

Martin Hocke

The Ancient Solitary Reign

Novel



For Pauline

and with many thanks to

Jenny Picton,

without whose help, etc

Part One

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wandering near her sacred bow'r,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

THOMAS GRAY

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

... In the reign
of the chicken owl comes like
a god.
Flown wind in the skin. Fine
rain in the bones. Owl breaks
like the day. Am an owl, am an owl.

GEORGE MACBETH

Owl

Chapter 1

In the beginning there was a shaft of sunlight in which danced tiny particles of dust and hay as the beam filtered its way through the rafters of the barn where Hunter first saw the light of day. Drowsy and secure, he dozed the late daylight hours away, warmed by the presence of his mother and the two little ones who soon appeared beside him in the nest.

As the days waned and dusk thickened into night, a ray of silver moonlight would take the sunbeam's place, wake the three fledglings and set them clamouring for food. In the nights that followed, the shaft of moonlight would be blotted out three times or more before the dawn by the huge shadow of his father returning from the hunt.

Being the firstborn, Hunter was served first at mealtimes and, after his parents, he had the lion's share. This seemed quite natural to him, though sometimes he felt sorry for his little brother Quaver, who took a long time to learn to eat properly and still had to be beak fed long after Hunter and his sister had learned to swallow whole. Hunter was also the first to learn to walk and the first of the three to be allowed outside and encouraged to make a clumsy, uncoordinated attempt at flight around the safety of the barn. He took all of this for granted and was happy, for it seemed to him that the pattern of his early days and ways had been well and benevolently preordained.

The words were difficult, of course, but less difficult for him than for Dawn Raptor or his little brother. Hunter listened carefully when his mother recited them at dawn and twilight every day and could soon repeat the credo without thinking and without making a mistake. He did not understand the words but in the beginning that did not seem to matter. They were part of his life, like the warmth of his mother, the regular appearance of his father bringing food and the first shaft of sunlight that filtered through the rafters before he went to sleep. It was not until the day little Quaver finally succeeded in squeaking through the words without stuttering or making a mistake that Hunter realised for the first time that life might not always be so simple and straightforward as it seemed.

'Congratulations, Quaver,' his mother said, when he had finished his recital. 'That was very good indeed. Now, I want to ask you all a question before you go to sleep. But before I ask the question, listen carefully to the words again. Dawn Raptor will say them this time and I want you to concentrate carefully, not just on the sound of them, but on exactly what they mean.'

Puzzled, Hunter shifted on his perch and listened while his sister said the words again in that detached and rather supercilious tone she had been using almost from the first day that she

learned to speak.

‘Hoard and covet not
But be brave and free.
Quest always after knowledge
And slowly learn to know
What science cannot see.
Seek and strive for learning,
Be temperate and wise
For skill and wisdom only
Will help us to survive.’

‘Thank you, Dawn Raptor,’ Dapple said when she had finished. ‘Now, Hunter, what do you think "knowledge" means?’

In the early dawn light this question came like a bolt from the blue and took Hunter by surprise. He steadied himself on his perch, thought for a moment or two and then looked at his mother with eyes wide open and replied. ‘It means knowing things,’ he said, taking care to speak slowly and precisely without squeaking like little Quaver or sounding flat and supercilious like his sister Dawn.

‘What things?’ asked Dapple, patiently.

‘Oh, all sorts of things,’ Hunter answered vaguely, gazing at the first ray of faint dawn light as if the answer lay among the dancing particles of hay and dust.

‘Give me an example,’ Dapple said, and though her tone was gentle, it was also very firm indeed and Hunter knew that he would have to think again.

‘Oh, you know,’ he said, affecting a somewhat careless manner to cover up his ignorance, ‘it means knowing all about hunting and about what sort of food to eat. That’s the most important kind of knowledge. And where to live and where to sleep and how to look after owlets and all that sort of thing.’

‘What else?’ his mother asked. ‘What else does knowledge mean?’

Perplexed, Hunter looked at her and racked his young and as yet unpractised brain. He found this sudden change in Dapple most disturbing. In front of his very eyes, his warm and loving mother appeared to be turning into a strict and relentless inquisitor. Then he had a flash of inspiration and blurted out his answer very quickly, before his sudden glimpse of vision faded in the rising sun. ‘It means knowing all about foxes, weasels, men with firesticks and most of

all about the monster owl. It means knowing all about the creatures that can do us harm.'

'Good,' said Dapple, smiling at him gently. 'That's not bad, Hunter. Not bad for a beginning. But knowledge means a great deal more than that. Knowledge means understanding why we Barn owls behave in a different way from our neighbours the Tawnies and the Little owls, and why owls in general are superior to all other birds of prey. It means understanding ecology and learning about man and the environment. It means studying the history of all owl species and understanding why they are the oldest and the highest form of life on earth. And then, of course, there is religion, but your father will attend to that.'

