

## Prologue

*Twelve years ago on the Night of Shadows...*

“Is it the right decision?” She asked with a questioning look.

“Do we have any other choice?”

He could see the worry darkening her otherwise calm face. Worry – and fear.

“Don’t be afraid”, he whispered, “All will be well.”

“The others were right, weren’t they? It was a mistake from the start. It should never have been allowed to happen...”

He smiled weakly and pointed to the cradle standing in a corner of the cosily furnished tower chamber. Two babies were lying in it sound asleep. “Do you call that a mistake?”

She stepped closer and looked at them sleeping.

“So small and fragile”, she whispered. “And completely oblivious...”

“And that is how it shall always be”, he added decisively. “We will do everything in our power to keep it that way.”

“And if...it is forever?” She looked at him again.

Tears fell from the corner of her eyes and rolled down her pale cheeks.

He did not know how to respond. Without saying a word he pulled her towards him and they embraced one another and allowed themselves hope and comfort on this cold storm-beaten night. Foaming waves crashed against the cliffs on which the castle stood, and lightning kept flashing across the dark sky.

“They are coming!”, she said quietly. “I can sense them.”

“Then the time has come”, he responded.

They looked at each other once again, to give each other strength for what was to be done. Soon after they lent over the cradle and each of them took one of the children out. The older of the two – even if only by a few moments – woke up for a short while and looked at her mother sleepily. Then she snuggled into her shoulder and quickly fell asleep.

Moments later noise could be heard coming from outside.

Frantic footsteps.

Screams.

The clatter of weapons...

“The time has come”, said their father. “They will soon be here.”

Their mother nodded and raised her free arm, on which she was wearing a silver bracelet. It was decorated with the symbol of a triskelion and adorned with a shimmering turquoise oval stone. And whilst the mother murmured a word in the old language, the stone started to glow from within.

The noise outside was getting ever louder. They were getting closer...

“Now”, urged the father.

*“Ar-aragur!”*

She repeated the word, more loudly and clearly this time and the glowing grew brighter. Shortly afterwards there was loud banging at the door.

“Open up!”, screamed a gravelly voice with the ugly accent of the Grimmlings. Only very few amongst them could speak at all. “In the name of the King! Open up!”

There was another bang against the chamber door. Whatever the invaders were banging against it, it was gradually working. The hinges yielded a bit, creaking. They would break at any moment. "The portal", urged the father. The child in his arms had awoken. She had heard the noise, and sensing the turmoil she began to cry quietly.

The blue glow of the stone had got even brighter, and as if from nowhere, a dome of light had appeared over it. It expanded, getting bigger and bigger.

Just then the door burst from its hinges and the Grimmlings stormed in.

The squat creatures exuded an almighty stink, were covered in jet-black fur and wearing rusty armour. Their hands, holding spears with poisoned points, were as green as their pointy-nosed faces with their puss-yellow eyes staring out. They stormed in screeching at the top of their voices, their mouths agape bearing their murderous fangs...

...but they were too late.

For in the meantime the dome of light had become so big that it completely encased the man, the woman and both of the children. Suddenly the light was so blindingly bright that the Grimmlings drew back with a start. And as it faded again, the Dark King's henchmen were alone in the chamber.

Only blue smoke remained, which swiftly dissipated. The man, the woman and their children had completely disappeared.

## 1: A Misunderstanding

When the alarm went off, Annlea was wide awake straight away.

It was Monday morning. School...

With a practised swipe of the hand Anny turned the alarm off, threw back the bed covers and leapt out of bed. Not that she particularly liked going to school, especially not at the start of a new week.

But Anny had a strong sense of duty.

And that meant that not only did she know what had to be done, but that she did it without complaint.

Her father sometimes joked that she had a little man in her ear giving out orders all of the time. Of course that was nonsense. But Anny just couldn't be any other way.

Roaming around outdoors or going to the swimming pool in the summer, like other girls her age, did not come into question for her. There were always things to do. Anny helped her father in any way she could. She vacuumed the house and did the dusting, went grocery shopping and did the cooking. And when she had finished everything she still had homework to do. There wasn't much free time left over, so Anny never got together with other girls to play. Because of that she didn't have any friends. But she didn't mind.

