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Opening extract from

The Shadow of Malabron

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Please print off and read at your leisure.

You will journey to strange storylands...

– The Book of Errantry

IN A CHAMBER HIGH IN A TOWER a young woman sits at a loom, weaving threads of many colours into a tapestry so large that it pools around her feet, half covering the chamber's marble floor. When her people first went to war, years ago now, she began to weave the story of their struggle against the enemy that threatened all the world. Everyone who has come to see the tapestry take shape has marvelled at the young woman's skill. When you gaze at the intricately woven threads they seem to move, and change, and reveal more than you had thought was there. The more you gaze, the more there is to see, until you feel you have been drawn into the tapestry yourself and have become part of its weave.

The long work is almost finished. At one end of the tapestry rise the dark clouds, like billowing towers of shadow, from which the hosts of the enemy first marched, spreading

fear and death across the land. From there the images sweep across the weave like a rushing tide of story, a story of blood and battle, of bravery and death, of hope lost and found again. And at the end of the tapestry the young woman is still working on, a city rises into the bright morning sky. A city of gleaming towers and crystal fountains upon a mighty rock in the sea. It is the city where the young woman lives with her brother. While she is famed for her weaving, he is known far and wide for his wondrous craft at metalworking. In years past, he made beautiful cups and candlesticks for his people, but for a long time now he has forged only blades and armour. From his smithy at the base of the tower, the sound of his hammer rings day and night.

They are there in the tapestry as well. She has woven her brother working in his smithy and herself in the tower room, where she can be seen paused for a moment from her work and gazing out through the window, across the waves to the dark wooded shore of the mainland, not yet touched by the light of morning. She has worked all through the night, but she will not finish the tapestry today. The story it tells is not over.

Years ago, on the eve of war, she promised her hand to a brave and noble young man, a prince of the realm. When her betrothed rode away to battle, he swore he would not return until victory was at hand. And now reports have been coming from the distant battlefields that this day is not far off. Her betrothed is said to be riding home even now with a band of heralds, bringing joyous news of the war's end. The young woman gazes long at the causeway that links the island city to the shore. It is empty: no troupe of gladly singing knights crosses it yet today. As she watches sea and shore, her hand strays to the tapestry. Her fingers feel their way across the warp and weft. She has worked on

these threads for so long that she knows them by touch.

The causeway in her tapestry is the same as the one outside her window: untravelled, but with space left to weave an army of victory with her betrothed at its head.

Then she sees something that makes her heart beat faster. From the trees on the shore a great flock of birds rises and wheels in the sky. Something passing through the forest has disturbed them.

She rises eagerly from the loom and descends the tower in haste to meet her brother at his forge. He sees the look on her face and his eyes widen with hope.

"Is it finished?" he asks.

"Soon," she says, and hurries out. The streets are mostly deserted at this early hour. At the stables she takes a horse and gallops across the great causeway as the bells of the city ring to greet the morning. On the mainland she plunges down a pathway lined with tall white standing stones into the forest.

As she slips under the shadows of the trees she senses that something is wrong. She can hear no birds, and the air is icy, much colder than it should be at this season. The hoofbeats of her mount on the hard earth are the only sounds to be heard. She rides on until the white stones give out and she is deep within the forest's shade.

There horror meets her eyes. From the branches of a dead tree hang blackened, lifeless bodies. From the remnants of their armour she knows these are her own people, the knights who had the guarding of the forest paths.

The horse shies and she forces it on, her heart cold with dread. All at once she feels herself pass with a shiver through an invisible web of enchantment. Still she keeps on, until she comes to a clearing and beholds a sight that freezes her blood.

The horse bolts in fear and she is thrown to the ground. Picking herself up she flees back through the deathly silent woods to the causeway, her one thought to warn her people. When she is halfway across the water, she hears a slow clop of hoofbeats behind her and she whirls, prepared to fight for her life. Riding slowly towards her on a horse armoured for war is a man she does not at first recognize. Then her heart leaps.

