

**Crown & Quest:
Spiritus I**

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Crown and Quest

There are many parallel universes,
each with its own Earth.

Princess Natalia lives in one Reality;
her counterpart, Natalie, lives in another.

Prologue

Princess Natalia

Darkness. And pain – relentless, agonising.

The dark was like a living thing, beating down on me and within me, a possessing, torturing spirit, destroying my flesh, my blood, my pounding heart, and crushing what was left of my mind.

And yet I tried to cling to life, to endure, even though agony was all my existence. My wailing and whimpering were cries calling life to stay with me, not to go, not to leave me dissolving into the dark.

But the dark won, and I lost myself.

When I woke, I wished I had died.

Though strangely, there was no pain.

I was clear-headed. I knew where I was. And that it would have been better if I'd never woken again. I would die now, anyway... but gradually.

There was some light, faint and sickly, greenish-yellow. So I could see the dungeon that held me. A stone box, quite spacious – for a coffin.

It had a door – a metal slab – but no window. Where was the light coming from? I couldn't tell. And why should I care?

I'd been as good as buried alive. Rage coursed through my veins. My life had been stolen – I was just nineteen.

They'd thrown me down on the floor. One side of my face was pressed to a flagstone. The ground felt cold but I myself didn't. I should have. It was winter.

Perhaps I was so numb, I could feel nothing: another mercy. I tried to sit up and found the most I could do was roll slightly forward and back. I was wretchedly weak, my body as heavy and unwieldy as a sack filled with cobblestones.

At that point I whispered a child's prayer I said at the worst times of my life, when I was in the depths of despair.

I'd known grief. My parents had died in a shipwreck when I was six years old. They hadn't taken me on the voyage. I'd been staying with my guardians, my uncle and aunt, who'd been good to me, before the bereavement and since. They had no children of their own. And now my uncle, the king of this land,

Arboressia, lay on his deathbed. And that was the reason why traitors had made their move: why I lay here, in this dungeon.

Perhaps I'd been taken to some isolated tower and placed in a cell there; but if not, I was still within a mighty fortress. It was the stronghold of an overlord, the head of a leading family, the Great House Araznier.

He was supposed to protect and defend me. Scarcely two hours could have passed since he'd been smiling and bowing deferentially, welcoming me in his courtyard. Or had I lost track of time? Perhaps I'd been unconscious for days.

Oh Aunt, exhaustion and anguish had badly affected your judgement. You sent me into a vipers' nest – for my own safety!

Chapter One

Princess Natalia

"You can't stay here in this castle," my aunt, Queen Yvraine, told me tearfully in a dressing room close to my uncle's bedchamber. She was pale and worn from long hours tending him and keeping watch by his bedside. She would allow me to see him for some moments each day, but no more than that.

"Sorrow will cloud your mind. You must remain strong and vigilant," she said, though she herself was shaking with fatigue. "When our dear king has gone, there may be a challenge..."

I knew what she meant. Although heir to the throne, I was a mere woman. More than a few overlords would like to place the crown on their own head, having chopped mine off. And my uncle had fallen ill while visiting an alpine outpost too small to prevail against a substantial force.

"You'll go to my cousin, Araznier." Aunt hugged me close and then pushed me away determinedly. "He's my own flesh and blood. I know he will protect you. His fortress is renowned: no attack has ever succeeded. And he has staunch allies. When the time comes, lords and knights will escort you to the Capital; there you will be crowned in splendour and the nation will rejoice."

I took no pleasure in such thoughts. How could I? Death would bring me the crown, having reaped my uncle's soul for the realms beyond.

I went to say my last farewell. Going into that chamber was like entering a shrine already haunted by the afterlife. Shadows were gathering; no daylight intruded. The fire burned low yet the air was stifling and heavy with the fumes of aromatic potions. A single candle wavering in a corner only served as a reminder of our frailty.

The great, canopied bed loomed before me. An attendant physician rose from a chair, bowed to me and withdrew to a discreet distance.

