

# **Excerpt**

**The White Swans of Fal**

**By**

**Jackie Ashton**

### Love is a Sad Sickness

No sickness worse than secret love  
It's long, alas, since I pondered that  
No more delay; I now confess  
my secret love, so slight and slim

I gave a love that I can't conceal  
to her hooded hair, her shy intent  
her narrow brows, her blue-green eyes  
her even teeth and aspect soft

I gave as well-and so declare-  
my soul's love to her soft throat  
her lovely voice, delicious lips  
snowy bosom, pointed breast

And may not overlook, alas,  
my cloud-hid love for her body bright  
her trim straight foot, her slender sole,  
her languid laugh, her timid hand

Allow there was never known before  
such a love as mine for her  
there lives not, never did, nor will,  
one who more gravely stole my love

Do not torment me, lady  
Let our purposes agree  
You are my spouse on this Fair Plain  
so let us embrace

Irish poem, 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Anonymous

**Rapture: ecstasy, delight, joy, bliss, heaven**

## ~Prologue~

### RAPTURE

All I will remember of my former self was that in life eighteen, I was Elizabeth Harrowsmith of Staffordshire, England, who died in the year annō dominī 1473, no life quest completed. Sadly, only quested lives are remembered in the Rapture.

The emotional residue of life falls away from me, much like a discarded garment. For those souls new to incarnation, this final stage of transformation from flesh to energy can be frightening. Most believe this a descent into an endless black void, one that captures the consciousness and bars it from escape. It is not final, though. Like birth, it is only a surrendering; merely a transitional phase one travels through to reach the Rapture-which I find I have returned to all too suddenly.

“Elizabeth....” A distant voice graces my mind, prompting an upsurge of fleeting memories and a surreal sadness. I long for my murdered lover, William De Logos, who was taken from me months before I passed over. Bitter frustration filled my last living days. I must be hallucinating. Confusion and mingled thoughts often occur, especially when the life quest has not been successful.

Visions of my past life flicker in the buoyant space around me. I see myself, flaxen curls, head low, shy, standing by the trunk of an ancient oak tree, on a cart path following the lazy meandering of a creek near my father’s castle. A handsome, dark-haired gentleman peers at me from his raven-black steed as he rides by. We speak, not with words, but with our eyes-our attraction, immediate.

Later that day, I discovered the identity of this mysterious stranger. He was the man my sister, Henrietta, spoke of many times. His family was of some wealth and interested in acquiring a title, purchased through the price of marriage. Our families held an earldom, but the income from rents were meager and much money lost by my father’s ruinous investments.

Wedding plans were drawn together hastily, both families eager for what the other possessed. In spite of it all, William and I agreed to meet in secret, knowing that he and Henrietta would wed in a month, after the reading of the Church banns.

William longed to marry me, but I was nay sixteen and had many suitors. My older, sullen-faced sister, however, was doomed for spinsterhood unless this

match was consummated. In the end, William asked me to run away with him to France, but I held back, feelings of guilt troubling my thoughts.

I knew not what price he would pay for my decision, for Henrietta plotted his death after spying us entangled in each other's arms, making love. She planned a picnic for William the following day, in a clearing by the river, telling me they were to discuss their wedding plans. Her shrill voice chanted over: 'He loves *me*, Elizabeth'. Running from her, I sought the comfort of William's embrace.

"Do not worry, my sweet golden flower," he had said. "I will declare my love for you to Henrietta, to the world for that matter. I would sooner be a happy man than a titled one."

Both nervous and excited, I waited for the pair to return, but when I saw my sister later that afternoon, she walked alone. I thought perhaps they had quarreled, for her eyes were reddened with unshed tears. She did not speak a word, instead she quickly departed my company, sulking, leaving me to rejoice in the knowledge that William and I would soon be together.

But early that evening, I found my dear William by the water's edge – gray-tinted, bloated and lifeless. I rushed to him, indifferent to the putrid air surrounding his body, and held him in my arms. William had succumbed to Henrietta's poisonous mushrooms, dead at the age of three and twenty.

No one knew the truth of his premature death, save I, for Henrietta confessed her deed to me as I lay in a pool of sweat and blood, near unconsciousness, giving birth to William's daughter.

"Elizabeth," she goaded me with her whispered secrets, "I killed your lover. Speak a word of this and I will kill your child, too."

Rendered mute between pain and confusion, I could say nothing. My concern was for the safety of my child. Mother was a kind woman. I knew she would tend to my daughter and keep her from Henrietta's wrath. I kissed my baby's sweet head as she suckled my breast, and then I died; Henrietta's secret, I took with me.

Shedding the memories of my past life, I now linger in agitated silence deep within a tranquility zone. This is usually a solitary phase in the Rapture, as the only energy present is one's own, unless, of course, you are traveling with your soul twin.

"Elizabeth...." Again the whisper enters my mind, but I push the stray astral voice from me in favor of my own reflections.

In the sizeable expanse of the cosmos, chance meetings with other souls do not often occur. 'Tis why I ignored his call and also the reason I was caught off guard by his presence. At first, I was frightened; but now his warmth envelops me as though he is holding me in his arms again.

"Elizabeth," he calls my name.

Unsure and excited, I pulse outward to greet him. The loneliness I felt while carrying his child is washed away by the voice so near to me now, searing my mind.

"William?"

It takes a moment to adjust to his presence. I slide into his energy; now he encases me.

“C’est moi!” William’s voice is cheerful; though his presence is uncertain and moving quickly in and out of my aura. The force of love bonding between us is as strong as a supernova; I feel I may implode.

“I missed you, William. More than I can speak of,” I say, feeling his unseen lips upon mine.

“And I, you, my sweet golden flower.” He wraps my thoughts with his.

“I was devastated when you left me.” Worse than that, I had slipped into an inconsolable depression, and Henrietta taunted me daily.

“I know,” he replies. “I watched you.”

“The babe....” I reflect on the image of our daughter, her face still present in my memories. I am grateful for this momentary glimpse of the past, for I know that soon all recollection of her and of my death while birthing her will be gone. She had inherited William’s dark hair and black eyes and was most precious.

“Yes, she is beautiful,” says William. “I wish I could have been there to hold her just once. We were both finished with that life too soon.”

“True. It was very short lived,” I concur. “But longer than some.”

Deep in thought, I sense something is wrong. I should be alone, reflecting on my past life, waiting to be reborn. Instead, William fills my surroundings.

“Why are you in my space, William? At no other time has my energy been joined by another soul.”

“I am unsure, mon amour.” He weaves his force into mine. “But I do enjoy the merging!”

Anxious over my new circumstances, I heave about in frustration. While I must agree with William-the sensation is wonderful-I am still wary.

“Do not fear.” An unknown voice penetrates our silence with words of instruction. “You are bound together for all eternity, as soul twins.”

“Soul twins?” I ask. ‘Tis been a strange experience thus far. Not at all my usual deathing, which consists of: light, familiar entities, tunnel, solitary reflection, decisions and rebirth. William’s extraneous element confuses me.

“Yes, he is your Other, your soul mate, and you are his.”

“Your Other. William, do you know what this means?” My excitement is growing, and so is my understanding.

“I do indeed,” he answers slowly.

“You will remain joined until the resolution of all seven life quests. Once you have succeeded in achieving the challenges ahead, you will be welcomed into His energy eternally, and resonate with highest of most high.”

As the strange entity hovers nearby, we grow eager to explore our new prospects. I allow William’s ether form further into me, embracing his ambiance.

“You would think this would be an easy task. There are only seven.”

“I believe I have existed forever, and yet I have mastered but one,” he muses.

“I have managed two, perhaps my energy is older than yours.”

“Which two have you gained?” he asks.

“My existence as Brother Anthony, merely two lives ago, granted me Serenity.” I can still see him – me – a well-rounded, cherry-cheeked, Italian monk. I project my remembrance out between us.

“Odd little man,” says William.

“And Patience. I earned that one several lives past.”

Replaying a mosaic of thoughts, I share the details of my life: a paralyzed youth in the south of Spain, hundreds of years ago.

“Poor fellow!” he exclaims, witnessing my pathetic existence.

“Yes, it was a difficult experience, but one worthy of a life quest.” I move away from the growing heat our mixed energies are creating. “What of yours? Which quest did you achieve?”

“I was fortunate enough to manage the hardest task first. Love.” Vibrating with tiny currents, William projects his montage of thought into our shared space. I witness his memory, played out before me like a vision, as he followed St. Paul throughout Europe. Suddenly, William pulls back; cutting the scene short as the image of his gruesome death begins to focus.

“Love. The base of all other quests. That is encouraging!” I am relieved to know that I will not have to conquer the most demanding challenge. Of the seven, we individually gained Patience, Serenity and Love. Only Humility, Honesty, Compassion and Acceptance remain. Being William’s soul twin, I can use his success to aid my count.

“Which of the quests will we attempt to conquer in this life?” I ask.

“It should be an individual decision, should it not?”

“Then I shall choose Honesty.” I hope it will be the least difficult to achieve. I am frustrated; my last few lives had been too complicated to attain a quest.

“That could be interesting.” He pauses for a moment, as if calculating the risks, then announces: “I choose Acceptance.”

Committing ourselves to our goals, a subtle, grace-filled calm settles over us.

“Will we meet soon?” It is I who breaks the silence.

“I believe we will. The Akashic records in the Universal library tells that when flesh forms of soul twins meet on earth, they reconvene in the Rapture as we are now, only as elemental forms of their flesh beings,” replies William. “Working together, we help to guide their journey.”

