

THE FATHER OF LIES CHRONICLES



The
SNOWGLOBE

A SHORT STORY

ALAN EARLY

Introduction

This story takes place during the events of *'Arthur Quinn and Hell's Keeper'* so you will need to read that book before continuing!

Merry Christmas!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alex Go". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

The first thing you should know about Sofia is that she loved Christmas. So, when she found the snowglobe in the abandoned house on Fumbally Lane, it wasn't a surprise that she allowed its little tinkling tune to play on repeat, drawing the attention of the Wolfsguard.

It had been a tough few days for Sofia, clambering from house to house, across garden walls that protruded just above the surface of the Flood. Up to then, she had been in a high rise flat opposite Christ Church – the penthouse, in fact. But then the guards had come, and ransacked the lower apartments and set the place alight. She had just managed to get out in time, spluttering on thick black smoke as she scrambled down the fire escape, and stayed hidden for the next day atop the tin roof of a garage. After that, she moved to a storeroom over a newsagents' for a night, followed by a vacant and echoey office for a couple of days and then a restaurant that was overrun with bugs and rats attacking the forgotten sacks of food. She swam from place to place, starting at each distant roar of engine, too terrified to go much further than the next building along.

It had been like this for months; since the Flood came, since Loki had taken over, since she had gotten split up from her family. She was nine years old and all alone in this wasted Dublin cityscape, with only the ferocious noises of the Wolfsguard for company.

Half the houses on Fumbally Lane when she got there were underwater; bungalows swallowed by the Flood. There were a couple of new apartment buildings, all clean lines and sharp corners, but these had already been looted and burnt out by the guards. She was about to turn away, swim further along Clanbrassil Street, when she spotted the open window. It was set into the gable of one of the few two storey houses – circular and barely wide enough for a football to squeeze through. Sofia had always been described as petite but, after months of eating just enough to survive, she had grown even skinnier. And so, she fitted through the little round window easily.

She found herself in an attic, surrounded by mounds of sheet-covered furniture, stacks of damp cardboard boxes and the cloying stench of mould. But it was a relief to be inside, to be out of the Flood, to have somewhere to hide for a while.

She pulled off the light rain-jacket she had borrowed (stolen!) from a store weeks ago and let it fall to the floor in a heap. It was winter but still too hot for anything more than a swimsuit and the jacket. She would dry in no time in the stifling heat of the attic. With a long sigh, Sofia collapsed on a beanbag against one wall, sending up a flume of dust that made her simultaneously cough, sneeze and laugh. When she could finally breathe again, she rubbed the dust and dust-activated tears out of her eyes, and looked about her.

Straightaway, she noticed the box with **XMAS** scrawled across it in thick black marker.

A gasp escaped her throat at the sight of the word.

She turned her wrist to look at her father's watch; it dangled loosely on her arm but she had secured it with a piece of twine. The watch had been a gift from Sofia's mother on their wedding day and was engraved with their initials on the underside. It was a masterpiece of Swiss engineering, Sofia's dad had told her once; totally water-resistant to a depth of 300 metres, scratch proof face and battery guaranteed to last two decades. According to the date counter, today was the 24th of December.

Christmas Eve.

Despite how weary her limbs were after the swim, she pushed away from the beanbag and crawled across the bare floorboards to the box. It was sealed shut with a few strips of yellowed Sellotape.

They came away easily – the glue long since dried – and she threw the flaps open.

Tinsel sprang out – red and green and gold and silver strands of it – like an explosion of festive cheer. Sofia pushed it all aside to get a better look inside the box.

Fairy lights were coiled around pieces of card and baubles were thrown haphazardly in – their loops of thread tangled together. There was a crib, complete with porcelain figures of the Holy Family fixed to the base. There were glass tea-light holders, painted with snowy vistas of robins and Santa Claus and candy-cane forests. And there – in the midst of it all – was the snowglobe.

Sofia reached in and tentatively lifted the snowglobe out. Then, holding it at arm's length as if it was a mewling baby, she took it back to the beanbag and placed it reverently on the floor.

It was about the size of a honeydew melon – (the comparison made Sofia think of her grandmother's favourite starter for Christmas dinner) – and sat on a clay base that was moulded with images of a Germanic Christmas village; snow-covered hills, wood cabins, sleds, the whole Yuletide shebang. In the middle of the globe itself was a tin Christmas tree, painted with thick garlands of tinsel, holly and multi-coloured candles. There were little tin figures at the foot of the tree, all wearing bobble-hats and scarves and all staring up in awe.

Sofia picked the globe up and shook it; flakes of polystyrene snow swirled around the tree. The figures were momentarily lost in the blizzard.

Still holding it, she noticed a brass handle on the bottom; the kind of handle one would expect at the back of a wind-up alarm clock. She turned it, hearing dull clicking sounds with each revolution and when it couldn't budge anymore, she placed it back on the floor.

Instantly, the tree and figures started rotating in the globe, keeping the snow whirling around them at an even pace. Tinny music drifted out of somewhere on the base; a tinkling version of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*.