It is him. He has returned.

His eyes meet hers and she shudders with a strange foreboding. Her betrothed wears a cloak as sleek and black as a raven's wing, not the bright cloak she wove for him when he rode out to battle so long ago. He is not that young man any more.

She runs to him. He lifts her into the saddle before him and holds her tightly.

"In the forest," she gasps. "An army of the enemy, hidden by spellcraft. We must warn the city."

"I know of the army," he says. "You are cold. Here."

He unclasps his black cloak and throws it over her shoulders.

"We must ride faster," she says. "There is no time to lose."

"But haste will raise alarm among the sentries," he replies, and his voice chills her. His smile is thin and mocking. "I do not want them alarmed. That would spoil the joyous moment of my return, when all the city will open its doors to welcome me."

Looking into his eyes she sees the truth of what he has become.

She tries to tear herself away but he holds her in an iron grip. As she struggles against him, she catches a glimpse of the sea far below. The waves are slowing, their crests going

hoary white and still. The waves are turning to ice. The sea itself will soon become a passage for the enemy.

A cry of terror and despair wells up in her then, but no sound comes from her throat.

"You will not speak again," he says, his voice as hard as his arms about her.

To her horror she feels her body changing form. Her very bones scream with pain as they shrink and twist into inhuman shapes. She tears at the cloak, but it is no longer something separate from her. Its black feathers are her feathers, their roots embedded in her flesh. She holds her arms before her and sees that they have become wings.

She gives a rasping shriek of horror and turns against her betrothed, her beak stabbing at his eye. He cries out and his grip loosens. Breaking free, she beats her wings frantically and rises, out of his reach. She is flying, higher and higher above the waves. The feeling of freedom that wells up in her is almost enough to overcome her terror. Then she sees the glaze of ice spreading across the water, the black clouds massing over the forest, driven on a sudden icy gale, and she speeds towards the city.

Reaching the walls at last she alights on the battlements. Somehow she must warn the sentries not to let the traitor through the gates. When she tries to speak the only sounds that come from her throat are shrill croaks. The sentries have no idea what to make of this strange black bird and its frenzied cries. They shoo her away, then there is a glad shout. *The prince is returning.* He is on the causeway. The call goes out to open the gates. The trumpets of welcome sound above the roar of the wind.

Her last hope is her brother. She soars down through the city to the tower and through her own window. Her brother is there, admiring the unfinished tapestry. He turns

in surprise at the sight of a raven perched on the back of his sister's chair. He does not recognize her. With soothing words he approaches the trembling bird, thinking that it lost its way in the fierce gale that has suddenly sprung up.

Desperate for a way to warn him, she flaps over to the tapestry, alights on it, and with her beak and talons tears at the gleaming city woven there. He cries out and hurries to stop her, then stops and watches as the bird rends only the walls and towers of the city. As the weaving falls in tatters, he understands, without knowing how it could be, that this creature is his sister. And he sees what she is trying to show him.

"The city," he says in a horrified whisper. "The enemy is here..."

The raven croaks frantically and hops onto his shoulder. He strokes her black wing.

"How...?"

She cannot answer, and there is no time. They leave their house together to spread the alarm, but it is already too late. The streets are crowded with people milling in fear and confusion. Somewhere close by a child is screaming for its mother. As they push through the throng, they hear the clash of swords growing louder, the roars and cries of battle drawing nearer. The earth shudders and groans beneath them, as if the very stones of the city have been struck a mortal blow. The streets crack open, and the crystal fountains run red. When they gaze up into the blackening sky, they see that the city's gleaming towers have begun to burn.

They understand then that the story they have always known is over, and a new one is about to begin. Where it will take them, and how it might end, there is no telling.

1

It is when you have already gone too far
that your journey truly begins.

