



WAR OF THE REALMS

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No one would have believed in the early years of the twenty-first century that this world was being watched by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own. Paraphrasing HG Wells' words feels like a suitably ironic way to start my story. The threat in 'War of the Worlds' came from Mars whereas, in mine, it was much nearer, less than a hair's breadth. While humankind had theories about superstring theory, our conquerors used it to invade our world.

It left us helpless to resist, just as Well's characters gawped in horror as three-legged tripods wreaked havoc on nineteenth century England. We couldn't respond swiftly enough to stop invading forces entering through inter-dimensional portals in historic locations. We could only watch as we confused their technology with magic.

Later on, there were those who said we'd ignored the signs of impending danger but they speak with the benefit of hindsight. The invasion succeeded because humans were utterly unprepared to fight a significantly more advanced race. It was another writer, Arthur C Clarke, who said *any sufficiently advanced technology was indistinguishable from magic* and human beings struggled to understand their enemy. It hurt their vanity, they didn't know how to react so the invasion was over before they knew it had begun.

Who would have thought Great Britain's invasion could begin in unlikely locations such as Glastonbury? Yet those with hindsight-enhanced vision will tell you it was an obvious venue because of its thousand-year-old legends of doorways to other worlds, hidden on its Tor and within its ancient Abbey.



Humans dismissed these stories as fairy tales; a phrase that would prove ironic.

People knew me as Rob Fellows at this point in my life. When you live as long as my kind, your identity needs to go through an occasional metamorphosis otherwise folk ask questions. Glastonbury's acceptance of alternate lifestyles made it easy to fit in, I'd lived there in several incarnations, perhaps because I anticipated going home one day. If I'm

honest, and I've vowed to be in this story, I found it amusing to listen to the tourists visit the Tor to look for the doorways to fairyland.

Fairyland. Huh.

On that rain-sodden day in June, on the solstice no less, they saw the door open in Saint Michael's tower and hordes of fairy tale creatures rampage down the Tor to destroy most of the town and local area. I wish I could have seen the reaction in Whitehall when frantic phone calls told them Britain was under attack from fairies.

Though we prefer the term Fae.

They didn't just attack Glastonbury, tourist sites and places of historic significance all over the country turned into what the armed forces called incursion zones: Avebury, Elva Hill and Swinside Circle in Cumbria, the Twelve Apostles near Dumfries, they were



everywhere. Stonehenge saw the biggest battle because the army's training ground on Salisbury Plain was near enough to respond quickly, before the Fae could get properly established. The subsequent annihilation of thousands of armed

personnel was the first indication conventional warfare wouldn't work.

A few survivors told stories, passed from one town to another by the old-fashioned means of word of mouth, once EMP weapons rendered human technology redundant. Within a year, under the yoke of fairy domination, society fractured. Those areas not directly supervised by the Fae regime became bases for local chieftains to wage guerrilla warfare while controlling humanity by cruelty and fear. Though Glastonbury was controlled by the Fae, the Taunton gang ruled its society. It wasn't a good place to live. I had a small shop from which I sold the produce grown by local farmers, it helped them scrape a living and ensured townspeople didn't starve. I was discreet enough not to draw attention from the Taunton gang or the Fae; it was delicate balancing act, rather like telling this story.

Though I didn't know it at the time the second day after the summer solstice, five years after the invasion, proved to be a turning point and that's why I begin my story there.



Ruth stumbled into the shop sobbing so hard she gasped for breath and clung to the door to stay upright. Two middle-aged women hurried to help her, supported her to the kitchen behind the shop counter but diplomatically abandoned her, their duty done. Until you knew all the details the prevailing wisdom stated you didn't get involved, I remained at the counter so as to appear just as aloof. The women made quick work of their shopping expedition and vanished out of the shop, casting dubious glances behind them, in the direction of my kitchen where the girl's sobs could be heard.

I shut and locked the door and went to investigate.

I knew something terrible had happened, Ruth wasn't one for emotional behaviour, even though, aged twelve, she'd watched her parents die in the first month of the war. She was sensible, fiercely intelligent and didn't suffer fools gladly, not the type prone to emotional crises.

