

Chapter 5 by David Marston

“You little fool!” Dag pulls Nick down to eye level, his old-yet-strong hands firmly gripping the younger man’s jacket collar. “Don’t you realise what you’ve done?”

“What? I just wanted to prove to myself that all this was real.”

“These flowers, anything from the Underworld, carry the taint of death.” Dag is nearly snarling, “You have brought death to this land, to the world. If you thought we had problems before, you ain’t seen nothing yet! Everything will wither and die—plants, vegetation, machines, animals, people. And it’s your fault!” Dag releases Nick and stalks away.

“I’m sorry,” Nick holds his hands out, utterly despondent.

“We know you didn’t do it on purpose, Nick. You didn’t know.” Lena tries to comfort him, “Blaming him doesn’t help, Dag. Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“There’s nothing mortals can do. It will take some serious magic to reverse this—the sort of magic the Bog Fairies have. Do you still think you can find them?”

“I’ve an idea—if it’s right, then yes.”

They head for Nick’s battered old car. He pops the boot open and takes out a laptop, tossing the keys to Josh, he says: “You’re driving—I’m working.”

“Where’re we going?” Josh asks slipping in behind the steering wheel.

After a few minutes’ Googling, Nick announces, “The marks Lord Gwyn made on this

map correspond with the location of the new mobile phone masts. Turn right here, Josh.”

Josh brakes heavily, coming to a halt just metres away from the towering mast. “What are you doing, Nick?” Lena leans over his shoulder unable to decipher the array of windows open on the computer screen.

“Using the wireless connection through my mobile to get into the phone company’s website.”

“Look,” says Dag pointing into the middle distance. “You can see the dead land, the land that the Fairies have abandoned. It’s less than a quarter of a mile from the mast.”

“Where are the Punkies then?” Lena looks around quizzically, “I can’t see any.”

“No,” Dag explains. “You won’t be able to. In this reality they exist on a different wavelength to people. They’re just outside of your sensory range,

as though they were on the very edge of your vision. But they're here all right; they're clustered around the mast."

"So, what do we do? Ask them to go home?"
Josh climbs out the car.

"Essentially, yes. And quickly, but persuading them might be difficult—they've obviously left for a reason."

"I think the masts attract them," says Nick looking up from his screen. "But I think I can make it repel them by changing the frequency at which it operates on. I think that if we then use our phones in close vicinity the resulting feedback will force them away."

"You can do that?" Lena asks.

"Of course I can. I'm a magician."

"It's a good idea," says Dag. "But we need to move quickly—look at the sky!" Black clouds are

drifting in quickly covering the sun, and the temperature is plummeting. “The taint of the Underworld is spreading fast.”

“Right,” Nick says. “Dag, you stay here with me. Josh, you drive Lena to the second mast and then get yourself to the third. Give me twenty minutes and then ring someone, anyone.”

Lena touches his arm gently, “Good luck.” Nick just smiles. “Twenty minutes to hack into a company computer system and manipulate it? He needs more than luck.”

“Hurry up, boy,” Dag frantically paces up and down.

“I’m going as fast as I can—this isn’t easy you know.” Nick has broken into the secure area of the website and he thinks he knows what he needs to do, but whoever designed the site either made it a

labyrinth on purpose or had no sense of aesthetic design.

The distant thunder rumbles, and flashes of lightning can be seen on the horizon. “The feed’s slow,” Nick grumbles under his breath.

“It’s the death,” Dag explains. “It will be starting to affect everything by now. People tend to be the last to succumb, but not always.” Nick glances up and then recoils in shock. Dag looks like he’s aged fifty years in barely five minutes. “Just hurry, Nick,” he whispers.

“Will you be OK?” Josh asks Lena as he pulls up close to the second mast. By now the rain is pounding off the windscreen with such ferocity that it will take scant seconds to be soaked to the skin.

“There’s not much point worrying about the rain if the alternative is the end of the world, now

is there, Josh?” She smiles gently—so calm, so collected, so knowing. Josh can understand what Nick sees in her.

“Guess not.”

Lena steps out of the car and into the downpour. She looks up and lets the rain splatter across her face darting under the relative cover of a stone wall.

Josh puts the car into first and speeds off, loose gravel scattering in his wake. The third mast is barely two miles away and he has ten minutes. Plenty of time and yet still he throws the car into every bend. The situation demands urgency.

He pushes his right foot down hard on the accelerator as the car comes out of a corner, but nothing happens. The engine splutters a moment later and then every emergency light on the dashboard illuminates.

“No!” Josh shouts and punches the steering wheel. Still in motion, but losing speed, he turns the key. There’s no spark, nothing. The car is dead. In his head he hears Dag’s words, “Vegetation, machines, people—all will die.” Josh abandons the car in the middle of the lane and runs through the rain as fast as his legs can carry him.

“Nearly there,” rain drips off Nick’s nose and onto his laptop.

