



The scraping grew loud and seemed to move to either side of Jonah, surrounding him. Now it was accompanied by a fearful chattering. He discovered he was running, and realised the scraping was moving with him, keeping pace. His vision tunnelled; all he could see was Gerent bending slowly and precisely to prise the grapnel free from the bark. Tiny black splinters sprayed across his bare feet as he raised the three-pronged anchor and hefted it. At the same time he took a step to the side, allowing Jonah to rush past him, to slow his headlong flight and turn, to look upon his pursuer.

It was not one but two, a pair of blind worms, pale as milk, each as thick in the body as a man. At the tips of their identical heads they bore serrated beaks, each chattering in unison with the other, their blurred movements as ruthless as a threshing machine. It dawned on Jonah that it was not just their beaks that moved together - so did the worms themselves. Like grotesque dancing partners they swayed and looped their pallid, segmented bodies in perfect synchrony. These dreadful twins were already so close he could the stench of their breath on his face.

Then Gerent swung the grapnel in a clean arc, embedding one of its prongs in the head of the worm nearest to him. It dropped instantly on to the tree, the connection with its twin broken, the dance over.

The felled worm did not bleed; the same could not be said for its twin. The instant the grapnel struck, a gaping wound opened in the head of the untouched worm. Jonah saw this vividly, for the vile creature's beak was

frantically chewing at the air bare inches in front of his nose. As the improvised weapon made contact away to his right he saw the flesh of this monster literally peel itself apart, revealing brightly glowing flesh within. Crimson blood and what might have been electrical sparks exploded outwards; the worm writhed, spraying gore and trails of miniature lightning before raising its blind head, uttering a single, piercing shriek and falling with a hollow thud next to its sibling.

Gasping, the two men leaned against each other. Jonah had to clutch at Gerent's shoulder to prevent himself from collapsing; the Neolithic man held him around his waist.

'They came from there,' said Gerent. Jonah was astonished how steady his voice was.

He was pointing towards the place where the tree trunk was rooted. Here Stone's skin was buckled outwards; plates of dark Stone-stuff clung to the bole of the tree like pieces of eggshell. It was not hard to imagine when the sapling must have first exploded through. Covering much of the base of the trunk, and banked heavily against the sheer wall of Stone itself, was a tremendous wedge of earth and debris.

A pair of holes stared back at them, identical eyes drilled into the compost. Were these worms the caretakers of the forest, tunnelling through the litter and processing the debris? Or were they predators, angry at having their territory invaded?

'I do not think we should stay here,' said Jonah, eyeing the tunnel mouths suspiciously. 'Next time we may not be so fortunate.'

'You wish to go back down? You want to give up?'

'Give up? No. We must go on and up, Gerent, on and up.'

'Stone says we cannot climb far.'

'I do not care a damn for what Stone may or may not say! We have come this far and I at least will not be turned from my path by a pair of overgrown earthworms! You may go back if you wish; I will go on!'

‘You are a pompous man, Lightfoot!’ cried Gerent, wrenching the grapnel free of the worm’s head with a sickening, damp sound. He wiped it clean against the creature’s flabby hide and grimaced. ‘But in this case you happen to be right. Come - the climbing will be easier from now on.’

And so it proved. The trees were packed tight and boasted innumerable boughs thick enough to support their weight. Gerent went first, with the rope coiled and slung around his neck and the grapnel lodged between his wings. Following the Neolithic king up into the forest’s maze, Jonah observed the tiny movements of those wings as they cushioned and supported the grapnel: instinctive movements of which Gerent himself was quite unaware.

The trees became more entangled the further they ascended, dulling their sense of direction. It was no longer like being in an upturned forest, more like climbing up through the branches of a single, enormous tree. They passed clots of rotting leaves and mounds of richly scented compost; as they rounded one such pile they observed another of the twin-worms. This specimen was a little smaller than the one Gerent had slain and dark green in colour. The two men crept past as quietly as they could; the beast (for they agreed that it was not two creatures but one) showed no sign of registering their presence, preferring instead to scythe at a clump of ferns with its chattering beak.

Noticing its tendency to graze, Jonah wondered if its cousin had intended not to attack them at all but simply to warn them away in response to some territorial instinct. He was reluctant to put the theory to the test, and breathed a silent sigh of relief as they passed out of earshot of the creature’s idiot chattering.

Turning his attention to the trees themselves, Jonah judged them all to be of the same species. The thick, black bark was like nothing he had seen before - and their tremendous girth was certainly unearthly; their heavy needles and the sweet scent of resin reminded him of terrestrial pines. Yet

he would have expected to find more than one variety of tree in such a large plantation.