– The Quips and Quiddities of Sir Dagonet

WILL HAD TAKEN THE MOTORCYCLE. He couldn't believe he had done it, but here he was, zooming down the highway with the wind buffeting him in the face and the bike humming powerfully beneath him. He scanned the road ahead for any sign of the brightly coloured tents he had seen earlier. The late afternoon sky was darkening with thick clouds. It looked like rain.

Will hunkered down over the handlebars. He was in a lot of trouble, but there was no turning back now.

He hadn't expected the day to turn out like this. The Lightfoot family had been on the road since early morning. It was the third day of their cross-country trip to a new home in another part of the country. On the first day Will had played Goblin Fortress on his gamebook until he was sick of it. On the second day he'd played I-Spy and other kiddie

car games with his little sister, Jess, and wondered if he'd ever been so bored in his entire life. On the third afternoon they passed the hundredth field with cows in it and he knew for certain he had never been so bored in his entire life. He was staring out of the window of the camper van at nothing in particular, dazed with boredom and half asleep, when he glimpsed something up ahead that woke him right up.

On the left side of the highway, behind a stand of trees, rose the colourful pennants and pavilions of what looked to be some sort of fair or amusement park.

He nudged Jess. She looked up and her eyes widened.

"Dad, look at that," Will shouted.

"Look at what," Dad said without a glimmer of interest. After three days behind the wheel he had become a robot, Will thought. A cranky, unshaven robot. And there was another day of driving still to go.

They were getting closer to the amusement park. Will could see tents, flags, the towers of what looked like a real castle. And the snowy top of a huge pavilion painted to look like a mountain. He thought he could hear music, the happy shrieks of kids having fun, and even smell the mouthwatering scents of popcorn and candyfloss.

Then he saw the sign. A long banner strung between two spindly trees, inviting him in thin spidery letters to visit

THE PERILOUS REALM

Enter if you dare.

Explore the

HAUNTED FOREST

THE SCARY-GO-ROUND

THE DRAGON'S LAIR

And much much more!

Something is Always Happening Here.

The turn-off was coming up fast. Will could see a narrow dirt road snaking into the trees. The sun was going down and lanterns had already been lit among the branches as if to show the way.

"Let's stop here," he said. "This place looks amazing."

"It's just some flea-bitten old tourist trap," Dad snorted.

The van wasn't slowing down.

"You don't know that," Will shot back. "Let's just have a look."

"Let's just find a campsite," Dad grumbled. "Maybe we can come back later."

They flew past the turn-off. The tents and flags quickly dwindled to bright specks in the distance, then vanished round the next bend in the road. Will kept talking about what he had seen, in the swiftly fading hope that he could wear Dad down. He tried to get Jess worked up, too, thinking that her voice added to his would tip the scales, but once the amusement park was out of sight, she quickly lost interest. Will wasn't really surprised. Since Mum had died, Jess had become very quiet. She rarely smiled, and never laughed. She followed Will around all the time, and whenever he and Dad had one of their arguments, she would hold Will's hand without saying a word. Sometimes he would forget she was there at all.

They drove on and on and then Dad suddenly pulled off into a big campsite for recreational vehicles. There weren't many other campers in the place, and they soon found a site to park. Dad shut off the rattling engine of their old rust bucket of a camper van and stretched.

"So let's go," Will said eagerly.

"Go where?" Dad asked, clearly having forgotten.

"The Perilous Realm."

Dad laughed.

"You've got to be kidding," he said. "I've had a long day's drive and now I've got to make dinner. The place is probably closed for the day anyhow. I bet they've already pulled up stakes and moved on. With money from a lot of suckers."

"It's not late," Will snapped. "There's still lots of time if we go now."

Dad gave him a black look, and then his eyes softened. He glanced at Jess, who was standing near by, wide-eyed and silent as usual. Then he turned to Will again.

"Will, I really need you to..." he began, then he lowered his head and sighed. "Just give it a rest, OK?" he finished, and climbed into the back of the van to start unloading the camping gear.

