

# The Twelfth Rune.

By

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## Chapter 1

I once saved the world.

Saved all of you actually, dear readers, using a hypersphere; which was a machine from back in the mists of time utilising the seven-ness of the universe and given to me by a ghost called Nye. Howling dervishes wanted to murder me most nastily, and I'd opened portals to suck them into the screaming, black nothingness of other dimensions.

Honest—I did.

Once they finished with me, then you, all of you, would have been nothing more than soggy blood soaked seconds for the Red Caps - murderous dwarves who once roamed the Scottish borders but were abroad in London Town when they first came for me. Never in my wildest dreams, or nightmares did I think I would have to do it all over again.

But who would know twelve is the unluckiest number?

It started with an innocent walk in rural Cornwall.

Sunday is my day off. It's no big deal; I can't say I work too hard during the week because I'm a writer living off family money. I try to write on a daily basis. You are probably more interested in how I saved the world than my attempts at being a best selling novelist. Here's the rub, I'm basically a reinvented office clone, by the name of Charlie Simpson. I was a fortyish, pasty, sandy-haired, plumpish, non-descript, floppy-fringed, posh, ex-city boy. After a short and failed career at being a murderer, (a long story) I got a distinctive new look. Skinhead, big boots, black clothes and I've sort of kept that style. It fits the new me, the saviour of the world, as it were.

I know I saved the world—really, I did. There is footage on my GoPro only I don't watch it much. The film is on a USB stick stored somewhere safe so no one else gets to see it. Maybe there will be a time when I'll upload it to YouTube... or maybe not.

Horrible bastards.

I got rid of them all on my own.

Okay, Nye helped, a bit.

A ghost from the 12<sup>th</sup> century—did I already tell you that? Sometimes my memory is a bit messed up. Nye, a real ghost, came into my life. I'm not making it up. Scottish, too, with an accent so thick I could barely understand her when she was haunting me.

And she helped me out with those terrible goings on in London Town.

Sometimes when I wonder what happened in London, I get brain freeze. It's as if I'd just taken a huge spoonful of my favourite Ben and Jerry's ice cream, Cherry Garcia. So I'd stopped thinking about it, and got on with life in sunny Cornwall with Annie, who, fortuitously, I'd also saved from being murdered. Okay, I admit it was mainly Nye who saved Annie, but I did have a major part in that little adventure.

Life was good. We found a nice cottage overlooking the sea in Marazion, Cornwall. From the huge bay window of our cottage we could see St. Michael's Mount. One couldn't get much further away from London without the aid of a boat and that suited both Annie and I.

The cottage we found felt special right from the beginning. It had an extraordinary feeling about it. Even some sort of *vibration*, it was just *right*, it gave us a *buzz*; we were *happy* there. Annie is a good artist and jewellery maker. She runs a little gallery in the main street. It caters mainly to the tourists, of course, but it gives the local colony of artists, artisans and makers somewhere to exhibit their art or goods to make a few quid. Being an artist in the South West is tough.

On a weekend we like to go exploring around the hills and moors of Cornwall. It was on one of our walks we fell into it all again. That particular Sunday we wanted to visit what we jocularly called the Cornish Alps. The China Clay industry in St. Austell and the edges of Bodmin Moor had, over the last four hundred years or so, thrown up massive amounts of waste. These "mountains" gleamed white above the flat moor, the kaolin-stained rocks evoking the vistas of alpine France or Italy. As we drive up the A30 in our ratty old Land Rover Discovery, we look forward to the moment when they appear on the horizon.

The reason for this Sunday outing was to search for amethysts amongst the mine waste. Annie uses the gemstones for her jewellery.

*Little did we know what we were letting ourselves in for.*

On our travels we'd noticed an isolated tip up towards Lanivet. It was a bit further than we normally went, but it was a nice day, and Snooky our dog would enjoy the walk. I also needed the fresh air and exercise. I'd been sitting on my fat arse all week tap-tapping at the computer.

