

A long time ago, when the earth was white and the seas were frozen, Guri stole fire from the faeries . . .

That's how the story goes. I know it off by heart – we all do. But I'm waiting by the fire for everyone to arrive, so that we can hear it all over again.

Rain's blowing hard against our hut as we let people in. Some of it's blowing in through the hole in the roof and the fire's gone out twice. Still, it's the first moon of autumn, and we're gathering here like always to hear Myrna tell our tale.

Bryn's fussing around as usual, getting everyone seated by the fire. Myrna has to be helped down on to our stool by Mabda, her daughter. You can almost hear her bones creak as she settles in. The rest of us sit on the floor, trying not to notice how damp it is. Everyone's coughing because of the smoke. I hitch my little brother, Lu, further up my knee and try to stop him pulling my hair. Digri pulls a face at me and grins. My mother pokes the fire again, and passes the pot around so that

we can have a drink, then we all turn our damp, grimy faces towards Myrna, and she looks back at us keenly, though her eyes are near enough blind.

She takes a long swig from the pot, and hands it back to my mother. Then she begins, in her rasping voice.

‘In the First Days,’ she says, ‘the land was filled with magic. There were spirits in the trees and the hedgerows, in pools of water and mossy caves. When the People came, digging the land, and chopping down trees and changing the way of rivers and streams, they fled to underground caverns, and chambers beneath the sea, or to the dark heart of the forest. Some of them left entirely, travelling on the Lost Paths to unknown lands, but those who stayed tried to defeat us by magic, causing rivers to flood and forests to burn, setting loose our animals at night, and turning fields of barley to rubble and stones. They are worse enemies than the wind and rain, because they mean us harm, and more deadly than the raiders, because only if they allow it can they be seen.’

I’ve tried to see one. Sometimes I think I have – or nearly. When I’ve gone further into the forest than I should, picking sticks. Where the light changes and one thing starts to look like another. You can hear them sometimes – little scuttering noises in the hedgerows, tiny footsteps pattering like rain on the leaves. If you see one before it sees you it can be made to talk, and you can ask it questions. But if they show

themselves to you, it's almost always trouble. They can take any shape they like, tall as a tree, fiery and beautiful, or soft, like mist on the river. They are the *Sith*, or faerie folk, and mostly we try to drive them out. But I would like, just once, to see a faerie.

'The strongest and fiercest of all the faerie folk is Mabb. She haunts the forest and the hillsides, looking for the rest of her folk who have been driven away, or trying to lure the People into her faerie world, or trick us into doing her will. They say that for every faerie she's lost she will take one of the People. And those who are lured into her realm rarely find their way out again.'

I bet I would, though. If I met Mabb, I wouldn't be afraid of her. I'd ask her what she did all day, and get her to show me her magic. We'd fly through the air like birds, or float underwater. We'd hide in flower cups or the roots of trees. We'd spin webs with the spiders and make honey with the bees. It's not true that you can't find your way back from the faerie world – Guri did. Myrna's telling his story now.

'Long ago, when the hard winters came, and the earth was white and even the seas were frozen, Guri followed a dancing light over a frozen moor,' she says. 'The flame changed colour and was sometimes blue, sometimes red and sometimes a cold, fierce yellow.'

'The wind battered Guri, and snow and ice froze his bones. At last he came to a lonely spot on a hill, where

mist curled from the earth in a circle. "I will die here," he thought, and he lay down. But some time later he woke up, bathed in a golden light. Outside the circle snow fell and the wind howled, but inside was warm and bright, and there was a table, set with food. At one end of it sat a woman such as he had never seen. Fiery hair fell below her knees, and round her head there was a little circlet of flames. Guri thought that he must have died after all, but he was warm, warmer than he had ever been, and he had thought he would never be warm again. The woman smiled at him and said, "Welcome," and her voice was like the crackling of fire over leaves.

"Eat," she said, "and drink."

Now Guri was hollow with hunger, for all his People had been starving through the long winter. But Guri knew that he mustn't eat or drink with the faeries, or he might never leave their world, and he was feared, for the woman was wild and strange as the moor itself. So he rose and sat at the table, but he didn't touch a thing.

