

As Above

29 February – Leap Year

At the witching hour upon the eve of St David's Day

The girl turns her masked face to the summit, above her the air shudders. Just seconds left. If only she can time it right. Heart pounding, blood hammering, she poises herself. She pulls out the mirror, angles it, catches the reflection of the dark night and the stars.

I can do this, she tells herself. I am the High Priestess. I am the Supreme One.

Then she recites aloud:

*'Winds of time meet me here,
Upon the stroke of midnight clear,
Spin a girdle round the heavens,*

*When the magick words are spoken,
Let the future rush to meet us,
Let the time between be broken,
Hurry the hours, tear down the clocks,
Speed up the procession of the equinox,
O winds of time, hear me say,
Let tomorrow be today.'*

She beckons to the rest of the coven. Twelve girls – faces covered with masks, clad from head to toe in black cloaks, tall hats, dark skirts – all close in. They trace a circle widdershins around a great cauldron set on a smouldering fire. One girl, petite and pretty, chants:

*'Oh mighty dragon of the fire,
Grant me the power that I desire,
Power of water and air from the sky,
And earth and fire that let you fly.'*

But the Supreme One steadies the mirror, whispers instead:

*'Oh mighty dragon of the ice,
Grant me the power in measure twice,
And take thee, thy human sacrifice.'*

The girls stop and hold out their left hands. And on each palm is marked a star. They hold them up to the night sky, baring them towards the constellation of Draco, in which the Pole Star – Polaris, the North Star – shines, and they recite:

*'Air and water, fire and earth,
In darkest night we wait your birth,*

*By light of moon, or ray of sun,
Let Merlin's magick be undone,*

*The hour has come of this leap year,
The time is right to reappear,*

*Forever you were, forever you shall be,
By Draco's grace we set you free,*

*Oh mighty dragons whom this spell release,
Crack open the fortress of Dinas Emrys.'*

The moment strikes midnight.

The Supreme One breathes on the mirror, clouds it over with her breath, cries out, 'AS ABOVE – SO BELOW, SO MOTE IT BE!'

The mountain slope shudders. The cauldron boils over. The face of the full moon darkens. There is a roaring and far away the sound of many stones cracking.

Then the mountain splits wide.

An appalling shriek rents the air. Yellow eyes glint through the darkness, teeth crash, talons scrape. A fetid stench slams into the night. And under their feet a ravine opens. A yawning cliff, dropping sheer, smooth, treacherous. And from the lip of this abyss a fearsome creature crawls out.

‘Welcome back O White Worm of Wessex,’ breathes out the Supreme One.

The dragon blinks at the girls. It unfolds its huge wings and stretches them out, like some nightmarish butterfly emerging from a hideous chrysalis, then it shakes its spiny neck. Its hooded eye settles on the petite, pretty girl.

In an instant she slips. The earth beneath her gives way. A booming, a shrieking tears at her ears. The ground over the old dragons’ lair caves in all around her.

The girl skids out of control. She falls. She screams. She stretches out her arms.

‘Help!’ she cries. ‘Somebody help me!’ But none dare, as heart bursting, body falling, twisting, turning, she plummets down over the cliff edge.

‘SO MOTE IT BE!’ roars the dragon.

Down plunges the girl. Down into the dark cavern.

Down on to the sharp crystals.

And as the girl’s heart is pierced, the crystals shatter.

At that moment, the whole of the mountain shakes, as if some deep power has been unleashed. There is a rush of heat, a blur of speed. Something passes out of the lair and, like a shooting star, fires up towards the sky. A sudden mist descends; through the darkness the girl-witches see ragged shapes like dark riders galloping away towards the summit of Snowdon.

The air grows cold.

The mountain is still.

The witches blink.

There is no dragon after all. Only their sister-witch impaled upon the rocks below.

The Supreme One hides the mirror under her cloak, takes her birch broom and, wedging it against the rocks, uses it to help her climb down into the roofless cavern. She leaps the last metre to the rocky bottom, but does not check the bleeding body of her friend speared on the broken crystals. Instead she reaches down and picks from the cavern floor a blackened object.

‘Yes!’ she whispers. The Supreme One slips the charred object beside the mirror, nestles it close to her heart. She mutters to herself, ‘So you would challenge me, Ellie Morgan ...’ Her voice grows cold, chilling, spiteful: ‘We will see about that.’

Then she turns. She reaches the fallen girl.
'Is she OK?' calls a voice from above.
'No,' replies the Supreme One. 'She has passed beyond the veil.'

Then through the dark morning she points a finger at one of the coven. 'Seize her!' she commands. 'Seize Rhiannon!'