A wave of memories and emotions came crashing down on Sofia as she watched the snowglobe. She thought of her parents, of her grandmother, of her older brother Ethan. She thought of the last time she had seen them – a few days after the Flood, during the mayhem when the Wolves had first showed up, when everyone had been running or swimming or wading in different directions and it had all been so confusing and scary. She thought of last Christmas and the dinner they had shared together and the joy on their faces when she had presented them all with the little pictures she had made for them. And then the tree stopped turning and tune tinkled its final notes and Sofia was back in the musty attic.

She hastily wound the snowglobe again and set it back down. Nostalgia flooded her as the music started up once more; Christmas mornings and seeing what Santa left for her and Ethan... the smell of gingerbread baking and turkey and coal fires... hanging the stockings and the bite of ice in the air... the holiday specials on TV and the selection boxes and the sense of togetherness and- Again, the music came to an end and the polystyrene snow settled around the tin figures.

Sofia wound the handle again, quicker this time.

Have yourself a merry little...

The feelings she was feeling were at once sad and happy, but all full of longing; longing for a time that was gone now, longing for her family, longing for something other than this – this *existence*. There was no other word for it. It wasn't life; it was *existing*. Barely getting by, all alone, hiding day in and day out. Eventually the Wolfsguard would catch up with her. It was inevitable. But for now – for that brief moment when the snow fell around the tin tree and the music filled the attic – Sofia could imagine herself back at home, at Christmastime, with her family.

She wound the snowglobe again and again and again, hardly noticing the time passing or the tears that were streaming down her cheeks or the sound of engines roaring ever closer.

Until-

There came a noise from elsewhere in the house; a dull thumping sound from somewhere below Sofia's feet.

She grasped the snowglobe tight to her chest, holding the brass handle still with one finger since it was mid-turn, mid-tune. She held her breath, eyes darting around the half-light of the attic. Her ears picked up another sound – the undulating whisper of moving water. No; it was somebody moving *through* water. At the far end of the attic, next to a pile of gardening equipment and a dusty armchair, was an open trapdoor leading to the second storey. From this angle, she could just about see the water

that came halfway up the floral wallpaper down there, and she could see the small waves repeating through it.

Someone was coming.

There was no time to dive back out the round window – and anyway, she'd make too much racket doing that – so instead she quietly shuffled down behind a stack of boxes, hugging the snowglobe to her, holding her breath and trying desperately to stop her teeth from chattering.

Sofia had just pushed herself as far as possible into the darkened corner, when she heard the whooshing sound of somebody pulling out of the water. There were drips and a creak of floorboards as the person – whoever it was – heaved their body through the trapdoor and into the attic.

Footsteps. Hesitant, scuffling footsteps, moving toward Sofia.

And then a voice, whispered-

'Hello? Anyone there?'

Sofia was so shocked at the realisation that it was a girl that she took a sharp intake of breath.

The footsteps hurried and then the girl was standing before her.

She was older than Sofia, twelve or thirteen at least, with her auburn hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. She was wearing a full body wet suit and had a long wooden staff in one hand that put Sofia in mind of Gandalf the wizard. At the sight of the girl, Sofia instinctively shuffled backwards.

'It's alright,' said the girl in the same hushed tone. She got to her hunkers, laid the staff aside and reached an open palm to Sofia. 'You should come with me. We need to get out of here.'

'Who-?' was all Sofia could croak out.

'Ash,' she said. 'My name is Ash. What's yours?'

'Sof- Sofi-'

'Sophie?'

She shook her head and muttered 'Sofia.'

'Sofia,' the Ash girl repeated. 'That's a lovely name.' She stood up suddenly, taking the staff with her. 'Now we need to go, Sofia.'

'No no no. It's safer here. We should wait until-'

'It's not safe at all, Sofia.' Ash shot her a sympathetic look. 'Don't you hear that?'

Now that Ash had pointed it out, she did. It was the noise of several engines, getting closer every second. She knew exactly what that sound was: the Wolfsguard.

'How-'

'That music you were playing drew their attention,' said Ash, nodding at the snowglobe. 'It drew my attention too. We were in a warehouse down the street, getting supplies, when I heard the song. The whole city is so quiet that even a tiny sound like that can be heard. I swam straight over here. But we have to get back to the others quickly. So come on!'

'Others?'

'Friends,' Ash said, a little impatiently. 'You're safe with us. Now let's go!'

She grabbed Sofia by the shoulder, yanking her unceremoniously to her feet and dragging her toward the trap door. Sofia didn't quite know if she should trust the girl but the alternative was waiting for the Wolfsguard, and nothing was worse than that. After a couple of steps across the attic, she was hurrying of her own volition.

Ash came to an abrupt halt at the edge of the trap door. She held up a hand – *silent!* – and pointed down into the watery corridor below. The roar of throttles was stronger here, meaning that the Wolfsguard were making for whatever entrance Ash had used.

