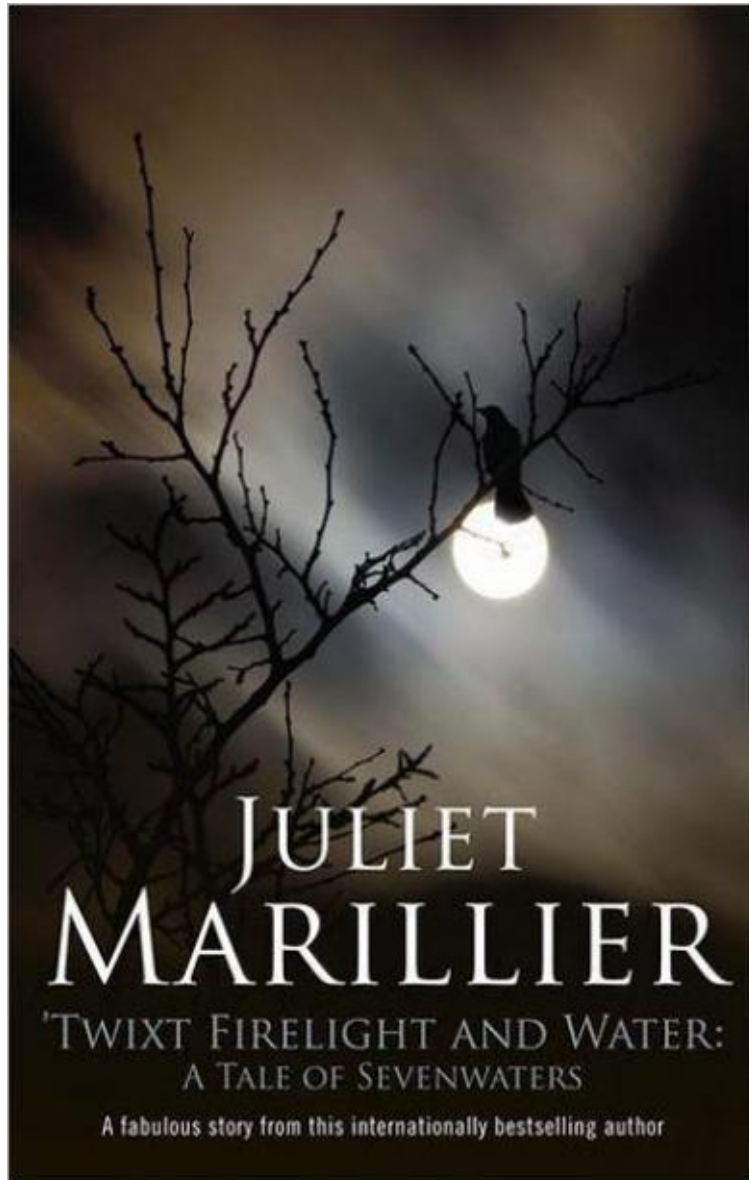


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MARILLIER

'TWIXT FIRELIGHT AND WATER:
A TALE OF SEVENWATERS

A fabulous story from this internationally bestselling author



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CONRI

*A fair maid in the wildwood lies
A raven pecks her sightless eyes
Then wings into the heavens again
To shriek his song of death and pain.*

I have a tale to tell. I would recite its verses while playing the harp, had not a sorceress long ago robbed me of my capacity to share my story. That may be just as well, for my tale would only make you sad. I was a bard then. I brought tears to the eyes of my listeners, made them hold their breath in anticipation, gasp in wonderment, cheer as the hero won his battle, cry as the fair lady lost her true love. In those days, I contrived happy endings. Folk like to see lovers reunited, challenges met and overcome, good triumphant over evil.

If ever my voice is returned to me, I will sing only sad songs.

* * * *

I listen as my companion instructs a clutch of green novices.

‘In the land of Erin dwell three races,’ he tells them. ‘First are the Tuatha De Danann, commonly known as the Fair Folk, proud and strong, noble and wise.’ *With a few notable exceptions*, I add in my mind. ‘They dwell in hollow hills and in deep forests,’ the druid continues, ‘though such sanctuaries are shrinking with the coming of the new faith. Second are the Old Ones, the Fomhoire, whom I should perhaps have placed at the start, since they have prior claim. Their shapes are many, their attitudes inscrutable. Long time and endless patience provide their solutions. They blend; they wait; they observe. The Old Ones are survivors. Last, human folk, late come to this land, short-lived, unsubtle, as moody and changeable as a Connemara shore in autumn.’

Up speaks a bright young fellow, all bony wrists and eager eyes. ‘Master Ciarán? There are surely more than three races here. What of leprechauns? Clurichauns? What of the *bean sidhe*?’

‘What about the Sea People?’ another novice chimes in.

‘And there’s those wee things that drink the milk straight from the cow,’ pipes up a red-cheeked lad who, from the looks of him, has but recently replaced his hayfork with a druid’s staff.

‘True,’ says my companion, unruffled as always. ‘There exists a fourth race, a fifth, a sixth; perhaps more than we will ever know. Set them aside for now and consider another variant. Ask yourself what may ensue when the pure blood of the three races is mixed and blended, creating something new. Imagine a being with human passions and frailties combined with Fomhoire endurance, say, or human stubbornness alongside the pride and craft of the Tuatha De. Imagine an individual with the Old Ones’ long memory and the Fair Folk’s facility in magic; picture a warrior of superb skill and courage, who possesses the ability to become rock, water, earth, tree in a heartbeat.

‘Such blends are not common. The three races of Erin seldom have congress with one another, and such alliances rarely produce children. When there is a slipping across boundaries, a union between old enemies, and an infant is born of that coupling, chances are the child will be something exceptional. The bravest heroes and the darkest villains are oft products of such unsanctioned pairings.’

The tutor pauses, his mulberry eyes seeing something beyond this grove, beyond this forest, beyond this summer day. I, too, contemplate. Hero or villain? If I still had my human tongue, I could answer for him. My companion walks the path of light. Here in the nemetons, his vocation is to teach, to guide, to set the feet of the young on right ways. His choice brought him some peace of mind. Some. He has suffered losses as painful as my own. The shadow of death lingers in those dark eyes even as he leads the young brethren in a prayer.

Hero or villain? It depends. I was once hero of my own tale, loved by a girl with star-bright eyes and hair like a soft shadow. I had youth, talent, a path before me. And then ... and then ... Had I a human voice, I would turn the fresh faces of these young druids pale with horror. I would shout and scream my story to the treetops, I would sit by the pool and let my tears fall into the still water, one and two and three. I would whisper her name to the wind, I would teach it to skylark and thrush, to sparrow and nightingale, and they would sing it abroad, an anthem, a lullaby, a love song, a dead march. Oh, if I had my voice again, there would be such a tale to tell. And in that tale, perhaps I would be hero and villain both.

I glimpsed her first 'twixt lake and fire

My heart took wing; soared high and higher

Lóch was her name. The moon above

Smiled down, pale witness of our love.

Ah, that night! She stood reed-slender, the fire's glow warming her face, and behind her the bright moon danced on the waters of the lake. My heart gave one great leap and I was changed forever. But I get ahead of myself. First I must tell of a day some years earlier: the day when I watched my mother bringing her new son home to the Otherworld.

I was hiding. At thirteen, I was in more fear of her than I had been as a little child. By then I'd begun to understand the darkness she carried within her, a weight of bitter resentment so tightly woven into the fabric of her that it was plain nothing would ever shift it. She'd been away. Three years it had been, three wonderful, peaceful years without her. I'd spent them making verses, practising the harp, and hoping beyond hope that she'd never come back. With her gone, folk had begun to befriend me. I had started to believe it might be possible for one of my kind to follow the paths of light. Yes, even a son of hers.

I was hiding high in the cradling branches of an oak. I watched her pass below, every part of me on edge, willing her to be only a phantom, only an evil memory. But she was real, as real as the little boy she carried in her arms, a red-haired mite of perhaps two summers. I knew at a glance that he was

hers. Her son. My replacement.

It was her habit to summon me after one of these trips out into the human world, and her summons came as soon as she'd left the child with a pair of local cottagers, then returned to our own realm. She stood in the shadow of the oaks, eyes cool as I approached. 'Conri,' she said. Her tone hardly differentiated me from a grain of dust under her foot.

'Mother.' I knelt before her, since that was the way she liked it, making my voice respectful.

'I don't suppose I can hope you spent the time of my absence working on the elements of your magical craft.'

It was not a question, and I did not offer an answer, merely gazed at the ground, wondering how she would punish me.

A sigh. 'I've had a reversal, Conri. A serious reversal that needs attention. Look at me!' Her voice suddenly sharp as an axe. I raised my head. She was young today, auburn hair cascading over her shoulders, figure shapely in a gown of soft green. Her mouth was set tight. Her eyes probed deep inside me. I could think of nothing to say that would please her.

'You've wasted the time fiddling about with your music. Yes?'

'Yes, Mother.' I set my jaw firm and held her gaze as my belly twisted in fear.

'Pah!' An explosion of annoyance, then a click of the fingers. Pain shot through my arms and hands, crippling, crushing. I crumpled, screaming. Around us in the high trees of the Otherworld, a host of birds echoed my cry. 'Stupid boy! With your parentage, you could have amounted to something. You are useless! Useless! A weakling!'

I forced myself back up to my knees. The agony was fading. I glanced at my arms, half-expecting that every bone would be broken, but they looked much as usual. My breath wheezed in my chest. I said nothing at all.

‘Never mind that.’ Mother’s tone had changed again. ‘It’s of little account now. Despite the reversal, I have not returned empty-handed. I have a weapon. A fine weapon. Or so it will become, when suitably polished. Conri, I have work for you.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ I croaked.

‘There’s a child. A boy. I’ve left him with human folk, right on the margin between that realm and this — you know the cottage in the forest, close by the place they call Hag’s Head in the human world?’

I did not tell her I’d been watching as she passed her baby boy over to strangers. ‘Yes, Mother,’ I said.

‘Folk might come looking,’ she said. ‘Human folk. The child is too small to be brought to our realm as yet; he requires a tiresome degree of feeding and cleaning. He’ll stay with these cottagers for a year or two. I’ve set a ward over him, of course. But you will watch, also. There will be a certain degree of ill will towards me, I imagine.’

‘Are not human folk too weak to break these wards, Mother? They have no magic.’

She smiled thinly. ‘These are not your everyday human folk,’ she said. ‘They’ll be rather determined, I fear. Conri, you must tell me immediately if you see anyone loitering close to the cottage, or in the woods nearby. And I need to know if my son’s guardians become at all careless. I don’t anticipate that will happen. They understand the importance of this task, and the punishment that will befall them if they do not fulfil it to my expectations.’

‘Your son,’ I said, making my tone suitably surprised. ‘So I have a little

brother.'

