the spell which triggered their release. Twin thunks—a mere emphasis of the music—and its sides unfolded on a velvet den. There was oil of bergamot from the sun-warmed sap of citrus trees. There were waxy distillation of ambergris, and special earths, and particulates of lead. Like a good wine, the contents were easily upset by travel, but as Alice unscrewed a bevelled jar of cold cream and dabbed a ball of lambswool to her face, she could feel that everything was already settling here at Invercombe. Scents of beeswax and almond and hints of rosewater mingled with the hissing sea as she turned two and three to the music in her chemistry before the long mirrors of her wardrobes.

She studied herself left and right. The jaw, the neck, the profile and the timeless face and frame of a woman still entirely beautiful, if no longer quite young. Feet tiptoe light. Firm hips and bosom. Alice. Alice Meynell. Hair which had always been closer to silver than blonde, but which she could still afford to wear long. Clear, Classical forehead. Those wide-spaced blue eyes. All a matter of luck, really. Mere human flesh hung on accidents of bone.

Humming, she extracted her silver spirit lamp, struck a taper to its wick, and wiped a glass chalice with white linen. The record was clicking in its groove. Setting it playing again, then the chalice warming above the spirit lamp's gentle heat, she added oils, dashes of spirit, tinctures and balms, then Grecian honey. Stirred with a spoon of whale ivory, the resulting goo gained a frothy lightness which made it especially receptive to the final ingredient, which was aether of the purest charm. Still humming, dancing, and lifting out a small vial from the magic depths of her portmanteau she whispered the part of the spell which caused its wyrelight to brighten, then squeezed the pipette and wafted the glowing tube towards the waiting chalice. Now, in a fluting voice, she chanted the many verses of her spell; sounds which she had refined with the avidity of the most dedicated steammaster. A pulse of darkness. Her song ended. The droplet fell. The potion was energised.

Sitting down at her dressing table, Alice kneaded her cheeks. Then she dabbed her fingertips in the preparation and began, always working upwards, to work it into the skin of her face. The sensation was tinglingly pleasant. Crackle, crackle, went the gramophone from the end of its song, joining with the faint hiss of the tide against the cliffs far below and all the rush of life which had brought her here to this moment, to this spell, to this place. She flexed her lips and blinked at the mirror. Then she worked on her neck and shoulders, and circled lightly across her arms and towards the scoop of her breasts, although there were other magics for the body.

There. She smiled more openly back at herself, completing the picture she wanted her husband Tom to see when she telephoned him. A hint of blue above the eyes, a dash of black across the lashes, then she cleaned her tools and closed her portmanteau and whispered the phrase which froze its two

locks. In every way, she felt refreshed. Amid its many other benefits, the practice of magic was far better than a good night's rest. She lifted her green dress back off its hanger and gauged, with a quick sniff, that it had absorbed just the right proportion of her personal scent. The record still crackled, and she realised that she was humming along as if it were still playing a tune. In fact—she cocked her head. What exactly had she been humming? It was dangerous, in any case, to murmur so carelessly when you were working with aether and the room, as she looked around, seemed caught in a stage-arrested movement. Hiss, crackle, the sound of the waves. As if, for one moment, the entire house had been breathing.

Realising that she hadn't replaced her earrings, she leaned before the dressing table to push the gold posts through the lobe of each ear. Then something terrible happened. As she studied herself under the bright scrutiny of the coastal light fell once again across her face, Alice noticed for the first time in her life that she was developing jowls on each side of her previously perfect jawline.

The telephone booth beneath the best stairs in Invercombe's inner hall was a small red-plum construction topped with a domed brass bell which looked as if it had been polished far more times than it had ever rang. It was part of the history of the house and her guild's own experiments, and certainly the earliest model Alice had even seen, although the booth inside was pleasant enough, for all that it was antique. Sitting down, she was confronted by a mirror, but in the softer downward glow of an electric bulb, she could almost tell herself that she hadn't seen what she had seen upstairs.

