

Chapter 2. The Tower Between the Worlds

I looked up. Everything was silent and the fog was still swirling, but right in front of me the green door that I'd seen earlier was ajar, and the dog was going through it.

I got up. I wasn't hurt. I pushed the door open and followed the dog in, just in time to see it disappear up a stone spiral staircase.

I didn't really think about whether it was a good idea or not, or whether I was barging into somebody else's house. I just followed the dog. After all, it had been telling me to follow it. And it was good to get away from that fog. I started up the stairs, huge old slabs of stone, dirty and worn and dimly lit, going up and up, round and round, till I was giddy and didn't know which way I was facing or how high I was. It was bit spooky, but there was none of the sense of doom that I'd had at the Well. In fact I had loads of energy. I was bounding up the steps two at a time without even getting out of breath

And then at last there was another door, a plain, heavy wooden one this time, and the dog was sitting outside it, waiting for me. As I arrived, it barked and the door opened, and we stepped through.

It was a completely round room, with big windows on every side, and it was about the messiest place I'd ever seen, a bit like a junk shop, with objects scattered around the floor that looked like they'd come from all over the world. Some were really interesting, like drums, and bits of armour, and a ship in a bottle. Others pretty random, like piles of stones and shells and old birds' nests. A jackdaw was perched on a big old leather bound book on the window sill, cocking its head at me.

At the centre of the room an old man with a long white beard and bushy eyebrows was sitting behind a desk piled high with books and papers and weird glass instruments.

“Good morning!” he said cheerfully, looking up at me. “Welcome to the Tower between the Worlds. I've been waiting for you.”

He stood up and came over to me, peering at me through round glasses that made his eyes look big.

“I'm sorry,” I said, feeling like I'd barged in on him in his study. “I didn't mean to...”

“No, no,” he said quickly. “I've been expecting you. In a sense I brought you here, though she was too close for for comfort. Still, here you are now, and quite safe, I should think.”

I didn't know what he meant exactly, but there was something about the way the old man talked that made me feel okay. He had a Welsh accent for a start, which reminded me of my

Grandad. He had the same sort of twinkle in his eyes too. All the same, I'd never seen him before and I didn't have a clue what was going on.

He took off his glasses and smiled.

“You're probably wondering who I am. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Geronwy, and I am the Mage of Gara - a wizard, you might call me. And this is my dog, Wagger, and this is Jack - my jackdaw.”

The bird croaked and did a poo on the windowsill.

“A wizard?” I said. “But....”

I was going to say, there aren't such things. But then I wasn't so sure. He was wearing a sort of robe with weird designs on it, and with his long white beard he did *look* like a wizard. Besides, he lived in a round tower and he had a talking dog.

“Well,” said Geronwy, “not so much *a* wizard, as *the* wizard, at least as far as the town of Gara is concerned. My job is to look after the town, and I've been here – oh, I don't know how long any more. But I'm getting on a bit now, as you can see. I don't get out as much as I used to. I need some help, and not just from anybody, mind. I need *you*. That's why I've brought you up here.”

I was trying to take in what he was saying, but it still didn't make much sense.

“I don't understand...” I started.

“Of course you don't!” He interrupted. “How could you? You crossed over without anyone explaining anything. And then the Red Witch nearly got her clutches on you. But there we are! You are here now, and let's not be too worried about you got here. I have had my eye on you, because you are a special boy. One who can move between the worlds. One who can run.”

“I can't run,” I protested. “I'm useless at it. You've got the wrong person.”

“I don't think so,” Geronwy said quietly. “You *did* run just now, didn't you? You ran from the Shadow. And when the Red Witch was upon you – you moved.”

The Red Witch? What was he talking about? The woman in the car? I looked back at him, meeting his eyes. One of them was bright and fierce, the other was kind and crinkly. The kind eye smiled at me.

“Come on,” he said. “Enough sitting about. I'll show you. Come over here, See for yourself!”

He led me over to one of the big windows.

It was a great view. We were high over the town and I could see for miles, right up to the moors. There were still patches of fog by the river, but it was breaking up fast, turning back to a sunny day. I looked down, and the first thing I saw was Mum, a long way below me in the park, pushing Fiona on a swing. I was really pleased to see them. It made everything seem normal.

The old man was just behind me. He spoke softly, but insistently, like teachers do when it's

important

“What you see now is what you call the 'real world', because that is what you are used to. But there's another world too, running alongside ours, passing through it in places. And that is the world of Spirits. They are everywhere. All around us, all the time. Only in some places they are easier to see, or sense. Here in this tower you may see both worlds and their interchange.....”

As he said that I saw a sort of flicker in front of Fi at the swings. I stared at it, wondering what it was.

Geronwy looked where I was looking. He knew I'd spotted something.

“Blink!” he said, in a strange deep voice.

I blinked. That was all. And everything changed.