'What's happened?' I said as I poured hot water from the kettle on the range into a teapot. Tea was the answer to every problem.

Red eyes looked up at me, tear tracks glistened on pale cheeks.

She took a breath to steady herself. 'It's Anita.'

The breath didn't work and she dissolved into tears again.

I placed the teapot on the table and turned to her. 'Was there anything you could have done to avoid what's happened? I asked firmly.

She didn't take her eyes off me, this was familiar territory. She shook her head.

'Then what are the tears for? Are you in trouble?'

Another shake of the head.

'You're upset then.'

A nod. Her sobbing eased.

'Then what good does it do? Eh? How does it help? Tell me. How?'

She closed her eyes, took three good deep breaths and opened them again.

I poured two cups of tea in the meantime, handed one to her.

‘Now tell me what’s happened.’

The girl stared into her mug as though her story could be found within it.

‘Anita’s dead.’ The fragile control looked like it could shatter but after another deep breath, she continued. ‘The Taunton gang proclaimed her a Fae harlot. They hanged her in the Abbey grounds.’

‘Where’s Andrew?’ I asked.

The girl shook her head and looked at me, fear in her eyes now, she understood my reason for asking. The lad was impetuous and he’d be out there now looking for ways to pay back those who’d murdered his sister. It didn’t help Ruth thought the world of the lad. I had an idea they were probably more than friends these days but I was only her unofficial foster father, who’d tell me anything?

‘We need to find him,’ I said.

It got a sigh of relief before she hugged me tightly.

‘How much does he know about what happened to Anita?’

Her eyes looked up into mine and I saw panic there.

‘You know what they do to Fae harlots, before they hang them,’ she said. ‘There were four men who... you know... to prove men are more virile than Fae males.’

I nodded and looked at the girl in front of me. My perpetual nightmare involved Ruth being abducted by the Fae and used in their breeding programme to invigorate their semi-infertile race. Ruth was beautiful, clever and a prime specimen of womanhood, I dreaded the day when she’d be abducted and raped.

Like Anita.

Mankind was ruthless in its means of preventing the birth of Fae hybrids, they held mock trials where women were accused of harlotry for not killing themselves after the act and punished by executions the townspeople were expected to watch.

‘Do you know who the four men were?’ I asked.

‘Three of them were senior Taunton gang officials but the fourth was Kyle Lindley.’

I tried not to show my concern.

‘After Kyle tried to rape Anita last month, Andrew will attack him first then.’

Ruth knew it too and she nodded before asking me the inevitable question .

‘Stop Andrew. Please?’ Her eyes pleaded.

She wasn’t the sort to ask idly, without careful consideration, she knew the risks involved. I looked at the desperation in her eyes, she might be only seventeen but she thought she was in love and she had to rescue her man before he did something she’d regret. Who else do you turn to at such times? The man she occasionally called Dad.

‘I’ll try,’ I said. I wasn’t raising any hopes. ‘But you know what Andrew’s like.’

‘Yeah.’ She’d stopped crying. I half wondered if it had been a performance to convince me but I knew Ruth better than that. Her eyes turned cold. ‘It’s why I’m coming with you.’

We argued of course but her father’s stubbornness won in the end, despite my reminders the same quality caused his death.

We set off in search of Andrew together, traversing Glastonbury, both a war zone and a ghost town. We walked along streets lined with burned out vehicles and small craters, past derelict buildings slowly being reclaimed by nature, where local people watched in anonymous safety behind boarded windows.



Grey clouds meant everywhere was dark and dreary, it allowed us to keep close to walls so as to avoid being noticed. We made our way down Benedict Street towards the King Arthur where Kyle Lindley drank himself into stupidity every night. Jim Purdey, the landlord made cider from apples I supplied him, it enabled his clientele to find the oblivion they sought.

‘Hide in the old school,’ I said and pointed across the road. ‘Keep a look out in case Andrew or Kyle turn up. Or a Fae patrol.’

She started to argue but the look I gave her choked any protest. It’s a strategy I use rarely and for that reason it works.

