
Opening Extract from...

Hyddenworld: Spring

Written by William Horwood

Published by Pan Books

1

The Rider and Her Quest

A few moments before dawn on the first day of Spring the White Horse and its rider came out of the darkness of winter and paused awhile on a hill near Brum in Englalond.

Wraiths of cold mist lingered in the hollows and ditches nearby, stirring with the horse's hoofs. Its rider was female and nothing much to look at, being barely more than a wraith herself.

Her papery face was wrinkled, her hands and fingers crooked, her eyes rheumy, her white hair thin and her body bent with long centuries of journeying. As she was too old to dismount in comfort the White Horse dropped to its knees to let her down. Afterwards she clung to its reins for support.

Around her neck she wore a disc of gold. It was worn and battered and its four main settings were all now empty of stones. They had represented the seasons – one for Spring, a second for Summer, the third for Autumn and the last for Winter – but time had loosened them and they had been lost.

The rider's name was Imbolc, which in the old language means Spring. She stood bowed now, the White Horse protective over her as, with mixed emotions, she remembered her last days in the place where she now stood.

This was Waseley Hill, where the metal-smith Beornamund, a Mercian CraftLord and maker of objects of power and majesty, had kept his forge fifteen hundred years before. In those days Imbolc was

a mortal, beautiful of form and spirit and loved by Beornamund. But their love was cut tragically short. On the day of their betrothal Imbolc was killed by a devastating flood caused by an argument among the selfish gods of the sky. He decided to wreak revenge upon them by making a flawless sphere of metal and glass of supernatural power, which he hurled into the heavens among them.

The gods laughed at his mortal pride. Only when the sphere began to draw to itself the fires of the Universe and the colours of Earth's seasons did they stop their squabbling and see the danger to mortal- and immortal-kind. They united to destroy it, doing their work so well that only four small fragments of the sphere, seemingly of no consequence, fell back to Earth. Returning to their own concerns they did not see something Beornamund saw, that each piece that fell was an exquisite gem which held fast to itself the light and power of one of the seasons. He recovered three of the gems easily enough but the most important of them, the gem of Spring, he could not find.

Angry still, he warned the gods that if ever the four gems were reunited then his original sphere would re-form itself more powerfully than before and the gods and their universe be threatened once again. He made a pendant disc of gold to hold the three he had found, leaving an empty place for the gem of Spring in case it came to light one day.

But the impulse of youth often gives way to wisdom and it was so with Beornamund. He grew ashamed of having challenged the gods and put the Universe at risk. From that time on he dedicated his life to making objects in celebration of Imbolc's beauty and their great love. So extraordinary were his skills, so deep his understanding of the nature of universal life, that when he died the gods offered to make him an immortal.

But because he loved Imbolc still, he told them he would only agree if they did the same for her, whose spirit had been an unhappy wanderer across the Earth since the day of her untimely death.

The gods talked secretly among themselves about his request and set a condition that must be satisfied if it was to be granted.

'Before you are reunited with Imbolc she must complete a task for us. The Earth is in need of a Peace-Weaver to heal the strife between

the mortals and repair the ills they cause the Earth. Let her ride the White Horse until the day comes . . .'

Wise Beornamund saw through their trickery and understood that they still wished to punish him for what he had done when he was young. He knew well that mortal strife is born of such greed and desire for plunder that it reigns eternal. He therefore feared that she could never complete her task and be free to return to him.

The gods shrugged and said, 'Well then, give her the pendant you made in defiance of us so many years ago, proud Beornamund. When its last gem, that of Winter, finally loosens and falls to Earth we will accept that she has truly lived through all the seasons of her life, one as a human, the last three in immortal time. Then, like you, she will have gained the wisdom to be immortal. But . . .'

Beornamund frowned, suspecting another trick.

'. . . but before she returns to you she must find her true successor, her sister, the Shield Maiden. For by then the greedy mortals will have need of someone more fearsome than a Peace-Weaver. And . . .'

Beornamund's frown deepened.

'. . . and while she's at it,' they added lightly, 'let her use mortal help to find what mortal made: the gem of Spring. We are curious to know where it has hidden itself all these years! Do that successfully and *then* can she finally return!'

He thought for a few moments and finally smiled, for he saw that they had overlooked something. The gods had asked merely that the gem be found, not brought to them. He knew very well that no mortal would be satisfied with a single gem, even if it was that of Spring. Once started on such a quest they would not stop until they found the others, which had been scattered across the Earth during Imbolc's journey down the centuries. Who could say with whom the power would lie if the day ever came when all the gems were united once more? Neither the gods nor himself, Beornamund decided. Which seemed just.

'Let it be so!' he said. 'There is the wyrd of destiny in all things and there will be in this.'

With that conclusion the gods also seemed satisfied.

*

So now Imbolc stood on the hill near Brum where Beornamund once had his forge, with the gem of Winter finally gone and her last quest now before her – to find the Shield Maiden and the gem of Spring. She had no doubt that in finding one the other would be found as well.

She leaned against the White Horse pondering these things and fearing that she was too old now for much journeying and that her energies were all but gone. Then she remembered advice she had had from the wise woman mortals call Modor. She had helped Imbolc in her early years as Peace-Weaver and been a close friend ever since. She often said, 'We can do nothing without the help of others for we are all one with the Earth and the Universe.'