'Hah!' There was neither affection nor amusement in the sound. 'A half-brother, but you'd be wise not to regard him as kin. You will not approach him, Conri. The child is mine only. As soon as he can listen and obey, I will commence his training. He will be subtle; clever; powerful. Ciarán will be my sword of vengeance.'

* * * *

It sounded ridiculous. That little scrap, not long out of swaddling clothes, the instrument of her fell power? Time passed. I watched as his carers tended to him, as he learned to run and to climb, as he began to talk. I watched him solemnly investigating all he discovered. I saw him gazing into tranquil pools; I observed him sitting so quietly the birds came up to perch on his toes. He was still a very small boy when I saw him bring a ripe plum down from high in a tree, right into his hand. Not long after, he sang a fox out of the bracken to lie down by him, obedient as any pet dog. My brother; my clever little brother. The cottagers tended him well, but they had no time for play. I wanted to show him how to catch a ball; how to make a little house in the woods; how to tease minnows into his hand. I wanted him to know he had a brother.

I reported regularly to my mother. 'Nobody has come looking for him. Nobody at all.' Of the magic, which Ciarán explored further with every passing day, I said not a word.

In time, inevitably, she discovered to her fierce satisfaction that this second son possessed all the potential the first had failed to exhibit, and she began his training. My job as overseer was at an end. I found myself at once relieved and saddened. I was free now to pursue my music. I did so within both worlds, for I could pass as a talented human bard provided I was careful not to reveal my eldritch gifts. Those were meagre enough beside my tiny half-brother's.

I was selfish to step away from him. I knew how cruel she could be; I

had experienced her training at first hand. She would not understand the frailty of a small child. She would not care what damage she inflicted. I told myself I could do nothing about it. She was a sorceress, powerful and without conscience. I was a half-and-half. My only assets were a good singing voice and nimble fingers. I reminded myself of this when occasionally I chanced upon my mother and the child working together. My brother's small face had become pinched and pale; his eyes, so like our mother's, were smudged with a bone-deep weariness. I saw her punish him. He took it stoically and tried harder to please. The joyous, instinctive magic he had used as an infant was quite gone. She taught him other skills.

Yes, I was both selfish and a coward. I avoided the clearing where they were accustomed to work, an Otherworld place beyond the eyes of Ciáran's human guardians. I tried to be blind to what she was doing to him. In the human world I found a master harper, a solitary man who made time for me, and I stayed long months with him, learning new skills and sharpening old ones. Ciarán was a prickle on my conscience, but I ignored him. Any attempt to intervene would see us both punished.

I was nearly seventeen; my brother would be four or five. I went to a Beltane fair and played my harp for dancing. At dusk a great fire was lit on the lakeshore. All knew the forest nearby held portals to the Otherworld. On such a night doors might be left ajar, and lovers who wandered into the woods for a little dalliance might find themselves on a longer journey than they'd anticipated. A perilous spot. Still, that was the traditional fair ground, and there we were, a little merry with good mead, a little dizzy from dancing, a little amorous, as befitted Beltane. At least, the human folk were — I remained detached, concentrating on playing and singing. I reached the end of a jig, looked up and across the throng, and there she was. The firelight glowed on the perfect curve of her cheek; it put a warm glint in her lovely eyes. The breeze blew strands of her dark hair over her brow, and she pushed them back with a graceful hand, smiling. Behind her, the moon shone on the trembling waters of the lake. She was looking at me.

In a heartbeat my life was changed.

With arms entwined, all summer long

*We danced to our own secret song
We shone with love's transforming flame
And then — oh, then — the autumn came.*

I forgot my mother. I forgot the small shoulders that now carried the weight of the sorceress's expectations. Lóch loved me, and I was new-made. We wandered the forest paths hand in hand. I made sure we kept away from portals to the Otherworld.

We were young, but we made plans. I could earn a living as a bard. Thanks to my maternal line — who would ever have believed I might gain some good from being *her* son? — my skills were already superior to those of human musicians, and I would have no trouble finding work. Lóch wanted a baby. We imagined her, a girl, always a little girl, with dark wisps of hair and eyes the colour of lake water. We would travel north. Lóch's grandmother, who had looked after her since she was an infant, could come with us. We would be a family.

There was no need to spell out my ancestry. My sweetheart had sound instincts, and she saw from the first that I was something unusual. I would not talk about my mother. I would have spoken of my father, but I knew nothing about him. When I'd asked my mother, as a child, she'd said, 'It doesn't matter who he was. He fulfilled his purpose. Not especially well, as it turned out.' I had seen in her eyes that I must not ask again.

'We'll live wherever you want,' I told Lóch as we lay on the grass one warm afternoon. 'Just not here.' The tide of desire was strong between us, the denial of it a painful pleasure. Her fingers traced delicate patterns on my arm; mine rested against her stomach, the soft sweetness of her body only a thin layer of fabric away. We had sworn we would not lie together until we were married.

We planned to be hand-fasted at Lughnasad, after the prayers of thanks for the season's bounty. Once wed, we would go, away, away, free of the burden of my mother, free of the anxiety and fear and pain she seemed to bring with her no matter how obedient I was to her commands. The freedom that

beckoned was not only the opportunity to be with my love as her husband, and to tread a new path with her beside me. It was my chance to be unshackled from my mother's dark ambition.

'Conri,' said Lóch, raising herself on one elbow to study my face. 'You look so sad sometimes. So troubled. What is it, dear heart?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'I'm trying to remember the words of a ballad, but the rhyme's eluding me.' I sat up and tickled her nose with a blade of grass until she was helpless with laughter, and the shadow was forgotten.

* * * *

Lóch's grandmother liked me, but she wanted us to wait. We were so young, she said, too young to see anything but an easy future. The prospect of leaving the cottage where she had brought up her orphaned granddaughter, and the friends she had in the district, and everything familiar, was frightening to her. Well, she was old by human standards, and I almost understood how she felt, but I knew we must leave. If we stayed close to this forest we would be within my mother's reach for all of our lives.

My musical skill was not the only thing I had inherited from my mother's line. I would live far longer than Lóch; I would continue to look young as she gradually aged. I dismissed this, certain my love for her was strong enough to withstand any test. Like many folk of mixed heritage, I had the ability to turn the minds of human folk one way or another — charm, one might call it, though not a charm in the sense of a spell, more a gift for choosing the right tone, the right words, the right look of the eyes to persuade a person to a certain way of thinking. I never used it on Lóch. She chose me for myself, for the man I was. I shied away from all magic, for I wanted to be human, not fey. But when Lóch's grandmother put her foot down, determined that we should wait at least a year to be sure of our minds, I used it on her. It was not long before the old woman was saying the plan was a fine one, and of course we were old enough, at seventeen, to be wed and journeying and thinking of a baby. So the hand-fasting was set for Lughnasad. We'd be married as soon as the harvest ritual was over, and straight away we would head north to a place where there were some cousins of Lóch's dead father.

We packed up the cottage; there was little enough in it.

‘What about your things, Conri?’ Lóch asked. ‘Clothes, tools, all your possessions?’ She had never asked me where I lived. I thought perhaps she did not want to know. Of recent times I’d been sleeping at the cottage, chastely on a bench while Lóch and her grandmother shared the bed.

I was about to reply that the only possession that mattered was my harp, but I realised it was not quite true. I had a little box, back in the Otherworld, with objects I had collected through the uncomfortable years of my childhood, treasures I had taken out at night after the day’s failures and punishments were over. Holding and stroking each in turn, I had been comforted by their familiarity. I did not want to leave that box behind. Besides, Lóch was right about clothing. In the human world one had to consider such activities as washing and mending. Before I was quite done with the Otherworld, my mother’s world, I must make one last trip back.

* * * *

Ten days before Lughnasad, on a morning of bitter wind, I slipped across the margin and fetched my box from the cave where I had hidden it. I took a cloak, a pair of boots, a favourite hat. I spoke to one or two folk, not saying I was leaving, and discovered that my mother had gone away to the south. Nobody knew if it was a short trip or a long one. I breathed more easily. With luck, she would not return until Lóch and I were far away.

I emerged into the human world close by the cottage where Ciarán and his keepers lived, a low, secluded place nestled at the foot of the crag called Hag’s Head, and surrounded by rowans. Why did I choose that way? Who knows? As I passed the place I heard a sound that stopped me in my tracks. It could have been me weeping like that, in little tight sobs as I tried to hold the pain inside, so nobody would hear me and know how weak I truly was. I found that I could not walk on by.

He was scrunched into a hollow between the rocks, arms wrapped around himself, knees up, head down. The bones of his shoulder, fragile as a

bird's, showed under the white skin, through a rip in his tunic. His hair was longer now, and the hue of a dark flame. He heard me coming, soft-footed as I was, and every part of him tensed.

‘Ciarán?’ It was awkward; he did not know me.

The small head came up. The dark mulberry eyes, reddened with tears, fixed their stare on me. He was like a little wild animal at bay, quivering with the need for flight. And yet not like, for there was a knowledge in those sad eyes that chilled me. My brother was too young for this.

I squatted down at a short distance, putting my belongings on the ground. ‘Did she hurt you?’ I asked.

Not a word. She had threatened him, no doubt, to keep him from speaking to passers-by.

‘Ciarán,’ I said quietly, ‘my name is Conri. We both have the same mother. That makes us brothers.’

He understood; I saw an unlikely hope flame in his eyes. Impossibilities flooded through my mind: *we could take him with us, we could hide, perhaps she would never find us.* And then, cruellest of all: *I should not go away. I should stay for his sake.*

‘Conri.’ Ciarán tried out the sound of it. ‘When is my father coming?’

The hairs on my neck rose. Surely he could not remember his father. I’d seen how little the boy was when she brought him here: too young to understand any of it. But then, this was no ordinary child.

‘I don’t know, Ciarán.’ *Don’t ask if you can come with me.* Already, so quickly, he had a grip on my heart. Why in the Dagda’s name had I passed this way? ‘I have to go now.’

‘Will you come back?’

I drew a shaky breath. There would be no lying to this particular child. ‘I don’t know.’ It was woefully inadequate. ‘Ciarán, I have something for you.’ I reached across and picked up my treasure box. My brother edged closer as I opened the lid. It was a meagre enough collection, but each item was precious to me. What to give him?

‘Here,’ I said, picking out a stone with swirling patterns of red and grey, a secret language ancient as myth. ‘I found this up in the hills beyond the western end of the lake. Earth and fire.’

His fingers closed around it. ‘Thank you,’ he whispered. ‘Goodbye, Conri.’

‘Goodbye, little brother.’ Morrigan’s curse, tears were starting in my eyes, and they trembled in my voice. The longer I stayed, the worse this would be for the two of us. I gathered my belongings, turned my back and walked away.