Jess tugged Will's sleeve. He knew what that meant, so he walked with her to the toilets up the winding campground road. As usual she tried to take his hand, but he shook her off.

There were spider webs in the windows of the building, and a rubbish bin overflowing with discarded food and drink containers near the door. While he waited for Jess outside, Will pictured the tents, the bright flags, the beckoning lights. *Something is Always Happening Here,* the sign had promised.

Will looked around. Smoke from campfires wafted through the air. From near by came the sound of country music playing on a tinny radio. Further away a dog was barking its stupid head off.

"Nothing is always happening here," Will muttered.

A big truck roared by him in the other lane and brought Will's attention back to what he was doing. He could feel the bike wobbling under him as he was buffeted by the truck's wake. For an instant he and the driver had exchanged glances. *A kid on a bike in this weather?* the driver's look had said. Will knew he should slow down, but he had to get off the highway

and into the fairground before the rain got worse. He needed to finish this.

The road ahead looked just the same as the road behind. He had been riding long enough, he thought, to have returned by now to the spot where he'd seen the amusement park. There was no way they could have already packed up the tents and moved on. But there was no sign of the lanterns among the trees.

"I won't go back," he shouted above the roar of the bike and the wind.

He had been angry ever since the day Mum told them she was going into hospital. He had guessed from the way she and Dad talked that she might not get well again, but even so, he never really thought the worst would happen. And so fast. One day she was there, the next she was gone.

He couldn't believe it was ... almost three years ago. Jess could hardly remember her. Will thought of her every day. And then a month ago Dad had announced at dinner that he'd found a new job, as a welder on a big construction project out west, and that they would be moving. Leaving the house where Will and Jess had grown up. The house that Will came home to every afternoon for the last three years with the hope that he might open the door and find her there, baking something in the kitchen or sitting in a wicker chair on the back porch reading a book. She would dry her hands on her apron, or put down the book and call him to come in and tell her what had happened at school that day.

It was a good job and a great opportunity, Dad had said. For all of them. But Will didn't see it. It was as if his dad was trying to forget. Trying to make them all forget. He'd told himself he wasn't going to let that happen. And so he'd tried to act like they weren't really moving. He shut himself in his room or stayed out late with his friends, and

refused to pack up his things. In the end, though, he'd had no choice. He couldn't win.

When Will and Jess got back to the van, Dad had taken his beloved antique motorcycle down from the rack on the rear of the van. He'd had to bring the bike along with them, even though almost everything else they owned was coming later in a removal van.

"The old girl's pretty dusty," he said to Will, and held out a plastic bucket. "Why don't you clean her up while I make dinner, and later I'll let you take her for a spin around the campground."

Will took the bucket, held it at arm's length for a moment, then let it drop. It hit the ground with a hollow thunk and rolled to Jess's feet. She bent and picked it up. Dad looked at Will for a long moment without speaking. Then he rubbed his forehead and turned away.

"Grow up, Will," he said over his shoulder.

He climbed back into the camper van and soon could be heard banging around in the cupboards. Will turned and saw Jess, still standing there holding the bucket.

"What are you looking at?" Will snapped. She stared wide-eyed at him without speaking.

As Will turned away angrily he caught sight of Dad's keys on the picnic table next to his jacket. He picked them up and opened the locket that Dad kept on the key ring. In the photograph inside Mum was smiling, holding a sunhat on her head to keep the wind from blowing it away. Will remembered that the picture had been taken at the lake, the summer before she died. He remembered how he and Dad had come back to the log cabin from their canoe trip, joking about something or other, and Dad had snapped the picture just after Mum said *what are the pair of you laughing*

about? She was already sick then but she hadn't told Will or Jess. She'd wanted them all to have one last happy time together.

He snapped the locket shut and slid the motorcycle key off the ring.

"I'm going," he said quietly.

"Where?" Jess asked.

"Nowhere. Don't worry about it."

"Don't go, Will," she said.

