A
pprentice 1, my fellow author, is lying supine in front of the fire, starting work on the cover. I peer over her shoulder and read:

_into the space between the lines, she is sketching, with pencil and crayons, a terrifying face, round as the moon, with horns._

‘Good work!’ I say. ‘But it’s time we focused down hard on the practicalities. Dragons are not easily enchanted out of stone.’

There is no response from Apprentice 2, at whom this is none too subtly directed. He is playing games hopping from the couch to the footstool while watching Scooby-Doo.

‘It might help,’ I intone testily, ‘if we took the trouble to make some plans.’

_Nada._

‘Like designing our weapon of power. Which must be the most fearsome weapon we can possibly imagine.’

His only response is to slide off the footstool so he ends up dangling with his head on the floor, while still watching the program upside-down.

I have the sudden, and awful, presentiment that one day I shall find myself on some alien battlefield entirely alone on the furtherance of this quest.

I climb the mountain (the staircase to my “fiction study”) and hunt through the maze of disordered arcania, until I find the crystal sphere. It is the size of a small plum, mostly brown, the colour of uncreamed coffee, but whorled and girdled with rings of greys, ivory and old gold, like the surface of Jupiter. It is part of the precious collection I bought out of the lap of an Inca peddler woman, complete with shawl and hat, who was travelling in a battered VW camper with a band of bedraggled Peruvian musicians. They bewitched me with their haunting music, those Spanish guitars, ukuleles and all manner of things shaped like potatoes with holes, against a backdrop of the volcanic central peak of Gran Canaria.

I recall how the sky was opaque as a net curtain with Sirocco-borne sand. I swear on my Hippocratic oath that she only parted with her treasures with the greatest reluctance, after assuring me that they were truly _Las Rocas de los Dragones_. So if anybody is to blame for this dragon obsession, blame her.

I return from the mountain, triumphantly bearing the crystal sphere, together with its plinth of jade, a treasure that might have been robbed from the grave of an Aztec princess, its organic surface flecked with lime-green petals.

Apprentice 1 deserts her drawing to join me.

I allow her to caress the crystal. Together we invoke the rune that will hold it there, on its bed of jade. Such caution is necessary because this is a stone of power and it yearns to escape all mortal control. It might suddenly disappear.

Apprentice 2 somersaults over to join us. We three form the magic circle.

‘Granddad,’ he pleads, ‘can we play with the dragon stones?’

‘First things first! We need to plan.’

Apprentice 1 pleads: ‘Can I play with the dragon stones too?’

‘All in good time! But first – a strategy. Remember the challenge that lies before us. I’m beginning to think we need a muse.’

‘A moose with horns?’

‘Not a moose – a muse. A goddess from the age of magic. Somebody who will help us find the spell to deliver our dragon from the stone.’

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When I met up with Jenny I was frankly pessimistic. All those aspiring writers of science-in-fiction whose hopes were dashed – where could they turn to? The temptation, as perilous as any dragon quest, was to do the job for themselves: self-publishing.

When I encounter people tempted down this road, I spare no feelings in spelling out the dangers. First, let us look at the
When a commissioning editor is considering a typescript, he or she will consult with colleagues at one of the regularly-set meetings, which includes other competing editors from different categories. They will argue their case before senior bosses who will monitor their opinions and performances. Editors cannot afford mistakes. These meetings may also include the production people, who will plan the actual physical structure, the typeface and size of print, the page layout, the headings and miscellaneous decorations, and — usually as an on-going joint exercise with the commissioning editor — the cover design. The meeting will also include senior sales people, the guys who will go out and sell the book into the hard-nosed world of booksellers. And it will include the marketing and promotional people, who will have to sell the book to a far more hostile world — the public.

This is not even Day Zero. There will be books with potential that fall at this hurdle on this day that is not even Day Zero. Because somebody, anybody around the table, may have personal bad vibes, or they know what the idsiosyncratic buyer in such-and-such a retailing chain will say. Or because the company (yes, it’s a business) injected time and money on a similar venture some years ago — and it sank like a stone.