“Then we must, without delay, prepare for a united surrendering of ourselves to life, my love.” Filled with dread, I contemplate the loneliness that would encase us as we split off onto our separate paths. To lose William again was painful, and yet, I knew it must be done.

“Now? Must we leave so soon?” He wraps my source tight in his energy.

“Yes.” The lingering voice reappears. “The longer you defer your departure, the more time you will have to change your minds. You may end up existing in a constant state of chaos.”

I knew this was certain for I had once stumbled across soul twins who had waited too long before journeying back to the flesh side. They were lost in their own confusion, spinning out of control, never fully committing to stepping off this plane and never being able to move on to the next.

“Remember,” says the voice, “time has no beginning and no end and is easy to get lost in.” Slowly, the entity disperses, leaving us to deliberate its message.

“So let us focus, Elizabeth. Now that we can combine our achievements and work together to accomplish the remaining quests, we should evolve much more expeditious.”

“Where shall we meet in the next life?”

“Meet?” he asks. “That is something I have never had to ponder. You know how it has been for us both—we tire of being here and merely step off this plane.”

“Tis true. This is a matter of sacred astral geometry and little else. There is naught more we can do than be sure that we are born on the correct path, the one path that will lead us to each other.” Hesitating, I recall more of the commandments I memorized so long ago. “And the canon decrees that we cannot travel beyond the physical limits of where we last died.”

“Yes,” says William, projecting his thoughts in a complex pattern of angles, pointing to earth. “Where your soul last dwelled, it should also return. I think that limits us to the British Isles.”

I agree.

“So, which do you prefer?”

“What of that one?” I direct his attention to a smaller isle and send a warm wave of my essence to him. “Is it not known as Erin?”

“Once, long ago. It has had many names. Now, I believe, it is referred to as Ireland,” explains William. “So Ireland it is, my sweeting.”

I love the way those words sound. Not that he can see me, nor that I have hair or eyes, teeth or bone, but for all eternity I will be his sweeting.

“We must ready ourselves,” he says. “But before we leave the Rapture, I want you to know this -”

I sense the strongest surge of loving consciousness I have ever experienced from William, here or on earth. It lingers well after we finished speaking.

## ARRIVAL

1610 The Age of Christ  
Slat-Mul-Rony, Co. Fermanagh, Ireland

### I

"Breathe, child, breathe!" Seamus Mulrony screamed desperately at the infant lying in his arms.

The birth of their sixth child should have been much like the others, an easy delivery for his wife, Bríana, but instead she lay twisting for hours in nightmarish pain. There had been no time to call the *beanghlúine* before things worsened, but even if the midwife had arrived earlier, it wouldn't have helped. Bridie Ny Ronáin, the local wise woman, knew the call of death. She recognized it when she saw how profusely Bríana was bleeding. God clearly marked this soul as His. Bridie could do nothing for her now, save pray.

"*Mo chroí, mo chroí....*" Bríana cried out for her newborn son. She turned to her husband - who was frantically rubbing the child's breast-and tried to speak, but death overcame Bríana Mulrony, easing her out of the flesh with one long, last exhalation.

"Breathe!" Seamus begged, willing life into the tiny infant's form.

Bridie lit a tallow candle near the bed to ward off the darkness that approached like an unwanted invader. She reached out to Bríana's forehead, brushing a sandy blond curl from her brow. Bríana stared off into an unknown distance; her eyes not yet glossed over with the slick, opaque film of death.

Whispering a Hail Mary, Bridie kissed the rosary she held, then slid her fingers down over Bríana's eyes, gently brushing her eyelids closed.

"God have mercy on you," she whispered. "Worry not, my friend. I'll watch after your wee one."

The crone wiped her eyes, leaning over Bríana's body, making the sign of the cross.

"*Ar dheis Dé d'anam,*" she sobbed. May your soul be on the right-hand side of God.

"For the love of God, little one...breathe!" Seamus demanded.

Seamus held the babe awkwardly, swabbing the inside of his tiny mouth with a finger. The infant gagged and choked out a ragged breath.

"Bridie, can anything be done? I cannot get him to breathe properly."

"Seamus." Bridie shook her head sadly and clenched her fists. "Bríana has left us...she's with God now."

Kneeling beside his wife's body, Seamus placed the babe on Bríana's breast and crooned softly into her ear, "You are my heart girl." Then, he kissed her lips, still warm and sweet of death.

Staring at his wife, Seamus bit down hard on the inside of his cheek to stave off the mounting tears. Even though his older sons were only one room away, he never felt lonelier. The mud and wattle cottage seemed empty to him now. The flame of the candle near the bed jumped and flickered, creating grotesque shadows on the wall. Seamus, certain he saw Bríana's soul take flight, wept and gazed down at his child, greasy white and streaked with blood.

"The babe, will he survive?"

As if protesting the cruel circumstances of his birth, the infant cried out sharply into the night.

"I think it likely," answered Bridie. She retrieved the babe, placing an ear to his chest to listen to his breathing. Removing the bloody debris from his tiny face, Bridie then counted fingers and toes. Placing three drops of water on the child's wrinkled brow, she muttered an incantation below her breath, to keep the demons away.

"A wet nurse...I can take the baby to Ailis O'Beirne. She will foster him for now; at least until he is suitably weaned."

Bridie glanced back to where her friend lay.

"I'll travel to the O'Beirne cottage tonight. Ailis and I will return before the moon is up, to take care of Bríana," she offered, then added with hesitation, "for the wake."

Holding back her tears, Bridie wiped her welling eyes on the sleeves of her tunic; the bodice of the *léine* already wet, blood-soaked. She shivered, holding the child close to her breast.

"Bríana..." Seamus cried, resting his head on his wife's body, weeping.

Stepping to the table that held a small basin of warm water, Bridie dropped a silver coin into it, and cupping her hand, she dipped it in the water. Rubbing warm water over the baby's body, Bridie sang in a soft, wispy voice, the incantation for the birth baptism.

"The little wavelet for thy form,

The little wavelet for thy voice,  
The little wavelet for thy sweet speech.

The little wavelet for thy means,  
The little wavelet for thy generosity,  
The little for wavelet for thine appetite.

The little wavelet for thy wealth,  
The little wavelet for thy life,  
The little wavelet for thine health.

Nine little palmfuls for thy grace  
In the name of the Three of Power."

"Fionn...the light one." Bridie pushed wet strings of hair into a golden curl, which lay slightly off-center on the top of the baby's head. All of the other Mulrony sons were dark, like their father, but this one favored his mother.

Walking up to Bridie's side, Seamus wearily stroked the babe's cheek. He looked down into his son's face, reddened from crying and the rigors of birth. This wee lad the only son to carry with him his mother's Nordic features; Seamus sighed and pushed his lips up in a hurt smile. Moving to the fireside, he bent down, lit a torch, then circled Bridie and the baby three times *deiseil*, the way of the sun, to bless the child with good fortune.

"Fionn. 'Tis a fine name, Bridie," he said, holding back his tears. "Fionn Peadar Mulrony."

**HONOR**  
**1615 The Age of Christ**

**II**

"Fionn! What's wrong with 'ye lad?" Seamus glanced down from his donkey. "'Tis only a dead wolf, son. You'll see a great many of them before your time is through."

Dismounting, Seamus hauled the animal's carcass off the ass's back. Fionn's brother, Innis, ran to his da, a toy bow clutched in his hands. The youngster set a mock arrow in flight, which hit the wolf's dead body, rebounding with a light thud. Innis scurried to pick up the twig and reload his bow.

Fionn remained several feet away from the wolf, staring at the beast's glassy eye, which gazed out somewhere past this world. Merely five, he understood little of death. He'd been present at a few wakes and only understood that the dead went to another place; the same place his mother now inhabited. Shuffling uneasily, he stepped closer and peered down into the wolf's deceased gape and wondered if his mother's eyes would hold the same look of death. Retching, Fionn fled his father's contempt, and his brother's sure aim.

Later that night, Bridie stopped by to collect an elf bolt that Seamus had promised her. One of his fields was full of the flint arrowhead good luck charms-left behind by fairies. Fionn kept his in a rabbit skin pouch, hoping that it would some day bring him great providence.

"Can I hold your charm, Bridie?" he asked, then carefully compared his to the one that Bridie would take home. His arrowhead was sharper, larger and superior in his mind.

"Sit here, lad." Bridie hauled him onto her lap as she sat on a stool in front of the fire. "There's a story as old as the hills themselves; tells how these charms came to be."

Fionn wriggled, settling himself on her thigh.

"Fairies blessed them with their magic and buried their treasure beneath the dirt!" Fionn held the arrowhead out in front of him. The edges glistened with reflected firelight.

"No dear. These are not made by fairies."

Seamus stoked up the fire with more peat and shook his head.

"Bridie, why are you filling the boy's head with nonsense? Everyone knows the fairy folk left them behind."

Sending Seamus a stern look, Bridie replied, "I have been taught by my mother, who was schooled by her mother, and her mother before that time. My knowledge is thousands of years old. I promised Bríana that I would look after her son. As part of that promise, I will teach him what I know."

Seamus rolled his eyes. "Do you think you can teach him how to endure the sight of a dead wolf?"

Dismissing Seamus's comment, Bridie clicked her tongue to her teeth, turning her attention back to Fionn.

"These elf bolts come from our ancient past."

Fionn turned the jagged bolt in his hand.

"Before you were born?"