* * * *

Eight days until Lughnasa and our wedding. There was no point in looking backwards. I could not save Ciarán. Even if Lóch had not existed, even if I had been prepared to sacrifice my own life for my brother’s sake, and stay where she could find and torment me daily, the sorceress would never have allowed me a part in his future. If Ciarán was to be her tool, she would not want his edge blunted by weakness, or his true metal tarnished by love. I could do nothing for him.

So there was a thread of sorrow and regret in the shimmering garment of our happiness. All the same, Lóch prepared for the ritual with bright eyes, and both she and her grandmother professed themselves ready for the adventure that lay ahead. Lóch and I embraced under the shelter of the trees, our bodies

pressed tight, desire making our breath falter. Our hearts hammered one against the other. Our wedding night could not come quickly enough.

* * * *

Six days until Lughnasa, and both Lóch and her grandmother had gone to the far side of the lake to bid farewell to an old friend, a crippled woman who would not be coming to the celebrations. They would be gone all day. I planned to spend the time practising the harp, for we'd been busy of late and I had neglected my craft. With the two of them to support, and perhaps soon a babe as well, I'd need to maintain my technique and keep on making new songs. Folk soon weary of a bard who repeats himself.

I worked all morning and by midday I was growing thirsty. I decided to go down to the local hostelry for a cup or two of ale. While I was sitting there minding my own business, a man came in. I looked at him once and I looked twice, for there was something familiar in that face. The fellow was quite old, with many white threads in his dark hair. His face was a map of experience. Despite his years, there was a strength in every part of him, like the tenacity of a wind-scourged tree. He was clad in plain traveller's garb, a grey cloak, well-worn boots of best quality. A broad-brimmed hat; a dagger at his belt. No bag. I studied the face again, and this time knew where I had seen it before.

The traveller looked around, then approached the innkeeper.

'Ale, my lord?' The innkeeper had sized up the newcomer and was greeting him accordingly.

'Share a jug with me,' I put in quickly, indicating that the traveller should come to sit at my table. 'I'll pay.'

The traveller's grey eyes narrowed, assessing me. My mother's words came back to me, sharp and clear: *These are not your everyday human folk. They'll be rather determined, I fear.* Then the man walked over and seated himself opposite me.

I waited for the ale to come. I did not ask any of the questions he might have been expecting, such as *Where are you headed?* and *Where are you from?* Instead, for the time it took for the innkeeper to bring the jug, I let myself dream. What if this strong, sad-looking stranger was *my father*, come to fetch me? What if he had been looking for me all these years, seventeen whole years, and now he was going to bring me home, and I would meet my family, and Lóch and I could live in a place where I truly belonged?

‘Are you from these parts?’ the man asked diffidently as I poured the ale.

‘Close by.’ I wondered if he glimpsed my mother in me. I wondered if he was as good at guesswork as I was.

‘Been here long?’

‘All my life. My name is Conri.’

‘Mm.’ He acknowledged it with a courteous nod, but did not offer his own in return. After a moment he added, ‘Why would you buy me a drink, Conri?’

My heart thumping, I said, ‘You’re a stranger in these parts. I imagine you may be here for a particular reason.’

‘You imagine correctly.’ I could almost see his mind working. He needed information, but speaking to the wrong person might put his whole plan in jeopardy. ‘What kind of trade do you ply?’ He glanced at my hands.

‘I’m a musician. Soon to be wed. We’ll be travelling to live with kinsfolk in the north.’

He nodded. This answer seemed to satisfy him. ‘Know all the locals, do you?’

‘Most. Are you looking for someone?’

‘A child. A boy.’

‘I see.’ I traced a finger around the rim of my ale cup, thinking he must indeed be tenacious if he thought to pit his human skills against her uncanny ones, his honest strength against her overweening ambition. ‘A small boy or a bigger one?’

It was in my voice, no doubt: the knowledge. The fear. When he spoke again his tone was hushed, so nobody else could hear, and there was an edge in it. ‘He’d be five years old by now. Red hair; pale skin; unusual eyes, the colour of ripe mulberries.’

‘Your son?’ I kept my own voice down.

‘Never mind that. Have you seen him?’

I thought of my mother’s wrath. I thought of Ciarán with my gift in his hand and his eyes full of shadows. ‘There is a child who meets that description living nearby,’ I whispered. ‘But there are ... risks. High risks, my lord.’ Oh, how his eyes came alight as I spoke! The selfsame look had kindled on my brother’s small face when I told him we were kin, and died when I bade him farewell.

‘How do I know I can trust you?’ Ciáran’s father asked.

‘I might ask you the same question,’ I said. ‘But I will not. I think the two of us want the same thing: for the boy to be safe. Where would you take him? How could you keep him out of danger?’

He looked at me. I saw the strength written in his face, and the suffering. ‘If I tell you,’ he said, ‘those who seek to harm him can get the answers from

you and hunt him down. So I will not tell. But there is a place where he can be protected, and I will take him there. His father and his brothers will keep him safe.'

'Brothers?' I echoed, somewhat taken aback to think there were more of us out there.

The stranger glanced towards the unglazed window of the inn. I had thought this a solitary journey, a father's lonely quest to claim his lost son. But this man was no fool. He'd brought reinforcements. The two of them were standing out the front waiting for him, youngish men made very much in his own mould, with pale, intense faces, keen eyes, unsmiling mouths. Weaponry of various kinds hung about them. The father hadn't needed to carry a pack; each of his sons bore one. His sons, but not hers. There was no touch of the uncanny on these hard-faced warriors.

'Half-brothers.'

It was not a question, but I thought it needed an answer. 'I only have one half-brother,' I said. 'Promise me he will be safe, and I will show you where he is.' Fear dripped through me like ice water. 'But understand the danger, for all of us.'

'Oh, I understand.' His voice was like iron. 'You are her son?'

I would not answer so direct a question. 'I will show you,' I said. 'The best time is early morning, not long after dawn. You must be prepared to leave quickly and travel swiftly. At present she is not here, but she may return at any time. Weapons such as those your sons bear will not help you in this struggle.'

'Come,' he said, rising to his feet.

The two sons were wary; everything about them spoke distrust. I bore some resemblance to my mother, and while I did not know their story, I

imagined she had wrought havoc amongst their family. Unsurprising, then, that they did not warm to me. But they did their father's bidding and a plan was made. We would camp out in the woods overnight, close to the cottage. We would move in before dawn and take him. They had horses stabled nearby, and could travel swiftly. And they had one or two other tricks, they said, but nobody told me what those were.

I prayed that my mother's visit to the south would be a lengthy one, though I knew Ciáran's training would call her back soon; her methods required that the student not be allowed time to mull over what she was doing to him. If she discovered this plan, all of us would be caught up in her fury. By Danu's sweet mercy, it was a risk indeed.

'We must make a pact of silence, Conri,' the nobleman said when the four of us were out of doors, under the trees, working out how it would unfold. 'Neither I nor my sons here will mention your name, whatever pressure is applied to us. None of us will say how we found the boy. In return, you will not speak of what happened. You will cover our tracks as best you can. You will do all in your power to avoid laying a trail. If you love your little brother, and it seems to me that is so, you will do what you can to ensure he is not hurt.'

Not hurt? Ciarán had already been hurt so badly the scars of it would be with him all his life. 'I will honour the pact,' I said. 'As I said, I'm to be married at Lugnasad. We won't be making our home here.'

'I wish you joy,' he said quietly. 'Now take us close to the place. We must remain in cover until it's time.'

I wondered what Lóch would think when she came home and found the cottage empty. I'd have to invent a story to cover my overnight absence. It felt wrong to lie to her, but she could not know the truth. If this worked, if Ciarán escaped, my mother would be brutal in her efforts to track the perpetrators down. The thought that her touch might reach my sweetheart curdled my blood and froze my heart within me. *Let the sorceress stay away. Let us be gone when she returns.*

* * * *

I think Ciarán knew. His eldritch abilities were exceptional. As the first dawn light touched the leaves of the rowans, a small form slipped out the cottage door, a hooded cloak concealing his bright hair. He moved across the open ground as swiftly as a creature evading predators, which, in a way, was exactly what he was. I glanced at the father's face, just once, and saw the glint of tears. The nobleman squatted down as the child approached us where we stood under the trees. Ciarán stopped two paces away, a tiny, upright figure, preternaturally still.

I think the father was intending to re-introduce himself, to reassure, to explain quickly the need for silence and flight. After all, his son had been a baby when they last met.

'Papa?' The small voice was held quiet. The child understood that this must be covert.

'I've come to take you home, Ciarán.' The grimmest of warriors could not have kept his tone steady at such a moment. 'We must go now, and as quietly as we can. Shall I carry you?'

Ciarán shook his head. He put a hand in his father's, as if they had been parted only from twilight till dawn, and they set off side by side. At the rear, uneasily, came the two brothers and I.

It felt as if I scarcely breathed while we made our way out of the forest and along the lake to the place where their horses were stabled. I waited at a distance while they retrieved the beasts; the fewer people saw me in their company, the fewer could make a link if my mother came asking. They mounted. Ciarán was seated before his father in the saddle.

'Thank you,' the nobleman said gravely. 'I understand what you have risked for him. I am in your debt.'

‘Ride safely,’ I said. ‘I don’t suppose we will meet again. Goodbye, Ciarán.’ I saw, looking at him, that while he was my mother’s son, a child with more than his share of the uncanny, he was also a human boy of five, scared, excited, almost overwhelmed by what had happened. ‘The blessing of Danu be always on you, little brother.’

He allowed himself a smile. ‘And on you, Conri,’ he said, and they rode away. Perhaps Ciáran’s father did not understand that an ordinary human man could not break a sorceress’s protective charm, however strong and determined he might be. But I understood, and I recognised in that moment that without the innate talent of the child himself, this rescue mission could never have been accomplished.

* * * *

Lugnasad morn: the dawn of our wedding day. The cottage had been promised to a local family down on their luck; they had paid only a token sum for the use of it. The grandmother had traded her house cow for a creaky cart and an ancient horse. I doubted either would last as far as our destination, the place where these cousins lived. Nonetheless, as soon as the hand-fasting ritual was over we were heading north. We would make camp by the wayside, and our wedding night would be spent under the stars.

Lóch sent me out of the house while she put on her finery. It was a surprise, she told me with twinkling eyes. I had seen her gown already. In a tiny cottage, there is little room for secrets. But I kissed her and went outside anyway. We had a small supply of good hay we’d kept aside to give the horse a strengthening meal before we started out. I’d take that down to the field, not hurrying over it. By the time I got back Lóch would be ready.

One moment I was standing by the dry-stone wall, feeding the horse by hand. The next I was flat on my back, held immobile in the grip of a spell. I could not move so much as my little finger. I looked up and into my mother’s eyes.

‘Where is he?’

There was only one feeling in me, and that was terror — not for myself, not for Ciarán, who should be well away by now, but for Lóch. I didn’t make a sound. I couldn’t have told my mother what she wanted anyway. The charm she had set on me made every breath a mountain to climb. Speak? Hardly.

