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THE TWELVE STRANGE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Written by **Syd Moore**

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Syd Moore was a lecturer and a presenter on *Pulp*, the Channel 4 books programme, before becoming a writer. She is the author of the mystery novels *The Drowning Pool* and *Witch Hunt*. *The Twelve Strange Days of Christmas* is part of the Essex Witch Museum series, which includes *Strange Magic*, *Strange Sight*, *Strange Fascination* and *Strange Tombs*. She lives in Essex, where her novels are set.

THE TWELVE
STRANGE DAYS OF
CHRISTMAS

SYD MOORE

**POINT
BLANK**

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[definition] Strange /streɪn(d)ʒ/

Adjective: strange

1. Unusual or surprising; difficult to understand or explain.

Comparative adjective: stranger; *superlative adjective:* strangest

Synonyms: Odd, curious, peculiar, funny, bizarre, weird, uncanny, queer, unexpected, unfamiliar, abnormal, atypical, anomalous, different, out of the ordinary, out of the way, extraordinary, remarkable, puzzling, mystifying, mysterious, perplexing, baffling, unaccountable, inexplicable, incongruous, uncommon, irregular, singular, deviant, aberrant, freak, freakish, surreal, alien.

SEPTIMUS AND THE SHAMAN

‘Thank you, dear Samuel,’ said the old man as he took the glass of brandy. With customary reverence, he held it up to examine against the light of the fire roaring in the fireplace and smiled as something within it kindled a memory.

The young man, Sam, took his own liberal serving to the armchair opposite and peered over the top of the tumbler. His respect and affection for Septimus Strange was great. Often he found himself surprised by the old curator’s generosity of spirit. Many times he was impressed by his esoteric knowledge that was both extraordinarily expansive, some might even say supernaturally so, and also ever-expanding. Even in his ninth decade Septimus Strange displayed an intense curiosity about the world that had never been sated, nor gave any signs of becoming less urgent. His mind was energetic and appreciative and in conversation displayed a sprightly energy that bubbled and sparked away inside.

Perhaps that was why Sam had been rather taken aback when the old man’s mood had appeared to dampen and fall as they had left the conference they had been attending and made the long journey back to the Witch Museum.

He had grown thoughtful and reflective rather than chirpy and excited as was his usual manner after engaging in lively discussion with like-minded professionals.

‘I thought you might have enjoyed this afternoon’s session rather more than you did, Septimus,’ Sam ventured after the pair of them had consumed a good centimetre of the brandy liqueur.

The old man lifted his head. His lips had thinned over the years and, this evening, his shoulders were definitely too narrow for the suit he was wearing. He looked to Sam with distracted amusement and a smile that became full. ‘Enjoy it? Oh I did, dear boy, I did.’

‘What was it then?’ asked Sam. ‘I felt that you lost some of your customary effervescence, for which you are so renowned. It was when they produced that Icelandic headdress, wasn’t it? I saw a shadow pass over you.’ He paused and, to be clear, added, ‘Metaphorically speaking.’

‘Oh yes. Then? Did you? The artefact, I suppose, took me back a bit. Reminded me of something I was once told. A prediction of sorts.’

‘Did that upset you?’

Septimus frowned. ‘It made me think a little too long.’

‘Well,’ said Sam as he swirled his glass and smelled the thick, sweet fumes of the spirit, ‘I couldn’t have concentrated on anything else. I was completely blown away by the stitching of the leather, those runic symbols. Wonderful to touch something like that.’

Septimus did not react for a moment, so Sam continued. He had been enthralled with the artefact and wanted to

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voice the feeling and learn what his mentor thought. ‘Those teeth strung round the feathers. The crafting of the mask itself . . . Personally, I thought it was,’ he took a breath, ‘magnificent.’

Septimus turned in his chair to face Sam more directly. ‘Oh no. I agree with you, Sam, indeed I do. I would say it was an excellent piece, in fact. Did you see the looks and expressions of reverence on the faces of the other curators? They were rapt, so attentive and careful as they held the headdress like so.’ He rested his glass on the arm of his chair and held up the imaginary artefact. “Ohhhhhhhh, how different it is”, “aaaahh – the majesty”, and so on.’ He put down the invisible headdress on his lap and fetched back the brandy. ‘And yet. I wonder if such a thing had been found on British soil – would it have been treated with such awe and respect? Such veneration by academics? I think it would more likely be relegated to “folk history” and not worthy of much regard.’