Hunter listened to all this in wide-eyed fascination. On the one hand, the prospect of acquiring all this knowledge was a stimulating challenge, but on the other hand how would he ever learn, much less remember, all these thousand different things? He asked his mother this and she smiled at him as the sun rose higher in the sky outside and slanted in a second beam of light to dance and mingle with the first and dazzle their night eyes.

'You will learn all these things by a process we call education,' his mother answered, blinking a little in the sunlight as she spoke.

'And what is education?' piped up little Quaver. 'Does it hurt much? Where does it happen and how long does it take?'

'No, it doesn't hurt much,' said his mother, laughing. 'In fact, if you are enthusiastic and study very hard, it doesn't hurt at all. And you needn't worry, Quaver. You don't have to travel yet because the first part of your education happens here.'

'Who teaches us? How does it happen?' asked Hunter.

'I teach you,' Dapple said. 'I teach you the basic theory of everything except religion. Since your father is Religion Owl on the Barn owl council, he is much better qualified to teach you that.'

'How many subjects are there?' Quaver asked.

'Eight, altogether,' Dapple said. 'History, geography, ecology, religion, human studies and owlology. I've already told you ...'

'What is owlology?' interrupted Hunter, who wished that Quaver and his mother would not tear away at things with such bewildering speed.

'Owlology is the study of owl behaviour patterns and philosophies,' said Dapple. 'Not only Barn owls, but all other species, too, especially our neighbours the Tawnies and the little immigrants, since with both of these we have to co-exist.'

'And human studies?' asked Dawn Raptor, who managed to sound cool and aloof even at that early age.

‘I told you that before,’ said Dapple. ‘Human studies are about man’s habits. Remember that we have to co-exist with him as well.’

‘That’s only six, so far,’ said Quaver, who had been counting slowly on his little talons. ‘What are the other two?’

‘I’ll tell you that at twilight,’ Dapple said. ‘The sun outside is high and this blazing light will make your head ache. Sleep now, and this evening, after twilight, we’ll begin.’

‘Just one more thing!’ begged little Quaver, bouncing with excitement on his perch. ‘You haven’t answered all of my first question yet. You haven’t told us how long it will take?’

‘There are three stages,’ Dapple said. ‘Basic education will last till you are grown up and old enough to fly away from home. The second stage will take at least four seasons with an expert tutor at his seat of learning.’

‘What shall we study there?’ asked Hunter, blinking as the double beam of sunlight shifted and shone directly on his perch.

‘The subject you prefer,’ said Dapple. ‘Always assuming you are fortunate enough to find a place.’

‘And the third stage,’ enquired Quaver, still hopping up and down as if he had a flea. ‘How long will the third stage take?’

His mother looked at him and smiled, in spite of the sunlight in her eyes. ‘The third stage will take a lot longer,’ she said. ‘If you wish to go on surviving, the third stage will last all through your life.’

‘But what is education for?’ Dawn Raptor asked, sounding sceptical and unimpressed. ‘In the words you taught us it says that only knowledge will help us to survive. And yet so far you have spoken only of theory. Of history, owlology, religion and the like. What about hunting, having fledglings and finding them a place to live? Surely those are the most important things?’

‘You have already started learning those,’ said Dapple, remaining cool and calm in the face of Dawn Raptor’s provocation. ‘That is what we call the Practice, as opposed to Theory, and you will learn it from your father. He will take you on field studies related to every subject that I teach. You are right, Dawn Raptor. The words sum up our religion and mean exactly what they say. Education is about survival. Everything you do and everything you learn is directed to that end. Other creatures come and go, but owls have inhabited this earth for more than sixty million springs. Which brings me to the hardest lesson. Most parents and teachers leave it till the end, but since you are such a little iconoclast, I will teach it to you now.’

‘What’s an iconoclast?’ squeaked Quaver, taking the question right out of Hunter’s bill.

‘Dissident, awkward, call it what you will,’ said Dapple, who was obviously annoyed in spite of her outer calm. ‘It means that your sister has a tendency to break images, contradict the wisdom and tread on the dreams of great owls who have been dead for centuries, all before she’s had the chance to learn one single lesson.’

‘Teach us then,’ Dawn Raptor said, taunting Dapple with her aloofness and composure. ‘Teach us the hardest lesson now. Make us afraid and unhappy before we have begun. Frighten us. Perhaps that way we’ll be easier to teach.’

‘Your father will hear of this,’ hissed Dapple, looking suddenly much older as the kindness vanished from her eyes. ‘Your father will hear of this, but in the meantime, I will satisfy your wish. The hardest lesson means that you can’t come home again.’ Dapple paused and as she looked at each of her fledglings in turn, the anger slowly faded from her eyes and a gentle sadness took its place.

‘What, never?’ Quaver asked, while Hunter sat silent on his perch, trying to absorb the dreadful shock.

