

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

(alternate)

FINN

It is late in the day, and the sky is pink, and a storm is coming but is not here yet, and we are going to the Scorpio Festival.

I'm excited.

I drive Puck and the Carroll brothers in the Morris to Skarmouth, which has gone mad — the town, not the car. You have to have a mind to lose it, and Mum told me several years ago that even though the Morris had very friendly headlights, it was not alive. I find this very depressing to think about but it seems to be true because the car never seems any happier with its lot in life no matter how much I pray for it. Loads of things have faces if you are looking for them, though, even if they don't have souls. Gabe's bicycle has a kind of scowl if you think of the handlebars as eyebrows. The gorse shieldbugs that the farmers curse in Thisby's cool summers have a neighborly expression if you peer beyond their inquisitive antenna to their shiny little eyes. We even have a mug that I prefer to use because there are two eye-like indentations in the clay by the curved handle that turn it into the happiest crockery we own. I feel strange if I'm in a place that doesn't have any faces in it, and when I walk into a room, the first

thing I do is look for a hidden face. If there isn't one in a knot of wood or formed by a radio's display or cast in the shadows by the hearth, I head myself right out of there. That's the nice thing about driving the Morris. I take another familiar face with me wherever I go.

Anyway, so it's Skarmouth that is mad and it's the Scorpio Festival that's driven it there. The single-track road into town is lined with more cars and trucks than I've ever seen in one place. Horses and wagons notch against the Bluebell Lodge, the horses placid with feedbags over their noses. I put the Morris in a tiny space next to a rubbish bin and hope that it will start when we return later. Puck wants us to sell it to get Dove better food for the race, but the idea of selling it is like hearing that a friend is going to the mainland for good. It is like hearing that *Gabe* is going to the mainland for good. I can't think about that too hard, either, though, or I won't think of anything but.

"Out we get!" Jonathan Carroll says, even though we're all already in the process of disembarking. He always seems happiest when he is saying something that someone else is already thinking.

Outside of the car, it is very loud. The town crawls with people. There are so many of them standing so close to one another and all of them dressed so strangely in Festival apparel that they don't look like hundreds of ordinary island folk going in hundreds of ordinary island directions. Instead they seem like a single, unfamiliar creature with many legs, just wobbling about the streets in no direction at all. In the wild and flickering light, I try to pick out a face on this creature, but I don't succeed.

I check myself anxiously for excitement, but it's as I suspected. The little flame of enthusiasm I felt earlier has extinguished entirely in the time it took to get here, darkened by

the sight of *capaill nisce* on the drive here and the presence of the crowd-creature and the wild noise of the transformed town. I miss when I was younger, before Mum and Dad died, when it seemed like I was simply content all the time. Now, no matter whatever feeling I start out with, it always seems to turn into fear eventually, like all plants become dirt if you leave them piled behind the lean-to long enough.

Somewhere nearby, Scorpio drummers begin to pound a ragged and threatening beat, and the crowd creature shouts as one. The light is odd and dreamlike with the flames from barrels and the little bulbs strung between light poles. The air is cold and smells like action: burning tar and baking buns and grilled meat on sticks. The old Skarmouth buildings seem to lean over the street as if eager to keep an eye on the people-creature that twists and turns over the cobblestones.

All of this makes the ground feel like pudding beneath me, so I remind myself of our purpose here: to finalize Puck's race registration. The ground firms up a bit.

"Right, Finn?" Jonathan Carroll asks me. He's been talking this entire time, and I only now realize it was to me. I tug my lumpy hat down over my ears because the wind doesn't care if it's a special day or not, it's going to work just as usual, and I blink at him until he clarifies, "You and me can go find out if I can bet this year."

I don't want to go with him. I'm already not sure whether or not the Scorpio Festival is a sin or not. I've only been to the Festival once before, but I remember that I didn't like it. Gabe told me that something is not a sin just because I don't like it, but Father Mooneyham's secretary Mrs. Wright told me that I'd know a sin because my rotting conscience would inform me, which

seems like the opposite of Gabe's statement. Anyway, I already know for sure that gambling's wicked, and I don't want to add that to the Festival's possible unholiness. I clearly remember a homily about cutting off your hand if it led you to transgress, and I cannot decide if this means I should cut off Jonathan Carroll or if I only have to worry about my own actual hands.

This is when I discover that the crowd has eaten my sister and Brian Carroll. I don't mind the loss of Brian Carroll much, because I don't know him very well, but I am upset at it for eating Puck. I never used to be afraid of being left behind but now I am always afraid of being left behind.

So I suppose I will just go with Jonathan. My soul feels imperiled.

"... but I never thought that, which is the crazy thing," Jonathan says. He's still talking. I didn't hear what he said, but I don't think it matters. He keeps on conversing with the air as we head into the Festival, and I press close to him to keep from being eaten. Cigar smoke hangs around my head and lusty singing clings to my ears. A man in a smart serge suit sloshes beer on my shoes and I dart away from him.