Sam had heard sentiment like this before. ‘But we recognise that familiarity breeds contempt,’ he said at last. ‘And you know as well as I do, Sept, that our moon talismans, hag stones, and athames have generated as much admiration in Scandinavia as their headdresses and artefacts do here.’

The old man brought his head down to his chest as if chastised, then looked up suddenly. ‘Quite right, Sam. This is why I need you. Why your appearance in my life has been so thoroughly,’ he paused and sniffed the air, ‘symbiotic,’ he said, pleased his brain had supplied the correct adjective. ‘You keep me on the right path. That is, not the left. Nor the

right.’ Then he winked. ‘Sometimes when one reaches my age, it is all too easy for one’s gaze, one’s thoughts, to fall on what is not well with the world, rather than appreciate in it all that is true and fair.’

Sam laughed and nodded, feeling rather pleased. ‘Surely not,’ he said. ‘Though I understand what you mean.’

‘I know you do, dear Sam,’ the old man agreed.

The silence that unfurled between them was not awkward or discomfoting, but quite the opposite. The pair enjoyed it and refilled their glasses.

After a while Septimus looked into the fire and said, ‘Did I ever tell you about my encounter with an Icelandic shaman?’

The young man’s attention was brought swiftly to brook. ‘No, you did not! And now you cannot keep it to yourself.’

It was Septimus’s turn to rattle out a laugh. ‘Oh, it was many, many years ago,’ he said, and started, as the fire in the hearth spluttered and gave out a spark, which thankfully landed on the tiles and not the carpet. ‘I haven’t said your name yet,’ Septimus whispered to it.

Sam frowned: that was odd. He wasn’t sure whether to challenge the old man on it or to let it go. Was it a sign, he wondered? Septimus was getting on a bit after all. But before he could act on any impulse the owner of the Witch Museum withdrew his gaze and said, ‘I had received an assignment in Reykjavik. It was during the war. We had invaded Iceland then, you know.’

Sam met his friend’s gaze with brows hoisted high.

‘Oh yes, that was a thing,’ Septimus said, misjudging Sam’s countenance.

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‘I have a vague notion that that happened,’ said Sam, deciding the aside to the fire was an uncharacteristic expression of whimsy, most likely brought about by the warmth and the brandy. He dismissed his initial misgivings and took up the conversation again. ‘We invaded Iceland?’

Septimus nodded. ‘It was a strategic island. Important for the North Atlantic sea lanes. And very well laid out for naval bases and air bases and so on. Not many people seem to be aware of what the Brits did back then, but anyhow, I digress. As I said, I was instructed by Commander Fleet back at the bureau, to investigate a manifesting medium on tour in Reykjavik. The authorities at the time were alarmed by the man’s accuracy, although this particular fellow was rather a harbinger of doom, predicting, amongst other things, sea strikes and sinkings, great losses of life. Fleet himself was wondering where the precision came from, if we might be able to use it somehow. Certainly, he was of the idea that the chap’s latest warnings necessitated some tight investigation. So I was despatched by plane.

‘Reykjavik is a small city. When I arrived, I located my lodgings with ease. I was to board with a pleasant landlady and another British captain. Once oriented and settled, I learned that the celebrated clairvoyant was performing that very night. So I started work straight away.

‘I must tell you that I arrived at the theatre with an open mind. The medium seemed neat and well presented, though he had a stuttering delivery, which did not impress me. He also appeared to have some irritating manners, often putting his hand to his mouth and coughing. Yet every human being has

their own manner of dealing with stage nerves. Or perhaps, I thought, he was suffering with a cold. I took notes as he went through the usual manifestation techniques.’ Septimus looked at Sam and winced. ‘Cheesecloth was produced, I’m pretty sure. Regurgitated from here.’ He tapped his tummy. ‘I could smell stomach acids. The lights in the auditorium had been subdued and there was some kind of fluorescence in the cloth that gave off a ghastly glow. Of course, the manifestation was supposed to be the spirit of one ancient guildsman of Reykjavik who had returned to warn the population of fresh impending disaster, which again I recorded. The prediction was vague, involving water and lead. Nothing that could be pinned down, but I’m sure the theatrics helped convince a proportion of those in attendance that they were in the presence of a skilled necromancer. After the “channelling” of his phantom guide, the medium addressed several members of the audience, attesting that he was receiving messages from various departed friends and family who had passed over to the spirit world. He did appear to score high, with some accuracy on at least sixty per cent of his attempts, which was rather more than I was used to seeing. The audience lapped this up with cries of astonishment and sometimes tears. I found that the clairvoyant was sympathetic and kind to those with whom he spoke and I did, at one point, wonder if there was really any harm in any of it. But then remembered my mission and, as the evening panned out, it became clear to me that the man had *a relationship* with the venue holders. Reykjavik was not as densely populated as many of our British cities. The organisers were local people who appeared