A small but highly committed group of oblivion seekers knocked back cloudy glasses of amber liquid or lay unconscious in their chairs. They ignored me as I walked to the bar. Jim Purdey’s face told me he knew why I was there.

‘It’s too early for him, Rob,’ the man said wiping the bar like they used to do in the old westerns, when cinema existed. ‘I said the same thing to the other lad not fifteen minutes ago.’

‘Andrew?’

It got a tight shrug. ‘The brother of the girl.’

We didn’t need to clarify which girl we were discussing, there would only be one in conversations today.

‘Where will Kyle be at this time of day?’ I asked.

Another shrug. ‘He’ll be with the Taunton gang, they’ll be coming back from the outlying farms where they’ll have been collecting protection money.’ A sniff. ‘And punishing those who don’t pay it.’

‘Right.’

I turned to go but Jim cleared his throat.

‘Be careful Rob, don’t get caught up in this, let it go. If that lad wants to avenge his sister, let him.’

I knew what those last two words meant, he’d die in the process.

‘Wish it was that simple Jim. Only Ruth’s fond of the lad.’

It got the briefest hint of a smile on the old man’s face. ‘Being a father of a daughter’s tough, ain’t it?’

‘Thanks Jim.’ I reached the door.

'Rob? The Lindley lad will have just got paid. He usually spends his money on one of Bella's girls. You could try there.'

'Did you tell...?'

Jim tutted loudly. 'I may be old but ain't lost all my marbles.'

I waved as I left and grimaced at the thought of visiting a place where girls of all ages were victims of appalling abuse and exploitation on a daily basis.

'Any news?' Ruth called as she ran out from the skeletal remains of the school.

I shook my head. Knowing Kyle's location was an advantage but I needed to find Andrew.

'Come on,' I said firmly. 'I've got an idea where he might be now.'

We retraced our route along Benedict Street, to the Abbey grounds. Any sign of tourism had long since vanished, a few sheep grazed the pasture, they belonged to the Taunton lot so no one dared to rustle them. We marched along the line of tree stumps where proud hornbeams had once flourished, to the back of the Abbey, to a small but rapidly growing graveyard. Even from some distance we could see a solitary figure standing, head bowed, over a recently dug grave.

I heard Ruth gasp and before I could say anything, she ran ahead of me, threw her arms around the boy and began to remonstrate with him. I decided to keep a respectful distance, Ruth's animated gestures and the boy's grief meant their argument was short-lived and they quickly fell into each other's arms and kissed passionately.

I turned my back. It's not easy when the girl you've watched grow up suddenly turns into a woman. I began to wonder how I'd deal with this transformation, Jim Purdey had been right, fathers of daughters don't have it easy. Especially when they're not your daughter.

I considered making my way home but decided I'd see them both home and make sure they were safe. I started to turn around when movement at the far side of the Abbey grounds caught my eye. Shadows had lengthened, hiding the new visitors until it was too late, they spotted me and sprinted in my direction.

Spriggans.

The giant, long-limbed, hideously ugly soldiers used by the Fae to do most of their fighting, a race bred and trained for one thing: to kill.

Ruth and Andrew were oblivious, lost in each other. They were far enough away to remain unnoticed if I reacted fast enough; I ran towards the spriggans with my hands raised in surrender. They're not known for their chivalry but I hoped my winning smile and charm would be enough.



I met a few yards from the Lady Chapel, the centre of the original Abbey. Two dozen creatures like orang-utans on steroids held their swords ready to attack as they surrounded me. Just one aspect of their behaviour gave me enough of a clue about how I might stay alive and ensure Ruth and Andrew remained undetected.

...ey kept turning to look at the Lady Chapel.

Not many people knew it contained one of the portals to the world of the Fae, a doorway to fairyland. In scientific terms, an event horizon. Judging by the number of spriggans sent as escort, I guessed someone important was due to arrive through the portal.

All this ran through my mind in a fraction of a second, no time to consider a Plan B.