Bridie laughed. "Yes little one, before my birth, and long before the *Fir Bolgs* and the *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, our ancient gods. You see Fionn, time is older than we know. It has no beginning and no end."

Fionn's mother, long since dead, called out to him - her form merely an outline of light in the darkness of his dreamscape. His waking mind replayed the haunting dream, which may have only been recurring for a fortnight or so, but to Fionn it seemed like an eternity. Each nightmare like the one before, anchored in his waking moments. But one thing did not change: he'd never seen her face.

He rubbed his eyes, stretched then yawned as he pushed his dirty feet over the end of a rickety cot. The usual morning quietness of the cottage wrapped him with comfort. The sun had not yet begun to peek up over the hills, but he rose noiselessly, readying to prepare the morning meal of bacon and fried bread.

Kneeling beside his cot, Fionn's daily ritual began with a few minutes of prayer for his mother. Afterwards he would cook breakfast and then gently nudge his father from slumber. His brothers would soon rise and the small cottage would be full of their laughter, and squabbles over the best pieces of meat. But Fionn cherished the time alone with his da. He didn't mind volunteering for the morning duties, as it allotted him a few precious moments of his father's undivided attention.

The bacon he'd just cooked had burnt crispy in scorched grease, and the stench permeated the dwelling, heavy and nauseating. A sense of something amiss fell over Fionn like a dark cloud. The early morning sunshine just beginning to stream through the windows usually imparted a cozy cheeriness inside the cottage-but not today. He shrugged the uncertain feeling off.

Fionn glanced at the wool curtain hanging in the doorway to his father's room. Walking to the bedroom, he slowed and pulled back the drape.

"Da?" he called out.

His father did not stir. Fionn stepped closer.

"Da?"

The old man's arm extended motionless from the side of the bed. His blue-gray fingers curled upwards, rigid.

"Da...." His comprehension escaped with a soft breath as the word fell from lips.

Sitting on a tree stump at the back of the cottage, Fionn contemplated his life and the people who left it. Hand to brow, he glanced up at the sun. It shone bright against the pale blue sky. Rain had been plentiful that

year. But it didn't seem right somehow that the one day the early morning summer sun appeared was the very day his father died. Fionn knew the sun mocked him.

Slouching, he rested his elbows on his knees and crushed pebbles into the soil with his bare feet, watching his older brother, Innis, chase the dog around the field that surrounded the shanty. The mutt, a black, shaggy mongrel named Dubh, ran past Fionn, tromping on his toes.

"Get on with 'ya!"

Innis sped after the dog as he passed by, kicking loose dirt at Fionn's feet.

"We was here first!" Innis scampered past his brother and spat.

"Da is dead. Don't you care?"

"Sobbing is not going to bring him back now, is it?" Innis yelled, running off into the field. Following close behind, Dubh nipped his heels.

Fionn wiped his tear-heavy eyes and glanced to where his older brother, Sean, stood hitching an ox to their work-worn cart. Sean would ride off to tell Aunt Eibhlin of her brother's demise. News of Seamus's death would spread fast as fire. Best she heard it from kin.

"Are ye staying behind, Fionn?" Sean called.

"Aye." Fionn wiped a lone tear from his cheek.

"Give Caít a hand then," Sean ordered. "Make sure she doesn't trouble herself overly." Flicking the reins, Sean set the ox into motion.

Fionn waved to his brother as he rode away, then glanced again at the sun, cursing it. His sister-in-law would be preparing food for the wake. He knew he should help, but the thought of assisting with cooking chores, while his dead father lay just feet away, made him nauseous.

By the time Fionn's brother returned with their aunt, Caít and several of the local women were readying his da's body to be laid out. Fionn did his best to stay out of their way by remaining in the hall just outside of his father's room. From there he watched as another older brother, Conall, directed the volunteers to their stations.

The village blacksmith—a muscular, dark-complexioned fellow—carried two casks of whiskey into the cottage, one under each arm. His dreary-looking daughter filled clay pipes with tobacco and arranged snuff on a plate for all to share. Tonight the house would be full of those who respected and loved Seamus Mulrony.

"Help me ready the bed." Caít handed a rotund, older woman a handful of fresh linen, moving Seamus's cold body from one side of the cot to the other. Fionn pulled the wool curtain to the edge of the doorway and watched.

"He lays so peaceful," one woman commented.

"Let's hope he has more peace in death than he did in life," Caít replied.

She washed Seamus's body and shaved his hollow face. He smelled fresh, of lavender blossoms placed near him. Fionn inhaled the sweet scent of death and flowers, and sighed. Over the past few years, the English seized most of the land in Ulster; the town folk barely had enough food rations to keep them from starving. This year, the village women prepared many bodies for waking.

Creeping forward slowly, Fionn stood in a dark corner of the room. He watched as Cáit, weeping, placed a crucifix on his da's chest, softly touching his stiff hands-which were set in prayer-winding the ebony rosary through his fingers.

Fionn's breath held still within his lungs as he tried to hold back tears. His sobs were almost inaudible. He crumbled, letting salty pearls flow as he bore witness. When Cáit lit the tallow candles, all of the women began keening, their loud moans and wails drowning him out entirely.

Holding his hands to his ears, Fionn attempted to obscure the deafening chorus. For keeners, the women lacked quality. Their cries were far too shrill to be considered beautiful. Aunt Eibhlin regularly hired herself out for a few coins to weep and wowl at other people's funerals. By far the best keener in all of County Fermanagh, when she arrived she joined in, leading the mourning chorus.

Running to her, Fionn wiped his tears against her cheek as she leaned close to hold him.

"What am I going to do now, Auntie? I've neither ma nor da?"

"Don't worry, Fionn, they will always be near." The words flowed from his aunt's lips like honey, sweet and hopeful.

He clung to her thin waist, then withdrew, his mouth turned down and sullen, feeling as though her matron's perfume was smothering him. No longer a child, Fionn could ill afford to act like one now.

Later that night, he lay on a pallet near the fire allowing the warmth of the flames to soothe him. Long after most of the mourners left, someone carried Fionn to

his cot, as the dull hum of his aunt's Rosary prayers echoed painfully in his head. Through the night, he dozed in fits, wakened by waves of nausea. Near sunrise, familiar voices drifted in through his window.

"The English killed him, they did! Stealing our land...The King be damned!" Sean spat.

"May he fall, never to rise!" cursed Uncle Killian.

"I knew at Christmastide he would be gone soon." It was Conall.

"How?" The voices grew fainter as they moved away from the window. Fionn strained to hear them.

"Christmas night. Father lit the Christmas candle, and after he went to sleep, it went out."

"Why did you not speak of this sooner?" asked Sean.

"I lit the candle again and hoped it would change the omen." Fionn heard nothing more than Conall's sobbing and someone urinating against the wall.

He rolled over and this time fell into a disturbed sleep full of dark dreams of faceless forms.

"Slow down, boy!" called Sean, but Fionn never slowed his pace. He walked alone, several fields ahead of the dejected group, down the tree-lined footpath leading from the parish church to his cottage, still some distance away. Peering up at the blue, cloudless sky, he squinted and wondered where God might be hiding. He saw nothing. He felt nothing, save a stark coldness moving through his soul.

Fionn surveyed the lush green fields on either side of the footpath, and worried about who would take over his da's duties now that he was gone. It would soon be time to harvest. There was much work to be done and he hoped that the new landlord would be merciful if they fell behind.

Again, Fionn glanced up into the sky, searching. His father, an angel now, hide somewhere behind the sun. The thought didn't bring much comfort.

He kicked a rock down the path, chasing its staggered course. At twelve, he was not quite a child, nor yet a man. He stood well over five feet tall, but was yet half a head shorter than Conall. His shoulders were slight, a child's frame, but over the past year they had spread wider. *A man's work will make a man's body*, his father had said.

"Fionn, stop, 'ya arse!" Innis' voice echoed down the verdant valley.

Fionn waved a dismissive hand. At times, his brother was hard to take. Today, he made his presence unbearable.

Innis was two years older than Fionn, though most of the time, his behavior suggested otherwise. Sean once said that Innis' birth took place under a bad moon. Fionn didn't doubt it. Sometimes they got along-especially when they played games or wrestled-but if Innis lost, he was incorrigible. The only good thing about him, at least in Fionn's opinion, was that he could train any dog to shepherd. Innis had a sacred bond with animals, some wild quality they shared in kind.

A raven called out, high above Fionn's head, its shrill caw, haunting. Fionn stopped and placed a hand to his brow. He couldn't see the bird clearly-the dark silhouette flew too near the sun's outer reach, distorting its outline as it mixed with the orb's brilliant rays.

"If I were a raven, I would fly far away, to another land.

I wonder how it would feel to be so free," he sighed. "Maybe, when I am bigger-the size of Conall or better even-I'll make my way in the world, owing nothing to any man, King or not."

Fionn was five years younger than Conall, and the lad admired his older brother with wide-eyed adoration. A kind young man with a soft heart, Conall had sat up with Fionn over the past two nights, calming his fears, soothing him with warm sheep's milk, sharing memories of their parents.

"What do you think will happen to us?" Fionn slumped on the cot next to his brother, defeated.

"There's nothing to worry about. Listen to me. Sean and Cáit have it all planned out. They've agreed to allow me to watch over the two of you." Conall put a warm arm around his brother's shoulder.

"So we won't have to go live with Auntie?"

"Not unless you'd like to."

"I heard Uncle Killian mention to Sean that we should go into apprenticeship with him."

"Fionn, you're staying here. Innis and you and I will take care of ourselves." Conall tousled his brother's blond mane. "Besides, Sean and Cáit live right down the road. We'll be fine."