"Hey now, here's a thought!" Jonathan says, grabbing my arm before I can get far. "Let's nip in to Wright's for a moment, shall we?"

Wright's is a general store that Puck and I don't often go into as it as the 'general' seems to mean things that people generally want rather than things people generally need, and we mostly only get to buy the latter. Skarmouth shops close on Sundays and sometimes on Wednesdays after noon and on all other days after four thirty, so I don't think that it will be open this late. But it is, and I can see that the shops on either side of it are as

well. This change in schedule feel backwards and soul-endangering too, although I would never say it out loud. Gabe only gets frustrated when I try to explain it to him, and he is far easier for me to talk to than Jonathan Carroll is.

Jonathan and I stop before the front window. It contains a fancy Scorpio Races display with three mannequins modeling traditional garb. One is just a torso wearing the brightly colored Scorpio scarves that wraps over your shoulder and pins at the hip. The other two are smooth fabric heads without faces, one sporting a flat cap with a thistles embroidered on it and the other demure under a delicate shawl with a scalloped edge meant to look like the ocean. It doesn't look like the ocean to me, though, because that scarf has never killed anyone.

Jonathan tugs me inside.

Behind the counter, there's a young woman behind the counter who is too pretty for me to look at straight on and even thinking about meeting her eyes makes me pinch the skin on the back of one of my hands with the fingers of my other. Behind her is a wall of appealing boxes and bottles. It doesn't matter what's in them, it only matters that they are all lined up just so with the labels out. I wonder whose job it is to put them up like that, because I would very much like that job. There's no hidden faces to be found in them, though, nor in the collection of biscuit and tea tins on the table in the middle of the shop, nor in the display of soaps that give the store its sweet lavender scent. And so I'm about to give up on Wright's and leave Jonathan loitering in front of the taffy display when I find a face in the glass case at the back of the shop.

The case is full of little, expensive objects like engraved pocketknives and silver locket and things that I believe are cuff

links, although I'm not precisely sure what cuff links are. I very much like thinking the phrase "cuff link" and so I hope that that's what they are, and not just buttons.

The face I discovered is on a heavy-looking stopwatch. It has a large set of needles to count the time, and two smaller circles on the top and the bottom, each with a tiny needle of their own. I don't know what these other two do, but when I tilt my head sideways, they give the stopwatch the appearance of a bewildered and affable owl face.

I am overcome with wanting for it.

It's such a big desire that it even wins out over fear, enough that I ask the lady behind the counter to turn over the tiny white tag attached to it so that I can see the price. It doesn't matter how much it costs, of course, because I have no money. My pockets contain nothing but a very crunchy piece of soda bread and a greasy lug nut I found in the road yesterday. But I stay there at the case anyway, my fingers pressed into the top of the glass, peering at the stopwatch. It peers back at me with its owl face.

"I'm going outside!" Jonathan says, but he is already going outside, and really, he means *we're going outside*, because he steers me out with him to continue battling through the crowd toward the butcher where the betting takes place. My mind still lingers on the watch, though.

I don't want it for myself. I want it for Puck.

Puck has been studying the *capaill uisce* on the beach, and I know she's worried about how much faster they are than Dove. She hopes that this speed might not matter as much since they don't always go in a straight line with that speed, but because she cannot practice safely on the beach with them, she can't really know how true that is. She has nothing to compare them to except

each other. I imagine her now with her hand outstretched in front of her, the stopwatch nestled in it, thumb resting securely on the button, swiftly and professionally marking their time and comparing it with Dove's.

Maybe I can find it in me to sell the Morris. The Morris, with its friendly and familiar face that goes with me whenever I leave home. I don't want to sell it for horse food. But selling it for horse food *and* a stopwatch — would that make it worth losing it right before losing Gabe as well?

I just keep imagining that picture of Puck with the stopwatch in the nest of her palm, timing the water horses. It is like a dream I have again and again, only I'm awake.

"Puck won't like if you're picking at your sweater like that," Jonathan shouts at me in the door of the butcher's. I want to keep picking at my sweater, though, and Jonathan doesn't notice that I keep at it because he begins to prattle about how he wishes the Grattons didn't know exactly how old he was in case he really wasn't old enough to place a bet yet as he shoulders his way in.

The interior of the butcher shop is ferociously bright white, the walls featureless and stark. It smells of blood and sweat, which makes me light-headed. It's packed as full as the rest of Skarmouth, and every man is faceless, turned toward the counter. Above the counter hangs the board scrawled with the names of all of the horses and riders for the Scorpio Races.

Kate Connolly. I find Puck's name on the list, and my heart does a furious little jig. *Dove.* It does another. I think it might be pride, at first, but I can't tell, because like all of my feelings, it dissolves into fear.