'Hurry!' I shrieked with as much panic in my voice as possible. 'There are humans nearby, preparing to attack, protect the portal at all costs!'

It stalled the spriggan attempt to kill me, they paused, swords aloft and looked at me in bewilderment.

'I'm Fae!' I shouted at them angrily in their own language. 'I'm under cover, a spy. Ignore my warning and you'll suffer, believe me! Now circle the portal and hurry!'

I was in real trouble if any Taunton gang members realised what I was saying but, like I said, I didn't have a Plan B.

I must have been convincing because the spriggans lowered their swords and surrounded the ancient remains of the Lady Chapel. It's a square of gothic stone, in its centre is an impressive archway under which used to be an altar. The spriggans stood with

their backs to its walls, keeping lookout for my supposed attack. I wondered how long the pretence would last before they realised how silly they looked.

A quick glance to my side reassured me that Ruth and Andrew were safe and now aware of the situation, they hid behind another part of the Abbey's gothic structure and watched anxiously.

Strange as it may sound, I felt relieved when the archway and the earth around it vibrated and an orange curtain of energy suddenly filled the void between its blocks of stone and the earth itself. I'd forgotten how beautiful the phenomenon was, energy sparkled as though light reflected off a million pieces of topaz, it fizzed like champagne. It made me miss home.

The spriggans readied their swords, expecting an attack, glared out at empty space.

Two good looking youths stepped through, armed to the teeth and waited in front of the shimmering curtain. They spotted me and the circle of spriggans but didn't react, their attention was entirely focused on the incredibly handsome young man who marched through the portal dressed in finery I'd not seen in the longest time. It was functional as well as decorative, chain mail made from silver; it caught the light from the portal and made the man look like an orange flame. It was nothing like medieval chain mail as we knew it, this would repel more than a sharp sword, even a bullet, it could withstand technology humans hadn't invented yet.

A spriggan spoke quietly and urgently to one of the youths who whispered something to their leader. He looked around the area, noticed me for the first time and grinned. He strode towards me, hand outstretched, grin widening.

'Robin Goodfellow! How convenient. I assume it's your knavery that has my spriggans ready to do battle with phantoms?'

My own grin felt more like a rictus of polite welcome, I shrugged because I couldn't think of anything to say except the man's name. 'Baldur.'

He kept hold of my hand as he scrutinised me carefully. 'You've barely changed. I assume this isn't a glamour?' He used his other hand to gesture up and down my body.

It was obvious his was but I wasn't going to anger this guy, not with the power he wielded.

'Why does Glastonbury deserve the privilege of a royal visit? Or do insignificant little towns feature on the Fae's royal progresses these days?'

The perfect teeth remained framed by plump lips but any feeling behind them vanished. He continued to look at me but released my hand from his cool grasp.

'How long have you lived here Robin?' he asked.

'You know how long. Your uncle was the one who banished me. Remember?'

He gave a disinterested shrug. 'How long?'

'When the protocols were signed between humanity and the Fae, separating us. Over six hundred human years.'

His scrutiny continued, almost turned into something akin to a medical examination.

'Yet you look so well. Can we go somewhere to talk?' he asked. 'Your home perhaps?'

I stared at him open-mouthed, until I realised the need to close it.

'You want to go to my home? But. It's nothing like you're used to Baldur. Won't you...?'

He slapped my shoulder playfully. 'Oh Robin, it will be a complete hovel, I'm sure. An absolute shit hole. But it will be safer than standing here, don't you agree?'

I nodded and gestured for him to follow me and set off through the Abbey grounds wondering what inter-dimensional portal I'd fallen through that had taken me into this nightmare. We were flanked by his spriggan escort and his royal guards as we marched along the streets of Armageddon. We didn't speak, the third in line to the Fae throne merely glanced at the destruction like he was a tourist, I half expected him to take out a camera. Casual glances over my shoulder told me Ruth and Andrew followed, maintaining a safe distance.

I was certain our promenade would get reported to the Taunton gang, it meant my low profile was going to be much, much higher. Lethally so.