The bulb dimmed, and she felt the usual familiar give-and-pull resistance as she closed the connector and dialled the number of Tom's club with the pivoted brass post. Relays engaged through hidden cables which, buried below ground here so as not to spoil the beauty of Invercombe's grounds, broadened at that folly transmission house to head on towards the pulse and throb of a clearinghouse reckoning engine. She gazed at the mirror and felt something shiver, a break in reality. Her face dissolved, and then even the glass itself faded—or rather *widened*—and exhaled a mingled rush of male voices. She felt the sting of cigar smoke and heard the faint roar of London traffic; the portal to London was fully open.

A waiter leaned towards her from the distant booth to enquire to whom it was that she wished to speak, and she felt the breath of the door swinging shut as he went away, then heard the chuckle of a drink being poured—before her husband arrived and seated himself opposite her in the mirror.

'I thought I'd find you here at the club, darling.'

'You know me. Regular as clockwork.' Tom's tie, although doubtless recently reknotted, was already askew, and he smelled more of sweat than of eau de cologne. 'How's Ralph? I've been telling myself all shifterm that no news is good news, and you certainly seem to have taken enough stuff with you to that place—where is it? Inverglade?'

'It's *Invercombe*. And I've scarcely taken anything.' Alice looked playfully wounded as Tom

gazed back at her with that familiar yearning look in his eyes. She needed his regard, especially after what she'd seen upstairs in the mirror of her vanity table. It was better than aether; a warm blaze. 'Ralph's settled in well. And I'm so glad we came here, even if I do miss you terribly.'

'You were in London for such a short time. And you've been away so long.' Tom's smile almost faded.

'Well, you know why. Needs must.'

'Yes, yes. And Ralph—I do understand that London's not the place for him.'

Tom gazed at her. He worked his lips. There were lines around his eyes now. He had Ralph's thick black hair, but it was receding at the forehead and greying at the temples now, although his jaw had been a little saggy even when she'd first met him. It was so much easier for men to grow old gracefully.

'Anyway, I've been missing you, darling.' He flared his nostrils as he breathed her scent, and the vague commotions and the clatter of a passing London tram touched Alice's senses as she told Tom about Invercombe's peculiarities: the steward of the house who was female, and Negro; the weathertop, of the effects of which she remained sceptical; the odd accents: and Ralph, who had slept well and was working his way through the surprisingly good library and nagging her about exploring the place.

'That all sounds quite marvellous. I'm proud of you both. And tell Ralph ... Tell him I'm proud of him, too. And that we'll soon be spending a lot more time together. There are so many things I want to share with him, Alice.'

'It's been difficult for us both.'

'And you seemed so gloomy when you left.'

'But I'm not now.'

'And you look ...'

Alice, even though she hadn't allowed her chin to droop, raised it a little further.

'... quite marvellous, darling.'

Then they talked of business, and the news was hardly cheering. A construction contract was being delayed for supposedly technical reasons. Tom was all for allowing extra time for redesign, but Alice remained convinced they should pull out and take legal action.

'Isn't that a bit harsh?'

'We have to be harsh. Wouldn't they do the same to our guild?'

Tom nodded. He knew his own instincts were often too conciliatory, and relied upon Alice's strength and advice. Then they said goodbye, and his image faded, and the mirror darkened, and she could feel—doors slamming in an unfelt wind—the relays closing on them all the way back to London. It was time for her to lift the connector, but for a few moments she left the line open, and the black space of the mirror seemed to widen. Looking into it now was almost like falling. With a little

more effort, she felt sure she might be able to enter that space; travel along the lines as something to incorporate and then emerge at some far other end. It was an idea, a risk, an experiment, which she long toyed with, and then always dismissed as both too ridiculous and dangerous. But what better place than here, the house, the telephone breathed to her, to try? After all, isn't this where all the trickery with mirrors began? Releasing the connector, she sat back and watched herself reform in the glass of the booth's mirror. Raising a hand to touch the tender flesh of the jawbone, she could feel the gravity, which pulled down mountains and rolled the moon across the sky, was clawing the flesh of her face.