Sean married early that spring, and now his wife, Cáit, was pregnant with their first child. Her face had taken on a dull quality, plain, with thin, pale lips, but when she smiled-which wasn't often lately-Fionn thought her face lit up like a child's. Constant worry over the health of her unborn child and of their meager food supply had the run of her life now. She'd almost lost the baby twice in as many months and was in no condition to look after Fionn

and his brothers. Luckily, the young couple lived close enough to maintain a watchful eye and to provide the necessary guidance for the boys.

Biting down hard on his lip, Fionn staved off his angry tears. The valley to the left, the bog in the basin near the edge of the forest, the pasture leading to the river, and the hills to the north-all had once been Mulrony land. For generations his family worked the pastures, gaining ever more property while building an alliance with the Maguire's, the most powerful clan that remained in County Fermanagh. It was common knowledge that Cathal Maguire had been about to bestow a title on his father, but Seamus had been far too outspoken. If the Maguire's wanted to maintain their land, they needed to distance themselves from troublemakers like Seamus. King James of England finally seized the Mulrony farm two years ago, after rumors of Seamus's financial support of Irish foot soldiers.

"He loved this land," Fionn whispered.

Sitting on an old uprooted tree stump in front of the cottage, Fionn waited for his brothers to return. He thought about the English strangers who had stolen their land, and recoiled at the realization that his Irish race had become nothing more than slaves.

The new English aristocracy, Lord Bagenal and family, recently arrived from London. Fionn watched the colorful procession of carriages move up the far side of the east hill a fortnight ago. Their new estate was complete-a castle and several outbuildings - and was built high atop the gently sloping ridge of their appointed lands. A grant of what *had* been the Mulrony farm.

Bagenal Castle was not far from where Fionn's cottage stood. Over the tops of the trees, smoke could always be seen rising from the castle chimney, a constant reminder of the English presence.

Fionn picked up a rock and threw it in the direction of the fortress.

"Bastards! I hope you rot in Hell!" He spat, gritting his teeth. "One day, I'll kill you all!"

"That's not fitting talk, brother. Da would not be pleased to hear it from your young mouth." Sean walked up beside Fionn and slung an arm around his shoulder. "But aye. I agree with you."

With Seamus's passing, Sean became the patriarch of Fionn's family in County Fermanagh. Although Uncle Killian would still represent them to the smattering of Irish clans

in power, Sean would retain some influence over local matters.

Were young Seamus and Rohan (Fionn's two oldest brothers) there to assist, things might have been easier to manage after Seamus's death. Rohan's demeanor was far shrewder than Sean's; the English never intimidated him or backed him into a corner that he couldn't escape. Unfortunately, Rohan and young Seamus left Slat-Mul-Rony three winters earlier to fight as foot soldiers in an uprising against the English. Fionn heard stories of a battle at Ballynahinch in which the Irish were outnumbered, defeated in a bloody slaughter. Since the battle, no word came from either of the two young warriors. If they had not died in battle, chances were they died of starvation or worse still, plague. Fionn heard that their deaths were almost certain.

#### IV

"Fionn, Da said you was a changeling!" Innis stuck his tongue out and ran behind the prickly juniper bushes near the cottage.

"He did not! Changelings die, you dolt!"

Not only had Seamus branded his sons with the same Mulrony tenacity, but also with the nearly identical family features of a strong jaw and warm blue eyes. But Fionn, with his blond locks, stood out from the rest of them like white foam on a black sea.

Fionn picked up a rock from the side of the cart path and threw it, missing Innis' head by mere inches.

"But you didn't die...you made Ma die in your place."

Innis jumped up from behind the bush and ran to the rear of the cottage. Though Fionn was two years younger, he was several inches taller, and could easily overpower his brother.

"*Póg mo thóin!*" Fionn rounded the corner of the cabin, reached out, and caught Innis by the scruff of the neck, pulling out strands of tangled hair in the process. Grabbing his brother roughly, Fionn pushed him down and rubbed his face in the dirt.

"I will not. You can kiss my arse, 'ya blond changeling," Innis shouted.

"Boys, enough!" Sean stood behind the two, shaking his head.

Innis' teeth were blackened with dirt. He spat a mouthful of frothy mud toward Fionn, then rubbed his tongue

with the hem of his soiled léine in an attempt to remove the rest of the grit with the dirty tunic.

"Innis is at it again! He said-"

"Come now boys, the day is not long enough!" Sean drew his mouth into a stern line. "I need you both to help me load the cart. Bagenal's man sent word that he wants us to take some kindling and turf to the castle. 'Tis getting colder at night. I suppose they're freezing."

Sean picked up both boys by the scruffy ends of their long, matted hair. They each let out a squeal as Sean gave them a light push in the direction of the woodpile behind the barn.

"Why should we? It's bad enough they have stolen our land! And you know that's what killed Da. You would not even treat a dog the way the English treat us." Fionn brushed his uncombed mop from his eyes.

"We've not a choice." Sean's impatience was showing. "Sweet Mary, you're filthy." He stroked his brother's head. "You're full of burrs. I'll have Cáit hack them out tonight, after you've washed yourself clean in the river."

Things were changing. Fionn often wondered how long it would be before the Irish were dressing like English foreigners, or even speaking their tongue. Bad enough, the crown worked to outlaw his native language, it was worse still the way Irish surnames were altered to fit the English standard. Even the name of their small town, Slat-Mul-Rony -which literally meant "land of the Rony's"- had been changed to Rosslea on the whim of a local English Baron.

The boys piled the sturdy wooden cart full of oak kindling. Fionn and Innis each grabbed one wooden handle along the sides, while Sean pushed from behind. Turf overhung the edges and caused the cart look like some ancient slow-moving, furry beast.

Though they owned an ox which could pull a wagon, it was impossible to stop the over burdened cart from tipping or the animal from panicking as it tried to pull a full load over the rough path running from the Mulrony's cottage to Lord Bagenal's manor. The cart was heavy and its progress awkward as they maneuvered it over the rocky terrain, up hills and through the thicket. Fionn and Innis cursed one another as they struggled, but somehow they managed to arrive at the castle by mid-day without one fist flung.

As they pulled the cart to rest near the side of the fortress, a large woman, dressed in a simple gray frock,

ran out of the kitchen to greet them. Her thinning white hair pulled back into a tight chignon caused her to look rather bald, and scornful.

"Wonderful!" She rubbed her fat, arthritic hands together. "Standing and staring at me will not get the job done, you little animals," the old woman admonished. "Come along now, get to work."

The boys eyed her with caution.

"Mrs. Greaves, they don't understand you," Gillian Bagenal shrugged her lithe shoulders.

Fionn whirled around and found himself facing the young girl. She was about his age. Her long, straight hair, raven black; her eyebrows edged with an ebony fringe of bangs; skin as white as cream; and gentle, feline-green eyes, like those of an child-angel or a fairy guardian of Avalon.

Chills shot up Fionn's spine and goose flesh crept on both arms. Her words lingered in his ears, and caused a dizzying effect, making Fionn feel as though his breath was rising out of his skin. Something pulled at his throat. He wanted to speak, but instead, stood silent.

The fairy-child fashioned an uneasy smile.

"Lady Gillian, the kitchen maids are busy preparing tea. Would you please tell Higgins that the turf is here, and have Tommy and Donogh come to help unload the cart."

"Yes, Mrs. Greaves," she answered, smiling again at Fionn. But this time when their eyes met, he glared back coldly.

"William!" My voice echoes in the ethers. I have been alone for what seems like an eternity and am anxious to feel his energy again.

"How I have missed you! Since we parted, time has all but stopped," he says. William's etherform enters the space around me and at once, I am whole.

"I grew frightened. I thought we may have to journey through this life alone."

"I, too. Now it feels as though we have always been together. Time has no true meaning, does it my love?"

"Not here. 'Tis useless in the Rapture," I sigh. "But we are together finally...and now our flesh forms have connected. This is truly amazing!"

"And I sensed they felt our presence."

"I think so, too. My little one responded with such a stunned reaction." I laugh, though I know I should not. I am only excited and weary of loneliness.

"Yes, but something is not right, Elizabeth. I perceived a degree of unpleasantness, however I am unsure of the reason."

I strive to remember what my flesh form felt, but upon our rejoining, it has all become but hazy thoughts and distant memories.

"Sean, the baby hasn't gotten any better." Caít pressed her newborn baby to her face, kissing his forehead. He was fevered and the infusion she made earlier that morning had not worked its usual charm. "Look how listless he is. He's so clammy and pasty gray. It's been days now...I need Bridie's medicine before he gets any worse."

The child was merely three weeks old and had not gained strength after his birth. Caít held him tight to her breast, inhaling the soft scent of the newborn. She moved to the fire and sat on a stool of pine that Sean had fashioned just days earlier, and wondered if her child would see his first year.

"Conall and Innis are at the market in Enniskillen and I'd rather stay here with you-you're dead on your feet. I'll send Fionn. He should be able to get to Bridie's cottage and back by nightfall."

Fionn grabbed his slingshot and fixed his *brat* around his shoulders, securing it with his brooch. The December winds could be harsh. He wrapped his shins with lengths of cloth for protection from the cold, then stepped to where Caít sat warming by the fire, and put his hand on her shoulder.

"I'll take the short cut through the back fields," he said. "Worry not, Sister. It won't take me long. Baby Seamus will soon be well."