The place we were heading for was just off the main road so we parked up in a lay-by. You'd know it because when you drive past, it's the big one with the burger van and the Confederate flag flying over it. I must say in these intemperate times, where the banner is banned in the US as a racist symbol, this guy has got balls. Perhaps he was railing at English rule in Cornwall, but politics aside, his burgers and hotdogs were pretty damn good.

It was a beautiful day and we could see right over the barren moors out towards the sea that was a shining blue line on the far horizon. There was a buzz in the air and we commented on the tingling feeling we were both experiencing but shook it off as the brightness of the sun and the vibrations from the cars and lorries flashing past us on the main road.

After finishing the burgers, we got our boots on and headed across the rough grasses of the moor towards the large conical shaped mound. The day was hot, and it was sweaty graft climbing the steep side of the waste tip. We scavenged amongst the debris for a few minutes and our work paid off. We found a number of decent sized amethysts that would be more than suitable to turn into beautiful jewellery and a couple of larger pieces which would look great as displays in the shop.

Annie and I had sat down to take a breather and share a bottle of water when we realised Snooky was missing. Normally, she hung around Annie or myself sticking her nose into the little holes we were scraping to find the stones. Or she would be waiting patiently for us to chuck a rock so she could chase it up and down the hill. I stood up and called her a few times.

'Snooky, Snooks, where are you, come on, that's a good girl.'

Nothing.

I whistled and shouted. 'Snooky, come here.'

I climbed higher to see if she was off chasing squirrels or rabbits or god forbid, sheep. Perhaps I should have kept her on the lead. I didn't want an irate farmer shooting her for worrying his livestock.

'Damn dog.' As I scanned the horizon, the sunlight made me squint. I needed my sunglasses, but I'd left them in the Land Rover.

I called again. This time I heard a muffled yipping and a bark.

She was close by.

I hunted around following the noise. Annie was up with me searching, too.

There it was—a hole.

I lay down and called Snooky's name. She gave a muted whine in return. I stuck my arm as far as I could to try to reach her but no luck. I was going to have to dig her out. Leaving Annie talking down the hole to keep Snooky from panicking I returned to the Discovery to get the shovel I kept there. I was back at the spoil heap in a matter of minutes and started to attack the pile, chucking the waste behind me. Annie thrilled at this extra work grubbed about the spoil as it meant more amethysts for her.

After some hard digging I was close enough to Snooks to grab her tail and try to drag her back. She yelped and squealed, but wouldn't budge—stuck fast and nowhere to go. Digging more carefully and scraping at the earth until I was at her body I pushed my hands down her sides, but couldn't feel anything in particular holding her in.

The white cloying soil fell away from her and I found her muzzle caught up in what looked like wire netting. It was probably old mining waste. Snooky whined a little as I gently started to pull the metal strands away from her. She wriggled wanting to get away. The wire gave way, and I passed the dog out of the now large hole to Annie.

I became aware of a high-pitched sound almost out of my hearing range. I shook my head and focused on my hearing. Was it tinnitus? It was a high frequency—was that what Snooky was following? I became a little lightheaded.

'Hey Annie can you hear that?' I poked at my ears.

'What?' She was busy grappling with a wriggling dog trying to lick her face.

'That noise, I can hear a noise, a sort of high-pitched whirring sound. Can you?'

She looked puzzled. 'No, perhaps it's that.' She pointed to a mobile phone mast on top of a nearby Tor.

I looked to the back of the hole I stood in. Lodged in the soil was the edge of a box—a straight line of metal amongst the dirt—something out of place.

Things with straight edges are not natural. This was manmade, and it was deep in a spoil heap at least a couple of hundred years old. Irritated by the sounds in my head but intrigued by the find, I pushed my shovel forward and started to clear around the object.

It definitely wasn't mining waste.

I reached down and pulled a well-tooled metal box out of its resting place. It was roughly the size of a Christmas tin of chocolates but it wasn't square. It shook slightly as I held it. I'd felt vibrations like that before.

*I was in a dark corridor holding the hypersphere before me waiting for the Red Caps to tear me to pieces.*

Climbing out of the hole I made my way down to the bottom of the pile where Annie and Snooky were waiting for me. Snooky wore her harness now—she wasn't getting away again.