‘Not to live,’ his mother said. ‘You can come and stay for short visits, but once you’ve grown up and flown away from home, you can never come back here again to live.’

‘What happens if we can’t find territories of our own?’ asked Quaver. ‘Or even before that, what happens if we can’t find a place to study for our further education?’

‘It will be arranged for you,’ said Dapple. ‘Or at any rate, you will be helped. Your father is a member of the council, after all.’

‘Why can’t we stay?’ Dawn Raptor asked. ‘I don’t want to, but just supposing that I did?’

‘It’s against Barn owl philosophy and lore,’ her mother answered. ‘In the interests of survival, you must become fully independent as soon as you are able.’

‘In the interests of whose survival?’ asked Dawn Raptor. ‘Mine, or the whole species?’

‘The whole species,’ Dapple said, ‘but yours as well. Even in times of plenty this territory cannot feed five adults and when there is a slump in the food supply, or heavy competition from daytime birds of prey, it barely provides sufficient for two adults and three chicks. So when you mate, you will need a territory that will provide enough food for your partner and for a family of your own.’

‘What if we promise not to mate and have a family?’ asked little Quaver. ‘Would it be all right for us to live here then?’

‘No, Quaver,’ said his mother, smiling and blinking in the sun again. ‘You will want to mate one day. It’s only natural. And when that time comes, you will be the first to want a place that you can call your own. I know it’s hard. It’s the hardest lesson that a mother has to teach, but

I teach it to you in the interests of survival. And for that same reason you must study very hard. For as the words say, without knowledge, skills and wisdom you will find it hard to stay alive. Sleep now and this evening, after twilight your new adventure will begin.’

Chapter 2

The fresh spring days of Hunter’s early youth melted away into the haze of a long, hot summer. After twilight, when darkness came alive with the seething and throbbing of the thousand creatures of the night, the three fledglings flew with their father Steeple in ever-widening circles round the barn, learning to develop the secret owl skills for identification, for navigation and above all for the hunt. In that long, idyllic summer they learned the names of many animals and trees and with their heightened senses they smelled the bee-sucked linden, wild rose and honeysuckle even as these flowers slept.

At dawn, they studied under Dapple in the barn, while outside the sun rose and beat the golden corn to ripe burnished copper ready for the cutting. Being the oldest and the strongest, Hunter was the best of the three at field work and generally stayed ahead of the others in the academic subjects that his mother taught. The exceptions were ecology, at which Dawn Raptor made slightly better progress, and poetry and singing, for which little Quaver showed a very special flair.

Hunter’s favourite subject was owlology. It fascinated him to hear about the ancient Tawnies who ruled their woodland kingdoms so close by and about the fierce little immigrant owls who were condemned to live in no man’s land or else to squat on any vacant spot of land that they could find. He longed to meet one of these lords of the secret darkness like themselves, but though he heard them calling far across the cornfields in the summer nights, none came close enough for eye contact to be made. In fact, no hazards and no threat of the unknown came to endanger the three fledglings as summer wore on to its end and they waxed strong and vigorous, both in body and in mind.

Then, late one twilight, shortly after they had eaten breakfast, Steeple cleared his throat, called for attention and made an announcement that took them by surprise. ‘You have all three led very sheltered lives,’ he said, most unexpectedly. ‘Not only you, Dawn Raptor, but both your brothers here as well. You come from a good home where you have enjoyed all of the essentials — food, love, shelter and a better than average general education. But before you move on to the last stage of your studies here with us, there is one very basic lesson you must learn.’

‘Tell us now, father,’ demanded little Quaver, sounding eager and impatient. Though the y-

oungest of the three, he seemed even more anxious than Dawn Raptor to quit the family constraints and fly away to his new freedom and his higher education.

Steeple looked at each of the three young owls in turn. His expression was graver than ever and he waited until the attention of his offspring was fully centred on his words. ‘You must learn about danger,’ Steeple said. ‘And, more important still, you must learn to come to terms with fear.’

‘But we know all about danger,’ protested Quaver, making an effort to keep his tone reasonably submissive and respectful. ‘Dapple has taught us all about the various dangers we may meet, whether from hawk or falcon at dawn or in the early twilight, from the atavistic Tawnies that may attack us if we stray too far into their precious woods, from man and his firesticks, from four-legged killers such as weasel, stoat and fox ...’

‘Stop!’ said Steeple in his sternest tones. ‘You have proved my point. You are merely reciting facts that you have learned by rote. None of you has any direct experience of danger, or of the thrill of fear.’

‘But Dapple really did teach us the theory exceptionally well,’ said Hunter. ‘She made it all seem very real. And on our reconnaissance flights with you, we’ve already learned to identify many of the dangers that Quaver has just mentioned.’

‘That’s true,’ chipped in Quaver. ‘At night I’ve seen a stoat and a fox, and twice at dusk I’ve seen a man. He was a long way off, but I saw him just the same.’

