

## Chapter 1

The crash was like an explosion. Patrick in the kitchen of his small farmhouse busily making himself an evening meal of slices of wheat bread well covered with a thick layer of smoked bacon, was startled. The sound had come from the old quarry. From time to time a part of the old tunnels collapsed giving a muffled rumbling like a distant thunder. This sound however was like thunder.

Patrick looked out the window at the sky. There was not a cloud to be seen, not even a small one. He left his bread on the kitchen table and walked to the back door to satisfy his curiosity.

He could see at the end of the small, weed overgrown dirt road the entrance to the quarry. It had not been used for ages and was regarded as very dangerous now. Nobody ever went there.

The quarry looked as it had always done and there was no dust cloud, to indicate that there had been a fall.

Just as Patrick turned to go back to his meal he saw a movement at the entrance. He squinted his eyes to see better. He could distinguish the figure of a man, moving fast, crunched down as if he was afraid to be seen. He came quickly down the road. Patrick waited till he was closer to call him.

"Hey there."

The man stopped in his tracks and stared in his direction. Then as if defeated he let his shoulders down and stood with bowed head.

"Hey, what were you doing there in the quarry? It's highly dangerous in there, you know!" Patrick yelled at the man.

The man raised his head and looked at him. An expression of fear and disbelief came over his face.

"Amon?"

"What Amon? I am Patrick, Patrick O'Conner."

The man stood and stared at Patrick. Then he slowly came closer.

"Are you the door-minder or the gate-keeper?" he asked.

"What are you talking about? I am Patrick O'Conner and I farm here."

"Every door has a minder and every gate a keeper."

"I don't know what you are talking about. You're not making sense to me."

"You really don't know?" the stranger asked.

"I have not the faintest idea what you are talking about."

The stranger stared at Patrick with disbelief.

"Then there is no minder or keeper here? Then I am free to go, nobody is going to report me? You are not tricking me, are you?"

Patrick sighed. He was puzzled by the man. He looked strange and he acted strange but somehow Patrick felt his vulnerability.

He noticed that the stranger's trouser legs were wet.

"Come in," he said, "I'm getting cold and you must be freezing by now."

Without waiting he turned and made his way back to the warm kitchen.

Patrick picked up one of the slices of bread and went to take a bite. He stopped when he saw the man standing at the door to the kitchen looking at him.

"Hungry?" Patrick asked.

The man nodded

"Sit down then. What is your name?"

"Styx, my name is Styx."

"Styx Who?"

"Just Styx."

Patrick shook his head. He went to the stove on which a pot of soup was bubbling. He ladled out a full bowl, took a spoon from the bench and put it in front of the strange man.

"Here, something warm."

As the man began to eat the soup, Patrick looked at him more closely. His hair was much longer than was decent, for this corner of Ireland that was. And as for his clothes, it looked as if he had come from a traveling theater group, straight out of a play.

"You don't want to know where I come from?"

"Often better not to know but if you want to tell me, I will listen."

"I came through the gate, from the other world, the fifth. I came to this the sixth Parallel."

"Oh," was all Patrick could say.

"They are after me. I tried two gates but the keepers reported me and they took me back."

"Who are they?"

"Rumbold's men. He doesn't like it when things like that happen."

"Who is Rumbold?"

"You will find out when they find my trace. They will make you responsible. They will accuse you of collaborating."

"I live in a free country. I have nothing to do with them."

"Ha, we are only as free as Rumbold lets us be free. I have seen what he thinks he can do."

"What is the sixth Parallel?"

"This one. " He hesitated before continuing. "You don't know, do you?"

"I have not the faintest idea what you are talking about." Patrick shook his head again. From which asylum had this one escaped, he asked himself.

It was as if the stranger was reading his mind.

"You must think that I am a lunatic," and he chuckled. He took a deep breath and continued: "This is not the only world that exists. There are several time lines and every time line contains a world. They continue roughly parallel but now and then they cross each other and on such a crossing there is a gate or a door, which can be used to cross from one world into another. If there were free travel between the different worlds, there would be chaos. That's why there are minders and keepers. They check if you can legitimately cross. You must have a very good reason to go into another world."

"How did you come here then?"

"As I told you I already tried two doors before but the minders caught me and sent me back. Then I saw this door and I tried again. I am a seer, I can see where the doors are. If I was caught here, well bad luck, I must keep trying or they will get me."

"What's on the other side?" Patrick asked.