You think that’s worrisome — perhaps even daunting. Now take on board that these are experienced experts, pooling wisdom. Meanwhile, you are venturing out alone. That meeting on a day that is not even Day Zero will be you talking with yourself. You have no experience of cover or book design, no contacts among the booksellers, no clout with the media, and you are heading out to publish a book by an unknown author through an unknown publisher, alias yourself!

And I haven’t even got round to the cost, which will be prohibitive. (And lest you be seduced by the promise of print-on-demand services, I’m afraid that there is a very real downside, which I’ll discuss in depth next week.) Let us put aside the fact you will be busy all day, every day, for a very long time. Imagine paying editors, cover designers, printers, perhaps a place to store your books so they’re clean and dry, and then there’s the cost of any marketing and promotion, and the cost of packaging and delivering, and then swallowing losses when unsold books are returned to you — usually just a torn off cover to save postage. To give you some idea, when Swift Publishers — a small press equipped with sales force and distributors, not a one-man-band — produced my book on tuberculosis, the marketing budget alone was £10,000. In 1992 that was a lot of money.

And now consider that most booksellers, or major distributors, will demand 50%, perhaps even 55%, discount — and that’s after you have paid for packaging and postage.

You understand now why, in that meeting with Jenny, I was pessimistic. To self-publish a book is downright hazardous. If it happens to be a work of non-fiction, and if its message is truly original and important, you might have a glimmer of a chance. But if it is a work of fiction, and Lord preserve us, if it is a work of lab lit, you will truly find yourself battling alone in a perilous landscape. Your dragon is warded by dreadful forces. Anyone who enters here must have a battle plan that has at least a decent chance of success. Foresight and knowledge will prove important. Believe me, you will need a powerful weapon — a weapon, and any magic you can blend into its forging, that is guaranteed to sunder the stone.

That then is the landscape I am obliged to enter. There’s no denying that I need a friend, an ally more powerful than a mere mortal. Why not look to a muse — a goddess from the Age of Magic — who would guide me on such a perilous odyssey?

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Where else should I turn to but Google — that bountiful font of magic and inspiration. Many were the hours I trawled the ether in search for such a muse — and failed to find her. One by one, I examined all nine of Mnemosyne’s daughters. Their hearts, as I discovered, were set upon song and their spirits, one and all, were free from care. “Happy,” I discovered, “is that man whom the Muses love!”

Hey — make it me!

You could see it was true, in the pictures of them dancing and singing, and hopping around in a blissful ring-a-rosary circle. There were muses for elegies, and tragedies, and flute-playing. My hopes soared when I discovered gorgeous Urania, holding the world in one hand and the callipers in the other — beloved of astronomy. Perfect! I could live with the fact my Urania inspired only chaste love, but I struggled with the discovery that she rested her foot on a turtle, which — don’t ask me! — is the symbol of silence and retreat. I withdrew my affections. I needed a more warlike muse yet one who treasured knowledge for knowledge’s own sake.

Where’s the Jamesons? — I seem to recall some such exclamation in the dark hours, when a lonely mortal is in need of succour. And then it came to me in a brainwave. Is there not an alterative pantheon to the Greeks — an Irish, or more broadly, Celtic pantheon? And here, at last, I found her. Brigid! My Celtic goddess! Born at the exact moment of daybreak, she rises into the dawn sky with her head on fire.

Where’s it gone, that Jamesons? I grab the bottle of peaty nectar, pour another generous libation.

Her blessed head on fire! I am mindful — and here I offer the first hint at the theme of my forthcoming novel — that it was fire that happens to be a work of fiction, and Lord preserve us, if it is a work of lab lit, you will truly find yourself battling alone in a perilous landscape. Your dragon is warded by dreadful forces. Anyone who enters here must have a battle plan that has at least a decent chance of success. Foresight and knowledge will prove important. Believe me, you will need a powerful weapon — a weapon, and any magic you can blend into its forging, that is guaranteed to sunder the stone.