"Are you not hungry?" she asked him, but Guri could only stare at her fiery hair which lit up the scene around him. Sparks fell from it on to the table like candles, lighting up all the food. He thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Mabb, Queen of the Faeries," she said, pouring a golden drink into a bowl. "Why don't

you eat?”

‘Guri could only shake his head. He found it hard to speak, for the drink smelled of summer, and the perfume of it filled his mind.

“‘What do you want?’” she asked him.

“‘I have come for my People,’” he said. “‘They cannot survive another winter without fire to keep them warm.’”

“‘There is no hurry,’” said the Lady. “‘These flames will never die. Stay and eat with me.’”

“‘If I do,’” said Guri, “‘will you give me the secret of fire?’”

‘Mabb’s voice rustled like laughter. “‘What will you give me?’” she asked.

“‘What can I give you?’” asked Guri.

‘Mabb looked at him with her mocking eyes. “‘A kiss,’” she said.

‘But Guri knew that if he kissed her, he might never leave. “‘I may not kiss you, Lady,’” he said, and Mabb’s smile became more mocking still.

“‘You have followed me so far,’” she said. “‘Will you go home empty-handed? A simple kiss is all I ask.’”

‘Then Guri spoke these words to her:

*The wolf has his pelt,
And the raven his wing,
But I have my immortal soul.*

‘Mabb shrugged. “One spark for another,” she said, and all around him the scene began to crumple and shrivel, as if it was burning up before his eyes.

‘Then Guri stood up quickly. “Wait!” he cried, and with one hand on his knife, he approached her.

‘Though Guri was tall, the Lady had to stoop to kiss him. But before he could feel her lips on his, he reached up and cut off a strand of her burning hair, then stepped back quickly.

‘Mabb was so angry that sparks flew from her hair and eyes. “You take that which is not given,” she said. “You must leave something in exchange.”

‘Guri held the burning strand in his left hand, and his shadow fell to the right. But now Mabb lifted her hand and his shadow left him, and went to stand at her side. A shiver passed through Guri. But he held up the lock of her hair like a torch and stepped out of the circle of light, into the whirling storm.

‘The wind blew and the snow and hail fell, but the burning strand didn’t go out. It burned Guri as he held it, and the left side of his body was scorched by the fire. Yet he struggled on, until he came to the huts of his People.

“‘I have brought you this Gift,” he said, and he sat down, shaking like a leaf in winter. His left side had withered like bark on a tree, or a twisted branch, struck by lightning. But he had brought to his People the Gift of fire, for the flaming strand never did go out.

And the People warmed themselves by it, and lit more fires throughout the long harsh winters that covered the earth in those days almost all the year round. And they learned to cook and make weapons and tools, so that they survived and grew strong, and spread from one shore to another, until the earth itself grew warm again.

‘But it was said of Guri that he never grew older, and that even on the brightest day he cast no shadow. With his left eye he could see only visions of the faerie world, with his left hand he could feel Mabb’s fingers and with his left foot he could find the faerie pathways. And at long last, when everyone he loved on this earth had died, he returned to the shadow he had left at Mabb’s side. But we, the People, grew strong, because of the Gift of fire.’

Tricksy folk, faeries, everyone knows that. Set babies crying all night. Turn milk sour in the cow, and set hens to laying pebbles instead of eggs. You never really get the better of them. But sometimes I wonder if you could try being friends with them. I don’t think anyone’s ever tried.

You can still see the hill where Guri met Mabb. It’s all speckled with stones, which are all the People who’ve ever looked for Mabb, or crossed her in some way, and it has a cleft in the top like a dimpled chin. Mabb’s Hill, we call it, but we aren’t allowed to go

up there. If you light a fire on Mabb's Hill, at the right time, Myrna says, she'll come for you.

'What is the right time?' I asked her, but she only gave me one of her looks.

'You'll be sorry if she comes for you,' she said.

