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The Fourth Branch

by Kage Baker

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When my name was Eogan, I lived in the community at Malinmhor, having gladly embraced my vows for the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I thought I had the best of the bargain. No heavier tool to lift than a pen cut from the quill of a gray goose, and the beauty of the red and green and yellow and black inks was a pleasure for my eyes, and how smooth were the sheets of fine white calfskin waiting for me! And how sweet to refresh myself with the Gospel that I copied, there in the little Scriptorium, when I could still believe in it!

What a world of grace fell away from me when that pagan man came among us, three weeks before Beltane in the five-hundred-and-seventh year since Christ's birth.

But no blame to him, poor man; God knows he had the worst of it. The truth is the trouble started well beforehand, but I knew nothing of it, happy and alone as I worked. So blinded with the beauty I made by day, that I never noticed the frightened faces when I joined my brothers and sisters for supper in the refectory of evenings.

And we didn't speak aloud much -- it was a monastery, after all -- and I wouldn't have believed in the trouble, had anyone explained it to me. If our community lay in the shadow of the high bare hill Dun Govaun, what harm in that? No rational Christian had anything to fear from a mound of dead stone. If pagans had feared the place in the past, if they'd told stories of babies carried off or folk seduced by small demons -- well, they were pagans, weren't they? At the mercy of darkness, as we brothers and sisters in Christ were not. Though I remember being awakened by the screams of a brother in his nightmares, I do remember that much now; but it signified nothing to me at the time.

Well. When the pagan came, it was neither by day or night but in the long hour between when the light had not faded, and when we neither fasted nor fed but sat at table with our meal not yet begun, and our brother the Cook had just brought out the oat-kettle, and Liath our Abbess was neither silent nor speaking, for she had just drawn in her breath to lead the grace. The pagans believe such in-between moments make doorways into the next world, you know.

In that unlucky moment the door opened and the Porter led in a young man in very fine clothes, perhaps too large for him.

"This is the guest Christ has sent us, who comes requiring meat and shelter for the night," said the Porter, and he withdrew to his duty. The man stood surveying us all with a pleasant face; and from the dust on his rich garments it was plain he'd traveled far, and from the harp he bore, slung in its case on his back, plain his profession of fili, of chronicler after the manner of the heathens. I thought he looked too young, to have learned so much lore as those people are required to know.

"A blessing on this table," he said, and our Abbess, scenting a pagan, corrected him:

"Christ's blessing on this table, and all here."

"Oh, by all means," he replied mildly, and smiled at the Abbess.

He dined, then, with us, and revealed that his name was Lewis, that he was indeed a pagan well-trained in his craft of relating the old histories, and had come to offer us a bargain: he would tell us all the wonder-tales he carried in his head and songs of the old pagan heroes, in return for food and lodging. Our Abbess looked across at me with the eye of a cat after a mouse, for both she and I collected these tales avidly (though we did not believe them at all).

So the bargain was made, with the understanding that the pagan should observe no pagan rites whilst among us, especially on the old feast day that was three weeks off, but attend Mass daily instead. To which Lewis agreed, readily, without anger. After dining he was shown the bath-house, and then the guest-house, and he took his leave of us for the evening with the urbane manners of a king's son, which we thought he must be.

When it grew light next day he met me in the scriptorium, for the purpose of fulfilling his end of the agreement, and settled himself on a stone seat. He took his harp from its case, and frowned to himself as he tuned it. I will record here that Lewis was small-boned, high-browed, with fine clean-shaven features and fair hair, though it did not curl. His eyes were just the color of the sky in that twilight time in which he had come.

When he had tuned the strings to his satisfaction, he said to me:

"Brother Eogan, tell me first what tales you have collected thus far, from other travelers, so I waste no time in repeating them. Have you \_The Cattle-raid of Cooley\_?"

"Yes, in good truth, we have."

"Have you \_The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel\_?"

"Yes, in good truth, we have."

"Would you mind awfully if we switched to Latin for this?" he inquired in that tongue. "It'll go quicker."

"Fair enough," I replied in the same language, and we conversed in Latin after that.

"What about the Finn MacCool stories? Any of those?"

"Well, we did get a couple of songs about him from an old man who stayed here last winter," I told him, noting that my red ink had sat too long and giving it a shake to mix it. "I don't think his memory was very reliable, though."

"Ah! Well, \_I've\_ got the complete cycle. Sounds like a good place to begin, wouldn't you say?" He grinned and fished a horn plectrum out of a pouch at his belt.

"Let's hear it!" I replied, and poised my pen over the lovely white page. God, how I've missed writing, just the physical act of moving the pen, making the ink flow! But let's go on with the story.

He had hours and hours of material on the Fenians, material I'd never heard before as well as the two stories the old man had given us (and as I'd suspected, the poor old thing had garbled them badly). I myself was born Christian, and since my parents were zealous converts, they'd always frowned on any of us children listening to the old pagan stories. I knew all about Patrick and Moses and Noah, but I could never hear about Cuchulainn or Deirdre until I became a monk. Ironic, isn't it? Anyway, Lewis relayed the whole story to me, all about Finn growing up in the forest because evil King Goll had killed his father, so the boy was raised in secret by a pair of druid women, who conjured a wolf-spirit to be his protector. Spellbinding! Lewis was a good storyteller, too: he had a very mobile expressive face, elegant gestures, and a nice light baritone. My pen just swept across the page.

We didn't even take a break until I got a paralyzing fit of writer's cramp just after the part where Finn calls his father's ghost from the Land of the Blessed and the old chief gives him advice. I got up and walked back and forth in the narrow stone room, swinging my arms, while Lewis took the opportunity to pour himself a cup of watered mead from the pitcher we'd brought.