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to be acquainted with many of their audience members. I have no doubt that, because there was a ticket price and a profit to be made, both parties – owners and performer – were to benefit from an exchange of information. Towards the end, as some kind of finale, the medium was able to elicit very positive responses from one of the members who broke down and wept at the message from his late brother. Uncanny accuracy was contained in the messages addressed to him. I later discovered from the woman sitting next to me that he lived next door to the venue's owners.'

'Usually the way,' said Sam.

Septimus nodded. 'But that is not the matter. The matter comes later. When the performance ended, I took my hat and coat and made to get out before the rush of the audience. As I left the theatre I found a woman waiting for me in the shadows. She did not speak but handed me a card.'

Sam shifted himself up in his seat. 'Oh yes?'

'On that card was written – "Not all in Iceland is false. If you wish to see truth meet me at eight o'clock tomorrow night. Come alone."'

'Intriguing,' said Sam and looked at the old man closely. His vigour was returning – the fire in the hearth jumped about his eyes as he returned to his memory.

'Indeed.'

'Of course you went?'

'I did. But it was not an immediate resolution. One must be careful how one treads in an occupied territory.'

Septimus noted the rise of his younger friend's eye and explained. 'It could have been a trap.'

‘Ah yes, of course.’

‘And I had leads to follow up with regard to the neighbour.’

‘Quite.’

‘But at eight o’clock the following night I was to be found outside the theatre in the darkened streets of Reykjavik.’

Sam looked on, committing the details to memory. He had a feeling things were about to get even more interesting.

‘It’s funny,’ said Septimus to his brandy glass. ‘My memory of the consequent incident is as clear as a bell, but for the life of me I can barely recall what the woman who met me looked like. It’s almost as if her face was slippery. I can only see a blur and have a sense that, although she was certainly far from good-looking, she was not exactly ugly.’

Sam suppressed a smile at the loose frankness of his older friend. Despite Septimus’s elastic soul, his tolerance and empathy for the human species, at times the years between them betrayed contrasting attitudes shaded by different upbringings.

‘It may have had something to do with the contents of the peace pipe I smoked,’ Septimus speculated.

Again, Sam started. The old man was always surprising him.

Septimus continued. ‘There was most certainly an amount of hallucinogen, a mind-altering compound, in there. Fly agaric most likely. Sami shamans often used them as a trigger in their cross-dimensional journeys.’ He saw Sam frown and added a pacifier. ‘Rituals.’ Then in an undertone he cast his eyes to the walls of the museum and, as if he were speaking to some invisible presence within them, muttered, ‘The boy has

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a keen mind, but there are some ideas he's not yet prepped for. The time will come of course. Never fear.'

Sam could not conceal fresh concern at the deviant tangent that their conversation had just sprung. Depression ballooned in his stomach. He hoped to God that the old boy's asides to the walls and hearth were no indication of brain decay.

'But I get ahead of myself,' said Septimus. Almost as if he had heard Sam's thoughts, his words became sharper, well-enunciated, focused. 'The woman – I have in my mind that her name was Hekla, though I am not entirely sure. But let us call her Hekla, to ease the telling of the tale. Her real name is not important. Hekla was of average beauty though heavy-browed. She spoke little as we drove out of Reykjavik into the flat rocky scrubs of the island. As we approached our destination, she turned off the headlights and slowed the car to a crawl.

