

EARTH'S LAST GUARDIANS – AN ODYSSEY WITH FAE

By Chris Parr

Science-Fantasy Adventure with Celtic Mythology

CHAPTER 0

Cian

His footsteps clang in the stairwell, but he doesn't hear them. Only the memory of that room, the scientists' voices, their doubt, their fear. And his own voice, cutting through their protests. They asked, he answered. Just enough. Uncertainty twists in his gut. His foot misses a step. He grips the cold banister, shaking his head. *What have I unleashed?*

There's no going back. Cian rubs the back of his neck. His thoughts roar over one another, the risks he calculated, the half-truths he told, the secrets he shared. Either way, the consequences will come rippling across worlds.

And then, there are the Milesians. *The Milesians*. Their name alone twists his lips into a sneer.

They're out there, watching, waiting, plotting. He exhales, releasing the overflow of doubt. His fingers brush the edge of his smart-polymer wig. The itch beneath, a reminder of the facade he must uphold, for now. He rolls his shoulders back until something clicks into place. Not bone, but resolve. He pushes through the glass exit door, sunlight splintering across the pane. Outside, the city hums oblivious. Tires whir against asphalt, the crosswalk signal beeps into the emptiness.

He hops onto the sidewalk, his steely-blue handwoven coat billowing in the wind. The parked cars move to the rhythm of his long strides while cherry blossom branches sway above his head, their subtle fragrance a reminder of his faraway homeland.

The blast of a truck horn rips through the quiet, jolting him back to reality. Cian's head snaps toward the sound.

That's when he spots him—a burly figure materializing from behind a parked truck, a shadow given weight and purpose.

“Excuse me, sir, could you give me the time, please?” the man asks, his voice high-pitched and strained with a forced politeness. *Something's off*. Cian's body shifts, poised for action.

“My phone battery died. I think I'm running late,” the man presses, stepping closer. Too close.

Cian edges back, but his heel catches as a hand from behind clamps down on his shoulder, its grip iron-strong. A sharp object jabs into his neck. Trapped. Pain flashes, igniting a wildfire through his body.

No. Not now!

His legs buckle. The world tilts, his senses splinter as the poison courses through his veins. Coherence shatters—the plan, the revelation, the Milesian threat, the fragile threads holding it all together. His knees hit the pavement, the left shoulder follows. And his head thuds down. In the numbness, the impact feels distant, the sound of someone else's fall.

Through the haze, he hears a rhythm, heels clicking briskly across the street. A muffled voice follows.

“Oh my god! Is he okay?”

Cian’s muscles refuse to obey the frantic commands of his body. Behind his sunglasses, still hooked in place, he forces his lids open, fighting the pull of unconsciousness. A woman crouches beside him, her hazel gaze scanning him with concern. With a guttural groan, he strains to speak. “No... danger...” His words break into incoherent babble.

Her fidgety hand dives into her purse. “I’m calling for an ambulance.” She tells the man standing tall beside them.

Cian fights for a breakthrough, but black spots swarm in, blotting out the light, the voices, the world. Darkness drags him into the cloak of the unknown.

Erímon

Erímon’s attention drops to the woman rummaging through her purse. His lips curve into a hollow smile. He slips the needle into his pocket and runs a hand through a forest of straight dark hair—a gesture that provides a distraction. In a deep voice, he assures the woman, “No, thank you, madam, this happens all the time. He’s got a blood sugar issue. He’ll be fine in a few minutes, nothing a candy can’t fix, huh?” A forced chuckle follows. “But, thank you for the offer, though.”

Watching the woman, a cold reminder enters his mind. *Her days are numbered. The weak will be the first to meet their demise. Humans are fragile.* For a brief second, his hard mask slackens, he imagines a different outcome. A tiny green shoot of empathy pushes through. Poison. He crushes it, committed to the path he’s chosen.

Erimon observes the woman's hesitant step backward, nearly stumbling off the curb. He savors her apprehension, the way it wrestles with her forced cheerfulness.

"Right, then. You'd best get him to a doctor when he wakes up. Or he's liable to crack his skull one of these days, you know." He tracks her every step as she crosses the street and disappears around the corner. There's no need for confrontation.

His accomplice winces, struggling under Cian's limp body. Erimon grabs the loose arm, hauling it up. "Let's get on with it already," he growls.

Cian's boots scrape against the pavement as they drag him toward the double-parked van. His partner leaves on foot, loosely waving without looking back.

Erimon's mouth curves. Finally, Cian is his. The key to the North Magnetic Pole Management Centre is closer than ever.