"Well!" He sipped and held the cup out to the light. "My goodness, who's your Beekeeper? That's great!"

"A former pagan," I admitted. "Nobody else quite gets the formula right, I must confess. You see, that's part of the Abbess' plan, here -- there's so much that's worth preserving in Eire, so much wisdom, such traditions, so much great literature! If only it wasn't \_pagan\_, you see. Not that I expect you to agree with me on that point, of course, and no offense intended -- "

"No, no." Lewis waved his hand. "Quite all right. I understand perfectly -- "

"But these wonderful stories, for example! I think it's absolutely criminal that the druids didn't bother to write any of them down. You must realize that in another generation or two they'll be completely forgotten, don't you? And, though we won't be the poorer for losing our false gods, it really would be too bad to lose Finn."

"My thoughts exactly." Lewis nodded. "That's one of the reasons I'm here, to tell you the truth. I can see the writing on the wall, and while my profession doesn't really encourage me to write on it myself -- so to speak -- there's nothing to stop me telling everything I know to you Christian fellows who can. In fact ... " He set down his harp and leaned forward. "In fact, I have rather a daring proposition for you."

I stopped pacing. "It's not something sinful, I trust."

"Oh! Not at all, at least not by your standards. Look, it's simply this: I'm a bit more

than a simple bard. I have some religious credentials as well, in my religion I mean. I was trained for certain rituals I'll never be able to perform nowadays, with so few of us left."

"But you're so young," I said doubtfully. "I thought most of the vates had died off years ago."

"I'm older than I look." Was he evading my gaze, there, for just a second? "In any case, my point is this: I'm quite resigned to the druids being dead as last year's mutton, but I feel badly about their more, ah, arcane knowledge being lost. The sciences. The sacred stuff. The holy rituals, the ceremonies and all that. Now, I couldn't ever tell you Christians certain things, being sworn to secrecy, but if you happened to overhear me talking to myself -- say if we happened to be sitting in the same room at the time -- and you happened to write down what you heard, well, it wouldn't be a sin for you, would it?"

"I'm not so sure about that." I sat down to consider it. "Preserving heathen history and legends is one thing. Preserving a false faith -- I don't know, Lewis ... I seem to remember the Blessed Patrick stating quite clearly that druid books ought to be burned, not preserved!"

He sighed and had another sip of mead. "I know what you're thinking: what if this is some pagan plot to keep the Old Religion going by making new copies of the famous Lost Lore? I'll tell you what you can do: once you've written down this Codex Druidae, you can bury it in a lead casket ten feet below the floor of this room. I'll swear any oath you like that it'll remain there undisturbed, unseen for a thousand years and more. Gracious, I wouldn't want it found by my co-religionists; can you imagine what they'd do to me if they knew I'd told this stuff to a Christian monk? We've got some pretty severe penalties for sacrilege, let me tell you!"

"It's a strange request ... " I tugged at my beard. "Still, I know how I'd feel in your position. Couldn't we finish this cycle of stories about Finn MacCool first?"

"Naturally!" He brightened up, setting down his mead and reaching for the harp. "How's your cramp? Feel up to some white-knuckle iambic pentameter? Let's see, I was just about to come to the part where Finn's woman is stolen by demons of darkness..."

"Finn married?" I grabbed up my pen.

"Not exactly. It was like this..."

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So we went on like that, he and I, and the hours lengthened into days. From sunrise until midday we'd work on the stories of Finn, or the tale of Conchobar's quest for the Four Blind Boys, or other fascinating material, with me copying fast in simple brown ink, leaving margins and capitals to be elaborated on and illuminated later. If the weather was fair and windless we'd move outdoors where the light was better and Lewis wouldn't have to keep re-tuning his strings. Sometimes the Abbess would come out, unable to restrain her desire, and read over my shoulder or listen with her eyes closed, to hear about Fergus and the Seal-Woman. But in the afternoons, when she had gone, we'd go inside and work on the Codex Druidae, the forbidden book. The actual text took no more than a week or so to rough in; I planned to spend more time on the illumination.

I must say, any reservations I had melted away once I actually wrote the Sacred Knowledge of my ancestors down. No wonder they'd kept it secret! Most of it was utter nonsense. I remember one absurd formula for producing children out of nature, by combining tiny bits of the parents' flesh in a glass dish. Some of their astronomy was fairly good, at least -- they knew, like Pythagoras, that the Earth was a sphere -- but they had this notion that the Earth revolves around the Sun! In fact, they thought -- but it's just too stupid to waste ink on. I confess I was laughing as I took most of it down. Lewis was a good sport about it, at least; but no wonder he'd abandoned the priestly caste to be a bard!

And in any case, he was a kindly young man, and I couldn't imagine him shutting unfortunate malefactors into wicker cages and burning them alive. Not that he wouldn't have been strong enough; one time he took his turn at serving the evening meal, though as a guest he needn't have, and I saw him hoist the great fish-cauldron on his shoulder and bear it from the kitchen as though it weighed nothing. I watched him mend a set of beads for one of the Sisters one evening at table, prizing and closing the bronze links with strong clever fingers. And his speech was graceful and witty, making us laugh so much it was as if Christ Himself were there telling jokes.

This happy time lasted until Beltane Eve. On that afternoon, Lewis and I were sitting out of doors, and white thorn blossoms were dropping on the calfskin from the bush above me, so I kept having to brush them away as I took down Lewis' account of the Daughter of the King Under the Waves. Suddenly he stopped; and a second later the birds, who had been singing delightfully, stopped too. "Liath is coming," Lewis announced, raising one eyebrow, "and something's wrong -- "

When she came into view I saw he was right, for her face was dark with unhappiness. She wasted no time, but came straight to Lewis, and in blunt Gaelic addressed him: "Pagan man, have you any knowledge of the ways of the sidhe?"