Instantly, the witches obey.

'You pushed her,' accuses the Supreme One.

'No!' squeals Rhiannon.

The witches start to chant. One holds Rhiannon. The others circle round her. The Supreme One climbs up out of the cavern. She grabs Rhiannon by the wrist.

'You bring Ellie here,' she says. 'You bring her now! You pin this on her, or I'll pin it on you.'

Then she raises her head to the constellation of Draco shining far above her.

So Belovv

'Fair is foul – foul is fair –

By water, fire, earth and air,

Fair is foul – foul is fair –

Let those who challenge me, BEWARE –

Fair is foul – foul is fair –

FOR I HAVE DESTROYED THE DRAGONS' LAIR!'

Act One

*Here be witches, so they say
Two from the hill and nine from the plain
One for her blood shed all in pain
Summoned by She, from over the sea
Here be witches
Here they be.*

From the Coven Song of Dinas Emrys
Anonymous

Day One: 1 March – St David's Day
Wing a Pathway to the Stars

One

This is where it starts.

Sweat streaming down my forehead, my hands clenched tight. Deep inside me, screaming that never ceases. For a split second, I can't remember what I'm screaming about. Then it all comes flooding back: the dark hillside, the storm, the wind howling off white-topped rocks, bracken tossing.

The riders in the mist.

Dark shapes, cloaks tight around them, the screech of a landslide, rocks cracking open, sheer drops.

I blink.

I drag my sleeve across my forehead. I glance at the clock. Midnight. Did I actually drop off watching telly?

OMG! I am now officially old aged!

But I saw him. For one second I looked into Henry's eyes. I know I did. (I'd have gone through a hundred nightmares for that alone.)

I saw him.

I try to hang on to the moment. Our eyes met. He said something. Snatches of words play in my mind, like cloud wisps drifting across mountaintops. I try to remember.

Then my phone pings.

Great.

His face fades.

The words evaporate.

I reach across the sofa, scrabble about to find my phone. Just my luck. It's bound to be George. *Meeting eyes with Henry, after so long ...* and then George spoils it. Typical. He *would* ring me in the middle of the night, right when I'm having some kind of weird déjà vu, true love, visiony thing. Sometimes I think George has got a sixth sense; it's called: Something Is Going On With Ellie Let Me Check Wot And Be A Pest.

So I ignore it. But when it doesn't stop, I reach over and press the Shove-Flipping-Off button.

I glance at the clock again. I really should go to bed. It's 00.10 and cold. The heating's gone off.

And then the phone pings *again*.

Really, what kind of nutter never gives up pinging you? I'm not even going to bother acknowledging it.

Inside George's head (I'm sure he thinks in **bold**):

Oh it was 29 FEBRUARY three seconds ago, when I know she was thinking of Henry and Not Me – why don't I keep on pinging her just in case there is the remotest chance she wanted to ask me to marry her and forgot?

I chuck my phone across the room on to the armchair. Then I drag a paper and pencil across the coffee table and try to draw a sketch of the dream. *Those riders, like they were made of mist ... Bit of shading, smudge it with fingers ... And Henry. The way his face ... his eyes ... his thick wavy hair ...*

The phone pings again.

Whoever wants my attention isn't giving up, are they?

I slam the pencil down, get up to retrieve the phone from the chair. I shiver. It actually is very very cold.

I pick up my phone, swipe it open.

And while I'm doing that, it rings too.

So I give in, press the green thing and scream, 'WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT? THIS IS SO NOT FUNNY!'

A faint, worried, female voice on the end says, through

a zillion crackles, 'Am I through to a Llanberis mountain-rescue volunteer?'

Oops.

Kick self in bum. I sit down on the sofa again, flick off the telly and angle myself under some cushions.

Awwww-kward.

'Yes,' I say.

Em-barr-ass-ing.

'Sorry. I thought you were ~~my friend who is a dope~~, um, somebody else.'

'I know it's late but there's been a landslide over by Dinas Emrys, and at least one casualty. I can't seem to contact other members of the rescue team.'

'Oh,' I say. *A casualty?* 'No, of course. I mean, yes, you can't get them, because they're going to a mountain-rescue conference over in Leeds.'

At least one casualty ...

'I mean, some have gone already, and my mum is going really early tomorrow – I mean today – it's part of her certificate. She can't go out now though, alone, she's off rota ...' My voice peters out.

A landslide at Dinas Emrys?

I don't add: *nobody thought there'd be an emergency, not tonight, not in the middle of winter, after midnight, on St*

David's Day. It's traditional not to go on the mountain ... not this side of it anyway.