He slams the van door shut and sets the wheels in motion. The truck roars as Erimon skillfully maneuvers through the city's streets. At a red light, waiting to turn left, the pervasive clickety-clack sound fills the cabin. His hawk-sharp gaze drills into the horizon. The sun conceals its brilliance behind a thick gray shield. *Perfect*, he tells himself. Across the street, a man with a curly-haired dog pauses mid-stride, staring skyward, mouth agape. A faint blue glow pierces through a growing mass of billowing clouds. Erimon parks the van behind the corner gas station.

With a firm grip on the belt, he hoists the prisoner over his broad shoulder. His face tightens under Cian's weight as he carries him to the center of the haze-covered parking lot. He fishes from his coat pocket a shiny metal device, and with a swift motion, he triggers it. The blue, gleaming mass shifts and hovers above him. It slices through the

fog, illuminating the jagged edges of wrecked cars littering the lot. A low rumbling hum permeates the air. Erimon hears the thrum of power.

A bright light descends from above, spiraling into a vortex that envelops them both. Wisps of mist ripple around them, silking across the ground. Erimon's triumphant smile lingers as they dissolve, spirited away to the hidden ship, moored in the sixth dimension, where Cian's fate awaits.

CHAPTER 1

THE HOBNOB

Andie

The cloying sweetness of lilies clashes with the bitter tang of stale coffee. Andie stands by her grandfather's polished mahogany casket, her spine a rigid line of resistance. Three days since Grandpa slipped away. Three days of nodding through the same hollow condolences. Three days of being a prop in someone else's mourning.

How many more hands? How many more "he's in a better place" before she can leave? Folding in on herself is out of the question. She wants to bolt. For years, everyone else's needs came first. Now the space shrinks around her.

You're strong as the land, love, Grandpa used to say. If that's true, an earthquake is long overdue. She needs to move.

Another stream of mourners pours in. Cousin Lydia dabs at nonexistent tears with a crumbled tissue. And there's Auntie Colleen, the Christmas interrogation queen. And who on earth is that bearded guy in the worn-out gray vest lingering in the back? A glimpse into Grandpa's life beyond the family.

Aunt Maggie draws her close. “Hey, are you holding up okay?” she whispers, her voice cracking.

“I’m functional, thanks.” The words come out sharper than intended. “It gets to me sometimes. The grief, I mean... it comes in waves. I’m fine.” Her gaze snaps toward the framed picture of her younger self, arms around Grandpa, their smiles radiating carefree joy. She steadies herself, purple circles betraying her exhaustion.

“You must be so tired,” Maggie says, gently squeezing her hand. “Taking care of him day and night...”

“Yeah, we were prepared...” Andie presses her lips together, sketching a faint smile before continuing.

“Your visits. They were a blessing. I don’t know how I would’ve managed without you.”

They both absently scan the room, then Maggie leans in, her voice dropping to a whisper. “You know? I believe his soul lingers around us for three days, I do! You go on and talk to him tonight. Let it all out.”

Andie nods, just a push of her chin, forcing a sigh down even as it breaks free.

“Hmm.” Maggie changes the subject. “By the way, I love what you’ve done with your hair.”

“I had a wrestling match with my brush, I guess.” Her fingers delve into her hair, fluffing it up even more. “I was thinking of dyeing it red. You know, new life direction, and all.”

“Nah, keep it ash-brown. It reminds me of your mom, those amber-greenish eyes, and her broad cheekbones, too.” She hesitates, studying Andie longer than is comfortable. “You’ve had your fair share of loss, haven’t you?”

“I’m fine. I’ll talk to grandpa tonight.” Andie traces the shooting star pendant Grandpa gave her.

She lifts a nonchalant shoulder.

“Come here.” Her aunt opens her arms. Over Maggie’s shoulder, the doors swing open. Frank and Raife walk in. She pulls back gently, watching her friends approach.

Their arrival breaks the weight in the room. Frank, preferring the company of his tools and the melodies coaxed from his guitar, offers a reassuring nod. Raife, his dark waves tumbling down his neck, exudes a quiet strength. Darkness crosses his usual playful features, a wordless acknowledgment of her grief. Yet there’s a subtle ease to his movements, a groundedness that provides a counterbalance. Andie offers a silent thanks for their unspoken support. Frank shifts his weight, fingers unconsciously drumming a rhythm against his thigh, while Raife’s glance skims her aunt before settling back on Andie.