Leaving the booth, pulling on a coat, Alice headed outside. It was even colder than she'd imagined. Trailing breath, she crossed the front courtyard and then the bridge which spanned the gorge-like cleave over the River Riddle, and followed the path which wound up through the pinetum towards a smell of smoke. Bald-headed, handlebar-moustached, gauntlet-gloved, Weatherman Ayres was dragging curling black masses of a form of cuckoo-plant she recognised as hellebore into the flames of a bonfire in a clearing.

'Always have to keep pulling this stuff up, Mistress,' he called as he saw her approach. 'Have to drag the water race, too, at least twice in the spring.' It was ugly stuff—purplish and studded with venomous blue-black berries—and the flames leapt up from it with a gushing hiss. Remembering her face, Alice stepped back.

'I just thought I'd come and see how you and your weather-top were progressing,' she said. 'I was rather hoping we might have seen its effects by now. At the very least, for the benefit of my son ...'

Weatherman Ayres tossed off his gloves and wiped his brow. Leading her up the muddy path of the gorge where pylons climbed from the wheelhouse below, he wheezed open an iron door into the weathertop's dry, amber light.

'Have you worked here long?'

'Best part of twenty years.'

'And you've never actually *used* this thing?'

'Well...'

He gave a dial a thoughtful tap with a fingernail. 'Thing is, Mistress, it's never been turned off. So in a way it's always been running. Or at least, idling. Machines are far happier doing the thing they're meant to do than doing nothing.' His moustache curled upwards as he smiled. Slapping the gantries, stroking the lion-coloured bricks, he guided Alice around each level. Barnacled with conductors, feeding on aether and electricity, rose the weathertop's main device. This place, Alice decided, was either a humming shrine to industry or a vast confidence trick. But at least there was a shipshape sense of order. Up and up. Then at last they were at the top, and through another iron door into the cold air of the outer gantry. They were high above Invercombe's trees, and the drop down was

impressive, especially on this side of the valley which fell all the way towards the turn and flash of the waterwheel.

The dome of the weathertop was pitted and stained. It looked like the surface of a harvest moon.

‘Is it safe to touch?’

‘Best not, Mistress.’

Looking out over the treetops through the clear, solid air, she laughed out loud, for the world whitened beyond the greys and shadows of Invercombe’s valley. The fields were heaps of bed-linen. The towns and houses seemed made of paper. ‘Why, Weatherman Ayres, it’s been snowing!’

‘Never realise here, would you?’

Not a heavy fall, it was true, but enough to transform the landscape. She stroked the cold handrail. The folly—a telephone relay house—was a white palace. That way, beyond the handkerchief fields, rose the Mendips. To the north, a dim glower, was Bristol. And there, a mere contraction of the haze, lay the place known as Einfeld...

In Einfeld, as every schoolchild knew, dwelt the changed, the deformed, those hobgoblins of industry who had suffered from over-exposure to aether and had taken on some of the attributes of its spells. Back in Ages less civilised than this, changelings had been burnt, or chained and imprisoned and dragged around like familiars or drays under the auspices of the Gatherers Guild. Now, though, and in these modern times, such practices were frowned upon. In Einfeld, the changelings, the trolls, the fairies—you could almost choose whatever name you wished—took care of their own. And the guilds conspired forgetfully to allow them to dwell there because it dealt with the problem, and was mostly in their interest, and it was easier to forget.

Alice fingered the small scab of the Mark on the inside of her left wrist, remembering how she once lined up with all the rest of the local offspring outside a green caravan on her Day of Testing. An odd moment alone inside that wheeled shed, which had smelled of pipesmoke and sour bedlinen, as the guildsman dripped her left wrist with some glowing stuff, which, poor as she’d then been, she had never seen before, but which even the most idiot child knew was called aether. And there you were. Your whole arm smarting and this blazing scab which would never really heal, which was called the Mark of the Elder. Many of the high guildswomen she’d subsequently encountered ornamented their Mark with cleverly constructed bracelets, although for the rest of the world it soon became tide-rimmed with dirt and everyday life. But your Mark was never quite forgotten. It proved, as long as it didn’t fade and you were careful and went to church and did all the things your guild expected of you and none of the things it didn’t, that you were still human. But as for what went on inside Einfeld’s walls amid those who had changed, that remained a mystery, although, and more than most people, Alice Meynell had often had cause to wonder...