He ignored her and went over to the motorcycle. Taking hold of the handlebars he lifted the kickstand, then began to push the bike out of the campsite. When he was on the road he looked back at Jess. She was watching him, the bucket still in her hand. She lifted her other hand and waved.

Will frowned and gave her a quick wave back. Then he turned, broke into a trot, and hopped onto the bike. He'd only ever been allowed to ride it up and down the street in front of their house, under Dad's supervision, but he had learned enough to start the engine and ride on his own.

A moment later he was roaring away from the camp. He heard his father shouting his name, but he didn't look back.

As Will rounded a long curve he saw another vehicle approaching in the opposite lane, and with a jolt he realized it was a police car. At that moment it occurred to him that he wasn't wearing a helmet and that he had no licence. He tried to think of a story that might get him out of this mess, but his frantic thoughts wouldn't latch onto anything. All he could do was keep riding as if nothing was wrong, and a few moments later the police car shot past him. He started to relax a little, thinking he'd been lucky, and then glanced in the rear view mirror.

The police car was slowing down to make a turn and its red and blue lights were flashing.

At the back of his mind a voice told him his little adventure was over. He should pull over, stop, and face what was coming to him. But he kept on riding, as if his hands were frozen to the handlebars.

Then, out of the rain, there were lights by the side of the road. And there was the huge banner, shining eerily in the twilight. Will squinted into the rain and saw it just ahead, the narrow dirt track leading off from the highway down an embankment.

There was no time to think. He leant into the turn and dived down the track, his one thought that maybe he could reach the parking lot, ditch the bike and hide among all the other people who were sure to be at the fairground. As he passed under the banner he saw that it was badly tattered, the inscription on it faded and almost unreadable. It hadn't looked like that when he first saw it. He ignored that and peered into the gloom, hoping to see lights ahead, but the dirt track had plunged into dark woods and only grew bumpier and narrower, so that he had to slow right down to avoid crashing into the trees. There were no lanterns. The trees and tall undergrowth on either side leaned in like the walls of a dimly lit cave.

Will tried to remember where the switch was to turn on the headlight but he was too busy keeping his eyes on the path to search for it. Then all of a sudden he slammed on the brakes.

There was no more road.

Ahead of him loomed a wall of leaves and branches. The bike skidded on the wet ground and with a sickening sense of the inevitable Will felt it slide underneath him. Then the front wheel struck something and the bike flipped violently.

Will felt himself lifted from the seat and tossed head over heels through the air. He had time to wonder how much this was going to hurt and then he was crashing into a green darkness that swallowed everything.

2

If you ever get lost, remember:
either your map is wrong,
or the world is.

– The Book of Errantry

WILL CLIMBED TO HIS FEET. He felt dazed, and slightly sick, as if he had just been woken suddenly from a deep sleep. He touched his arms, his head. Nothing hurt. There was no blood. Nothing was broken.

It was dark here under the trees, darker than it should have been, he thought. The rain had stopped, and the air was full of the pungent scent of wet earth. All was quiet. He could hear the wind in the trees, the distant chirping of birds. There was no sign of the motorcycle, but around him were scattered what looked like the remains of an amusement park: wooden stakes in the ground, and bits of rope and shreds of canvas hanging in the trees. Other than that, there was nothing to tell him that he hadn't landed right in the middle of nowhere. He turned in a circle, not sure which way he had come from or which way to go.

Then he saw the red and blue lights flickering through the leaves.

Will turned and ran the other way as fast as he could. It was not easy. The undergrowth grew thick and tangled around him. He was scratched and clawed at by thorns and branches. After struggling for as long as he could he had no choice but to stop and catch his breath. At least the lights of the police car had vanished, but there was still no sign of the fairground. Where were the lights, the tents, the noise and the crowds of people...?