Caít nodded, hopeful at last, and quickly wiped a tear from her eye. She pushed the thoughts of dead babies out of her mind and watched as Fionn departed, noting a strange confidence in his step. His assurance was contagious. All would be well, she thought wearily.

Having reached the old witch's cottage swiftly, Fionn returned homeward within moments of procuring the baby's draft: a dark syrupy liquid corked tight in a tiny jar. But the late autumn twilight moved in faster than he had grown accustomed to during the longer days, only a month ago. The dark shadows seemed animated and threatening.

Fionn armed his sling with acorns and aimed into the pine bough canopy of the forest. He was a good shot; at least that's what his da had always told him. It was hard to believe that it had been six months since his father's death. The thought sent shivers through him.

He enjoyed trekking through the forest with his brothers, but out in the woods alone, thinking of the dead, fairy folk, and spirits, Fionn grew frightened.

"What of wolves?" He looked frantically to the left, then to the right.

"What if an *uruiscg* attacks me?" He imagined a pack of *uruiscg* forest spirits-half human, half goat-waiting for their next human meal just beyond the curve in the path ahead. Fionn inhaled courage from the pine-scented air and stepped forward.

The space around him hung sinister and heavy, and every hair on his neck stood on end. He stopped quick, cocking his head to listen to the sounds that did not belong in the forest. He walked this cart path many times in his twelve years and knew it well. Every curve, every tree and rock a beacon. Now, his intuition warned him to be careful-something was not right. He walked onward, at any rate, hoping Bridie's magic would be guarding him.

A demon-black crow dove for Fionn's head and cried out, *r-r-ruk*. He ducked fast, his heart flitting against his ribs. Holding a slingshot in one hand, he grasped the elf bolt in the bottom of his pouch with the other.

"A *mhamaidh*?" Fionn called out for his mother. He knew she watched over him from Heaven, and wished he could sense her presence with him now. It would help to shake the growing feeling that he was being stalked by some ominous presence.

A twig broke nearby. Fionn spun around.

He cursed Sean, under his breath, for sending him to Bridie's cottage alone to get the baby's feverfew syrup, but his anger dissolved into worry when he thought of his nephew.

"I hear you out there!" Fionn yelled into the dark shadows. "*Cé atá ann?*" Who's there? His voice cracked.

With caution, he backed up against a tall oak tree. *This will afford me some defense*, he thought. Crouching down, he hefted the largest rock within reach to fill his sling, but a sudden mill of fists pounded his body, striking his face and chest with solid blows. Fionn's slingshot fell to the ground.

"Get the Irish bastard!" one boy screamed.

Fionn recognized his assailants as the stable boys from the castle. He rose quick and dodged the gang, but a lumbering, rusty-haired lad punched him in the stomach.

"*Éist liom! Ná déan sin!*" Listen to me! Don't do that!

Fionn flinched as the tallest of the boys leaned into his face and spat.

"Filthy heathen animal!"

Another boy seized the silver brooch that fastened Fionn's *brat*. He tried to break away, but the youth tugged hard, pulling it free. Fionn's cloak dropped to the ground.

The brassy-haired thug grabbed at the rabbit-skin bag tucked into the waistband wrapped around Fionn's *léine*.

"What's in here, aye?" He opened the sack and pulled out a miniature earthenware jar.

Fionn struggled against the weight of the others as they pinned him against a tree.

Pulling the stopper off the top, the thug sniffed at its contents.

"Yuck! Smells like piss. It's sure not poteen. You know, poteen! Poteen!" He spewed the words into Fionn's face, spraying him with rancid breath.

"Poteen?" Fionn stared at them, attempting to garner some meaning from their strange English words, then tried to explain that it was not liquor in the bottle, but medicine for his nephew.

"Where's the still? We know it's out here somewhere, 'ya little Irish demon!"

One of the boys kicked him, then kneed him in the stomach, while the others punched at his face. Fionn flailed his fists, screaming curses. He struggled to maintain his balance, but a solid kick to his backside knocked him over.

Hitting the ground with a *thwamp*, Fionn's head struck a sharp rock jutting out of the ground. He made a weak attempt to lift his head but fell back, unable to rise.

"Sweet Jesus, Tommy, he's bleedin' like a stuck pig. Quick, let's get a move on!" Blood flowed over the dirt and pebbles like a liquid crimson cloth. "Do 'ya think he's gonna die?"

"What do I care if he does?" Tommy yelled, wiping blood from his mouth. "The little sod knocked my tooth out." He spat into the brush near Fionn's head.

Fionn rolled onto his side to face his attackers. He struggled, attempting to grab at their boots, but Tommy drew his foot back and with all his strength, kicked him in the ribs. The boys laughed as they ran off into the forest, leaving Fionn injured and alone.

Lying motionless, Fionn lifted his gaze past the overgrowth of the pine trees, to the night sky. He thought of his nephew and of his father and mother. He contemplated the way the stars twinkled in the heavens, and he prayed for his safety and for the health of his nephew.

Fionn swiped weakly at the blood on his forehead, smearing it on his face. He was cold and needed to move,

to stand, and yet when he tried, his muscles refused. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift, listening to the sounds of the night. Small creatures scurried under the multicolored leaves scattered generously on the forest floor.

"Maybe it's the fairies," he whispered, and then sank into a dreamless sleep.

## VI

Bridie Ny Ronáin toddled swiftly along the trail leading to the Mulrony's cabin, pulling stray scarlet hairs from her face back into the knot at the base of her neck. Several times she stumbled over larger pebbles kicked loose from the earth but each time, caught her balance before she fell.

"Old woman, you should not have forgotten your walking stick," she scolded herself. "Your feet are not nimble anymore."

Her voice lingered as a misty reminder in the surrounding air. She walked through the vaporous cloud, looking over her shoulder, watching the haze disperse.

Bridie was a crone, the local healer, and many years ago the villagers branded her *The Red Witch*. People were sure she could place a hex on someone simply by whispering their name into a sow's ear. Even more infamous for the misfortune she enchanted with her evil eye, she received generous amounts of coins by those who employed her talents. Mostly though, she cured the many afflictions that bedeviled the locals.

Having been born into a family of healers, Bridie had been blessed with the ability to concoct infusions, elixirs and balms that soothed most common complaints. She had an innate understanding of nature, and knew intuitively which herbs to blend. That's what was troubling her.

That morning she awoke with an uncomfortable gnawing in the pit of her stomach. The odd feeling settled into her gut sometime during the night. She stirred once, but thought the uneasiness might be caused by the effect of too much stone energy. Sometimes, absorbing the essence given off by the Ogham stones down by the bank of the river caused such oddness. But through the night, Baby Seamus's face appeared to her. She'd never had misgivings about a cure, but this day a feeling of discomfort nagged her, so she set out to check on the small patient.

The crisp woody scent of fallen leaves left Bridie feeling uplifted and reminded her of a time long ago,

before the English claimed her homeland for their own, a time of her youth, when the people of the ancient Irish kingdom of *Cú Chulainn* lived proud and free.

Bridie inhaled the pleasing aroma of the late autumn morning. Tipping her face up to catch the itinerant rays of sunlight penetrating the thick canopy of pine and the bony branches of the barren hawthorn and birch, she closed her eyes to feel the warmth on her face. On the back of her closed eyelids, something flashed in her mind's eye, quick and hazy. She blinked, then scanned the path ahead. She knew a body lay out there. Somewhere.

Taking a few more steps, she followed the rocky path as it twisted to the left. Bridie spotted him laying on the ground, still as a corpse, his faded green *léine*, dirty and blood-soaked, his *brat* thrown into the bushes.

"Fionn!"

She ran to the boy's side and laid a knurled hand to his head as she watched his chest for movement. His breathing was shallow, but he lived.

Throwing off her leather sack packed with salves, brews, and other medicinal tools, Bridie set to work. From undergrowth beneath the tree where he lay, she pulled loose a piece of moss, still wet and thick with dew. She wiped it across Fionn's brow, removing the dried blood. The boy whimpered.

"It's all right. Bridie is here my little one." He moaned louder as Bridie's hand moved closer to the wound. "Hush, now," she comforted him, stroking his hair.

Footsteps. The old woman lifted her head. Someone was approaching at a quick clip.

The crackling of dry leaves and twigs intensified as the unexpected visitor drew near. Bridie leaned over Fionn protectively, pulling her long, brown *brat* over his body. The cloak afforded little defense.

"Whittle!" Like a chattering wren, a young girl's voice called out into the woods. "Come here at once."

A black and gold collie leaped from the thick overgrowth and ran toward Bridie. She reached out with a long, bony hand and pushed the dog away.

"Leave us alone!" she snapped in Irish.

Gillian stopped fast, clutching a book to her chest. A woman as ancient as God himself knelt on the path ahead. Her cloak concealed most of a body, save for two small feet sticking out, lifeless. The old woman's scrawny hand waved her off. Gillian approached with caution, in spite of the warning.

"What has happened?" The girl ran to Fionn's side and knelt next to the old woman, tossing a well-worn volume of French poetry to the ground.

"Do you speak English?"

Bridie nodded. She knew a little something about almost everything, and that included a smattering of English she'd picked up from the British serving girls who took the chance to visit her cottage.

"He is hurt." Bridie pulled the *brat* away from Fionn's face.

The child stepped back and gasped as she stared at the open wound that stretched from hairline to eyebrow across the boy's forehead. Bruises were swelling up, searing his eyes shut.

"Come." Gillian stood and motioned Bridie to follow. "We can take him there." She tugged at the long sleeve of Bridie's *léine*, pulling the old woman closer to her, then drew back the branches that obscured the larger view of the fields and hills. "My home," she further explained.