There were tears in my eyes as I looked at my uncle. His once plump, genial face had thinned tragically to resemble a mask of skin over a skull. His grey hair straggled across the whiteness of the pillow. He lay so still, the velvet covers up to his chin, that it seemed as if his spirit had already left this world.

How I wished I had the skill to make him better. About a month ago, he'd been injured while riding in a valley. His horse, alarmed by a sudden rock fall, had reared and thrown him.

My poor uncle had endured a severe concussion and developed a feverish sickness. The physicians and herbalists had tried every remedy they'd ever heard of but nothing could be done. The sweats had given way to a deathly coma.

I touched his cold brow gently. "Sleep well, and Heaven bless you, Sire," I whispered.

The next morning at daybreak a select company embarked on the journey to Fortress Araznier. Oh, I thought I was so bold and daring. I refused to travel in the jolting carriage with the king's advisor, the Lord Counsellor, and the three ladies-in-waiting who were accompanying me. I rode with the warriors who guarded us; they were my distant relatives, knights and squires of the Royal House. They wore armour like steel scales and plumed helmets.

At noon we stopped at a hunting lodge and dined in a hall under the glassy gaze of dozens of stags' and boars' heads. Then we were off again, as snow began to fall and the paved road grew slippery with ice.

But by dusk we arrived safely at the grim fortress, to be greeted with convincing cordiality by the overlord and his only son, Gledian.

I thought it was odd that so few people were present in the courtyard when the carriage came to a creaking halt. There was none of the usual hustle and bustle, the busyness of an important stronghold. An attendant was at hand to unfold the steps and help the queasy passengers descend to solid ground. Another servant led my warriors away in the direction of food and drink, while an elderly maid ushered me and my weary ladies into a reception room, where we could sip mulled wine and recover from the journey.

We weren't given much time to ourselves. The maid soon returned, bringing the Lord Counsellor with her. There was no sign of Araznier's wife, nor of his three daughters.

The Counsellor was a grave man, white-bearded and black-robed. He came up to me and told me quietly that the overlord wished to speak with me in private on some 'matters of polity'.

I hadn't been involved much in the government of the nation but supposed it was time for me to start shouldering some of my future responsibilities. So,

with the help of my ladies, I tidied myself up quickly as best I could. A comb was produced to tame my tawny hair. I had put aside my fur cloak, which was spattered with dirt from the road, but the hem of my gown was stained too, and muddy boots peeped out from beneath it.

I groaned at the sight of them and said to the waiting Counsellor, "I'm not in a fit state for polite company..."

The Counsellor smiled thinly. "You are delightful as always, Your Highness. And now, perhaps we should join our good host. It would be best if your gentlewomen remained here: the matters to be discussed are confidential." Bowing to me, he gestured towards the door.

It was unusual for me to walk anywhere without at least two female chaperones. I felt a little uneasy then, as I walked beside the stooping dignitary, our footsteps echoing along the stone hallways. The oil lamps had been lit: bronze bowls hanging from the ceiling, blessing us with the false reassurance of a golden-orange glow.

We entered a panelled chamber. Araznier himself was waiting for us there. He was a daunting figure, even in late middle-age. Tall and burly, with a meaty face and jutting jaw, he was ill-at-ease among paintings and tapestries. The battlefield was his territory. That gold-trimmed robe didn't suit him; armour did.

But he would conform to courtly etiquette when he had to. He bowed low to me. "Your Highness."

I inclined my head respectfully. "My lord."

"Your presence honours this house." His expression was bland.

I gave the traditional response. "Thank you for your gracious hospitality."

"Your Highness, kindly come through to my study. Some trusted knights attend us there: they bring important news."

I took a deep breath. "Certainly. I should be glad to hear what they say." It was time for me to behave like a future monarch.

Araznier opened a door and held it for me. I stepped into a large, panelled but sparsely-furnished room.