We sat in my kitchen, the spriggans surrounded the building and the two royal guard stood like sentinels in the doorway. I knew the type, they were efficiently lethal, capable of taking out dozens of any opposition without raising a sweat. If I stepped out of line, they'd do the same to me, in a blur of movement humans wouldn't see.

My royal guest looked around him with that look we all recognise, the one where there's a foul smell directly under their nose.

'It wasn't always like this,' I heard myself say defensively, 'but there's a war on.'

Another complacent shrug. It reminded me why I never liked Baldur.

'So,' I said deciding I'd had enough. 'What is this all about?'

'I want you to answer some questions Robin.'

'Why should I?'

He looked at me in bewilderment, astonished I'd ask the question at all.

'Your race needs answers.'

My jaw clenched. 'My race Baldur? Do you mean the one from which I was exiled? Or the race that adopted me?'

Fierce dark brown eyes levelled on mine.

'I don't have time for silly games, Robin.'

'My life hasn't been a game for a long time Baldur, silliness was abandoned when your uncle decided I was some kind of political threat and tried to kill me and then blamed me for trying to kill him. How long did it take the rest of you to realise he was crazy?'

The man swatted my question like it was a fly.

'Are you refusing to cooperate, Robin?' It was said with an ominously dark tone.

'What's in it for me?'

Those dark eyes burned until he suddenly turned to look at one of his royal guards at the same instant the guard turned to him. The young man held a black crystal the size of a tennis ball, stepped forward, handed it to Baldur, whispered something and bowed before returning to his position.

Baldur stood up, walked towards the furthest corner of my kitchen, and stared into the crystal, a sophisticated communication device. It had to be linked to others in this realm; it wasn't powerful enough to transcend dimensional borders. When he turned back to hand the device to the guard, his expression was bleak and serious.

'I will have your answers Robin, or they will be taken from you painfully. Will you cooperate?'

The news had changed things and it offered me a lever. I wished I knew what type.

The behaviour of his two guards changed too, they were nervous now, surreptitiously glancing at themselves and each other. Even Baldur's behaviour had a degree of anxiety he was doing his best to hide with bluster. He remained standing, looked around the room as though searching for something.

It got me thinking.

Why come to Glastonbury? It wasn't significantly strategic in any way, the major cities remained important and were tightly controlled. We were in a Somerset backwater, not the place where you'd expect to find a senior member of the royal family. What did the place have that was important to them?

The answer stared back at me in the window's reflection. Baldur's first words on seeing me: 'How convenient.'

Baldur had deliberately sought me out. There was his scrutiny of me too, royalty don't concern themselves with the welfare of underlings, not unless it was relevant to them.

Baldur realised I hadn't answered and glared at me.

'Will you cooperate?'

I shrugged in the same complacent way he'd used, I knew it would irk him.

'As you've come so far to find me Baldur, how could I refuse?'

His reaction was fascinating, for a split second he was bemused at my guessing his purpose but it was too late, I'd seen it. And he knew it.

‘My spies spent a lot of time tracking you down, Robin,’ he said as though we were having a casual conversation suddenly. ‘When you first arrived here you quickly became famous amongst the humans.’

He was eager to rip away my carefully deduced conclusions, in this game the winner was the one who controlled the best cards in the hand. Humans called games like this Poker. The Fae played Ard Rí. I was good at both.

‘After the Fae returned to their new home, human bards and minstrels were desperate for material to weave into their plays and stories. They often found it amusing to include me in them, as a gesture of appreciation. One of them even wrote a play about the arguments between your greedy uncle and his shrewish queen, I even allowed him to use the nickname Oberon gave me in happier times. Do you remember it?’

The glare again. ‘Puck.’ Another dismissive wave, ‘Regardless, I need answers.’

Another communication interrupted his threat. When he turned to face me, no glamour could hide the anxiety on Baldur’s features. In the shop I heard one of the spriggans cough wetly. It got a reaction from the royal guards and they briefly exchanged looks with Baldur, they were worried.

I’ve lived through terrible times in human history. The present may be apocalyptic but the past has seen similar periods where life was tenuous. I witnessed the Black Death wipe out a third of Europe. The behaviour of these three young men reminded me of those days, where you checked yourself regularly and avoided close contact with other people, hated those who always looked healthy.