As he stood there, breathing heavily, he became aware of a faint, far-off sound, a delicate musical ringing like that made by bells or wind chimes. The wind rose and stirred the leaves, drowning out the sound, and Will waited, straining to hear. As the wind fell the sound returned. It was louder now, and it had a tune, Will realized. A slow, enticing melody that rang softly in his ears like a vague memory.

It had to be the Perilous Realm. He was close. He was almost there.

He plunged on in what he thought was the right direction, eagerly pushing tall stems and twining branches out of his path. And then in front of his reaching hands there was nothing but empty air. He stumbled forward, nearly falling.

A wide clearing lay before him, dotted with white flowers that glowed in the fading light of dusk and gave off a sweet, familiar scent. Like the ringing sounds, he knew this scent from somewhere just out of reach of his memory.

In the middle of the clearing, on a rise, stood a huge tree.

The tree was cloven almost in two down the middle, as if it had once been struck by lightning. One half was dead, its bare black limbs tangled and twined together like a withered nest. The other half was topped by a vast canopy

of bright green leaves stirred by a faint cool breeze and winking in the last golden light of the vanishing sun. Only the lower trunk was whole, its bark thickly gnarled and cloaked in moss.

Will approached the great tree and stood beneath it. He had found the source of the mysterious chimes. Small shards of glass or metal hung by silver threads from the branches, like strange fruit. As they stirred in the evening wind they jostled one another and were set ringing.

The world seemed half asleep, as dazed as he felt.

"I'm dead," Will said out loud. He wasn't sure why he said it, or even if he believed it, but the thought gave him a strange feeling of calm.

As the shards bobbed and turned he saw his own reflection flit brokenly across their surfaces.

Mirrors, he realized. There were dozens of them, hanging high and low all over the tree. Some of the pieces of mirror were large and jagged, some slender and delicate, others dark and smoky like volcanic glass.

He reached out and nudged the three nearest mirror shards in front of him, setting them softly ringing again. The sound they made was beautiful, even more so than he had thought before, but still he felt an uneasy prickling along the back of his neck. Who had hung the mirrors here, and why? He had the urge to turn round and find his way back to the bike, if he could, even if that meant facing up to what he had done. But then he would be leaving the mirrors and their music behind. All at once the temptation came to slip one of the shards off the branch and take it with him.

He stepped closer and peered at the shards as they turned upon their threads, catching glimpses of his own face. In each shard what he saw was blurred or distorted, like the images in a hall of mirrors. In one his face was long and

thin, as though he had been stretched like a rubber band. In another his image was blurred and indistinct, as though he was looking at it underwater. The third mirror made him recoil and then laugh: in it his face had been squashed and warped almost beyond recognition as a face. He looked like some sort of misshapen goblin out of a book of fairy tales.

Eagerly Will moved away from the first group of mirrors towards the others. He went from shard to shard with the same result, always hazy or ridiculous, until he came to the largest one yet, revolving slowly by itself on its string, untouched by any of the others. Will reached up and took this mirror shard in his hand. This time he did not laugh.

The face in the mirror was his own, but it had changed in a way unlike the other shards. The hair was longer and wilder than his, the skin was deeply tanned, the mouth set and determined. It was him, but not him. It was a Will Lightfoot who had seen more than he had. More of the world. He had the odd thought that he would like to know this Will Lightfoot.

The mirror caught a beam of sunlight slanting through the leaves. For an instant Will was blinded by the flash, and when he could see again, what he beheld in the mirror froze him in horror.

The eyes in his reflected face were someone else's eyes. Lightless, unwavering eyes that peered at him through the mask that his own face had become. Someone was watching him through his own reflection. And with a terrible certainty he knew that the mind behind the eyes was cold and pitiless, that it had read his thoughts and learnt his name and where he had come from, and knew where he was right now.

Will struggled to look away, but found himself unable to move, or even shut his eyes. He felt the grip of an iron will that sought to hold him for its own purpose. And yet, even

as he fought with it, he was also aware of what was happening around him in the clearing. The sunlight had dimmed and there were sounds now, faint murmurings and whisperings not made by the wind in the trees.