‘Stoats and foxes cannot fly,’ said Steeple, patiently. ‘They cannot hurt you when you’re high up in the air. And the man you saw is one of those with whom we co-exist on and around the territory that they farm. They tolerate us because we kill mice, sparrows, moles and other creatures they do not eat — food which for their own reasons they eschew.’

‘Dawn Raptor met a kestrel face to face,’ said Quaver, his voice rising still higher in excitement. ‘You can’t say that wasn’t dangerous!’

‘All right, we’ll ask your sister what she felt,’ said Steeple, leaning back on his perch and raising his eyebrows at his daughter to indicate that the floor was hers.

Dawn’s eyes moved quickly from Steeple to her two brothers and then back again as if she intended to sum up her audience before she gave an answer. Then she shrugged and glanced sideways through a chink in the rafters and stared out into the rising dawn.

‘Dapple was with me,’ she said, in a voice that sounded superior and almost bored. ‘I did feel a thrill — some excitement, yes — but there were two of us and I knew my mother would scare the kestrel off if it attacked us.’

‘Exactly!’ said Steeple, leaning forward on his perch. ‘You were not afraid, then?’

‘No,’ said Dawn Raptor, shaking her head twice as she looked at her father. ‘For the moment, fear, for me, is just a word.’

‘What about Hunter?’ demanded Quaver, as his sister settled back into her rather supercilious listening posture. ‘Hunter was on his own when those two crows attacked him for flying too near their nest. He was in danger. He must have felt afraid.’

Steeple turned to the oldest of his offspring and raised his eyebrows once again.

‘Well, Hunter,’ he said, in serious level tones, ‘tell your brother what you felt.’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Hunter, ‘only I don’t think it was really fear. Perhaps I felt a pang when they first flew at me with all that mindless squawking. Certainly, I would have been afraid if I hadn’t identified them as crows and therefore belonging to a lower form of bird life with no brain to speak of and with vastly inferior weapons to our own.’

‘And after this initial shock?’ asked Steeple, seeming pleased with what Hunter had said so far.

‘I was indignant,’ Hunter said. ‘Maybe even angry. My impulse was to turn and rip them with my talons, but I merely hissed at them and flew on by.’

‘It was fear you felt, initially,’ said Steeple, nodding wisely. ‘It was only a touch, admittedly, but for a moment or two it was unpleasant enough for you to realise what real fear can do.’

‘You mean it can petrify you, like a rabbit and a stoat,’ asked Hunter, remembering a lesson that his mother had taught them on the subject.

‘Precisely,’ answered Steeple. ‘Fear can paralyse the body’s functions. It can freeze your wings and talons. It can cause you to shed pellets accidentally and, in the case of a very old or a very weak owl, it can stop your heart and even kill you.’

‘What a dreadful thing,’ said Hunter, who was now almost afraid of fear itself. ‘Is there no way it can be avoided?’

Steeple looked at Hunter and slowly shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Fear cannot be avoided. And since it cannot be avoided, you must learn to live with it and to accept it as essential for survival. For fear, like pain, is just as much a part of life as comfort, warmth or love. Do not attempt to ignore it, because, like pain, it is a warning. Only the very stupid are never afraid and the very stupid don’t survive.’

‘How will you teach us to come to terms with fear?’ asked Dawn Raptor, speaking for the first time of her own accord. ‘Surely it is something we must feel for ourselves, or do you believe, as usual, that more briefing, teaching and theory will make the problem disappear?’

‘We can prepare you for it,’ answered Steeple, ignoring the sarcasm in Dawn Raptor’s tone. ‘But this time you are right. The real impact of fear comes always from the unexpected, and

the worst fear of all is fear of the unknown.’

‘The only thing that I’m afraid of is the monster owl,’ chipped in Quaver. ‘I have bad dreams about him sometimes. Suddenly he appears above me, blotting out the sky.’

‘That proves my point,’ said Steeple. ‘The monster owl frightens you because you’ve never seen one. In these territories, at least, it is extinct and therefore unknown and because it is unknown your imaginings make it seem more terrible than it really is.’

‘Have you ever seen one?’ asked Quaver, who was slightly frightened by the legend of the monster, even when awake.

‘No, of course not,’ Steeple said. ‘But I once met a Short-eared nomad owl who had travelled very far and he had seen one. He told me that our cousins across the salty waters had also seen giant owls and even fought against them, but that was long ago.’

‘Do you think they might return one day?’ asked Hunter, who was almost as fascinated as his younger brother by any mention of the monster owl.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Steeple, smiling his usual grave and solemn smile. ‘No giant owl has invaded these territories for many hundred springs. You are all fortunate to be growing up in a time of peace and plenty. Of course, there is danger all around us always, but for the moment our only real problems are internal, either within the Barn owl community itself or with our neighbours the Tawnies and the little immigrants that live in no man’s land. For the moment, there is no danger from outside.’