'Out the windows I could see a mountain rising on the horizon. I expected us to take one of the forks in the roads that veered round to circle the base. And yet, that is not the path we followed. We took the road that led towards the coast, but soon turned off onto a mud track. I could feel from the bumps and lurches that there was no smoothness underneath the wheels. This was a track little travelled. And, I must confide, Sam my boy, I did wonder if I had been unwise to keep this excursion to myself. I had left no word with my landlady, nor the captain, of where I might be found, so should I come to grief, no one would know. See, I had not yet met my wife at this point, and, as a bachelor with no

dependants, I was accustomed to taking care of no one but myself. And, although I was no youth, my heart was packed tight with ideas of valour, noble discovery, and the certain integrity of intuition.'

In his chair Sam nodded. He knew what Septimus meant, though trust in his own intuition was not something he had yet mastered.

'So,' Septimus continued. 'Second thoughts. Presently Hekla stopped the car. I could not see why we might have come here to the base of the little mountain. We got out. Hekla pointed upwards to the summit and made off. Again, I wondered if this was the right course of action, but with little else to do and no access to Hekla's car keys, I was faced with no other choice. I followed her and we began our ascent.

'As we scaled the dusty boulders that lined the sides, I humorously voiced the opinion that if I had known we were to be rock climbing I would not have worn my best brogues. Hekla apologised but reassured me that my sartorial sacrifice would be worth what I was to find when we reached our final destination.

'It was an exerting climb. About halfway up, Hekla began to move sideways, her hands gripping onto the rocks that protruded from the cliff. As I scrambled after her, I saw that the rear side of the mountain, hidden from the road, had fallen away, leaving something of a hollow there.

'The rocks, at this point, became smaller and less fixed and we had to slow down to ensure we didn't lose our footing. Gradually I realised this was not a mountain we were making our way across, but a volcano. Extinct, I hoped, or certainly

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dormant. Though the air was cold, crisping our breath, the rocks underneath our hands were not.

‘Hekla pointed down to the crater. I could see pricks of light flickering there. We descended, stumbling over black rocks and boulders, and as we grew closer, I saw that they were little bonfires. It did not become clear until we had reached the bottom of the crater, a kind of plateau, that they were arranged to form a circle. A circle that was pierced by a dark, murky crack. As soon as I saw it, I had the impulse to run to its dark yawn, to crouch down and reassure myself there was no dancing red larva beneath it, but Hekla steered me away to a shelter fashioned from canvas and draped with moss and furs. The trappings must have had the effect of camouflaging it for I had not seen it on our descent.

‘She rustled the flap and told me to wait, then disappeared inside.

‘I was happy to study my surroundings. There was much to take in about this place Hekla had brought me to: the craggy lip of the crater in silhouette against the luminous galactic dust of the Milky Way. The primal hardness of the black rocks – larva spat once from the earth’s core and then hardened into solidity by Old Man Time – these black rocks, under the moonshine, took on a lunar cast. I had never been anywhere like it before. It was,’ he paused and let his smile float skywards, ‘. . . it was marvellous.’

Sam discerned that his friend was moved and tried hard to peer into his world and imagine what he was describing.

‘It is possible, of course,’ Septimus continued, ‘that the imposing surroundings had altered my state of consciousness.

Elevated it. And that perhaps the darkness, the sensory deprivation, had caused other senses to overcompensate. For sure, I cannot say. But soon I was roused from my deep contemplation by Hekla who bade me enter the shelter.

‘Inside, it seemed more cave than tepee. Full of smoke and odours of herbs. There was another fire burning in a stone hearth at its centre. Sitting around it, several natives were chanting and singing in low, softened voices, some old song. I was obliged to disrobe and don something that resembled more of a leather cloak. It was fur-lined and warm, which was a relief, as although I had not removed my trousers and vest, Hekla had insisted on taking my coat, jacket and shirt. Outside it was not warm.

‘I was moved to a vacant space in the circle and instructed to sit down, then, as the chanting increased, a peace-pipe was passed around. I did not smoke at the time, but felt that to refuse such an offering would constitute bad manners, and for sure I was not only a stranger in their midst, but also an uninvited British invader. I accepted the pipe with respect and, much to the amusement of the natives gathered there, managed to take down a few spluttering lungfuls before it was passed on.

‘By and by, I noted a change in my perceptions. The colours in the tent grew more intense. I became impressed by a sense of drama, as if we were all gathered to await a special guest. I had the notion that I was not in the company of human beings but visiting guardians of some ancient earth secret, who had, in a moment of extreme benevolence, allowed me access. I could not see Hekla but I was filled with

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a sense of gratitude for her note, for bringing me to witness, to experience, this most sacred of rites.