Three men were there, standing by the warm hearth. I was only acquainted with one of them: the overlord's son, Gledian. I'd seen him in the courtyard, but we'd met previously on several occasions. He'd attended some grand State banquets. He was a younger version of his father; his stubbly, cropped hair was a light copper-brown instead of iron-grey.

The two other gentlemen were, like him, in their mid-twenties or thereabouts. I didn't recognise them, which was puzzling. Araznier had said they were knights. Over the course of my short life I'd been introduced to most men of that status. Their clothes were nondescript, whereas Lord Gledian's outfit was evidently fashionable and expensive.

The Counsellor closed the door. He and our host flanked me as we approached the other trio.

I assumed there would be introductions and formal pleasantries, but Araznier stopped in his tracks, exclaimed, "The documents!" and then said, "Counsellor, if you will..."

To me, the overlord said, "Pray excuse us a moment." And the older men walked away.

But Gledian was in front of me, bowing and holding out a small golden casket.

"Madam, please accept a token of my esteem."

"Oh! Thank you. How generous..." I was charmed. What a lovely welcoming gift!

As if lured by the treasure, one of the other men – a 'knight' – pushed forward roughly, brushing against me. I took a step back and looked round, the casket unopened in my hands. The door had closed. Araznier and the Counsellor had left me alone with –

They moved quickly. Gledian snatched the gift away. His accomplices grabbed my arms. A gag was tied like a tourniquet round my head while I thrashed about, choking on my efforts to scream. But I was held so tightly that I could hardly breathe, imprisoned by an evil mockery of an embrace.

Gledian watched, smiling. His eyes glittered, and I realised what sort of creature he truly was.

He put his face close to mine and murmured softly to me, "Rest assured: you don't whet my appetite."

I squirmed. I shuddered.

He sneered. "I want your crown. I shall take that, and your throne. And..." He gloated. "I shall take all of Arboressia, the richest prize."

Treason!

I'd make them work to kill me. Enraged, I kicked out. For an instant, I was a clumsily moving target. Perhaps that small rebellion saved my life. Perhaps, as the bludgeon struck, it was meant to end my life, and failed.

What did that matter? I would die anyway in this dungeon. Or – no!

Would they come back? Torment me? Decide, after all, to...

"I'll take them with me!" I snarled to the cold stone floor.

Fury gave me some energy and determination. I wriggled and flopped and crawled to the wall and levered myself up, sagging like a doll filled with beads made of lead. After more wriggling and writhing, swearing and sweating, I'd managed to open my bodice as if inviting molestation, but I had also extracted two long, thin and tapered metal rods from the complicated inner structure of my corset.

"Hah!" I crowed in triumph, brandishing my daggers.

But then I tensed, suddenly watchful.

There was a flickering, a dimming of the yellow-green light in that cell.

Oh no! I wouldn't welcome the dark.

I waited, frozen. The light was fainter, but remained. I prayed that it wouldn't suddenly go out.

Near the door, an area of shadow was deepening. It seemed to ripple, thicken, blacken. It was like a cloak... Worn by a tall figure –?

Now terror gripped my throat. The old stories, the legends about the Folk of the deep forests, their powers and their evil deeds, filled my mind.

There were things worse than any human traitor.

Chapter Two

Princess Natalia

Someone in a black, hooded cloak was now clearly visible, standing near the dungeon door, scarcely four paces away from me.

I spat out, "If you're here to kill me, make it quick."

The voice that responded was disturbing – but not in the way I'd expected. It was like midnight in midsummer, its depths velvet-dark, intriguing. A male voice, though unearthly – perhaps from the spirit realm.

It said, "Princess Natalia, my people have healed you. They left you in a weakened condition so that you couldn't attack me. You've armed yourself, I see."

I took a second to recover from surprise. Keeping the metal rods where they were, pointing at him, I said, "Am I supposed to believe you consider me a threat?"

The sallow light turned whiter, clearer. My visitor moved. I jumped, but he was only putting back his hood.

I might have gasped if I hadn't felt so ill-used and angry.

He was handsome beyond dreams, beyond nightmares, with a masculine beauty that was not remotely human.