‘So how do you propose to teach us about fear?’ asked Dawn Raptor, returning to the point from which they had strayed.

Her father looked at her for a moment or two before replying.

‘Before you leave home,’ he said, eventually. ‘I’m going to take you into danger, one by one, and in the midst of danger you will for the first time begin to come to terms with fear.’

‘But it will only be a training exercise, won’t it?’ asked Quaver, sounding rather worried. ‘You will protect us if we get attacked by something we can’t handle?’

‘Of course,’ said Steeple. ‘But to be successful, the exercise must also contain an element of risk. Otherwise, as Dawn Raptor suspected, it would be theory only and as such would prove to be quite futile.’

‘Doesn’t it worry you?’ Dawn Raptor asked. ‘A father who must deliberately lead his offspring into danger?’

‘Naturally it does,’ said Steeple, rather brusquely. ‘It is the hardest lesson that a father has to teach.’

‘Like Dapple when she explained to us that when we were grown up we had to leave home

and take care of ourselves,' said Quaver. 'When she told us that we could never, ever come and live at home again?'

'That is even worse,' said Steeple. 'To face danger is always better than to lose the ones we love. Both for a mother and her young ones, that is truly the hardest lesson of them all.'

'Why teach it then?' Dawn Raptor asked. 'Why must we all conform to this conditioning — to this eternal Barn owl dogma? Shall we never be permitted to think and make decisions for ourselves?'

'It is natural, not dogmatic,' answered Steeple, who seemed quite unruffled by his daughter's challenge. 'We teach it against our individual wills, in the interests of survival. And for the same reason I must teach you how to come to terms with fear.'

'When?' asked Hunter, already attempting to steel himself for the ordeal that lay ahead.

'You are the first, Hunter,' said his father very firmly. 'You fly with me tonight. We shall fly from twilight until dawn, or until danger finds us. And when danger finds us we will pause and you will come to terms with fear.'

Chapter 3

Soaring above the territory that he knew and loved so well, accompanied by the steady wing beats of his father, Hunter felt a deep sadness at the thought that he must soon leave this peaceful homeland of copse, field and meadow for the great unknown — vast tracts of land he must learn to chart and navigate alone in the interests of survival.

The flaming harvest moon shone full as they flew, shedding a ghostly light on the fields, some of stubble, some still thick, golden corn, and on the dark trees that drooped drowsily with the weight of leaves, fruit and flowers that were about to fall. Even at this time of ripeness, Hunter sensed the autumn lurking somewhere behind the flaming moon, waiting to bring change and to reclaim the spoils of summer to the pungent, acrid earth from whence they came.

Midnight came and went as they flew on in ever-widening circles until at last they came to the ruined church where Steeple told him their ancestors had once settled, bred and for many generations had their being. As they glided high above the church's broken tower, Hunter sensed a sudden change in his father's flight path. He had picked up something down there in the lower world. Though receiving nothing yet, Hunter swerved alongside his father as their flight path changed and they veered east before beginning to drop silently downwards towards the long, dark copse that straggled the borders of their territory. Then Hunter picked up the danger, too.

Somewhere on the edge of the copse prowled a large predatory mammal, still out of sight in

the distant darkness, but pinpointed by the owls' superb sensory skill.

'Have you got it yet?' asked Steeple, in a whisper, as they glided downwards in the direction of the unseen killer.

'Yes, I've got it,' Hunter answered softly. 'It's a fox, or else a wild dog.'

'Fox,' his father said. 'Or a big vixen, to be more exact. In a moment you'll come in range and get the rankness of the smell.' No sooner had he spoken than the stench drifted up and threatened to engulf Hunter as the two owls drifted closer to their quarry.

'Silence now,' whispered Steeple softly. 'When we get near enough to see her, circle with me and watch closely. She's found something she intends to kill.' They dropped still closer to the ground until the vixen came in sight, moving her haunches slowly and purposefully along the edges of the copse, her yellow eyes fixed on some point in the open field beyond. Hunter decided that what frightened him most was her strange, primeval beauty and the rank smell that rose up from her, transmitting an untamed and wanton lust to kill.

Suddenly Steeple turned on a surge of power and rose almost vertically till he was high in the night sky, remote from the slinking predator below. Hovering, he waited there till Hunter joined him and then began to circle once again.

'I have decided,' he said. 'We need fly no further this night in search of danger. We have found it here. Listen carefully to my briefing,' he continued, 'and do not interrupt me till the end. Then ask me to clarify what you have not understood.' Hunter nodded as they circled high up in the sky, keeping the vixen's stealthy movements monitored with their inner vision.