Dinas Emrys? Henry?

The line crackles. 'I see.'

'So there's only me and my friend ~~the one who is a dope~~ on our side of the mountain ... you'll have to phone the emergency services – the police,' I say.

What if it's Henry?

I continue, 'Or there's the Caernarfon team ... on second thoughts, it might be best to call them ... Dinas Emrys is right by the main road just up from Beddgelert.'

I'm not thinking straight.

'OK, thanks. Sorry to ring your number. I'll get on to Caernarfon right now,' she says.

'OK,' I say. I don't add – *but how did you get my number?* Because the words 'Dinas Emrys' are sending shock waves right through me.

Dinas Emrys, you see, is an old fortress on the far side of Snowdon, which also happens to house a dragons' cave. And also happens to be where Henry, *my Henry*, the boy I've promised to love forever, is lying entombed.

Don't ask. I will explain.

Then I noticed the other twenty-two missed calls.

And pings.

Rhiannon

Ellie. OMG. Someone's died. I don't know who else to message. You've got to come and help me. I'm up at Dinas Emrys. I CAN'T TELL MY DAD. EVA. There's been a DISASTER. This is V V V urgent and V V V V V V V V terrible. Hire a cab – I'll pay. Anything. JUST GET ME AWAY FROM HERE. I'm so scared. Please come ELLIE.

More calls ...

More pings ...

And ...

Rhiannon

Ellie? I'm SO not joking. IS YOUR PHONE ON SILENT OR WOT? I've called and called you. YOU HAVE TO COME. Don't tell anyone esp. George. There are these shapes in the mist. Delete these messages. And HURRY.

More calls ...

And ...

Rhiannon

My battery is dying. I'm scared. I'm waiting for you. ELLIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE?

I read the pings.

My mobile buzzes half-heartedly with an alert: **Low Battery**.

I ping her back.

Ellie

Hang on Rhi I'm coming – can I call anyone? What should I tell them? How bad is it? Do you need police? Be as quick as I can – but need to charge battery/do stuff to be safe ... it's a long way – but I'll hurry xxx

But really, don't you think we should call your dad?

I reread the pings.

An electric shock jolts across my chest. I try to breathe. A landslide. *Dinas Emrys*. Shapes in the mist. Someone dead?

Henry?

My déjà vu just goes mental.

I must get there. I must check the cave. And what does Rhi mean 'V V V urgent and V V V V V V V V terrible'?

My heart pounds. Even though I'm shivering, another sweat breaks out across my back – it turns icy. Then I shiver some more. And because it's so cold I pull the knitted patchwork blanket over me and don't do anything at all except shiver. Because you know how it is, when you get that sudden fear on you – you hardly know what to do.

Grab things. Keep on shivering? Go and *do* something? Think first? Everything gets in the way.

If I'm going to get over to Dinas Emrys, I'm going to have to take my bike. I mean, hire a cab? At this hour? Is Rhi out of her mind? Everything in Llanberis will be closed. I'd have difficulty even getting a taxi from Caernarfon in the middle of the night. No, I'm going to have to cycle all the way up through the pass, up to the top and then down the other side towards Beddgelert. So I better get going.

Slight problem: phone has low battery.

Emergency Rescue Rule Book (LMS&R Hand Book. Section 33): 'Emergency rescue recovery missions in serious weather: NEVER set out without a fully charged battery on a minimum of two mobiles or handheld devices.'

OK, I only have one and it is flat.

Stay calm and charge your phone, Ellie. Rhiannon is such a drama queen: Miss V V V Urgent and V V V V V V V V Terrible. She'll just have to wait. I mean. The landslide hasn't toppled on her, has it? Why isn't she calling Caernarfon? (Perhaps she has ...) I totally understand why she can't tell her dad. What the hell is she doing over at Dinas Emrys anyway?

With my Henry.

Perhaps it really is awful.

Arrgh! I need to hurry.

Think it through, Ellie, I tell myself. This isn't going to be a walk in the park. It will take you at least three quarters of an hour, maybe longer, to bike it. It's all the way up past Nant Peris. (It will take definitely longer.) It will be dark. It will be cold. Grab something to eat. Carbohydrate load. Poor Rhiannon, she must be terrified. Take your daysack. Think it through. No good setting off before you've *thought it through*. Rhi is going to have to wait. The emergency services will get there soon. They can take her home. (But I'm still going, you know. What about Henry?) If the emergency services can't take her, she can ride pillion over the back wheel. We can freewheel into Beddgelert, ditch the bike ... wait for a bus ... are there night buses? Take extra bike lights.