When Snooky saw me place the box on the ground she whimpered and moved behind Annie. I could still hear a high frequency whine in my ears. Annie couped down and rubbed the top of the box with her fingers. 'What's this?'

I shrugged. 'Dunno, it was at the bottom of the hole the dog was in, strange isn't it?'

'It looks old,' she said. 'Is there anything in it?'

I picked it up. The shape reminded me of something, but I wasn't quite sure what. I counted the sides. There were twelve. In my past life I'd been an engineer so I knew it was a dodecagon. Interesting.

The box was vibrating slightly in my hands. I handed it to Annie. 'Feel anything?'

Annie held the tin box with a puzzled look on her face. She shook her head. 'No, not really.' Putting it up to her ear she shook it sharply, 'nothing,' she said with a faux scowl of disappointment. She handed it back to me.

'Really, you can't feel it vibrating?' The tremors ran up my forearms leaving an unpleasant feeling of pins and needles in their wake. It was then I realised it didn't have a lid, it was a completely sealed. I dumped it down next to our kit. I would deal with it later, and we got back to the task of finding amethysts for Annie's business.

## Chapter 15

‘We will make a trade.’

Jan’s funereal tones split the tense atmosphere and saved me from being killed by Modred.

The flat tones of his voice competed with the wails and shouts of the pseudo-Roger Daltrey booming out of the speakers. I was reminded of my Mum and Dad always buying me the cheap Woolworth covers of the Top 10 when I was a kid.

Modred necked some more small blue pills. I guessed he was speeding out of his box—if the drug had any actual effect on the undead. Maybe they were just tic-tac’s he was using as props. I wasn’t close enough, nor did I plan to be close enough to smell his minty breath.

‘A trade, Jan? What is it you wish to trade with me?’ Modred glared across the table.

‘I have something you desire.’ Jan stared at me. Did he intend to double cross me?

‘A trade, Man, that would be a gas—cool. But hey...’ He looked serious. ‘Don’t flip your wig pussycat, but I, uh ...’ he waved his arm around in a grandiose gesture, ‘I, uh, have everything, dig?’

I took a sip of the Blue Nun from the glass regularly topped up by my dolly bird waitress. I spat it out it tasted like piss. The food in front of me started to sink into the plates, blackening, twisting, and liquefying. My stomach turned.

‘I... have the... blade you desire.’ Jan Tregeagle struggled to get the words out.

Modred made another flamboyant signal, and the room plunged into blackness. I remembered darkness like this before. The sort of black where you can’t see your hand held in front of your face—a darkness that fills your mouth and seeps into your brain. I tried to grasp the table in front of me to help maintain perspective, so I knew which way was up.

The table wasn’t there. The music disappeared too. The world became silent, which was even more terrifying.

*Was I dead?*

*Had Jan traded my mortal soul?*

The man who reappeared before me was no longer the 1960’s throwback mod, but a dapper city businessman. I stood in a fashionable office, not unlike my dad’s in London.

Jan sat in the same model of Eames chair that graced my Father’s office. Modred pulled at his shirt cuffs and straightened his tie. He slipped his hand into one of the pockets of his pinstriped suit. He made sure his thumb hung fashionably outside of the pocket.

*Poser.*

‘Ah, Charles, so glad you could join us. Please take a seat.’

He indicated another Eames chair to the right of Jan Tregeagle. I was confused; it was as if the last, however long it was, hadn’t happened.

*Did I really have Black Forest Gateau?*

He moved to a large globe next to the picture window. Somehow, we seemed to be thirty stories above Bodmin Moor. The grassy moorland stretched out before us. I could even see a blue slash of the sea in the distance. Modred moved his hands over the globe, and the tectonic plates separated revealing the bottles of spirits within. He grasped a bottle of Yamazaki 50 Year Single Malt watching my face as he took a glass.

‘A wee dram Charles before we get down to business?’

He knew, the bastard. This was exactly how my dad and I sorted things out. And he knew I knew that he knew.

The crystal glass he passed to me must have held about fifteen hundred quid’s worth of whisky. The peaty aroma filled the room. I looked around expecting Nye, my friendly ghost to enter the room. I noticed neither Modred nor Jan partook of the spirit.

