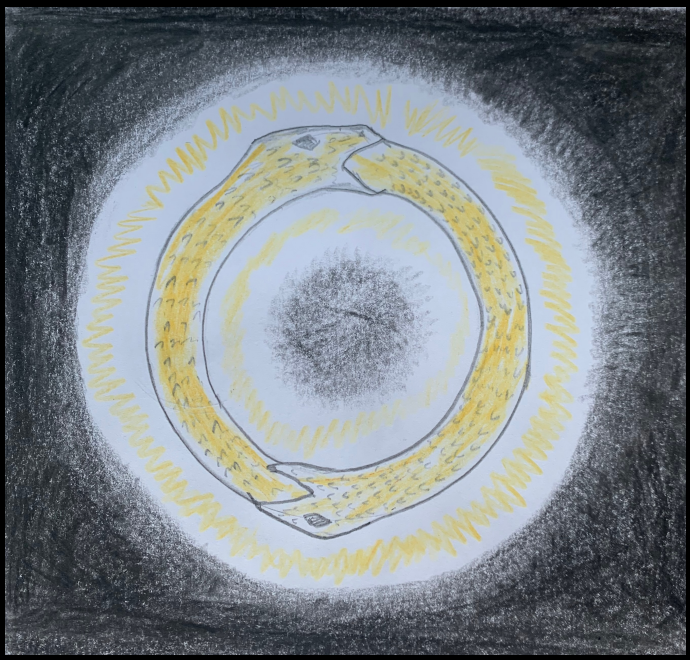
THE KING OF ANNWN



Lorna Smithers

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First published 2024.

For the King of Annwn.
For all who walk Annuvian paths
For all who have crawled
out of the Abyss.

‘In Annwn, in the deep, in the depth’
~ Cynddelw

‘In Annwn below the earth…
there is one who knows
what sadness
is better than joy’
~ Taliesin

CONTENTS

Fragments of a Lost Mythos

In the Beginning

I In the Deep

The Abyss
The Dragon Mother
Nodens and the Deep
The Battle of the Dragons
The Heart of Annwn

II The Boy in the Serpent Skins

The Boy in the Serpent Skins
The Creation of the World
The King of Bones
The Deep Sea Giants
The Kingdom of Annwn

III Vindos the Hunter

The Womb of Anrhuna
The Peace of the Giants
Vindos the Hunter
The People of the Oak
Nodens Silver Hand

IV Kraideti

Kraideti's Garden
The Abduction of Kraideti
The Battle of Vindos and Lugus
The Prisoner of Annwn

V Summer and Winter

The Gifts of Vindos
The Followers of Vindos
The Ice Age
The Battle of Fire and Ice
The Wheel of Fate

VI The Son

The Corpse of an Eagle
Hunters in the Forest
The Battle at the Ford
The Barren Queen
The Son
The Monstrous Claw

VII The Golden Bowl

The Joys of Maponos
The Fortress of Nine Jaws
The Council of the Giants
The Battle of the Trees
The Golden Bowl
Shapes-in-the-Mist
The Song of Maponos

VIII The Chase of the Pigs

The Nightmares of Vindos
The Chase of the Pigs
The Storyteller
A Grave for Maponos

IX The Hanging Yew

The Bride of Flowers
The Eagle on the Oak
The Stone of Vindos
The Hanging Yew

Acknowledgements

Fragments of a Lost Mythos

I wrote this book for love of a God. He was known in ancient Britain as Vindos 'White'[1] and is still known in Wales and beyond as Gwyn ap Nudd 'White son of Mist.'

I met Gwyn at a nadir in my life at the head of a fairy funeral procession on Fairy Lane in my hometown of Penwortham in Lancashire. My rational mind refused to believe it. What would a wild Welsh God want with a suburban English poet? Yet, I knew deep within that I knew Him and had always known Him from time's beginning. I dedicated myself to Gwyn as my patron God and began to serve Him as His awenydd 'person inspired' by bringing His stories and veneration back to the world.

In medieval Welsh mythology Gwyn is the King of Annwn, 'Very Deep,' the Otherworld, later known as Faery. Two of my books, *The Broken Cauldron* and *Gatherer of Souls*, recover and reimagine His stories from existing sources and reweave them back into the landscape of northern Britain from where they have been lost.

This book is different because I have been called to go beyond the existing texts, from the known to the unknown, under Gwyn's guidance through meditation and journeywork to seek visions of the stories of His birth, His boyhood and how He built His kingdom. I've also drawn on Irish, Norse and other Indo-European sources.

What lies herein is an emerging myth, both new and ancient, telling the cycle of the birth and death of Vindos. I don't believe it's the only one - He told me there are as many stories of His birth as there as facets on the jewel in His forehead - but it is the one He has inspired me to tell.

---

[1] Although this name itself isn't recorded its stem gives its name to Vindolanda 'White Springs'.

In the later sections you will note I have drawn on the Four Branches of *The Mabinogion,* reading between the lines, finding the King of Annwn in different guises, to reconstruct the later episodes in the story of Vindos. For this I am indebted to Will Parker's reading of the Four Branches as a plot by which the forces of Annwn are 'drawn out' 'confronted' and 'neutralised' by the Children of Don.[2]

Whereas some of the stories are set in their traditional places I have chosen to locate others within my home county of Lancashire weaving the mythos of Vindos and His family into the landscape where I met and venerate Them.

I decided to use the ancient British names for the Gods rather than their medieval Welsh names to create a more archaic feel. Thus Vindos rather than Gwyn, Nodens rather than Nudd, Uidianos rather than Gwydion, reconstructing with a little poetic licence where I have no scholarship to follow, for instance Kraideti rather than Creiddylad.

I started writing this book in 2019 and it took many forms before I decided on the current format of fragmentary episodes and poems which follows the form of the medieval Welsh sources such as *The Mabinogion*, *The Black Book of Carmarthen* and *How Culhwch won Olwen*.

I share it here, not as an ur-text, as the one truth about Gwyn's origins, but as one facet of the jewel of His mysteries. I hope it will help and inspire its readers to come to know and love Gwyn and to seek visions of His tales.

---

[2] Parker, W. *The Four Branches of the Mabinogion*, (2005, Bardic Press), p646

In the Beginning

was the breath,
the in-breath and the out-breath
of Old Mother Universe.

In the vastness of the Void she slept,
and in her sleep, in her dreams,
she stirred her cauldron.

And in her cauldron
she saw her face in the Deep
and she saw it was surrounded by stars

and each star was the eye of a giant
and each was a fiery warrior.
By the light of the stars

she saw a nine-headed dragon
and knew her for the Mother of Annwn.
She saw the birth of the gods

and the death of dragons
and the battles that would form worlds -
everything from the beginning

until the end of time.
Her vision was so sad and so beautiful
her cauldron burst and the stars poured forth.

Thus was the beginning -
the first breaking of the cauldron.
Thus from a big bang the universe was born.

I
In the Deep

The Abyss

The boy fell,
the boy fell,
the boy fell

down into
the darkness
of the Abyss.

Since his birth
he had been falling.
He didn't have a name.

Long ago he had
left his stomach
up above him.

He carried only
his memories
and their pain.

The safe warmth of his mother's womb. His sister there beside him sharing an umbilical. The flash of a golden spearhead, the golden gauntlets that tore them out. His shining foe and a circle of bright gods against a backdrop of dead dragons and a starless sky. The snapping of the cord. Their separation - she stolen up, he cast down. Then the endless falling, their hearts no longer beating as one.

The boy fell,
the boy fell,
the boy fell

down into
the darkness

of despair.

Before he lost
his voice he had
ceased screaming,

reaching out,
clinging onto
the invisible thread.

Accepting life
was nothing
but one long fall,

with nothing else
to do before death,
he dreamt.

The Dragon Mother

The boy dreamt
of a deep place that had never
known light until the birth of the stars.
Of the coils, the folds, of the Dragon Mother
stirring to life from the infinite waters.
Of her raising nine heads in each
beset a sparkling jewel.

The boy dreamt
of the birth of dragons from
caves in her coils, cracks in her folds.
Of monstrous serpents winged and wingless.
Of primordial monsters crawling forth.
Of her nine dragon heads with
pride surveying all.

The boy dreamt
of battles between dragons.
Of wingless serpents rising from
the depths to snatch the winged ones down.
Of a great scaled beast who ate the stars.
Of nine dragon jewels glittering
on his mother's brows.

The boy dreamt
of the deaths of dragons.
Of the light fading from their jewels.
Of the kindred of the dead eating their hearts,
taking their jewels to the treasuries
where glittered the memories
of the departed.

The boy dreamt
of the ghosts of dragons

breaking free of invisible threads
to flock in the skies before departing
to ride the winds of the Abyss.
Of their foreheads pale
and jewelless.

The boy dreamt
of his mother's sadness
as the backs of dead dragons
formed her hills, their wings her cliffs.
Of her nine heads admiring her land.
He awoke knowing it was
destined to be his.

Nodens and the Deep

The boy dreamt of the birth of the stars - each the eye of a fiery giant. How they battled in the Heavens, mating, spawning bright gods, gathering as constellations in the dark.

To his astonishment a blue god in silver armour plummeting head first into the waters like a comet with an icy tail. *Has he sunk beneath? Drowned? Why should I care?*

He surfaced, pulled himself onto the land, gasped for breath, stood, surveyed his surroundings. Although he was not old his face was etched with lines of stress and strain and his grey eyes were cloudy with deep regret and pain.

He climbed the cliffs, set out across the hills, a tiny figure. To where the Dragon Mother towered over all like a mountain he went and bowed the sheen of his silvery head.

She raised her nine heads. “God from the stars what is your name?”

“My name is Nodens and I am the son of Bel and Don. I was once King of the Gods but I am no longer.”

“Why is that?”

“I was cast down as I dreamed of forbidden depths, of dragons, of you… Tell me what is your name?”

“I am Anrhuna.”

“And where do you come from?”

“I come from the Deep and I am its mother.”

“You speak in paradoxes.”

“That is the nature of the wisdom which comes from the Abyss.”

“Can you teach me?”

“The Abyss does not give up its secrets easily. What will you give?”

“I would give my sword arm.”

“And so you will, but not yet, for it will be needed.”

The Dragon Mother took Nodens in her coils and in them he hung upside down over the whirling darkness of the Abyss.

Many times the boy slept and woke before his next dream-vision.

“Everything my father, Bel, told me is wrong!” Nodens exclaimed. “The Heavens were not created before the Deep, may be above, but are not superior. There is no up, no down, no before or after. Everything meets here, in you, the Dragon Mother.”

“Yours is the wisdom of the Abyss.” Anrhuna eased him from her coils and took him in her arms as a goddess with a crown of nine jewels, dark hair, full breasts, grey skin and serpent tails.

Nodens is my father. So that’s why I’m not a dragon. In the waters the boy saw both parents in his face; grey skin, sharp cheekbones, a pointed chin, whitest hair, the white jewel in his forehead. Hands and feet with seven claw-like nails.

The Battle of the Dragons

The boy dreamt of his father asleep in the arms of his mother, in goddess form, watching his chest rise and fall. Every so often Anrhuna looked up pensively to where the stars burned unusually bright and held Nodens tighter.

Slowly he awoke, stretched against her, blinking. “Is it my eyes or are the stars shining brighter than before?”

“It is not your eyes. Your kin have lit the Forges of the Stars.”

“Is it my eyes or are the stars falling from the Heavens?”

“It is not your eyes. Your kin are coming to bring our end.”

“I fear I have brought this fate upon us,” lamented Nodens. “I am afraid, not so much for us, but our unborn children.”

Anrhuna put her hand to her pregnant belly, spoke fiercely, “I will be able to protect them better in dragon form.”

Nodens nodded, they stood, kissed and embraced, before she shifted back into a nine-headed dragon. “I will rally my children.” The trumpeting call of her nine heads shivered through the air and resounded from the rock faces; an irresistible summons to the dragons rising from crack and cavern and spiralling down from the skies to assemble in a kaleidoscopic gathering of starlit scales. *My brothers and sisters all the colours of my mother’s jewels.*

Nodens put on his silver armour, took up his silver sword, setting in the hilt two dark blue dragon jewels. He stood, a small determined silver speck, at the forefront of the dragons, as they massed to defend the Dragon Mother.

This memory I will lock away safe from fire or sword.

*

The stars fell.

"No, no, no!" the boy cried out in his sleep on the abyssal winds.

At the head of the army of bright gods and brighter fire giants was a shining boy-god in golden armour, with a halo of fair hair, illumined by his inner light, brandishing his golden spear. "Victory will be mine! Nodens, for your treachery, my skilful hand will replace your sword arm!"

"Who are you," Nodens demanded, "to claim my kingship?"

"Lugus the Many-Skilled. The prophesied god who has now come!"

The mouth of Nodens fell open. "But the fulfilment of that prophecy should have been impossible."

"Yet here I am!"

"Then my blade will test your credibility."

The Sword of Nodens and the Spear of Lugus met. A silver whirlwind and a golden dance too fast for the eye to follow. Bright gods and giants stepped down from the skies to be met with breath of fire and ice and dragon claws.

To the boy's dismay, although the swordsmanship of Nodens was superior, the Spear of Lugus had a deadly life of its own; jabbing, cutting, slashing, breaching his father's defences, drawing from blue skin the reddest blood.

Dragons fell to bright blades, spun blinded by the stars. *How dare they come here with their unbearable light?*

The helm of Nodens askew. Blood matting his silver hair. Teeth clenched, breath gasping, with his last strength, he swept aside the spear, dented Lugus's breastplate, knocked the wind from him, the smile from his face.

Heedless, displaying its magic, the cursed spear fought on. *It's not fair,* the boy raged, small fists clenching in his sleep, *he'd be no match for my father without it.*

Lugus recovered, struck the sword from the hand of Nodens. *Mercy, mercy, please*. Lugus stepped in, with a single sweep severed his father's sword arm at the elbow. Unbearable his scream, the blood spurting from his stump, his expression of agony as he collapsed into the red pool.

*

The boy tossed, turned, in a dream become a nightmare, as his Dragon Mother fought alone, nine heads swinging, rending, tearing god-flesh, defying all but the shining boy-god's spear. Nine times nine deadly blows she smote him, but still he did not die, dancing around her in a blur of blinding light, opening an awful pattern of jagged wounds.

Tiring from her exertions and blood loss Anrhuna lunged with her red-jewelled head. Lugus cut it off with a swing. Blood spurted from the neck, releasing from within her a gushing fountain of fire. From it were born a dozen blazing red dragons, finding their wings, flying upwards, into the Heavens. The boy gaped and watched appalled as Lugus severed the head with the light blue jewel and a cascade of ice bridged the skies birthing a group of icy pale blue dragons. From the head with the grey jewel, an upward avalanche of stone, grey dragons… tumbling earth and greens… gushing magma and oranges… So much water from the head with the dark blue jewel it might have drowned the battlefield if it had not spouted into the Heavens with the dark blue dragons. Spindly yellow dragons took flight on the thinnest of air from the head with the yellow jewel and on

a mighty blast of wind the purples took flight from the purple-jewelled head. *Sad thing, only one head left, the last with the white jewel like mine.* As it fell a rush of mist and taking form from it a pack of white dragons fading into the starless night, beautiful, evanescent, lost to him.

Tears blurred his eyes as their myriad colours vanished above and the life left his mother's eyes. Then his enemy hefted his golden spear and pierced her swollen belly. Her body fell with no heads to scream. Blood flooded from her womb to join the blood of her children.

"Victory!" declared Lugus to the applause of his shining army.

Insurmountable fury as the boy watched his foe tear his sister from the womb with one golden gauntlet, him with the other - a tiny dark-haired girl and white-haired boy.

"Behold! The Girl who will Bring Life I will keep and the Boy who will Bring Death I will cast into the Abyss!"

"No!" cried the boy waking himself from his sleep to the spiralling darkness. "I refuse to fall any longer! I will live!"

The defiance in his voice halted the abyssal winds.

"I will live to have revenge for the maiming of my father and the murder of my mother and to win back my sister!"

His pain gave him teeth and his anger gave him claws. Slowly, painstakingly, claw-hold by claw-hold, inch by inch, he began to claw his way out of the Abyss. *By the spirits of my mother and the dead dragons I will have revenge.* The winds started up again but still he pressed on.

Oh no. The ghost of a winged serpent spinning down, hissing, spitting. "Living thing!" Livid at his attempted escape. Clawing at him. Too weak. Claws passing through.

Phew.

Don't look. She's going down and I'm going up. Onward. Upward. By every dragon's heart pierced by a bright god, every set of entrails ripped out, I will have revenge.

The ghosts of two wingless serpents. "Die." "Die." They coiled around him. "Your mother is dead. There is no hope left."

He shook them off. He was a dragon child. "By the eyes of the dragons blinded by the fire giants I will find hope even if it is hidden in the deepest reaches of the universe."

"You'll fail." "Nothing has ever crawled from the Abyss."

He thought he could make it. He really thought he could. Until he broke one claw and then another. He fell and fell again. After countless falls the thought of

vengeance was not enough. *Impossible. So tired of climbing. So tired of hurting. Just let go and surrender to the end.*

Then, from above, the voice of nine ghost heads. "Come to me, my son, I will bestow upon you a destiny - I will make you King of Annwn and the dead and grant you the power to turn tragedy into beauty and sadness into joy."

*

At last the boy crawled exhausted from the brink of the Abyss to stare up at the nine-headed ghost of his Dragon Mother. Immense. Sorrowful. Hanging over her realm like a cloud of despair. Heads rearing, clinging to their identities by pale threads, coils trailing ether into the Abyss.

Beneath lay her corpse, pregnant belly rent. Limp necks a mutilated tangle of severed ends, exposed and raw. Her blood drenched the ground, mixing with the blood of other dead dragons, winged and wingless serpents, a sea of blood and broken bodies stretching as far as he could see. Between them dead gods bright no longer, dead giants burning eyes growing dim. The Kingdom of the Stars was distant above and some were missing.

"My son, I am glad to see you. My dragon children are dead, my last departed to the Heavens, your sister gone."

"Do you know where my dragon-kin have flown to?"

"No," she shook her nine ghost heads, "for the jewels that might have connected me with them have been stolen."

"Someone stole your jewels?" The boy turned, outraged, to the gaping holes in the foreheads of her corpse.

“Yes and I don’t know whether the bright gods, or the fire giants, or the winged serpents have taken them.”

In the distance he noticed the bands of marauding winged serpents trawling the battlefield, taking pickings from the dragons; eating hearts and livers, stretching out long reams of bowels, dragging them into their holes.

“What of my father, is he…”

“No. He is not dead. He is deep in a healing sleep. I brought him here to keep him safe.”