His mouth hung open a second in surprise. "I have," he admitted.

"Good, for we have need of it. Brother Crimthann has been stolen away from us by the \_sidhe\_ of Dun Govaun, and must be rescued."

If Finn and all his host had suddenly leaped alive from my page, I could not have been more bewildered. Fairy folk? Fairy folk kidnapping one of \_us\_? But the \_sidhe\_ were mere heathen fables, they didn't exist! And I saw that Lewis was no less amazed, though courteously he asked her to explain.

It seemed that Brother Crimthann, who was one of the younger members of our community, had been troubled lately with bad dreams. In his dreams, the \_sidhe\_ came into the cell where he slept as easily as if they walked through smoke, and bore him away with them to their palace under Dun Govaun. There he suffered torments of fleshly temptation, but by morning woke in his cell again with no sign of the ordeal of his dreams: not even the guilty emission of a young man so tempted. He had sworn that the \_sidhe\_ were not beautiful, either, but pale and small, hairless, silent.

At this I saw Lewis start forward, like a hound catching a scent. "Now that is a strange thing, truly," he told the Abbess.

"Strange, but not so strange as this: Brother Crimthann did not come to prayers this morning, nor later, nor was he to be found in his cell. But Brother Aidan's hut adjoins his, and Brother Aidan swears that in the third hour of the night the moon shone into his cell, bright enough to flood between the stone chinks; and as you are a pagan and learned in these things I need not tell you that there was no moon last night." The Abbess looked at him grimly. "Now, this is a pagan matter. The blessed Patrick gave us prayers against the \_sidhe\_, \_but I never read anywhere that fairy women carried him away from his holy bed. Can you go to them, then, and win our brother back with that fine pagan talk of yours? Bring him alive out of Dun Govaun, and Christ will bless you for it, druid though you are."

"I will," said Lewis, "and gladly, good Mother! Only tell me where to find Dun Govaun, and I'll go there straight."

"Brother Eogan knows," she told him, and gave me a Look of Order. "Eogan, show him the way."

Well, we set out from the monastery in no small excitement. I was still incredulous at being sent off to find \_fairies\_, of all things, and Lewis was excited and gleeful as a child guessing what a present might be.

"This is really marvelous!" he told me as we pushed our way through the heather. "Tell me, Eogan, have you ever noticed this sort of thing going on before? Strange lights in the sky, unusual marking in the fields, cattle inexplicably slaughtered in grotesque ways? Any nocturnal goings-on in your cell?"

"Certainly not," I replied stiffly. "I sleep soundly at night, at least since I stopped having to shave my tonsure any more. I daresay Brother Crimthann will too, when he's past thirty and not quite so easily tempted by the flesh."

"Cheer up! Baldness looks good on some men. You think that's all it is, then, with Brother Crimthann? He's been sneaking out at night to visit a girl?" Lewis leapt nimbly up on a rock and peered ahead, shading his eyes with his hand. "Ah! Is that the famous Dun Govaun?"

"That's it." I regarded it sourly. "The supposed hall of the fairies. Absolutely ridiculous! It's a completely smooth and solid hill. Not even a rabbit hole on it anywhere. As for Brother Crimthann, he's simply run away, if you ask me. That's the problem with these boys who get all inflamed by the idea of monastic life before they've had a chance to see what sleeping with a woman's like." I bent to untangle a branch of gorse from the leg of my trews. "Chastity seems like such a wonderful idea until the first time someone actually tempts them, and then they go all to pieces. Then it's hysteria, night sweats and all Satan's fault."

"Not one of the better innovations of Christianity, if you'll pardon my saying so," Lewis remarked as we hurried on. "Well, but perhaps we'll find a clue on Dun Govaun. I'm eager to see if anything's up there. There are, er ... certain stories amongst my people, of creatures like the ones Brother Crimthann described. The pale fellows. We've never been able to verify anything, of course. So what do you think Dun Govaun is? Not a natural hill, at any rate."

"Oh, nothing more than the burial mound of some heathen king," I said dismissively; but I glanced upward, for by then we were actually walking up the side of the great hill, and I felt my opinion curdle in my heart. Perhaps a \_giant\_ heathen king, then. But surely nothing more!

"There's a place in Britain -- " began Lewis, and then he stopped still in his tracks. He seemed to be listening intently to something; his face lit up. He began to laugh.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said, in rather poor taste under the circumstances, I thought. "They're here, Eogan! There are actually living things inside this hill!"

"How do you know?" I was unable to see what should amuse him so.

"Let's say it's Druidical Wisdom," he replied, chuckling, and began to pace rapidly along the side of the hill. "Yes -- yes -- there should be a suitably concealed opening, and I'll bet it's just about here -- "

"What in Christ's name are you babbling about?" I demanded, running after him until he suddenly vanished before my astounded eyes. I froze, staring at empty grass and windy sky. To my horror his bright voice went right on:

"Yes, here it is, no doubt about it. Look at that! Eogan? What's the matter? Oh." His head appeared in midair, a vision no less terrifying. He must have seen how frightened I was, for in a soothing voice he said:

"Don't be afraid. This is only a conjurer's trick. There's magic in your Bible, isn't there? Moses and Aaron working spells against the Pharaoh's magicians? This is no more than that."

"But -- " I said, and that was when I felt my faith first shifting under me. All this while I had believed that Christ's coming had scoured sorcery out of the world, as the sunrise dispels darkness; and though the old stories might be good to tell and listen to, and the days of the heroes sentimentally longed after, no such wonders existed any more, if indeed they ever had.