'You should know already,' Steeple said, 'that there are certain types of owl that do not live in fixed abodes as we and the Tawnies do, but camp out on the ground wherever they can get a living. To combat the constant danger from four-legged raptors they have developed ground defence techniques that are occasionally useful even to those of us who live in proper, well-protected homes like churches, barns or hollow trees. What we are going to do now is to pretend to be two nomadic, Short-eared owls who have nested on the ground. I shall play the part of the mother and your role will be that of the young owlet who has not yet learned to fly. We shall drop now into the field of stubble, midway between the copse and the family of rabbits that the vixen is preparing to destroy. She will come upon us as she steals towards the rabbits from her down wind position in the copse. Seeing that you cannot move, she will attack. I shall employ the decoy ground defence technique to distract her just as she reaches the critical distance, ready to spring, and it is already too late for you to fly away. Remember that you must not move, however close she gets. Use the static defence display, but do not take off until I tell you. Any questions?'

‘Yes,’ said Hunter, as they continued to circle high in the late summer sky. ‘I’ve never used the static defence display before. What if it doesn’t work?’

‘It will work,’ said Steeple. ‘just before the vixen reaches the critical distance — the point of no return, when she is so close that you no longer have time or space for flight — the sudden increase in fear will send a message to your brain and the rest will happen automatically.’

‘Supposing that it doesn’t?’ said Hunter, who had begun to wish that his father had been a much more common owl who took less interest in his education and let fear find him by itself.

‘If it doesn’t work, I shall attack the vixen from behind,’ said Steeple, sounding quite calm and sanguine, as if he relished the prospect of battle with any vicious beast, in spite of his religion and his position on the Barn owl council.

‘Very well,’ said Hunter, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. ‘Ready for action stations when you are.’

‘Right!’ said Steeple. ‘Action stations now.’

There was no more time to think, for Steeple veered west and dived down towards the field where they would meet the vixen face to face. Hunter followed close behind and as they plunged earthwards he came to understand what his father had meant earlier by the thrill of fear, for as danger seemed to spring up from the darkness down below he knew in those few moments that he had never before seen so clearly or felt so vividly alive.

Steeple and Hunter dropped so swiftly from the sky that the vixen did not see them land, though she had already begun her stealthy, slinking course across the field. But she sensed them soon afterwards, almost before they had taken up position, with Hunter sitting tall and humanoid directly in her path, while his father lay down outside the vixen’s line of vision, behind a mound of earth, with one wing half trailing on the ground as if it had been broken.

The she-fox paused in her slow approach, lifted one front foot from the ground and cocked her cruel head slightly to one side. As she spotted Hunter, straight ahead, her foot came down again, her body stiffened, she snarled softly and her yellow eyes burned brightly with the lust for blood.

Faithful to his brief, Hunter sat quite erect and still as the vixen crawled closer and closer to him until the rankness of her smell grew almost overpowering. Soon she was only ten lengths away, head lowered, teeth snarling and her tongue lolling only inches from the ground. The ten lengths dwindled to eight, seven, six and still Hunter did not attempt to take off and fly away. At five lengths distance the vixen paused and snarled, glaring at Hunter with eyes that glowed and swam with lust for blood. Though almost petrified, Hunter obeyed his orders and continued to stare back into those dreadful eyes.

‘She’s nearly there,’ he thought. ‘She’s nearly reached the point of no return. Just one step more and she can spring. Oh, please, please let my instinct function now!’

As the vixen moved her haunches slowly, limbering to spring in for the kill, Hunter’s body plumage suddenly began to ruffle and swell so quickly that in a split second he seemed almost twice his size. At the same time, his wings spread and rotated forwards like a giant fan.

The vixen wilted at this apparition and jumped half a pace backwards as Hunter clattered his bill, hissed, screamed and snorted at her with a terrifying battle cry.

‘It works,’ he thought, delighted with himself. ‘I’ve done it, I’ve done it.’ And he felt life flowing back through his body and firmness forming in those parts of him that had been liquefied by fear.

Frustrated, the vixen snarled, dropped her head and began to edge forward once again. No longer very young, she was experienced and exceptionally vicious, but realised now that dealing with this apparition was going to be a very different proposition from the killing of an ordinary farmyard cock. Yellow eyes glowing and her predator’s heart now touched by fear, she nonetheless stole forward determined to tear Hunter limb from limb.

Hunter swelled and snorted ferociously as she reached the critical position once again, baring his talons ready for battle as she moved her slow haunches ready for the spring. Then a louder and more fearsome screech than Hunter’s shattered the air as if it meant to carry to all the owls in creation and beyond them to the pale moon that bathed the night-time fighters in its light. From the corner of his eye, Hunter saw Steeple emerge from behind his clump of cover, dragging himself on his belly with both wings limp and trailing as if they had been broken.

The vixen leaped like a hare on all fours and spun round to face the new intruder. Then her head turned and her eyes flashed back to Hunter, who was, after all, so much closer to those cruel and practised jaws. At that moment she was distracted once again by a piteous mewing from behind her. She turned again and stared at Steeple as he dragged his clumsy, broken-seeming body across the cornfield stubble. Even in the midst of fear, though still ready to do battle, Hunter was fascinated by his father’s histrionics.