‘Where is he, Conri? Tell me! *Vanished in the night*, his keepers said. A child of that age does not wander off on his own.’ Her face was a spectral white, her eyes wine-dark. Her voice scourged me. ‘Speak, Conri! What did you see? Who came? Which way did they go?’

I lay mute, staring up at her like a dullard who cannot understand plain words. With a very small part of my mind, the part I was able to shield, I willed Lóch not to come out and look for me.

‘What is the matter with you, wretched boy? While you tend to horses like a feeble-minded farmhand, and no doubt waste day after day on your endless hummings and tinklings, my son has disappeared from under your nose! You fool, Conri, you stupid, treacherous fool! Tell me! You must know! Tell me who has taken him!’ She relaxed her spell a little; she wanted me capable of speech.

If I lied, she would recognise it instantly. If I told the truth she would be off after them in the blink of an eye. My silence could win them precious time. I lay there, looking up at her, and spoke not a word.

‘Come.’ My mother clicked her fingers. Now I could move. I could move in one direction only, and that was after her. A good thing. She led me away from Lóch, away from the grandmother, away from the cottage and into the forest. She led me, a dog on an invisible chain, across the margin and into the Otherworld. We stood in the shade of the oaks, the sorceress and I, and in my mind I offered an apology to my little brother, and another to his father, and my regrets to the two hard-faced men who were Ciarán’s half-brothers. I had not particularly liked them, but I had respected them. I had seen the bonds of family there, a phenomenon previously unknown to me. I hoped those

bonds were strong enough to withstand a sorceress's fury.

‘Very well, Conri.’ My mother’s face was calm now. She knew I could not run, not with her spell on me. She knew how easily I had bent and broken before her punishments in the years of my growing to a man. ‘I can ensure you never set your fingers to the harp strings again. I can turn you into a twisted, crippled apology for a man. I can do this between one breath and the next. There is one way you can save yourself, and that is by telling me what you know. Now, Conri. Right now.’

My heart thudded like a war drum; my skin broke out in cold sweat. She didn’t know about Lóch. Somehow, all summer long, she had been so engrossed in her new project, honing her human weapon, that she had taken her eyes right off me. She had not seen that I had fallen in love. She had threatened my hands; she had threatened my body. She had not used the threat that I most feared. Oh gods, if only I could be strong, both Ciarán and Lóch might be spared my mother’s wrath.

I drew a deep breath. ‘I know nothing,’ I said. ‘Nothing at all.’

I expected pain, and she delivered it. I put my teeth through my lip; I bloodied my palms with my nails. At a certain point I lost control of my bladder, ruining my wedding clothes. The sun rose higher. The Lughnasad ritual would be starting, and Lóch would be cross with me. I tried not to think of her. The most probing, the most penetrating charm my mother could devise must never find the small, safe place where my dear one was hidden, deep in my heart.

My mother must soon come to believe I had nothing to tell her, surely. I had never held out so long before. Always, eventually, I had delivered what she wanted once the punishment reached a certain level. Back then, I had not had Lóch to think of. Or my brother. I was starting to understand about family. As I writhed, I allowed hope in. *Soon she’ll give up on me. She’ll leave me here and head off to wherever she gave birth to him, and I can creep back over the margin. Lóch will forgive me. We can be wed tomorrow ...*

The sun rose higher still. The harvest ritual would be over; the folk of the village would be celebrating with mead and games. Lóch would be upset, worried.

Through the tears and blood and sweat I saw a change in my mother's eyes. She became very still, so still that only a person familiar with all her moods, as I was, would have realised what fury possessed her. 'You know something,' she said. 'You have lied to me; you have held something back. I cannot wait any longer, Conri. Someone's taken my jewel, my treasure, my son. Not his father; I left that man fit for nothing but dribbling into his beard. It will have been one of the brothers. They'll have taken him back to Sevenwaters, thinking to hide him in the nemetons. Fools. Not one of them can outpace me, outride me, outwit me.'

I thought of Ciarán. Might not my exceptional little brother and his formidable kinsmen stand strong even against her? *Hold your silence, Conri.* I was almost beyond speech anyway. My lip was split; my jaw was on fire. Every part of me hurt. I was glad Lóch could not see me.

'I knew you'd never amount to much,' my mother said, and one elegantly-shod foot came out to deliver a casual kick in the ribs.

And then, ah then, when she might have headed off on her quest and left me lying, a pathetic bundle of rags and bloodied, filthy flesh splayed amongst the hard roots of a great oak, I had to open my mouth, didn't I? I had to speak. Fool. Bitter, hopeless fool. 'In the end,' I whispered, 'Ciarán will turn against you. He will defeat you. I know it.' And I did, though how, I could not have said. Not magic. Not the Sight. But deep in the bone, I knew.

Looking in her eyes, beyond terror, I believed she would kill me. I was wrong. I believed she would find Lóch and destroy her. I was wrong there, too. What my mother did was set a *geis* on me.

'Conri son of Oonagh,' she said, raising both hands so the full sleeves of her robe spread out like wings, the fine blue fabric rippling in the forest breeze, 'you will pay the price for your disobedience!'

I was starting to feel very odd, as if the aching in my joints, the nausea, the burning and stinging and tearing sensations had been only a prelude to the grand tune of the day. Now I itched all over. My skin began to sprout like a field of new-sown wheat, save that this crop was night-black. My lips pushed forward, tightened, hardened; my throat began to close up. My limbs shrivelled. *A twisted cripple of a man ...* She was doing it. She would make me a man unfit to wed, unable to earn a living ... *Lóch loves you, Conri. Hold onto that. She will love you no matter what kind of monster you become.* Gods! I was shrinking, changing, my clothing falling off me, my feet becoming ... my feet becoming ... claws ...

‘From this day forth, Conri, take the form of a raven! You will live in this bodily shape, but your mind will remain that of a man. Every moment you will understand what your life might have been, had you not chosen to defy me!’

Raven. I was a raven. A dazzle of colour assaulted my eyes; all was light. Tiny sounds came clear to me from high in the canopy: chirp, rustle, whisper. I turned my head one way and the other, and the dizziness made me stagger on my splayed bird-feet. No wonder my skin itched so. I had sprouted feathers.

‘Fifteen years will you live thus, as a wild creature. When those fifteen years are done you will regain the form of a man. You’d best live solitary, Conri. For should any man or woman know who you are, should anyone at all recognise you as the man who dared thwart me, or as my son, or as Ciáran’s half-brother, or as the fellow who used to play the harp in these parts, should anyone know you and call you by your name before those fifteen years are up, you will be condemned to stay in that form —’ She paused, the word *forever* trembling on her lips. Perhaps the knowledge that we were kin stopped her; or perhaps she simply wanted to make this more entertaining, as is the nature of *geasa* generally. She was nothing if not inventive. ‘Until a woman agrees to marry you in your bird shape,’ she said. And after a pause for reflection, ‘A woman of *that* family. The Sevenwaters family.’ There was an unpleasant smile on her lips, a smile that told me how likely such a means of salvation must be. ‘None of them would ever agree,’ she added. ‘Not after what I did to them. The shadow of it will hang over generation on generation. Make sure

nobody knows you, Conri. Fly away, foolish musician, fly far, far away. *And never meddle in my affairs again.*'

Cursed to remain in raven form

I left Lóch on our wedding morn.

No word could speak, no story tell.

My life became not heav'n, but hell.

My mother could hardly have pronounced a crueler *geis* if she had known all about Lóch and our plans for the future. Fifteen years. In fifteen years' time, Lóch would be well past the safe age for childbearing. In fifteen years, her grandmother would be gone. For all that time I'd be incapable of providing for anyone but myself. Worse still, I had no way to explain to Lóch what had happened; why I had vanished on our wedding day with not a word, not a sign, not a clue. I could not even watch over her. There were only two people in the world, barring my mother, who I believed might recognise me in the form of a raven. One was my clever little brother. The other was the woman who loved me. If I were ever to be a man again, and if Lóch were ever to be my wife, I must keep out of her sight for fifteen years.

I stayed close, but not too close. And so I watched as it unfolded, the disaster I had brought down on the one I loved. The cottage was already promised; the cow was already sold. Lóch and her grandmother waited a while for me, relying on the hospitality of friends. The grandmother thought I had bolted, suddenly frightened of the responsibilities of marriage. Lóch refused to believe it. Some harm had come to me, she said; but I was strong and courageous, and eventually I would make my way back to her. I would have wept at that, if I could.

When others were growing weary of housing the two of them, they took up the old plan and headed north. I followed, unable to do more than keep an eye on them, but finding it impossible to leave. Lóch looked sad and tired; the grandmother was stoical, tending to the horse, finding firewood, saying little. I made an error, coming too close one day when I saw Lóch weeping by the fire, her head in her hands, her lovely shining hair lank and lifeless across her shoulders. She had taken off her boots. Her feet were red with blisters.

Perched on a branch nearby, I was startled when she raised her head suddenly and looked straight at me.

‘You again,’ she said, and smiled. I was possessed by the longing to wing down and alight beside her, to feel the gentle touch of her hand, to offer what comfort I could. But I saw in her eyes that I had already come too close. My broken heart cracked anew as I spread my wings and flew away, away, where there was no chance that she would see me. I could offer her nothing at all.

* * * *

Fifteen years. Lóch and I were seventeen when the *geis* was set on me; its term was almost our whole lives again. My imagination, trapped inside my bird form, ran riot with what could happen in such a time. I was a bard; I conjured up tragedies of a grand and entertaining nature. Well, I have said already that my tale was a sad one, and that much was true. Grand and entertaining, no. Just full of helpless, useless tears.

From this point on, it is short enough to tell. The early years passed. Lóch’s grandmother died within two winters of my transformation, carried off by an old people’s sickness, a cough, a loss of appetite, a quick fading. They had given up the search for their kinsfolk when the horse could not manage the distance, and had instead established themselves in a tumbledown hut abandoned by earlier tenants who perhaps feared the encroaching forest with its shadowy strangeness, its mysterious night time noises. Lóch eked out a living. She turned her hand to whatever tasks the season demanded, helping local farmers with haymaking or pear-picking or minding children. I could not leave her; it would have been like cutting out half my soul. I lived in the woods near her little house, making sure I saw but was not seen. I learned the habits of a wild creature. Sometimes it seemed to me I was losing myself, becoming more raven than man, until I saw Lóch coming home, a slight, purposeful figure, thinner now, the gentle curve of her cheek turned to a sharper line, her gaze watchful. On her own, living so far from other dwellings, she had an eye out for the perils one might expect in such a situation, and once or twice I saw her drive off a foolish fellow with her pitchfork. She was waiting for me. Four years on, five years on, she was still waiting.