"Just a world like this. In essence it is the same but development may be a little different."

"You mean there are real people there, like you and me?"

"Yes, I would be a good example. I come from there remember."

Patrick was confused and needed to think.

"Eat your soup. If you want to travel from here you will need a good feed. The winter is cold and will ask a lot from your strength."

"Have you seen other strangers here, Patrick?" Styx asked.

"No but I do not always watch the quarry, I have work to do."

Patrick sat opposite the stranger called Styx chewing his bread without tasting it.

"Coffee?" he asked.

"What is coffee?"

"Well, coffee! You know milled brown beans and you pour water over it."

"Beans?"

"Oh, leave it," Patrick sighted. He made two cups of coffee, one with a lot of milk in it.

"Here," he said, "taste this."

Styx smelled the drink and took a small sip. Patrick saw by his face that it was not totally to his liking.

"Keeps you awake and it is an acquired taste." Patrick said smiling.

"What are you planning to now do, Styx?"

"I have to go further, I can't stay here. This is the first house they will search for me."

"Over my dead body, nobody comes into my house. Would it be this Rumbold guy?"

"He won't come here himself, he will send his henchmen and they are real bastards."

"Does he know that there is a gate here in the quarry?"

"If I can find it, other seers can find it too and I am sure that Rumbold has connections with some, probably black ones."

"What do you mean?"

"Seers who do dirty tricks for good money."

"Do you?"

"Good heavens, no."

"How did you find this door?"

"I was hiding in the cave and I sensed the 'draft'. So I went further inside and then I found it."

Patrick didn't know what to think. The man could have escaped from a mental institution or perhaps it was his wild imagination. Who had ever heard of parallel worlds? Of course such things happened in science fiction stories but they were always galaxies away and were populated with the most hideous creatures trying to devour any visitor.

Patrick was curious about the rest of the tale and decided to play the game.

"Why did you call 'Amon', when you saw me?"

"I thought you were Amon at first."

"Who is Amon then?"

"He is a landowner on the other side. You and he look like two drops of the same water. He is bad news."

"Nice to know that I have something like that in the family."

"He is no family to you, he has nothing to do with you. He only looks like you."

"How?"

"When the worlds were created they were all the same but slowly they began to have their differences. They don't mirror each other so some things can go differently. People are different because each has their own will and thoughts. Some 'strains' stay parallel and then they produce doubles, others fluctuate and take another course. In the very long term nothing will be the same anymore."

"You are saying that that Amon has similar parents as I have and so forth?"

"Exactly."

Patrick looked at Styx and shook his head again. Where could this guy get it all from? He must be really warped.

"Are there many of these doubles?"

"I don't know. I know they exist but I have never met one till now. It is my first time on this side, you know."

"Of course. And what are you planning to do now?"

"I have to go, I have to go far from the door and hide for some time. Maybe I can find another door and slip in again but they will certainly be looking for me, at least Rumbold will."

"Why is that?"

"Rumbold wanted me to make sure that he got the upper hand in a business deal. It would have meant that I had to deprive good hard working people in order to accommodate him. It would have nearly ruined these people. So I refused. That was not too bad but I also warned those people. Rumbold does not have a chance anymore, even if he can find a black seer to do the job for him."

"And what does he want from you?"

"He wants nothing from me anymore, he wants me out of the way and the only way he knows is to send his henchmen after me and lock me up and let me succumb."

"He wants to kill you?"

"No, just to lock me up and after a year he has to note with 'regret' that one of his prisoners died."

"What does that man do over there?"

"He is the area's magistrate and he is a big land lord. Or maybe it is just the other way around, landlord first and then magistrate."

"Sounds like a nice guy."

"He came to the area after his uncle died and took over the estate. Life became hell for some people, especially if they resented him. He has his way of breaking people and the government doesn't look at it because it is such in the far corner of the country and is not really important. They are glad that someone wants to do that job there."

Patrick cut himself another slice of bread.

"Want one?" he asked.

"If I am allowed."

"I wouldn't offer one if I didn't mean it."

"Please, I am famished, I didn't get much in the last three days. Dosh gave me some but he doesn't have much himself."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know his story, he doesn't want to talk about it. He lives out on the moors in an old cottage. He doesn't talk to anybody and chases everybody away. They just leave him alone. I think people regard him as some type of idiot but not dangerous. His cottage looks fabulous in summer, He has always lots of flowers around it and he is always pottering around in his garden."

