

# FULL CIRCLE



PAMELA FREEMAN



# BRAMBLE

‘I’m sending a rope down!’ Medric said. ‘There’s nothing to hitch it to here, so don’t pull on it until I’m braced and I give you the word.’

‘All right,’ said Bramble. She was lucky, she supposed, that she had come down into the caves with Medric, an experienced miner, but part of her wished he would let her stay down here at the bottom of this shaft, alone in the middle of a mountain with Acton’s bones, until she too had died and her flesh had sifted into dust.

‘Ready?’ Medric called.

Bramble adjusted the rope under her armpits and clasped her arms around the fragile bundle of Acton’s bones. She pushed down all feeling. She didn’t have time for grief, or love, or anything but revenge. Saker the enchanter was going to come to grief himself, and she would be there to destroy him. For her sister Maryrose. For all the innocents killed by Saker’s ghost army.

‘Ready,’ she said.

‘Now!’

She began to climb, bracing herself against the shaft wall with her feet as Medric hauled from above. The rope cut her, but she was making steady progress when Medric yelled something from above and the world came tumbling down.

Dirt and small rocks hit her face first, blinding her, and then Medric’s heavy body slid down the shaft, slamming them both to the ground, with rubble and pebbles cascading after them, covering the candle stub and plunging them into darkness.

They lay gasping for a long moment before Bramble could move.

‘Everlasting dark!’ Medric swore, his voice shaky. ‘The edge just gave way.’

Somehow, it made Bramble grin. Gods and powers, delvers and hunters from the Great Forest, all had conspired to get her here to find these bones, and now a simple accident could undo it all. She rather liked that, liked the feeling of being, for the moment, free from destiny and instruction. No one had foreseen this, as far as she knew. That meant she could react as she liked and do as she pleased in response.

So she laughed.

‘Bramble!’ Medric reproved, much as her mother used to.

‘Well, it could have been worse,’ she said. ‘You’re not really hurt, are you?’

She sat up and felt both the jacket full of bones and herself for injuries. Scrapes, bruises (gods, lots of bruises!), and a swelling above one ear – although it seemed very large for something that had just happened, so it may have been a legacy from her first fall down the shaft.

Medric searched around in the rubble until he found the tinderbox, then fished a spare candle out of his belt pouch and lit it. She *was* lucky that Medric had proved so steadfast. She wouldn’t have blamed him if he had run away when the delvers came and pushed her down this shaft.

‘Always carry a few,’ he said, although earlier he had intimated that they would run out of light if they didn’t turn back soon. He really didn’t like being underground, Bramble thought, with a flicker of worry. They weren’t likely to get out of here anytime soon.

‘Will your friend go for help?’

‘Fursey?’ Medric shook his head, sending dust flying out of his hair like gold in the candlelight. ‘He left after the delvers came. Doesn’t even know we’re down here.’ His voice was dark with abandonment; he’d hoped that Fursey would stay with him, Bramble thought.

She ignored his sigh; they didn’t have time to worry about love affairs gone wrong, no matter how strange the beloved or how deep the hurt. ‘So we’ll have to find another way out.’

‘I might be able to climb out,’ Medric said doubtfully, but when they examined the shaft they found it was clogged with rubble, and with her saddlebags, which had slid down the shaft with Medric. Bramble dislodged them, sending gravel spinning off, and emptied

out everything in them: spare clothes, hairbrush, boot ties, rags, salt were all moved to one bag, leaving the other empty, ready. Almost empty. At the bottom, where she had put it before leaving Gorham's farm, months ago, was the red scarf she had won when she became the Kill Reborn. It was the only colour in this dark world, and she left it where it was, not sure if she were being sentimental or prudent. It was tangled with the brooch Ash had given her. She had tucked it in there when they left Obsidian Lake.

She left the brooch and scarf and put Acton's bones in on top of them. The leg bones didn't fit, and she had to suppress a feeling of panic that she had to leave them behind. She placed them carefully on a low rock, feeling both solemn and silly; they looked ridiculous, like pickings from a giant's plate, but they were Acton's, and she couldn't just throw them away.

Medric tried pulling a few rocks out from the shaft, but more just shifted down into their place. 'There's been a big rockfall,' he said, in a far more confident tone, the voice of the miner. 'No getting out that way, not without a gang of men working from above.'