I never saw my mother. I tried not to think of her, but bitterness grew in me with every passing season. I wondered if she had found Ciarán, or whether my silence, maintained at so great a cost, had won my little brother freedom and a place in the heart of his family. I felt some pangs of jealousy. Under the circumstances, that was not unreasonable. I began to understand how resentment and fury could drive a person mad. I did not want any insights into my mother's mind, but they came to me anyway. If I had possessed the means to destroy her I would have done it without a second thought. The wide-eyed bard who had fallen in love with a girl between firelight and water was no more. The raven was a different creature. With every passing year, some of my mother's darkness crept into my spirit.

You could imagine, I suppose, various endings to the tale of Lóch and Conri. I have said already that it did not follow the path of *happy ever after*. I watched her; she waited for me. By the time ten years had passed, Lóch had cleared a good-sized area around her cottage and established a garden, in which she grew not only vegetables for her own use, but a variety of herbs. She had taught herself certain healing skills, and received frequent visits from folk in search of simples. My love had a circle of friends and was no longer alone. She had admirers, too, men whom I hated for the way they looked at her, but she refused every offer of marriage. I dared not come close enough to hear what she said to them, but I imagined it. *I will not wed. I'm waiting for my sweetheart to come home*. After ten years, folk must have found this more than a little odd.

It happened in summer, late in the afternoon. Lóch had been working in the garden, and I watching her from a position high in the boughs of an oak, well screened from her sight. I loved the lines and curves of her body in the practical homespun she wore. I could see how time was changing her, but for me she would always be the perfect creature I had seen that very first night, the fire on her face, the moon at her back, the woman who had looked at me and made my heart hers in an instant.

Lóch had a work table outdoors, a place where she could enjoy the sun while preparing vegetables for the pot or herbs for drying. I gazed down from my branch, and it seemed to me every movement she made was a poem, and every glance from her weary eyes was a song. She lost her balance, her ankle

turning as she trod on a stone. The knife in her hand slipped. I heard her cry out, and I saw the blood flowing from her arm, a crimson stream, welling, spurting ... Lóch snatched up a cloth, pressed it against the red tide. The cloth filled with blood, the stream dyed her gown, her face went ashen pale. She fell to her knees, too weak to hold the staunching rag in place. So quick, oh, gods, so quick ...

I flew to her, bird-heart rattling in bird-breast, dark wings beating a panic song, shock driving the geis right out of my consciousness. I tried to help her. I tried, I tried. Where were my human hands that could press the cloth hard against the ebbing life? Where was my human voice that could shout for help? Where was my human strength, so I could pick her up and run to the nearest house? Gone, all gone. Nothing I could do would save her.

Lóch lay where she had fallen, her sweet features filmed with sweat, her skin pale as moonlight. With a fold of cloth held in my beak, witness of my futile attempt to stem the flow of blood, I stood by her right shoulder, my bird-eyes fixed on hers. *Beloved. Oh, beloved.*

She tried to speak; her lips moved, searching for words. I remembered the *geis* then, and cared nothing at all for it. Lóch was dying; I could not help her. I had failed her. If she was gone it mattered nothing whether I lived or died, whether I was bird or man. Without her I had no life. In that moment, all I wanted was that she look at me and know me, know that I had kept faith all these years, as she had. Know that I had not deserted her; know that I loved her still.

A film was creeping over her eyes; her breath faltered. *Oh, Lóch. Don't leave me. Don't leave me all alone. I love you. More than the moon and stars, more than the pure notes of the harp, more than the whole world. Lóch. Lóch, my love.*

She snatched a rasping breath. The dying eyes turned on me, sweet and steadfast as always. 'Conri,' she whispered. 'I knew you'd come.' And she was gone.

* * * *

There was a long time in the wilderness. Heedless of danger, caring nothing if I lived or died, I came close to starving myself, and closer to killing myself by other means, but the fey part of me made that a harder task than it might have been. As for the *geis*, it was no longer of any significance. I'd be a bird forever. What did that matter? I had nothing. I had nobody. I was less a raven than a festering mass of bitterness and sorrow, and if I became a man again, I did not think I would be a man worth knowing. So I wandered, and the years passed. I never took a mate; I never kept company with other ravens, for wild birds shunned me, sensing my difference. All feared me: man, the predator. Hah! If only they knew what a helpless, hopeless creature I truly was. If Lóch had not loved me, she would by now be happily wed, with children half-grown. She'd have a man who could warm her bed and provide for her. Loving me had destroyed her.

I do not know what changed in me. Perhaps it was visiting the hill where once I had picked up a stone patterned in red and grey: fire and earth. Perhaps it was seeing a man with his two little sons, walking on a lake shore and laughing. I remembered that I was not quite alone. If my sacrifice and Lóch's had not been in vain, somewhere in the north I had a brother. Ciarán would be a man now, close to the age his sombre half-brothers had been when they came for him. I remembered the name Sevenwaters. I considered the bitter, cynical, hopeless creature I was now, and knew I could not bear to live on like this, summer after summer, winter after winter, for all the lengthy span allotted to a half-and-half like myself. If I did not manage to make an end of myself, I would live far longer than the lifetime of an ordinary man. So would Ciarán. I went to find him.

'Ready to go?' he asks now. So lost have I been in my reverie that the lesson is finished, the novices have departed without my noticing, and Ciarán is watching me quizzically, his travelling bag strapped up and ready in his hand. Today we head off into the forest for a few days' solitude. It is our habit to make these quiet journeys from time to time. Ciarán gathers herbs, prays, meditates. I keep him company, making myself useful when I can.

We've been together many, many years. His father brought him safely to

the nemetons but died not long after, and Ciarán was raised by the druids. A choice was made to let the boy forget what little he knew of his origins. He grew up unaware that his father had been lord of Sevenwaters. In time, that proved costly indeed.

Ciarán became a fine man; a better man than I ever would have been. He had his own share of sorrows. Love drew him away from the druid path awhile. What our mother did to him and his sweetheart was crueller than the punishment she meted out to Lóch and me. Ciarán rose above it. My brother; my strong, clear-headed brother.

‘Come, then,’ he says. I fly to perch on his shoulder, and together we walk off into the forest of Sevenwaters.

* * * *

AISHA

‘Go,’ my father said. ‘Go and find out for yourself.’

It was fair enough. I was a woman grown, and though there were certain expectations I had not fulfilled — by my age, a woman was supposed to have a husband and children — my life so far had contained more than its share of adventures. I could always rise to a challenge. I was my father’s daughter, wasn’t I? He’d done both, the adventures and the family. It was family we were discussing now, the shadowy, mysterious part of it that was away to the northwest in Erin. I’d travelled to many places, but never there.

‘I will,’ I replied. ‘And you can come with me.’

Father laughed, his eyes crinkling up. He had my smallest half-brother, Luis, on his knee and was whirling a wooden rattle. The baby reached for it, shrieking with delight. ‘Me? I’m an old man, Aisha.’

In years, perhaps he was. He didn’t look old, save for the touch of snow in his dark hair and those smile lines on his sun-browned skin. ‘Is that what Mercedes says?’ I asked, knowing my stepmother said nothing of the sort. Mercedes was a few years my junior: my father’s third wife, and mother of his youngest children. Ours was a noisy, busy establishment that saw a constant stream of visitors, mostly folk from the village wanting Father’s advice on matters of law or religion or the care of sick animals. He had become a father to all of them since we settled here. His seafaring days were done; in that sense, perhaps he was old, but there was a vigour about him like that of an aged olive tree, hardy, tough, his roots sunk deep in the land. And fruitful; the children kept coming. The place was full of toddlers and animals — Father had never learned to resist the pleading eyes of a homeless dog.

‘Never mind that,’ he said now. ‘You go. Sail on the *Sofia* when Fernando next takes her to Dublin. You’re an enterprising girl, Aisha; you can make your own way from there.’

‘And what do I do when I get to Sevenwaters? March up to the front door and say, Good morning, I’m your — what, great-niece? Second cousin? Sorry my father couldn’t come; it’s only been forty years.’

‘Closer to fifty,’ Father said, lifting Luis up against his shoulder. ‘Just as well I taught my children Irish. At least you’ll be able to introduce yourself. Tell them your father’s a doddering ancient who has trouble hobbling as far as the front door. Tell them whatever you like.’

I wondered, for the hundredth time, why the bonds of family had not drawn him home in all those years. With his ships loading and unloading in Dublin regularly, he could easily have gone. Sevenwaters was not so very far north of that port, provided one could negotiate the borders between Norse and Irish territories, which were under ongoing dispute. But while Father had a hundred stories of his boyhood, and a hundred more about heroes, monsters and warrior women, he never talked about what might have become of his kin since he last saw them.

‘I don’t want to know, Aisha,’ he said, reading my thoughts on my face. ‘Every time I got news, in those first years after I left, it was bad news. My brothers dying, one after another, all uselessly. The borders shrinking; war and madness. Besides, I like the sun. It’s always raining in those parts. And I’d miss Mercedes and the little ones.’ After a moment he added, ‘I suppose Conor may be still alive — your druid uncle. It’s been a long time. And my nephew may still be chieftain at Sevenwaters; he was only a lad when my eldest brother died. But they’ll be strangers to you, despite the tie of blood.’

It was hard to think of my father’s family as strangers. They were in the most enthralling of his stories, the one that told of a disaster that had nearly destroyed them all. It included a wicked stepmother — when I thought of Mercedes, this made me laugh, for my father’s rosy-cheeked, smiling young wife was as far from that figure as I could imagine — and a transformation wrought by magic, six brothers turned into swans and saved only by their sister’s courage and endurance. My father had been one of them. I knew those boys from the inside out. I knew the intensity of their anguish; I felt their terror; I understood their guilt. I knew them up till the point when the ordeal

was over and my father, Padriac, who was the youngest of them, decided to walk away from Sevenwaters and never look back. And yet they were not real. They were characters in a story, like Cu Chulainn the great hero, or Emer who was turned into a fly. The notion of meeting them in the flesh felt very strange. They would be old now. But perhaps they were like Father. I only had to look into his eyes to see the boy there, the same who had once splinted the legs and salved the wounds of injured creatures in Erin, and who still did it here in Xixón, far from the shores of home.

‘You must miss it sometimes,’ I said. ‘You must miss them.’

‘My life is rich, Aisha,’ said Father, patting his son rhythmically on the back. Luis was hungry; the rattle of pots and pans from the cooking area told me Mercedes was preparing a meal. ‘I’ve made my home wherever I travelled. And you are your mother’s daughter, my dear. A restless soul; an adventurer. So go, and go with my blessing. When you come back, I’ll be ready to hear the tale.’