Yet my belief had been imperfect, hadn't it? For the old prophets did work magic, Christ himself had done so, and where in Scripture did it say that we lived in an orderly and rational world?

Lewis extended a disembodied hand, in a gesture meant to calm me. "Come around here and I'll show you."

Christ forgive me, I went to see. As I approached the rest of him appeared, whole and sound, and I saw the wavering stripes of shadow he was pointing out so proudly. They were like the blurs that used to dance before my eyes when I'd worked too late by one candle. "Now, watch this," he told me, and closed his eyes and seemed to concentrate. I heard a humming sound and a snap. The mouth of a cave yawned before us, black dark and deep. I made the Sign of the Cross against all evil.

"What did you do?"

"I just -- broke the spell. In a manner of speaking. I'll bet Brother Crimthann's in there," Lewis' smile faded as he considered the thing he'd revealed to me. "Good Lord, a real abduction. What should we do now, do you suppose?"

"You -- you said you'd rescue him!" I sputtered.

"I did, didn't I?" He looked unhappy. "Well. You wait here, then. I'll be back as soon as I can." To my astonishment he turned without the least hesitation and proceeded down into the darkness, and I realized he had no weapon with him larger than a penknife. I watched his back dwindling into the shadows a moment before I ran after him, calling on the power of Christ to shield me.

"Oh -- " He half-turned as I caught hold of his cloak. "That's all right, you don't have to come. Really, you'll be safer out there. I can see in the dark, had I mentioned that?"

"No," I replied, groping after him. There were strange smells in that darkness, but I didn't want to be thought a coward; and wasn't the power of Christ greater than anything that might be down there? It must be, mustn't it? "I'll bear you company."

"Well, that's awfully thoughtful of you. Now, be careful, Eogan; I don't know if you can feel it or not, but we're in some kind of stone passageway. It's getting narrower and there's a kind of threshold we're about to step across. Here. Step up with me now -- "

Then it was as though lightning had come down from Heaven into that black place, and I was struck and thrown like a spark from a smith's anvil.

Hours and hours later I heard Lewis saying, "Well, that was certainly stupid." I sat up painfully, feeling as though I'd been beaten. We lay in half-darkness, in an angle of corridor lined by panes of milk-white glass that glowed softly. Behind us, set into the floor, was a simple metal grating.

"Eogan," said Lewis, and there was a queer frightened tone in his voice. "Eogan, there are people coming for us, and I'm afraid I have a problem."

"What is that?" How groggy I sounded.

"I seem to be paralyzed."

I felt sick. "Your neck's broken, then. I'm sorry, man."

"No, it can't break, but -- " He paused a moment and then spoke rapidly. "Eogan, I'd like to make a confession. Will you hear it? Will you be my anmchara?"

"But you're a pagan!"

"I'll convert. Will you? If I ask you in Christ's name?" His voice was desperate.

And of course I must say Yes, and so I was bound to his secret. I leaned close in the

darkness to hear Lewis as he drew a deep breath and confessed:

"You see ... I'm afraid I'm rather more of a pagan than you thought. In fact, I'm not strictly what you'd call a human being."

"What are you, then?" I sat back to stare at him. His eyes were dark with terror and he was certainly sweating like a mortal man.

"The word \_cyborg\_ won't mean anything to you. You'd call me a homunculus, I suppose, grown from a mortal infant but changed with clever machinery. The masters who created me live nearly two thousand years in the future, Eogan. I work for them here in the past, finding things they want and hiding them in places that won't be disturbed until their own era. I've been functioning for four centuries now." He swallowed hard and seemed to get his panic under control. "They made me immortal and indestructible; at least they thought so. They know everything -- well, not quite everything, or I wouldn't be lying here now, would I? My God, I \_can't\_ die! Can I?" He gave a laugh that caught on a sob. I reached for his hand and squeezed it. It felt mortal.

"I don't know what on earth you're talking about," I told him, trying even now to hold tight to my orderly rational world. "But I've seen men fall and lose movement down one side of themselves, or lose the power of speech. I think that's happened to you, Lewis. I'm sorry."

"Actually I suppose it \_is\_ something like that. When we stepped on that grid -- obviously it was a trap, and I suspect it was designed for my kind -- it damaged me. Only my head is working, and I think that's because of an emergency backup system. I don't know how much longer before that system breaks down too. I can't seem to reset myself! Listen, Eogan! Will you swear to me to fulfill a duty? As my confessor, Eogan!"

"Of course," I assured him. As his anmchara I had that obligation, though I'd barely understood what he'd said. I understand well enough now, to my grief.

"Go back now!" Lewis begged me. "Go back and seal the \_Codex Druidae\_ in lead, and bury it ten feet below the floor of your scriptorium! You'll find the lead casket with my things in the guest house. Please, Eogan!"

"Why is this so important?" I felt his forehead. He wasn't feverish; cold in fact. He had to be raving, though.

"Because it'll be worth an awful lot of money to the Neo-Wiccans when it's dug up in 2350!" he replied.

I had not the slightest idea what he meant by that at all, nor was I ever to get him to explain further, for his eyes went wide suddenly and he gasped. "Good God! Look at that!"

This last was not a timely prayer but a reaction to the creatures who were suddenly there with us in that dark hall, things like horrible children. Small, with skins pale as ashes, and tiny weak faces set low on big heads. They were naked, save for goggles of black glass worn over eyes that were probably as weak as the rest of them. No genitals at all. I wanted to yell with revulsion at the sight of them; but a voice like the devil spoke within my ear, wheedling, coaxing, imploring.