‘What a performance,’ he thought proudly, as the crumpled body flopped and dragged its way along the ground accompanied by heartrending mews of pain and fear.

The killer cast one quick glance back at Hunter, who still stood war-plumed and erect, whereas the other creature was clearly maimed and half-dead already. Lured by the prospect of an easy kill, the she-fox leaped towards Steeple and bounded the few remaining paces that separated her from an orgy of bloodletting and revenge. Hunter held his breath. Would his father take off before the vixen reached him, or would he turn and fight?

In a split second that seemed like all eternity, Hunter saw the vixen cross the critical divide and spring while at the same instant Steeple bunched up all of the power and strength within him and thrust forwards up into the air. For one moment neither fox nor owl was in contact with the ground. Then the fox crashed nose first into the field while Steeple rose gracefully up into the air, circled and then gave word for Hunter to follow him.

The vixen gnashed her teeth and howled with rage, thus warning all prospective prey for many meadows round. She saw a great white shadow as Hunter soared above her on the ascending flight path towards his father and howled once more at the sky, part in rage and part in that strange fear of the unknown that Steeple had described at twilight. Then she stopped her futile baying at the moon and snapped in frustration at the stubble across which her maimed and easy prey had dragged itself before some magic had spirited it away into the air and into a realm that lay far beyond the vixen's ken.

Snapping at the stubble with her teeth, the vixen became aware of something long and greyish white that brushed and tickled her nose as it stuck up from the ground. At first, she drew her head back in surprise and then bent closer to examine this curious feather which was all that was left now to testify to the passing of those secret creatures from another world, suspended somewhere between heaven and earth, a world of which men and foxes know so very little.

Chapter 4

Not long afterwards, when the first leaves had begun to fall, Hunter sat in the barn with his mother, his brother and his sister anxiously awaiting Steeple, who was due to return sometime before dawn from the biannual session of the Barn owl council with news of the arrangements that had been made for their further education.

Day had just begun to break up the darkness with faint stripes of pink as their father flew in after his long journey from the west, settled on his favourite perch and greeted each of them in turn. Quaver was bouncing up and down on his perch, unable to mask his excitement. Hunter fidgeted, full of curiosity and only Dawn Raptor sat still and aloof, as if her father's homecoming with the news that was about to determine all their futures was of little or no concern to her, but merely some new ritual or protocol that must be borne with all the rest.

'Well, father?' asked Quaver, unable to stand the tension for a single moment longer. 'Am I to study poetry and singing? Has Hunter been accepted for owlology? Where is Dawn Raptor going? For the Great God Bird's sake, tell us soon or else we shall go mad. We've hardly eaten all night long. We just kept flying back here all the time to see if you'd arrived. I know you must be tired, but please, please don't keep us in suspense!'

‘One at a time,’ said Steeple, turning his grave smile from Dapple to his youngest fledgling. ‘We’ll start with Quaver, since as usual he seems to be the most impatient. You, Quaver, will indeed be studying poetry and singing and you will be taught by Bardic, our current expert on the Barn owl council.’

‘Not the Bard Owl himself?’ asked Quaver, his eyes almost rounded with a surfeit of surprise and pleasure.

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Steeple, smiling once again. ‘You have been very lucky, though I must warn you that you may not find Bardic as tolerant and easy to get on with as you might expect. Like so many poets and composers, he has his own little habits and eccentricities that you will almost certainly find difficult to adjust to, especially after the more conventional environment you’ve been used to here.’

‘I shan’t mind at all,’ chirped Quaver, cheerfully. ‘It will make a change and you have always told us, father, that change is an essential component in any form of higher education.’

‘That’s quite true,’ said Steeple, whose expression had become a trifle graver, ‘but there is change and change, and not all change is always for the better. However, I will give you the best briefing that I can before you leave and I’m sure you will behave sensibly and make the best of this great opportunity. As for Hunter, he too has been very lucky. He will be taught by Beak Poke, who is the longest serving member of our council and has been incumbent Owl now for more than twenty springs.’

‘What kind of bird is Beak Poke?’ asked Hunter, who felt elated and anxious both at the same time.

‘He’s very old of course,’ his father said, ‘but he’s certainly one of the greatest living experts on his subject. He’s a pragmatist and when he was younger not everyone approved entirely of his methods. He’s said to have lived for a while with a colony of immigrants and to have spent so much time in a woodland domain with the Tawnies that he almost went native. Yet his store of knowledge is immense, not only in his own subject, but in other fields as well.’

‘What about Dawn Raptor?’ asked Hunter, glancing at his sister who sat listening quietly, only her eyes moving slightly back and forth between her father and her brother. Both her body posture and the expression in her eyes seemed to suggest that she expected a disappointment but was determined to show no reaction whatsoever when it came.