* * * *

I owed it to both of them, to Father who had always trusted me, no matter how wild an adventure I attempted, and to Mother who had perished at sea while working as his first mate, to go ahead with the plan that had sprung from nowhere. Two months later, I was stepping off the *Sofia* in Dublin, where my general appearance caused bystanders to gawk and whisper behind their hands. What went relatively unremarked in Galicia was clearly the height of exoticism in this city of wheat-fair, pale-skinned Norsemen and slight, dark Irish. I’d offered to give Fernando a hand with the unloading, but he’d declined, saying I’d only attract crowds that would get in his way. So I wished him well and headed off on my own, telling him I’d pick up a lift home when next he made landfall here.

There were one or two incidents by the wayside. Not every traveller in Erin is respectful of womenfolk, but I’d had plenty of practice at fending off advances of various kinds; there were years and years of dented skulls and bruised privates behind me. At a wayside inn I arm-wrestled a local farmer for a jug of ale and ended up sharing it with him and his friends. I didn’t talk

any more than I needed to. Demonstrating my fluent Irish would only mean all sorts of questions, and idle curiosity bored me. With Father's map in my head and a sailor's sense of direction — I'd captained the *Sofia* for Fernando more than once — I headed north to Sevenwaters.

I reached the edge of the forest at dusk. I had seen plenty of forests in my time, back home in Xixón and in other parts of the world on one voyage or another. Hot, damp forests full of bright birds and howling creatures. Cold, crisp, empty forests where snow bent the boughs of fir and spruce, and bears lay in winter dreams. This was less forest than blanket of darkness, lying over hill and valley in mysterious, shadowy silence. I decided to camp overnight and go on by daylight. It wasn't just the brooding quiet of the place, the sense of its being somewhere out of ordinary time and space. There were guard posts to north and south, well-manned even at this hour. Likely the whole forest was ringed by them. I didn't suppose those guards would put an arrow through me first and ask questions later. But they might well try to apprehend me. I hadn't decided yet how I would introduce myself to my father's long-lost family, but I knew I didn't intend to walk into their hall with a spear shoved in my back and some man at arms announcing that he'd caught me spying.

It was a cold night. I made no fire, but slept rolled in my blanket. Soon after dawn I packed up and set out into the forest. Somewhere in these woods there was a lake, a big one. Beside the lake was a keep, and in that keep lived the family of Sevenwaters, my father's kin.

Father had warned me about the paths through this forest, both directly, when he knew I was coming here, and indirectly, through the stories he'd told over the years. I'd never been sure whether to believe the implication that eldritch folk made their homes here alongside the human ones. In the tales there were two other races of people in Erin, both of them ancient. Understanding between the various groups was quite unusual in other parts of the land, but at Sevenwaters they all lived more or less side by side. When a person told tales about cows with wings and giant serpents that spewed up precious stones, it did lead one to assume that he was given to flights of the imagination. On the other hand, Father was the most practical of men, whether removing a thorn from the foot of a dog or talking over trade matters with Fernando and me. Besides, there was one especially uncanny story in his

past that I had come to believe must be true, the one about him and his brothers being turned into swans. So perhaps he was right about the paths through the Sevenwaters forest changing of their own accord from one day to the next. It was to keep out strangers, he had explained. Many was the traveller who had gone astray somewhere in this tangle of pathways, only to come to light years later as a little pile of bleached bones. But I would be all right; I would find the way. I was family. For me the paths would lead where they should.

I considered this as I headed further into the dense and murky woods. It was all right in theory. The difficulty lay in the fact that I looked nothing like Father. Since stepping off the *Sofia* in Dublin I had seen no woman, and few men, as tall as I was; I had seen nobody, male or female, with skin as dark as mine. My features were not those of an Irishwoman. I took after my mother's side of the family. How would these uncanny forces — supposing they did exist — pick me out as my father's daughter when all the outward signs suggested I was as out of place here as an olive in a bowl of grapes? It was supposed to be less than one day's walk from the forest's edge to the keep of Sevenwaters, depending on where one started. Since I was heading for a lake, I'd find a stream and follow its course. I'd watch out for markers — rock formations, notable trees, ponds, clearings — and with luck I would reach my destination before nightfall.

It was a pleasant enough walk, for the main part. The woods were not as empty as they'd seemed in that odd dusk light, but full of birds and other creatures about their daily business. I saw no uncanny folk, but I spotted a deer, a wild pig and a wary fox. I found a stream and, after refilling my water skin, I followed its course as best I could. Here and there the waterway lost me, gurgling among tumbled rocks netted with brambles. The day passed, and the massed trees stretched ahead. By morning light I had admired the myriad greens of their foliage, the patterns of sun and shade, ever-changing; I had enjoyed walking to the sound of rustling leaves and calling birds. Now, in late afternoon, they were starting to look more like guards, an army of dark trunks blocking my way. I found I was longing for open ground.

I walked on, sure I was heading due west, yet uneasy, for there was a sameness about this row of leaning beeches, this stone somewhat resembling a toad, that suggested I had passed this way before. I was not the kind of

traveller who walked in circles. There was a true direction in me; I had never been lost. Under my breath I uttered one or two choice epithets, keeping to Galician, though with only the poxy trees to hear me I might just as well have cursed in Irish. This was ridiculous. If I didn't find a better path soon I'd be spending the night in here. All right, I had a blanket, I had food and water, I had slept in far less comfortable places in my time, but I grappled with the sense that the forest of Sevenwaters was shutting me out. Or in.

'My grandfather was a chieftain of Sevenwaters,' I said aloud, finding myself faintly ridiculous. 'If I can't come in, who can?'

I expected no reply and I got none, save for the mocking *kraak* of a raven as it flew to alight on a branch nearby. The creature turned its head to one side, assessing me. Was I imagining things, or did it have a particularly inimical expression in its eye? As I looked up, it flew a short distance away, then alighted and peered at me again.

'Would I trust a bird with eyes like those to show me the way?' I muttered. 'Not for an instant. But as I'm headed in that direction anyway, by all means tag along.'

The light was fading fast. The thick canopy and the filtered sun had made me misjudge the time of day. With hardly a clearing to be found and the broad, leaf-strewn paths of this morning completely absent, the wise choice would be to make camp the next time I came upon some rocks that might provide shelter, and accept the fact that I would not reach the keep today.

There were, of course, no rocks. I was starting to believe Father's stories now, and wishing I had asked him for better directions. As for the wretched raven, I didn't like the look of it at all. It seemed altogether too knowing for a wild creature, and it wouldn't go away.

'Rocks,' I said, slithering down a muddy incline bordered by stinging nettles. 'An outcrop, perhaps a cave, that's what I want.' I eyed the bird with distaste, wondering if ravens made good eating. I suspected this one's flesh would be as tough and bitter as the look in its eye. I slid to a halt, digging my

walking staff into the ground. ‘Or then again ...’

We had emerged at the edge of a small, circular glade. It was a patch of light in the dark forest, and in its centre the stream flowed into a neat pool circled by flat stones. A campfire burned on the stones, and by it sat a man, cross-legged. His back was as straight as a child’s, his hair a striking dark auburn, his eyes a peculiar shade of mulberry. He looked around my own age, and was clad in a long grey robe. As I stood at the edge of the clearing, waiting for him to speak, the raven winged its way over and landed on his shoulder. I winced, imagining those claws digging in.

The red haired man rose gracefully to his feet. His garb seemed that of a religious brother of some kind, though I saw neither cross nor tonsure. All he wore around his neck was a white stone strung on a cord.

‘Please, warm yourself at our campfire,’ he said courteously. ‘We see few travellers here. Have you lost your way?’

I moved forward, feeling not only his gaze but that of the bird. ‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Lost my way? Not exactly.’ I studied the pair more closely, wondering if there was anything uncanny about them. I wasn’t sure how one could tell. There was a neatly strapped bundle over near the trees and a blanket spread out, as well as cooking gear and some other items — corked jars, a little book, a bundle of rowan twigs, a sheaf of herbs. I saw no weapons. ‘I’m heading for the keep of Sevenwaters. It can’t be far from here.’

‘Less than a mile as the crow flies,’ the man said. ‘But dusk is close. I’d advise you to wait until morning, then we can walk on with you and show you the way. You’re welcome to camp here, if you wish.’

Not a word about who I was or the nature of my business. I liked that. On the other hand, it showed a remarkable lack of caution. What was to stop me from sticking a knife in the fellow’s back and making off with all his worldly goods?

The raven gave a *kraaa*, which I interpreted as: *Don't flatter yourself, we can overpower you with our eyes shut*, or something to that effect. I shot the bird a look of dislike. 'Unusual pet,' I commented, putting down my pack and lowering myself to sit beside it.

The red-haired man almost smiled. 'Fiacha is an old friend,' he said. 'Far more than an ordinary raven, as you can perhaps see for yourself. My name is Ciarán.'

That startled me. I scrutinised his features anew, seeking signs of my father. This was a handsome man, strong-jawed, the planes of his face well-defined, the eyes deep and watchful. Ciarán. There was a Ciarán in the tales of family, a half-brother born of a sorceress, who had been spirited away from home and had not returned until after my father was gone. The sorceress had been one of those others, the ancient races I was not quite sure I believed in. If this was the same Ciarán, his mother had come close to destroying my father's family. But no, this could not be the man; he was far too young.

'I'm a druid,' he said. 'The nemetons where my kind live and work are not far from here. Fiacha and I are spending a few days alone in quiet meditation. A respite from my teaching duties. I am responsible for the novices.'

'Then I've interrupted your time alone.'

'As to that,' Ciarán said, organising a cook pot, water, beans, herbs with a deftness obviously born of long practice, 'my visions have been troubling. I want no more today. I would welcome your company, if you wish to remain with us.'

I asked no questions until the supper was cooked and we were eating it by the fire. Night was falling in the forest around us; birds sang their last farewells to the fading light. The raven, Fiacha, sat hunched on a tree stump nearby, his unnerving gaze following every mouthful from bowl to fingers to lips. If he was hungry, why didn't he fly off and catch something?

‘Do you know the Sevenwaters family well?’ This seemed a safe way to broach the subject.

Ciarán glanced up from his meal. ‘I do.’

‘You mentioned that you are a druid. Can you tell me if there is a man called Conor among your number? He would be old, over sixty by now.’

A silence. Then he said, ‘Why do you ask?’

There seemed no particular reason to hold back, so I came right out with it. ‘My father’s name is Padriac. He’s Conor’s youngest brother. I would be interested to meet Conor, and perhaps the current chieftain and his family. That’s if I get to the keep. Father told me family can find their way in this forest, but I can’t say it’s been easy.’

‘You are Padriac’s daughter?’ A smile of delight and wonderment transformed Ciáran’s sombre features. ‘Then you will most certainly find your way. In any case, Fiacha and I can guide you to the keep, as I said earlier. No hurry. For now, let’s enjoy our meal and the quiet of this place, and perhaps exchange a tale or two. I did not know your father. He left Sevenwaters when I was an infant. But Conor is still here. My brother is chief druid, in excellent health despite his years, and much respected. He will most certainly want to meet you.’