It was like looking through a telescope. Mum and Fiona were suddenly really close up. But it wasn't just that. Everything looked different. The playground, the houses, the other people seemed like they were projected, like slides, or maybe holograms. And behind them was this pulsating world of brightness and shadows. As I looked, figures began to take shape in the shadows. And that flicker that I'd seen in front of Fi was clear - a little demon, with a mischievous grin. It suddenly grabbed the swing and twisted it so that Fi fell off. She tumbled forwards onto the ground and started bellowing.

Mum rushed round and picked her up. The demon was laughing.

I was outraged.

“Hey! That thing! It pushed her off!”

Geronwy smiled.

“That little devil is always hanging round the playground, but he's no bother really, just a naughty child himself. Don't worry about your sister. She is fine. And you *saw*. You saw well. Now let us find out how far your vision will stretch. Look up now, up towards the moors.”

I was a bit worried about Fi, but I knew she'd be okay with Mum there. So I did what he said and looked up towards the moors again. But this time they didn't stay as a distant blue line. They seemed to come rushing in towards me, until I was staring straight into a rocky valley, really wild and beautiful. A stream fell in a series of waterfalls, and a thorn tree grew with its roots in the stream and an enormous bird's nest in its branches. Six big black birds sat around it, looking out down the valley.

“The ravens,” murmured Geronwy beside me.. “*Corwen, Hraeth, Branda, Raafi, Cigfran, Fren*. The Guardian Ravens of the High Moor. They move through both Worlds and owe no allegiance to either. But look behind them, at the rocks.”

The rocks. There was something there. I blinked again, and it all came closer and clearer. There was a dark patch that looked like a cave, and next it was a funny little man with red boots

and a yellow waistcoat, smoking a pipe. Just like a pixie in a picture book.

I never believed in pixies. They were just stories made up for tourists. I thought the old man was tricking me.

“I don't believe it!” I said, turning away. “There's no such things as pixies, everybody knows that.”

Geronwy raised an eyebrow.

“Do they indeed? Then so much the better because they won't be looking for them. But you saw what you saw. And what you saw was my good friend Billie Blin. He's waiting for you. Or rather he was. The Fair Folk don't do time in a straight line like we do, you see. They move around in it, like fish in a lake. But you were able to see across time as well as space. Remarkable!”

He sounded so sure, and when I looked at him I believed him. Maybe he *was* a wizard. And maybe there *was* another world like he said. Maybe all those old fairy stories weren't just made up after all. But what did it have to do with me?

“I don't get it,” I said. “You say you brought me up here, as if I'm special or something. But I'm not special at all.”

The old man's fierce eye glittered at me.

“Oh, but you are! Everybody is, of course, in a way. Everybody has talents that lie unseen, waiting for the right moment to bring them out. But *you* have the power to move between the worlds. Not because you deserved it or wanted it, mind. It just happened. While you've been ill the Cauldron of Inspiration has turned in you, and it won't turn back.”

“Cauldron of Inspiration?” I said. “What's that?”

He shook his head and gave me a half smile.

“You'll understand in time. Now listen! Because this is important. I need you, and the whole town needs you. There is a shadow growing in the Old Well. You know that already - a dark spirit such as has not been seen in the town of Gara for many centuries. It is spreading poison through the town, even now. I can cast it out. Of course I can. I am the Mage of Gara. That's what I'm here for. Only.....”

He stopped suddenly. He looked quite upset. He collapsed back into his chair, and passed his hand across his face.

“Only I need the Rebis.”

“The what?”

“The Rebis. The ancient stone of the Alchemysts – not really a stone, mind you, rather a powder made from the prime materials of the Earth. We have to have it. Only the Rebis has the power to cleanse the waters of this town.”

“Re-what?” I asked again.

“Rebis. Antimony of Sun and Moon. *'Gold of the Moon. Black diamond of the sun. Opposites turned in the dew of Ceridwen,'* in the old formula. Through the blending of opposites we harness the Universal Remedy. The Rebis is the Grand Elixir. It mends, it heals, it gives eternal life – or at least very long life – if you want that sort of thing. I can create it, but I must have the ingredients, and *you* must find them for me.”

He bent towards me

“Do you understand the importance of water, Kai? Like the blood in your veins it flows through the earth in channels big and small, on the surface and deep below the earth's skin, preserving us, keeping us alive. But poison can spread through water like a virus spreads in your blood. It is taking over the town now. You have felt it. Everyone feels it, though they don't know what it is. A disaffection, a disregard for others, disharmony, illness, personal greed. Families parting, friends falling out, no-one listening to any one else. One by one, the old shops are closing down. Soon there'll be nothing left but supermarkets and estate agents. And already they are pulling down the ancient walls of the old walkways to make a car park. Because the blood of the town is poisoned.”

He paused, gazing at me intently.

“So will you help me, Kai?”

I couldn't really answer. I kept thinking he must have got the wrong person.