This pinstriped Modred took a seat behind his expensive looking desk. Strange and exotic wood inlays swirled across the expanse between us. He placed a pair of half-moon glasses on his nose. He steepled his hands in front of his face, a masquerade as phony as his smile. He turned to Jan.

‘You have the blade?’

‘Yes.’ Jan waited.

‘And you wish to trade?’

‘Yes.’

I sipped my whisky and watched the two... things ... negotiate.

Modred took some papers off his desk, flicked through them, peering here and there through his glasses. He shuffled them and placed them back, exactly on the spot he had lifted them from. The pages were blank.

He cocked his head. ‘Pray, remind me, which blade are we talking about here.’

Jan looked at me, his dead face showing exasperation. He sighed. It sounded like a stiff breeze blowing through a stand of bulrushes.

‘I have Excalibur, and I will trade it for the mortal.’

Modred leaned forward his eyes glowing orange.

‘Jan, I think you take me for a fool. He tapped his fingers against the shiny veneer of his desk.

‘If I correctly remember it was you that bought the mortal to me. And now you wish to trade that which I have, as yet, made no claim on.’

The orange eyes turned to me. I took a large gulp of the whisky. It burnt all the way down, exploding in my stomach, causing me to cough and tears to stream down my face.

‘Mr. Simpson has the artefact that I need to complete my collection.’ Modred got up and walked around the table. He snatched up the bottle and topped up my glass.

‘You see, Charlie, I am naught but a collector. A curator, if you will, of the ancient and the interesting. And the bauble you hold would fill a sizable hole in my collection.’

He raised his hands and sat back on the edge of his desk.

‘Oh, I know some wild tales have been woven about me, and you have been shown things that mere mortals should never be shown or meet.’ He gestured at a glowering Jan.

‘But, my friend, if you think you are in peril here, then back in your mortal world, you will face peril a hundredfold more from those you deem your friends and protectors.’

He pressed a button on his desk, and a screen dropped from the ceiling. A laptop rose up through an aperture that appeared on his desk.

‘Let me show you something.’

He held one of those little black clicky widgets you point at the computer to get things moving. Yes, Modred, the destroyer, the traitor who resided in the lowest circle of hell, gave me a PowerPoint presentation.

It was the lowest circle of hell—death by PowerPoint. An eternity of Modred showing me how bad my family, friends and the Cornish Guardians actually were.

It was so bad it was funny. Fake news, for sure. So fake I could see the joins where the photos had been manipulated. And the CGI movies? They were so terrible they could easily get over a million hits on YouTube. I slunk down into my Eames chair and sipped the Jap scotch. Another subtle irony.

Modred finished schmoozing me and took his place back behind his battleship of a desk.

‘So, you see, my friends,’ he bared his white teeth in what he thought passed for a friendly grin, but which sent shivers down my spine. ‘I am ready to deal.’

My phone burped again. My trouser pocket glowed green, so I checked the screen.

Charlie, ask ye man tae show ye his collection.

Nye. No “Hello Charlie, it’s been a while, how are you?”

I took another hit of the single malt, breathing in the peaty scent.

I half raised a hand, as if I was about to ask permission to go to the loo. Modred raised a questioning eyebrow. Jan’s face was a blank, eyes closed; he had drifted off somewhere about ten minutes into the PPT.

‘Er, before we make any important decisions could I erm, have a look at your collection?’ I remembered my manners. ‘Please.’

Modred perked up. ‘Delighted, old boy, delighted.’ He stood and gestured towards a large gray metal door that I hadn’t noticed before and certainly wasn’t there when I came in. It looked like a safe with one of those large circular steel wheels that one has to spin before dragging the heavy door open.

Modred opened it using a pin number on an electronic device that popped out of the wall as we got there. As he poked the buttons, he hunched around shielding us from seeing the numbers he punched in. Each number produced a musical tone.

I had learnt these tones many moons ago when I had been abroad. It was one of the ways we scammed telephone exchanges to get free international calls home. This was information that might come in useful, so I filed it away in my head.