As one of her heads spoke another glanced towards an overhanging rock. Under it the boy saw she had sheltered his father. He walked over, knelt beside him, brushed back his silver hair. His blue skin was pale and his once-proud features were sunken with pain yet he was breathing steadily and his wounds were closing. Skin was starting to cover the coagulated mess of his stump.

“Will he wake when his healing is complete?”

“That is my hope.”

*

“Now,” the ghost of Anrhuna turned to her corpse, “there is a rite amongst the dragons of Annwn - as you are the only one of my children left here you must eat my heart.”

The boy swallowed nervously as with a single bite of her ghost jaws she tore it from her chest and offered it to him, big and bloody, large and slippery, uncannily still beating. “My heart is the Heart of Annwn. If you succeed in eating it all, its power will be yours and you will be king.”

“But it is so much bigger than I and I have little appetite.”

“Little bite by little bite and you will be king.”

The boy very much wanted to be king. He needed his kingship inside him. He bared his teeth and bit in, took one bite, then another. As he ate, he grew. He became a

mighty wolf, a raging bull, a bull-horned man, a horned serpent, finally, a black dragon. As he tore and devoured the last pieces of the heart he spread his wings to fill the darkest reaches of the Deep. He roared, “I am King of Annwn! I will rule the dead! I will build my kingdom from the bones of dead dragons and the light of dead stars! I will bring joy to every serpent who has known sorrow and I will take vengeance on my enemies!”

Weary and full he slept and when he awoke he was just a boy with a large heart that felt too big for his body.

II
The Boy in the Serpent Skins

The Boy in the Serpent Skins

However am I going to create a kingdom from such desolation?

The boy looked out from the white dragon's cave he had made his home across the carnage where the winged and wingless serpents were feasting on his dragon-kin.

Flocks of devourers. Throngs of death-eaters.

From the cast-off skin of a white serpent he had fashioned a makeshift tunic and fastened it with a bone pin.

Still, when his mother's ghost wasn't watching, a quartet of young winged ghost serpents descended to mock him, to pluck at his skins, calling him, "Nameless," "Kinless," "Grey One from the Abyss," "the King of Bones."

"Vindos," "Vindos," "Vindos," they tugged his white hair.

"Stop it!" he turned upon them in rage, fixed them with black abyssal pupils, "or by the power within me as king, by the Heart of Annwn, I will send you to the Abyss."

"No," "no," "please don't," they simpered and begged. "We don't want to return and be reborn." "Certainly not as wingless." "We want to stay as winged serpents."

"Then," the boy mused, an idea forming, although it went against the rules of life and death, of the Abyss, "I will let you remain as ghosts if you serve as my messengers. To prove yourselves you will fly to the Heavens and bring news of the lost dragons and my sister."

The boy watched them vanish into the skies and wondered if they would ever return. *If not good riddance*.

With a shrug of his skinny shoulders he set out again, wading through the gore, his bare feet sticky with it, his small hands forever red, to perform the death-rites for his kindred and to lead the ghosts who lingered back to the Abyss.

Time stretched out until there was not an ounce of flesh on the glistening white bones and the serpents had returned, bellies distended from glutting, to their holes.

"I gathered all the jewels I could find," he told his mother's ghost, holding up a serpent-skin pouch, not very full.

She nodded in approval with all nine ghost heads.

"And," he said, thinking sadly of the messengers he had sent away and had not come back, "I have decided on a name."

Sorrow for as a ghost she had not the power to name him.

"Vindos," he decided, "for my white hair."

"White, Blessed, Holy." She savoured it. "A good name."

The Creation of the World

“We found them!” “We found them!” “We found them!”

As the messengers swooped down a lift in the boy’s heart.

“The dragons were creating worlds.” They formed a circle and demonstrated, breathing misty orbs with ghost breath.

“Worlds of fire and ice, rolling magma, lumps of earth and stone, great gas giants, worlds of water and swirling mist.”

“Across every one roaming the Restless Wind!”

“Drawn across the Sea of Stars,” a messenger gestured, “by your mother’s jewels in the hands of Uidianos.”

“Who is…”

“A son of Don.”

“The one who cast your father out.”

“The greatest magician in the universe.”

“To the Eye of Bel,” they continued their story, “who is calling himself the sun, before him to create the perfect world.”

“From nine elements shaped by the dragons to the Magician’s song - from fire a red hot core, from magma a liquid mantle, from stone a firm foundation, from earth a fertile surface, from water seas and rivers, from ice rolled the poles, from air light the skies, then in garments of mist the world was dressed, the Restless Wind roaming all!”

“How beautiful,” Vindos spoke in awe, the blue and white orb swirling before his eyes in a majestic vision.

“Uidianos tried to make the dragons leave but they refused.”

“They’ve decided to make it their home.”

“The Magician got angry.” “Very angry.” They mimicked his violent expression ghost faces shifting in and out.

“Then…” they exchanged grim glances.

“He shattered your mother’s jewels.”

“No!” cried Vindos.

“Out poured the last remnants of her elemental essences in all nine colours to circle around the North Pole.”

“Where the ice dragon lies, a great wyrm, in sunken caves.”

“The Magician named them the Northern Lights.”

How awful. Yet how entrancing. He saw their dance.

“And what of my sister?” he asked with concern.

“She was there alongside the Children of Don.”

“Tell him.” “No don’t tell him.” “Tell him.” They argued.

“What?” Vindos demanded losing his patience.

“She was hand-in-hand with Lugus Skilful Hand.”

The King of Bones

"My bone," "no my bone," the messengers tousled in the air, see-sawing back and forth, snarling, beating their wings.

"Stop arguing," snapped Vindos, "there are plenty of bones to go round."

"But I want to put this white shoulder bone in the white wall…"

"For Annwn's sake we are building a kingdom for the dead not playing a game of Serpent Bones. It doesn't matter which bones go where so long as the walls stand up."

"Oh yes it does." "White walls stand stronger facing towards the white holes and red walls towards the red." "With claws at the bottom, thigh and hip bones in the middle, shoulder bones at the corners, spines along the top, then skulls overlooking all." "Strong as a dragon!" "Then white should touch yellow and never red…"

"At this rate I'll be old and dead before I've built my kingdom."

"The other winged serpents might help." "For a price."

*

"Three yellow dragon jewels, two light blue and a white claw," Vindos bartered with the yellow winged serpent.

"Five yellow, three dark blue, the claw and your shoulder bone," she returned with a flick of her tongue.

"You know I haven't got any dark blue," he growled, "and I've told you several times you're not having any of my bones."

"Five yellow, three light blue, the claw and two finger bones."

“Hmm.” Vindos considered his fingers. *The Children of Don get on fine with five and I am desperate for aid building my kingdom yet if I start bartering them away now I won’t have any left by the time I get to the last holes*. “No,” he determined, “you’re not having any of my bones.”

“Not even one finger bone?”

“No.”

“Well it was worth a try. My last offer stands plus your help removing an angry ghost from our bowel cave.”

“Done.”

*

A sight to behold - all nine colours working together. Scavenging, organising into piles, building their walls. Houses of bones stretching as far as the eye could see. In the midst his fortress, nine-walled, the winged serpents lifting his mother’s skulls onto the tops of the nine towers.

Look, for a moment, a kingdom, look again bone dragons.

Even the reds and whites had set aside their wars.

“It’s perfect,” Vindos smiled to his messengers.

Above the leaders of the winged serpents debated who had won.

“The whites!”

Cheers from all but the reds.

Then a snapping from the bottom of the red tower.

“Bad bone!” “Bad bone!” From overhead outraged cries.

To his dismay the tower tipped, toppled to the floor with a clattering of bones, his mother’s skull rolling from it. The impact caused the red wall to teeter, totter, then fall. Vindos gasped in consternation as the others

followed, the roof collapsed, the entire edifice crashed down.

The impact rocked the nearby houses which pitched and fell. *No, no, no*. The effect spread outwards like a ripple, like in a game of Push Bones, one house collapsing after another in all directions as the serpents rowed.

"Behold the fall of the Kingdom of Bones."

The Deep Sea Giants

"Damn it!" Vindos flung the broken thigh bone to the floor, having failed to stick it together with bone glue, to join the rest. "Damn it all to the deepest reaches of the Abyss!"

Disconsolate he sat choking back tears of despair. *I'm never going to build my kingdom let alone be strong enough to go to the world to win my sister back from Lugus.*

Desolate he sat, cursing the day he was ripped from the womb, his mother's killers, the winged serpents, himself.

I might as well go back to the Abyss and throw myself in.

He returned to that whirling darkness and stood on the brink, heedless of the expressions of horror on his mother's heads. She was fading now as she fought her call.

"I am nothing. Nothing but a King of Bones."

He turned to take one last look at his fallen kingdom. So white, so desolate, its broken glint. *Nothing to live for*. Then, *who is that?* The tap, tap of a walking stick drew his eye to an old woman in a black cloak, muttering to herself as she approached, hunched, bent. *The Old Mother?*

"Young man, I hope you're not thinking of giving up." She had two kindly eyes, a crooked nose, in a wizened face.

"Everything's broken, me too, my task is too big."

"It is an immense task but it's not too big for giants."

"Giants?" Curiosity brought Vindos back from the brink.

"Did your mother not tell you about Lyr and his children?"

"She did not." A glance at her poor waning ghost.

"Lyr was a fire giant second only to Bel in brightness. He had an affair with Penarda, the wife of Euros, a son of Bel and Don. She bore him many children. As a punishment Euros imprisoned them in the depths of the Deep.

"Lyr is old, has lost half his speech, but his children are big and strong and could help you build your kingdom."

*

Swimming, swimming down, to the bottommost depths, where even the dark blue wingless serpents feared to throng.

A golden palace. A golden lock. "Only Euros has the key and he keeps it in a golden box locked in another box by another golden key locked in another box by another…" His messengers had reported and he'd got the picture.

Annuvian magic is needed. He shrunk himself down to key-size, entered the lock, turned, just a little at first, bringing about a reluctant creaking. He set his teeth, rolled harder, *good,* he was turning properly now. Right over, onto his side, onto his back, then he'd rolled all the way over. One full turn. *Now for that double click.* Harder this time. Getting jammed. Sticking, sticking, claws thrashing in tight confines. Then the final click. *Out*.

"Thank you… for… rescue…" Lyr so old and his voice like the *ssh*, *ssh* of the tides of the waters of the Deep.

"I am Bran, the firstborn son, how can we return the favour?"

*

“A sight! A sight!” cried the messengers.

The winged serpents flocked down to watch as Vindos led the giants, dripping, from the depths of the Deep. Bran, tall as a mountain, black hair, lake-like eyes beside the ridge of his nose. Branwen, as immense in size and stature. Behind them, only slightly less tall, monstrous shapes.

“We’ve brought our bone grinders. What are your orders?”

Vindos had the strength of all the Deep Sea Giants to hand but his mind was as blank as the void before creation.

"Three drops," the Old Mother presented Vindos with a potion.

"What is it?" he asked, fascinated by its glow.

"Awen," she replied, "prophetic inspiration brewed in my cauldron which will grant you a vision of all times. Then," she poked him with his walking stick, "it will be up to you to discern what to do. Now, close your eyes."

Obeying her orders he squeezed them shut.

"This is the gift of clear sight." A drop on each eyelid.

"Open your mouth." A drop on his tongue.

It tastes of stars, no of starlight, no of the wonder in the eyes of the first-born fire giants. As though all the stars who would ever live existed at once he saw through their eyes the entirety of the universe from beginning to end.

He was alive. He was dead. He was everything. He was nothing. He saw things that had never been seen, heard names that had never been spoken, knew what to do.

"In your bone grinders grind up the bones then from the dust build nine towers topped with my mother's skulls to call the dragon children home at the end of the world."

"The Towers of the Wyrms!" cried the messengers.

"Now," he told his land, "from the sadness and desolation of this battlefield let beauty and joy be born. Here, green hills for the horses to run, here stones for the wolves to howl, here water-meadows for the aurochs, here marshlands beloved of the heron, here the ponds of the dragonflies and here the pools of the sleeping butterflies, here the forest for the trees when they cease to march.

“Raise great peaks so the dragon mountains are no longer alone, wrap them in mist, then crown them in snow.

“Giants, bring me the dead stars, I will sing back their light. Fix them in the skies, hang them as lanterns, let them roam the marsh lighting the mist, to guide the dead home.

“Now, for my fortress, let the ribcage of my Dragon Mother form its great hall, around its nine walls impenetrable as the secrets of dead dragons. Raise it on high! My stone of dragon bones will fly defying every law!”

“The Star of the King of Annwn!” the messengers cheered.

Standing in his hall, with its high domed ceiling, illuminated by dead starlight, Vindos sensed the beating of a mighty heart. *Whose? Mine? My mother’s? The Heart of Annwn? All, the Heart of my Kingdom, beating in my chest in this vastness, this loneliness, this emptiness…*

“Craft me a throne of carved white bone and one for my queen. I am not destined to be alone. Fill my hall with chairs, tables, cups, plates, prepare for a great mead-feast!”

Vindos climbed onto his battlements and flung down all the tears he had not cried when he was cast into the Abyss. They fell into the waters of the Deep and from them were born the fairest of people as joyful as tears are sorrowful.

*

“There’s one thing missing,” the Old Mother poked Vindos in the ribs and looked to the empty centre of the hall.

He turned to Lasar, the Blue Smith, “you must forge my cauldron.”

“Name the metal of your choice. Bronze, silver, gold?”

“None. A more primordial material from the depths.”

“Not iron?”

“No.”

That metal, for which the giants have no letters, they mined. Labouring in the Fires of Annwn Lasar fashioned it into an immense cauldron and Vindos added pearls to its rim.

Nine fair maidens danced around it singing spell-songs:

“In the deepest hall
of Annwn

dance
the shadows

of nine sisters
round

the forging
of the cauldron

to the beating
of the heart.

From
the darkness

of the ocean from
the depths

where

we were born

we rise like water
to sing our serpent songs -

it shall be filled with
inspiration,

it shall be
the spoil of bards,

it shall boil
only good meat,

never
a coward's food.

It shall bring life
to the dead

and the living
it shall fill

as nine sisters
dance

as shadows
round

the King
of Annwn's hall."

Vindos filled the cauldron with water and tipped in dead stars.

"I hereby bestow upon you guardianship of this cauldron," spoke the Old Mother as he knelt before her,

“forged in the likeness of my own with its power of rebirth.”

“No words of thanks could be enough for this gift.”

“By the breath of the Nine Maidens it will be kindled.”

As the flames leapt to warm the waters, boiling, bubbling, the dead stars came to life, forming constellations in a wondrous vision of the universe that briefly made sense before they were just wandering stars again.

“The King of Annwn!” “The King of Annwn!”

Vindos took to his throne with his fair people feasting around him. *I have everything I could desire except my queen.*

III
Vindos the Hunter

The Womb of Anrhuna

"Your sister has brought life to the world," announced the messengers.

"Life," Vindos tasted the word, recalled his visions.

"From language and materials of the earth Uidianos and his magicians fashioned trees but they remained bare until Kraideti, the Girl who will Bring Life, awoke them."

"Bursting into leaf and bud." "Flowers in her footsteps."

"Birch in her armour." "Willow half-asleep." "Trembling aspen." "Alder with his feet in the water." "Thundery oak." "Tall ash." "Prickly holly." "Blackthorn and hawthorn contending over who has the sharpest thorns." "Little hazel." "Proud beech." "The deadly yew."

Trees. A deep yearning for green. For touch of bark.

"Then the Magician brought forth your mother's womb."

"He stole her womb as well as her jewels?"

"He tapped it with his wand. 'Let there be life'."

"But to the disappointment of the gods no life came."

"Then he shook it and out fell all the animals."

"All the birds and the fish of the seas."

"Dead, stone dead," a messenger shook his head in remorse.

"Yet your sister awoke them to life with her breath!"

"Boar, bear, wolf." "Chough, rook, raven." "Chatty sparrow." "Mouse, squirrel, vole." "Trout and salmon." "Snake and slowworm." "Ant and bee." "Slug, snail, spider."

Wolves. A sense of kinship with those wild canines.

"For her favourite she chose a horse and galloped away."

If my sister has brought life I must soon bring death. A shiver of foreboding ran like a spider down Vindos's spine.

*

"The time has arrived for me to return to the Abyss," spoke the ghost of Anrhuna, nearly invisible, thin as air.

Sorrow clutched at Vindos. A choking in his throat.

"I will be reborn in the world as the Great Mother," she declared, fierceness returning, "I will claim back my womb!"

"Thank you for staying so long to help and guide me."

"I'm proud of you for building your kingdom. You will make a good ruler so long as you promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Never to unleash the fury of the spirits of Annwn on the world."

"I promise," spoke Vindos, his hand on his heart.

"When I am gone," she said, "wake your father, then take the giants to the world to claim the Island of Britain."

The Peace of the Giants

"Let us build our fortresses upon the hills, our seats upon the mountains, our circles of stone in alignment with the stars."

Vindos watched those gigantic builders set to work.

No sooner had they made their homes the silver starship of Uidianos approached with its sixteen tall masts.

Giants pounded down from the hills with their clubs. Bright gods spilled from the ship like golden water. *My enemy*. Lugus, now a radiant young man, face like the sun, sunbeams darting from his golden spear, stood at the fore.

Vindos's fist clenched around the serpent's tooth at his belt.

Then, between the two sides, stepped a figure in white robes with a silver circlet on his head and a long grey beard.

"My brother," said Nodens, "Uidianos."

The Magician planted down his staff. "Peace."

Onto the battlefield walked the most majestic maiden.

Dark her hair as the bark of hawthorn,
long and curling as strands of honeysuckle.
Green her skin as beech leaves in their second flush.
Greener her jewel sparkling in her forehead
like an emerald from a far-distant land.
Her beauty was such it stilled breath
and filled every heart with desire,
thus she was called Kraideti.

"My long lost sister," Vindos gasped.

On her appearance the staff budded into life.

The skilful hand of Lugus and the giant hand of Bran shook.

“We shall divide the land,” spoke Uidianos, “the lowlands to the gods, the uplands and rocky isles to the giants.”

Vindos felt such envy as Lugus took Kraideti’s hand.

His father’s touch on his shoulder. “Peace Vindos.”

Anrhuna appeared as a mighty sea dragon to claim back her womb and took it to a secret cave in the deepest sea.

Not a drop of blood has been shed between god and giant. It will be me, Vindos the Hunter, who will bring death.

Vindos the Hunter

Vindos went to the deadly yew to petition wood for his bow.

"Dark yew
whose bark holds
the secrets of the dead,
whose berries hold
death itself

will you
grant unto me
one of your branches
supple as the wind
for my bow?