My mind was working hard. *My brother.* ‘Forgive me,’ I said, ‘but does this mean you are indeed the same Ciarán who was born to the chieftain of Sevenwaters and a ... a ...’ I seldom found myself short of words, but this was delicate.

‘I am that Ciarán. My father was Colum of Sevenwaters. My mother was one of the Fair Folk.’ He spoke plainly, as if this knowledge were in no way extraordinary.

It went some way to explaining why he looked so young. Father’s tales

had taught me the Tuatha de Danann were a long-lived race and kept their youthful looks into old age. Observing the calm expression on Ciáran's face, the relaxed, graceful hands as he passed me a chunk of bread, a wedge of cheese, I considered the likelihood that along with her longevity he had inherited his mother's facility for magic. A druid. Were druids something akin to mages?

'You spoke of visions,' I said. 'What kind of visions?'

'It is part of our discipline to practise the use of still water — a scrying bowl, or a pool — for this purpose,' Ciarán said. 'We may see past or present; we may see a possible future. We may be shown what might have been. Or nothing at all. Some folk have a latent ability. Several in the family have a strong natural gift. We do not always use water. Images may be present in the smoke from a fire, or we may see them after fasting, a vigil, a time of bodily denial. Unspoken truths may visit us in sleep.'

I shivered. He sounded so matter-of-fact. I watched him as he passed a slice of cheese to Fiacha, who snatched it from the outstretched fingers and swallowed it in a gulp. 'How long has the bird been with you?' I asked.

'Long. Fiacha has seen me through many trials. Folk think him ill-tempered. He has his reasons for that. Time after time he has aided me in the cause of good. He has worked with me to battle the forces of darkness. And indeed, to quell the darkness within. Our mother ... never mind that. Let us exchange a tale or two. May I know your name?'

'Aisha. It is a name from my mother's country. He brought her here once, he said, when his sister was dying. But they didn't stay. Father was changed by what happened to him when he was young. He wanted to live his own life, far from this place.'

Ciarán nodded gravely. 'I, too, went away,' he said. 'I made a choice to return. I have my brethren. I have the family, though I do not dwell among them. I have Fiacha. I have my memories and my visions.'

He was a man of such controlled demeanour, it was only the slightest break in the mellow tone, the very smallest change in the eyes that hinted at suffering, regret, a depth of sorrow I had no hope of understanding. As Ciarán spoke, Fiacha flew across to perch on his shoulder again, almost as if offering comfort.

‘Clearly your father wed and had at least one daughter,’ Ciarán said, entirely calm again. ‘Is he in good health?’

I grinned. ‘Robust health. Thrice married, and a father of many children, the newest a babe not long out of swaddling. Beloved in his home village; owner of a significant trading fleet that is mostly managed by my half-brother these days. My stepmother is a woman of four and twenty. She loves Father dearly. He made a good life for himself.’

‘And taught his children to speak Irish like natives.’

‘He said the stories wouldn’t sound right in Galician.’

We sat in silence for a while. I felt suddenly edgy. I had plenty more questions to ask, but it seemed to me there was something unspoken, something weighty that the druid knew, and the bird knew, and I didn’t. I held my tongue. Ciarán had been perfectly courteous and open, and there was no reason at all to suspect him.

‘What of you, Aisha?’ he asked. ‘Have you a family of your own, a husband, children?’

Kraaak. The sound conveyed a desire for the conversation to take some other turn, or to cease so we could all sleep.

‘It’s uncanny,’ I murmured. ‘That bird speaks a language I can almost understand. No, I have neither. I’ve never felt the need or the wish for a husband, and as for children, the kind of life I lead hardly has room for them.’ As I spoke, I thought of Mercedes and her many sisters, cousins and aunts. At

all times of day and night there tended to be a bevy of women in our house. If I had produced a child or two, there would have been no shortage of doting substitute mothers. ‘I don’t really want them,’ I said, making myself be honest and thinking, not for the first time, that darkness and a campfire encourage all manner of confidences between strangers.

Ciarán nodded. ‘A child is the most precious gift of all,’ he said quietly. ‘But you cannot understand that until you have one of your own.’

This idea was familiar from the little talks I got from Mercedes and her kinswomen, lectures that had become increasingly frequent as I approached the age at which I might as well give up thoughts of motherhood. I had not expected it from Ciarán. Nor had I expected him to say it the way he did. ‘But you’re a druid,’ I blurted out.

‘I was not always a druid. Nor was Fiacha here always a raven.’

This was getting beyond the acceptable borders of oddity. ‘What did you say?’

‘That is a tale for another day,’ Ciarán said. ‘Let us have something else instead. Has your father told you the saga of the clurichaun wars?’

He was an expert storyteller. While I had heard the clurichaun tale before, Ciarán had his own version, droll and witty, and I was soon captivated. I told a tale in my turn, about a princess and a drowned settlement. He told another, and all too soon it was time to settle by the campfire for the night. I fell asleep still smiling. The raven roosted above us, a deeper patch of shadow.

The next day we struck camp and walked on, and as we walked we told more stories: the voyage of Bran, Cruachan’s cave, the dream of Aengus. The prince who kept his dead wives in a closet; the spurned lady left to starve in a tower, her ghost thereafter scratching at the window every night and keeping the household in terror. Fiacha punctuated our tales with his hoarse cries.

Time was not softening his evident disapproval of his master's new travelling companion.

Dusk fell on the second day, and we still had not reached Sevenwaters.

'I thought this was only one day's walk,' I said as Ciarán stopped in a comfortable camping spot. A rock wall sheltered a patch of level ground, and there was a pool among stones, much like the one by which we'd camped the previous night. 'I'm sure that's what my father said.'

'Sometimes it takes a little longer.' Ciarán was calm. Out came the cook pot, the bunch of herbs, the flint and tinder. 'Could you gather some dry wood while we still have light?'

I busied myself collecting fallen branches and piling them nearby. I watched him building a fire, and after a while I asked, 'Will we reach Sevenwaters tomorrow, do you think?' He seemed a good man, but I could not help being a little suspicious. If he had told the truth about his identity, he was half fey. What if he was guiding me, not to the home of Father's kinsfolk, but down one of those tracks spoken of in the tales, leading to the Otherworld? There were stories of people getting trapped in that uncanny realm for a hundred years. I might relish adventures, but the prospect of such a journey was a little too much even for me.

'Perhaps,' Ciarán said in answer to my question. 'If not tomorrow, then the next day. If not the next, then the one after. Are you in a hurry, Aisha?'

'No,' I said. 'But I'm perplexed. One *mile* as the *crow flies*, I think you told me. It seems you've chosen quite a circuitous path, Ciarán.'

He smiled. 'The path is as long as the stories we tell,' he said. 'It is as long as it needs to be. Don't concern yourself; we'll reach our destination at the right time.'

I could think of no appropriate answer. It would be sheer folly to strike

out on my own; I had no choice but to stay with him. The evening passed. We sat by the fire and told more tales, wondrous, grand, surprising and silly in their turn. I achieved a minor miracle by coaxing Fiacha down from his branch and onto my shoulder. I could feel his claws through my woollen tunic.

‘Come, then,’ I murmured, holding my lure — a piece of the cheese the bird so liked — between my fingers. ‘Come on, I’m not so bad.’ The raven sidled down my arm, step by cautious step. I thought he would snatch the prize and fly off, but I kept talking to him quietly, as I had seen my father do with wild creatures, and he stayed there long enough to eat the morsel from my fingers. I reached slowly across with my other hand; brushed the soft breast feathers. The bird fixed his bright gaze on me, and my heart went still with the strangeness of the moment. Then, in an eye-blink, he was gone back up to his perch.

‘Ciarán?’

‘Mm?’

‘Do I remember correctly, that you told me Fiacha was not always a raven? What did you mean by that?’

‘Ah.’ My companion settled himself more comfortably by the fire. ‘I imagine your father has told you many tales of Sevenwaters. You know what I am and can guess, perhaps, what my mother’s line has given me. I could tell you a story, a remarkable and sad one. You might find it easier to believe if I did not use words, but showed you instead.’

My skin prickled. ‘Showed me? In pictures?’ I could not imagine how this might be achieved by night, in the middle of the forest.

‘In a vision. If you are open to it, I can reveal the story to you in the water of this pool. Indeed, that would be entirely apt, since the tale begins between firelight and water.’

Fiacha ruffled his feathers, moving restlessly on his branch.

‘Why is he doing that?’ I asked, eyeing the bird. ‘Does he not want the tale told? Or is he merely complaining of hunger or a sore belly?’

‘He thinks he does not want the tale told,’ Ciarán said, apparently taking me quite seriously. ‘But there is no doubt that this is the time to tell it. I would guess you are afraid of very little, Aisha. There is no need to fear this. The challenge lies not in the tale itself, but in the choice it reveals.’

‘A choice for whom?’ I was intrigued. I had always prided myself on meeting whatever challenges came my way.

Ciarán did not answer my question, but moved to kneel by the pool, stretching out a long hand towards me. ‘Will you try it?’ he asked. Fiacha turned his back on us. He could hardly have made his disapproval more plain. ‘You’ll need to sit beside me, here, and keep hold of my hand. Fix your gaze on the water, and you will see what I see. It may take some time. Be patient.’

It did not take long at all. Images formed on the surface of the pool and in its depths, and while I held Ciáran’s hand I could see them quite clearly. I thought I could hear voices, too, though here in the glade all was quiet. Perhaps they spoke only in our minds. It was indeed a strange tale, and a sad one: a big brother and a little brother; a malevolent mother and a courageous father; true love turned to sorrow and loss; an ingeniously cruel curse. It was a tale that fitted neatly around the one I already knew of Sevenwaters, the story of the Lady Oonagh, who wed my grandfather and turned his sons into swans. Conri’s was a tale fit to bring a strong man to tears. When it was done, and the pond showed no more than a ripple or two, we sat for some time in complete silence. Glancing at the bird, trying to imagine what might be in his thoughts, I met a glare of challenge. *Don’t you dare feel sorry for me.* It came to me that I had been told this tale for a purpose.

‘A choice,’ I said flatly. ‘You’re offering me the choice to marry a raven.’

Ciarán stretched his arms and flexed his fingers; he had become cramped, sitting so still to hold the vision. ‘Offering, no. Setting it before you, yes. I thought it just possible you might consider it.’

‘No man would want a wife who wed him out of pity,’ I said.

The raven — Conri, if it was indeed he — gave a derisive cry. The sound echoed away into the darkness under the trees.

‘Is it pity you feel?’ Ciarán asked.

‘For the bird, no. He’s a wary, prickly sort of creature, and I wonder what kind of man he would be, if it were actually possible to reverse this — *geis*, is that the word? — by going through with a marriage. Who would perform such a marriage, anyway? What priest could possibly countenance such a bizarre idea?’