Imbolc looked about and guessed that the White Horse had brought her to Waseley Hill for a reason. She reached a hand into the swirling mists which formed and re-formed about her and she sensed that mortal help was very close at hand and that the Modor was thinking of her too, far distant though she was. She relaxed and let go the reins, stronger now. What would be, would be.

The mist began to clear and the White Horse moved across the breaking light of dawn to protect Imbolc's old eyes from the rising sun, as her final quest began.

2
Bedwyn Stort

Three hydden and a half – the half being a thin, gawky, fair-haired boy of eleven – lay huddled and asleep in one of the ditches not far below where Imbolc stood.

One was Brief, Master Scrivener of Brum and the most eminent archivist of his age. He was tall for a hydden, nearly three feet high, and was wrapped in a thick, grubby red cloak with the black woollen cap of a scholar on his head to keep him warm.

Next to him lay the stocky well-made figure of Mister Pike who, at thirty years, was a good many years younger than Brief. He was a staverman: a hydden trained in the military arts, and his role just then was to protect Brief against those who might wish to harm him and his own occasional folly in venturing where he should not go. Pike's heavy ironclad, a stave hooped at either end with cast-iron, lay beside him.

Further on still in this muddy abode was Barklice, one of the city's most renowned verderers, whose ancient role involved travelling about Brum and its environs dealing with matters of dispute and litigation and soothing the troubled waters and sometimes intemperate spirits of different hydden communities thereabout.

As such, and as a by-product of his demanding work, he was not only one of the most experienced route-finders alive in Englalond but also spare of build, thin of face and free of spirit.

All were dressed in trews and jerkins, their shoes home-made, the uppers of leather and the black soles of the best material available to them: pieces of tread taken from the discarded car tyres of humans.

None of these three had wyfkin or living family, which was why they had chosen each other's company to trek out of the city the evening before to welcome the coming of Spring with story and chatter, shared jokes at themselves and the world at large, a few simple rituals that went to the deep core of their faith in Mother Earth. More deeply still they were worshippers of the Mirror-of-All in whose vast reflection they believed all mortals, hydden and human alike, had their reality and being.

To hydden such as these, the first day of Spring was a very different thing than that which humans usually celebrate. For humans live mainly in cities and homes which isolate them from the elements. Which means that by the time humans recognize that Spring is in the air Spring is in fact already well begun.

Hydden are closer to the Earth and know that the loveliest of seasons starts much earlier than March or April. It arrives with the first stirrings in the cold ground, and certain yawnings and scratchings in deep burrows, occasional glimmerings of softer light through clouds still bleak with winter chill and in the new-found life and joy of the rilling of the streams that comes with the thawing of winter snow and late January rain.

No one can say with certainty at what hour or day Spring actually begins, but in the northern part of the Hyddenworld the first day of Spring is arbitrarily set at February 1st, using the human calendar, and that was why despite the cold, dank weather Master Brief and his friends had made the trek south-west out of Brum to Waseley Hill to welcome the season in with a warm brew and open fire. The mead had been strong and they snored still.

The fourth among their number, the 'half' as Brief sometimes called him, though he was tall for his age, was his assistant Bedwyn Stort. He lay separately from the others wrapped tight in a discarded black plastic refuse sack – a logical if eccentric protection from the damp. He looked as he was, a restless sleeper, and he never imbibed. One foot, shoeless, had forced itself out of the bag on one side, the other had twisted and stuck uncomfortably into one of its corners.

An arm, ending in a freckled hand, had thrown itself up the side of the ditch as if attempting to escape his body. The other hand was

clasped tight over the face and eyes to protect them from the dawning light.

But to no avail.

Fingers parted, an eye opened and then closed again before the hand moved away altogether and Stort slowly opened his eyes and peered with such curious intensity that it was as if he was not sure where he was or even who he was.

His nose, which was long, sniffled at the air and as he looked at the mist swirling just above it, and over his sleeping companions, his expression changed to one of surprise, even astonishment.

He sat up and disentangled himself from the bag to reveal his normal garb, which was a suit of Harris tweed, made by himself to his own design, which had so many bulging pockets of different shapes and sizes that it was impossible to work out where one began and another ended.

It was the mist that puzzled him.

'Strange,' he murmured, 'it's moving as if stirred, which means that something has stirred it, something big.'

He heard the snorting of a horse.

'A horse,' he told himself aloud, which was how he often worked things out, 'but no ordinary horse. *No ordinary horse!*'

He glanced at his companions, saw they were fast asleep and heaved himself out of the ditch onto the grass above, where he stood quite still, his tousled head with its protruding ears to one side, listening.

'Very weird,' he told himself, adding with playful but serious irony, '*wyrd* indeed!'

For 'wyrd' is what humans sometimes call fate or destiny. But for the hydden, wyrd is a matter of choice rather than inevitability and they know that to make the choice may change a life for ever. So wyrd was to be taken seriously.

Stort hesitated only briefly before, without a thought for his personal safety, he began striding up the hill into the mist. For even at eleven Bedwyn Stort's scientific curiosity and quest for answers ran far ahead of any danger his actions might attract.