\_Please, \_it\_ begged me, \_please! Rise and bring the mechanism with you. Pleeese go with us. We're going somewhere nice. You'll want to come. \_And though I detested the little voice before and after I heard it, while it twittered away at me I could no more deny it than a call of nature. I prayed to my sunlit Christ to deny them power over me; still I obeyed them, got to my feet and picked up Lewis. His head hung down like a broken doll's and I was certain I'd killed him; but as I moved to follow the pale children, I heard him murmuring inexplicably: "\_Mass hysteria\_, was it? \_Faked photographs\_, was it?" in tones of indignation.

Down the long hall we went, dark and warm, reeking with strange animal smells. We came to a door, neatly made, and the pale children bid me put my shoulder against it and push my way in. I shoved through into a tiny stone chamber, lit by white glass beyond the door ("Watch out! Careful of my head!" fretted Lewis as it nearly knocked on the jamb). Then we were in and the door had swung shut after us, and I saw that there was no handle on the inside, and the silky voices had stopped, and I felt like a fool in a trap, which I was.

Behind me I heard a hiss of indrawn breath.

"Guests," mused a voice in Latin. "How fortunate I am."

"Eogan, turn around!" cried Lewis, in tones of distinct alarm.

I whirled about expecting a dragon, at least, but saw instead a pale child in chains, sitting against the wall.

No, not a child. On his big head were wisps of hair, and a thin wispy beard trailed from his chin; his gender was evident, if small as a baby's. He had a nose, too, and a bitter thin mouth, and wide pale eyes that were fixed on us with an expression of malevolent amusement.

"Slave," he told me, "bring the machine-man here. I'd like a look at him."

"Slave yourself," I replied, though I'd felt the strongest compulsion to do as he'd bid me. I retreated to the opposite side of the room and set Lewis down carefully. He was staring as if fascinated at the prisoner.

"What on Earth are you?" he inquired.

"And what are you?" mocked the other. "But, you see, I know the answer to that question. We know all about you and you know nothing about us. You passed through the Disruption Field, clearly."

"Was that what it was?" Lewis' head lolled sideways. "Eogan, hold me up so I can see him!" I obliged while the prisoner giggled at us.

"Yes, and it works well, apparently! Mother will be so happy. My Uncles will learn a lot from you, when they open up that ticking head of yours. Though of course we'll all have to move now. We'll have learned enough to improve our defenses next time, at least!" The creature smiled nastily. Real fear showed in Lewis' eyes.

"What are you?" I demanded, sifting through my memory for old tales I'd heard from other children. "Are you a luporchan?"

That sent him into gales of shrill laughter. "Of course I am! Of course I am, slave, and what's more I'm a Prince among luporchans! Son of the Queen. Though I'm a bad Prince and in royal disfavor, as you can see." He rattled his chains at us.

"Oh, shut up," Lewis snapped at him. "You're some kind of half-human hybrid, aren't you? And that poor boy from the monastery was being brought here to make more like you, wasn't he?"

"Was Mother feeling lustful again?" The Prince shook his head. "Another hairy little baby, I suppose, and perhaps he'll be as disobedient as me. That's the price we pay, though, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Lewis licked his lips. "Listen, if they're going to dismantle me, will you at least tell me what you people are?"

"What we are?" The Prince frowned. Then he leaned forward in his chains, looking sly. "I'll tell you a story, fili. No harp to accompany me? Too bad. You'll just have to make up the music in your head as we go along.

"This is THE TALE OF THE THREE BRANCHES."

"In the Beginning, the great World-Tree bore three branches, and from each branch came a son. The eldest son was wide and strong, practical and brave, but not very imaginative. The second son was tall and graceful, creative and gifted, but prone to silliness and instability."

"I wonder if you're describing Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons?" speculated Lewis.

"Is that what they call themselves? The third son was small and weak and unfortunately something of an idiot, but he had one talent: he could invent clever things. He wasn't clever himself, you understand, in fact he could barely speak or think, but he had an affinity for patterns and systems. And from these three sons of these three branches came the races of Men.

"And the children of the two older sons were able to reason and speak with each other, and they interbred: and the powerful and clever ones made war on the kin of the youngest son, to take by force the ingenious things they made. It was difficult for ideas to penetrate the heads of the kin, but this much got through to them: they must at all costs defend themselves against the big people, and hide from them somehow. And so this was what the stupid things focused on, with the dedication of ants, to the exclusion of all else, for all eternity, while their big cousins invented Civilization and Trade and Art!

"But the more they stayed in their hiding-places the stupider and weaker they became, as generations passed, and it became pitifully easy for the big people to find them, and raid them, and rape their queens. But then a remarkable thing happened! Half-breed children were born in the dark warrens of the kin who were bigger, and cleverer, and braver than the others! And they became the leaders because it occurred to them they could lead. So the kin prospered, and found better places to hide, and made more ingenious devices for protecting themselves. And this way, for a while, they had the advantage in the long, long game of Hide and Seek.

"Sadly, this advantage was lost." The Prince glared at Lewis. "It seems that at the other end of Time the big people found a way to create a new race, unnatural and immortal, clockwork and flesh mingled, a disgusting alteration of humanity. Of course they made them a slave race -- "

"Oh, we are not either," Lewis said testily.

"-- And they reached back through Time to plant these vile alterations in every civilization, to act as their agents, their spies, their thieves. Need I mention that one of their objectives was to find us, and help themselves to our useful inventions?"

"No, that's certainly not true!" Lewis objected. "They don't even believe you exist! If they had, they'd have warned me about you. But I was always told you people were a late-20th-century hoax!"