Dark yew
whose evergreen
needles know better
than I the secrets
of eternity

will you
grant unto me
one of your branches
strong as your heart
for arrows?"

"Dark king
of the pale mists,
I will grant your petition,
you may harvest
my branches

if you

grant unto me
at my time of passing
a place to hang over
the Abyss."

"Yes, of course," said Vindos, wondering at her strange request and whether he would ever get to the root of it.

*

Who is that horse with the huge round hooves
that could trample armies
like cut reeds to
the ground?

"I am your destiny," spoke the white stallion, "come to carry you, to lead you by the bridle, hunting the living and dead."

*

Majestic the stag
with antlers like the crowns of the forest.
Strong the bull with horns like the crescent moon.
No-one can stop the relentless charge
of the boar but the Hunter.

Longing, pain and necessity twisted in Vindos like an arrowhead.

"I know what you're thinking," said the wolf, padding silently to his side, "I too have felt the calling to bring death."

Majestic the stag
running like water through the forest.
Strong the bull on the hill with stars in his eyes.

Relentless the boar digging valleys
ravishing the hillside.

"They're too much for the world," observed the wolf.

"But I love them," said Vindos.

"Then kill them for love."

*

"Death!" "Death!" "Death!" cawed the crows gathering above the corpse of the Great Bull as Vindos pulled the knife from his chest and looked down at his bloody hands.

"Death!" cried the eagle circling the eddies above.

"Death!" shrilled the blackbirds.

"Death!" The news passed from the beaks of the birds to the squirrels leaping through the trees, to the herds of deer, to the wolves in their dens, to the bounding hares. "You will never outrun it!" "Nobody amongst us will get away!"

The bees hummed it. The salmon swam with it upriver.

"Death!" "Vindos has brought death to the world!"

*

"I name you Dormach," said Vindos to the wolf, "you will remain at my side forever to help me hunt the souls of the dead and lead them to Annwn through Death's Door."

Vindos pricked his finger with the serpent's tooth at his belt and put a drop of blood on each of the wolf's ears and a third dripped accidentally onto his nose. *Too late now*.

The wolf grew and grew, shifting form, becoming paler and paler, shining glistening white, red-eared, ruddy

nose like a beacon, two serpent tails trailing into the clouds.

The wolf pack received their transformations one by one.

"From hereon you will be my Hounds of Annwn."

*

"Your name is Carngrun," Vindos named the white stallion, "you will live forever to carry me on my hunt."

A drop of blood behind each of the horse's ears.

Rearing, rearing, high proud crest, whinny like a sea dragon. Vermillion nostrils. Switching ears. Noble eyes.

A good horse, a strong horse, a kindred spirit.

*

The skin of the Great Bull Vindos took for hunting garments, two horns for his helmet, the third he put to his lips.

He summoned the Restless Wind who sang:

"Lie low, lie low,
for tonight I blow

to tear the leaves
from the trees

as the Hunter
rides to tear down

the souls of the lost
and the errant.

Lie low, lie low,
for tonight I blow

to herald the dark
half of the year

as the Hunter
rides the long nights

and we say farewell
to the light.”

The People of the Oak

Vindos dreamt of the Magician's knife, cutting, nicking, carving little wooden men in the images of the gods, of him standing them to face each other on a wooden board.

Wood Sense. He intuited the name of the game.

"Live." Uidianos tapped the head of a man with his wand.

Nothing. The wooden man remained motionless.

"Live." Again. Harder. "Live!" "Live!" "Live!" Uidianos struck the men from the board and with a bolt of lightning smote it in half, a jagged crack, a fissure between, then all the men falling, falling, falling into the Abyss.

*

Vindos dreamt of the axe of the Skilful One hewing down an oak. Splitting it in half. Hacking from the halves two rough-hewn figures; a man and a woman, hair dark as bark, skin tan as sap wood, somehow beautiful, somehow sad.

Into their empty eye sockets he put pieces of quartz.

Lugus took them to Uidianos. "Uncle make them live."

"Live!" "Live!" "Live!" The Magician struck their heads with his wand but for all his lightning they did not live.

Lugus took them to Kraideti. "Bringer of Life can you…"

Kraideti knelt beside the woman. "This is the Breath of Life," she gently breathed into her mouth, "so you will live."

The woman's chest rose then fell and she opened her eyes. "I am alive," she spoke, "but what about my other half?"

Kraideti knelt beside the man and breathed again into his mouth, "This is the Breath of Life so you too will live."

The man's chest rose then fell and he opened his eyes.

They took each other's hands, embraced, tangled together in a knot of gnarly limbs and became one tree again.

My sister has brought them to life I must bring their deaths.

*

Vindos dreamt of a garden with bountiful fruit bushes and apple trees where the people walked hand-in-hand by day, at night danced, knotted together, men and women, men and men, women and women, with their other halves.

Oh treacherous treacherous dreams. A glade where Kraideti and Lugus caressed and their lips met each other's.

No, no, no, she should be mine and not his.

"What's that?" The eyes of Lugus shifted to an apple tree.

"A snake," Kraideti saw the adder coiled around it. Zig-zag pattern of his skin, emotionless eye, flick of his tongue.

"It is one of the serpents of Annwn. Cast it out!"

"I'm afraid you are banished," Kraideti told the snake.

Out he slithered, from beneath the roots of the thorn trees that kept the Garden of Kraideti safe from pain and death.

Nodens Silver Hand

"Come, come!" "A sight!" "A sight!" "A silver forge!"

Vindos followed the calls of his messengers to a hilltop where, to his surprise, he saw smoke, the glow of a fire, heard the blows of a hammer. Growing closer he saw two small, twisted, disfigured persons working at a forge whilst his mother and father looked on. To his wonder they were beating out molten silver into the form of an arm. He pulled up and watched as they repeatedly returned it to the flames, brought it out red and glowing, until they agreed with a nod they had the correct shape. They then hammered out the fingers, with a chisel knocked each knuckle, whorls for the nails. Once it was finished they carried it to Nodens and fitted it to his stump.

"It's perfect." Nodens flexed his silver fingers.

"Who are these to work such magic?" Vindos asked him.

"The giants call them dwarves. They were born premature of a giantess, taken for dead, buried beneath this hill. When they awoke and could not dig themselves out they dug down instead to form tunnels, mines, found the precious metals and learnt to work them into beautiful things."

"With your hand restored could you teach me to fight?"

Nodens shook his head. "This was made to heal not harm."

"Then I'll teach myself. I will find my own weapons and armour to win my sister back from Lugus Skilful-Hand!"

*

A dream of hammer blows ringing out from infernal depths. Following it to its source - a furnace, a forge. At work a pair of dwarves, hideously deformed, with misaligned grins and fire-blackened skin. Joined at the shoulder, they worked with their outer arms, one holding a piece of dark metal whilst the other banged it into shape.

A huge iron sword, a size for a giant, with two fiery serpents engraved upon the hilt. In a terrible premonition he saw it in the hands of a human king, red flames spouting from the serpents' mouths, swinging to bring his death.

The twins ceased work, downed their tools, half-grinned, half-grimaced. "King of Annwn," spoke the left, "Annwn's king," the right, "we expected your coming," both.

"Greetings," spoke Vindos, "what are your names?"

"Andos and Bando." "But we know not who is who." "Today I am Andos." "I am Bando." "Tomorrow we will change."

"How have you come to forget your identities?"

"A red serpent." "Came to hurt us." "Really bad."

Vindos shuddered as he looked upon their scars.

"Made us forget the difference between dream and reality." "Are we awake?" "We're awake." "But who is who?"

"You had it right today," said Vindos, "I can see your souls."

"Andos it's truly you." "Bando it's truly you."

The joy in their eyes made Vindos want to weep.

"Come and serve in the Fires of Annwn as my armourers and the red serpents will never hurt you again."

*

As the conjoined twins forged the Sword of Vindos from the dark metal and fixed a white jewel in its hilt he named it:

"Death Bringer
the wrath of my kingdom
to bring death from
the mists."

Upon his shield they engraved three circles with jewels in the centre.

"Mist Bringer
the defence of my kingdom
to oppose death from
the mists."

A white jewel they hammered into the head of his spear.

"Mist Weaver
the swiftness of my kingdom
to dispense death from
the mists."

Once they had beaten out the plates of his armour and a helmet with bull horns they helped him fasten them on. Vindos belted on his sword and took up his spear and shield.

"I shall match the Sword of Nodens and the Spear of Lugus!"

The dwarves, who loved dark things, trembled at their work.

*

Vindos tested his battle-skills against the giants, the dragons, the serpents. By fire, by ice, he honed his will. With obfuscating mists, with battle-fog, he confused, befuddled his opponents, stepped forth with a blow to kill.

"Mercy fierce Bull of Battle!" "Mercy Immortal Lord!"

None can match me now except for the bright gods.

"Father, please, if you do not teach me the art of swordsmanship I will most certainly fall to my rival's spear."

Nodens sighed. Worked his silver fingers. "I admit," he consented, "I have been longing to try out my silver hand."

IV
Kraideti

Kraideti's Garden

For countless years Vindos hunted not only for the souls of the dead but the Garden of Kraideti and could not find it.

Everywhere he searched for an entrance to where his sister's birds sang night and day to keep pain and death at bay.

Every crack and crevice in every cave where the squeaks of the hanging bats were high and haunting. Every bole in every tree where the owls couldn't give a hoot.

Every woodland where the stags clashed and shook their antlers and the insects gnawing deadwood spat at him.

Every ripple in every lake where the sun's dance escaped.

Every river he swam from source to sea and questioned every fish and opened every pearl mussel but they were silent as the water spirits who poured the springs.

He flopped like a fish onto the riverbank gasping for breath.

He rose again to chase the Restless Wind. When he finally caught him in the Land of the Last Breaths he said:

"I have no eyes
to see

I have no ears
to hear

I have no voice
to speak

and yet I blow.
I know

nothing more than
you know.

I have no legs
to run

yet turning
I go."

Done with the living Vindos questioned the dead.

Even the ghosts are under my sister's enchantment.

"Sss." The snake. "I can take you to Kraideti's Garden."

Vindos took snake-form and followed the snake into the garden.

"Thank you my friend we shall be friends forever."

On his belly he went where the flowers ever blossomed, where the fruits were ever on the trees, where the sun never ceased shining nor the people smiling, to his sister's sacred-most glade and coiled around the apple tree.

Not long until she arrived hand-in-hand with Lugus.

"Snake! What are you doing back in my garden?"

Vindos slid down the tree, shifted into a horned serpent, stood as a bull-horned man, grey-skin, white hair, white jewel glinting in his forehead, terrifying in his beauty.

"Who… who are you? Why do I feel I know you?"

"I am your lost brother who your lover threw into the Abyss."

"You told me he was dead." She rounded on Lugus.

"He lied," Vindos spoke cold and accusing. "I am King of Annwn now and you are destined to be my Queen."

"No," Lugus shook his head, "I am King of the Gods and she will sit beside me at the Court of Don as my Queen."

"I belong to neither of you. I am the Great Queen." Kraideti pulled free from the hand of Lugus and folded her arms. "I will choose my own king," she asserted.

"Come with me," Vindos held out his hand, "to deep Annwn."

"I cannot leave because my green things need me."

"Come with me and I will show you greener hills, islands of apples far more delicious, fruits far sweeter. We will drink mead made by bees who make honey in

secret catacombs known not to giants nor gods. I will show you pleasures no other in the universe has dreamt of."

"Do not leave." Lugus drew his burning sword.

"Come with me," urged Vindos, "by the breath and heartbeat we share we are brother and sister, lover and beloved."

"Don't you dare take my queen by force."

"I would not force you." Grey fingers interlaced with green.

"My brother."

"My sister my beloved."

Vindos swept Kraideti onto his white horse into the mist.

*

"The Wonders of Annwn," Vindos told Kraideti, "are yours."

She mounted a white mare and away they tore to the Hills of Annwn where the white horses graze, shifting like the mists, never once the same, to the Fields of Annwn where every daisy turned the sunny chalice of its gaze.

To the Mountains of Annwn, cloud-topped peaks distant on the horizon, like his evanescent sister on her white steed, the faster Vindos rode getting further away.

The Annuvian magic is in her bones as it is in mine.

Into the Forest of Annwn, ever easeful, ever green, where every tree bowed and showed the treasures at their roots.

To the deep, dark heart to gaze into the spiralling Abyss.

"The Abyss is deep but it is not as deep as my love."

To the Waterfalls of Annwn only Vindos could find with their falling songs of silver water and their joys behind.

"See my bees feeding on forbidden flowers making honey in hidden catacombs busy as Annwn's timeless hours?"

"I fear for my bees trapped in time and don't know why."

To the Island of Apples where they bit into red-green fruits and tasted the bittersweet punnets of the past and future.

To the Star of the King of Annwn, spinning in the sky, many-faceted as his jewel and bright as the sparkle in his eye.

"I see our many names, our many faces," Kraideti gasped.

To his feasting hall where the leaves of the past become food for the future in delightful delicacies and where Teirtu, the youngest of the nine maidens, plays her harp.

To the dance, half-step by half-step, she knew too well.

She loves me, she loves my rival, she loves me not.

Besotted by mead up to his bedchamber, sheets of silk, posts of gold, to where the Birds of Annwn came to sing.

Songs like golden water falling from yellow beaks.

I have fallen for her blackbird songs.

The Battle of Vindos and Lugus

"Vindos wake up." Kraideti's voice, her hand on his shoulder.

Vindos blinked sleep from his eyes with dawning unease.

"Is it me or are the stars shining brighter than before?"

Words my mother spoke to my father in a distant dream.

Vindos threw off the sheets and joined Kraideti at the window. "Damn them. They've lit the Forges of the Stars."

"Is it me or are the stars falling from the Heavens?"

I fear history is returning to repeat itself again.

"My enemies are coming to bring my end."

"Awake! Awake!" The messengers stormed in.

"Lugus is approaching!" "Victor grandson of Scorcher circled by flames." "By the stolen fire of the sun." "With all the Children of Don and all the stars from the Heavens!"

Vindos donned his armour and called his battle-fog around him.

I have been waiting for this moment since I was born.

"The time has arrived for vengeance on my enemy. Rally my armies, the winged and wingless serpents, release my monsters and tell them feeding time has come!"

*

"Flee!" Vindos commanded the ghosts before wrapping his fortress and beloved in mist and saying farewell with a kiss.

Stars falling, so dazzlingly bright, like millennia ago.

To the head of his army he strode to shout up to his rival. "For the maiming of my father and the murder of

my mother I will have your pain, your blood, your death!"

"I am invincible. By my spear you will meet your end!"

The Spear of Lugus, like a deadly sun-beam, light-quick. Stepping back into the mist, obfuscating himself, side-stepping, swinging his sword in a brutal blow. *First blood*.

Grimacing in pain, golden shoulder plate hanging, Lugus renewed his attack, burning for revenge, spear supple as a serpent, flame-spined, flame-tipped, jabbing, slashing.

All around them the brilliant catastrophe of the gods and fire giants meeting the winged and wingless serpents.

The spear too fast, ducking, diving into mist. *Aargh*. It seared the forearm of Vindos and scorched across his belly. *It's going to be the death of me unless I rid him of it.*

In his clear sight a chance move - *might be my end.*

Vindos feigned a fall and dropped his sword. Lugus launched the burning spear and Vindos grasped it in both hands. With the coolness of mist he doused the flames. He held it, a finger's width from his belly, twisting like a snake. Screaming he flung the accursed spear in a launching arc into a chasm and willed his land to close over it.

The battle paused. Every eye, burning, golden, stared.

"The spear is gone!" "We're going to win!" Cries of his messengers and screeches of winged serpents on the wind.

Now for the invincible youth. Putting the smarting of his hands aside, Vindos picked up his sword, met the fiery one.

"It's time to die." A killing blow. He thrust his sword into the chest of Lugus and pulled it out with a gush of blood.

Lugus gagged, eyes wide, blood trickling from his mouth. But he did not fall, he did not die, he did not even drop his sword. “You fool! I told you I can’t be killed!”

“You liar! I will find a way to kill you, to break the spell!”

By spear, by knife, he did not die. Vindos took the form of a wolf and Lugus took the form of a lynx. Hissing, snarling. *Nasty scratch across my face*. Vindos got him by the scruff of his neck, shook him, but he did not die.

Lugus escaped in eagle-form and left him spitting feathers. Vindos flew up as a raven, tore with beak and claw. Still he did not die. From above, *how close the battle.*

Then the monsters lumbered onto the battlefield; the Black Forked Toad, the Speckled Crested Snake, the Beast with a Hundred Heads hungry for battle-fodder.

Vindos took the form of a serpent, coiled around Lugus, pulled him down. Bone-breaking crash. Earth splitting. Still, he remained alive. Vindos wrapped tighter around him, *crushed, crushed, crushed*. “Why won’t you die?”

“Mercy,” begged Lugus, “have mercy please!”

“Not until you are dead will my vengeance be complete,” Vindos spoke implacably, “your stars have fled.”

Lugus trembled as he saw his armies departing.

“I’m going to put you in my prison of cold stone. There every torture I can imagine you will endure and be warned - the imagination of the King of Annwn is endless.”

In spite of his win Vindos had little appetite for the feast. He touched not knife nor fork nor drink from his mead cup, determined to keep his mind sharp for what was to follow.

Kraideti was quiet, withdrawn, watching him like a wary animal. *She's seen what I am capable of.* No kisses. *She has guessed why I'm not coming to the bedchamber.*

"Please don't do it," she begged, "don't torture Lugus."

"He killed our mother. I must find out how he can die."

"I will not sleep with you," Kraideti told Vindos vehemently, "with the blood of my other lover on your hands."

*

"The claws, the teeth, the saws," gestured the messengers.

"See these?" Vindos asked Lugus.

"I'll talk," his rival strained at his chains, "I'll tell you how I was born, how I fell from beneath my wicked mother's skirts when she stepped over my uncle's wand. How she put on me a curse that I will never have a name, weapons or a wife and my uncle Uidianos won them.

"How I came to the Court of Don where only skilled gods have a throne and I claimed mine as I have every skill; warrior, carpenter, goldsmith, golden shoe-maker…"

"Enough chatter," Vindos snapped, "tell me about the spell."

"My uncle disguised us as shoe-makers to fit a shoe to my mother's foot then conjured a wren and I killed it

with my slingshot and thus she named me the fair one with…"

"Not that one."

"My uncle disguised us as bards and conjured starships and tricked my mother into giving me weapons."

"Not that one. The invincibility spell."