‘Most people look in that direction,’ Weatherman Ayres said, following her gaze. ‘Not that there’s much to see. Never have any dealings with them, but I’ve heard people sometimes go to the

for help—cures, predictions. Though I doubt they ever get it. Place is a disappointment, by accounts ...’

She took dinner that evening with Ralph in his bedroom. The air felt warmly luxurious, yet beyond Invercombe the earth was sheeted with snow. She shared her discovery with him, and the knowledge floated over them as they played chequers. Ralph could beat her now if she didn't concentrate. He could even chat about his latest studies in his beloved sciences as he did so. Apart from the sad truth of those jowls, she felt almost entirely happy. It was pleasant to be sitting here in this odd, old house with Ralph—sheltered from the night, the snows, and as Ralph's words drifted and the chequers clicked, she even allowed herself to prod at the guilty thought that part of her wanted to keep him like this, trapped in a tower like a creature in those fairy stories of which he had once been so fond. But now she really did want him to heal and to live a life away from her. She even half-believed that it could happen, now that they were at Invercombe.

Ralph grew tired, then slightly feverish. Feeling she'd allowed too much of her own restlessness to bother him, she plumped up the pillows, poured him a little more of his tincture, and watched the movement of his Adam's apple as he swallowed. Then he turned to her with the dark fluid still on his lips, and something that was not him was in his gaze.

She guarded the fire and dimmed the lights. She loosened his bedclothes and laid a cold cloth across his forehead. But he was still restless and lay awkwardly across his pillows. Such times, such feelings, were catching. Alice, who was somehow even more desperate than usual for Ralph to have a restful night, removed the wooden box containing his painstones. Polished and intricately veined, she'd avoided using them since they'd arrived here, but now she took out the third of the five strengths.

Ralph gave a bucking cough. His eyes skidded over her face. Another spasm was coming. She pressed the painstone's cool weight into his right hand and closed his fingers around it. Letting go, checking the sheets for telltale flecks of blood, a breath of sweat surged over her own skin. So many times she had thought, *let it be me*. She thought it again now as Ralph's breathing began to ease. Within a minute—the painstone was that quick—he was asleep.

False alarm, really. She was over-stimulated, herself. Standing up, she glanced at the couch and wondered if she should spend the night here, but Ralph's breathing was regular, and he would take her presence as an indication that things were going backwards. When they were going *forwards*. Yes. Really ... Kissing his cheek, breathing what was now the somehow indisputably male scent of his body, she left Ralph to his dreams.

Back in her own room, she avoided the dressing table mirror's gaze as she took off her shoes and then her jacket and lay down on her bed. She heard the sounds of the house falling towards sleep: Cissy Dunning's low, liquid voice; the maids' footsteps and bed-time whispers; doors closing. Ralph

was growing. Soon, if things went in the way she sometimes permitted herself to believe, his voice would finish cracking and he'd be thinking, in the yearning abstract sense which came at that age but never seemed to leave most men, of the frictions of passion. Perhaps he was already pleasuring himself, although Alice doubted it; they lived too close for the signs not to be apparent. But he was certainly growing, whilst she—by the same unavoidable rules of unethered physics and nature, as one thing can never gain without another losing—was falling away from beauty.

She remembered how the first realisation of the power of her features had come from the attentions the old gardener had started giving her in the damp old house in which she'd been raised. *Have to be careful with those looks, my girl*, was all her aunt had muttered when she'd limped in, her dress torn. But at least she'd begun to study herself differently in the mirror. Alice had always known that her father and mother had been a handsome couple, but, by questioning her aunt at unexpected moments and burrowing through the society pages of the old newspapers, she came to understand that her father Freddie Bowdly-Smart had been a 'notorious bachelor', that he'd 'played the field' (but what sport was that?) before settling on Fay Girouard as his wife. Fay had been an 'actress', although Alice hadn't then understood the implications of that description, other than to realise that her mother's fortune had lain in her body, her face. They'd married, and Alice Bowdly-Smart been born, and one clear morning Fay and Freddie had left her in the hands of a wet nurse to go out sailing on their swish new yacht. The tides had borne their drowned bodies back to shore a shifterm or so later, and she and her parent's money were given in trust to a maiden aunt.

The old woman had been as vague with Alice about the trust money as she was about most things, but the hints were already there in the poor state of the house and the decrepit servants and the watered-down food. The whole place, along with the debts which apparently went back into her aunt's youth and a lost suitor, was an object lesson in wasting gentility. Realising there was no inheritance, and dropping the Smart, Alice Bowdly had left the house after the death of her aunt and headed for the genteel city of Lichfield, which was the furthest destination she could afford on a one-way, third-class ticket. Once there, with a flashing smile and a glimpse of leg, she managed to obtain lodgings, but soon discovered that a smile alone wasn't enough to keep away starvation. But Alice submitted. She did whatever was necessary. Remaining detached was something she'd always been good at, and she reinvested the money she made and the contacts she gained in better clothes and better manners and, finally, a better place to live in the cathedral square.

In her early twenties, she moved south, by now a beautiful, modestly prosperous woman, toward Dudley, that wellspring of Midlands wealth and production. This time, she was able to set herself up in the most elegant district of Tipton, and to promenade the Castle Gardens. The affluent sons of higher guildsmen who managed the local slaughterhouses took her out on picnics, and Alice grew moderately expert at water-colour painting and playing the piano, and discovered she had a taste for the better things, and travelled somewhat, and learned a little French. She even received several offers

of respectable marriage, but none of them was good enough for Alice Bowdly.

Soon, she was nearing thirty, and still dissatisfied, and still beautiful as ever. So she took the train to London, as Alice Smart this time, and dropped most of the ten years which were starting to weigh on her shoulders. Setting herself up in Northcentral in a small but extraordinarily expensive flat overlooking the ziggurat gardens of Westminster Great Park, and with the help of a well-placed grandmaster of the Guild of Electricians who became infatuated with her, she gained access to the appropriate right circles. She made sure to dress and behave in an appropriately youthful manner, but still she seemed mature and compassionate beyond her years. To the men, she was everything the other society girls were not, and Great-grand-master Tom Meynell was the biggest of all catches, and she was pleased to discover that she genuinely liked the man. Still, marriages within the Great Guilds involve monumental exchanges of power and wealth, whilst Alice could offer nothing but herself. Casting aside the grandmaster electrician, Alice glittered as she had never glittered in the summer that Tom Meynell finally proposed to her, and their marriage was the event of the season. She and Tom were happy together, and she loved the riches, the endless cars and carriages and corridors and lawns and lakes and servants, which were now all hers. She loved Tom as well, although the child which they both wanted was slow in coming. She used potions and took discreet medical advice, but she was ten years older than Tom thought her to be and her body, at the time when she most needed it, finally seemed to be betraying her. Then, after several false alarms, she was properly pregnant. She felt proud and ill, and the birth was everything she'd been dreading, but the child was perfect—a son, even—and Alice was happy as she had never been happy before. Ralph Meynell was all the good things about her and the greatest thing of all was that he would never have to struggle as she had struggled.

In some ways, her appearance should have ceased to matter then. Women of the Great Guilds are permitted to sag a little once they have become maternal, and their husbands are expected to look discreetly elsewhere. But not Alice Meynell. She was the epitome of grace. And she had discovered by now that she had a far greater aptitude for the affairs of guild politics than Tom. Once his father died she became his sole buttress and sounding board, and she was often able to tilt things in her guild's favour by using her soirees, her contacts, her smile. Alice didn't know quite when she had started to use the powers of aether in her cosmetics—it was a far more gradual process than that—but she never doubted, just as she had rarely doubted anything throughout her whole life, that she was doing what was *right*, what was *necessary*. Her fortune, and her guild and her son and her husband, all depended upon her being the legend of languorous grace which was Great-grandmistress Alice Meynell.