Jonathan is still talking. "—is so marvelous! When it—"

His words are drowned out by a great cheer through the assembled company; something that has happened at the front of the line has pleased them. They're having a good time. Everyone out here is having a good time. They love the noise and the fire and the music and the horses and the game of it. My parents seemed to be the only people on the island who did not follow the races, and now they are dead. Now there is only me who doesn't care about the races or any of the things associated with them. I wouldn't like to ride, and I wouldn't want to watch, and I don't care for gambling, and I don't like the gossip. I suppose I like the November Cakes, although I don't know if they count. Could I have the November Cakes without the Races? That is how I'd prefer this island. Father Mooneyham told me that the divine never contained mistakes, but I think possibly I was made incorrectly if I was truly intended to be placed on Thisby. I can't tell if I have too much of something or too little of it, but I do not fit. Not even for a night.

I duck behind Jonathan Carroll and bolt out into the street.

My mind is all fear and the stopwatch in Puck's hand. I push under arms and around backs and step over dogs. I have no immediate plan besides going to the Morris and simply sitting in it and letting myself play the image of Puck operating the stopwatch over and over again.

"Watch!" someone warns me, too late, and I am knocked off my feet with such speed that I say "oh" against my will. I roll onto my face and then back onto my side in time to see a black shape leap off the ground before me. I don't understand, but then I do. It's a barrel, rolling and bouncing on its side, spewing fire. It must have glanced me in its heedless charge.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!” This is one of the barrel’s handlers. It is a game, I see now, with several boys cantering in front with sticks to clear the crowd and guide the barrel, and several boys behind, chasing it and redirecting it when they can, pointing it down toward the pier so that it can leap into the ocean.

One of the rear chasers stops to help me up. “You’re a mess,” he says, as if I was the one who made myself so. “Your face is all black.”

“Your barrel coughed on me,” I say. My lips taste like charcoal. I don’t know where my hat is. I am still trying to fetch my thoughts, because I think they are still spinning end over end down toward the pier. The boy still has me by the arm.

“Here, Charlie, don’t let him go just yet.” The other rear chaser catches up to us. He’s wearing one of the curious satchels the face-painters wear during ordinary fair days — an open mouthed, flat-bottomed bag that displays paint pots and a tip jar. Only instead of the usual array of colors, he has only two: chalky black, and chalk white, which aren’t really colors at all. “Here you go, mate.” While the one called Charlie holds my arm, he smears my face with some of the white, and then a few dabs of the black. This is not really an apology. I am just part of the game now. I am displeased. “Free of charge. Now you’re a proper little Scorpio devil.”

Charlie releases me. I scowl at them and this makes them laugh and I am even more displeased. I can tell that I am making the face Mum used to call my frog face, but I don’t have anything more fearsome. I wish Puck were there, because she would go off on them, but she isn’t, so I simply turn and continue ducking my way toward the Morris.

Once I get to where the car is parked, I stand beside it and try to rub my cheek. Whatever they've put on me has dried quick, though, and I can tell by the unsatisfying mark on my sleeve that I haven't really budged it. I want the stopwatch more than ever. Longing for Puck to come rescue me has only made me want it for her more than before. I imagine giving it to her. No, I imagine giving her a November Cake, and then I imagine hiding the stopwatch on her pillow for her to discover when she went to bed. This image replaces the previous one and I play it over and over as I turn to the Morris.

As I turn to open the door, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the driver's side window. It makes me flinch, first, because it's so shocking. Black and white stripes across my cheeks, changing the shape of it, turning it into something unrecognizable. I have to peer hard to see my familiar eyes behind the mask of it. I have somehow managed to acquire a hidden face on my own. All of a sudden I remember how at the Festival that Mum had taken us to, Dory Maud had given me one of the ugly curse masks to wear. I had nearly forgotten about it in my desire to erase the possibly sinful ramifications of wearing one of them — I had been much less concerned about my godliness back then. I can't believe I'd forgotten how comforting it had been to be transformed into a creature that belonged at the Festival, but now, looking at this other face hidden right on my own, the memory of that comfort comes back to me.

I make a ferocious growl at my reflection and am pleased with the result. This striking monster face is far better suited to this island than my ordinary face. I make an even worse expression.

“What are you up to over there?” A voice carries to me, high and light and unmistakably mainland.

I quickly drop my grimace. The woman speaking to me wears a festival scarf over her crisp mainland dress. Her shoes and hair are very clean. She looks like she should be in an ad for shoes or hair. She is a tourist.

I can feel myself making the frog face again. I have no idea what it looks like under the paint. “I was just checking the car.”

“It’s very cute!” she says. “I’ve always liked these so very much. It has an adorable face!”

I feel warmed.

She asks, “Is it your parents’?”

“My parents are dead.”

She looks at me for a very long time as if waiting for me to add something, and she seems offended or upset, so I finally add, with as much cheeriness as I can manage, “But I try to keep it running best I can.”

The woman tries on several different expressions. She jiggles the handle of her bag and straightens her scarf and purses her lips. Finally, she asks, “Is it for sale?”

I can just see my hidden face reflected out of the corner of my eye. I think of the stopwatch. “Yes.”