Smoke rose from a chimney, which seemed to magically ride on the tops of the trees. Bridie knew it to be the plantation castle; just past a thick oak grove rising between the cart trail and the field. To the right, a small footpath that, she assumed, led back to the meadow behind the castle.

Bridie gave the lass a weary look.

As if Gillian could read her mind, she clutched Bridie's hand gently.

"Yes."

"*Déan é.*" Do it. Bridie glanced back to where Fionn lay. He'd lapsed into unconsciousness again. After having lain out all night in the cold he might be very ill by now. Evil spirits worked their most wicked spells in the darkness. She said a quick prayer for her ward, then pulled a few large, dead branches from the forest floor and began weaving them into a triangular cot. Stooping over her leather bag, she retrieved a silver-handled knife, and pulled down on a lengthy section of a drooping pine limb, cutting it away from the tree. Weaving the pine boughs in through the limbs, she assembled a pallet.

Gillian helped ease the boughs through the web of branches. Her fingers were deft, but not quick enough to escape the sting of the pine needles and the sharp splinters.

When the last bough was in place, Bridie grabbed Gillian's hand, surprising her. She chanted while pointing at the child's palm, making broad circles in the air with

her finger, then reached into her pouch and pulled out a wad of foliage, tied up in twine. Bridie opened the leaves fully to reveal the content: a stinking, greasy ointment.

"Yuck! You are not putting that on me!" Gillian screeched. But Bridie applied the ointment despite the young girl's protests.

"It no longer stings." Gillian flexed her hand. "Thank you."

Bridie shoved her medicine back into the bag and pulled the *brat* from her shoulders. She unfolded it and smoothed the cloak over the pine boughs.

"Everything will be all right. We shall take him to a safe place," said Gillian.

Her sweet, melodic voice danced in Fionn's dreamy mind. Though he could not understand her, something familiar and warm flushed over him and he clung to that feeling. It carried with it some quality that caressed his thoughts with calm understanding.

He felt a gentle push as the girl slid her hands under the backs of his heels, lifting his lower torso. Tenderly, Bridie grabbed him around the shoulders. He groaned as they raised him onto the pallet, then he slipped into the black void that had become a familiar haven.

VII

Working together, they made it to the field without injury to themselves or to Fionn. Their progression sped up once they were out in the clearing, but the castle was still two hills away. Bridie looked back at the boy from time to time, watching the uneven rise and fall of his chest.

"Look, he's moving!" Gillian stopped to catch her breath.

Bridie nodded and continued pulling the awkward cot. Fionn was awake now. Best to get him to where she could tend to his needs.

The gray limestone of the castle reminded the crone of the Ogham standing stones that were planted by the banks of the River Finn. Druids wrote sacred text upon them many centuries ago and most of their secrets were lost for good. The ability to read the stones had all but died out of the Irish. But Bridie could read them; she knew their meanings. Merely to sit beside them was enough to strengthen her will, energy and power to unprecedented levels. Her spells were always more successful after spending time with the stones.

Traveling to the river once every month at the new moon, Bridie spent a good part of the night in the monolith's presence, listening to them sing in their unstrained stony voices. Lately though, it seemed as if the stones possessed a new voice. She knew they were calling out to her-but to do what? She didn't know. In time, she thought, the answer would unfold. She was to visit them again soon, as it was almost *Samhainn*, the night of the ancestors, a night of powerful magic.

"Over there." Gillian pointed to the back section of the bastion.

Activity flourished in the castle yard. Two young boys laughed as they chased a pig into a pen behind the barns. In the garden, a plump servant demonstrated the proper way to hoe the rows, chanting orders in a monotonous, raw voice to several scrawny girls trailing behind her.

The main garden, almost exhausted of its flower-producing capability, broke out in sporadic clouds of faded yellow marigolds. The section to the rear overflowed, overripe with herbs. Young girls were filling baskets with the last of the remaining harvest, to dry for use during the winter months.

"Help! Higgins! Please come and help at once!"

Gillian watched as her father's manservant's head peeked out of the small diamond-shaped panes of glass in the kitchen window. The door flew open and he bounded outside.

"This way." The girl motioned Bridie to follow her.

"Here, now, Miss Gillian, what do 'ya 'ave going on?" Higgins eyed the old woman and the boy with caution.

"He's hurt...beaten, I think." Gillian lowered her end of the cot slowly, following Bridie's lead. "He needs to be inside, near the fire. This woman can help him."

"We can't 'ave 'im inside. Lord Bagenal will have me head." Higgins scratched the top of his scalp as though illustrating the point, while he inspected the old woman before him.

He knew her by reputation: The Red Witch of the Slat. He'd heard many stories about her. Some were tales of healing; others were of conjuring. Her hair, the brightest shade of red he'd ever seen, unsettled him. He stepped back from her a few cautious steps, just to get out from beneath her eerie aura.

"Help me lift him," Gillian ordered. "We can put him on one of the stable boys' pallets near the hearth."

Higgins helped the girl move Fionn, all the while eyeing the old witch. He watched as she pulled her *brat* from the cot, just in case she made any sudden movements, or disappeared behind the outstretched cloak. Instead, Bridie began to drape it over Fionn, but Gillian ran to a cupboard in the hallway, pulling a heavy woolen blanket from a shelf within.

"No. This will be warmer." Gillian smiled. "Does it feel better?" she asked, tucking in the corners.

Fionn's eyes fluttered opened, wavering between sleep and wakefulness. Peering through bruised slits, he thought he saw an angel or maybe even a fairy floating above him. Hearing strange voices, speaking in an unfamiliar tongue, he closed his eyes.

"Where am I?" His Irish slurred with effort, Fionn tried to move, but his body objected, stiff and sore.

He forced his eyes opened again, this time long enough to focus. *The pretty English cailín, and a fire, so warm...and Bridie Ny Ronáin?* Nothing was sensible.

"I must be dreaming," he mumbled.

"Shhh, little one," Bridie whispered in Irish. She knelt next to the boy, laying her hand on his head, checking for fever. "I'll make you a drink to give you extra strength, and I'll put something soothing here." She touched his forehead, causing Fionn to flinch. "Tell me who harmed you. I will curse them."

"The Bagenal's stable boys." Fionn tried to pull himself up to glare at Gillian, but he fell back onto the cot, woozy and weak. "They came at me all at once. They took the baby's medicine, Bridie. I didn't have a chance." He bit his lip and looked away, ashamed.

Bridie knelt by Fionn's side and dug through her bag. Using a large leaf to hold a smaller wad of blackwort leaves inside, she tore a strip of cloth from the hem of Fionn's *léine*, and wrapped the wad tightly to the wound.

Instructing Gillian to fetch some water for the infusion of angelica, Bridie inspected the girl as she walked away. She was all of ten summers. Twelve maybe. It would not be uncommon for a child of her age and social status to already be given away in marriage. Strange though that the girl seemed to ignore the fact that she was English nobility; such generosity toward the Irish was not tolerated.

Gillian rushed to the cauldron and ladled hot water into a mug. Bridie dumped dried weeds into the steaming cup and swished the contents with her finger. She helped Fionn hold the cup as he drank.

"Is he going to be all right?" Gillian asked.

"He will be, if the spirits are kind. I go now." She stated to Gillian and then turned to speak to Fionn in Irish. "Be still. They cannot understand you, and perhaps it is best for now. No one would believe you." She stroked his golden hair, adding, "And no one would care. I will go to Sean. We will be back later today to take you home. Promise me you will lie here quietly." She took the empty cup from his hands.

Fionn nodded.

"Hasten, Bridie. I don't belong here."

Stretching out on the pallet, Fionn closed his eyes. He figured he could pass the time away dreaming, but instead his thoughts turned to worry for baby Seamus, and he could not shut the strangers out of his mind. They babbled on, and to Fionn's Irish ears, they sounded like senseless clucking chickens.

He cracked his eyes open so that if anyone were looking at him, they would think him still asleep. Through a small forest of eyelashes and puffy flesh, Fionn spotted the hearth with a full cauldron of boiling water hanging from a large hook over the fire. He turned his head a bit, which went unnoticed with the current pre-dinner commotion. Plants and herbs dangled in tied bunches from the center beam. He spied mint, thyme, basil and parsley-probably all the same herbs that Cáit dried for winter use in cooking or as medicines. Medicine...Fionn closed his eyes, his thoughts turning to the baby again. *If anything happens to him, it will be on my head. What if he dies? Would Cáit and Sean banish me from the cottages to starve? Would I go to Hell for being so careless?*

"Do you think we should move him upstairs to one of the servants' rooms? A real bed would be more appropriate for someone trying to recuperate from such injuries, *n'est-ce pas*, Higgins?" The young girl's voice interrupted Fionn's thoughts. He lay still, hoping the two would think him sleeping.

"Lady Gillian, 'yur father would thrash you and me both. I think he's fine 'ere." Higgins leaned in for a closer look at Fionn. "'Sides, he's restin' now."

Higgins shoed some of the younger servants outside to continue their yard chores, and busied himself with other tasks. He walked out of the kitchen with Gillian following close behind, deviling him to move Fionn. She stopped short, watching as the old man hobbled into the drawing room, paying her no heed.

Through still half-closed eyes, Fionn perceived the form of a slender woman standing near the black cauldron that hung in the fireplace. She picked up a wooden ladle and stirred the contents of a pot hanging on a smaller hook to the left of the cauldron. Humming a tune quietly, she swirled the simmering mixture, sending waves of wondrous smells throughout the kitchen, then stepped away from the fire.