The years went by, unmeasured in her features by anything more than a refinement of her beauty. Officially, she passed twenty-five, then neared thirty, and Ralph grew into a young lad, bright and eager and compassionate, although of course she missed the baby he had been, and would have had several more children. There were even a few false alarms. Then there was that hot afternoon on London's Kite Hills. Ralph had been nine, and feeling it was time—overdue, indeed—that he learned

to swim, she'd taken him to the bathing pools there. Not that these chlorine-scented public places would have been her ideal choice, but at least the waters of the children's pool were shallow and safe. Or so she'd thought, although Ralph had stood rigid in the blazing water as the other children crashed and screamed around him, refusing to duck his head or strike out, and then complaining that his cheeks ached. He'd run off across the hilly parkland like a released prisoner when they left the pools, and she'd sat down in the shade of the trees to nurse her small disappointment. He'd started coughing when he ran back up to her. She'd been about to remind him that he should use a handkerchief when she'd seen blood gleaming on his palm, and their entire world had turned on its foundations. The same summer, Alice also realised that she was no longer fertile. Ralph—in a phrase which she'd merrily often thought without fully understanding—was everything.

So began this time of seeking, although she never allowed it to stop her from being Alice Meynell. She was still, to all outward appearances, a woman in the full bloom of her beauty. In the guild's great houses she even had to resort to the monthly charade of staining a few items of her laundry with blood, for she knew how gossip seeped up from below stairs, but she was Alice, Alice Meynell, and she made sure her presence was remembered as she and Ralph travelled the spas and resorts of Europe. She even discovered that distance lent her an extra sheen of myth and glamour. When she was in London, she planned her assaults on the soirees and dances with military precision. Arriving *here*. Not being *there*. Shamelessly flirting. Yes, she decided as she lay on her bed, it was more than ever necessary that she remain entirely Alice Meynell, and put a stop to these jowls which reminded her of the dreadful, dragged-down features of her ghastly, deceiving aunt.

Invercombe was dark, quiet. Shivering slightly from the coldness of the floor, she crossed to her portmanteau and breathed open the locks and removed the stuffed pages of a fat notebook. In the electric glow of the table lamp, she spread its pages, which were torn, folded to near-separation, incomplete and stained—like a guildsman's book of spells, but snatched, borrowed, copied or found at small or large cost—across her bed. Alice's own neatly slanted green-inked handwriting mingled with the browned scribbles of men long dead, and scraps of eye-straining small print, and curls of hieroglyph, and fragments of strange illustration.

Through the night she considered questions and impossibilities. She breathed fragments of spells which caused the pages, many of which were infused with the remnants of aether through thumbprints and spillages, to rustle and stir. Oh, that they might all knit into a single magic carpet to bear her and Ralph and their troubles away! But instead she settled on something from an incomplete glossary; a small addition to the armoury of charms and spells which filled her portmanteau and might—no *would*, for belief was always important—chase those sagging obscenities on her jawline away. And there was a correspondence in her being here at the edge of the very tidal estuary where the glossary assured her the thing she needed could actually be found. Reassembling her notebook, closing her portmanteau, she pulled on boots and her warmest cloak and headed down through the dark house. She

spent a few minutes in the library, flicking through hand-tinted pages of bivalves and molluscs until she came to the entry she was looking for and tore it out, and left the house by a side doorway.

Invercombe's grounds were still filled with shadow. Only the weathertop had caught a little of the early light; it gleamed through the bare specimen trees as she descended the terraces where flagstones glistened with incipient ice. A strangely pleasant scent came from a dark green patch of what might otherwise have been merely grass. On impulse, Alice stooped to fan it with her fingers and the dew which dripped from their tips tasted sharply sweet, and here, at the far end of which sallo walk and the flatter expanse of the pleasure grounds, the pathways from the garden joined, leading through a gate past the mosaic depths of the seapool which was replenished with salt water, as she understood it, by hidden sluices from the surge of sea against the cliffs of Clarence Cove beyond Durnock Head. Walking briskly on around the looming headland, she discovered that the bigger rocks towards the Bristol Channel were dusted with snow—in the vague gloom, they looked like iced buns—and that the tide was out and the distant lights of the Severn Bridge, a trail of fragile arms like floating jellyfish, were still twinkling.