‘Then suddenly the chanting stopped. Everyone got to their feet. I was pulled up then led out of the tent and round into the circle of fires.

‘There, in the middle, was another fire I had not seen before and which had only just been lit. Behind it, cross-legged, sat an old, old man, who had not been in the tent. He was dressed in shaman’s robes, feathers had been plaited into his hair and his face was decorated with paint. I think he was not native but may have come from Finland. Perhaps one of the Sami. A travelling shaman. Displaced from his land. Many were.’ Septimus looked into his brandy as the fire danced through it. ‘I was taken to him and presented. As I bowed, an understanding seemed to pass over his eyes and he invited me to take a place opposite him, the other side of his fire.

‘Of course, I accepted and sat down watching the tiny flames lick at the wood and coal. Above them the air warped and through the sparks and smoke that rose, I was drawn to the shaman’s dark eyes. They appeared to me, in that state, full of infinite wisdom. The wise man’s leathery skin, was tight and fast and tanned over eons by exposure to and intercourse with the natural world. And again, I had the impression of vast arcane knowledge and, paradoxically you might think, an idea of great sophistication. It was humbling. I felt gauche within myself. I think the shaman realised these feelings of mine for he directed one of the women to bring me a drum.

‘When I took it into my arms, I felt a pang of excitement and an exquisite tremble of belonging.

‘There were ten in the outer circle now, positioned between the bonfires. My eyes had adjusted: I could see that they came from different places. A couple were blonde, classically Nordic, others were graced with olive skin, more yet were pale-eyed and red-haired. At a signal given by the shaman, they all instantly began to move as one and together in a unity of motion started to beat their drums. Slow at first. Bang, bang, bang.’ Septimus held the palm of his hand rigid and struck his lap. ‘Like so. A tight, short sound. Powerful.

‘The shaman spoke to me, some words in a language I did not understand, but I had the idea he was instructing me to copy his rhythm, which was slightly faster than the rest. So I moved my hands to the skin and began to beat it. By increments the rhythm sped up. Now, along with the shaman, there were twelve of us there in that circle drumming. All of us joined in a synchronous beating out of a most hallowed rhythm.’

‘What was the drum like?’ Sam asked, unable to stopper his mouth. He was curious as to the ritual that his friend was describing and craved more detail.

‘Yes,’ said Septimus. ‘You’ve got it. It was a Noaidi rune drum. A replica of which we have downstairs in the international section. Very good. Well spotted, Samuel. Commander Fleet had the likeness made when I recounted the incident. He later gave me the copy, after he had acquired an original himself. The drum I beat was fashioned from wood and, I think, calf skin. A number of symbols had been painted

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across the membrane – a sun, a man with antlers, lines representing people, animals, landscapes, spirits and gods. They were not unlike some of the hieroglyphs to be found on Doctor John Dee’s disc, although those represented Dee’s language of the angels and the symbology of the rune drum signifies meaning of another kind.’

Sam nodded, curiosity sated, and Septimus returned to his tale. ‘The shaman beat the drum. As I said, the rhythm was old, captivating, like the sound of heartbeats, the pulse of life. I could see the shaman’s eyes closing, that he was going into a trance and at the same time I too could feel myself following. I continued to drum, my body seeming to operate by itself, almost on autopilot. The fire began to crackle and roar as the shaman recited words, intoning them like a Latin verse. I felt my spirit grow sharp, and just then as I breathed in it seemed that time slowed.

‘The moment lengthened.

‘Everything stilled.

‘The universe swirled and eased its constant motion.

‘I was conscious of sitting under the umbrella of night and felt the gaze of the moon on my cheeks, the firmness of the earth beneath me, the vibration of its low heartbeat thrumming through me. My ears detected a soft murmur, as if the unseen world was stirring and becoming visible. I became aware of everything living around me. Life, you see, life.’