What that meant I couldn't fathom, but this much was becoming clear to me: Lewis' crazy

story must be true, somehow. His enemies knew what he was, and how to harm him. These people were the incubi, the demons the Bible warned us about. But where in Scripture would I find Lewis, amongst what peoples of the earth?

"Not a slave race, eh?" retorted the Prince. "You know what they think you need to know, nothing more! And I'm sure my marvelous moron uncles will learn things from your dismantled carcass that will give us the mechanical advantage once again."

Lewis looked terrified, but he gave a disdainful little laugh. "So your own people can forge stronger chains for you? Why are you a prisoner, by the bye?"

"Politics!" snarled the Prince. "I had my own plan for furthering our kin. Why not creep out to the big women as they sleep? Why shouldn't they bear and raise our half-breeds? Why shouldn't we live in the sunlight like you? But Mother wouldn't hear of it, and I wouldn't stop, and so here I am."

"How sad for you. Well, this has all been very interesting, but I think I'll leave now," Lewis told him airily. I looked at him, astonished at his nerve. "I have no intention of letting anyone take me apart, thank you very much. Shall we go, Eogan?"

"How?" The Prince gave an incredulous grin. "Have you noticed there's no handle on the inside of this door, and it's flush with the wall?"

Lewis ignored him. "Eogan, feel in the lapel of my cloak. You ought to find a long rod of metal, very thin and fine. Take it out." I did as he asked and found it, sewn into the lining. A moment's work with my penknife and I had it in my hand.

"Now, bend the end into a hook."

"What can you hope to accomplish?" the Prince demanded. "There's no lock you can pick, either!"

"Now, slide the hook end under the door and pull it inward." I obeyed him. The Prince started up in his chains, staring in horror as the simplicity of the solution occurred to him.

"Those idiots -- !! But you, my fine machine, you're broken now. You think this big oaf can repair you? You're helpless and they'll come after you, my uncles will, if it takes them years! They'll get you back no matter where you hide, and then -- "

"Not at all! You see, when my primary system failed my emergency backup system began broadcasting a distress signal," Lewis taunted him. "My Masters are already on their way to rescue me. I'll be repaired. Pull open the door, Eogan."

"Ha! What you have failed to realize is that this whole Mound is shielded with lead," shrieked the Prince triumphantly. "Your signal hasn't reached anyone!"

Lewis' grin faltered for just a second, but he turned it into a sneer of defiance. "Well -- as soon as I'm clear of this mound, my signal will be heard. And then my Masters will come after you! See how you like -- "

"If you've finished threatening each other," I said, being the only man in the room who could actually move, "the hallway's clear." I looked out into the stinking half-lit way.

"Then I'm on my way, short circuit or no short circuit!" Lewis crowed. Bracing the open door with my body, I got hold of him by one arm and dragged him out with me.

"I'll raise the alarm!" cried the Prince, but as the door swung slowly shut on its counterweight I heard him subside and mutter: "On the other hand, would anyone thank me in the least? Why bother?"

"I'll have to carry you again," I said, taking Lewis' other arm to hoist him up; but he got a distracted look in his eyes.

"Listen!" he said. "Do you hear it? There's somebody else. Someone's weeping."

I listened. "I can't hear anything!"

"There's another mortal," Lewis told me. "Brother Crimthann? We've still got to rescue him!" Which shamed me, because my earnest desire was to run from there without looking back, Christian as I was and him no more than a pagan, or perhaps less.

But I pulled him with me deeper into the hill and we found another door, ten paces on. Even I could hear the weeping then; and when we pushed it open Brother Crimthann screamed and cowered back in his chains.

"Hush! It's you we've come for, man!" I told him. He mastered his terror enough to be silent, pressing his hands over his mouth even as tears ran down his face. He smelled of shameful things. I left Lewis in the doorway and knelt beside Crimthann, turning his manacles this way and that to look for a keyhole, a seam, anything that I might force to open them. Nothing there! The rings were smooth and featureless, neither iron nor bronze. I pulled so that Crimthann flinched and whimpered, but they held fast.

"I can't break his bonds!" I told Lewis. He groaned.



"Let me see them," he said, so I pulled him in and wedged the door with my foot, painfully. He studied the manacles a moment as I strained to hold him up, and Crimthann blinked back his tears in confusion.

"I was afraid of this," said Lewis. "I can disable them, but it'll drain my backup system. Can't be helped. Listen, Eogan! This may well finish me. Don't leave my body here! If you can carry it out, my Company will be able to locate me, and they'll come. Now, take my hand and set it on that panel, there, above his head."

I looked up at the little square of blinking lights, bright unnatural colors. "Do you mean this will kill you?" I asked, appalled.

"Oh, no, we don't die. I'm sure they can repair me. But the charge will probably erase -- I wonder if it'll erase my mind?" I saw his pupils go wide as the possibilities sank in. "My -- what if all my memories are gone?"

"Then Christ have mercy on you," I replied, for even then I still believed. I lifted his hand as he bid me and laid it against the panel. He sighed once; I felt a stinging shock go through Lewis' body, then, and he made a terrible sound. The panel hissed and spat like a demon unmasked, but the manacles fell away from Crimthann's wrists.

Crimthann needed no urging, he fell forward and crawled at once for the door. Lewis' eyes were blank and blind now, I thought he must surely be dead; but I kept faith and bore him with me out of that cell. We ran for our lives through the tunnel, Crimthann and I, and when I saw the black grate set in the floor I sprang across it with the Salmon-Leap of the old heroes I so admired. No lightning struck me as I hurtled free of the dangerous place: falling fair, I kept running with Lewis, and did not stop until we came out into clean air.

I fell and rolled on the cold hillside and it was gray dawn, the sun not yet risen on Beltane morning, with the clouds in the East all underlit red. Behind me, Brother Crimthann staggered out and fell on his face, to lie shivering and sobbing.