"Oh, that one, well, he walked around me three times, brushed my head, shoulders, knees and toes, with an eagle feather, told me I can't be killed indoors or outdoors, on horseback or on foot. The only way I can die is…"

To the disappointment of Vindos his rival's tongue stuck. "Messengers," he spoke grimly, "give me the claws."

*

When Vindos returned to his bedchamber Kraideti was awake.

"I heard the screams," she said with a shudder, "I will not sleep with you with the blood of Lugus on your hands."

"I haven't got his blood on my hands," Vindos displayed his palms, still sore, but he had washed them well.

"You've got blood on your boot," she pointed.

"Ah." Vindos grimaced.

"Your messengers told me you captured his warriors. Dragged one into the cell, before the eyes of Lugus killed him, cut his heart out, fed it to his son and drove him mad."

"You can't believe everything my messengers say."

"I will not sleep with you again until the torture stops."

*

But it did not stop. Vindos was like a dog with a bone. Determined to get the secret from his rival at whatever cost.

"I will cut off your skilful hand like you cut off my father's!"

His messengers called him away and when he returned Kraideti was gone and the prison cell was empty but for a single hawthorn flower sinking into a pool of blood.

V
Summer and Winter

The Gifts of Vindos

Their paradise is at an end, observed Vindos, watching as Kraideti took Lugus back to her garden on her white mare.

"Look," she spoke in dismay, "in the absence of the songs of my birds all the leaves have fallen from the trees."

"Kraideti," her people emerged, "we're hungry."

"Our bellies have swollen with children we can't feed."

"Disease walks amongst us souring our stomachs."

"We have been stricken with old age - gnarly as old trees."

"You should not have eaten from the Apple King's Tree."

"But the apples looked so tasty." "And they tasted so good."

"Worry not," said Lugus, "we are back now. By her green magic and my sunlight to bring leaf and bud to the trees."

Grass greened, leaves sprang, the scent of blooms.

"By our marriage," he said, "we will have an eternal summer."

*

If I am to win Kraideti back it must not be by violence but by love.

Vindos bided his time, riding out each year to gather the souls, as the Island of Britain grew warmer and the fruits withered and rotted on the trees and the springs ran dry.

"Vindos." The voice of the ice dragon at the North Pole.

My old friend, forgotten for too long, I am coming.

Over the scorched island, animals and trees moving north, over the vast churning ocean to where the Northern Lights danced in monstrous shapes with flashing haloes.

Purples, greens, yellows, from my mother's jewels.

Colder and colder, flurries of snow, icebergs, a land of ice beneath the frozen eye of the giant, Polaris, the North Star.

Dismounting. Down, into the icy tunnels formed by the wyrm and made his prison by the bright gods. The long folds of his body stretching miles underground clamped down, chained, his wings trapped, wrapped by lengths of chain against his sunken sides. *I promised to free him but cannot touch the accursed iron.*

Finally to the cavern where the ice dragon could barely lift his huge and scaly head due to the heavy collar round his neck fixed by pinions hammered fast to the floor.

Heavy pale blue lids of his eyes shuttered with pain and ignominy opened. *Still gold, dragon gold, golder than the armour of Lugus, the plates of the giants, their vessels.*

The pale blue jewel in his forehead glittered, beautiful, remarkable as frost. *What grief to see such majesty bound.*

"I'm dying." A seeping of cold from the dragon's mouth.

Vindos could not deny this chill frost-laden truth.

"What has become of your promise to free me and my kin?"

"That will not happen until the end of the world."

"That may be too late for me."

"I'm sorry."

"Apologies help nobody. Can you do nothing about this Eternal Summer created by the stolen sunlight of your rival?"

"I will not win until I have worked out how to kill him."

"I propose you oppose his fire with my Gift of Ice."

"You would grant me your gift?" Vindos was astonished.

"It is wasted here." A defeated sigh. "Hold out your hand."

Vindos obeyed, braced himself, as the ice dragon breathed out a long exhalation colder than the icy caverns, than the polar ice, than all but the Ice of Annwn. It coalesced as a single snowflake in the palm of his hand.

"Thank you," when he could speak again, for the extreme cold had stolen his breath, "it will serve you well."

*

This will be a gambit. Vindos rode towards the garden, weaponless, armourless, clad in simple hunting garments evergreen as hollies. Sprigs with berries on Carngrun's bridle matching the blood-red tips of the white horse's ears.

Decked in snow, the hunter, his horse, his hounds.

Dormach's red nose glowing like a beacon against the white.

Snowflakes in the air, perfect in their symmetry, shining almost as brightly as his white jewel. He sprinkled snow on the trees, soft, for the paws of squirrels, a montage of white for the robin's red breast. The ground he froze, coated, for the huge round hoof-prints of his horse and the many-padded prints of his hounds.

"The devil has returned to steal our beloved goddess."

Lugus had equipped the people with spears for defence and some waved them yet others stared in awe,

eyes wide and jewel-like, mouths open enough to catch snow.

"Turn back," Lugus brandished his fiery sword, "or die."

Kraideti stood beside him, her dress, woven from hawthorn flowers, wilted, her hair lank, her eyes tired and red.

She knows this island cannot endure an Eternal Summer.

"I come not seeking battle or conflict." Vindos held out his hands empty of all but the innocuous snowflake. Dismounting, "I have seen your garden is withering, the fruits are rotten, your people are sick and tiring of their labour. To alleviate their suffering I have brought them gifts."

"What trick is this?" Lugus demanded. "I see no gifts."

"My first gift," Vindos addressed the people, "is hunting. Those with the courage to leave I will show how to live in the wilds by killing the animals and eating their flesh."

"There is an outside?" "Yes but Lugus said it was dangerous." "I long to go out." "Leave and you will perish."

"My second gift is winter - cooling winds, glittering frosts, snow, a respite from the heat and work of summer. A time to rest, seek shelter, tell stories, dream deep."

He strewed them with snowflakes, drifting down gently to fall on shoulders, to glisten on eyelashes, to sit on palms, perfect for a moment then melting sadly like tears.

The people stared enchanted at the snowy Winter King.

"My third gift," he spoke more sombrely, "is death."

“Death?” “Why would we want that?” “Take it away!”

“Hear me out,” Vindos persuaded them, “death can be painful and cruel or can be a kind end to disease and old age.”

“But is it not the end of all?” “Dark, terrifying as the Abyss?”

“Death marks the end of your mortal lives but not of your immortal souls which will return with me to Annwn, its hills, its trees evergreen, where you will never thirst and never hunger, until from my cauldron you are reborn.”

“Is this true?” They looked confused. “Is Annwn not a hellish place filled with monsters, prisons filled with tortures?”

“My rival has presented a biased view of my world.”

“Don’t believe him,” Lugus warned them, “he intends to draw you away from the Summer Lands with his lies.”

Kraideti, expressionless, showed favour for neither.

“Kill me then,” Vindos knelt in the snow, tossed his long white hair aside, exposed his neck, bowed his head. “By my death your people will know I brought only gifts.”

“What is this?” Lugus flared. “More treachery?”

Vindos kept his gaze firmly, obdurately, on the white white snow, his grip on the snowflake firm in his right hand. *It will protect me from his flames but not from his sword*. Every muscle tensed as he heard the *crunch, crunch, crunch* of his rival’s footsteps, uneven, uncertain, imagined him looking at his hounds as if expecting some trick.

Not so funny when the perfectly polished leather boots stood at his side and he felt the heat of the flaming sword as Lugus lifted it overhead and Kraideti had done nought.

What if she doesn't step in and I lose my gambit and my life?

"For the love of Kraideti and the safety of our children, Annwn's King, the King of Winter will die!"

Heat, blistering, scorching as the sword descended. *She loves me not.* Terror. Disbelief. *I have lost. Don't flinch.*

"Stop!" Kraideti's bare green feet beside him.

The blade nicked his neck and a single drop of blood fell onto the snow. Red on white. *She loves me*. *Alive. Breathe.*

The people erupted into cheers. *I won. They love me too.*

Kraideti placed herself between the rivals and Vindos wrapped her in snow, snow-white dress, frosty crown, snow flecking her dark hair and embellishing her eye lashes. Snow reflected in her jewel, swirling, like battling dragons.

"I breathed life into you," she told her people, "I am your mother and I am your goddess and I am your Great Queen."

They dropped their weapons and fell to their knees.

"Like me," she looked from Vindos to Lugus, "you have free choice so may choose for yourselves whether to remain in my garden or leave with my brother and his gifts."

The Followers of Vindos

I have not won the love of Kraideti but I have won my people.

A wild and boisterous bunch, on leaving the garden casting off their leaves, running naked, whooping, cat-calling.

He led them north and taught them the ways of the hunt. “The first rule of hunting is never to steal another’s prey, the second always to leave a portion for the wolves…”

To his frustration they were soft and weak, clumsy and wooden, slow runners, poor shots with a spear. He was forced to hunt and wrestle down the aurochs for them.

Slowly, they learnt, too slowly. “I’m too tired.” “I’m hurt.”

As they slept he sat apart on a wolf-skin, tossing up snowflakes to cool the hot air. *How long until I lose my patience*?

From the camp approached a young woman. *Crowberry*, Vindos recalled, *for her crowberry dark skin*. “Is there a problem?” he asked her. There usually was.

“No,” she replied, “it’s not us, we’re trying our hardest.” Drawing a deep breath then looking boldly up at him, “It’s you. You’re too big, too strong, have such high expectations with your godly powers we can’t live up to.”

As her words sunk in Vindos recognised her wisdom. He hadn’t thought to look at things from their perspective before.

“Why don’t you,” she asked, ever bolder, “come down to us?”

Make myself like one of them. Small. Weak. At first a deplorable thought yet there was something in her wise

sparkling eyes and her hand stretching towards him so bravely.

"Alright," he shrunk himself down in size and stature and checked his hand was a good fit with hers. "How's that?"

"Perfect," she said, smiling, blushing, at his touch.

Vindos hunted with them and gained his measure of their form, its strengths and limits, its aches and pains. He gained a little sympathy yet still he pushed himself as he pushed them. At last, not by godly strength but by human effort, they ran as pack, like wolves, tearing down their prey.

*

Eventually, even with the Gift of Ice, it grew too hot on the plains. Vindos led his people further north, up into the hills, up into the mountains. Following a dream he had shared with Crowberry he led them to a wooded valley where flowed a white river, bursting with rapids, torrential. From a high spring, a cave beside it, poured a swift stream, forming a series of waterfalls, glass-like, dazzling.

"This place will be known as the Valley of Winter."

There he taught them feats of running, jumping, balancing, wrestling, swordsmanship, a dozen spear-feats. "Each of you," he told them, "will show me a feat of your own."

Their stories they recounted around their campfire. Afterwards many partnered up and headed into the woods.

Would it be wrong for me to sleep with one of my people? He tumbled and worried the idea like a bone.

When his snowflakes did not cool him he climbed up to the pool beneath the waterfall to take an icy dip to quench his desire but was thwarted when he saw

Crowberry and Foxfire swimming naked beneath the stars.

*

Crowberry was the first to best Vindos and it was not by her spear-feat, throwing it with her foot, but by her smile.

"As the strongest and cleverest I name you leader."

To her he gifted the awen. "Two drops on your eyelids for clear sight and one drop on your tongue to speak the future."

She swallowed hard, as if she'd swallowed a star, fell into a deep trance, returned with riddles he could not decipher.

"I must record them," she told him, "on the Howling Rocks."

With stone and chisel she set to work. "This one is the Stone of Vindos recording your story from birth until death."

"How did you know Kraideti and I shared an umbilical? I spoke not of the conjoined twins. What is this, the eagle on the oak, upside down the raven on the yew?"

"Images from your deep past and future deeps. Here generations of Inspired Ones will continue to carve your story."

She's uncanny. She sees beyonds I cannot see. She must be made of the heartwood of the oak where doors open.

*

"When will you take me to see your realm?" Crowberry asked.

"To go we will drink this," Vindos held up a black potion he had concocted from the ichor of the poisonous insects who scuttle in the caves near the dream-places of

the Abyss. “It will put us into a state like sleep but deeper, closer to death, so our spirits can leave our bodies.”

“Alright.” Her eyes were dark and trusting.

“I’ll go first,” he drank his fill and passed it to her.

“It tastes of the Void, before time, before life and death.”

“Let’s lie down,” he took her hand, led her to the wolf furs he had gifted her at the back of the cave. They lay in silence until the darkness descended, the tightness in the chest, the feeling of panic as their bodies rebelled against the poison passed, heart-rate and breathing slowed, near-stilled.

“Now,” the spirit of Vindos stepped from his human-like body, took the hand of her spirit, helped her from hers.

At the back of the cave he opened a door then led her down the long dark tunnels to another doorway into his realm.

“It’s beautiful,” she gasped, “all this is for us?”

Smiling he took raven form and she took crow form. Together they flew over the green hills, the water-meadows, the marshland, with hollering flocks of ghost swans and geese, whistling widgeon, startled snipe.

“It’s true - the fish really do leap in Annwn.”

“And my fortress spins in the skies - the brightest of stars.”

Up he led her, into his hall, both returning to human form.

“You and your people will be welcomed at my feast. This place,” he gestured, “I have prepared specially for you.”

Her mouth fell open as she stared upon the delicacies.

“More fruit and meat than you can eat and mead to wash away your sorrows ready to enter the cauldron to be reborn.”

"I think I remember it." Crowberry stared at the vessel.

"You have likely been here as a plant or an animal."

"Maybe as crowberry," she said playfully, then, "I remember you. I've stood with you before and I will again."

She remembers not only the past but the future too.

*

Vindos awoke beside Crowberry and reluctantly released her hand, got up, quietly padded out, so as not to wake her.

"Don't go." She had stood and removed her clothes.

He fought off a rush of desire. "I'd love to but can't. Kraideti."

"You think she doesn't sleep with her people?"

"I didn't realise… but if we… would you not miss me?"

"I have others too."

Crowberry and Foxfire swimming.

"It might create jealousy amongst your kin."

"Perhaps," said Crowberry, "yet," hands on her naked hips, "the awen demands it. I have had a vision that I will bear your daughter and she will bear your daughter and so on. Here, in the Valley of Winter, we will serve as your Inspired Ones - warriors, diviners, healers, counsellors."

A long line of women, wolf-skinned, raven-feathered.

"Well, if the awen demands it." Vindos undressed.

"Let him in," Kraideti commanded Lugus, "you know why he's here."

He's terrified of dying, thought Vindos, as his rival lowered his sword and Kraideti led him to the glade where the first of the oak people lay upon their death beds.

"The Bringer of Death." Mutters from the others.

They shied from him, sombre, in grey hunting garments to match his skin, bone horn at his neck, face grim.

"I'm sad to die in the midst of this tragedy," spoke Dara.

"Our people sick," lamented Daroon, "the oak woods burning."

"There is a remedy." Vindos looked at Kraideti.

Silent but she knows she must become the Queen of Winter.

"The seasons will change," Kraideti reassured them.

"Winter will come," spoke Vindos, "there will be hope."

He sprinkled snowflakes upon their fevered brows.

"As Kraideti breathed life into you I am here to take your last breath and guide your souls back to Annwn's depths."

"We might be reborn together," Daroon hoped.

Even in sickness they were still holding hands.

"Tree of my tree," said Dara.

"Trunk of my trunk," said Daroon.

"Together, forever, in life and in death," both voices.

Vindos sat with Kraideti until they had breathed their last.

"I'm glad you're here," she said and embraced him.

As he held her he felt the cycle of their in-breath and out-breath and saw the immensity of their roles as the

Bringer of Life and the Bringer of Death mirrored in her eyes.

"I know what I must do to save my people," she said.

"When the Hunter rises meet me beside my apple tree."

*

He hung chimes on the apple boughs, strewed them with snow, recruited a red-breasted robin to sing a last sweet song.

"My Winter King." She was sad, reluctant, beautiful.

"My Queen. The gifts of Annwn and winter will be yours."

He took her hand, green and grey, life and death, opened a doorway in the apple tree to the long dark tunnels.

Every enchantment he conjured for her; icicles along the tunnel walls, his fortress glittering and sparkling with hoar frost, a frosty path leading up to it in a dizzying spiral.

In his hall they were wed and they danced amidst falling snowflakes and they kissed and made love beneath sheets of snow and they rode together across the land bringing gifts to their people with the blessings of winter.

*

Time passed. It grew colder and colder. Yet Vindos and Kraideti could not bring themselves to be separated again.

They clung together like a hand stuck to frozen metal.

They kept promising each other, "One more year."

The people complained and shivered in their skins.

"You're losing control of your gift," Kraideti warned Vindos.

She's right. The snowflake was getting bigger and colder. It filled his hand. Its frozen numbness stretched to the tips of his fingers, into his wrist, right up his lower arm.

As it grew so did the glaciers, inching in from the north, the chill of the blizzard winds, the depth of the snow.

"Can't you stop it?" Vindos asked the ice dragon.

"It's in your hands now," a mirthful shake of his hoary head.

Vindos battled the snowflake, too big for his hand, too big to hold in two, to wrap his arms around, no matter how big he grew and it was cold, so very cold. Not only did it get bigger and colder, but it developed a life of its own, rolling from him, forcing him to chase it across the land.

When, finally, he caught it, it took the form of an icy warrior and he wrestled it on the plains, on the hills, on the mountainside where it grew to the size of an ice giant. When he took a tumble, let go, it rolled, becoming a gigantic snowball big as the sun, over the edge of a precipice and took off on dragon wings. With a triumphant rumble the glaciers followed, then the blizzards.

*

Time passed. In spite of the Fire of Lugus the people froze.

"Lugus Skilful Hand." "Victor grandson of Scorcher." "Spear Thrower." "Slinger of Slingshots." "Maker of the Oak People." "Fire-Maker." "Flame-Footed." "Lend your flames!"

They loved his rival now and they cursed Vindos.

Curse the day he stole sunlight from his grandfather!

Crowberry died of old age and her daughter, Wolf-Kin, was forced to lead the Followers of Vindos from the Valley of Winter to warmer climes south of the Island of Britain.

Vindos pursued his gift with horse, with hounds, with his spear and a net made from the sinews of a beached whale.

On the continent he tracked it down to where it had cut a system of caverns within a mountain as a vast wyrm. He took hold of its tail and held on as it dragged him, slammed him against the walls, but it slipped from his grip, launched itself from a cave and flew away on icy wings.

He followed it to the highest mountains in the far east, where it appeared as a monstrous yeti. He fought with it and snared it in his net yet it burst the fibres and broke free.

Over the frozen seas, in the far west, it appeared as a wendigo, with a heart of ice, feasting on human flesh. He downed it, tore out its heart, but it slithered from his hands, melted. Behind him, the true wendigo appeared, ran.

"I'm trying my best." He fell asleep exhausted in Kraideti's arms, slumped over the feast, never made it to bed.