Because there was still music, and music was her great passion.

No matter how tiring a day had been – when Anny picked up her violin in the evening, when she swept the bow over the strings and felt the gentle vibrations, it was then that she was happy. She liked practising and delighted in improving each time. The fact that the other children in her class just shook their heads at her and made fun of her behind her back didn't matter to her.

She just wasn't like other people, and it had always been like that.

It started with her name and its unusual spelling. It continued with her father, who was a librarian by profession and could be an oddball. Anny loved him, but people gossiped about him and made jokes about the eccentric bookworm.

The walk to the bathroom seemed, despite everything, to go on forever. She trudged along the hallway. The pale girl in the mirror looked at her so wearily it very nearly gave her a fright. Her black hair hung lank and straggly. Maybe she shouldn't have practised violin until after midnight.

Anny had a wash and brushed her teeth. Then she brushed her hair, put her hair up and slipped into the knee-length black skirt and the dark-red polo shirt that was her school uniform. A little later she went downstairs to the kitchen-diner of the small house, where her father was already sitting eating breakfast. Or what he called breakfast anyway...

"Good Morning, Pops", said Anny.

"Morning", replied her father with his mouth full looking over his plate at her.

"Are you eating porridge yet again?", asked Anny wrinkling her nose. If there was anything Anny didn't like, it was porridge. It didn't matter whether it was made with water or milk, whether it was sweet or salty – it just tasted awful.

"What else would I be eating?", asked her father.

"Well, some fresh fruit, for example", said Anny as she grabbed an apple and took a bite of it.

"Without porridge before Waterloo, Wellington's soldiers would have starved and Napoleon would have won the war", her father enlightened her, grinning. He knew very well that she didn't like the stuff. "Porridge is the mortar that built the British Empire."

“Mortar is right”, said Anny and rolled her eyes. She sat down with him on the little table in the middle of the kitchen and ate her apple, whilst her father kept spooning in his porridge.

“What are you thinking about?”, he wanted to know.

“About the performance the day after tomorrow. Up in Llandudno”, she explained.

“Performance”, he echoed. She knew the vacant expression with which he was looking through his horn-rimmed glasses well.

“Pops!”, she said sternly. “You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

“No, no”, he reassured her and ran his hand through his messy brown hair. “Performance on Friday. Llandudno. Got it.”

“The day after tomorrow, on Wednesday.”, she corrected him with a sigh. “You really did forget.”

“Sorry, darling.” He made a face like a little boy, who had just been caught stealing from the biscuit jar. “Can you forgive me one more time?”

Anny shrugged her narrow shoulders – she knew what her Pops was like. “The main thing is that you drive me there.”

“Of course.” He nodded and with that the matter was resolved. At least that’s what Anny thought...

After they had cleared the breakfast things, they set off. The Vauxhall standing on the drive belonged to the library and had seen better days, which was hardly surprising considering all of the heavy books he constantly had to cart around. The car creaked and squeaked on every corner, Anny almost felt sorry for it.

The house that Anny and her father lived in was a stretch outside the little town of Tywyn on a hill. On a clear day you could see from there to the sea, but sadly the sky was mostly overcast and it rained, although there were different types of rain: pelting spring rain, refreshing May rain, balmy summer rain, stormy autumn rain and of course the never-ending cats-and-dogs winter rain. But it wasn't so bad. The people on the Welsh coast were used to it, and it didn't matter to Anny anyway. Because when she was doing her favourite thing and playing the violin, she didn't even need nice weather.

Tywyn was a small town on the mouth of the River Dysynni, and its mostly two-storey houses huddled between blue sea and green hills. Since the inhabitants numbered only a little over three thousand, most people knew each other to look at, which was good and bad at the same time. For in Tywyn whilst nobody was lonely, there was a lot of tittle-tattle. Quite often Anny and her father were the topic of the gossip. Anny had wondered a few times why they hadn't moved away from Tywyn long ago, but her Pops, who originally came from London, used to say he preferred the sedate life in this small town to the hustle and bustle in the city. And Anny had given up arguing with him.