"Were you born around there, Styx?"

"No, I originally came from the south. Only, two years ago I wandered there and got stuck. I had a thing with the daughter of the innkeeper. She was a great gift."

Patrick was confused. It sounded all so natural and realistic, at least in Styx mind.

"You can not go tonight, you would get lost. You can stay here, and sleep in the hay."

"Thanks."

"And before you go tomorrow I will give you some other clothes. With those you would stick out like a clown at a funeral."

"I wish I could do something in return."

"That's all right. I don't expect anything but maybe one day you will remember me. But if you don't mind, I want to go to bed. It is starting to get cold in here. Come, I show you the hay."

Patrick lay in the broad wooden bed he had shared with Caitlin till two years ago when she had disappeared. Every night his thoughts were with her, asking himself where she would be at the moment and why she had chosen to walk out on him.

But that night his thoughts turned to the strange things the stranger, Styx had told him. He must have a really vivid imagination.

Patrick tried to remember how it had started. He remembered seeing the guy coming from the end of the road. How did he get there? The only way to the quarry passed a few yards from his house and he had not seen him going to the quarry. Coming over the fields would be a real hassle now all the ploughed fields were frozen and the chunks of

dirt protruded like sharp rocks. And his clothes They were of the type of fashion of at least hundred years ago. And his stories! It didn't make sense at all. They were so dramatic and off the planet. That couldn't happen, not here and now. The police would be around in no time, certainly for a guy like this Rumbold character. Patrick dozed off and dreamt that the quarry had blown up and streams of people pored out of it, all clad in the most fantastic costumes.

Early in the morning Patrick woke up tired. He came out of bed. It was freezing and he quickly poked the stove and put some new wood on the fire. He filled a kettle with water from the tub in the corner and remembered that he had to break the ice in the well and fill the tub during the day. He put the kettle on the stove and went down to the stable to take care of the few cows he kept. In previous years Caitlin would have made breakfast in the mean time but now he had to do that himself after he finished in the stable.

When he came in the stable Styx was busily giving hay to the cows. In the isle Patrick saw the bucket was already filled with milk.

"I thought that you could use some help here," Styx said a apologetically.

"Well, thanks. Come, the kitchen is warming up. I hope that you slept well?"

"Yes, nice and warm in the hay."

"Breakfast then."

Patrick made a big pot of tea and cut a few thick slices of the rough country bread he baked himself.

They sat at opposite sides of the kitchen table.

"Tell me about Amon," Patrick said. "You looked afraid when you saw me yesterday so I assume that he is not in your good books."

"I don't like Amon, he is up to no good all the time. The only thing about him is that he leaves the women alone but that isn't such a good thing either. He is a good friend of Rumbold. They play the same cards and they thrive in the remote corner."

"Well I hope you don't have the same ideas about me."

"No," Styx smiled, "you are a good man, I can feel that. I can tell you that you will see some sunshine later, even though it is now cloudy around you. All will be well."

Patrick poured himself another cup of tea. His thoughts were everywhere. This man made him confused. He was a riddle and Patrick didn't like riddles. Now Styx added a new one on top of the pile he had already created.

"Come," Patrick said, "if you want to go further then we have to prepare you."

He went to his bedroom and a few moment later came back with some clothes.

"It's not my best stuff, but it doesn't fit me anymore and you can have it. At least then you will be less noticeable. Get dressed and I'll harness the horse to the cart and I drive you to the village."

Patrick went to the stable and harnessed his horse to the two-wheeler. He threw a blanket over the horse because it was cold outside.

Styx came out the door as he pulled out of the stable.

"I left my clothes here. I don't think I can use them anymore."

"I will make sure that they go. If I ever get unwanted visitors I don't want any trace of you here. It seems that it would not be healthy for either of us."

Patrick realized that he was now taking Styx story seriously and meant what he had just said.

"Come on, hop on and let's go. I will take you down to the village."

Styx clambered up next to him on the box. In silence Patrick drove the cart down the dirt road, onto the cobble road that ran down to the village.

"Where do you want to go?" Patrick asked.

"I don't know. Anywhere is good for me."

"There are busses going to anywhere but you will need money. You have any?"

"Well," Styx hesitated, "I didn't think the few coins I had would do here, so I left them with my clothes."

Patrick pulled out his wallet.

"I'm not rich but you were good entertainment. Here, take this. It will help you for a couple of days."

"Thanks and if I can ever repay you, I will."

"Don't mention it."