Dag continues to pace, despite the fact it is now clearly causing him pain.

Lena squats down and tries to send positive thoughts of encouragement.

Josh runs and runs. His muscles scream, his lungs moan and he just keeps on going.

“OK, the frequencies are changed—I think—just in time, too.” Nick hits the return key and half closes the computer’s lid. He smiles at Dag and the

old man nods back. “Let’s do it, then.” He takes his mobile out of his pocket. “Sorry Guinevere,” he apologises as the Punky is pushed aside in the phone’s system and Nick scrolls down to a random number.

And three thumbs press the green dial button on three different phones simultaneously.

The air sparks around the phone masts as though there are loose electric cables flailing in the wind.

“Well, is it working?” Nick asks as Dag looks to the sky. Suddenly dozens of glowing balls appear in the air and a single one bursts out of Nick’s phone.

“Yes. Yes, they’re going back!” He gives a jump of joy shaking his fist in the air, “Yes!” When he hits the ground, though, all the strength

seems to leave him and his body crumples into a heap.

“Dag!” Nick darts across to his stricken mentor, “Dag! Are you all right?” The old man looks pale and empty of life.

“The Punkies,” he croaks. “You must get the Punkies to do the right thing. Only their combined magics can cleanse the land.” Nick nods and Dag closes his eyes letting loose a great exhalation of breath. Then he lies still. Nick touches his withered cheek—it’s cold, he’s not dead, but not too far from it either.

“Guinevere?”

“Yes-yes-yes?” The ball of light hovering nearby bounced around the sky.

“Do you know how to fix this? Can you and the Punkies really end the tainting?”

“Yes-yes-yes, we can. Make magic together, in a group powerful, alone not so. Change things we can.”

“Then get to it.”

“No-no-no-won’t-can’t-shan’t!” The icon manically shakes its head. “Cold out here. Warm in there—feel alive. Out here it is only endless death for us in the service of Gwyn of the Underworld.”

“What?”

“There, in phones, we are part of the real world again! I can be with you!”

“Guinevere, I don’t know what you are. I don’t know if you’re the soul of a child or a fairy or what, but if you don’t help me now,” Nick is trying to control his anger, “the Underworld’s taint is going to destroy everything—Dag said so—only the Punkies can end this. If this phone dies, if I die, you’ll just be alone again—only now you’ll have

the knowledge that you let all this happen! You'll have the guilt!" The little Punky is silent and then after what seems an age she splutters an annoyed grunt. She circles around Nick's head before shooting up high into the sky and emitting a piercing screech.

Moments later what seems like thousands of Punkies fly in from all directions convening on Guinevere. They fly in a display, diving at sharp angles, taking abrupt turns, building up momentum before heading off in the direction of the dead ground.

In the distance Nick can see a blue gas rising up from the ground. The Punkies fly straight into it creating electric sparks every time the blue and white lights touch. The rain continues to pour down, but the flashes are brighter, more pronounced than any lightning Nick has ever seen.

After a few minutes the Punkies converge into an almost solid mass and as one fly into the thickest patch of blue gas. The resulting flash turns the whole world bright white for just a second, and when it clears, Nick and the others can see again the rain has stopped. The clouds begin to clear and the sun comes out. Dag sits bolt upright and exclaims, “Well, they did it, then?”

Half an hour later and the four have regrouped and now hover around the ticking over car engine, trying to dry out. Josh sits on the bonnet as Nick tries to get closer to Lena.

“Guess that’s it,” Josh calls out cheerfully, adrenaline still pounding through his system. “We’ve saved the world. Wow. Tune in next week for more exciting adventures of the Mystic Team, eh Dag?”

“You better hope not,” Dag scowls. “We did well, children, but half the problems were of our own making and I still need to go and apologise to Lord Gwyn.” He pulls his hat down low, “I’m sure we will be needed again, but let’s try and make sure it’s not before I’m back,” and with that Dag turns, walks away and in a blink of an eye disappears.

“Well, I don’t know about you two, but I’m going home for a hot bath, something to eat and eight hours’ sleep.” Lena stretches wearily, “Nice working with you Nick—that was pretty clever stuff you came up with.”

“Ah, you know,” he scratches the back of his head suddenly embarrassed. “Just don’t ask where I learnt to hack into international corporations’ websites.”

Lena turned to make her way home. “Wait,” Nick says knowing that if he doesn’t do this he’ll regret it forever. “Um, do you think, maybe, we could go for a drink or dinner or something? Sometime? Maybe?”

“Sure,” she beams. “Drink. Dinner. Something. Sometime. Maybe. Tempting offer, Nick.” She turns away and starts to walk, before stopping and glancing over her shoulder. “I’ll send you a text.”

The two young men watch her disappear down the lane. Suddenly they feel older and Nick knows that working for a website design company in Weston-super-Mare is never going to be quite enough after today.

“Pint?” Josh jumps down off the car.

“Pint,” Nick says firmly.