'So,' Bramble said, turning and staring into the dark. 'We go exploring.'

They were standing under a low roof in a flat-bottomed area which sloped gently down to their left and rose more steeply to their right, where the roof became too low for them to walk. There was only one way to go.

'Just as well it's heading the right way,' Bramble said.

'Everything gets turned around underground,' Medric said warningly. 'Don't depend on your sense of direction down here.'

'But –' Bramble always knew where she was, and that sense seemed to be working fine. She pointed down the slope and slightly to the right. 'The mine entrance is that way.'

Medric looked sceptical. 'No choice either way,' he said. 'We follow the river bed.'

'What?'

'This would have been a river course, one time,' he explained as he led the way down, candle held high. 'That's why the walls are so smooth.'

Bramble hitched Acton's bones over her shoulder more comfortably, and reached out to touch the wall with the other hand. It was

smoother than she'd expected. 'So if we follow it down, we find water?' she suggested.

'If we're lucky. If it doesn't narrow too much, or if there's been no rockfalls, or if the land hasn't shifted since the river flowed – which it probably has, which is why the course is dry now.' He turned to look seriously at her, his hazel eyes reflecting the spark of candlelight. 'We'll be lucky if we get out alive.'

Bramble smiled. At least this was *real* – not god-given dreams or time shifting beneath her feet. And it distracted her from thoughts of Acton, which she wasn't ready to face now her first bout of. She thumped Medric on the shoulder and saw him wince as she hit a bruise. 'I'm hard to kill,' she said. 'Let's go.'

They went carefully but as fast as they dared, not knowing how long they'd be down here, and the candles wouldn't last forever. They followed the old river, ignoring narrower side passages, even though some of them sloped upwards, because in the larger course there was a faint stream of air across their faces.

'Follow the air,' Medric said, as though it was the one rule of life, Bramble thought, and maybe it was, in a mine.

Medric settled down into a plodding careful state. He looked at the floor, mostly, leaving it to Bramble to look ahead. She realised that this shutting off was how he had managed to survive the long years of mining.

The old river bed was leading them gradually astray, further down, further north. Bramble reckoned they had passed the mine entrance some time back, and they were now much deeper than when they had started, but she was encouraged by the fresh air which still blew gently in their faces. It had to come from somewhere.

They reached a section where the passage closed in, so they had to crouch, and then slither along. Medric started breathing more heavily. He was a big man, and it was a tight fit.

'I'll go up ahead,' Bramble said, 'and see if it widens out.'

He nodded thankfully and backed out to where he could sit up, his hands shaking. Bramble left the candle with him and went backwards on her stomach, feeling with her toes. The passage narrowed until she could only just move, and she felt a sudden spurt of panic. The walls seemed to press down upon her, the dark she had found soothing only a few minutes before was now full of death, the earth itself a grave where she would be pinned, helpless, forever . . .

She pushed the fear down, but it gave her more sympathy for Medric. If he felt like this all the time, he was being heroic just for not screaming. With an effort of will, she kept moving.

As if to reward her, the toe of her boot, sliding carefully backwards, fell into empty air. A ledge, dropping off. How far down? She bent her leg up and found that at the edge her toe couldn't reach the upper wall. The passage widened just before the drop – perhaps enough to let her sit up and turn around. She snaked sideways so that she wouldn't be hanging half-off and half-on the ledge and edged carefully down.

She could feel the air moving more freely around her head and shoulders as she came closer to the drop, and cautiously sat up, bumping her head just a little. She could sit crouched over easily enough, and she could sense a huge empty space in front of her, full of sound . . . whispering, plinking, rushing . . .

'It opens up,' she called back to Medric 'but come carefully – there's a drop on the other side.' She sat and listened hard as her voice echoed out and round. Other noises, too. Water and air, air and water . . . fire?

Medric came face first, pushing the candle in front of him. That's not going to do much good in a place this size, Bramble thought, but she took it from him and raised it high as he shuffled closer and sat up, more hunched than she but a safer distance from the drop.

The tiny light from the candle was caught, reflected, from a million places, a million drops of water. They were at the top of what must have once been a short waterfall, at the edge of a cavern so large that every sound they made was taken and echoed and echoed again.

There was just enough light to see boulders and arches of rock, icicles and ant hills of rock reaching down and up from ceiling and floor, joining in places into pillars. The cave – the cavern – stretched up in places so high that no light reached. It seemed to reach up into the dark of the night sky, so Bramble felt surprised not to see any stars.

