

ONE

The dream

The minute I closed my eyes I could feel the dream coming. It was dark, pitch black, damp and cold. Even without any light, I knew where I was and what was going to happen, so I waited. It was silent at first as it always was. The cave where I was had smooth, damp walls and I was probably deep inside it. The only sound was the dripping of water from the roof.

Listening harder; fainter sounds came to me. Muffled scurrying sounds faded away from me then came towards me but never close enough for me to work out. The atmosphere was odd but I had had this dream now so many times that it did not frighten me, knowing they would not reach me or the drips from the roof touch me, so I waited.

A man's footsteps echoed around the cave for a few minutes before the sound of them came towards me. Along with the regular thump of his boot came a sharp clink, as if the man wore spurs like a cowboy. There was also the scrape of metal on stone as he walked. The man was alone as before and before that. Again, he stopped when the pool of shadowy light he brought with him was directly over me.

The shadowy light showed the man was wearing a padded suit with armoured plates under a black open cloak. The metal plates on his chest and shoulders were marked with streaks of mud and dust and there were flecks of dirt encrusted in the sleeves. The man carried a long spear with the spike pointed towards the ground. It was this that had added the scraping sound to his clinking step. Each time I had the dream I realised that I noticed something new. This time I noticed that the spear was encrusted with dirt. Even in the dream state, I felt myself freeze as the man lifted the spear. He laid it down gently and knelt towards me. He never seemed to be carrying anything else but the spear and a sword, the hilt of which protruded from behind his head. There was no tallow lamp or thick wooden branch aflame in his other hand. Yet, light shone from somewhere.

The man lifted his visor to inspect me and the light around me was suddenly clear but with a red tinge. The man's face was full of curiosity but I could see nervousness in his manner. He looked jumpy and undecided. His mouth was twitching under his thick dark red beard. There was sweat on his brow, gluing the thin red strands of hair to his forehead. It made me wonder how the man ever managed to do what he did next.

I was wrapped in a blanket against the cold. He lifted me off the ground. He held me as always in the crook of his arm and pulled his cloak around me. Taking the clip that held the cloak in place, he moved it closer to me as he had done before. This time I noticed its distinctive detail. The clip was bronze and engraved with a set of very unique symbols and letters one below the other. At the top of the clasp was a bird, similar to a duck, depicted floating on water. Below this lay a sword and a spear, crossed at the centre. Finally, at the bottom were etched some letters which I knew I should have been able to read but I

could not. A nagging thought came to me then. I should know the man's face and knew that the etched letters were initials, but I could not place either the man or the letters.

I stared and stared at them as the man carried me through the cave. He walked faster and faster, his spear in one hand and me in the other. Nestled under the cloak I could see little more than the partial body of the spear and the clasp, bathed again in shadowy light. After a while I was forced to give up my study of the clip. By now the man was running and jostling me around so much that only by listening to the thump, clink and scrape of his step was I able to relax a little.

Suddenly, the shaft of daylight came into view. We were on the edge of the pebbled shore of a wide stretch of water. The water looked cold and deep as I peeked out from the folds of the cloak. A small rowing boat was tied to a post on the shore. It could take perhaps four people but there was never anyone else but us.

The man knelt beside the boat and placed me gently on the floor of it. He folded the cloak around himself and stepped in beside me and sat on the middle of the rowing seat. Taking up the oars he paused and listened hard for a moment, and then he began to row earnestly away from the cave. A bell began to ring from somewhere close by. It split the air with its shrill tones. The man seemed unaware of this relentless sound and yet it filled my head, nagging at me to take notice.

I woke with a start. The cave, the boat and the water were gone. Instead I lay in my familiar bed, staring up at my dream catchers above it. The bell was my alarm, still demanding my attention. Groaning, I rolled over and switched it off. I lay there for a minute trying to remember why I should have set my alarm on a Saturday morning, but the dream filled my mind. Absentmindedly rubbing the tiny fire circle that formed a birthmark on my right wrist, I sat up and took a few deep breathes in an effort to shake the dream from my mind, but it refused to budge.