Realizing he had not eaten since supper the night before, Fionn licked his lips, forgetting he might be observed.

"You are awake. I knew it." Gillian pulled her skirt and petticoats out of the way and sat on the floor next to Fionn. He closed his eyes tight and rolled away from her, but she reached out and softly laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It really is all right now. You're safe here," she said. He could feel her hot breath in his ear. "My name is Gillian," she whispered.

"*Dia dhuit.*" He rolled back to face her.

"Gillian." She pointed to herself. "Gillian Bagenal."

Fionn watched the way her lips moved around the words, and then understood their meaning.

"Fionn Mulrony," he offered, pointing a thumb to his chest as he sat up.

"Fionn? I've never heard that name before." Gillian paused, frowning. "You don't know what I am saying, do you?" She stopped for a moment as a puzzled look slowly rested upon her face.

Glancing over the girl's shoulder to where the soup cooked, Fionn licked his lips again. He was starving and the kitchen air was heavy with the bouquet of simmering onions, carrots and potatoes.

"Are you hungry?" She made a motion of spoon to mouth.

He nodded. He was famished and his stomach growled as if to speak for itself.

Gillian scooped the hot vegetable stew into a bowl.

"Here, eat this with haste," she whispered, looking over her shoulder. The English servants wouldn't appreciate losing their portion of stew to anyone of Irish blood.

Sitting cross-legged, Fionn spooned the hearty stew into his mouth, dripping the thick gravy down his chin. It wasn't as good as Cáit's, but it filled his stomach. He belched-wiping his face with a sleeve-and peered up at

Gillian. Eating as much as he could manage with the spoon, he rubbed a finger along the sides and scraped it clean.

Upon handing the empty bowl back to the girl, his fingertips brushed hers. They were soft and warm, and the mere touch sent a feeling that coursed through his body, causing his heart to shudder off beat, and then to speed up uncontrollably. Perspiration collected on the back of his neck. He felt dizzy. Fionn looked at her, into the depths of her emerald eyes. He saw a reflection of himself staring back. The corners of his lips rose into an involuntary smile.

Gillian perceived the welling of emotions, too. Strange sensations coursed through her, as though she were charged with an unknown element, startling her. She took the empty bowl from his hands.

Sliding the dirty dish into the cupboard beneath the wash pan, she would later, when there was no risk of being seen, wash it and put it away with no one the wiser. Turning back to Fionn to continue her nursing efforts, Gillian detected the heavy-booted footsteps of her father pounding down the hall. Having little time to react, she pushed Fionn down on to the pallet.

Gillian rose, straightening her dress nervously. She didn't want to frighten the boy, but found it hard to conceal her own fear. Lord Bagenal's anger was not easily dismantled.

"Gillian, what's going on?" Her father's gruff voice became louder as his heavy footfalls echoed in the hallway leading to the kitchen. "What have you brought home this time?" Lord James Bagenal stormed into the room, wielding a large leather belt in his right hand; his free hand pushing back a thick coil of black curls.

"Father! Please. He is injured," Gillian pleaded. "And is but a child, no older than I. Look at him." She pointed to Fionn. "He can barely move."

Peering over the corner of the wooden countertop, Lord Bagenal surveyed the bruised and bloody child from a distance. He dropped the belt on the counter. The huge buckle clanked dangerously.

"Higgins!" Bagenal roared, his face colored an angry crimson. He turned to his daughter. "Gillian, I care not what the problem is." His words were slow and weighted with exhausted patience. "It is not our problem. They are not our people. You do not know what kind of trouble caused this."

Higgins bounded down the hall, throwing himself into the kitchen. Grabbing onto the outside of the doorway to

keep from tumbling headfirst into Lord Bagenal, Higgins stood bolt upright, bloodshot eyes bulging. His greasy, gray hair flicked forward onto his brow.

"Yes, me Lordship sir, what can I do for ye?" Higgins blundered. "Oh, dear, I see...."

Peering up at the strangers, wide eyed, Fionn's face froze with fear. The skinny old man was not a concern to him; it was the angry man with the belt who sent his heart racing. Fionn eyed the strap warily. He had not been struck a great many times in his life, and the pain from his current injuries were too great to entertain surviving another thrashing.

"Why would you allow my daughter to bring an Irish peasant into the castle?" Lord Bagenal glared at his hapless servant.

"Well, sir...." He stepped back and began explaining. "Lady Gillian asked me 'ta help 'er, and she told me 'ta let 'im in... 'cause he was hurt an all." Higgins paused for a moment and hung his head low. "She brought with The Red Witch with 'er, and 'ya know 'ya don't mess with tha' one." He shook his head.

"The Red Witch! For God's sake, Gillian, have you no common sense?" James Bagenal paced the kitchen in long, measured steps. "Don't you realize that we live in a hostile land? At any time we could face repercussions by a local mob, especially now, when the English troops are so far away! They only need an excuse, and would have one readily if anything more should happen to the boy." He paced near Fionn, his boots stopping in front of the boy's down-turned face. "You have forced me into a corner, daughter."

He glared at Fionn, lips tightened, cheeks turning from crimson to white.

"For the life of me, girl!" Seeing his daughter's lips tremble, Lord Bagenal held back his anger. He inspected the crumpled form lying amidst the blankets on the pallet.

Fionn lifted his head and stared back through blackened eyes, as Lady Bagenal's lighter step echoed down the long hall. Gillian turned and ran out to meet her, hugging her tight, kissing her cheek.

"Mother, come quick! He's been horribly beaten. The poor boy has been lying outside all night. I found him this morning, on the path by the second field. The wolves might have made a meal of him if I had not rescued him!" Gillian grabbed her mother's billowing sleeve and pulled her into the kitchen.

"Slow down, Gillian." Lady Bagenal, a tiny, dark-haired woman with saucer-shaped, brown eyes, inspected the child.

"Your daughter has brought trouble to our doorstep!" yelled Lord Bagenal. "I think she needs to understand that though the Irish are little more than animals, they are not to be treated like the sick birds and squirrels she finds and brings home to cure." He shook his head, disgusted.

## VIII

Fionn sat upright, pulled the blanket away, and knotted the two ends of his *brat* together to keep it from slipping off his shoulders. All the while, he thought of his stolen silver brooch. It had been in his family for generations, engraved with the ancient Irish name of *Ó Maolruanaidh*, their family legacy-their charge, a large red hand.

The meaning of the crest dated back to early times symbolizing Labrid of the red hand and the powers of the sun God. Fionn's father gave it to him before he died, passing it down from youngest son to youngest son. Now it rested in another's possession.

He touched the knot where the brooch should have been, vowing to retrieve the stolen heirloom, even if it meant risking his life. Surely it could get no worse than this: injured and behind enemy lines. He straightened his shoulders, suddenly proud to have unwittingly accomplished the task, and at such a young age. If he had a bow, he could kill them all, burn the buildings and take possession of Mulrony land - Irish land-once again. A smile slid across his face.

"What are we to do with him?" Rebecca brushed her husband's arm.

Lord Bagenal pulled away, angry, and paced the kitchen.

"The Red Witch 'as gone 'ta get his kin," Higgins chipped in nervously. "I would think...unless she's gone 'ta fetch her bag 'a spells. I suppose there's no tellin' how long she'll be. All that gibberish they prattle back and forth, who can understand it! She *did* talk to the lad before she left, though. I would think 'e knows where she's off 'ta," he said, wiping snot from his pimpled nose with the sleeve of his shirt.

"One of the stable hands," offered Rebecca. "Are they not of Irish blood?"

"Yes, that's right, ma'am," Higgins replied. "I'll go fetch 'im meself." The servant turned and slowly hobbled out of the kitchen. The door slammed behind him, pushed by an invisible, solid breeze.

"What have we done?" My thought startles William from his own focused reality.

"I do not know, mon amour."

"Though their personalities might be well suited, they are complete opposites. How can we ply this situation?" Now it occurs to me the reason for the unpleasant air when the flesh first met.

"I know not."

"Should I give up my form and attempt to be reborn?" I ask.

"Nay, I do not think that an option. I believe we have to work with what energy we have created." William pulls his essence around me.

"They're not the same religions, nor the same social class ... they are not even the same nationality. What happened?" I am cross. What I hoped to be an easy life quest now seems out of my reach.

"I am unsure. My essence followed a path that resonated soundly with your path. It felt right. Let us trust that it was right."

"And if it was not?"

William smoothes the edges of my energy with his, calming me.

"We shall know soon enough."

As Fernando, the crippled Spanish child I had once been, I intuitively knew that during that short life, my quest was on course. I sensed each element as it fell into place and upon his-my death-I realized my mission would be successful. This is too different. The experience is uncertain and I am growing nervous. We have just begun this new life, and already I feel defeated.

I move close to Fionn, as close as my space permits. I long to hold him, to caress him in loving arms, but my hands move through him. I trace the outline of his face, the welts of the many bruises, and wonder what sort of pain he feels. No longer attached to flesh, the only pain we feel is emotional-'tis what drives our energy. I sigh, knowing that Fionn feels pain in both forms, and there is naught I can do about it.

Fionn eased back on to the pallet. He had a headache that grew more painful by the minute. How long would it take Bridie to get to Sean's cottage? He knew that when he was accosted, he'd been no more than an hour away from Sean's door, but he had no idea how long it would take the old woman to walk the meandering trail from the castle.