‘Not on Stone, it seems,’ he mused.

There was something else the black trees reminded him of too. Clambering up them was unnervingly like clambering through the labyrinth of twisted memory rods they had found exposed in the Threshold. Each time he reached for the next handhold he winced, half-expecting the familiar jolt of energy as his uniquely adept fingers tapped into the memory-store concealed beneath Stone’s skin. Occasionally he believed he did feel something - a tingle of electricity, a tiny spark of memory coursing up his arm. But, of course, it was only his imagination.

Part of him wanted the contact, wanted to experience again the miracle of delving into the past - or perhaps this time into the future ... But mostly he was fearful of the power only he and Archan had possessed: the power not only to read the memory rods of Stone but to change them as well.

The power to alter the course of history.

Pausing, he gazed past Gerent’s body into the forest. Branches swarmed, an intricate, three-dimensional web, in the recesses of which he saw strange shadows and half-formed shapes. It was like looking out through the eyes of a child, a child who as night descends sees witches skulking in the corners of his room and elves dancing on the wainscotting. Darting movements caught his attention, but when he turned to look all was still. In the meantime the forest creaked and whispered and made its intricate shadow-play, leaving him tense and uncertain.

In fact they saw no living things during the climb other than the twin-worms, and Jonah found this in itself unsettling. Terrestrial woodlands were home to thousands of varieties of creatures, yet in this Stone equivalent there was no birdsong, nor any sign of rodent or foraging insect.

Sightlines through to the sky grew sparse; all sense of the world outside the forest had gone. Despite this it did not seem unduly dark. The

forest interior was intensely sculptural, its elaborate contours modelled by rich green light and deep, deep shadows. Looking down at his hands Jonah saw the same green cast across his skin, as though his blood had turned to sap. He became aware of the subtlest noise: a shallow breathing he was almost unable to separate from the sound of the air his lungs claimed for their own: the voice of the woodland.

They had planned to follow the trail of destruction left by the Bonaventure as it had tumbled through the trees; in fact there was little damage to be found beyond the broken anchormen. A few of the bigger trunks bore scratches and even the odd scorch-mark, but there were almost no broken limbs and in all directions the branches bore well-established growths of needles and scores of hanging vines.

‘It cannot have grown back so quickly,’ cried Jonah, stopping to catch his breath. ‘It has been a matter of only a few days since the Bonaventure fell through.’

‘Charm?’ suggested Gerent, grateful of the chance to rest.

‘Pah! Are we to put everything down to magic now?’

Gerent looked at him and said nothing.

‘Well, whatever it is that has happened, it will soon be impossible to track the boat’s progress. We shall very soon be exploring blind.’

‘We may have been doing that from the beginning, Lightfoot.’

Huffing melodramatically, Jonah took the lead, but they had advanced only a little further when a chill infiltrated his spine. ‘Do you feel that?’ he whispered, glancing around nervously. ‘It seems suddenly cold. This is most unlike Stone, I must say. Oh - it’s gone.’

‘I felt nothing, Lightfoot.’

Jonah’s apprehension increased as he studied the woodland. It seemed to be closing in on them, fat branches twisting across every available pathway, closing off all escapes. The deep shadows - impossible though it seemed - grew steadily deeper and darker, but more than that they appeared to acquire solidity, as if they were no longer voids but had substance. Where

once they had receded now the shadows swelled, advancing through the spaces between the branches and pressing away the green light until all was black and sombre. Within these bloated shadows Jonah fancied he could see movement, jerky and uncontrolled.

He shrank against Gerent and felt the man tense against him. 'Should we retreat?' Jonah gulped, but Gerent shook his head.

'It is the same behind and below us,' he answered curtly. 'There is nowhere for us to go.'

A wind gusted down from above, disrupting the advancing shadows as though they were but flimsy shrouds and scattering the remains. The forest was restored, except now it was different: there were strange objects hulked behind the trees, giant structures that seemed at once familiar yet, because of the strange green light in which they were bathed, quite alien.

Jonah stared at these things - they were all around them, as well as above and below - turning his head as though trying to puzzle out a child's drawing. There was a profile that reminded him of a long, hooked nose; there a shape like a rabbit's ear; there a hard mechanical silhouette. What were they? The answer floated and dipped just out of reach.