“I don't know - what am I supposed to do?” I said weakly

“You will have to be brave. You will have to be cunning. And you will have to run. And you will fetch the ingredients for the Rebis: gold of the moon from the fairy halls; the sun's black star from the bottom of the sea; and more powerful than either, the dew of Ceridwen, the water of the magic fountain. Will you do that for me?”

“But I'm not like you think,” I protested. “I'm not brave and I'm not cunning, and I'm useless at running.”

Geronwy half closed his eyes, and a flicker of a smile crossed his face.

“You *could* be all those things,” he said softly. “I am offering you a mission, Kai. It is hard, but I wouldn't ask it if I didn't think you could do it. The cauldron of inspiration has turned and now it must fill. Will you help us to save the Old Well of Gara, and clear the Shadow from the town?”

“But I still don't know how,” I said.

“Don't worry about how. If you accept the mission, it will find you.”

He turned away. I just stood there for a bit, looking round the room. Wagger seemed to have gone to sleep under the desk, and Jack was perched high up in the rafters. Neither of them was taking any notice of me, and Geronwy put on his glasses and started leafing through a pile of

yellowing papers.

They were all waiting for me though. I had to say something.

I didn't know who the old man was. I didn't know if I had the powers he was talking about. I didn't know what had really happened at the Well. I didn't know if I was imagining it all. I didn't know much about anything.

But I did know one thing. I didn't want to go on being ill and lazy and lying at home doing nothing. Since I'd come through the green door I'd felt well and alive, and I wanted to stay like that. I knew I wasn't brave or strong or cunning, but I wanted to be. And maybe I could be, if I had the chance.

And another thing - there was something pretty bad in the Old Well. And I wanted to help. I really did. I wanted everything to be all right in my family, in the town...

"Yeah, okay," I said.

Wagger jumped up, tail wagging as if he was going for a walk. Jack dived down from the rafters and stood on the desk. Geronwy took off his glasses and smiled up mildly with his gentle eye.

"Good!" he said.

He stood up.

"Well, Kai, you'd better get home before your mother does, or she'll worry.... We'll meet again, you can count on that. And in the meantime, you can be sure I haven't forgotten about you. You might see Jack, or Wagger. They are my eyes and ears these days. Wagger will take you down"

The dog stretched and wagged its tail.

"One last thing," said Geronwy. "What did you see at the Well? What was it that made you cross over?"

"I...don't know," I said. "Nothing really – just a dead frog."

"A dead frog. Indeed! Well, goodbye Kai."

The door to the spiral staircase opened. Wagger stood beside it.

"Can I come back?" I asked.

"I should think so," he said vaguely, moving back to his desk. "When the time is right..."

It was sunny again in the street. Cars were moving normally, people were on the pavements. An ordinary day.

Wagger was beside me.

"All right," he grunted. "Off you go. Home."

He trotted away.

I turned round to look behind me. There was no green door in the wall, and no tower either. Only Mrs Cranch's sweetshop on one side and a pub on the other, and between them an empty wall. But the door had been there, just now. I was certain of it. I'd come out through it.

Everything was normal again. A bunch of people came out of the pub. Somebody laughed. Somebody shouted. Somebody went past on a bicycle, going the wrong way. I felt in my pocket and found the 50p still there, so I went into the shop.

Mrs Cranch was serving another customer.

"I hear they're going to put a new supermarket down at the Old Well," the customer was saying. "With a proper car park. The council's given permission. About time they did something with that area, if you ask me. It's got really run down."

"I think the Old Well's a bit special though, don't you?" said Mrs Cranch.

"Never go there myself," said the customer, and left.

Mrs Cranch turned to me.

"Hello young man." She smiled. She had a nice face, all grey hair and wrinkles. "What would you like?"

I pointed to a jar at random.

"50p's worth of those please."

She climbed on her stool and pulled down the jar. Puffing with the effort, she shook a few jellied fruits into a paper bag, weighed it and handed it to me.

"Do you know....?" I wanted to ask her if she knew about Geronwy, but I was embarrassed.

"I mean....I thought there was a door in the wall, just next your shop."

Mrs Cranch looked at me for a long time. Then she shook her head.

"A door? No, I don't believe there is now. I should think I'd know about it if there was a door next to my shop, wouldn't I?"

"I suppose you would," I said.

I thought about telling Mum about the wizard's tower, and the thing in the Old Well, but she wouldn't have believed me. She 'd have thought I was going mad on top of everything else, and called the doctor. Anyway, she was too stressed to tell things to. Fiona had been waking up in the nights and Dad was coming home really late from work, so he was tired too, and they often argued. I wondered if it was true what Geronwy had said, about the Old Well spreading poison.

Fi came home with a bruise on her leg and showed it off to me. She was really proud of it.

"How did you get it?" I asked. Although I knew.

“A little man did push me, “ said Fi in her baby voice.

“Fi, don't make up stories!” said Mum crossly. “You fell off.”

I decided not to say anything. There wasn't any point. Anyway, Mum was probably right. All those things were already just a memory, like a dream that didn't connect with anything real.. Maybe they hadn't happened at all.