Myrna's still speaking, but now her story's taken a sad turn. Because the People aren't strong any more. After years of bad winters, bad summers, bad harvests, the creeping sickness, the shaking sickness, and the raiders, all that's left of us is five small huts huddled between the forest and Mabb's Hill.

'These are the five households of the People,' Myrna says, and she names us all.

There's mine, of course, with my mother and Bryn, my father's brother, and Lu, who was named for my father.

Myrna and Mabda, her daughter, and Arun, Mabda's grandson, who lives with them since his father was killed with mine. But Arun's not here now, because he was sick this morning and has to stay in his bed.

My friend Digri, with Griff, his father, and little Ogda.

Gwern, Griff's brother, with Orla and Peglan and Derry.

Arval, with Tilse, in the hut where Arun used to live.

Long ago, the land we live in was part of a much bigger land. The People came to it on foot, following the herds of deer and wild horses. We had no huts, no crops; we just followed the animals and hunted them. Then the big winters came and when the ice cracked, the land cracked with it, leaving us on an island. The People didn't mind. We didn't have to follow the animals so far, and soon we learned how to keep them in one place so that we could build our huts and grow our own food.

But not everyone was happy. There were other folk here when we first came. Wild men of the woods who lived like animals and fled when they saw us. Some of them turned raiders, attacking our huts, and taking our food.

They're still there, giving us trouble. My father died when the raiders came. Tall savage men, wearing nothing but paint on their bodies. Howling like wolves and not seeming to feel the cold. Women and children had to crouch in the underground hide, while my father and his brothers, Bryn and Arval, together with Griff, his brother Gwern and Magda's two sons, all fought the raiders with arrows and spears. Digri says he fought too, but he never did. He stayed in the hide with me, crying like a girl.

My father was pierced by a spear, and all Myrna's healing arts could not bring him back from the Land of Shadows. And Mabda lost both her sons that day,

and was sick with grieving. And my mother, who was already carrying my brother, looked likely to die herself. But Myrna nursed her with wild primrose and nettles, and raspberry leaves, and before the year was out my brother was born, and named Lu, which was our father's name.

I shift and sigh and try to get comfortable. Lu whines when I move him and Myrna looks sharply my way, eyes like curdled milk. But I know this part of the story by heart anyway. We all do. It doesn't make us feel good to hear it. Because it's not a good story, and no one knows how it'll go on.

'There may not be many of us left,' Myrna says, 'but there is new life.' She glances round at the youngest ones, at Lu and Ogda, Peglan and Derry, and the baby that is in Tilse's stomach. 'And where there is new life, there is always hope. May the land keep you, and may the People keep the land.'

She finishes, making the sign of protection against the *Sith*, and she looks round at us all just as if she could see us, as if she's waiting for an answer, or another end to her tale.

In the silence that follows I look at my mother, but her head's bowed so low that her plaits are sweeping the floor. Then I look at Digri, but he's picking at the floor with his new knife. Little Ogda's sitting next to him, her two short braids sticking straight out from

her head, two candles of snot from her nose. Peglan and Derry are sleeping already, on their mother's knee. Everyone else is watching the shapes in the fire, and I can see, plain as day, what they're thinking. They're remembering, though none of us was alive then, not even Myrna, the days when the People were strong and great. But now there are only five households left, and another hard winter coming. Beavers build their dams high and the wolves' pelts grow thick. That's what they're thinking.

I hitch my little brother further up my knee. His head's heavy on my arm, and my leg's gone dead. Plus he's started to drool, and there's a big wet patch near my shoulder. Disgusting. Then Griff, Digri's father, stirs at last.

'We need another Gift,' he says.



No one says anything to this. My mother gets up and starts raking the fire, then, with much huffing and sighing, everyone starts to leave. Mabda helps Myrna to her feet; Digri carries Ogda. My mother sweeps the ashes from round the fire.

'Put Lu to bed, Keri,' she says, and she stands the broom against the wall. Bryn comes back from checking that the pigs are safely penned in. 'Sleep well, Keri,' he says.