Septimus cleared his throat, an unconscious action which betrayed the physical changes in his body that the remembrance had brought about. ‘And these sensations,’ he went

on, his voice trembling, ‘they clashed and joined together, a confluence. As one, even stronger than they had been before. A united force. And I felt this *force* reach into the very fabric of my living being and twist and pluck out a thread of a feeling, an impulse so often buried in modern man. But a sensitivity that is there, that still exists, that continues despite the onslaught of technological progress, despite the clamour of the modern world, despite the de-sensitisation, the layering of logic and social mores and expectation. And this sensitivity, this *untwisted* response, my dear friend, came to the fore. It made me acknowledge my place, my identity in the vastness of the cosmos, and understand the great force, the immensity and wonder of existence.’

Sam watched the old man’s features shine, as if animated by a burning sun within.

‘It is a thing to feel it,’ he said, shaking his head. Though he was not sad: on his lips played a smile. ‘And if one feels it and does not suppress it, then one cannot prevent oneself from opening further. And if one is thus open, then a two-way exchange may begin. So brief, so wondrous, so rare. “Wordless, notion-less communication with the universe” is what I later scribbled in my notes.’

He sat back and tapped his glass. Sam wondered if he was going to give up his narration and instead take his mind back to that moment and enclose himself within its richness once more.

He wouldn’t have blamed him. The mere description, he was aware, had unleashed a response inside his own self. And, as he sat by the fire in Septimus’s lounge, he became aware

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of a feeling at the back of his head, an itch or a notion or perhaps an ‘understanding’, that some of the exhibits beneath him in the Witch Museum might be moving, vibrating, responding to the energy being created here like a séance, singing to him in a silent, collective voice, a hymn.

‘I gave into the feeling,’ Septimus said at length. ‘I closed my eyes and yet continued to be sentient of everything around me – the movement of the stars above, at particle level – turning, spinning, the swirl of a mote of dust in the horsehead nebula, dancing, pulsing. And I could *feel* everything too. As I breathed in I detected the temperature of the air that pushed into my lungs and sank through the membranes into my blood, oxygenating it.

‘And as I was caught in that long deliberate moment, I heard the shaman call out. The words were indistinct, blurred. Something like “Aka” or “Akka” or “Barka”.

‘The sound prompted me to open my eyes. As I did, the drumming stopped. Time slowed to a point, then froze. Everyone in the circle, cross-legged and sweating, paused in their banging of the drums, hands held high, as still as statues. The stars ceased their blinking. The earth stopped its spinning.

‘I became aware of a spray of red liquid emerging slowly from the crevice beside us. I could not move my head to it for I too was frozen in the moment. But the liquid, I saw out of the corner of my eye, dazzling gold, bubbling red, billowed in mid-air, and swirled into a foamy form. It was not party to the laws of time or gravity or anything else as shallow and base. Though I could not see it with clarity I knew, if I were

to look, the most ferocious set of features would stare back at me. And so I tried not to meet its gaze, but to lower my eyes in supplication to this fiery dragon-like creature, fashioned from larva and flame.

‘I fastened my eyes on the shaman, whom I could see moving fractionally, his hair, trapped in the lengthening of time, quivered languidly as it responded to the fluctuation of his hands on the drum.

‘And then I saw behind him another man standing. Another shaman, identical in every way to the one sitting across the fire from me, though incandescent, transparent. He took a step forward and passed through the solid form of the shaman on the ground, and I knew suddenly that I was seeing the wise man’s spirit body.

‘As clear as I see you now,’ said Septimus. ‘And it – he – turned and gestured to the unfurling matter that was tossing and rearing from the crack in the ground.

‘In the next minute, I heard his voice in my head. “The spirit of the fire has words for you,” he said. “A warning.”

‘There was little else I could do but wait for what was to come.

‘There was more movement by the crack, then I heard the words, “He, who you see, is not what he be. The mark of your foe is upon him.” And immediately I was caught by an image of the man I had inspected the night before. My mind had summoned it so clearly that I had the sense that I was not there, right then, within the mountainside crater, but had been drawn away through the air, to float about the form of the clairvoyant on stage at the theatre. And I experienced the

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very strange feeling that I was levitating around him unseen, listening to the squeak of his skin as pinpricks of sweat transcended through his pores. I peered into his eyes and saw the black fibres of his irises dilate and expand with fear. I felt the motion of the air as his hand disturbed it, flying to cover his mouth as his tongue spasmed and crinkled to adopt a lisp and cover the Germanic consonants creeping into his speech. And, of course, it came to me right then that indeed he was a spy. And as soon as that recognition flared, the image disappeared. The air tensed and flexed. Time popped and burst. The fire between myself and the shaman blazed up, the drummers recommenced their noisy banging, the shaman's hair moved again.