‘It’s different for your sister,’ said Steeple, frowning seriously at his daughter. ‘She has not yet shown any special aptitude or ambition to excel in any one specific field. She’s a good all-rounder who might benefit from a more practical form of higher education. For the moment, she’ll stay on with us, at home, until she develops a new interest or until something suitable

turns up.’

Both Hunter and his younger brother gazed solemnly at their sister to see how she might react to this decision, but Dawn Raptor sat quite calm and still and gave no sign of disappointment or displeasure. It seemed as if either Steeple or her mother had already prepared her for this decision, or else she herself had already guessed.

‘Of course,’ said Steeple, raising his eyebrows and scrutinising Dawn Raptor with the sort of gentle severity that they knew so well, ‘it may be that your sister is a late developer. She may discover a special talent or a keen interest in one particular subject at some time in the near or distant future. That quite often happens, and in such cases it is always useful to have as much practical experience as possible to fall back on. In education, as in life itself, theory without practice is seldom of any great advantage. So in the meantime, Dawn Raptor will stay on here with us.’

Watching his sister, Hunter saw a wry, ironic smile flit across her features and he felt that he could tell what she was thinking from a series of disturbing little things that she had whispered to him from time to time either during or at the end of Dapple’s lessons. ‘Indoctrination she means, not teaching,’ was one that had quite shocked him, or, ‘Why should we be burdened with this traditional mumbo jumbo that goes back twelve million years when all the world around us is changing into a new, exciting place?’

‘Couldn’t Dawn Raptor go as apprentice to the Dissident Owl?’ piped up Quaver, whose mind had obviously been running along the same lines as Hunter’s.

‘Impossible,’ said Steeple, as a frown once more engulfed his features. ‘You can only become an official iconoclast as an adult, after taking at least two types of further education. Dissidents simply happen, they are never made.’

‘Then why do you always have a Dissident Owl on the council?’ asked Quaver. ‘If he doesn’t agree with traditional Barn owl lore, philosophy and religion, surely the Dissident member can be nothing but a nuisance?’

‘Certainly the Dissident Owl can be a nuisance,’ said Steeple, with a tolerant little sigh, ‘but, don’t you see, it is his role. It is Barn owl policy to give every point of view a hearing on the council. It would be very dangerous to deny any minority the chance of a lawful hearing. Without an official opportunity to air their views, the dissidents might feel frustrated and form some kind of clandestine, subversive movement.’

‘I see,’ said Quaver, who seemed most impressed by his father’s logic. But as Hunter watched his sister, he sensed a stubborn, deep-rooted rejection of this thinking. Perturbed, he pondered to himself that it was perhaps a good thing she was being forced to stay for what she obvious-

ly thought of as a further process of conditioning.

His worries about Dawn Raptor were cut off as Steeple coughed and raised his head to command their full attention. 'I am tired now and I want to sleep,' he said. 'But at twilight, Hunter, the briefing for your journey will begin. It will last from twilight until dawn and you will leave for your seat of learning tomorrow when night falls. Your briefing will be vitally important because the journey from here to Beak Poke's domain is to some extent a dangerous one.'

'Why is it dangerous, especially?' asked Hunter. 'You have taught us that the worst fear is fear of the unknown, so please tell me now, lest my imaginings turn into nightmares like the ones that Quaver has about the monster owl.'

'You will have to cross the Lost Domain,' said Dapple, unable to mask a motherly concern. 'That will be the worst part, I imagine.'

'What is the Lost Domain?' demanded Quaver, as eager and curious as if he were about to fly across the place himself.

'The Lost Domain is a forbidden territory where no owls ever fly,' said Steeple. 'It contains the secret forest and a vast, fertile stretch of parkland leading to a lake and to the largest man-made edifice that any owl in these territories has ever seen.'

'Why do no owls live or hunt there?' Hunter asked. 'Why are there no Tawnies in the forest or Barn owls in the parkland, if the territory is as rich as you suggest?'

'Tawnies inhabited the forest until several hundred springs ago, but that is another story. The peril, Hunter, comes from men with firesticks who patrol the place in daylight hours, but very rarely in the night. The other, much lesser danger you will face from the Tawnies in the woodland you must cross at the outset of your journey, soon after you have flown by the broken church, skirted the village and crossed the no man's land beyond.'

'Why the Tawnies?' Hunter asked. 'We have territorial conventions and agreements with them that go back for many hundred springs.'

'Tawnies vary, like Barn owls or any other creatures,' said Steeple, with a patient little smile. 'Only Tawnies vary more than we do because some are privileged and some are not. Those who live in our neighbouring woods have had few advantages and very little education. They are primitive, atavistic and unfriendly birds, though not dangerous if you follow the correct procedures. But again, more of that at twilight. I am weary after the council meeting and my long journey from the west. Rest now, Hunter, for you will need all your strength and energy for the new beginning and for the days and nights that lie ahead.'