The Fae knew nothing like that. Their world was devoid of such things, their lifestyle, their technology, created a perfect world. Yet it wasn’t their original home, this world was, so their vindictive nature meant they coveted this realm, regardless of its faults.

I remembered falling ill a short time after my exile, a local apothecary initially thought I’d caught the plague but when the sores and fever didn’t appear he abandoned his diagnosis, shrugged his shoulders and left me to live or die.

Baldur’s anxiety and search for me made sense now.

‘How many of your soldiers are dead?’ I asked.

He jerked his head in my direction, swiftly assessing how to react.

'Hundreds,' he said and sank onto a chair. 'Thousands are ill and likely to die soon.'

'Where? In the major cities I assume?'

He nodded and looked at me as though I was psychic. 'Your capital city has the most casualties, it started there first.'

I nodded, my theory confirmed. Baldur swallowed and looked at me, eyes almost pleading.

'Have the humans developed poison as a weapon? Tell me Robin. Please?'

'Yes,' I said.

'I knew it!' Baldur bit his lip and smashed the chair with his fist. 'Dishonourable bastards!'

'What will you do now?' I asked.

He shook his head slowly. 'Search for treatment for my men. You must help me find an antidote, Robin.'

I stood up. 'Wait there. Let me show you something.'

I almost felt sorry for the slumped figure in his chair who stared at his feet and shook his head repeatedly. I stepped outside into the remains of my kitchen garden. I almost fell over Ruth leaning against the door, she stepped back and cannoned into Andrew, both of them landed in a heap at my feet.

'Some spies you'd make!' I whispered.

'What's happening?' Ruth asked with whispered urgency.

'Where's the net we use to protect raspberries and strawberries from birds?'

'It's in what's left of the greenhouse. Why?'

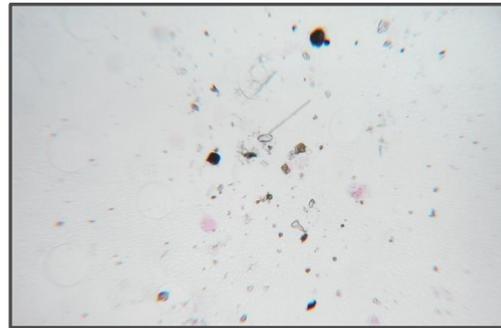
'Fetch it. Bring it in to the kitchen and hold it up for me. I want to show something to our guest.'

She frowned in confusion but I turned and re-entered the kitchen before she could say anything. They joined us a moment later, holding up a large sheet that had once been white but was now pitted with small black marks, little more than pinpricks.

‘There’s your poison Baldur,’ I said.

He frowned and stared at the sheet in bewilderment.

‘That sheet represents three months of exposure to the air in a rural environment. In the same amount of time, in the capital city, those marks would turn the sheet almost black. Those black particles are what your soldiers breathe every day.’



He stared at it and shook his head.

‘What is it?’

‘Humans call it pollution. It came from the machines they used and the power stations that generated their energy. They’re immunity arises from being exposed to it from birth.’

He looked at me, at Ruth and Andrew, his frown deepening. ‘But why? Did they know we were going to attack?’

‘No,’ I smiled at his arrogance. ‘This is how they live normally.’

‘Deliberately poisoning their world?’

I nodded.

‘It was a place of such beauty when we lived here. How could they...?’

Ruth lifted her chin. ‘We were trying to change things, but then you bastards arrived and declared war on us.’

I grinned at her courage.

‘Still want this realm for yourselves?’ I asked casually.

What happened next is documented in exacting detail by greater minds than mine. Baldur initiated the return of his soldiers immediately, they withdrew through the same portals through which they'd arrived and within a week our world had one member of the Fae race left. Me.

Slowly, carefully, society rebuilt itself and war crime tribunals punished those who deserved it.

Ironically, thanks to our technologically advanced enemy and over a much longer timescale, humanity learned to live cleaner lives too.