‘The one you see before you,’ Ciarán said. ‘Performing the ritual of hand-fasting is one of a druid’s regular duties.’

I felt a chill all through me. He could do it; he could do it right now, tonight, and if the peculiar story proved to be true, I could free a man from a life-long hell set on him simply because he’d wanted to protect a child. And I’d be saddled with a husband I didn’t want, a man who’d likely prove to be just as irritable and unpleasant as the raven was. I wondered if I had in fact fallen asleep in the forest, and would wake soon with a crick in my neck and the nightmare memory fading fast.

‘What possible reason could I have for agreeing to do this?’ I asked, then remembered something. ‘Wait! Did you actually know I was coming? Did you guess who I was? He came to find me. Fiacha. He led me to you. Don’t tell me —’

‘Nothing so devious, Aisha. I did not know who you were until you mentioned your father. I had seen you in a vision, earlier, approaching this place. I sent Fiacha out to find you, thinking you might need help. Perhaps some other power has intervened to aid my brother here, for your arrival seems almost an act of the gods.’

I thought about this for a while. Reason said I must give a polite refusal. A small, mad part of me, a part I recognised all too well, urged me to be bold, to take a chance, to do what nobody else in the length and breadth of Erin would be prepared to do. That impulse had led me into some unusual situations in my time. I’d never once failed to extricate myself safely. I considered the story itself and the odd bond between these two half-brothers. ‘I have some questions,’ I said.

‘Ask them.’

‘First — is it safe to speak his name now? To acknowledge that I know who he is?’

‘Quite safe. That part of the *geis* died with his beloved Lóch.’

‘Then tell me, how did you learn Conri’s story, and when? Was it like this, in a vision?’

‘Some of it was revealed to me in that way. But I knew already what had become of him. She told me. Our mother. There was a time when I went back to her. A dispute with my family drove me from Sevenwaters. There were aspects of our mother’s craft I wanted to learn. She welcomed me, little knowing the depth of my loathing. She gloated over what she had done to Conri; she thought herself ingenious. It was another reason to destroy her.’

‘She’s gone, then?’

His mouth went into a hard line. ‘She is no more.’

‘Ciarán ...’ I hesitated.

‘Mm?’

‘What she did to Conri — it was very long ago. Haven’t you tried to undo the *geis* before? There must have been other unwed girls in the family over the years.’

He grimaced. ‘It seemed too much to ask. As you can see, he himself has mixed feelings on the matter.’

‘Can you ... can you communicate with Conri?’

‘You mean speaking mind to mind, without words? Alas, no. We have an understanding; it has developed over the years and has served us well enough. But I cannot ask him what he wants, Aisha. I can only use my own judgement. He needs to do this. And I want it done. He’s my brother, and I owe him. I cannot put it more simply than that.’

‘Then why now and not before? If it seemed too much to ask those other women, why is it all right to ask me?’

Ciarán regarded me with his dark mulberry eyes. ‘You seem ... formidable,’ he said quietly. ‘A woman travelling all alone with perfect confidence; a woman of wit and intelligence, balance and integrity. Strong; brave; whole. If anyone can do this, I believe you can.’

‘You don’t even know me.’

His lips curved. ‘You think not? We’ve exchanged many tales as we walked, Aisha. We’ve passed through the forest of Sevenwaters together. Besides, I am the son of a sorceress; I have abilities beyond the strictly human. I believe my assessment of you is accurate. If I did not, I would never

have suggested this course of action. Would I trust my brother's future to a woman who was doomed to fail?'

The situation was nothing short of ridiculous. I considered the possibility that Ciarán was actually completely mad, one of those wild men who are supposed to wander about the woods and commune with the trees, and that the next thing he might do was strangle me or have his way with me, or both.

'Why do you smile?' he asked.

'I'm wondering what he's like now,' I said. 'Conri. In the vision he was just a lad, barely become a man. He hadn't even —' I broke off as a new thought struck me. Conri had been transformed into a raven on his wedding day. If I did what Ciarán wanted, I'd be acquiring a husband who was not only elderly, but also inexperienced in the art of love. The prospect hadn't much to recommend it. 'There would be rather a large gap between our ages,' I said. My mind quashed this objection instantly with an image of Father and Mercedes dancing together by lantern light. Tenderness. Passion. Complete understanding. A pang of some hitherto unknown emotion went through my heart. Longing? Yearning? That was crazy. My life was a good one, a complete one. I did not need this complication.

'He was a goodlooking boy,' Ciarán said. 'He's likely to be a well-made man. And he is the same kind as I am: my half-brother. I expect that in physical appearance Conri will seem no older than five and thirty.'

'And he'll come complete with an ill temper and a load of bitterness on his shoulders.'

'It's not as if there's been no cause for that,' said Ciarán mildly. 'And once he is a man again, it may change. You could change it, Aisha.'

'And if I can't bear the fellow?'

'A hand-fasting can be made for a finite period. A year and a day. Five

summers. Whatever is deemed appropriate.’ After a moment, Ciarán added, ‘I must be quite honest with you. To be sure of meeting the requirements of a *geis*, one might need to make permanent vows.’

‘I need time. Time to think.’ By all the saints. Was I actually considering this? What had got into me?

‘Of course.’ Ciarán looked as if he’d be quite content to sit here by the fire all night if necessary. ‘You’ll be tired,’ he added. ‘Take all the time you need. He’s waited many years; a little longer can make no difference.’

A little longer. Or much, much longer. If I said no, Conri might be condemned to stay in bird form more or less indefinitely. The raven seemed bitter and warped. What would he be like in another twenty years? I began to realise what a patient man Ciarán was. A good brother. They both were.

‘You may prefer that we lead you straight to the keep in the morning,’ Ciarán said now. ‘I can introduce you to Sean and his family: his wife, two unwed daughters and a very small son. And Conor; I could take you to meet him.’

There was something he wasn’t saying.

‘But?’

‘It just occurred to me,’ Ciarán said with unusual hesitancy, ‘that if we performed the hand-fasting *before* you went to meet the family, your explanations would be much easier. You arrive with your husband, the two of you receive a delighted welcome. Conri is accepted as a member of the family without question. There would be no need to speak of his past or of his parentage. It seems you have travelled widely, Aisha, and met many folk from different lands. The fact that you were wed to a man of Erin would hardly provoke questions. Appearing as a single woman travelling alone, then suddenly acquiring a husband more or less from nowhere, surely would.’

‘Do these people know about Fiacha?’

‘They know him only as a raven.’

I stared into the fire, trying to imagine how it would be to walk into the keep of Sevenwaters as a married woman. I could not picture it. Instead, I saw young Conri facing his mother, holding his nerve against the onslaught of her cruelty. That boy with the lovely voice, losing himself. And the raven by Lóch’s side, watching her die.

What Ciarán had just suggested would be too much for Conri. It would be too soon. Once the transformation was done, he’d need time, space, quiet. I’d seen the way Father tended to abused animals, how he gentled them, waiting until they were ready to take the first steps forward. Gentle was not a word folk used when describing me. But I supposed I could learn.

‘If I agreed to this,’ I said, ‘I wouldn’t take him straight to meet the family. It’s been a long time for him. We’d be best on our own awhile. He needs to mend. Until that’s begun, he should see only you and me, I think. I know how to fend for myself in the woods, Ciarán. All we’d need would be shelter and quiet, until he’s healed.’ Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that the bird had turned around. He was looking at me.

‘You have the time for this?’ Ciarán asked.

I had told Fernando I would catch up with him next time the ship came into Dublin. It could equally well be the time after, or the time after that.

‘There’s no point in agreeing to something if I’m not going to do it properly,’ I said. ‘I’d be foolish if I expected a man to step out of such an ordeal with no damage at all. And if I’m to be his wife, it’s up to me to help him get over it, I suppose. I should make it quite clear’ — I glanced over at Fiacha, who had gone so still he resembled a carven effigy of a bird — ‘that I never planned to settle in these parts. That doesn’t change. I can stay awhile. As long as he needs. Then he’ll be coming back to Xixón with me. He should

meet my father.' It was quite difficult to surprise Father; in that, he was like me. But I was sure, *Here's my husband. Not long ago he was a raven*, would startle even him.

Ciarán had gone rather pale. I think that up until now he had not given real credence to the possibility that I might say yes.

'I suppose,' I added, 'it's not so much a husband I'll be getting as an adventure.'

* * * *

CONRI

My frail bird body shudders. I watch my brother as he readies himself for the hand-fasting ritual, and there's so much in me I think I might split apart. Lóch, sweet, lovely Lóch, forever lost. And this woman, this tall black woman with the clear eyes and strong jaw, a woman like a shining blade, a woman as unlike my sweetheart as anyone could be; why is she doing this? She almost frightens me. *Lóch, dear heart, I'm sorry. It should have been you by my side. Lóch, don't hate me for this.*

'Are you ready?' Ciarán asks.

I cannot answer, but the woman — Aisha, her name is — nods her head. At the last moment, she reaches up and tweaks a corner of her elaborate head-cloth. The cloth unwinds; a cascade of hair descends, black as night and glossy as silk. Even my ascetic brother gawks at her. Suddenly, despite her height, her garb that might be a man's — long tunic, woollen hose and boots — despite the strength and challenge in her gaze, a warrior's look, Aisha is all woman.

She turns her dark eyes full on me. 'Conri,' she says, quiet as a breeze in the grass, 'I'm sorry your hand-fasting cannot be as you once dreamed. I did not know your Lóch, but I am certain she would not want you to spend the rest of your life this way. I can never replace her. But I can offer you a new kind of life. I can offer my best effort.'

Sheer terror churns in my gut. I don't want this! Why would I want my life back without Lóch? If this works, what will I be, so many years on? A wrinkled greybeard with the mind of that young lad who thought himself man enough to wed and be a father? What if Ciarán speaks the words and I become a creature with a man's body and a bird's mind? What if I turn into a monster? I never asked for this, I never expected anyone to do it, I don't want it ...

‘Are you ready, Conri?’

I look at Ciáran’s face, high-boned, steady-eyed, calm as still water. I do not look at Aisha; there is no need. I feel her presence beside me, strong as oak, fearless as Queen Maeve herself, beautiful as the keen flight of an arrow or the piercing cry of the pipes. I want this. I want it from the bottom of my heart. I want it as the parched earth wants rain. I want it as a man wants sunlight after long winter. I want it with every wretched, bitter, cynical corner of my body.

I cannot give Ciarán an answer, so I stretch my wings and fly to Aisha’s shoulder. She flinches, then straightens, ready for the challenge. Her strong mouth softens into a smile.

‘We’re ready,’ she says.

Ciarán paces steadily, casting a circle in the clearing. He greets the spirits of the quarters, asks the gods for a blessing, then moves to stand before us in the centre. We are on the stones between the campfire and the pool. