



This sample of the novel *Mach – Book One: The Awakening* was downloaded from <https://hutchwrites.com> and is the Copyright © 2024 [*et seq*] of David Hutchison. All Rights Reserved.

The Copyright for this document, the novel from which it is taken, and all applicable Rights, are retained by the author. This document may be forwarded to other readers without any charge(s) or any changes, both of which are strictly prohibited. No part of this document may be reproduced by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, or by any other means, now known or hereafter invented or discovered, without written permission. The novel, and this sample, are a work of fiction. References to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other events, names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events, places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

FRANKLIN *f* PUBLISHING

❧ ONE ❧

The heavy squalls running from the hills to the sea had been endless and Mach, eyes half closed in the driving rain, stumbled wet-footed as he crested a summit and looked west to the islands. He could see their grey-green bulk disappearing and reappearing as cloaks of rain rushed over them then swept further out to sea. Far below, the village of Moinach lay still, nestled in the bay, its small fishing boats visibly rocking in the waves.

Planting himself with his back against a rocky outcrop for the meagre shelter it offered, Mach paused, feeling rivulets of water trickling over his skin under his thick woollen clothing. He knew this scene, these hills, those islands like he knew his hand. His father, like his father before him, had taken this same path across the hills from Duart to Moinach with him many times, and it seemed that this route always brought rain as its companion. He remembered – and briefly, could almost feel – his father's rough hand in his as they crossed these hills; his father, unspeaking and erect, striding above him as he tried to keep pace.

He thought of his mother's phrase, *rain and time pass*, and shivered. With thoughts of tomorrow assailing him he felt a nervous tightening in his stomach. He had spent seventeen terms in this life and with the next moon he would be eighteen by the calendar. It went unspoken in his village that when the moon next rose over the island peaks, Mach's eighteenth term would begin and he would go through the Awakening, moving from boy to man.

Thinking of this coming change he shivered again, wondering what lay in front of him; every boy went through the Awakening but nobody ever talked of it, and the ceremony had just three attendants – the child, the Priest, and an Elder – nobody else was permitted.

Mach felt a wave of sadness run through him; he knew that the attendant Elder would have been his father but, three terms before, his father had set out from the village, never to return. In stories told at night, when shadows visit and spirits moved through the village, he had half-heard that his father was dead but this he couldn't believe.

He remembered his father's face, alive and full of purpose, as he looked down at him on their last day together. "Be upright and honour your mother, boy," was all he had said as he drew him close in a fierce embrace. Mach had looked deep into his father's eyes then and had felt the *ceangal*, the bond, that today, on this rain-stormed hill, he felt still. His father had placed his hands on his shoulders and said, "Look to every step boy, not what's passed and not what's to come. You'll not fall." And with that, he had turned, walked out of the village and out of his life.

Mach remembered watching his father as he climbed the steep path between the cliffs, growing smaller, more distant, until with one footfall, and without a pause or backward glance, he had disappeared over the horizon, swallowed into the Inner Lands. As the rain lashed his face, Mach thought, "How I wish my father could be with me at my Awakening." Then, bringing himself back to the present, he shrugged off that melancholic impossibility and turned once more to the path descending to Moinach, mindful of every step.

It was said that his village had been on this spot since Time itself began. The twenty-one houses had been built when Anoch was Chief and, even though hundreds of terms had passed, the village had neither grown nor shrunk. The bay, a tight U with its gently shelving shingle beach, was a natural protection from the sea, and a short distance behind the houses, surrounding and protecting them, high rocky cliffs, where seabirds constantly screamed and wheeled, rose into the sky.

All twenty-one houses were plain, built identically, and stood radiating towards the cliffs in three straight, but fanned, lines at the innermost part of the bay. Their undecorated stone face was pierced simply by a door and two windows, and inside, each of the four chambers was floored with smooth wooden planks.

As far as anyone could remember, the rhythms of life in the village had always been the same. Barefoot, men had scaled the precipitous cliffs to harvest their crop of seabirds for their meat, their eggs and the oil they yielded that fired every home's lamps. Men had ventured beyond the bay in their small boats and into the dangerous, limitless waters of the Western Sea to fish. Each family

had their allocation of cattle and sheep in the high southern pastures. People died and children were born. The Great Cold came and went as expected and life continued.

Mach slept fitfully that night, dreaming of climbing upwards but never arriving, and feeling his fingers aching under the effort. He woke with a start as his mother shook him gently by the shoulder. "Wake up, boy. We are beyond sunrise."

Her voice, a song in his ears like no other woman's, was always gentle, with the slight trace of the tongue of her own people from the far Eastern Lands. Even when his mother argued, her voice would never rise above the soft rhythms he heard now. Stretching, he looked up at her; the lines on her face, put there by time and distant aches, had always seemed to have been there, and even these were soft lines. "Get dressed, boy . . . this is your day," and Mach saw her eyes filled with a mother's pride for her own.

Rising through sleep, Mach remembered that this day was the first day of his eighteenth term, and dressed quickly. Turning to the East he gently brought his hands together, palm meeting palm and, bowing his head, uttered the Great Invocation, "Salute to all who have given life before me and to those who have yet to come."

When he joined his mother she placed a simple wooden box on the table. Opening it, she withdrew a package of cloth and slid it towards him, "For your eighteenth term, boy." And, as Mach reached for it, he saw once again his mother's gentle gaze of approval and how ageless she seemed.

Smiling in this special moment, he took the package in both hands, feeling its weight, and lifting it to his forehead offered it to his mother with a slight bow. His mother returned his smile and shook her head, "The contents are yours, boy."

Laying the package down, Mach saw that the cloth had been bright red once but that had obviously been a long time ago and it had faded with time. Across it, in a repeating pattern, there were symbols he knew to be those of the Eastern People far beyond his own Land and, with a light touch of the fabric, he gave his mother a questioning look.

"Yes, it is ancient. As I know it, this cloth came to me from the mother of my mother's mother. I am told it has . . . properties in certain situations." Her laugh was soft, "Whatever those situations are, I have obviously never been in them. It is old. It has been in our line for many terms. And it is a thing of beauty." Smiling, she reached across the table taking one of Mach's hands in hers. "It is my gift to you. This will be the last time I can give you anything as a child," and, with a slight squeeze of his hand, "Inside, waiting for this very day, is a gift from your father."

Mach's eyes widened. Slowly he undid the cloth and, catching light as it filtered through the window, an exquisite neck band made of gold lay there. He looked up at his mother, and with a smile, she said, "Again boy, this *torca* also comes from ancient times. The father of your father's father was the maker of this." Getting to her feet she came round and crouched down beside him.

“If I may,” and lifting the band to hold in front of her son, said, “Do you see the ancient symbols of our line?”

Mach looked at the *torca* in his mother’s hand. The main ring of gold was about the thickness of his thumb and had been hammered along its length. At either end, in the representation of a beast’s claw, two intricate symbols had been worked into the solid metal that each claw held. One he recognised immediately as his family’s symbol, the other he’d never seen before. “What is this one mother?”

“That is *my* family’s symbol. All those terms ago, it was known that our families would join and so it was made. It has been passed from hand to hand in the certain knowledge that, one day, you would be first to wear it,” and with a light touch on Mach’s shoulder she moved back to her place opposite. With another smile for him, she said, “Well, boy?”

Mach looked at her; his mother’s delight in him at this moment was transparent. Slowly, he pulled the ends apart and fitted the *torca* around his neck, his father’s family symbol on the right as was proper. Pushing the ends back together, they lay at his throat, symbol facing symbol, almost touching; he stood and said, “It *is* well, mother.”

Picking up the cloth that had wrapped the *torca*, his mother tucked this into Mach’s belt, then took his hands in hers. Slowly she looked him up and down. “My son . . . almost a man,” and he noticed the slightest trace of a shadow cross his mother’s face. “Listen to me, boy. *Never* lose either the cloth or the *torca*. Both have properties. Both are ancient. Both, I fear, you will need,” and, as she sensed questions rising in her son, she let go of his hands. Turning slightly from him, she continued in an even tone, “You have to meet the Elder now, and you are already late. I have made you late,” and then, turning fully from him, she said, “Go to the north shore, the Elder will be waiting.”

Mach did not want to leave and felt a resistance rising within him, but came to her side. Wrapping one arm round her shoulders, and pulling her toward him, he bent down, and gently kissed her cheek. “Thank you, mother, I shall see you this evening,” and with that he turned from her and stepped out of the door, his first step towards his Awakening.

His mother watched him through the window as he walked away, remembering the pain she had borne bringing him into this world. Now her boy was eighteen terms, strong and tall and taking his first real steps. “This evening?” she thought, “I hope in this life I shall see you one more time.”

•

As he headed for the north shore Mach was met by a gentle breeze and the familiar scents of the sea. Feeling a lightness in his heart, and the weight of the *torca* round his neck, he walked tall. Yesterday he had been apprehensive, nervous when thinking of this day’s event, but his gifts seemed to have cleared his mind and now he was calm. From a very early age every child knew the Awakening ceremony was ahead; he was no different – first steps, first words and first emotions, they came, and passed, with all.

Several neighbours saw him and, smiling, raised their hands palms up in formal greeting rather than speaking; everyone knew that today Mach left the village as a boy, to return as a man.

Clearing the village, he headed for the north shore of the bay. Ahead of him, in the distance, silhouetted against the sea, he could see the cowed figure of the Elder sitting in solitude, his boat drawn up above the waterline. As he approached he wondered which Elder had been chosen from his people. If his father had still been there – or lived? – undoubtedly he would have been with him, his bloodline alone would have given him the right, but the choice of Elder to attend today's ceremony would have been decided by the village council.

Drawing closer to the waiting figure, the shingle beneath his feet crunched, and the Elder stood and turned in one swift movement. "As noisy as cattle, boy," and with a gasp Mach saw it was his father's brother before him.

"Uncle Enach . . . I didn't know you were here," and then, remembering both his manners and the occasion, he bowed deeply.

His uncle, a man of forty-five terms, taller and broader than his father, as Mach remembered, looked him up and down, appraising him with piercing blue eyes. After a short pause he gave him a shallower bow, his long grey hair falling forward over his weather-beaten face. "Well, I wasn't and now I am," adding with a smile, "A bit like you, boy," and as he spread his arms wide, Mach stepped forward, to be encircled in his strong embrace.

"Your mother? How is she?"

"Well, uncle, she is well."

Enach nodded as if hearing expected news. "We must go," adding with a half grunt, "We must not keep Oshaigh waiting."

Mach was taken by surprise. "Oshaigh? Oshaigh will attend?"

His uncle scowled at him, snapping, "Yes boy, Oshaigh. Now," his finger jabbing, "get in that boat, get an oar in each hand, and let us get to that island, there." Mach followed his finger and saw that he was pointing at Cranna, the central island of three which lay offshore.

When they'd left the shore, and Mach had dropped into a steady rowing rhythm, he allowed himself room for thought. His people had always been guided by Sataigh, "*a priest of a hundred terms if he was one*," he thought. Oshaigh, though, was a High Priest never seen in these lands, rarely spoken of, and even then, in hushed reverential whispers. Certainly the Druadich priests moved in every Land, and it was said they had no boundaries, but apart from meeting a young acolyte once or twice, Mach had only ever seen Sataigh as priest amongst his people. Now, Oshaigh was here for his Awakening ceremony. "And Cranna?" he thought, "Why Cranna?" Questions crowded his head.

He looked at his uncle, sitting silent, upright and immobile, his face under his cowl a stern expressionless mask. Mach struggled to find the right words but knew that questions were not proper on this day. With this last thought he gave up the struggle and turned his mind back to his

rowing, and as he did so, his uncle said, “It’s your line, boy. It is an honour that Oshaigh attends, but it’s your line. Now, concentrate – we are almost there.”

Startled, Mach swivelled round; Cranna was looming above them. He had seen his village become ever smaller as he rowed yet, caught up in his thoughts, hadn’t realised that they were almost there. Slowly he guided the vessel along the rocky shore until the Cove of Cranbuih, the only landing on the island, was in sight. A few moments later they had run ashore on the shingle, and both he and his uncle pulled the small craft beyond the waterline. Turning to Mach, Enach said, “Remember, boy, keep your heart open and free from questions – the Awakening relies on both.”

Nodding his agreement, Mach strode ahead of his uncle and up the beach. Whatever lay ahead was his.

❧ TWO ❧

As Mach reached the crest of the beach, his uncle caught up with him. “Now, boy,” his arms open, palms up, as he turned first left then right, “do you know *where* you are going?” Mach looked at him, seeing humour in his eyes. “I am here for a simple reason too.”

Realising his error, Mach said, “A simple reason?”

Enach, however, only grunted, “*Follow me, boy,*” and strode off towards the cliffs. Humbled, Mach watched his uncle – his Elder – reach the cliffs’ rocky base and, without breaking step, begin to climb. Mach followed, looking up to see Cranna’s endless stony face stretching to the sky. His uncle had already ascended some twenty feet and as he searched for his first hold he heard him say, “Climb boy, don’t hesitate,” and reached for the hard, striated, rock above his head, his fingers curling around its ancient, weathered projections.

After climbing for some time Mach felt his muscles protest at his over-reaches and shake on his foot-holds, so, reaching a slight ledge he thought he could safely pause for a moment or two. Flattening himself against the rock, he looked up. His uncle was not in sight. Looking down, he judged himself to be half way up the rock-face. Then, from high above, he heard his uncle’s faint voice, “Climb, boy, don’t hesitate.” *Resting, not hesitating,* he thought; then wondered, *was that my uncle’s voice?* Whether he had heard him or his mind had just played him false, his muscles started to object violently to the position he was in and he resumed his ascent.

He knew that with each moment he was closing the distance between himself and the summit, but this was hard; his breathing was becoming laboured and his muscles were beginning to feel spongy and soft. Last night’s vivid dream of climbing upwards but never arriving came back to him, his body aching under the effort, and here – in reality – he was revisiting the same sensations. A distant fear crept into his belly as he gripped the rock tighter, and at that moment, as if it were just above his head, he heard his uncle very clearly say, “Look to every step boy, you’ll not fall.”

Taking his concentration away from the fear that pulsed through him and back to the rock,

Mach felt the grip in his fingers both soften and become more secure as he climbed higher and higher. Covering the last section of his climb at speed, he scrambled over the last few feet, and almost landed in his uncle's lap.

Enach was calmly sitting cross-legged, and eyed Mach with a wry look, "What took you, boy?"

Without responding, Mach got to his feet, and feeling his breathing beginning to settle, he looked inwards and saw a part of Cranna he had never seen before.

With the cliffs behind him dropping hundreds of feet to the sea, he was standing on the edge of an almost circular rim of stone and, as far as he could see, this formed the complete top of Cranna. The land within dropped sharply at first, making the top of the cliffs that encircled it appear like some natural rampart and then, like a great upturned bowl, it gently descended into a wide grassy hollow.

Standing at the centre of the hollow was a high circular building which, even from a distance, Mach could see was made of stone. Although he knew of people who lived in the southern part of the Inner Lands building circular wooden houses on the water, he had never seen either his own people or heard of other people building circular buildings of stone. From this high position he could see three stone flagged paths leading from the outer edges and gently arcing towards the building at the centre.

Drinking in the extraordinary scene before him, he turned to his uncle, and raised his eyebrows in query. Enach unfolded his legs and stood. "No questions, boy. In this place, even the idea of a question is the idea of an idiot. Come, let's get down."

Buffeted by the wind, Mach looked back eastwards across the sea and saw his village nestled at the base of its own cliffs, and could just make out smoke lazily rising and drifting from some of the chimneys. Turning inwards once more, it felt as if his home was very far away.

When they reached the foot of this short second climb, Mach found they were completely sheltered from the wind, and the silence in this inner level was tangible. With his uncle steering him by the arm, they stepped onto one of the stone paths together, and as they walked, Mach marvelled at the deep stillness of this place; apart from their soft footsteps, there wasn't a sound.

Soon they were far enough along the path for him to see that it lead directly to a massive, wooden door in the strange, central structure. The building itself was plain and smooth, without any visible joints in the stone, and stood about three times his height, and sixty feet across. It appeared to be totally unadorned, although, as they drew near, Mach could see that to the right of this door there were three ornate symbols cleanly carved into the stone.

Looking closer he recognised them as ancient Druadich symbols, and rather than being carved into the surface of the stone, they appeared to be much deeper, as if cut through the stone itself. Stepping forward he slid his fingers into one of the carvings, and immediately felt a warmth rushing from his fingertips through his whole body, and a sensation of being bathed in and

welcomed by swirling golden light. From some part deep within, Mach felt himself respond as he glimpsed something like the Ancients' entwining signs – something older, beyond Time itself – and when he withdrew his hand the flowing, golden light was snuffed out like a lamp.

Raising his eyebrows he turned to his uncle who only shook his head, “What did I *just* say about questions?” and pointing to the door, “You enter here,” and without another word, turned from him and walked away on the path which ran around the building. Mach watched him go then, turning to the door before him, pushed it open and stepped inside.

As his eyes adjusted to the interior he found himself in what appeared to be a passageway of smooth stone, about four feet wide and seven feet high, which was lit at regular intervals by wall oil lamps and ran from the door, to curve out of sight. Hesitating only slightly as he took this in, he walked ahead. The stone appeared to absorb even his footsteps, as Mach could hear nothing other than his breathing.

Beyond the curve, Mach approached two other openings that led into two more passageways. Pausing slightly to look along each, he saw that they too, curved into the distance, and then he walked purposively on.

Soon, he could see the end of his path and as he stepped through the opening he was startled by what he saw. He had entered a vast inner circle of stone, lit by hundreds of oil lamps, and cut by many doorways. Within this, facing him, and soaring upwards in the towering space, stood a great rectangular wooden structure, open at one end and rising on three sides with what appeared to be wide seating levels of dark polished wood like very large steps. To Mach's astounded gaze this huge wooden edifice seemed even larger than the building he had seen from outside.

At the far end of this structure, hanging down and covering its whole width, he could see many long coloured cloths, about three feet wide. Each carried symbols he did not recognise, but one was emblazoned with the very same symbols that were on the cloth his mother had given him that morning, although he noted that the cloth before him was of the deepest vibrant red.

Hanging on a chain in front of these cloths was a great, wide disc of polished silver; the sacred mirror of the Druadich.

His eye caught movement as Enach entered, motioning Mach to his side without a word. They walked together into the wooden area where his uncle paused and gave a deep, formal bow towards the mirror. Mach followed his uncle's example and his uncle sat, kneeling at the end of the first seating area, leaving a space for Mach beside him.

Minutes passed and, in the stillness, Mach realised he had ceased asking himself what would happen next; all he noted was his breathing was deep and slow, and a growing sensation that he could sit there forever.

From within this deep, dark silence in which Mach sat he sensed another had entered. He was aware of his uncle bowing deeply, his forehead touching the polished wood in front of him and again he followed his Elder's example. Then, breaking the silence, he heard a deep, resonant voice. "So Enach, this is the boy." As he felt his uncle rise from his bow, Mach also rose and found himself looking directly into the eyes of High Priest Oshaigh kneeling opposite. He immediately bowed deeply again, "Holiness," he breathed.

"Rise, boy," and with a soft aside to Enach, Oshaigh added, "would that my own priests had such fervour."

Rising a second time, Mach looked towards Oshaigh and thought, *if my mother seemed ageless, then here is age itself*. The lines which crossed and scored Oshaigh's face were as deep as chisel cuts; his pale skin stretched tightly over the bones within and his hair and beard were long, the colour of doves' feathers. Yet, as he looked at him, he saw Oshaigh's eyes light up like a child's, changing his whole face and dropping the terms away.

"Yes boy, I *am* old; more terms than can be counted, I fear," adding, "Certainly far more than your mother." Mach had heard talk of Druadich telepathic power before but this was his first direct experience of it, and he could sense his uncle stirring uneasily beside him. Oshaigh continued, "You have grown, boy. It doesn't seem like eighteen terms since first I saw you." Seeing puzzlement cross Mach's face, he said, "I was at your naming ceremony. Now we," with a slight nod towards Enach, "are all together again, for your Awakening." He paused, falling back into silence as if enumerating the events of all the terms between then and now.

After some moments the High Priest broke the silence. "The Awakening is normally a strange event in a person's life. As each person is different, so is their Awakening." His gaze drifted to the great mirror hanging at the far end. "In the Brotherhood we are sometimes given the gift of knowing what the Awakening will mean to a person. Eighteen terms ago, I was given that gift by you as you were named." Although he wished it were otherwise, Mach remembered his uncle's warning regarding questions and remained silent, waiting for the priest to continue.

Oshaigh appeared to be pondering several thoughts, his gaze falling between them. Then, looking up, he said, "Your studies, boy? How are your studies?"

"I know numbers, Holiness, and I am learning the heavens. I know three tongues fluently and can speak some of the ancient tongue."

Oshaigh nodded as if inwards. "And the Disciplines?"

Mach's mind flitted over the pains his muscles had endured and the bruises he had collected daily these last three terms at Duart. "Staff and sword, Holiness. Hand Disciplines require work."

Again, Oshaigh nodded. "So, if you were required to show me, you could?"

Mach recognised the question. "I have nothing to show, Holiness."

Oshaigh only said, "Good," and relapsed into silence. After several moments he said,

“Normally, the Awakening is a great unknown. Sometimes, it is as simple as, ‘Learn from your father, become a good fisherman’, sometimes it is more complex. However, I was privileged to know your Awakening, and the journey from this day forward, which was laid out for you eighteen terms ago.” Then, as if some important question had been answered in this light interchange, Oshaigh stood with a fluidity that belied his age, saying, “Let us go within.”

All three moved deeper into the large wooden area, towards where the all-seeing mirror hung, and there Mach noticed a low table within the shadows. On this, he could just make out the forms of a small vial made of what looked like sacred silver, beside this a very small knife and, beyond both, a small wooden box. He realised that daylight was entering and, glancing up, he saw, high above them, a wide circular opening in the roof of the building, a blue disc of sky beyond.

They knelt down with Mach in the centre, the High Priest on his right, his uncle on his left. Oshaigh then said, “Enach, the mirror.” and his uncle reached beyond the table to pull on the chain, and slowly lowered the mirror until it was level with them. Mach could now see that this great disc was one piece of sacred silver with many symbols worked into its edge. Looking into its slightly convex surface he saw three distorted figures reflected in it with the large wooden structure behind them.

After sitting for several moments in silence, Oshaigh uttered a phrase which Mach knew to be the ancient tongue, but it was spoken so low that he couldn’t catch its meaning. Then, reaching forward, the priest picked up the vial and knife from the table. Turning to Mach the priest said, “Open your mouth, boy.” Mach did as he was commanded, and reaching forward the priest sliced into his tongue with the small knife in one swift wrist action. Handing him the vial, the priest said, “Drink,” and Mach, feeling the sharp cut and fire in his mouth, took this from him. Holding the vial in both hands, he raised it up to his forehead in homage and then, in one gulp, swallowed its contents.

Immediately, all pain and the fire in his mouth ceased, and he was left with a warm, slightly bitter taste on his tongue. He heard Oshaigh utter a phrase he could not make out and after several seconds, his uncle began to repeat this same phrase over and over again until his voice drifted into silence. Then, from what seemed very far away, he heard Oshaigh say, “Be still. Concentrate,” and Mach drew his focus to his breathing, feeling his body open and close with every breath.

Stillness. With every breath his heartbeat seemed to slow.

Mach knew, without knowing why, that he was waiting, and as time passed, he had the feeling that with every inhalation he was sucking in every particle of light around him; with every exhalation, passing the light into the darkness. Within his ribcage he felt, or heard, a double beat and after a long pause another.

Floating. Mach lifted his head and looked into the shining silver, sacred mirror before him.

And, as he gazed into the mirror, he noticed the ancient symbols at the edges appear to move, then settle. He tried to move his head and found that he could not. Locked there, he stared

into the mirror. His breathing was now so still that every breath seemed to take minutes. Again, he felt his heart's double thump, then stillness. Around him, he sensed darkness slowly coalescing into light and back again. The symbols around the mirror's edge began to shift and intertwine with each other, lifting from the mirror and drifting into space. He thought that he could perhaps touch each as they drifted out towards him but, as he tried, he realised he could not raise his arms.

In that still place, within the unfathomable quiet, he perceived that all that existed was his mind; there *was* no Cranna; no High Priest; no Elder and no boy called Mach at his Awakening. He saw all such impermanence shift, change and drift away like early morning fog being burnt off by a rising sun. Then, slowly at first, followed by a rush, he felt shafts of brilliant golden light piercing his very being and even the sensation of breath fell from him.

Stillness.

The sacred mirror appeared to move and grow as if he were falling within, and with a blinding flash of light his body had gone.

Nothingness.

From very far off, he heard a voice. Oshaigh. The voice said, "The Past" and, as if a white curtain had been pulled aside, Mach saw Moinach and a gathering of his villagers. From within the crowd a man and woman walked forward together arm in arm, and the woman was carrying a swaddled child. Drawing closer, the couple smiled over their infant son; the mother half speaking, half singing in the tongue of the Eastern Lands as the child lay smiling up at her. The father, taking the baby gently from its mother, raised it aloft in the eight directions; offering his son to the world, and as he did so, the child began to cry. From a distant place, Mach felt tears coursing down his cheeks as he watched himself with his parents, youthful, as he had never seen them, at the dawn of his time.

The light that surrounded them wavered, and Mach sensed the sacred mirror begin to turn slowly on its axis as shafts of light, of the purest white, ripped through the deepest part of his being. He felt a great, unfathomable sadness shoot through him as the scene shimmered before him disappearing and, for the first time, he knew regret.

Nothingness.

Stillness.

Again, from a distance too far to judge, he heard Oshaigh utter, "The Present," and, as he heard the words, his whole being bucked and jolted with pain. The mirror was now aflame as he looked on, then descended into, a scene from hell. Boiling vats of oil were pouring over the walls of a great stone stronghold as a huge body of men bristling with arms attacked it. The blood-coloured sky was filled with flaming arrows. Screams tore the air and ripped through his body. Choking smoke billowed through the scene and he felt his being recoil in horror.

Then, striding toward him, sword in hand, a tall figure appeared, his eyes wild with the clash of battle. He saw the man's sword arm and war tunic spattered with human remains, his face

covered with blood, and heard his breathing heavy and laboured. As the man paused, an arrow, flames streaming from it, thudded directly into his chest, and Mach touched the pain, his body bucking as the arrow tore into muscle and sinew. He saw surprise in the man's eyes as he collapsed to his knees. Lifting his head, the man appeared to look at him and, before he fell forward, Mach realised he was looking directly on his father.

With his whole being buffeted as if by the great Western Sea, Mach felt the mirror slowly turn on its axis once more. The hellish scene shimmered into nothingness before him, to be replaced by a quiet, pulsing darkness.

Once more, Oshaigh's voice reached him from the distance, "The Future." The sacred mirror appeared to grow before him – its light almost blinding – and he looked upon scenes which would not hold still. He now witnessed rapidly changing scenes of devastation followed by scenes of tranquillity. Ruination and lands laid waste were followed by great crowds of people in joyous gatherings. And as these scenes floated before him he became aware that he was standing beside a great wide river in full spate. Approaching from his left he saw two women arm in arm; one dark, one fair. On the far bank he saw a third woman, her long red hair and clothes being whipped in the wind, and he felt his body plunge into the river and begin to rock and sway in its current.

Far off, he heard a growling rumble, then saw, a great wall of water, higher than any cliff he had ever seen, rushing towards him, its sound growing ever louder to deafen him. Whether he was hit or whether he somehow avoided this onrush he was never to know, but he felt his whole being thrown from side to side, and as he fell backwards he was aware of the mirror spinning violently on its axis and disappearing from view.

Gazing upwards he could see through the great circular hole cut in the ceiling high above him a sliced moon in the heavens. He tried to speak but found he could not. Slowly the moon inched further into view. He became aware of Oshaigh kneeling beside him, chanting the names of the Ancients. Now the moon was fully in sight and it appeared to fill the hole, commanding all he could see.

Sacred moon.

Sacred mirror.

Sacred silver.

He felt Oshaigh beside him. He felt the knife cut backwards and forwards across the skin of his upper arm. He felt the sacred earth turn once and an ancient, deep darkness swallowing him whole.