With a last desperate effort, Will tore his gaze away from the shard and stumbled backwards. He regained his balance, his breath coming in gasps. When he looked round he was startled to see that while he had been standing in front of the mirror – hadn't it only been a few moments? – twilight had fallen. The clearing was cloaked in blue shadows.

Will turned in circles, no longer knowing which way he had come. In every direction the woods were dark and uninviting.

Then he saw the lights. Cold white beams were bobbing and weaving through the trees. It had to be the police, searching for him in the woods with torches. He had no thought of running from them now.

"I'm here!" he shouted, and started towards them, but halted when he noticed that the lights were acting strangely. They seemed to be moving together, merging, into larger, glowing shapes.

Will stood transfixed. The lights had merged into three pale figures moving among the trees, slowly approaching the clearing. He stared harder, unsure of what he was seeing. They were people, as far as he could tell, but there was something strange about the way they moved, as if their feet were not touching the earth but flowing over it, like water or smoke. As they approached they became clearer to him, their outlines sharper.

One was a tall, stern-looking man in a long coat. Another was a girl about Jess's age, wearing a white dress, her long flowing hair streaming slowly about her, as though she were walking underwater.

A glad shout of recognition died in his throat. It must be them, but it couldn't be... He shuddered, without knowing why.

The third shape remained hazy and difficult to see. It seemed to be a woman in a long cloak or nightgown, but it lingered further away from him than the other two, and he could not make out its features. He was suddenly the most afraid of this figure, and turned away from it.

There was little doubt now about the other two. Will blinked and stared.

"Dad?" he said, stepping forward. "Jess?"

They kept approaching slowly, never taking their eyes off him, though they did not speak. He called their names again with growing unease. As the man and the girl drew closer, he saw that their eyes were fixed on him not with love or even recognition, but with cold watchfulness, like the eyes he had seen in the mirror.

"Who are you?" he shouted, and fear slid through him like icy water. All at once he knew that these things were not like him, that they were not even beings of flesh and blood. His one thought now was escape, but a strange feeling, like a cold electric charge, was flooding through his limbs. When he tried to move he felt something hindering him, holding him rooted where he was, just as it had been when the eyes had watched him from the mirror shard. He felt a numb paralysis rising through his limbs and he cried out.

The pale shapes came to a halt. At first Will thought his cry had stopped them, but then he heard another sound, faint but growing louder. A chorus of many voices, high and low, raised in an eerie, ululating shriek.

The three figures turned in search of the source of the sound, and as they did their bodies and faces seemed to waver, quivering like reflections on water. Swiftly all three

began to retreat as one, receding until once more they became dim, smoky shadows and then vanished altogether.

Whatever power had held Will now let him go, and he sank to his knees, trembling. The unearthly chorus grew louder and seemed to be coming from all directions at once. Will stared wildly around. There was no telling what was about to appear out of the trees. He climbed shakily to his feet, turned and ran heedlessly, thinking only to get away from the tree, the clearing and the impossible things he had seen there. He stumbled headlong through the undergrowth, slapping blindly at the clutching branches in his path.

When he came out into a more open space he bolted forward, tripped over an exposed tree root and fell heavily to the earth. He lay stunned for a moment, and then as he scrambled to his feet a hand gripped his arm.

"No!" he shouted, pulling away violently. He twisted round and saw that it was a girl, about his age, in a long, dark red cloak. Under the shade of her hood her eyes glittered like pale green stones. Her hand gripped the handle of a knife that hung in a leather sheath from her belt.

"Follow me," she whispered. "Now."

"I have to get out of here," Will said. "I have to—"

The girl began to speak and then broke off. She raised her head and her eyes darted around, as though she saw or heard something that Will could not. When she turned to him again there was fear in her voice.

"If you want to live, follow me."

With that she turned and started off at a run through the trees. Will hesitated, his thoughts whirling madly, and then he followed.