His skin gleamed faintly silver, as if we were out in the moonlight. His eyes shone silver-green, dramatically defined by ink-black brows. His long, raven hair flowed to his sturdy shoulders. Beneath his cloak he wore a dark surcoat, breeches and boots.

It seemed he had neither a sword nor a bow. I supposed he wouldn't need such weapons – it was said the Folk used magic. Every aspect of him appeared to be proof of that.

I asked breathlessly, "What are you?" The legends swirled round my mind. "A warlock? An elf-lord? Or – no!"

I shrank back against the wall. "Are you –" I continued, a tremor in my voice, "Are you one of the Accursed, a drinker of human blood?"

His gaze was steady, appraising. "All the Folk share a common ancestry but some of us are Infected, and some are not. What's more, some of the Infected are murderous, and some..."

He moved again, but so swiftly I hardly noticed. Then he was holding a small bronze vial between thumb and forefinger.

"This contains laqua," he said. "A potion that keeps the blood-thirst at bay."

So he was Infected. Yet not about to kill me?

He said levelly, "I mean you no harm." The vial had gone.

I wanted to believe him, and his voice – his very presence – was compelling; but I couldn't trust him, or anyone else, for that matter.

I rallied, gathering my thoughts, and said, "If your people have helped me, they have my gratitude." Hardly allowing myself to feel hopeful, I asked, "Are you here to free me?" I held my breath.

"Yes. You must decide on your destination. I can set you down in the castle where your uncle and aunt currently reside. However, it's full of intrigues and potential assassins. And before long the Araznians, on learning that you have escaped, will arrive in force. Gledian is no more than his father's puppet.

"Therefore, you may prefer a different course of action. If you make an alliance with me and my people, we'll defend you from traitors. We'll do so discreetly. At first no one will guess how closely you are guarded, and by whom."

I stared at him, amazed. An alliance with the Folk? With the Infected elven-brood, haunters of ancient woodland, feared spellcasters? It was unthinkable! Impossible! And yet...

Would it make a certain, distorted, sense? An insane logic to a princess thrown in a dungeon?

It might...

I proceeded cautiously.

I asked, "Why would you wish to ally yourself with me? I assume you're a spokesman for your kind."

"My name is Alexius," he said. "In the old tales recounted by your storytellers I am known as the Erl-King."

"The Elven King himself!" I exclaimed, and said warily, "I'm honoured."

"The tales are not wholly true," he said. "We call ourselves the ethairn, and although we are adepts, we don't work with magic, but with the Energies that stream through the natural world."

I didn't understand what he was saying. He was obviously a being made of magic, with that silver gloss to his skin and his leaf-green eyes.

I felt foolish wielding my corsetry daggers. I lowered them – somewhat. And thought of a pointed question.

"Sire, what bargain must I make with you?"

He smiled then. Strangely, his cold beauty warmed my heart. But I didn't want to be susceptible to his enchantments. My heart, I resolved, would be as unyielding as the walls of my cell.

Yet he had walked through them, I thought uneasily, as he replied, "The feor – the Infected who prey on humans – are increasing in number. There is a... method... by which a human can be changed into an ethair. The feor are forcing the change upon their victims, who are, consequently, Infected."

I listened in horror. There had indeed been reports lately of more missing people, mostly villagers who lived in the hill-country or near the most ancient forests.

The king continued, "The feor are ambitious. Their ultimate aim is to rule every land on Earth. We laqua-drinkers oppose them but we need to build our armies. This is my proposal: I will protect you, and in turn, you will allow your warriors to become ethairn if they so choose."

"What?" I burst out, incredulous. "None of my knights or their troops would consent to live as a... as a... No man would."

"You're mistaken," the king said calmly. "Your warriors value strength and skill. Many will relish the chance to acquire the abilities of the ethairn. But most volunteers will be turned away. I will only accept the best among them: men – and also women – who will never use their powers to enslave humans."

"Women?" I was baffled. "There are no female soldiers. Some daughters of the hill-tribes are knife-fighters – or so I've been told."

"I will recruit them, if I may."

Extraordinary. And so was my predicament.

Perhaps I was delusional – I'd been bludgeoned into madness.

But if that were not the case... I should consider the Erl-King's words most seriously.

He waited, cloaked in shadow.

It would do me no good to return undefended to the castle. There, my aunt made the decisions. Araznier might protest innocence and convince her with clever lies. I might be handed back to him.

What would my uncle, if he were here, advise me to do?

Had he ever mentioned the Folk? I didn't think so. He was a practical man. Rather too down-to-earth. In this situation, confronted with the silvery-skinned woodland king, he might... Well, there was nothing practical to do but talk with the stranger, as I had.

What was my visitor's name? Alexius.

I would assert myself, if I could. I said, "Whatever spells you have cast to weaken me, let them cease."

A breeze swept round me. I felt lighter, as if invisible chains had fallen away. I put down the metal rods, laced my bodice, and climbed stiffly to my feet with as much dignity as I could muster.

What choice had I? If this Accursed had set a trap, I hoped it would be more comfortable than the dungeon. And if he meant to deal honestly with me, I would be provided with stealthy defenders who could vanquish every foe.

Then I thought of... "My warriors and my ladies!" I asked anxiously, "Sire, what has become of them?"

"The Araznians gave them poisoned wine," he said, "but we ensured the toxins were diluted. When the comatose bodies had been heaped on waste land, we carried them to safety. Your people will awake in the woods not far from a village."

I hoped he had told me the truth. I thanked him soberly and then enquired, "Do you know what happened to the Lord Counsellor? Was he in on the plot?"

"He was. He remains at the fortress."

I sighed. I hadn't been well acquainted with the advisor but it pained me to think he had bowed to my uncle while scheming against the Royal House.

"I'm in your debt," I admitted. "Are we to sign a treaty?"

"No," said the Erl-King. "We'll shake hands: that is all. Do we have an agreement?"

An agreement that would permit him to lure my warriors into his army of the Accursed. What a deadly contract!

Oh, I had to steel myself to say "Yes" and touch that silver skin. My flesh crawled; I trembled. But his grasp was firm, and cool as fresh water rather than icy-cold.

And darkness flowed around us and drowned all thought.

Chapter Three

Natalie

Natalia's half-ethair counterpart,

who lives on a different Earth.

It was the usual strangeness. I knew that I was asleep, and wouldn't wake up for a while. I dreamt I was walking – well, gliding along, really – through misty moonlight. I could see nothing but patches of shadow and drifts of cloudy vapour, but I was aware of space, an empty vastness, all around.

Then the dream ended, though everything else stayed the same. I was still gliding like a lost soul through an eerie night. I was used to this situation and wished sincerely that I wasn't.

I could get out of it, if I wanted to. This wasn't a mystical vision, but a communication. My powers, though they might be called psychic, were the product of science so advanced it crossed over to the paranormal.

As if responding to my dislike, the mist drew back, leaving a clearer path ahead. The way was brighter, shining with a soft, silvery radiance. It seemed welcoming and not in the least threatening. Even so, as I went forward, I suddenly felt cold with fear.

I decided to block the connection, break the link – and found I couldn't. That had never happened before. I tried again and failed. Shuddering, I wrapped my arms around myself defensively.

Someone was approaching: someone whose very existence filled me with dread.

I wanted to turn and run but I was fixed to the spot. I began to struggle against the glowing Energies that held me.

One of the abilities I possessed might, in the ordinary world, be called a sixth sense. This was telling me – no, screaming at me – that I was about to meet a person whose powers were not only much stronger than mine, but greater than those of the most gifted people I knew. The oncoming vigour surged forward like a force field.

Right in front of me – I wasn’t sure exactly how near or far it was – an area of the hazy light began to move. Slowly swirling and churning, it shaped a holographic image like a ghost materialising.

Suddenly I felt deadened. But I hadn’t been numbed by shock. My nerves had been soothed: I was unnaturally calm. It took me a few sluggish moments to realise that my fear... in fact my mind, was being controlled.

Glimmering light both formed and obscured the phantom. Then – a moment of clarity. I sensed generosity and compassion, though someone this powerful might have been able to fool me.

It wasn’t generous to have bound me in mind and body. I fought harder, determined to smash the imprisoning Energies.

“Let me go!” I demanded.

I was immediately released but there was a downside – my fear returned.

The image spoke to me then, in a quiet though commanding voice. It echoed through consciousness and wouldn’t easily be forgotten.

“Natalie, I am an envoy. I bring you a message: secrets are emerging from the past into the present.”

The stranger was talking in riddles. I said tautly, “I don’t understand.”

“I lived long ago in the Bronze Age, the time of the Early Domain.”

I was even more bewildered. Had this hologram been recorded so soon after the founding of the Domain, a crucial alliance? Why would someone from the ancient world want to talk to me?”

The stranger continued. “The Domain-Folk were stronger in those days; our skills were considerable. By our calculations we could predict the distant future. And with the device we invented, the Lens, we could look along the paths of Time and glimpse what was to come. It became clear that, ultimately, the world would face a great threat.”

Fear upon fear.

The voice resumed. “When I was alive, the Era of Ice was coming to an end, and the glaciers that covered many lands had melted away. However, in your lifetime, the process will reach its final stage. The immense, frozen plains of the north and south will thaw, the meltwater flowing into the sea. As the world grows warmer, the ocean will rise to swallow the land.

"If no effective action is taken, a Great Flood will occur during your lifetime. It will be worse than any previous deluge. Such a widespread disaster will destroy civilisation."

I protested: "We've tried our best! We've built Energy barriers..."

But the tides still rose, gradual yet unstoppable.

The ghostly image was silent. Mist whirled up around us and blew away, to be replaced by...

I was standing on a cliff top above a stormy sea. A cold wind slammed into me, my hair whipped across my face, and my clothes – I appeared to be wearing a long dress and a cloak – billowed as I shivered.

A cloaked, hooded figure stepped towards me. The landscape blurred for an instant, swivelling around us, and then it was still again.

My companion pointed downward to a steep-sided valley, where a fast-flowing river spilled into the sea.

As I looked, I saw swimmers, dozens of them, crowd upon crowd in the rushing water...

No, they couldn't be...

I gasped in horror as I realised I was looking at corpses, people who had been drowned and swept away by a flood. Their poor, limp bodies were flung about in the torrent.

I couldn't watch. I turned away.

The air quivered, as if in a heat-haze. The ground under my feet crumbled, forming waves of sand: the dunes of a desert, spreading to the horizon.

A fierce sun beat down. I raised the hood of my cloak. The stranger stood beside me, face in shadow.

I asked, my voice unsteady, "The river – is that happening now?"

Every few months, floods and storms caused devastation in countries around the world.

Instead of replying, my companion said, "I speak for the Signum."

Like a whispered chant, "Signum, Signum," spun, insistent, round my brain, haunting, lingering, fading.

"The Signum will save countless lives," said the stranger. "It is a machine constructed for that purpose. At first, in the early epoch, it was called 'A'Desh-lura'."

That name was in Arkha, the Domain's prehistoric language, which I knew quite well, even though it was much older than Latin or Doric.

I said tentatively, "A'Desh-lura? Does that mean 'Against a deluge'?" Whereas the Latin 'Signum' meant a sign – perhaps an omen.

"Yes, the machine will prevent the Great Flood," the stranger continued. "It carries the hopes of the world. We knew the powers of the Domain-Folk would wane over time. Your generation would not have the strength to turn back the tide. It was necessary for us to create a device that would, long after we were dead and gone, halt the melting of the ice and the rise of the oceans."

"Please follow me," my companion requested, walking away across the dunes. I had to hurry to keep up, the sand slipping under my feet.

We came to a palace in the desert – a hall of huge marble pillars. Covered with ornately carved patterns, they rose to a ceiling that glistened with mother-of-pearl. We went on through the rows of columns until walls surrounded us and then we entered a vault or windowless room.

But there was light here. Floating in the centre, a globe of white fire blazed like a small sun.

My companion said, "That is the Signum."

Around it, figures moved: exotic and intimidating people.

They were tall, sinewy, lithe, clothed in colourful silk robes, their arms and faces tattooed with geometrical designs, their long hair pinned with jewelled combs.

They circled the burning sphere. Several reached towards it, their outstretched hands glowing, cobweb-fine Energy cords spinning from their fingers to the fire. On touching the flames, the strands darkened. Black threads wriggled through the silver sun, coiling and spiralling, weaving themselves into the fabric, the molecules of the structure.

"You see how we built the device," said my companion. "Sadly, before we had finished our work, evil snaked amongst us."

The vivid scene dissolved into mist; the stranger reappeared as the ghostly, light-shrouded image.

It said in sombre tones, "A machine composed of so much concentrated power could have many uses. Conflict broke out, in the midst of which several of us, staunch friends, decided the Signum should be hidden away. It would be kept safe until humankind faced annihilation."

The stranger halted. I was about to ask uneasily what all this had to do with me, when the softly echoing voice spoke again.

"Unfortunately, the device fled from us all. It sent word by a devious method, confirming it would find a place of refuge. If it survived, it would emerge when the time of the Flood approached."

A moment's pause, and then the stranger went on. "That time approaches now but the Signum has not come forward. Yet it might still be found. An artefact, a small disc once controlled by the device, is transmitting my image to your mind, bringing this message. The artefact has acquired some information that may lead you to the Signum."

"Lead – lead *me* to the Signum?" I was shrill with astonishment. I gabbled, "But what on Earth –? Why –?"

"This is a matter of life and death, Natalie," said the stranger. "The machine must be tracked down. It may be testing us –"

"Tracked down?" I quavered.

"It must be found," the image persisted.

"Tell someone else!" I said, panicking. "Someone more capable. I'm too young – just nineteen! It's crazy to ask me –"

"No, you are suitable," the voice interrupted. "Your youth is an advantage: you have resilience and an enquiring mind. Educated to a high standard within the Domain, you also understand the wider world. Therefore you have been chosen to find the device that will save innumerable lives. The journey may be difficult, its ending unsure. Should you embark on this quest, you must be stealthy and wary. Merciless thieves will be on the prowl, some of them disguised –"

"Now hold on! Just wait a minute!"

But my tormentor was as stubborn as the tides. "The Signum will need you. It cannot function alone. It must receive a secret command before it begins the process for which it was made. That command will, at some stage, enter your mind; then no one, not even the Signum itself, will be able to read it or dig it out."

The stranger gestured towards me – "Look!"

I was lifting my hands; they were cupped, filled with golden light. It shone outward from a core like a brilliant gem.

As I stared at the little furnace, its sunny halo faded, leaving an object that was, in its way, just as mysterious.

In my palms lay a small, circular stone, a yellowish disc. Its surface was rough, its edges uneven, weathered, but I could make out the traces of what might be engraving: faint grooves across its pitted face.

"Keep the disc safe," I was told. "Carry it with you on your travels. I am its envoy and will speak with you again. This roundel has now divided; it has a twin, which has found its way to someone true of heart who will assist you."

I felt as though a cloak made of iron had been placed around my shoulders, weighing me down with unwanted responsibilities.

I said feebly, "You know, I really don't think that I'm –"

But I was instructed, "Sleep now. When you awake, the disc will begin to guide you."

Drowsiness swept over me. I felt like a misty phantom, falling through drifts onto a bed of cloud.

I woke up.

Woke in a cold sweat.

Appropriately, a storm was raging, and not just overhead – it seemed to surround the house. Thunder boomed like an explosion, lightning flared through the curtains, blinding me with silver, and a high wind battered the invisible outer wall and howled like an army of ghosts.