The room we stepped into was a cornucopia of the weird and the wonderful. It was as if the National Museum had been given *carte blanche* to plunder and steal from every culture across the world, which they had, but this was better. There were rows and rows of display cabinets disappearing into the distance. Half open boxes spewed out Etruscan treasures, and rolls of papyrus that seemed to have strange writing on them lay haphazardly around the walls. As we walked through the darkened aisles, lights automatically switched on.

Modred kept up a dialogue explaining things to me and pointing at some of his more prized possessions until we came to a long rack of swords.

‘Now Jan, let us return to our *negotiations*.’ Modred pulled a short, but wicked looking sword and held it to my throat. The point nicked the skin, and I felt warm blood trickling down my neck.

The phone in my pocket burped again. I quickly glanced at the screen, but had no idea what she was on about.

*Bastart, That's ma dirk. The wan I kilt that bastart Jarl wi'.*

'Jan, I will have Excalibur, and you will have the life of this mortal. But first I must also have the stone. I do not know what deal you have made with the guardian Myghal, but do not underestimate me,' said Modred.

Jan bowed and scraped flouncing his arm out as he had done before. He fixed his gravedigger rictus on his face.

'I am obliged Modred. I spent lifetimes dredging that damned pond at the whim of those pox'd clergymen. I, too, am a collector, and the Lady once was obliged to do me a favour. That favour was to give me guardianship of Arthur's blade.'

Modred's eyes became burning coals.

'It is my blade, Jan Tregeagle. Excalibur is mine. I am the rightful heir to the throne. Sir Bedivere was a fool, spellbound by Merlin. That damned wizard turned away from me, tricked me and usurped my position—where is my sword?'

Modred turned towards Jan. The sword point left my throat as he directed his attention to Tregeagle. I stepped away.

My phone burped.

*Tae yer left Charlie, walk tae yer left, dinnae look back.*

A dark corridor stretched ahead of me. I had a memory of a dark hallway in London. Memories full of horrors and death, but I walked into the darkness anyway. At the far end, I could see a light—a green light. Was it Nye? There was a gentle, comforting hum in my ear and a peaty smell in the air.

It wasn't the whisky it had to be Nye. Why wasn't she here with me?

I stopped for a moment to listen. Modred and Jan must still be negotiating over my demise or salvation.

*Move ye idjeet.*

I moved until I came to another door with a large metal wheel. As I stepped up to the cold steel, the number pad slid out of the door. I poked at the numbers that had corresponded to the tones I had heard earlier. It was a simple code: 9191.

*The angel numbers, aye.*

There was a click and a whirr somewhere deep in the equipment, so I grabbed the wheel and span it anticlockwise. The locks slammed back, and I pulled the door open. Light flooded in.

I looked back down the corridor.

Like the rest of this damned repository, boxes were stacked to the ceiling. Many of them bulging and split. Jewels and coins had cascaded onto the floor. Weapons such as I had never seen before were racked. Cobwebs and dust evidence of the ages they stood in the dark.

Something glittered brightly in the light and caught my eye. I heard a shout that seemed to suggest that my presence was missing.

*Tak it.*

I bent and picked up a shiny blue bracelet. It was warm in my hands and had a sinuous quality to it. A quick glance before I shoved it into my pocket confirmed it had the form of a snake.

The whole building tilted and I staggered. Modred was about to change the nature of the game.

A green radiance enveloped me, and I was pulled through the door into buoyant cold weightlessness.

I was back underwater.

Where were the bloody mermaids? Come to that, which way was up?

I let some breath dribble out of my mouth. I followed the bubbles towards the grey light above me. They tell you always go towards the light. I kicked hard my lungs bursting. A hand was on my back. Modred? I twisted my head to see the owner of the helping hand. I saw blond hair waving in the murky water and below that the billowing of a silken gown.

*The Lady?*

The light above grew brighter. With an explosive cough, my head broke the surface. I sucked in the cold air, coughed and then puked. I trod water spinning around trying to see where I was. To my right, I could hear shouts. A dog barked. I spat and called out. I heard my name called, the sound bouncing across the water.

‘Charlie.’

My phone, still in my hand, was working.

*Swim then, ye wee daftie.*