*

Time passed and still Vindos could not catch his gift. Coughing, spluttering, he hauled himself out of freezing waters onto a glacier and shook himself off like a dog. Somewhere, down there, as a mighty sea monster, it had shaken him off, then plummeted down to unplumbable depths.

Reaching the end of his tether Vindos slammed down his weapons, in a sack, lathered with grease to keep them dry.

"I've had enough!" he bawled. "I don't want you anymore!"

As he spoke a slapping of cold waters against the glacier, before, on two flippers, up meekly climbed a seal.

"So that's the way it works," he murmured softly. Stooping to stroke its silky whispers, "You make a very nice seal but I'm afraid I'm done with creatures of cold climes."

Vindos slung his sack over his shoulder and summoned his horse. The seal whimpered, shifted into a white wolf, leapt up after him, licked his hand with its icy tongue.

"I don't need another dog." He summoned Dormach.

All around Vindos appeared a thick angry blizzard. Idly he held out his right hand. "I really don't want to catch another snowflake after all the trouble you put me through."

Several splodges fell over his fingers before the snowflake dropped into his palm meek and mild as a wolf pup. He closed his fist around it, tightened his grip, determined not to let go and it sunk in and became part of him.

The Battle of Fire and Ice

"Lugus has seized Kraideti," reported the messengers. "He's hidden her in a cave and we know where they are."

"Come out!" Vindos roared seeing the fire within.

Lugus appeared from the cave mouth to stare at his rival, hair and hunting gear crusted with seaweed and ice, tired, looking as if he'd been around the world twice. "Hunting a snowflake - now I see you're completely mad."

"You have stolen my beloved and I demand her back."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"My messengers told me…"

"You believe everything they say?"

"Whatever, I have mastered my gift, it's time for you to die!"

Vindos drew his sword and along the blade crackled ice cold as the caves where his gift nearly lost its slippery tail.

"My scorching flames will end you and your Ice Age!"

Bolts of ice flying from his sword Vindos rode down Lugus but he parried, *dash, dash, dash*, sent fiery bolts back.

Dismounting, great balls of ice, like in giants' snowball fights and his rival retaliating with orbs of fire. Vindos and Lugus grew into giants - a fire giant, an ice giant.

Freezing, scorching each other, scarring the land. A blast of fire sending an avalanche down a mountain and frozen stalactites juddering in the ground like shot nerves. Seared elbow. Lugus limp-hopping. Still, they strode across the mountaintops, pinnacle to pinnacle, swords arching in great swinging crescents of fire and ice, raining sparks and frosty shards down onto the land below.

Birds flapping, horses galloping, people running for cover.

A missed step. A fiery blast to the chest. *Boom!* Falling, falling, down the mountain, down to his death. *No*.

Rising, rising, as an icy dragon. A blast of breath. *Whoosh!* Freezing Lugus through and through. Making of him a statue of ice, frozen hair, stiff, half-blown, unblinking eyelashes, stuck there helpless in his pose of victory, sword overhead, mouth still forming the letter 'y'.

Vindos flew in with *death* written in the pupils of his eyes.

Something awakened in Lugus. Ice melted, dripping, steaming, as he thawed, transformed into a red dragon, wings beating as a long breath of fire erupted from his throat.

Ice breath, flame breath met, in a blistering cloud. Boiling drops fell as if from a cauldron in the skies, maiming mountains, scalding rock and stone, stripping snow.

The shriek of a dying something terrible to know.

In the back of the mind of Vindos a sense of wrong but what was that in comparison to fighting dragon against dragon, the power, the devastation, the might of it?

Twisting in the air, battling ever-north, to the Island of Britain.

Tiring of fire and ice, getting their claws into each other, tearing off a nice long strip of flesh from the flank of Lugus to his shoulder and swallowing it in one gulp. Nasty icky wound down his rival's side. Soon Vindos was torn. Terrible wounds, dripping blood, frothy and crimson, falling onto the white snow, hissing, steaming. Breath coming in huge, hard painful snorts, lungs

heaving in and out, horrible, raspy, harsh, organs in plain view.

We're destroying the land and killing each other.

The knowing growing in him but he would not give in to his rival no matter what he destroyed or how much he bled.

The hearts of mountains exposed, magma leaking out.

"Stop!" Kraideti between them on her white mare. Beautiful, dishevelled hair, white hooves pawing the air. "For the love of me," she commanded, "I demand you stop!"

Vindos paused but Lugus reached for her with a red claw.

She was there, then she was not, then Lugus fell.

Astonished, Vindos teetered too, joined his rival spiralling down, down, down, to the black and war-torn land.

The Wheel of Fate

Vindos was trapped beneath dark ice in icy waters. Whenever he attempted to surface there was terrible pain.

Then, a cup to his lips, valerian and henbane.

"Sleep beloved," Kraideti's voice.

Vindos dreamt he was a dragon of ice then the ice dragon. Perishing as the polar ice melted away. Ghosts of polar bears in a solemn white line, walruses dragging their bellies… *Should be gathering them, not following them into a whirlpool, into the spiralling dark of the Abyss.*

"Vindos, don't die, I love you!" A hand squeezing his.

So easy to let go to the dark but he paddled against it, with fins, with flippers, with arms, with legs, with dragon wings.

"Back, back, back," to the ghosts, "it's not our time."

*

"Vindos wake up."

Voices up there. Kraideti's face. *Beloved tell me I won.*

This time he surfaced in a body that was one vast ache like the mountains, reft and riven, bleeding waters of snow. *Drip, drip, drip.* He was in a fire-lit cavern. All around loosenings of the thaw. *Winter has been broken by my fall.*

Kraideti beside him, his mother and father drawn with concern. *And over there, it cannot be, she saved my rival too*.

"You nearly destroyed our beloved green island."

"My hatred got the better of me," Vindos admitted.

"It cannot happen again. If you truly love me and this land an agreement between you and Lugus and I must be made."

*

A starlit night. Ice water flowing in rivulets ripped by dragons. Rivers in the long scars. Sighs of blackened rocks.

What terrible power now limping and vain.

Huge full moon rising over the beaten plains where a black-cloaked old woman stood at a table with a black cloth, four golden rings upon it adorned with twining serpents.

This will be the strangest marriage the world has ever seen.

Kraideti, between Vindos and Lugus, majestic in a wedding dress woven from the winter flowers that survive on the mountain heights where even yetis cannot walk.

Vindos had conjured an icy crown and even on this most desolate of nights the fire of Lugus burned on his brow.

"Do you, Vindos, take me as your Winter Queen?"

"I do."

"Do you, Lugus, take me as your Summer Queen?"

"I do."

One ring on the finger of each rival and two on Kraideti's.

"From henceforth," spoke the Old Mother, "you will battle for Kraideti only at summer's end and winter's end."

A vision of his repeated defeat at the Middle Ford, the river red with his blood, from it the white flowers blooming. Another of hunting his rival down and scattering his blood across the land with the blood-red leaves.

"So you will be bound until the Day of Doom."

Appearing in the moon a silver wheel and sitting at it a goddess in a seamless and immaculate white dress, silver hair and brows, eyes pale and cold as the North Star.

"Aryanrhot," gasped Lugus, "my wicked mother. Don't say she has come here to put another fate upon me."

Aryanrhot downed her treadle with a silver-slippered foot.

"Spin, spin, Silver Wheel of Fortune,
spin, spin, Silver Wheel of Fate.

I sing of a moonless night,
of the making of four golden rings.

Hammer blow by hammer blow
of the bending of metal,

of the bending of fates.
Of two serpents intertwined,

the River of Time become a circle.
Two dragons of fire and ice,

two deadly rivals
bound by love and hate

upon the pinions of the Silver Wheel.
Rising, falling, waxing, waning,

like the dark and full moon.
The Great Queen

between them.
To her alone they bow.

So the seasons turn they will battle
until the end of the world.”

VI
The Son

The Corpse of an Eagle

Time passed. With the retreat of the glaciers the Followers of Vindos returned to the Valley of Winter. Then the trees. Wise trees. His favourite yew. Old now. Still, Vindos sat beneath the shadows of her boughs listening to tree talk, slow as sap, deeper than heart wood. *All her wisdom cannot help me defeat Lugus at winter's end.*

How hard he fought against his rival and the fate.

How hard he tried to pull the accursed ring from his finger. *Stuck, stuck fast, as if by the strongest of pine sap glue.*

Time passed. Generations and generations of people.

After another humiliating defeat, in human form, aware he shouldn't be in the world in summer, he went to the cave of his Inspired One to seek counsel from Winter Warrior.

"I cannot live like this any longer," he lamented.

She remained silent, hair black, peppered with grey, face harsh as the edges of the mountains. A crow cawed above.

"I have tried to kill Lugus with every weapon I can imagine - spears, swords, scythes, sickles, a twin-bladed axe…"

She listened diligently, nodding her head, enumerating, made no sign there were any he had missed.

"I have battled him as every animal, every dragon, serpent and monster of Annwn, monstrous things born from my imagination, near scared him to death, failed to win."

"If you cannot kill him as a dragon no beast will suffice."

"I have struck blows to the back of his head, to his temples, pierced his heart, his bowels, broken his back,

every bone in his body, severed all his arteries and his veins."

An expert in the arts of battle, several weapons at her belt, more hidden within her wolf furs, she had taught him their uses, of many blows, if she could think of no more…

"Not easy." She sang and slipped into her trance. "There." She pointed to a golden eagle soaring overhead. "You must bring me the corpse of an eagle and from its innards I will divine how you can kill the Invincible One."

*

It took Vindos several moons to find the dead body of an eagle. *Bad luck to shoot down one of the guardians of the eyries, the golden carrion-eaters of the skies, friends of Lugus.*

Two ravens had followed an old eagle with a hare in his mouth to his eyrie then descended and brought his death.

Taking raven form Vindos flew up swiftly to their feast. Luckily the hare was fatter and juicier than the tough bony eagle and they were busy in its belly when he arrived.

Surprise in their glinty-black eyes to see another raven in their territory but they reserved their courtesy and invited him to share in accord with the ways of their kind.

He revealed his identity as the King of Annwn. "I need more than a share of the eagle. You can have the eyes, what you want of the flesh, but I require the insides intact."

"That is far more than your share. We will take the heart, kidneys, and liver, you may have the bowels."

"That's all the tastiest bits! I will give you for each organ a golden thread to weave into your new nest on this rock."

"Very well, we will keep the bowels and stomach."

"For them I will give you a piece of the finest silk embroidered with golden stitches on which to lay your eggs."

"We want, at least, the gizzard." A raven pecked it out.

For some reason, not for any of the treasures of Annwn, "A golden ball, a net of golden baubles, a golden egg," would they give it up. Vindos could only guess it contained some kind of precious stone within the grit. Satisfied he had got the best bargain possible, he began his journey down the mountain, the heavy corpse in his arms.

*

Long his journey, down from the Eagle Mountains, across the Wooded Plains, fording the Reaping River. Into the Water Country, the Damp Oak Woodland, avoiding the boggy places marked by sphagnum moss, wading through patches of alder carr up to his thighs. Rowing across the Largest Lake. Over the Middle Ford. Up into the High Hills, climbing the peaks, past the High Lakes.

To his consternation, in the summer heat, the corpse began to decay and his magic could only delay its rotting. *Should be used to death-stink*. Seeing other carrion-eaters off. Finally, to the Sunlit Estuary, up the River of Mist to the White River and into the Valley of Winter at dusk.

Outside the cave of his Inspired One he plonked the corpse. All stiff. Once proud eagle head twisted to the side. Fat tongue protruding from the beak. Feathers still brown and golden but the matter inside well on its way to softness and stink. A few little maggots had got in and

were busy squirming away joyously at their cleaning work.

Serpents and dragons this is far from encouraging.

The dogs rushed out, barking, drawn by the stench, Winter Warrior following. Looking down her lip curled. "It's old." She poked at the innards. "They've gone squishy." After digging about, "And where is the gizzard?"

"It's the best I could do," Vindos replied grumpily.

"It will not," she warned him, "make for the clearest reading."

Still, she sang her song, entered her trance, stared into the innards with her black pupils then beyond. "He cannot be killed indoors or outdoors, on horseback or on foot."

"I already know that," Vindos growled.

"He must be killed between."

"I can't get more between than the Middle Ford."

"You must kill him with one blow."

"Ah," said Vindos, "perhaps that's where I have been going wrong. I always lose my temper and rain on him many blows." He pondered this. "Still something is missing."

"Like a gizzard?" she asked him disapprovingly.

Vindos spread his hands helplessly, "In and out of a raven by now."

"Well, we must work with what we've got," sighed Winter Warrior. "To strike one blow you are going to have to learn to hold back your hatred and control your temper."

"I fear I cannot. It's like asking a storm not to blow."

"Then you must find another to fight your battle for you."

Hunters in the Forest

Vindos searched for a warrior strong and patient enough to take his place in his battle against Lugus but found none.

Damn it the last day before the end of winter already.

"A white stag," reported his messengers, "in the Damp Oak Forest." "Seventeen tines to each antler." "Evading all."

There he was. Glistening white. Antlers like frosty boughs. Black liquid eyes like a pair of cauldrons. Strong prominent wither. Slanting shoulders. Legs straight and rigid. Cute little curls to his white fetlocks. Cloven hooves.

His eyes met the Hunter's in a long silent moment in which all stilled. The wind in the trees, the creaking of the boughs, the song of the birds, the chewing of the deer, the digging of the boar. A spider, in her web, stopped devouring her prey, turned all eight eyes to hunter and hunted.

Then the stag bounded off leaving his tracks in the mud. Vindos touched his heels to his horse's sides, let out his reins, loosed his hounds, yapping, baying, white red-eared flashes ahead of him. Noses to the ground, stag-whiff in their nostrils, gaining on him. Riding between trees, ducking boughs. Never, ever, getting his flowing white hair stuck in any twig or any branch no matter how low.

A glimpse of a dashing white rump. Loosening an arrow. *Got him in the flank.* The mighty stag flinched yet he ran on with the raven-feathered shaft hanging from him.

Faster, driven by fear, pain. Blood dripping. Hounds baying. *No chance he will get away*. Anticipation of the kill, the pulling down, the knifing, then the grallacking, the steaming of the innards on a white misty morn. *His*

head I will take and present to Kraideti as a gift on my return.

Then the yelps of his hounds turning from excitement to fury. At the Middle Ford the stag had gone down in the shallows and the dogs of another hunter were feeding on him.

Who has dared to break the first rule of hunting?

Seeing the Hounds of Annwn coming, the dogs, a motley bunch, shaggy and grey, fled, tails between their legs.

The huntsman did not run but stood paralysed. He was small, young, dark-haired, barely filled his hunting garments. A wet patch slowly spread to stain the front of his breeches as he realised he was facing the Hunter of Souls.

"You have broken my rule never to steal the prey of another."

"I'm sorry." Frightened brown eyes met his.

"What is your name?" asked Vindos.

"Anmen," he replied.

Patience. Vindos recalled the meaning of the name. *Perhaps* a *portent of a man who might strike only one blow.*

"I fear my failure to live up to my name may mean my end."

"Perhaps not. I shall not only spare your life but give you the chance to win my friendship if you grant me a favour."

Light returned to Anmen's despondent brown eyes.

"To make up for breaking my rule you will stand in for me as King of Annwn; live my life, lead my hunt, feast in my hall," swallowing his jealousy, "sleep with my wife."

Anmen gaped. "That sounds more like a reward."

“I haven’t finished yet for on the first day of summer you will fight my battle against my rival at the Middle Ford.”

Looking glum, “Then I must suffer your defeat?”

“No,” snapped Vindos tetchily, “not,” more gently, “if you follow my instructions carefully. You must wait until he stands in the midst of the ford then strike only one blow.”

Vindos held out his right hand and Anmen shook it. When they released their hands each was in the other’s form.

“Take good care of him,” said Vindos to his horse and hounds.

He whistled to the motley dogs. “Grey Ruff, White Ears, Shaggy Socks, Snuffles, Ruffles, White Breast, Bane.” They sat obediently at his feet. “From now on you won’t be running off without me so let’s return to the hunt.”

The Battle at the Ford

A year passed. Vindos took Anmen's place as the Leader of the Hunt in the Damp Oak Forest and it was not long until news of how well he hunted and governed his clan spread.

"Anmen's done better than you," reported his messengers. "Out-hunted you on the hunt." "Out-eaten and out-drunk you at the feast." "He hasn't lost a single ghost."

"As for in the bedroom…" they began to snigger.

"Don't tell me," Vindos snapped, "I don't want to know."

*

This will be the first day in millennia I do not don my armour and suffer my humiliating defeat at the Middle Ford.

Still, Vindos was nervous as he led Anmen's clan to mass with his other followers on the north bank of the ford whilst the Followers of Lugus massed on the south bank.

Cheers erupting from his people in wolf furs and raven feathers as Anmen, in his form, rode down from the skies.

He wears my armour well but has not my battle-fury.

Kraideti rode beside him majestic in her hawthorn flower dress but her lips were pressed as if hiding some hurt.

By the Abyss he'd best not have mistreated my beloved.

Then, to louder applause, from the people in lynx furs and eagle feathers arrived Lugus golden-armoured and bold.

Is it me or is he missing some of his inner light?

The strangest of battles. Clumsy. Lacking ferocity. Anmen, true to his name, attacked not, parried, lured Lugus into the middle of the ford to the cost of boos from the crowd, then once he got him there struck a killing blow.

Gasps as the black sword pierced the heart of Lugus and with it in his chest he fell backwards into the waters. Swirl of blood, his enemy motionless, hilt marking his fall.

"No." The people muttered. "It can't be." "He's invincible." "On the first day of summer our king can't die."

But, for the first time in memory, Lugus stayed dead.

"Congratulations!" Vindos cried to break the malaise and strode to shake hands with Anmen and return their forms.

"Lugus is dead." He pulled his sword from his rival's body and held it, dripping blood, into the air. "Our rivalry is at an end and Kraideti will be my queen forever."

"I will not," Kraideti stared at him in anger and disgust, "not after you shunned me for a year in bed and have now broken your promise, our wedding vows, the fate."

Shunned her for a year in bed that can only mean… He looked to Anmen. *My friend was more loyal than I thought.*

"I'm sorry," Vindos told her, "I can explain."

"No," she replied, "I have had enough of your deceits. I must have a Summer King and summer must come. I have heard of a human huntsmen in the Damp Oak Forest who rides like the wind, ruts like a stag, hunts like a wolf."

She is looking at Anmen. What a knot I have tied for myself.