'I blinked hard, and when I next opened my eyes, the shaman was shaking me. The fire was long since gone. Only ashes and cinders. Around us was darkness and silence. We were alone but for Hekla.

'I was disoriented and began to collect myself. The shaman was saying something insistent. He had thrown rune stones on the earth and was pointing to one. I tried to focus but my vision was still rather odd, certainly blurred.

'He repeated his words. This time I could not understand his meaning. It was Hekla who translated: "There are more warnings." She pointed to a stone which I now began to see was carved with a particular forking runic symbol. "You must take care of your women. They will die in violence," Hekla told me.'

In his chair Sam gasped and shivered. For once, he didn't know what to say.

“But,” she pointed to a rune, “there will be one, who will come.” The shaman spoke to her in a low voice. “Synthesis,” she translated. “One will come who will show. She will come. She will go.”

Septimus checked Sam. ‘I wasn’t sure what he meant then of course. But I knew it frightened me. All of it. And in fact, I believe the shock of what he said, combined with the lack of heat contrived to bring about something of a fainting fit. For I remember struggling to my feet and then nothing more.’

‘Nothing at all?’ asked Sam.

‘When I came round, I was wrapped in blankets in the back of Hekla’s car. I had a headache and a dry mouth and felt like I had gone two rounds in the ring with Raging Bull. When we reached my lodgings, Hekla conversed with my landlady and I was put straight to bed and nursed over the next two days with lots of meat broth.’

‘Oh,’ said Sam. ‘And that was that?’

‘Well, not quite. When I had fully recovered, I organised a secure line with the commander. At my request the alleged medium was taken into custody and interrogated. He did not have enough stamina to resist for long and, sure enough, as my vision revealed, he later confessed to being a German plant.’

‘Interesting,’ said Sam and ruminated over the implications. ‘And what say you of that? Your vision?’

‘There are two or three possibilities, but I prefer the idea that the amplification of my senses resulted in my concentration fastening on a point and inspecting it more closely

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than I had done before. The medium was, after all, the reason I had been sent there in the first place.'

Sam looked down as he asked, 'And what of the, er, prophecies?'

'Dear boy, my daughter, it is true, died in a tragic and awful manner, but no one knows what became of my wife. I wondered . . .' but he did not complete his sentence.

Though eager to hear what the old man wondered, Sam was not going to press him now. He watched Septimus's forehead writhe with creases as he wrestled with dark emotions. Losing a daughter in an accident was awful, the worst. A wife disappearing into thin air, well, it was not worth thinking about. Sam couldn't imagine the anguish his friend had experienced and was suddenly possessed by the urge to wrest him from the contemplation of his life's appalling tragedies. 'I see,' he said to move Septimus on. 'But what of the demons – the fire spirit that you saw?'

His colleague's face came up. 'Now of that I'm not sure. There is a common understanding amongst those who dabble in such things that if one is able to discover the true name of a demon or elemental or such, then one is empowered to call it up and draw upon its energy.'

'So you think there is something in it?' Sam pressed on, considering whether Septimus might offer up a crystal of truth, a reason that he could hold up to his own internal light and marvel at. 'Do you actually think there was?'

'It is an experience that has stayed with me, over the years, for sure.'

‘Then we should write it up. Display your story beside the Noaidi drum.’

In his chair, Septimus chuckled. ‘I don’t think so, dear boy.’

‘No? Why not? Ah, military secrets.’

Septimus straightened his back and leaned towards his friend. ‘Secrets indeed!’ And much to Sam’s surprise, he gave a little laugh. ‘I’ll say to you what Commander Fleet advised me.’

‘Yes? What’s that?’ Sam leaned in, all ears, waiting for pearls of wisdom to fall.

‘I’d keep quiet on this one, Strange, if I were you. Don’t want the world knowing you were stoned. I’d hazard it was the drugs.’

‘The drugs?’ said Sam, hugely disappointed.

‘That’s right,’ Septimus nodded but there was a glimmer in his eyes.

‘And do you think that?’ Sam persisted. ‘That it was the drugs?’

But Septimus just smiled and finished his drink. ‘My dear, that would be telling. There are some things you have to find out for yourself. Or else what’s the point of the journey?’