Squinting at the nearest of them he managed to resolve the outline of a long spar from which hung several thick ropes and countless vines. From the top of the spar was suspended a long, triangular pennant. A second spar intersected with the first at a sharp angle; attached to this was a broad, white sail. The object locked itself into focus and he had it!

'It is boat!' he gasped, and suddenly the discovery seemed inevitable. 'Another boat - or rather, a ship.' He cast his gaze around. 'And there, another. And another, and another!. By God, Gerent, there are scores of the things! This is a veritable ship's graveyard!'

Heedless of any danger, Jonah scrambled along a bough towards the nearest ship; Gerent followed more cautiously. Having forced his way between several close-set branches Jonah emerged into what was almost a clearing. The ship was hanging exactly on a level with his eyes, supported

and enwrapped by hundreds of limber branches and lianas. Examining it more closely he saw that many of these were not simply holding the ship but had actually grown into it - or were growing from it, he could not tell which. Moreover, some parts of the vessel were so twisted out of shape that it was hard to see where ship left off and tree began.

‘A strange fruit,’ commented Gerent, his voice so close behind that it made Jonah jump.

Jonah wiped his brow, yearning for Stone’s eternal wind to blow away the forest’s stuffy air. ‘Indeed,’ he replied. ‘I wonder if this one has a name.’

Both men peered at the ship. It was of a type Jonah could not easily identify. It dated perhaps from the Elizabethan era, and something about its design made him think of pirates. A raised deck near the prow bore several small cannon. The hull was long and shallow, its bottom half painted dirty white and its top half coloured black and decorated with gilded swirls and flourishes. Its two enormous sails were triangular, slung from sloping yards, and looked quite intact; this surprised Jonah, who would have expected the surrounding trees to have long since torn them to shreds.

Yet that may not be so, he corrected himself. We are the intruders here, not this vessel. Unlike us, it belongs.

‘There!’ called Gerent. ‘Is that its name?’

Jonah followed the direction he was pointing. There were words carved high up on the stern but he could barely read them, wreathed as they were in shadow. ‘Yes, I can see part of it ... it looks like “Reinara ...” something. I cannot read the rest.’ Not for the first time he wondered at the selectivity of Stone’s magic: the airborne charm that allowed him and Gerent - and Kythe for that matter - to understand each others’ speech fell short when it came to the written word. Gerent could no more read English than Jonah could the strange marks the Neolithic man sometimes made.

‘Does it mean anything to you?’

‘No, I am afraid not. My knowledge of history might be good when it comes to you and your prehistoric contemporaries, Gerent, but I never paid much attention to the Middle Ages. The name sounds Italian, but I can tell you little else about it.’

‘So it is from your world?’

Jonah frowned at the obvious question. ‘Yes, yes it is. Our world, Gerent, yours and mine. It is, you might say, a relic from my past and a vision of your future.’ He smiled, pleased with himself.

‘Here is another.’

Adjacent to the Italian pirate ship was a vessel rather older and of a type more familiar to Jonah’s eyes. Like the Reinara it was welded to the forest by vast numbers of branches and woven vines. One particularly thick branch sprouted from its keel, looking for all the world like a massive umbilicus pumping live-giving fluids into its belly. Apart from a few wooden carvings and the dramatically upraised bow and stern, both of which were curled into stylised serpents’ heads, this vessel was much more workmanlike in its construction. Its single, central mast bore a square sail, and its rudder was a heavy oar lashed with ropes beside the stern.

‘A Viking longboat,’ announced Jonah with relish. ‘This is the sort of boat your people might have learned to build had they remained on Earth, Gerent.’

‘It is from the place you call Scandinavia?’

‘Indeed it is! Is it not splendid?’

Gerent seemed genuinely affected by the longboat, and managed to climb close enough to touch the nails holding its hull-planks in place. Heroically posed, with his long, golden hair flowing down his naked back, he looked again like a character from Nordic myth, or maybe a Viking warrior in search of lands to conquer. There was in his eyes a yearning, an emptiness that begged to be filled.

There were too many ships to catalogue. Here was a small boat with a rounded hull and a sail decorated with fantastic beasts; here an eighteenth

S t o n e   &   S e a   b y   G r a h a m   E d w a r d s

century brig. Here hung a real curiosity - a truly enormous metal construction whose long deck was encrusted with towers and cranes and massive guns. To Jonah's Victorian eyes it looked impossibly futuristic. Each one unique, each one sharing the same weird symbiosis with the forest.

'A ships' graveyard,' repeated Jonah as the strangeness of the place finally overwhelmed him.

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