The Barren Queen

Vindos rewarded Anmen's friendship with Annuvian gifts. "A horse, a hound, a hawk for keeping my hunt. A plate and a cup for keeping my feast. And because you did not sleep with my wife I will give you a single kiss."

No-one, least of all Anmen, knew the meaning of that kiss.

By lips' touch I will keep my raven-eye on all he does.

*

"You should be seeking marriage," Anmen's mother advised her son. "Has no woman in our camp caught your eye?"

"None in this camp."

"What about the camp beside the Largest Lake?"

"None there, or in the High Hills, or in the Low Lands."

"Is there nobody who can match your expectations?"

"Only one, from a land far away, but she is far too beautiful to look upon with her green skin, her green jewel."

"Oh my son, too many young men have pined away longing for the Queen of Annwn, beyond reach."

"I know, I am being foolish, what would you have me do?"

"I suggest you do as your fathers before you have done to discern who to take as a wife. Go and sit the night on the Green Hill on the Water and pray for guidance."

*

As Anmen prayed on the green hill he was distracted by the sound of silver bells ringing from all directions but none.

On the night air a white mare prancing, there, gone.

"Just illusions… ancestors advise me on a wife."

"She will come at sunrise," a voice as close as breath.

Birdsong. The most beautiful blackbird song. Golden beaks. A mist circling the green hill at dawn. Silver ringing.

There, a woman on a white horse, secretive, veiled. Little silver bells on her fingers and toes, long wedding gown. She turned, beckoned to Anmen with an enticing finger.

My beloved working all the enchantments of Annwn. Vindos watched the familiar chase with pain and regret.

Anmen mounted his white horse and rode after Kraideti, silver bells tinkling in the dawn skies like the laughter of the fair folk, as she led him through the forest and into the High Hills, the faster he rode getting further away.

As they approached Noon Hill finally he begged her, "Stop."

On the summit she halted her horse and dismounted.

Dismounting he approached her humbly. "Are you…?"

In the full light of the noon day sun she lifted her veil.

Her dazzling beauty brought Anmen to his knees. Prostrating himself he kissed the bells on her toes reverently.

"Will you marry me?" asked Kraideti.

"Yes," his voice was a disbelieving whisper.

*

At first Anmen's people loved his mysterious new bride. They treated her like a goddess laying garlands of flowers

at her feet, gifting her fine jewellery, composing her songs.

But, after a year when there was no child and the summer was muggy and hot they began to mutter among themselves.

"Why is there no baby?"

"Why is this summer so very warm?"

"Who is she? Where does she come from?"

After two years when there was no child and the fruits and berries were sour and everything stank of stale sweat the people began to give voice to darker suspicions.

"Nobody knows where she is from."

"She might be one of them." "The other folk." "From Annwn."

After three years when there was no child and the fruits rotted and the people were plagued with mosquitoes and afflicted by the shaking sickness they cursed.

"Still no baby."

"It's her. She's from the other side."

"This wedding is not a blessing but a curse."

*

Vindos, to his chastisement and amusement, knew why there was no child for every night he observed Anmen stroking Kraideti's curves and telling her beautiful she was with a boyish blush before turning his back on her in bed.

It's not her it's him. The romantic sot doesn't know how to get a woman pregnant. This means I must step in.

*

Vindos took raven form and waited in an oak for his moment.

When Anmen left the feast to relieve himself Vindos shifted into his own form and stepped from behind the oak. Seeing Vindos he strove frantically to fasten his trousers although the look in his eyes said he was already dead.

Why, at the last, do men care more for dignity than safety?

Anmen won the struggle and looked Vindos in the eye. "I know why you're here," he spoke downcast. "That for my betraying you by marrying your queen you are going to take my soul and torture me in Annwn for eternity."

"On the contrary," said Vindos with a disarming smile, "you, my firm friend, my good ally, have done me a favour for my beloved refused to bear myself or my rival a child and this provides the perfect opportunity."

Anmen looked confused. "I'm not sure I…"

Vindos waved a bottle of mead. "Drink with me." He poured two large cups, patted a fallen oak trunk companionably. "Sit and let us have a little man to man. I heard you need advice on what to do with a woman in the bedroom."

Once their cup and their conversation was ended Anmen was swaying, his head spinning, not just from the mead.

"Now," Vindos poured each another large cup, "let us drink to my hunt." He drained his in one and Anmen followed.

"Let us drink to my feast," Vindos poured again, each drank deep.

"And now," he poured the last, "let us drink to my wife."

If Anmen saw a hint of malice in the eyes of his drinking partner it was swiftly forgotten for after the last cup he slumped into a drunken stupor and Vindos took his form.

He made his way to the marital hut with more than a slight sway in his step weaving his way through the trees. Staggering through the door he awoke Kraideti, embraced her, kissed her full on the lips with his usual ardour.

"Anmen what is this?" she spoke surprised and enlivened, "it is most unlike you and what is that familiar taste?"

"I have been drinking the Mead of Vindos. The King of Annwn met me in the woods and gave me his greatest gift."

"How strange," said Kraideti, "I wonder why he would…"

"Best not to question his mysterious ways. Let us simply be grateful for his generosity and the effect for tonight I am feeling frisky and think we might conceive a baby."

The Son

Nine long moons Vindos awaited the birth of his son. Somewhere deep within he knew it would be a divine boy.

The pregnancy cheered the people greatly but the summer stretched out long and as the birth approached to the concern of all Kraideti was afflicted with the shaking sickness.

Vindos again took Anmen's form and sat beside his beloved as her human form was wracked by fever and chills.

"Is that you Anmen?" "Or is that you Vindos?"

Guilt at his games as he guessed some part of her knew.

As her labour pains began and the birthing women circled her, "Are these friends?" "Or are they demons?" "What are these horrid long shadows around me with claws?"

Frightened whispers amongst the women at her madness.

Terrible her labours and terrible her screams as Kraideti was wracked by wave after wave of pain to no reprieve.

"Is it breached?" The women stood at the end of her bed staring into the unknown between her legs. "What if isn't a boy or girl but a horse or calf or monster of Annwn?"

Those concerns were on the mind of Vindos too.

"It matters not what it is but that she delivers it alive." Tightly he held her hand offering her his life with each push.

"I… can't push… anymore…"

Vindos sensed her soul slipping away.

"Yes you can," he held her, pulled her back into her body.

One more push, one more scream, more blood on the sheets and the birthing women gasping, “It’s a…” “it’s a…”

“What is it?” growled Vindos every muscle tense.

“It’s a boy.” “With sun-bright hair.” “A smile to melt the stars.”

*

“My son,” Kraideti took him in her arms, put him to her breast.

Holding her little sunbeam restored her to health.

“Our divine boy,” she smiled, “let us name him Maponos.”

Joy in the camp as the people doted over the new-born son. Showers of gifts; little trinkets of sinew and bone, blankets, swaddling clothes, tiny shoes sewn from soft hides.

On the third night, satisfied his beloved and his son were safe, Vindos returned to his own form and to Annwn.

*

“The baby’s gone,” reported the messengers.

“Gone?” Vindos blanched.

“Not exactly,” they spoke shiftily, “he’s been eaten.”

“I am beginning to have grave doubts about your tales.”

“By Kraideti.” “She went mad in the night and tore him apart with her claws then she swallowed down the pieces.”

“That’s it! For your lies I’m sending you back to the Abyss!”

“It’s the truth.” “Her birthing women fell asleep in the night.” “When they awoke they found the baby gone.”

“And Kraideti with blood round her mouth and under her nails.”

“That’s obscene.” Yet Vindos saw it in his clear sight.

“Up!” “Murderer!” “Cannibal!” The messengers imitated the birthing women. “They dragged her out and the clan prepared to beat her to death yet Anmen stepped in.” “Don’t harm my wife. She is sick and acted from madness.”

“She must be punished.” The messengers imitated the crowd. “As she rides a white horse let her serve as a horse.” “Carry visitors from the look-out post to camp.” “Telling her story.”

Kraideti stripped, on her hands and knees, her long hair lank and caked with mud and filth as her riders jeered, kicking her with their heels, pulling on her dark mane.

“What calumniation!” Vindos was furious. “She cannot have eaten our son for I have not been called to gather his soul.”

The Monstrous Claw

As Vindos drew near to the camp his attention was caught by the sound of a girl crying. He followed it to the glade where she sat, sobbing, her head in her hands. Beside her was Kraideti's white mare, tethered to a post, circling in distress, whinnying, milk seeping from full udders.

Seeing his approach the girl gasped and nearly bolted.

"It's ok," Vindos reassured her, "I'm here to help." He calmed the mare, stroking her nose, patting her shoulder.

"She likes you." The girl too was calmed.

"Now tell me what happened here."

"It was horrible! Kraideti's mare had a foal, white with a dark mane, two nights he remained at her side, on the third…"

"Go on."

"You won't believe me."

"I am the King of Annwn and the unbelievable is my domain."

"A… a… huge and monstrous claw," she stuttered, "big enough to grasp a foal snatched him away into the dark."

*

"A clawed one," said the messengers.

Claws like iron.
Hide the best-honed
blade cannot cut through.
Hairs on his back like wires of steel.
Taller than the shadows of trees.
Like a shadow he came from
the darkness of Annwn
to snatch the foal.

Claws like blades.
Hide tougher than rocks.
Scars and welts like obsidian.
Taller than the shadows of mountains.
Like a shadow he came from
the darkness of Annwn
to snatch your son.

"He took them to the caves of the red winged serpents."

There they slither and sprawl,
red scaly bellies scraping,
flickering tongues,
the Fires of Annwn in
their hungry eyes preparing
to devour your son and the foal.

*

Vindos made his way down the long dark tunnels where the breath lights glow - serpent skulls lit by red flames.

Fear for his son and anger vied within him. *This time the clawed ones and red winged serpents have gone too far.* Hand on his sword. Not often was he forced to kill his own. *Or, perhaps, this time, they will lure me to my end.*

As he walked he was surprised to hear the intimations of the deepest most beautiful music he had ever heard. More enchanting than the songs of the dark blue serpents, of the fair folk, of Teirtu at her harp, of any song in his hall.

It evoked the birth of the stars, the eyes of giants singing star-songs and living in love and in peace, long before they lit their forges and went to war. A song that

could lull those first giants to sleep winking out one by one.

Vindos yawned and recognised Annuvian magic.

Whoever is playing these masterful chords that could put the whole universe to sleep and even the old mother herself?

From the serpent caves shone a luminous sun-like light.

This song, of the birth of the sun, of my grandfather Bel, when he was all laughter and delight. Before he was known as Scorcher and the evils of his burning eye led to the forging of its golden lid, later raised lovingly, to shine upon the world. This song could put the sun to sleep.

Entering the cave, near-blinded by the light, *my son.*

His hair was pale as the palest straw.
His eyes were blue as the sky
at summer's height.
His cheeks were pink as campion.
His smile could melt the hardest giant's heart
and make the hardest mountain bow his craggy top.

My miracle child is sitting astride a miracle colt.

The foal was white as the whitest sea foam.
His mane was dark as the gaps
between the stars.
His hooves were round
and shiny as the mussels in the far seas.
By the strength of his shoulder and the round
of his haunch he will be swift as the swiftest wave.

My miracle child is playing a golden harp.

The harp was golden as his son's birthing band.
It was strung from the hairs of his

white dark-maned foal.
Its chords were far sweeter
than the honey in the Mead of Vindos.
It was tuned to the keys of the Key Keeper
who keeps the keys of the Song of the Universe.

All around Maponos the red winged serpents slept and amongst them, like a fallen mountain, lay the clawed one. With a sweep of his sword Vindos cut off the monstrous claw.

*

What joy. The white mare untethered. His beloved released from the look-out post to look upon her divine son.

"He's alive and filled with magic. So much magic."

She stared at Vindos in disbelief for she did not know he was the son of the King of Annwn not her human husband. "How did you…? Why did you…? After I left you…?"

"I love you and I love your shining son. I will return at midwinter with gifts for you, Anmen, Maponos, for all."

VII
The Golden Bowl

The Joys of Maponos

How quickly Maponos grew, out-growing the other boys in his camp, out-hunting them on the hunt, out-feasting them at the feast, by his smile remaining in favour with all.

With his harp he enchanted both the living and dead.

When Anmen died Vindos said to Kraideti, "Maponos cannot remain as the Leader of the Hunt in the Damp Oak Forest. He is too big for this world. He deserves a better fate."

"What do you propose?" she asked.

"I shall adopt him as my own son. Let's take him to Annwn."

*

Happy halcyon days blue as kingfishers teaching his son to fish.

Riding together on the hunt for the Chief of Boars to win the comb and shears he mysteriously hid between his ears.

Maponos playing his harp alongside Teirtu in his hall.

All the fair folk loved him and Vindos turned a blind eye as his son danced amongst them winning lover after lover.

The doves flocked around him.

The hawks knew him as their only master.

The rainbow showed him the joys in her beyonds.

He was the favourite of the huntsmen and the hunted. The deer and their fauns, the swine and their piglets, the ducks and their golden ducklings followed wherever he led.

See how he charms the rats from the basement of my fort.

The dead followed him more willingly than they followed Vindos and his deep music quenched their wrath.

*

"It mystifies me," said Kraideti to Vindos as they lay in his bed, "where our son's eternal youth and charms come from."

"All from you," lied Vindos, "my majestic wife."

Knock, knock, knock. Three sharp raps on the fortress door.

No, it can't be. But Vindos recognised that knock.

"Vindos son of Nodens."

No, not that voice.

"I, Victor grandson of Scorcher…"

"Lugus," Kraideti gasped, "however…"

"I know not." Vindos put on his trousers and tore down.

Right there, outside the fortress door, his rival. As alive as ever, in his golden armour, flames around his sword.

"How are you back from the dead?" Vindos demanded.

"I'm not the only one who indulges in a little shapeshifting," said Lugus with a knowing look as Kraideti arrived, breathless, pulling a comb through her hair.

He knew my game and sent a man to the ford in his form.

"Whatever does he mean?" Kraideti asked Vindos.

"This time you are truly going to die in our battle at the Middle Ford," Vindos growled, shifting into a wolf as his rival shifted into a lynx, chasing him from Annwn's depths.

The Fortress of Nine Jaws

Time passed. Winters and Summers. Kraideti here and gone. Maponos going with her leaving Annwn empty and cold.

Uidianos teaching his magicians the secrets of the stars at the stone circles and the knowledge of the trees in the oaken groves and fear and suspicions surrounding his plots.

Skirmishes between gods and giants not coming to much.

Another long hot summer. Vindos strode uneasily up and down his fortress walls a tight ball of suspicion in his belly.

He sent his messengers out again and again but little news.

"The stars burn no brighter." "The forests are easeful." "Too easeful." "Except the forest at the Fortress of Nine Jaws."

But trees have not grown outside that fort since…

A chill shivered up the spine of Vindos and back down.

*

Vindos recalled many moons ago gathering the giant's soul.

Nine-jawed was he and nine-jawed his fortress.

Within it he not only ate the flesh of humans and drank their blood. His vessel, a golden bowl, in which he had descried countless wonders he had made a source of horrors; by warping the Giant's Letters an instrument of torture.

Many souls Vindos had gathered, their bodies cold and skeletal, their hands stuck to the golden bowl, their

mouths stretched in silent agony as they stared into its depths.

Vindos had felt a certain grim satisfaction when he'd found the giant dead, his corpse rotten, his huge hands glued to the bowl, all nine jaws open in one silent scream.

A victim of his own vessel - the death he deserves.

He hadn't questioned the circumstances.

Even in death, by way of the horrors in the bowl, by the darkest madness, the nine jaws of his spirit were silenced.

Vindos had taken him to the deepest reaches of Annwn and chained him amongst the Underworld Giants, those he would never set free even at the end of the world.

No tree had grown near the Fortress of Nine Jaws since.

"Nine Jaws is dead," said Vindos, "some other power moves that forest and I suspect the trickery of Uidianos."

The Council of the Giants

Vindos flew with the ravens of Bran to where the giants were assembling at the stone circle known as the Giant's Dance.

Huge, their leader, tall as any mountain, his beard an alder grove around the damp groove of his mouth and all the alder trees from the carr woodlands gathered around him.

On the crags of Bran's shoulders his ravens perched.

From all directions giants approached, hills, mountains, with their trees, the land moving. Forests marched.

What a gathering. Vindos was struck by awe.

"Brothers and sisters," Bran addressed his brethren. "I fear we are approaching the end of the Peace of the Giants."

"Aye." "Aye." Nods of stony faces and craggy heads.

"Attacks upon our hill forts and mountain seats."

"Magicians at our circles stealing secrets of the stars."

"Uidianos has taught them the language of the trees and it is said he hungers for knowledge of our Giant's Letters."

"I have graver news," continued Bran, "Nefen is dead."

"Nefen." "Nine Jaws." "We heard rumours he'd…"

"Turned bad," Bran nodded solemnly, "perhaps not of his own doing. He was found dead at his Golden Bowl and Uidianos has taken his fort and surrounded it with a forest."

"The Magician's doing." "That is it." "This means war!" Voices rolling like boulders down mountainsides.

"Not so quick," croaked Vindos, flying down into the centre of the circle and taking his own form, "I fear it's a trap."

“You know our laws.” “An attack on one is an attack on all.”

For all his arguments Vindos could not dissuade them.

“Let the hills, the mountains, the forests march.” “Let us carve our Giant’s Letters onto our shields and weapons.”

“Some must stay,” said Bran, “to keep watch on the stars.”

“I will,” said Idris. Others, “I,” “and I,” “and I.”

“Will we have your aid?” Bran asked Vindos.

“Yes.” “We did help build your kingdom.” Calls from others.

“Sorry,” Vindos spoke reluctantly, “but I cannot. I should not be out in summer and I promised my mother not to release the fury of the spirits of Annwn upon the world.”

“Then at least your followers and your son?”

“My followers yes but Maponos is a harpist not a warrior.”

Yet Vindos spoke too late for into the circle poured a golden glow and beautiful song as his radiant son approached and exchanged his harp for a bow and arrows.

“Blessed Raven,” he sunk to one knee, “I will be your swiftest shooter, defend you and our forests, will not fail you.”

The Battle of the Trees

How my messengers delight in describing the battle scene.

"The forests of the giants marched to the Fortress of Nine Jaws." "Uidianos and his magicians awakened their trees."

Oak woke first with a mighty groan.
Ash stretched his yawning frame to the heavens.
Hawthorn awoke skittish unable to find her thorns.
Willow was rough from his slumber.
Aspen could not stop trembling.
Birch, usually at the forefront, staggered in late
struggling under the weight of his armour.
Blackthorn came shaking a twig
and complaining about her rude awakening.

"Lugus raised his battle-cry shining bright at summer's height."