I rose on my knees at once and turned Lewis over. "?enogeraseiromemymllafitahW" he babbled, blinking rapidly, and his spine arched back until I thought it would surely snap. Then he went limp again. He opened his eyes and looked around.

"Well," he whispered, "Lucky me. Even my backup system has a backup." He paused for a moment, as if listening to himself, and his face grew sad. "Oh. Not for long, though. It's just transmitting my location. My organic parts seem to be shutting down." He raised desperate eyes to my face. "Remember, Eogan! The Codex Druidae, you must bury it under the floor! And you won't tell what I confessed to you, about what I am -- Oh, God, is this it? Is this what happens to you?"

There was only one thing I could do for him. "What kind of child were you created from?" I asked him. "Had it ever received Christ's grace?"

"What?" He searched my face, bewildered. "No! I was abandoned in the temple at Aquae Sulis!" He gave a hysterical giggle. "Some Roman matron's holiday indiscretion, I've no doubt, left behind at the spa, a little unwanted souvenir..."

"You won't die," I told him confidently; and I swept my hands through the grass that was pearly with the dew of Beltane morning, and I washed that high fine brow of his with it. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

I think I expected a vision of Christ then, or a blare of heavenly trumpets at least; but nothing of the sort happened. Lewis endured the sacrament patiently, and smiled a small polite smile.

"Why, how nice. You've given me a soul." His smile widened in ironical amusement. "Now I'll live forever, won't I?"

But the color was going out of his face, and then it left his eyes, and they closed and he was no more than a waxen doll on the hillside. I rose to my feet and looked full into the rising sun. All the birds were singing.

\* \* \* \*

And even then I had not lost my faith. I carried Lewis down from Dun Govaun, with Brother Crimthann silent beside me, and we returned to the community and the Abbess was moved to tears, that the brave pagan had given his life to rescue our brother. Yet everyone agreed the story had a happy ending: for hadn't he accepted Christ's grace and gained an immortal soul? And his body was laid on a bier in our little church, and we celebrated a grand funeral Mass for him; and that night I kept the dead watch for my friend, alone with the tall candles around his body and my sorrow and exhaustion.

At some hour in the night I opened my eyes and they were there, the two strangers. One was a knave in oil-stained clothes; the other wore the fine garments of a gentleman. They were standing at the bier and the knave had his hand on Lewis' face, prizing open one eye with his

dirty thumb. I leapt to my feet.

The gentleman turned coolly to face me. "I suppose you're the one we have to thank." He gave a brief bow. "My name is Aegeus. We've come to collect our friend, here."

"Can you make him live again?" I asked.

"That's what we're determining now." He nodded at the knave, who had pulled open Lewis' mouth and was examining his teeth. I didn't like to see him handled so disrespectfully. "What do you think, Barry?"

"Maybe," the knave gave Lewis' hair a casual tousle. "Most of the organs have died. He'll be in a Regeneration vat for a few years, but he might be all right."

"What about his memories?" I begged them. "The things he knows! All those stories!"

"Probably wiped out," the knave yawned. "Maybe retrievable. We won't be able to tell for a while."

This so broke the heart in me that I knelt down, with tears brimming in my eyes. The one who called himself Aegeus paced close and stood over me.

"But let's talk about you, my friend. You've seen a lot more than you ought to have seen. What are we going to do about you, eh?" I looked up at him sharply. He was smiling a hard smile.

"I took a vow," I told him in indignation. "To bury that damned silly book and keep silent about what he had to tell me. I don't break vows!" It was true, then.

"That's right; The Silence of The Confessional!" he reflected, and his face became much friendlier. "Well then. Perhaps we can do business, after all. A mortal who can keep his mouth shut can benefit from being our friend, you know. What do you want in life, anyway? Land? Cattle? Or, wait, you're a monk. Something pretty for your church, here?" He waved a hand and looked around.

"Only heal him," I nodded at Lewis. "Only save his mind, if you can!" I thought of all the stories of enchantment Lewis knew, all the remarkable people he must have known, the things he must have seen: Rome in its decline, perhaps the Blessed Patrick, perhaps even the old heroes when they breathed mortal air and hunted the red deer.

"Of course we'll make every effort. He's a highly valued operative, after all," Aegeus told me. "Now, look. You do as he told you, and keep your vow of silence, and you'll be a fortunate man. We've got to go now; but I'll see you again. Let's go, Barry."

"Right," replied the knave, and pulled Lewis from the bier and threw him over his shoulder like so much merchandise. They walked toward the door.

"But his body!" I cried. "It'll be gone! What will I tell the others?"

Aegeus stopped and turned, tapping his upper lip thoughtfully with one finger. He grinned. "Ah! You can tell them a miracle occurred. The Holy Angels came and carried him off bodily to heaven! This is an ignorant age. They ought to believe that."

I only stared at them, too shocked to reply; and he waved cheerily, and they walked out into the darkness. I think it was then that my faith died in me utterly.

Yet in the end I told his lie, for I could think of nothing else, and my brothers and sisters rejoiced, and the story spread and poor Lewis became venerated as a local saint. But I knew the lie for what it was. And as I thought over the whole story -- what the Prince had said, what Lewis had revealed of himself -- nowhere in it could I find any trace of Christ's power, or His mercy, or His love. My God was irrelevant to those pale folk hiding in their mound, and to that knave in his oil-stained clothes.

And for all that we had a celebrated saint and a miracle to call our own, the peace of our community had been broken. Though there was never any molestation after that: the night after Lewis' body was taken away there was a violent thunderstorm and brilliant lights playing about on Dun Govaun. Perhaps the Kin had fled to some new hiding-place, or perhaps Lewis' Company had avenged his injury.