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Where am I? Is it possible I have fallen asleep at my desk? But this is not the landscape of my study… I find myself, like the Divine Dante, lost and alone in an infernal landscape, a coastline of black and rugged rock. Before me, across a stagnant pool, stands the strangest building, rambling and feral, with goblin’s heads adorning the roof. I am suddenly fearful. I am overcome by an overwhelming sense of danger. I hear a voice, cackling and strange, beyond my left shoulder. There’s a rumble of noise that might be thunder, were it not for the fact it sounds more like a donkey coughing. And then this haggard being appears. She is toothless. And very nearly hairless. I see veins of pink and blue marbling coursing the skin of her seborrhoeic scalp.
‘Who the blazes are you?’

‘Brigid – sure ye evoked me!’

‘You’re Brigid?’

‘At yere service, noble warrior!’

‘You look terrible.’

‘Terror is me middle name.’

‘You’re supposed to appear with the dawn, your head in flames.’

‘Ah now, I thought ye, a man of science, could be doing without the special effects.’

‘You look about three thousand years old.’

‘More four and a half – but I’m flattered with three.’

‘And you’re my muse?’

‘Ready and willing!’

‘So what can you do?’

She goes, ‘Peh-peh-peh!’

‘What on earth?’

‘Sure, don’t all of me power resides in me whistling.’

‘You call that whistling?’

‘Ye should try whistling yereself without a tooth in yere mouth and a throat that’s been dry for thousands of years.’

I follow her yearning eyes to the bottle of Jameson’s, which, by happenstance is still clutched in my left hand. I pass it to her, hear the sound of toothless glugging.

My thoughts careen about in my head. What good is a whistler who cannot whistle? Should I try to find her a dentist? But I sense that this is a world in which there are no dentists.

‘Help!’ I cry to the darkening heavens.

‘No sooner asked than granted.’ She coughed, a dreadful gargling sound, then intoned in a quavery oracular sing-song. ‘Ye should look to a message, when and where ye least expect it.’

‘That’s it?’

There is what might pass for a whistle. Then, all of a sudden she is gone, as mysteriously as she appeared – taking what remains of the peaty flavour with her.

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*Look to a messenger.* I dream of what it might imply, tossing and turning in alternating spells of fearfulness and hoping. I dream about taking to arms, with a fearsome weapon as yet to be designed, in the cause of logic and enlightenment... I would claim too, as a man not given to exaggeration, that the message was there in my mail the next morning. I do, I fulsomely claim it. In all of the years I have spent in writing, and publishing, I have never received a communication by post from Google – so it is not unreasonable to see this as a message, in timing and content, I would never have anticipated.

I have it right here, this message, which arrived out of the blue in my business mail in mid-September. I find myself re-reading the opening words:

Google Book Search: The Story
By Jens Redmer...

I read on:

Google book search has proved both popular and controversial. I've written this booklet to explore the issues involved and explode some of the myths...

The myths?

Google Book Search is split into two distinct parts: our Partner Programme and Library project...

I am plagued by a headache, of mysterious origins. I feel the need to clear my brain, to think about this carefully and clearly. I own to being sceptical – even downright cynical. And yet...could it be that my muse has answered my call? My mind retraces its tentative footsteps through this strange and unexpected message to discover the phrase, the very words, that have captured my attention...*Our Partner Programme*.

(Next week, warrior Frank and his fearless apprentices ask themselves if they have discovered the rune of power.)
Foremost, dreaming of Goddess Durga is an auspicious sign. Goddess Durga is one of the avatar of Goddess Shakthi, and She is regarded the most ferocious form of the Goddess. She takes the Durga avatar to put an end to all the demons and thus uph... What does it mean? This is the second time I'm seeing goddess Durga in my dream. Do I have to worship her more? Update Cancel.