"The giants advanced, Bran clashing his spear on his alder shield and Maponos loosing golden arrows from behind."

Swift as birds the arrows of Maponos.
A multitude like golden raindrops.
Their beaks were sharp.
But none struck the Invincible One.

"Bough clashed with bough." "Limb was torn from limb." "Trunks fell." "Sap and blood ran." "Trees groaned."

"The fight between Bran and Lugus was fierce until the Magician stepped in, took out his wand, sang a spell-song."

The spear you carry
is nothing but an alder sprig,
the shield you bear but battered bark.

By the ravens upon
your shoulders I know your name
is Bran and you will be their battle-fodder.

"Lugus drove his spear into Bran's thigh and the giant fell."

"No," gasped Vindos, "if the head falls…"

"The body follows," nodded the messengers.

"What has become of Maponos?"

"Shot down." "Taken prisoner." "Kraideti too."

*

I must have clear sight on this. Vindos tasted a drop of awen from his cauldron and stared deep into its starry depths.

The head of the giants falling, the body crumpling, the deaths of mountains. The forests he loved riven, cleaved, fallen boughs, forlorn trunks, followers wading through blood.

The fortress with gateways like jaws with darkness and danger in each of its corridors and in its darkest chamber…

Maponos and Kraideti hands stuck to the Golden Bowl.

Still they stood, faces twisted in silent agony, as they stared into it enduring the endless horrors that once were wonders.

"I know this for a trap to draw me out in the midst of summer against my promise to my mother but I will not abide the torment of my wife and son at the Golden Bowl."

Vindos donned his armour, his battle-fog, his fury.

Call every one of my people to take up weapons!
Summon every serpent and monster of Annwn!
Let my wrathful ones from their prisons!
Tell Diwrnarch to bring my cauldron
so the dead can be reborn!

*

By night, by darkness, by fog Vindos led his armies into the world - a vanguard of terror as yet unseen by human eyes.

His sword at the forefront bringing death from the mists.

*S*erpents wrapping the trees and pulling them down.

Monsters capturing battalions in their throats and napes.

Wrathful ones touch colder than mid-winter's morn.

When his people met their end they were taken to the cauldron, thrown in, returned as fierce only unable to speak.

Terrible to look upon those ranks of the speechless dead.

Sure he was winning Vindos created his shape-in-the-mist and imbued it with his intelligence with a drop of blood.

"Go well my shape to deceive Lugus Skilful-Hand."

*

Vindos slipped as mist between the falling boughs of the trees.

He approached the fort with its looming walls, nine doors with teeth like a giant's, made his way to the ninth jaw.

"You are going to a dark place no song can reach."

That warning voice, neither in my ears of in my mind, sounds like Maponos but is more likely a trick of the fortress.

"Enter and the ninth jaw will close behind you for eternity."

"You don't frighten me," Vindos spoke defiantly.

As a slither of mist he passed between the giant's teeth and they slammed shut leaving him in utter darkness. Shaking off battle-weariness he shifted back into his own form.

"I have escaped the Abyss. Mine is the mastery of prisons and dark places. This fortress holds no fear for me."

"You have not seen what I have seen. Here be monsters."

Vindos brushed off the voice like cobwebs and went down the long corridors, the flights of stairs, cursed when he saw the shadows thickening, heard the scraping of claws.

Clawed ones come for vengeance for their brother.

"Go back, return, to Annwn's darkness!"

They did not obey and when he had run their gauntlet his blade was slick with dark and sticky blood, his armour was torn and he was bleeding in countless places.

"I told you it was a trap," the gloomy voice.

Vindos opened the door to the darkest chamber, slammed it shut against the scraping claws, leant against it.

Torches burnt in braziers, eerily illuminating the tarnished surface of the golden bowl, its twisted letters. And standing there, on the dull marble slab, with their hands gripping the rim, his wife and son. She in her dress of summer flowers, he in hunting garments with bow and quiver.

Frozen. Perfect but for the arrow in Maponos's arm. Their expressions more horrible than those of who gazed too long into the Abyss in their darkest nightmares and it won.

"Kraideti," he shook her shoulders, "Maponos," shook his.

Still they stared, eyes wide and white, into the horrors.

I dare not peel their fingers from the rim for fear of separating their bodies from where their tortured minds roam.

The only solution is to enter the illusion to bring them home.

When Vindos put his hands on the golden bowl he realised he was alone.

The Golden Bowl

It's just an illusion, thought Vindos, but that didn't make it hurt any less. Every morning he awoke to fight his battle against Lugus at the Middle Ford and every evening he lost and was dragged to the Fortress of Nine Jaws.

There, in the darkest chamber, every night he was tortured to death with claws and jaws and serpent venoms.

Sometimes Uidianos made it worse by letting him choose.

When he refused to beg for the end the Magician led in Maponos, killed the youth, force-fed his heart to his father.

No real torture but for it being the wrong way round. No father should be forced to witness the death of his own son!

Every night he died not of his wounds but of a broken heart and who should come to piece it back together but Maponos.

"It's just an illusion born from the golden bowl."

His son sat beside him, took up his harp, played the deep music; the song of the stars, of water rushing from the cauldron, of starships sailing across the unfathomable ocean.

Maponos soothed his father's mind and took him beyond the horrors of the accursed vessel into the deepest sleep.

Yet when Vindos awoke it all started over again.

Shapes-in-the-Mist

"This could all end if only you tell me the Secret of Death."

The Magician's face merciless as the silver sky.

"You know I cannot speak it as Kraideti cannot speak the Secret of Life - you'd be better asking my speechless dead."

Vindos did not know how long he could continue to endure.

"It's just an illusion," the reminder of Maponos.

Somewhere beyond these horrors my wife and son live on.

Once again Vindos reached out to his shape-in-the-mist.

*

The shape-of-Vindos sat brooding in the mist on Winter Hill.

He'd lost the battle. Seen the monsters driven back to Annwn. The kingdom raided. The oxen yoked and forced to draw a harrow across the blood and bones of the battlefield, Lugus walking behind it scattering the stolen seed.

The gods had celebrated their ridding the green island of giants and trees, taking their hill forts, their circles of stone.

But I have cast a pall upon their promised harvest.

On the command of Vindos he had cast an enchantment on the land, ensorcelling it with mist, with Kraideti and Maponos sent a plague of mice to eat the crops.

The appearance of his master's wife and son at the golden bowl had been a trick of the Magician's and they

had taken the form of mice and were ring-leading the assault.

To his satisfaction not a sheath of barley without a mouse upon it, ghost white, clinging to stalks with strong dexterous tails, munching inexorably with small sharp teeth.

Uidianos and Lugus still chased them through the fields.

Enough games, the voice of Vindos, *I cannot defeat the golden bowl, turn its horrors into wonders, need your help.*

*

"Uidianos caught Kraideti and Maponos by their tails," the messengers imitated, cackling, "put them in his gloves."

The shape-of-Vindos shivered torn between two needs.

"He's taken Kraideti to the Green Hill to be hung." "He's erecting a scaffold made of two forks a twig across it." "He's tying a string around her neck even as we speak."

I cannot allow my master's wife to suffer such a fate.

The shape-of-Vindos went to the Green Hill where he shifted form into a white-robed grey-bearded magician.

"Good day," he spoke, "whatever are you doing here?"

"I am hanging a thief," Uidianos replied.

"I see a mouse. This is most unbefitting for a god high as you."

"I caught it stealing and the punishment for theft is death."

"I will give you a golden coin if you allow it to go."

"No. I will neither sell nor release it."

"Three golden coins."

"No."

"Seven golden coins… twenty four golden coins… all the horses of Annwn and all the baggage ever carried by them."

"No. I want the enchantment removed from this land."

"Very well but only if you release not only the mouse who is hanging on the scaffold but the mouse in your glove."

"You seem awfully desperate for their release."

"That is because," he returned to his own guise, "I am the Grey King, the shape-of-Vindos, these mice are his wife and son and I will not remove the enchantment unless you free him from the torments of the golden bowl."

"Too late," spat the Magician, "Vindos is dead."

"Vindos must be dead because you're fading," said Kraideti.

The shape looked down at his diminishing limbs.

"Whilst you're with us there is hope," said Maponos.

The shape led them through the ninth jaw into the fortress to where the clawed ones lurked in the blood-drenched shadows and the light of Maponos drove them back.

Finally they arrived in the darkest chamber where Vindos slumped, gaunt, emaciated, his hair whiter than ever before and his knuckles whiter in their death-grip on the rim of the golden bowl, his eyes still wide in silent agony.

"He's dead," said Kraideti heart-broken, "we're too late."

"You're the Bringer of Life and I have my music," said Maponos. "Let us enter the illusion and bring him home."

*

Vindos had chosen death rather than giving away its secret.

Defeated by his failure to turn horrors into wonders, he had chosen the end over returning to another tortured day.

Death, a release, spirit drifting, back to the Abyss…

What's this? No, not another illusion, more treachery. Kraideti and Maponos coming to put my broken heart together again, returning it to my chest, singing me back. Kraideti's treacherous lips breathing into me the Breath of Life.

"No, not again," Vindos spoke with a croaky voice.

“We’re real,” said Kraideti, “we entered the spell to save you.”

“You fools! We will all be trapped here now and there will be no-one to look after my kingdom and gather the dead.”

“Three minds are better than one,” spoke Maponos. “We are family, wield the magic of Annwn, together we have the power to turn back the warping of the golden bowl.”

“I already tried and failed… I failed… there’s no hope left.”

“Father, do not give up for yours is an awesome destiny.”

Maponos took up his golden harp and played a song born from the cauldron at the beginning of the universe.

There’s a sea behind a river,
behind a brook, behind a stream,
and when the stars within it gather
he will guide the dead back home.

There’s an ocean in the cauldron
where the stars began to burn
and as our candlelight grows dimmer
he will guide the dead back home.

His is an infinite vocation
in those dark and starry seas
and when the stars depart their stations
he will guide the dead back home.

When the seas are black and bloody
and the stars are but black holes
all souls to him he’ll gather -
he will guide the dead back home.

When the cauldron's but a memory,
seas and stars are but a dream,
all souls in him he'll gather -
he will guide the dead back home.

To the Song of Maponos the walls of the prison crumbled.

For the first time in an eternity Vindos saw the stars he was destined to reap and he added his voice to the song.

Kraideti joined and together they shattered the golden bowl.

VIII
The Chase of the Pigs

The Nightmares of Vindos

After he had recovered Vindos banished the Fortress of Nine Jaws from the land, wrapping it in mist, with a tumultuous crash delivering it into the misty hinterlands where lost souls walk with wandering stones and stray clouds.

He assigned to it a wraith of mist, a mist-born guardian. “Let none enter, even me, until the end of the world.”

He succeeded in banishing it from the land but not his dreams. All too often he was back there again in the chamber with the face of Uidianos merciless above him. The visage of Taranis the Thunderer with his chariot wheels, men being broken upon them, he and his rival on the Silver Wheel, one rising, one falling, the victims of fate.

Vindos and Lugus on the Wood Sense board with wooden men and the Magician above playing them against one another with lightning flashing from his wand.

Waking with a scream, sweating, trembling, fearing it was all still an illusion and he was still in the golden bowl.

“It’s over,” repeatedly Kraideti reassured him.

Whilst she was there her kisses and embraces kept the nightmares, the flashbacks, the dark thoughts and doubts at bay and the music of Maponos calmed his troubled mind.

“Summer approaches. You both must return soon.”

“But my love…” “But father…”

“I must learn to stand on my own two feet again.”

*

More nightmares. Awakening with a scream to wake the dead.

What has become of me? He strode up and down his bed chamber cursing and lamenting his weakness. *My shape-in-the-mist, but a spectre, is more of a man than me.*

We won, I'm free, yet Uidianos still has power over me.

Vindos slammed his fist into the wall, bloodying his knuckles and leaving a gaping great hole but felt no better.

Damn him. I'm allowing him drive me to insanity.

Unable to deal with his struggles alone he summoned Carngrun and rode to the world to consult his Inspired One.

*

"Vindos, I heard the rumours."

The face of Crow Born was gnarly as a crow's, her eyes as black and her hair adorned with feathers of dead crows.

Vindos told her his story including what he'd hid from Kraideti. She listened unflinchingly, with sympathy but without pity, as he recited each of the horrors he had endured.

He spoke his worst fears at the end. "Alone I failed to break the golden bowl suggesting it was Uidianos not Nine Jaws who warped the magic and he is stronger than I am."

"He is the greatest magician in the universe."

"I've never been afraid of anyone before."

"I have many a cure in this cave," Crow Born pointed to jars of her herbs and bottles of potions in the alcoves, "for coughs, colds, fevers, nausea, shakes, nightmares…"

"You could treat the symptoms but not the cause."

“I regret to tell you,” she spoke wryly, “I have no cure for fear.”

“Fear.” The word a familiar meat. “Is that all this is?”

“If I had the cure for fear, some miracle tuft of fur or a feather or dust made from a bat’s wing, would you take it?”

“No. It has helped me stay alive and has helped me live.”

“Then live with it, listen to it, but let it master you no longer.”

The Chase of the Pigs

Once Vindos had made his peace with his fear his nightmares eased. He returned to the world to hunt the dead and to hunt down his rival fiercer than ever before.

He feared less for himself than for Maponos. *The Magician must know that his song broke the golden bowl.* Not only that, with the music of his harp, with illusions of bright light he was winning the followers of the bright gods.

For his aid Vindos had gifted Maponos with a herd of Annuvian pigs. Everywhere he led them he created a new story for the land, with new place-names delighting the huge entourage with horses and baggage who followed him.

"The Harper on the Hills." "The Light of the North."

How they worship the sun of my life and how his bards sing.

It was rumoured Maponos had mastered the art of gifting his awen to his chosen ones with magical hawks who flew into them and lifted them upon the wings of poesy.

"Those who shine brightest rarely sing longest."

Whose is that voice? Is it my own recounting of one of the sayings of my Inspired Ones or the crows who fly above?

*

"The pigs of Maponos have been stolen," the messengers flew in.

A sense of dread like the coming storm.

"Who by?" Vindos demanded.

"A storyteller." "And his apprentice." "His illusions were far grander than the illusions of Maponos."

One hundred horses prancing
with the gracefulness
of swans
swimming the Shining River.

One hundred hounds barking
with the grandeur
of geese
soaring the winter wind-paths.

One hundred collars
and one hundred leashes
made from the gold of the sun.

One hundred sets of golden spurs.
Golden stirrups and stitching
on every single saddle.

"These arts I will teach you in exchange for your pigs."

"But they were a gift from my father…"

"You value these dirty pigs more than mastery of your art?"

"No. I must hold my favour as the Bright One on the Hills."

"The pigs led the storyteller's apprentice a merry chase down into Swine Valley where they trampled him at Swine Ford, through the Camp of the Pigs wrecking it amok, down to Hog Bottom, up to Hog Top, then to Hunter's Hill where, unlike you, he failed to wrestle Peblo."

"I know that route," Vindos recalled chasing them.

"Then, finally down to Swine Fold, where he penned them."

"When Maponos realised it was a trick he followed to the fold, on the bank of the Shining River, and the

storyteller challenged him to a competition to win them back."

"That's no storyteller and apprentice but Uidianos and Lugus in disguise!" exclaimed Vindos. "Tell Kraideti to meet me on Hunter's Hill for Maponos is in grave danger."

The Storyteller

In human guises Vindos and Kraideti rode down from Hunter's Hill to Swine Fold where gathered a crowd from far and wide to witness the contention of the two bards.

"Maponos!" "Maponos!" Cheers for his son.

"Who is this Storyteller?" The people were perplexed yet enchanted by the magnificent figure in his robes of all the swirling colours of the rainbow conjuring golden birds.

"I will begin," the Storyteller spoke with a sweeping gesture of his long sleeves, "with a tale about the Divine Youth."

"Yes!" "Yes!" "A Maponogi!" cheered the crowd.

"You all know the story of how he was snatched at birth by the Monstrous Claw but Vindos brought him back?"

"Yes!" "Yes!" "We know that one tell us another."

"Have you ever wondered at the fondness of Vindos for the son of his wife and Anmen and the strangeness of his special friendship with the human who slept with her?"

"Yes!" "Yes!" Great curiosity. "Tell us more."

No, thought Vindos, *he's going to reveal my deepest secret.*

The Storyteller told the story. "When, after three years, Anmen did not get his wife pregnant, Vindos appeared in the woods with the finest bottle of mead. One cup, two cups, three…" he conjured them, "then Anmen fell down drunk, Vindos took his form, entered his wife's bed."

"Like a demon lover!" "Just like his fair folk!"

Kraideti paled and glared at Vindos.

The jaw of Maponos dropped.

"I did it for love," Vindos explained.

“So that’s why he’s so powerful, so like you, I should have known.” Kraideti grimaced at her naivety, shook her head.

Maponos smiled and turned to the crowd. “Hear how my father saved my mother, how much he loves her, me too?”

“Yes!” “Yes!” “Hail Vindos!” “Hail Maponos!” “Hail Kraideti!”

My miracle son has turned his story around.

A thundery look in the eyes of the Storyteller like the storm clouds rolling in fast from the west rumbling into place.

“Now I have a story to tell,” Maponos strummed his harp. “You know the story of the coming of Lugus Skilful Hand?”

“Yes!” “Yes!” “We know that one tell us another!”

“I’ll bet you do not know the mysteries of his birth.”

“No!” “No!” “We do not know who his father is.” “A mystery!”

“A secret nobody knows,” spoke the Storyteller darkly.

Yet Maponos began. “Long ago, before the creation of the world, the Old Mother spoke a prophecy to Bel and Don - Aryanrhot will bear the god who will shoot down the sun.

“Fearful for his bright burning eye Bel locked Aryanrot away in her tower with nothing but her spinning wheel.”

Maponos conjured an image of the silver spinner.

“Spin, spin, Silver Wheel of Fortune,
Spin, spin, Silver Wheel of Fate.

You might lock me away
but you cannot halt

the turning
of the constellations

any more than you can undo
the prophecies etched

in Giant's Letters in your hall
or confine my powers within these walls.

The God Who is Yet to Come will come.
The sun who is yet to fall will fall."

"When Uidianos went to war against the Dragon Mother he perceived the aid of the prophesied god would be needed and stole the key to the tower from Bel's golden box."

"I never knew that," said the Apprentice.

"Lies," spoke the Storyteller sternly.

"He sailed in his starship," Maponos conjured the images, "to the Tower of Aryanrhot, turned the key in the lock, ascended her spiral stairway to the room where she spun.

"In the form a young bard he tried to seduce his sister."

The audience gasped.

"You didn't!" the Apprentice gaped.

"Of course not!" the Storyteller thundered.