Charge. Your. Phone.

Take money. Oh, and your bus pass.

I go into the hall. I look in the big mirror. Yuck. I drag a brush through my hair, pull some extra socks out of the tops of my wellies, put them on, take two huge fleecy hoodies off the pegs and pull one on top of the other.

It really is brutally cold. I go to the kitchen. I stand hopping from one foot to the other on the freezing flagstone floor. Wow, it's totally below zero. I grab my walking boots

from the back porch, pull them on. Outside it looks like it's actually trying to snow. Winter is *supposed* to over by now; you know – snowdrops and daffs and crocuses and things are supposed to be coming out. There's mist everywhere – really tight up against the farmhouse. Ragged lines of cloud strain through the grey night, just like the Brenin Llwyd.¹ I remember the riders, the shadows in the mist.

The Riders!

That dream I just had.

The dark hillside, the storm, the wind howling off white-topped rocks, bracken tossing.

Dark shapes, cloaks tight around them, the screech of a landslide, rock cracking open, quartz splitting through crystal down to sheer drops.

And the body of the girl screaming, falling.

The Brenin Llwyd. Working his evil visions.

He's out there in the cold and dark.

Waiting for me.

1. The Brenin Llwyd, in Welsh folklore, is the most powerful and perhaps the oldest Lord of the Grey Dark. He is said to haunt Snowdonia, hiding in the mists of the mountaintops. His breath, a thick fog, descends in the space of a few heartbeats; it drives unwary travellers to their deaths by hiding the edges of precipices and icy llyns. He is a brooding, silent, evil figure, who lies in wait for those who venture up into his mountains. Those who are never seen again are said to have been taken by the Brenin Llwyd and his grey riders.

Two

I grab water and chocolate. Should I wake Mum? She needs to sleep. Hell, I'm tired too. We got totally exhausted yesterday rescuing newborn lambs up on the high pastures. It took hours. Getting them back down to the farmhouse and safely into the barn was no joke. Tomorrow morning – *this* morning, Mum is heading all the way to Leeds, too. She can't do anything about Dinas Emrys, anyway. It's way too early. Imagine it:

ME: Hey Mum. Wake up.

MUM: Huh?

ME: Someone rang looking for mountain rescue, but that's sorted. Anyway, I had this thing while I was watching *Horror Her*, I've decided to go out in the middle of the night for a bike ride to meet the Brenin Llwyd.

MUM: Huh?

ME: I can't tell you exactly what's happened – something about a landslide – but I thought I'd wake you up anyway. Oh, and Rhiannon's pinging me.

MUM: Huh?

ME: OK, now you can go back to sleep.

MUM: Ellie?

ME: It's fine. Night night. Have a nice time in Leeds.

Amazingly stupid idea. But I ought to at least say goodbye – she actually *is* leaving at the crack of dawn, and I might not be back. On the other hand, I ought not to wake her up ... dilemma.

So decide, I tell myself.

So I do: I am not going to wake her. After all, I'm practically grown up now, sixteen going on seventeen (pretty soon). I Do Not Need To Inform My Mum Every Time I Leave The House.

So instead, while I wait for my phone to charge, I'll write her a note. She's going to be confused and do her puzzled face. It's not something a normal teenager thinks of doing. Oh yes, I think I'll just go for a lengthy bike ride, at half past midnight just because ... well, it seems like a good idea.

So I start writing:

Dear Mum,

Then I realised this is the moment when: I Have To Tell Her About Henry. Ha. Ha. Biggest Awwwww-kward Ever.

What to say? I glance at my phone battery icon. Green bar only a third up. *Come on green bar – hurry up!* I glance out of the kitchen window again. No answers out there. The mist is tighter against the house than before. I can hardly see a thing. I strain through the glass hoping to catch a glimpse of the moon; after all it should be full, shouldn't it?

An evil shiver suddenly shoots down my spine. Was that something moving?

Grey shapes, dark against dark. All the tiny hairs on the back of my neck go prickly. *What if there really are grey riders. What if the Brenin Llwyd actually exists?*

Stop it. Focus on what to tell Mum. Currently, she doesn't know anything at all about Henry.

Hmmm.

But how to tell?

I continue the wake-up scene in my head:

ME: OK, (clears imaginary throat) I'm going out, mostly because of something that started

around Christmas and Rhiannon's texts.
And the two are connected.

MUM: Huh?

ME: You see, I met this boy, but I never told you about him.

MUM: Huh?

ME: And it's a long story, but the short version is: he is a dragon.