'There are no wonders like the wonders of the dark,' Medric said quietly. Bramble suspected that was something Fursey had once said to him, but whoever said it was right. The echoes of Medric's voice climbed and soared and flew back to them in high cascades of sound.

'Wonders . . .' the echoes said, and, 'Dark . . .'

The echoes were surrounded and supported by another sound. Everywhere, from the icicles of rock and from points on the cavern's roof, the tiny drops of water fell, onto rock or into shallow pools. Each small *plop* or splat was magnified and transmuted into a thin, ceaseless mourning cry. The rocks were weeping, and this was the sound of their tears.

The falling water caught the candlelight and sent sparks of it back to them, so that they were caught in a small pool of dazzle, of rainbow glimpses and fleeting lines of light.

'You know where we are, don't you?' Medric said. 'These are the Weeping Caverns. The home of Lady Death herself. We'll never get out.'

# ASH

Like harp music, the sound of the river rippled far below them. It sounded calm, now. Soothing, as though it had never leapt high, never threatened. The old man smiled, his long white hair casting a shining circle around his head in the firelight. Ash was aware of the other men, his father included, standing in the shadows of the cave, but he couldn't bring himself to look at them. Desperately, he stared into the old man's intense blue eyes.

'She calls you,' the man said. 'She calls your name. Close your eyes. Listen.'

Bewildered, hoping that he was not beyond acceptance, that the human face which had reflected back at him from the pool did not mean that he was worthless, Ash closed his eyes. He had so hoped to find his true shape when he climbed down to meet the River. Every other Traveller man did so, after all. Why should he be different? Did he *have* no true shape? No animal spirit deep in his soul which the River could call out? What did that make him?

Ash shuddered with a combination of grief and horror at the thought and felt the old man pat his back in comfort.

'Listen,' he said gently. 'She will speak to you.'

The river was growing louder. Ash concentrated. He had heard the River speak only minutes ago, when he stood in her waters and asked permission to drink. She had laughed, and granted it. Now there were no words, only sounds, like music, like the music he carried in his head, day after day.

The music built in his mind, speaking of emotion deeper than thought, deeper than words, stronger than time. Love was only a small part of it, on the edges. Desire ran through it, but was not the centre. He strained, listening harder, and felt it slip away.

‘Be still,’ the old man said.

The hand on Ash’s back was warm and reassuring. He let out a long breath, forcing his muscles to loosen, and found the centre of the music, the rhythm that controlled everything. *Welcome*, it said. *Belong*.

He began to cry. He had yearned towards homecoming when he lived with Doronit, hoping past sense that she could give it to him. He had seen belonging like this and envied it, watching Mabry and Elva hold their baby, his namesake. He had dreamt of returning to the Road with his parents as a stonecaster, earning a place with them as he had not been able to do as a musician. Each dream had withered, sending him back to the Road, and finally pushing him here. Perhaps he had been Travelling towards the River all his life.

*Yes*, said the music. *All your life*.

Ash raised his face to the old man, who was smiling.

‘She has been waiting for you for a long, long time, child,’ he said, as he had said once before. ‘And so have I.’

Ash found his voice with difficulty. ‘Who are you?’ he whispered.

‘I am the Prowman.’

It was a term Ash knew from old river songs – the Prowman stood at the front of the boat and signalled to the steersman which direction to take, to avoid the rapids and treacherous currents. He found the name reassuring.

Ash’s father, Rowan, came forward hesitantly. His head was a badger’s; each of the men there wore his true nature in the form of an animal, revealed to them through the power of the River. The sweat on his naked skin reflected the torchlight in slabs of gold and red.

Rowan put a hand gently on Ash’s shoulder. The dark badger eyes searched his. And then Rowan let Ash go, turned to the other men and lifted his arms high in a gesture of victory. He howled triumph and the other men joined in, dancing and shouting, the animal screams and yowls echoing off the cave walls until Ash was nearly deafened. It was a terrible sound: harsh, cacophonous, wonderful. It lifted him up into a kind of exaltation. He still didn’t understand what had happened, or why he had not been given his true shape like the other men; but he did understand that they accepted him, honoured him, just as he was. The moment was over too soon. Rowan and the other men ran off into the darkness which led to one of the other

caves. Some of them carried torches, the flames and smoke flickering behind them as they ran.