"Thwarted the Magician put his wand in his sister's cup."

"End it there if you know what is good for you," grated the Storyteller and thunder rolled overhead.

"In Aryanrhot's cup appeared…"

"What?" "What was it?"

"A worm!"

"Sick!" "What ungodly magic!" "What comes next?"

"I'm warning you," snarled the Storyteller.

Vindos tensed. *Maponos knows not what danger he is in*. He froze torn between stepping in and hearing the story.

"What happened next?" "What did she do?"

"She did not see it and later she drank it down."

"Eeurgh." "What dark magic." "What did it do to her?"

"If you value your life you will end this tale." The Storyteller's cloak whipped around him and lightning crackled.

No disguising the storm-grey eyes of Uidianos now.

Vindos shifted into his own form and nocked his bow.

"The truth will be heard," Maponos spoke defiantly.

Electricity made the hair of everyone in the crowd stand.

"Three moons later she realised she was pre…" began Maponos.

As Vindos loosed his arrow at the Storyteller a bolt of lightning shot from the sky, striking Maponos in the chest, searing a hollow chasm, simmering his body to ashes.

The Storyteller vanished into thin air and the arrow which should have pierced his heart thudded into the fence of the pig pen and stuck there useless, trembling. As the pigs wheeled and spun squealing as if they were being butchered the whole world shuddered around Vindos.

How can my son be dead and my enemies gone?

"No!" He tried to deny the pile of blackness before him, his voice shaking the sky harder than the Magician's thunder.

"Maponos!" Kraideti's cry shook tears from the clouds.

Together they gathered the ashes as the rain poured down and smeared what was left on their faces, tears

leaving white traces as they embraced and wept for their son.

A Grave for Maponos

Sorrow. Sorrow too deep for words. All rain wrenched from the heavens. All tears risen up from the earth. Not only the people wept but the birds, the animals, the plants too.

There was no face, no blade of grass on the whole island not wet. Bel turned away and it appeared the sun had gone out until he returned with a red eye behind the clouds.

Even the Restless Wind, who never cried, shed a tear.

Vindos and Kraideti bore the ashes of Maponos on a melancholy boat with a single black sail down the Shining River to the Green Hill on the Water and dug a mound.

There, in that sacred place, before Anmen's people, where a solitary heron watched over the marsh they put the ashes in an urn, interred it, took it in turns to speak a verse.

Kraideti:

The light is gone from the world,
the harper from the hills,
no-one can still the Restless Wind.
I am dead within.

Vindos:

The light is gone from Annwn,
the harper from my halls,
no-one can still the restless dead.
I am desolate.

IX
The Hanging Yew

The Bride of Flowers

After the death of Maponos Vindos was inconsolable. In wolf form he roamed the High Hills sleeping in misery in the Wolf Holes and at mid-winter sitting on Wolf Crag howling.

He could not bear to return to his hall because there the ghost of Maponos sung on, but a shade of himself, refusing the cauldron as if bound by a heavy blue-grey chain.

The people and the land too felt the pall of the absence of the Light of the North, of the Harper on the Hills.

Dead, my son, my miracle child, for the cost of a sordid tale about the birth of my enemy who I still cannot kill.

"A call," the messengers, "from the Inspired One of the North."

*

Vindos paused at the Howling Rocks to take his own form and found himself drawn to the Stone of Vindos. New carvings. Painful to look upon. His imprisonment at the golden bowl, its breaking, the tragic death of his son. Premonition gripped him as he saw there was only one gap left before the eagle on the oak and the raven on the yew.

The sky was thick with crows flocking over the cave.

The crow-black hair of Black Wings had never seen a brush and her right calf tapered into a nub rather than a foot.

"The crows bring news. Lugus has a new wife."

In his grief Vindos cared little about his rival's love life.

"She is rumoured to be more beautiful than Kraideti."

His grief was so deep he was incapable of feeling jealousy.

"By day she is a flower bride of great beauty but she is rarely seen at night. Some say she transforms into a monstrous owl sending Lugus running from the bed chamber."

The interest of Vindos was piqued. "Who is she?"

"That is a mystery. I have thrown the bones and divined she is neither a child of the world nor of Annwn."

"But that's impossible." Vindos frowned.

"And," she brushed away a crow, "I have been shown she can win the knowledge to undo the spell upon Lugus."

"Tell me what I must do to gain her favour."

"Lugus is away," a knowing black gaze, "I think you can guess."

"It seems I must use this opportunity to seduce her."

*

Vindos took the guise of a human huntsman and rode out with horse and hounds to chase a stag past where the flower maiden sat in a meadow making chains of flowers.

Her hair was pale and soft as meadowsweet.
Her eyes were large and owl-like
and yellow as broom.
Her lips were red
as the tiny red flowers of the oak
hanging amongst the green swaying catkins.
Her gaze was fierce as an owl's and her long nails
looked like claws carefully disguised
by the perfect manicure.

Vindos shot down the stag before her, took its head, rode off. A look over his shoulder revealed her owlish eyes

upon him, following him brazenly, as she licked her thin lips.

As darkness fell Vindos approached the Fortress of Lugus. “My name is Gron,” he introduced himself to the gatekeeper, “I have hunted long and seek a safe place to rest.”

“You’ll not find safety here,” the gatekeeper warned.

“Then at least rest. I have brought the lady of the fort a trophy.”

When Vindos entered the hall was empty but for the flower bride tearing into a platter of meat with her long nails.

“My lady,” he bowed, “I hear you’ve got quite an appetite.” He knelt before her and offered up the stag’s head.

“I’m no longer hungry but have other needs you might satisfy.”

She led him from the hall upstairs, scattering her petals, looking back at him, down a corridor to her bed chamber. As Vindos entered the darkness he saw she had not a petal left and was a monstrous owl with huge staring eyes filled with hunger, a sharp beak, sharper talons.

Vindos shifted into the form of an owl just as monstrous.

At first she was taken aback. “You are more of a man than I thought,” she exclaimed staring, “I think you are…”

“A hunter,” chimed in Vindos. He brushed her wing. “Tell me, fierce one” he spoke enticingly, “do you like hunting?”

“Yes! Oh yes!” she cried fiercely.

“Then let us hunt together.”

“My name is Blodewed.”

Flower Face. Fitting for flower bride and owl.

*

They hunted and feasted then satiated their other appetites in the bole of a gnarly oak made perfectly for owls.

Afterwards, “Is it true,” Vindos asked, smoothing her feathers, “you are neither a child of the world nor of Annwn?”

“I wasn’t, then I was, I am not the only one, there are many of us.”

“Really?”

“Come! Fly with me.”

On soft wings she took flight to a hidden valley in the Cloud Mountains where gathered the strangest of creatures whose likes he had seen neither in the world nor Annwn.

Flower brides with hair of flax and lady’s bedstraw,
lips as pink as rose-buds and hazel flowers.
Tree women with crowns of ivies
draped in honeysuckle.
Tree men armed with apples.
Males with top-knots of horse-hair,
flat man-like chests and the legs of horses.
A goat with a single horn on his head braying sadly.

“What are you?” asked Vindos.

Fleeting gazes evasive and wary as colts.

“Do none of you know where you came from?”

They exchanged glances and some retreated into the trees.

“We’ve been told not to ask,” replied a horse-man.

“By whom?” replied Vindos.

“The magician who comes to visit us,” spoke a tree-woman.

Vindos shivered as a revelation came upon him. *They were born from Uidianos's attempts to master the Secret of Life.*

"And when he comes to us," a flower maiden whispered in his ear, "he likes to have his wicked way with us."

The Eagle on the Oak

Vindos lay in the bed chamber of Lugus and Blodewed, on a bed of petals, breathing in her scent. Victory smelt sweet. *I have succeeded in seducing my rival's beautiful new wife. Ironic, and perhaps fitting, that I taught the people to use meadowsweet to sweeten the stench of death.*

Is she in love with me? He wondered as he watched her breast rise and fall and saw her smiling in her sleep. She was all flowers by day. He preferred her at night. *Can a woman of flowers and feathers truly think and feel?* More darkly, *what if she was made by Uidianos to bring about my demise?* When they hunted together she seemed to be free and he trusted the words of his Inspired One.

"Tell me," he said, when they woke, tracing the pattern of her perfect oak-bud-like lips, "do you love me?"

"I love you more than you guess but fear you seek to use me."

"Do you love me more than you love Lugus?"

"Truly."

"Then to prove my trust, that you are not the Magician's tool, I ask you to help me to solve a mystery."

"What lies beyond the knowing of Annwn's King?"

"The knowledge of how your husband can be killed."

"Ah," smiled Blodewed, "that I will win for you easily."

*

Blodewed approached Vindos looking satisfied. "He cannot be killed indoors or outdoors, on horseback or on foot."

"I already know that," he told her disappointed.

"He must be killed by one blow when he stands between."

"I know that too." *I overestimated her. My efforts are in vain.*

"He must be killed with a magical spear forged in the Fires of Annwn on every seventh day over the course of a year."

"This is more like it," said Vindos, "is there more?"

"Yes," Blodewed smirked and chuckled to herself, "it's no wonder all these centuries you have not worked it out."

Unable to conceal his impatience, "Then tell me!"

"A bath must be made for him on a riverbank with an arched roof over the tub and a billy goat must be brought. He must put one foot on the tub and one on the goat and when he stands between worlds with the spear he can be killed."

"That's ridiculous!" exclaimed Vindos. "He and the Magician are surely pulling your leg with another of their tricks."

"It's the truth," said Blodewed, "I swear on my life."

Can I trust her, a creation of Uidianos, betraying her husband? How do I knew she won't betray me? I have no choice.

"Very well," said Vindos, "I will make the spear if you can arrange the tub on the riverbank and round up a billy goat."

*

Vindos worked for a year forging the spear and took to the shadows and watched as Blodewed prepared his victim.

"I love you and showing me how you can be killed so we can make sure it never happens will help me feel safe."

How persuasive she is, Vindos thought, as she guided Lugus in constructing the bathtub with the arched roof on the bank of the Shining River and rounding up the billy goat.

"Now," Lugus said with a smile, "you must bathe me."

Blodewed obliged, soaping him, engaging in a little love play.

Once he was spanking clean Lugus rose from the bath, dripping, naked as the day he was born, with the help of Blodewed put one foot on the bath tub and the other on the goat.

I could never have predicted my vengeance would be like this. Concealing his mirth Vindos rallied his hatred. *For my mother's death, my father's maiming, the theft of my wife*.

His spear flew straight and true to pierce his rival's side.

Lugus screamed, a terrible scream of pain and betrayal, and flew up in the form of an eagle with the spearhead within him and the spear-shaft hanging from his side.

Vindos and Blodewed followed as owls, harrying him as he flew in agony, dripping blood through the Damp Oak Forest, to alight on the mighty oak, Daronwy in the midst of the Lake Region on a high plain between two lakes.

There he perched with his festering wound for nine nights oozing rot and decaying flesh with strings of maggots.

"What's that?" Blodewed pointed as the woodland parted.

A great white sow, the largest Vindos had ever seen, like some beast of Annwn. Yet this was not his but one of the great white animals from the Old Mother's cauldron.

Wise old eyes, pregnant belly, swollen udders, cloven trotters.

I believe this might be Old Mother Universe herself.

She came to gorge on the mast of fallen flesh and maggots.

"Woe is me," Lugus groaned, "that I was ever born, won a name, weapons and a wife for all have betrayed me."

Vengeance. Sweet and metallic as blood. But, like a dying eagle, a sight that shouldn't be seen, something rotten.

"This is miserable," Blodewed turned away, "let's leave."

"No," said Vindos, as the trees parted again for the Magician, following the prints of the sow to where his son perched in his death-throes, "my revenge is not yet complete."

The Magician blanched. "My golden eagle, my shining boy, what has become of you, all skin and bone with your festering wound and maggots on the old oak tree."

He drove away the sow, took out his wand, sang a spell-song.

There is an oak between two lakes
in its arms a Many-Skilled One.
I call you down by your name
Lugus of the Skilful Hand.

Lugus sank to the middle of the Tree.

There is an oak on a high plain
in its arms a Many-Skilled One.
I call you down by your name
to return to your weapons.

Lugus sank into the lowest branches.

There is an oak on a slope
in its arms a Many-Skilled One.
I call you down not to a woman
but to your faithful father.

Lugus fell from the arms of the oak into his father's arms.

As Uidianos cradled Lugus the last light vanished from his eyes. His skinny form crumpled to feathers and dust. As the last remnants of his son slipped through his fingers Uidianos let out a terrible choking sound that did not escape his throat - it seemed the Magician had never learnt to cry. He gathered them up, put them in a pocket within his cloak, departed, shoulders shaking, into the wood.

My vengeance is complete. Why does it taste like dust?

The Stone of Vindos

I have my vengeance and Kraideti is mine so why am I not happy?

All winter something rankled within Vindos, like a poisoned spearpoint, like a festering wound. Try as he might he could not find it and pull it out. *I have thrived on desire for revenge and endless battling so long I feel lost without it and cannot be at peace with my beloved wife.*

At the end of winter, "Will you stay or go the world?"

"You know I must return to bring summer," replied Kraideti.

As she spoke three loud knocks on the fortress door.

It can't be… but Vindos recognised that knock… my *rival back from the dead again? Some trick? Truly I am fated.*

At the door stood Lugus, pale, cheeks gaunt, skin stretched tight by suffering, golden hair lank, dark circles beneath his eyes. He had clearly been brought back from the dead.

Uidianos has mastered the secrets of life and death!

"I have come to claim not only my wife but my death blow."

As Lugus spoke to the horror of Vindos in the distance the chasm opened and from it flew his spear back into his hand.

"By the laws of Old Mother Universe you must stand on the bank of the Shining River as I did and receive a blow."

"No way am I going to my death in my birthday suit with one foot on a bathtub and one foot on a billy goat!"

"You will come defenceless aside from a stone."

What kind of a coward does he take me for?

"The stone you hide behind will be chosen by a woman."

I can see where this is going and guess who betrayed me.

"My treacherous wife," the smile of Lugus was grim, "Blodewed."

*

The moon. The Silver Wheel. The Wheel of Fate. Waxing. Waning. Two rivals bound upon it. One rises. One falls.

Too late Vindos saw the fatal mirroring of their acts. Their battles, their love, their torments, finally their deaths.

No escape. The golden ring he could not take off.

"What will you do my love?" asked Kraideti.

"I will go. It is time the King of the Dead knew death."

*

Vindos looked at his armour. *Pointless. It won't protect me.*

Hearing scratching at his window he looked up to see an owl. "Blodewed, after betraying me, what are you doing here?"

"I know you do not love me but I still love you. Tell me which stone to choose and I will find it and if none is strong enough I will shape it with my own hands from the hardest obsidian or the darkest matter from the depths of the Void."

Is she playing with me? No, I see the love in her eyes.

"You do not need to do that. Instead go to the Valley of Winter and bring the Stone of Vindos to decide my fate."

*

Vindos paced around his stone, fingers tracing the engravings. His affair with Blodewed filled the gap next to the eagle on the oak and the raven on the yew. The memories his Inspired Ones had etched there of his life, the pictures of their prophecies, now all made sense. The birth of Vindos through to… he pondered his death. *Old stone either you will save me from it or together we will end.*

Vindos took his position, naked, behind his stone, looked his rival in the eye. *So alike our hatred, our undoing*.

Kraideti and Blodewed eyeing each other looking on.

Uidianos, grave as an executioner, standing behind his son.

Only by knowing death will I truly know its secret.

"Strike now," the Magician commanded.

The Spear of Lugus hurtled into life, wreathed by fire, its head malevolent, serpent-like. *Slam*. *Smash*. Straight through the image of the Heart of Annwn in the heart of the stone, shattering it into a myriad pieces, as many as the pictures of his life; scattered, broken, no longer making sense, falling into the waters of the Shining River. No time to dodge or brace himself. No escaping his fate.

The spear pierced his side and with a scream of agony Vindos flew up in the form of a raven with the spearhead inside him and the spear-shaft hanging from him and took flight.

He knew where to go. He understood his yew's request.

Nine Nights

Vindos alighted in the branches of the yew where she hung by her roots over the whirling darkness of the Abyss.

Like his father, but in raven form, he hung upside-down.

"I, Vindos, King of Annwn, who escaped you long ago now come to make a sacrifice in exchange for your wisdom."

"I knew you would return to me. What will you give?"

"I give myself, every last drop of my blood, for the vision by which I can undo my mistakes, set the world to rights."

"The wisdom you seek lies within you. Answer my questions."

Nine nights. Each an eternity carrying pain in its hands. Vindos hung from the yew, rocked by the wind, wracked by the wound in his side as the maggots ate at him.

As his blood dripped down, from it he divined his answers.

Night One:

Tell me
the hour the King
and Queen of Annwn
were born.

Not easy,
we were not born
but ripped from the womb
on the hour of the death
of dragons.

*

Night Two:

Tell me
in your eternal
battle who killed
who?

Not easy,
summer and winter
are mirrors - when one
kills the other kills
too.

*

Night Three:

Tell Me
how many trees
are in the forests
of Annwn?

Not easy,
for they are without
number but ask me again
and I will name
them.

*

Night Four:

Tell me
how many doors

there are to
Annwn.

Not easy,
for they are without
number but ask me again
and I will open
them.

*

Night Five:

Tell me
where divide
darkness and light,
day and night?

Not easy,
for there are no
divisions - each follows
each in an endless
procession.

*

Night Six:

Tell me
where the Restless Wind
comes from and where
he rests.

Not easy,
for no-one but he
knows the location of the Lands

of the First and Last
Breaths.

*

Night Seven:

Tell me
how many
stars are in the
Heavens.

Not easy,
for they will not
be counted until all
souls are in the
cauldron.

*

Night Eight:

Tell me
the fate of
your last drop
of blood.

Not easy,
for I cannot divide it
from the ocean of blood
that will drown
the world.

*

Night Nine:

Tell Me
the hour the King
and Queen of Annwn
will die.

"Not this," the voice of Vindos was harsh and croaky from thirst and hunger and the pain of his wound was too much to bear. "I can face my own death but I can't face hers."

"Tell Me!"

Not easy -
we cannot live without
each other and thus will die
together when all souls
are gathered.

*

With these words, on the ninth night, the vision was his.
The marching of armies carrying crosses,
battling dragons in the skies,

flying machines,
vehicles bigger than monsters
bearing battalions, dark shapes, blinding explosions

that tore great rifts in the universe and from them pouring
legions of the dead in lines so long he saw no end.
Finally, himself, as a black dragon.

Vision failing, Vindos fell
down, down, down
into the Abyss.

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A book reimagining the lost mythos of Vindos (Gwyn ap Nudd)