“Hey. Thanks for coming. Let’s get out of here.” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “How about some practice at the Hobnob? Like now.” Andie pushes, yearning to escape. “Come on!” She wants to sound strong and lets out a chortle just to prove it. But the chortle wavers. Her friends exchange a glance. Minutes later, they pile into Frank’s old truck and head up the mountain road. He steers toward Grandpa Albert’s bed-and-breakfast overlooking the valley. Its weathered beams and flower boxes are as familiar as

her own name. Further out lies the Hobnob, a spot where they trade the world for laughter, drinks, and music.

They stroll along the frost-kissed road, the air crisp with the invigorating scent of early spring. Hints of pine, a distant fireplace, and the earthy aroma of frozen undergrowth mingle with melting snow. Crossing over an aged stone bridge, Andie leans against the wooden railing. Her friends linger, hands shoved into pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold. Raife's attention drifts toward the creek, tracking the movement of hidden wildlife, while Frank sends a pebble skimming across the water.

The soothing melody of clinking ice pellets floating downstream pulls her in. Tiny icicles dip from the branches over the creek. Frozen ornaments flashing. Andie squints until the sound and the sight tangle into a memory.

She's fifteen again, palms against the bus's rear window, watching Grandpa limp along the white-rimmed sidewalk. His long coat flaps unevenly with each hurried stride. He halts, hoisting her forgotten lunch bag high over his head. Her fingers scrape the glass, lips parting, wanting to yell at the driver to stop. But the bus rolls on, and Grandpa shrinks into the distance, his figure blurring into the hoarfrost.

Raife nudges her with his elbow, tilting his chin toward the sky. A hawk rides the wind, wings spread wide. A rare and majestic sight. They both track its path, silent, caught in the same current. That familiar twinkle in Raife's expression, the one that never dims, warms her.

"Tapwe," Raife says, a hint of ancestral lineage shimmering in his features, evident in the way he carries himself with subtle dignity. Half Cree by birth, he even says Ayhay at times, instead of thank you, even though he didn't learn any Cree words at

home. The three of them had the habit of saying *tapwe* all the time, which means *it is so* or *the truth*. It became a group motto. *Tapwe*.

Frank strides ahead, focused on the path. He doesn't join the conversation, yet a faint smile tugs at his lips as Raife points out the hawk.

The Hobnob emerges, a cute, lopsided log cabin adorned with blue shutters and solar panels on its roof. Inside the one-room shack, Andie slams two logs into the hearth, then cracks a few twigs and flicks a match. The flame grows, and the fire crackles.

Raife scours the contents of the noisy fridge and purses his lips. "We forgot the beers, guys." He plops on one of the mismatched chairs at the table, adjacent to the worn green sofa, feet kicked out and arms draped over the backrest.

Frank ambles to the music corner. With focused intent, he retrieves his guitar and tunes its strings, coaxing single-chord metallic tones. Andie watches the rhythmic tremor of his blond bangs as he tests the iridescent sounds of a few harmonics. The three of them sync up. They're warming up.

Andie counts them off. "And one, and two, and one, two, three, four!"

The trio launches into a spirited rendition of a Celtic melody her grandfather adored, The Water Kilpie from Orison. Frank's fingers glide across the fretboard, concentration carving a line between his brows as he lays down a solid bassline. Raife leaves the keyboard and moves to the piano. His knack for adding his own flavor brings energy to every piece.

The final note rings in her ear. Andie lays her flute on her lap. "Do you think we should try to book a gig at the Café?" she asks. "I'm up for it. I kept working on my

voice.”

Frank tunes his bass, though it’s already quite fine. “Maybe next week. I’ll call them.”

Raife chuckles. An ember pops, sending a sprinkle of sparks upward as if his laughter provoked it.

“Remember Mr. O’Donnell’s after-school practices?” he trails off, watching the fire. “We were a sight, weren’t we?”

Andie snorts. “Yeah, remember how you just punched through piano keys?” She turns to Frank. “And you with your three-chord wonder routine.” She flicks her thumb toward herself. “And me, nearly blowing out the mic with every note.” She shakes her head, chuckling. “My voice breaking as if it were a rusty hinge, way off-key in the highs and tight as a guitar string in winter.” Frank grins, lips twitching. “And me, startled like a deer caught in the headlights the first time I heard you sing,” he says, his tone dipping into a boyish tilt. Raife and Andie freeze, staring at him. Then all at once they burst into laughter, the sound bouncing off log walls. The laughter tapers off, leaving only the strumming of Frank’s guitar.

Andie glances at the blueprint pinned on the wall. “Guys, I’ve got news: the excavation’s almost done.”

Frank nods, plucking a low chord. “Great!”

Raife shoves the chair back, fingers drumming the table. “I swear, once that studio’s up, you won’t be able to drag me out of there.”