His head throbbed the more he thought of his uneasy situation but suddenly, the kitchen door flew open and the skinny, old man returned, dragging an equally scrawny boy behind him.

"Ya speak 'is tongue?" quizzed Higgins.

"I-I don' know if I remember."

Donogh O'Rourke glanced at Fionn.

Fionn glared back through angry, welted slits.

Donogh turned away, nervous and a bit ashamed of himself. He never wanted to attack Fionn. The sad fact was that he always did as Tommy told him. Tommy was mean-spirited, evil, and Donogh, so far, had survived his many thrashings.

He put his hand into the pocket of his breeches and felt the silver brooch he'd ripped from Fionn's *brat* during the fight. He remembered having one like it, long ago.

"Conas tá tú?" The words came to him quickly, easily rolling from his tongue.

"Conas tá mé?" Fionn repeated his question, sarcasm edging each word. "What do you mean, how am I? What do you care? You were there...one of them. What do you want?"

"They need to know where The Red Witch has gone and who she is returning with. Lord Bagenal fears further trouble." Donogh put his fist to his lips and cleared his throat. It had been years since he had spoken his mother tongue.

"She's gone for my brother. They will be coming soon to collect me. There will be no trouble." Fionn sat up on the small cot. "You are Irish?"

"Aye, I am. My ma was, anyway. My da was an English soldier," he stated, puffing out his chest.

"What is he saying?" demanded Lord Bagenal.

"He said The Red Witch has gone 'ta get his brother, and that she should be back soon. There will be no further incident." The boy shifted his weight nervously from one leg to the other.

"Ask who beat him," Gillian piped in.

"Lady Gillian wants to know who is responsible for your wounds."

Fionn snorted. "And you will tell them what?"

"I'll say the darkness prevented you from seeing your attacker. I can't tell them I had anything to do with this. They do not care for the Irish, but they won't put up with hooligans, either." He grinned at Fionn. "You really got Tommy good, though! Knocked out a tooth."

Fionn winced, feeling as if every muscle in his face was bruised.

"Good! He deserved that and more."

"What did he say, Donogh? What are you telling him?" Gillian broke in.

"He said 'twas too dark to see his attacker."

"Oh, that is dreadful." The girl leaned forward, tilting her head, reaching one hand out to Fionn's face. Her father promptly slapped it down.

"That's fine, Donogh. Return to your duties." Lord Bagenal waved a dismissive hand. He had all the information he needed. The Irish boy would be gone before nightfall.

Fionn dozed sporadically, dreaming of baby Seamus, Bridie, even Gillian. Once fully awake he felt somewhat refreshed, the fuzziness having left his brain. Staring at the ceiling, lost in thought, he was unaware of the clatter rising from the courtyard. Within moments, Higgins rushed Sean into the kitchen.

"Thanks to God, 'ye are not dead! Are you well enough for travel?" Sean surveyed the visible damage to Fionn's face and then lifted his *léine*, scanning the welts on his legs. "Who did this?" Black and purple bruises and open wounds from ankle to thigh. "Best not to worry with that now. Let's get gone from this place, before trouble starts."

Sean helped Fionn to his feet. The boy wobbled a bit, but was quick to regain his balance.

"We have to hurry."

"Where is Bridie?" Fionn limped to the cart

"She's with Cáit-with the baby." Sean seated himself in the cart and snapped the reins, sending the donkey into a slow trot. "Your brothers and I started searching for you last night, but there were wolves in our path, they forced us back home. We feared you dead."

The cart crept down the dusty, rutted trail toward their home. Fionn glanced back over his shoulder. Donogh ran out from behind the barn chasing after their cart, and for a moment Fionn feared another attack, but instead the boy pitched the silver brooch into the back of the wagon.

Moving to the rear to collect the heirloom, Fionn secured his *brat*, and scrambled to the front of the cart.

"Baby Seamus...is he any better?"

The cart leaned into a rut, throwing Fionn into the seat next to his brother. He groaned. The dizziness was returning and his head ached.

"Is the baby going to be all right?"

"I know not. He worsened overnight. Bridie is with him now," Sean replied. "I'm sure he will be fine. Pray to God he will be healthy again. 'Tis all we can do now." Sean stared blankly ahead.

"I swear if anything happens to baby Seamus, I will kill them." Fionn's promise slipped from his lips, unheard.

The ride back to the cottage seemed to take forever and provided Fionn with plenty of time to dwell on his revenge. Donogh would be spared perhaps, but Tommy and the other boy would die in the worst way he could imagine. He could dig a hole, fill it with spears and cover it with boughs, then chase the boys into it. Or perhaps he would ambush them, rolling large boulders down a hill as they slept out under the stars. Some death plots, however, were quick and straightforward, as simple as a push off a cliff, or the piercing of their hearts with well-aimed arrows.

Sean was ignorant of Fionn's murderous thoughts. He beat the reins on the donkey's neck, attempting to speed her up, but the animal, cautious with her steps, would not be forced to move any quicker. They arrived at the shanty just before nightfall; tallow candles burned bright in every window of the shack. Sean jumped from the cart and threw the reins to Fionn.

"Tie her up," he yelled back over his shoulder.

Fionn fastened the leather thong to a post and limped painfully back to the house. A shiver ran through him as he stepped over the threshold.

"Fionn!" Cáit opened her arms and pulled him to her chest, fearfully watching the witch perform her magic.

Bridie was positioned inside of a large circle of salt that was sketched out on the floor. The child, swaddled in a white blanket, lay in the center of Bridie's outspread brat.

The old woman recited her spells and prayers, eyes closed, making motions with her hands, as if writing invisible words. When she'd finished with her work, she pulled a dried sprig of St. John's Wort out of her bag and placed it on the baby's stomach.

Walking around the child several times, she removed the foliage, grabbed a knife from the pocket of her robe, and walked to the edge of the ring. She bent down and cut the circle open, allowing her an exit. Holding the sprig high above her head, she chanted a few more mystical words, and then threw the greenery into the fire.

Wind howled overhead, causing a draft in the kitchen, sending the candle flames into a monstrous dance. Bridie motioned Fionn to move closer. She stood in front of the hearth waiting for him; her arms open wide.

Fionn hesitated. He watched as the flickering light cast evil shadows upon her face. Braced in fear, he shuffled toward her, until he stood eye to eye with the witch. The room filled with cool haze and a back draft of peak smoke.

She put her warm hands on his face and then smoothed them over the outline of his body while her lips moved, noiseless, in secret prayer, healing his wounds. Then, signaling the ritual over, she smiled, revealing her few blackened teeth, stepped into the circle and lifted the baby.

"Cáit, get the infusion I made earlier." She pointed to the mug on the table.

Cáit grabbed the teapot and poured the warm liquid into the cup.

"Is he healed?" Sean's white-knuckled fists were clenched.

"He must drink the infusion. That will help him to breathe better. As for the evil spirits, they are gone now. They wanted to take his soul to the other side."

"Why would they want my child's soul?" Cáit queried.

"The energy is strong on these grounds. You're very close to the old rath. Many men died in battle on that very spot, and the spirits still walk between the worlds," explained Bridie, smoothing the baby's hair. "When someone becomes ill, their essence weakens. It is easier for hostile souls to pull the sick ones over to their side."

The rath, an old earthen mound fort in the field behind the cottage, had been there for as long as anyone in the area could remember. Some said it was the refuge for the *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, others told of a war between giants that took place there. But no one in County Fermanagh knew for sure. They were only certain that spirits of the dead and damned roamed near it.

Cáit grabbed the baby from Bridie's arms; his body still limp, his eyes, heavy lidded.

"Will 'ya sip now, precious?" She dipped the spoon into the medicinal tea and rested it on his bottom lip for a moment. The child lifted his head and opened his mouth. "Ah, that's a good love. Look, Sean, he's waking."

Sean rushed to his son and cradled the infant's tiny head in the palm of his hand.

"Thank you, Bridie," he said, as he glanced to the hearth where the crone had been standing, but she had already disappeared.

William and I wait for the old woman near the Ogham stones erected by the River Finn. We are not often allowed to communicate to the living, and almost never to those not of our flesh forms, but tonight is different. 'Tis All Hallows Eve. *Samhainn*. The night of the dead.

"She is approaching. I am aware of her presence."

"Yes, I see her now, William. But what are we to do with her when she is near?"

Our plan had never been fully concocted, but as we know not what is possible, we must allow things to happen naturally.

"When she begins her prayers, mix your energy with the stone's life force until they vibrate so loud, they hum, then I will speak and hopefully, she will be able to hear us."

I see the old crone and am struck by her aged beauty. She peers up into the night sky, waving a hand, and for a moment, I think she waves to me. I long to wave back, to be seen.

"I think she is close enough, Elizabeth." William prompts me into action.

This energy building exercise is rather like holding one's breath or a constant sensation of euphoria. I enjoy the way it feels, and am almost taken away by the steady tremor I am creating. I aim it toward the stones, which have their own essence, and there, outside of their cool aura, we mix.

In my joy, I nearly forget my task. The old woman is a vision in a dream and the din is beginning to sound like a voice.

"We come to you on behalf of Fionn and Gillian." William's voice melts into my thoughts.

I free myself from the drone to notice the woman. She is perplexed, moving around the stones, hesitating, touching them and pulling back, frightened.

"Do not fear. Be calm and sit by our side."

She smiles up into the darkness, and then proceeds between the stones. I experience her energy as it mixes with mine and I know at once that she is no longer afraid. She will listen.

"You must help," William pleads. "You must help."