The image of the particular shell was clear in her mind, but the real life of the shore was messy and slippery and smelly. She unfolded a small steel knife from the pocket of her cloak and plunged her hand into a rockpool, which proved far colder and deeper than she'd imagined. When she lifted the first creature out, her sleeve wet and her fingers dripping, she saw from the different banding of its shell that it wasn't *Cardium glycymeris*—the mollusc she was looking for. Tossing it back and straightening up and wondering how best to continue her search, she noticed something quick and dark scuttling across the rocks. She felt a momentary thread of fear, but the shape was undoubtedly human.

'You there!' she shouted, for it was important when dealing with common people to establish dominance right away. 'What do you think you're doing here?'

The creature straightened. It had some kind of sack in its hand, and was dragging a rake. But it didn't move towards her, and Alice was obliged to risk her ankles on the greenish boulders which separated them.

'What's your name?' She kept up her haughty tone, but still the figure simply watched her. It was wearing a cap and an old and sodden-looking jerkin. More surprisingly, in this frigid weather, it was barefoot. A lad of Ralph's age or perhaps a little younger. Obviously impoverished, and perhaps dumb or simple as well. She was about to give up on the encounter when the creature blinked and licked its lips and straightened up a little more—closer, in fact, to Alice's own height than she'd have guessed—and spoke.

'I'm gathering cockles. My name's Marion Price and this is my bit of shore.'

So it was a girl. No *Mistress* or *Marm*. No curtesy. And *my bit of shore*, as if she owned the place.

'My name is Greatgrandmistress Alice Meynell. I'm from the big house—'

'Invercombe.'

Interrupting, even. But Alice persisted and unfolded the plate she'd torn from the book of shorelife to show the particular species of mollusc.

'Well? Do you think you'll be able to help?'

'That's a beady oyster. We generally throw them away.'

'I need one like this—see. The book calls them blood pearls.'

'Oh?' The shoregirl pursed her lips. They and her cheeks were reddened from the wind and the cold, although the effect was one for which many a grandmistress would have striven. 'You'll be disappointed if you want to make jewels of them. They don't last, although the children play with them happily enough.'

As if she were not still a child herself! But, even before Alice had had a chance to assure her that the blood pearl's very friability was the reason she wanted one, the shoregirl was hopping in a zigzag over rocks which would have shredded Alice's own feet to bone.

'You collect shells?'

'Cockles. We boil them up and sell them up along the market at Luttrell for about three shilling a bucket. We keep most of the weed to make laver bread.'

'You *eat* seaweed?'

'Of course.' Girl and woman studied each other from across the rockpool over which they were crouching, both equally amazed. 'You've never tried laver bread?'

Alice smiled and shook her head. 'Where are you from? Is there a village nearby?'

'It's called Clyst. It's just around that bit of headland. I live there with my mother and father. I have a brother. I have ...' The shoregirl paused. 'One sister.'

Amid fronds of weed and the pulsing mouths of anemones, the girl's starfish fingers moved.

'And you do this every morning? Collecting cockles?'

'Not every morning. We do it whenever there's enough light and the tide's right.'

What a life! Dragged in and out across this estuary like a bit of flotsam.

'Now *this* ...' The girl prised the shell off, lifted it dripping into the air with blued and wrinkled fingertips. Definitely *Cardium glycymeris*, but, split open with a quick twist of her stubby knife, there was no blood pearl inside.

'Does your family have a guild?'

'... Of course.' A slight pause in the wanderings of her fingers.

Alice understood. Here in the west, even the shoremen and coracle builders imagined themselves guildsmen. What light there was glowed up from the chilly water and across the girl's face, which had an unrippled stillness itself as she worked, deep and intent. Alice found her strange accent, her animating quiet, pleasantly soothing. A few more beady oysters sacrificed their lives. The hiss of the tide was getting louder.

'Shouldn't we be going? Isn't there somewhere further up the shore?'

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