But Brother Crimthann tried to hang himself one night; and though he was caught and survived, our Abbess had to watch him continually like a child, for he would weep and rage at the smallest thing.

My life was no joy to me, either. I kept faith with Lewis, I found the lead casket and buried the Codex Druidae where he'd bid me, deep down under the stones of the Scriptorium floor. For all I know it's there still. Indeed, I have assurance it must be. I found his harp, too, and kept it safe, though it broke my heart to see it and remember his voice. I thought perhaps the two strangers might come back to claim it. The more I thought about this, though, the more I began to dread the idea; so one night I took the harp, and what little I owned, and breaking my vows I fled the community to lose myself in a distant place.

It was for nothing, anyway. On the third night of my exile, I woke in the heather to find

Aegeus crouching beside me.

"This'll never do, you know," he told me sternly. "You're supposed to stay where we can keep an eye on you."

"I buried your book!" I sat up. "I've told your lies. Leave me in peace, can't you?"

"Can't do that, I'm afraid." He shook his head. "You're a security risk. Look, we're not so bad. You'll have to come with me, now, but you'll be all right. You'll work for us and live a long happy life."

So I went with him in the strange ship, and I learned more of the way the world is run -- no Christ there running it, either -- and I was given lands and livestock and a fine house. All I must do is open my door certain nights to certain strangers who come and depart in haste, after meals and a change of clothes and horses. Sometimes they leave packages, that other strangers come and collect later.

They seldom answer my questions, and never my inquiries about Lewis; so I fear that they failed to save him, though in most other respects they seem as powerful as gods. I have seen many things that men would think were miracles. For all this I am supplied with every comfort a man might want for his flesh. My masters seem to think it will make me happy.

But I have not been happy since: until this last Samhain night, when I lay in my too-comfortable bed with banked coals warming the room, very unlike the hard pallet on chilly stone in the place where I was blessed.

I heard my name called, there in the darkness. I sat up and saw Lewis, just as he had been, brightly lit as though he stood in sunlight. He looked puzzled.

"Am I having a dream?" he wanted to know.

"No; it must be me dreaming, because you're dead," I told him.

"Dead?" He looked appalled. His jaw hung slack a moment before the memory seemed to come back to him. "Good Lord, what am I doing here then?"

"Well, I -- I'd supposed you'd come back to offer me spiritual comfort," I ventured.

He shook his head dubiously.

"Sorry, old fellow, I haven't a clue. Unless -- perhaps they've succeeded in reactivating me!" His eyes lit up and he rubbed his hands together. "Not that that explains how I got \_here\_, but I'm not complaining."

"But you're not really here," I pointed out.

"Of course I am! Look!" He made a grab for a pitcher that sat on the table, but his hand passed straight through it. He overbalanced slightly and righted himself.

"Damn! How embarrassing." He frowned. "Well -- I suppose the possibility exists that I'm actually floating in a Regeneration vat at a Company repair facility, and I'm coming to you now by means of some sort of electromagnetic projection."

"What on earth does that mean?" I rubbed my eyes wearily.

"I don't know how I'd explain it to you. Actually I don't know if it's even possible." He frowned thoughtfully. "No, I think \_I'm\_ the one having the dream, and you're the illusion. That must be it. I'm in a nice warm vat somewhere, with all my mortal parts busily being regenerated, and my brain's come back on-line and I'm having a rather peculiar dream. Still ... you don't look well, Eogan."

"I've lost my faith."

"Gosh, I'm sorry to hear it." He looked sympathetic. He seemed to be searching in his mind for something nice to say, and then an expression of incredulous delight crossed his face. "Great Caesar's Ghost! You don't suppose that baptism business actually worked, do you? You don't suppose this is my soul talking to you now?" He took a few swaggering steps back and forth.

"Oh, Lewis, I wish I could believe that." I leaned my head in my hand.

"I suppose I don't believe it either. But how can we know for sure? Wouldn't you like to believe that your God would let me into your Christian Heaven? Assuming I died, of course?"

"More than anything, Lewis. If there is such a place, you'll be there. But I don't know. I used to know," I replied, anguished.

"Oh, who knows anything? If you're simply the result of my nutritive solution being a bit rich, then I'll wake up when they decant me and go on about my business of making money for them, forever and ever and ever. And if I'm nothing more than your dream -- maybe sent to you because your Christ wanted to cheer you up a little -- then you'll wake up in the morning and go on with your mortal life until it's over. Let's be happy, Eogan. Your life's too short, and mine's too long, to mourn. Do something that gives you joy."

"What?" I demanded. "What, in God's name, can I do?"

"Oh, I don't know." He waved his hand. "You used to enjoy writing, didn't you?"

That was when the stranger, arriving late and pounding on my door, woke me to a black room

and unrelieved night.

But then I dared this thing, to write down what I'd seen, and my heart hasn't been so light in ages. Lewis was right: this is real joy to me, this dance of my goose quill across the bare page. Perhaps it would violate nobody's trust to begin it again, the copying down of knowledge? I'm not fit for the Gospels any more, but I remember so many of the hero-tales Lewis told me. The community at Malinmhor has only the one copy we made. I could set them down again.

I will, I'll uncover the harp and watch as the sunlight moves across the fine wood and glints on the strings. I'll imagine Lewis sitting there talking to me, sipping the heather-honey mead, or singing as the birds chatter in the soft air beyond the stone window sill. We'll set Finn galloping with his band of heroes, and Cuchullain will perform terrible wonders, and it will all flow out of my pen like sunlight. God have mercy on me, a miserable sinner; what other grace can I hope for?

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