I glanced around my room. It was small but a decent size for one person. My bed was against one long wall and the window took up most of the opposite one. The walls were a tranquil yellow but as Mum often told me, you could see very little of it. I had a mixture of posters neatly spaced around my room. I focused on my two favourites, the memorabilia film series poster across from my bed and a horse galloping towards me through the night, cut out of black velvet, which hung above my desk at the other end of the room.

My mind was too full of the dream. Instead of sending my thoughts on a different track, staring at my posters only drew me deeper into the dream again. Questions started surfacing like "When did I start having the dream?" I found I knew the answer. I was almost certain that it was when I was twelve. That was when we had moved from the small town in Fife in Scotland, where we had lived since I was a baby. We had moved just four miles to this cottage in the countryside. Our previous house was still being rented out. I had been told we had not been able to sell it. A house like many others in its street. The same red brick first floor and rendered ground floor, a white front door with a matching garage. Mum had put huge plant pots either side of the door with brightly coloured flowers. Across from us was my best friend Laura's house.

I remembered just as there was a loud knock on my door.

“Rose!” came my mum’s voice, in her urgent morning manner, “I thought you were meeting Laura in the library for ten o’clock!”

“Just coming!” I responded. Grabbing a brush, I brushed my hair down into place. My hair was as black as Dad’s was red. I kept it long and at the moment it sat neatly at my waist. My hair was as stubborn as I could be. Only washing my hair was going to tame it. Perhaps a shower could at least keep the dream at bay till I could speak to Laura. My clock already said quarter to nine. I ran to the bathroom.

The hot water faded the dream, but not the other more burning questions it created. I stepped out of the shower, more irritated than when I had gone in. I rubbed myself dry vigorously, but the question stayed demanding attention. At seventeen, I was five foot two and about seven stone, so how could anyone pick me up with one hand? Was the dream a memory? Or could it be a premonition? Could such a dream be real at all or just my imagination working as I fell asleep? I had no answer.

“I’ll discuss the dream with Laura later,” I decided out loud. Almost instantly, thoughts of my dream and its questions retreated contentedly to the back of my mind. I found the hair dryer, dried my hair and hurriedly pulled on a clean pair of jeans and a blue hooded top over a t-shirt.

“Remember that you are going to the library and not the shops today,” Mum said smiling knowingly at me. “You need to give plenty of time to researching your history project first.” Mum was telling me what I already knew, but as she handed me the box of cereal, I could see the twinkle of laughter in her hazel eyes. For a moment I was struck by how different my parents looked to me. In contrast to my wavy hair, Mum, although not red like Dad had brown fine hair. My hair was jet black. My complexion was a shade darker too, especially around my eyes and brow. The only similarity I had in looks to either of my parents was that I had blue eyes like Dad. Mum’s eyes were hazel.

“Of course, we will remember to go and do research at the library Mum,” I assured her, “that’s why we are meeting up so early.”

“There was me thinking you were dedicated to this history project!” she teased, “If you still need to pack for staying over at Laura’s tonight, you can go and do that now. I can give you a lift in.”

“To make sure we get to the library?” I teased.

Mum raised her eyebrows. “That book of Laura’s is still on our bookshelf by the way.”

I got up and went back to my room. I emptied my school rucksack and put all but my history folder onto my desk. I packed fresh pyjamas and a new change of clothes. Then I went to find my wash bag and the book. Laura’s book lay on top of the line of other books on the same shelf where I’d left it two weeks ago. I picked it up hastily and returned to my room. As I dropped the book into my rucksack, there was a loud clang as something metal hit my tin pencil case at the bottom. I paused for a moment. Then I remembered the metal brooch I had been using as a bookmark while reading the book. My hand was halfway into my bag to retrieve it when I caught sight of my alarm clock. I was going to be late. I zipped up my rucksack and left the room.