They left one torch behind, stuck in a crevice in the rock wall. The dark closed in around, making the cave seem even bigger, the echoes sharper. Ash was aware of his wet feet and calves, suddenly cold where the River had splashed him as he climbed.

The Prowman walked behind one of the boulders near the passage and came back with a blanket and pack. He threw the blanket to Ash, who hesitated. All the other men were naked, except for the Prowman, who wore leggings and a tunic.

‘Am I . . . allowed?’

The old man shrugged, the beads at the end of his long braids clicking softly. ‘Animals go naked,’ he said. ‘We are not animals.’

‘What are we?’

The Prowman gestured to the floor and they sat, cross-legged, Ash pulling the blanket around himself. The pack held food: cooked chicken, bread, apples, dried pear. Ash fell on it thankfully. He hadn’t eaten in three days.

‘Slowly,’ the Prowman said. ‘Or you’ll just throw it all up again.’

It was good advice, but it was hard to follow. Ash forced himself to start with the bread and chewed it thoroughly instead of wolfing it down.

‘What are we . . . Well, that’s a little hard to say,’ the Prowman said, smiling. ‘We are . . . Hers. I can tell you some things about yourself, although I do not know you. You are a musician.’

Ash shook his head vigorously, glad his mouth was full of chicken so he didn’t have to say the disappointing words out loud.

‘No?’ The Prowman paused, surprised. ‘You *don’t* make up music?’

Ash stilled, his hand over the chicken. *Did* he make up music? The moment seemed to stretch for hours.

‘In my head,’ he said finally. ‘Only in my head.’

‘Ah, well, that’s where all music starts.’

‘But I can’t sing!’ Ash said. ‘Or play anything.’

‘The River doesn’t care about that. She wants what’s inside you, not what you do outside.’

‘What? What’s inside me?’

‘The thing that makes the music, that *thinks* the music. The centre of you. It’s why She chose me, why She chose you.’

‘Chose us to do what?’

For the first time, the Prowman seemed unsure. ‘Different things. Be Her voice, for one. Be Her eyes in the world, Her . . . life, her . . .’

‘Her lover, you said,’ Ash prompted. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that, except intensely curious.

‘Mmm . . . you’ll find out about that in time, although it won’t be what you expect.’

‘Nothing ever is!’ Ash exclaimed, tired of being told only part of things, tired of always being at the beginning of understanding. Enough of this mysticism. He had a job to do. ‘I need to learn the secret songs.’

The Prowman shook his head, and Ash jumped to his feet, infuriated. ‘Don’t tell me there’s *another* shagging test!’

‘No, no, don’t worry,’ the Prowman said, laughing sympathetically. ‘You don’t need to learn the songs because when you need them, She will give them to you. How do you think the men learnt them in the first place? She gave them to me, and I gave them to the men. She will be your teacher, lad, when the time comes.’

But Ash had a better idea.

‘*You* can sing them!’ It was a relief, to hand over the responsibility to someone he was sure could fulfil it. But the Prowman put up a hand in refusal.

‘No. This is your job. Your time to be active in the world. I have had my time, and it was more than enough.’ There was a note of sorrow, of loss, of relinquishment, in his voice. ‘So there is nothing to keep you here,’ the Prowman went on. ‘Go where you need to go, and She will be there waiting for you.’

‘Sanctuary,’ Ash said without thinking. ‘I have to go to Sanctuary.’

The Prowman’s face became shadowed; tears stood in his eyes. With their bright blue clouded, he looked very old, the torchlight showing hundreds of wrinkles, his hands browned with age spots, his hair snow white.

‘Sanctuary,’ he whispered. ‘That is a name I have not heard in a very long time.’ He looked up, tears disappearing. ‘Why do you go to Sanctuary?’

Ash hesitated, overwhelmed by how much he had to explain.

‘To raise the ghost of Acton,’ he said simply. ‘So that Acton can lay this army of ghosts to rest.’

The Prowman went very still.

‘Acton,’ he said. ‘She did not tell me that. I wonder why.’ He sat for a long moment and then stood up, as supple as a young boy. ‘If you go to raise Acton’s ghost, lad, I think you will need me with you.’

Relief washed over Ash. ‘You’ll come with us?’

‘I will take you the River’s way.’