After all Tywyn had everything you needed in life: two supermarkets, an ice-cream parlour, a cinema and several shops along the high street, which led through the hills in a north-easterly direction. They had a public swimming pool too, as well as some bakeries and restaurants, even an Indian, where Anny and her Pops sometimes went to eat. And then of course there was the library where Anny's father worked – a small building on Neptune Road that was full to the rafters of the flat roof with books. Despite that it was Anny's father's particular ambition to continually acquire new collections.

Books were his world.

Anny could not remember a single day in her life when she had not seen her Pops with a book in his hand. In his younger years he had even dabbled with writing a novel of his own, but for some

reason he had stopped. Anny supposed it had something to do with her mother, but she had never asked him about it. For whenever talk turned to her mother, Anny's father became extraordinarily sad and withdrawn, and it upset Anny to see him like that.

Twyn's real attraction wasn't the library or the beaches, stretching along Cardigan Bay drawing tourists from inland during the summer, but Tallylyn Railway, an old train pulled by a steam engine that clattered through valleys and gorges in the countryside on a narrow-gauge track – and it had been doing it for more than a hundred and fifty years.

Twyn had a school too – an old brick building in the middle of the small town. Anny's father dropped her off there every day on his way to work, so that she didn't have to get the school bus. They often used this time together to have a little chat. However, on this morning Anny's father hardly said a word. He sat tensely in the driver's seat chewing on his bottom lip. Suddenly – they had just got to the school gate – he made a face as if he had just bitten down on a piece of driftwood.

“Damn”, he snarled.

“What is it?”, asked Anny taken aback.

“I knew it!”, shouted her father and hit the steering wheel in frustration,

“What did you know?”

“That I had forgotten something important.” He looked at her sheepishly through his glasses. His look begged for forgiveness. “Anny, sweetheart, I'm really sorry...the performance in Llandudno...”

“Yes?” she probed.

“There's a problem”, he admitted through gritted teeth.

Anny looked at him in disbelief, “But Pops, you promised.”

“I know, I know”, he said and ran his hand helplessly through his already messy hair. “I just somehow thought the performance was on Friday and agreed to the donor’s party that’s happening at the library the day after tomorrow.”

“To the donor’s party? But...”

“It’s really important, darling. A few influential people will be there, who will decide whether we get the money for a new extension. And at the event it would be nice if you...if you...”

“I have to give a concert?” Anny raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “At your donor’s party? And miss my performance in Llandudno for it?”

“After all, it’s a performance too”, said her father with an apologetic smile. “One with a good cause to boot. If enough donations are collected...”

Anny stared at him. She watched his mouth opening and closing, but she wasn’t taking in what he said.

“The performance is important to me, Pops”, she repeated quietly. “If I’m lucky I can then take part in the big festival. It only happens once a year and I’ve got the opportunity to perform on a real stage in front of lots of people.”

“You can still do it next year.” He stroked her cheek to comfort her. “Believe me, darling, you would be doing me a huge favour.”

Anny bit her lip.

She wanted to refuse, wanted to tell him that it wasn’t fair, that she definitely wanted to take part in the performance and that it was her big dream...

But she didn’t.

“Okay”, she said and nodded – what else could she say? Her sense of duty had taken over like a bad habit and just wouldn’t allow her to object.

“Thank you, darling. I’ll make it up to you soon, I promise.”

Anny sighed. If she’d got ten pence for every time he’d said that to her, she’d have enough for a new bike by now.

“Have a lovely day.”

“You too, Pops.” She smiled weakly, opened the passenger door and got out. She wanted to go and join the stream of other pupils shoving towards the school gate, but then she turned round again. “Mum would have understood me”, she said quietly and didn’t even know why.

“Yes”, he admitted and a shadow fell over his face. “She really would have.”

She could see him gulp, and although it was exactly what she had wanted, she was sorry for it now. She wanted to say something when he slammed the door shut and drove off.

Anny sighed and shouldered her things. School started.