'We can go out that way,' Sofia said, pointing at the little round window.

'We can't,' said Ash. 'The way I came in is right across from the warehouse yard. If the guards go there, they'll find the others – and us! We need some kind of a...' She trailed off, eyes darting about the attic.

‘Some kind of a what?’

Ash looked back at her, beaming a triumphant smile. ‘Distraction,’ she said, then reached behind Sofia to take a leaf blower from the pile of gardening tools.

‘What are you-?’ Sofia asked as the girl swept past her to the little window, examining the leaf blower controls as she went. Ash ignored her question and dragged the beanbag along with her. She got on her knees and turned the bag over, eventually finding a seam and then waved a hand back at Sofia without looking at her.

‘Can you hand me that pruning shears,’ she said, clicking her fingers hurriedly. ‘The ones on top of all that gardening stuff?’

‘Eh, but what are you-?’

‘Pruning shears.’

Sofia did as she said. Ash jabbed one of the blades into the fabric of the bean bag and slit a few inches up the seam. Holding it closed so that the polystyrene beans wouldn’t spill out, she did the same to the seam on the opposite side. All the while, Sofia was anxiously aware of the nearing engines, getting more impatient with each second.

‘Ash! What are you at?!’

The girl looked up at her with that same knowing grin and said, ‘Giving the Wolfsguard a white Christmas.’

She put one of the bean bag holes against the window, propping it up on some boxes there and then shoved the spout of the leaf blower in the other seam. She hit a switch on the side of the blower – (nothing happened) – and looked back at Sofia.

‘How fast can you swim?’

‘Pretty fast.’

(The Wolves’ engines were so close now that they shook the walls of the attic.)

‘Good.’ She tapped the string throttle on the leaf blower. ‘When I set this off, you need to be fast. Go through the trap door and keep left. You’ll see the open window. The warehouse yard is across from it. Keep going, don’t stop, until you reach the open warehouse door. You won’t miss it. I’ll be right behind you all the while.’

‘Ash-‘

‘No time, Sofia.’ She cocked her head to the left; the engines were idling now. ‘They’re here.’

She put one foot on the leaf blower to hold it steady and pulled the throttle. The fan whirred to life, filling the bean bag with air and blowing the foam filling out through the open window. Sofia caught a glimpse of the snowstorm effect it created before Ash shoved her toward the trap door.

They were in the water before Sofia could catch a breath and panic surged up in her until the older girl hauled her shoulders above the surface. She snorted stagnant water out of her nostrils and inhaled oxygen greedily. From the attic above them came the chugging sound of the leaf blower but Ash paid it no attention, and kicked off along the corridor to the left, grunting at Sofia to ‘Hurry up!’

They swam down the hallway, their heads bumping occasionally against the damp-stained ceiling and very soon reached the window Ash had come through. She pushed Sofia through first, into a flooded back garden, and followed herself a second later.

There were no Wolfsguard in sight but judging by the choppy wake of the Flood, their jet skis had passed through here only seconds earlier. Sofia could hear their engines off to the left, in the direction of the round window, as they swam away from the house. She could see the warehouse up ahead – and the open door, which she was sure she would have missed if she hadn’t been on the lookout for. Ash was a much stronger swimmer than Sofia and had already halved the distance to the warehouse. As Sofia struggled to catch up, she risked a glimpse to the left.

The polystyrene beans were snowing on the Wolfsguard like the miniature flakes in the snowglobe. It was beautiful and made her heart ache in the same way that the globe had.

Ash – suddenly beside her – shook Sofia’s shoulder, waking her from her stupor.

‘Come on!’ she spat. ‘Nearly there!’

They swam on and a moment later, broke through into the warehouse. A handful of people were waiting there, two to a jet ski, and all young. As one of them helped Sofia out of the water and onto a ski, she realised for the first time why she hadn’t been as fast as Ash.

She was still hugging the snowglobe to her chest.

They made it back to Kilmainham Gaol by nightfall. Ash sat next to Sofia on the jet ski, explaining who they were, how they had all come together, and so on. She was breathless when she stepped into the central room of the Gaol for the first time; all those people, all that sound and chatter and laughter. There were candles burning around the place and their cinnamon fragrance made Sofia feel instantly Christmassy and at home. In the makeshift kitchen, a boy and girl were dispensing turkey sandwiches – (‘We found some frozen slices a few weeks back,’ Ash had told her.) – and gingerbread cookies and mince pies.

‘What do you think?’ asked Ash. Sofia was so in awe that they hadn’t moved from the doorway.

‘It’s wonderful,’ she said. ‘But...’

‘But?’

‘You’re missing one thing.’

‘Oh yeah? What’s that?’

‘A Christmas tree,’ said Sofia, holding up the snowglobe. She stepped away from Ash, moving through the smiling faces to place the globe beside a cluster of candles. As soon as she placed it down, finally letting go of the brass handle, the tree started turning and the tinkling song filled the Gaol.

Have yourself a merry little Christmas...