Their conversation turns to the layouts and finishing touches of the studio. A strange unease vibrates at the edge of Andie’s mind. A low hum of foreboding. She pushes it away, blaming the insecurity that comes with losing Grandpa.

CHAPTER 2

THE HOLE IN THE ROCK

Raife

The professional excavators have wrapped up their work. Raife, his skills honed over summers working machinery in his uncle's landscaping business, steps in to take charge. He's rented a rock-drilling backhoe, ready to carve the cavern into its final shape.

The first rays of light gild the horizon in shades of amber and gold as Raife, ablaze with determination, springs into action. His head bounces around at every bump, the old, rundown backhoe rattling beneath him. He's like a child with a toy. He steers, shifting gears while spraying himself with the raw energy of a blaring metal song, *The Skeleton Key* from *Epica*. It prompts him to sing, or rather belt out with spirited screams.

Positioned at the rear of the cave, Raife digs in, his tool biting into the rock, each rhythmic tremor coursing through the backhoe's frame and into his body. Hours pass, his shirt clings damply to his broad back. At this point, every strike is a battle, but he presses on, ignoring the fatigue.

Then it happens. The tool's tip sinks into a hairline crevice lodged in the rear ceiling, and he forces it deeper. Too fast. A sharp, deafening snap splits the air. A chill spiders down his back. He whips upward. For a split second, his breath stalls. The fissure branches outward, jagged and crawling, spilling fine threads of dust. A slab, grotesquely large, dwarfing the tractor, shudders above him. Its edges sag, grinding against unseen supports, ready to collapse at the slightest provocation. Raife's stomach twists into knots.

“Wo!” he bellows, the word getting lost in the chaotic rumble. Dust and pebbles rain down in frantic bursts, pelting his shoulders and head. Squinting through the grit, he yanks the gear stick into reverse, fingers clawing at the levers while disengaging the ground hold. But the tractor sticks. “Dammit, get unstuck, you bastard,” he rages. The machinery snarls and jerks, its wheels scrabbling against the uneven ground. Above, the slab fractures further as larger stones begin to tumble, bouncing off the machinery. A rock the size of a cinder block slams into the ground beside the wheel, shaking the frame. Raife grinds his teeth, his jaw shut tight as he wrestles with the oversized steering wheel. The tractor finally breaks free. He steers it backward, its wheels scraping the edges of the cavern. With a final jarring jolt, the tractor shoots out of the cave’s mouth. A thunderous roar erupts before him, shaking the vehicle violently. Rock and debris explode outward, shattering against the chassis. Raife ducks, arms shielding his head as the roar bears down on him. He blindly pulls farther, then kills the engine. Heart pounding up his throat, he throws himself from the seat, landing hard on his hands and knees. Clouds of debris swirl around him, sticking to his skin. The clatter of falling rocks still rings in his ears and rattles through his bones. He staggers to his feet, bristling with the dread of what he just escaped. The scratches on his arms sting as he wipes them with the hem of his shirt. No stitches needed, but the pain carries a sense of retribution.

“Damn! Pushed too hard again, I get hasty when I’m tired!” he hisses, frowning at the battered backhoe. He resists the urge to kick the rickety machine, wanting to blame it. Instead, he sinks onto a nearby rock, his shoulders slumping. “That was too close.” *Why do I always have to take risks? I have nothing to prove.*

Raife blows the air out of his lungs, letting the tension settle. He yanks off his t-shirt, the fabric snagging on callused, grimy hands. As he mops the dirt from his face with it, lean muscles, carved by years of martial arts, flex beneath skin. He twists to survey the damage behind him, and the movement ripples across his back.

Bah, enough wallowing! No real damage's been done. Let's finish this damn job. Frank and Andie are counting on me.

He spits, a harsh, guttural release. Circling to the cave mouth, he peruses the results of his precarious effort. In a groan, he deems the drilling job complete.

Popping open a well-earned beer, he knocks it back in one go, the liquid cutting through layers of grit in his throat. He crushes the empty can in one hand, the aluminum giving way with a satisfying crunch, before tossing it into his collection bag.

The slab scrapes against the stone floor as Raife gives one final shove, pushing it aside. He lets out a rough belch of contentment. "All done," he says out loud, voice ragged.

Hands on his hips, he takes in the fruits of his labor. A studio ceiling carved into a perfect dome. Pride straightens his spine.

preservation.world is where Andie's path leads in Part Three. This address exists both in story and reality. Welcome to the convergence.

Interested in reading the book? Send us a note, and we'll keep you informed of the release date. info@preservation.world