MUM: Ellie, if he's not very nice, are you sure you should keep on seeing him?

ME: I'm not 'seeing him', and he is very nice.
I mean he really *is* a dragon – you know fire and wings – not bad tempered or whatever.

MUM: OOoooooh-kaaay.

ME: So I have to go out to check he's locked up in his cave.

MUM: All right darling. That's just fine. A pitch-dark freezing night is a fabulous time to go on a date/visit an inmate/check your pet monster is under control. Off you go. By the way, my first boyfriend was a three-headed griffin with bad breath. Have fun!

Right. There is probably no way to tell The Person Who Loves You Most In The World just exactly why you were/are ready to risk your life on a relationship that has only lasted a week (ish) and involves a dragon in a cave. I mean, that's what happened, at Christmas.

Risk my life. And leave her all alone. Forever.

But I will have to try. Because I've got a V V V bad feeling about tonight.

Green bar is up to halfway. Can I risk it?

Only yesterday, I saw a figure standing up on the mountain above the pass, opposite Clogwyn on the great knife-edge that Mum and I call the Devil's Bridge.

I saw him standing there, when we were working so hard to save those newborn lambs. I tried to dismiss it; told myself. It Couldn't Possibly Be Henry. But now, all this ... oh, be still my beating heart.

Whatever. It was definitely a sign. So I'm going to have to let Mum know. Everything this time.

Including what happened at Christmas, just in case ...

Green bar is up to two thirds. Yay! Just another five minutes and I can go.

I sit down with a pen and a piece of paper and I start again:

Dear Mum,

I have to tell you about Henry. I don't know how to start, because you're probably going to think your teenage daughter has gone loopy. I should start at the most important point and come straight out and tell you that Henry is a dragon and I am in love with him. (Not some cuddly toy for sale in the Llanberis railway station souvenir shop. NOT one of those huge, great, big, ugly, red dragon things. PULL-LEEESE.) No, Henry Is Not A Cuddly Toy. He is a boy (though very cuddly. In fact, he's cuddly, gorgeous, fit, lush, tall, kind, special: OK get out the thesaurus and add in all your fave synonyms for AWESOME.), and he's also a dragon/boy. OK?

Not OK.

She'll think I've been reading too many paranormal romances and am certifiably bonkers. Or am trying to cook up some sort of lame drama-thing, because I'm a teenager and obviously I don't have a boyfriend because I live halfway up the largest mountain in Wales. The days in which boys would climb towers (or mountains) to see the girls they love are over. Or never were.

Nowadays boys would never even consider doing all

that romantic stuff (except for George and he lives up here anyway, so that doesn't count). Sigh.

I put down the pen. Maybe Mum will think Henry is someone I've met on World of Myth/War/Mountain/Craft and is a gamer, who has an avatar who happens to be a red dragon.

So I add the following:

It all started long ago with the Mabinogion and Merlin and Y Ddraig Goch, and I can't go into all of that, because I've got to go off and see what's happened asap, so you'll just have to believe me when I say that's the way it is. I'm in love with Henry, and I have promised to dedicate my entire life to try and free him from this curse that's hanging over him, which also involves his worst enemy: Oswald, the White Dragon of Wessex, who happens to be his uncle btw.

I know it sounds odd. Try to get over that bit. Anyway, I would like to have told you all this properly but Rhi's waiting for me, so that's all I can say for now.

Love you very much.

Ellie.

I put the letter into an envelope. I don't read it through, because I know if I do, I will start ~~to cry~~ to imagine how (when she comes back from Leeds) I'll have to sit across the breakfast table from her and tell her the whole story. And I really don't want to.

Green bar is over three quarters now. Yippee!

So I put the envelope behind the clock on the mantelpiece in the front room, because I know she won't look there, until she needs postage stamps. And who the heck ever needs postage stamps these days, what with direct debits and the internet? So that means the letter will stay there. Unread. For. A. Very. Long. Time.

Phew.

But if the stuff at Dinas Emrys is really V V V urgent and V x woteva terrible and I have to go off and do other V urgent and V terrible things and I never return, it will still be there. And she will find it eventually, and she will know what has happened to me, and then George will have to tell her the rest.

I grab my mobile. Three-quarters charged is good enough.

I go into the front room and put the letter behind the clock. Ceri, our sheepdog, whines and raises one ear quizzically. I shush her. Then I leave Mum a temporary, stand-in note scrawled on the fridge in whiteboard marker:

*GONE OUT TO SEE RHYANNON. HAVE A NICE
TRIP xxx*

Then I put on my waterproofs, pick up my gear and sneak out the front door.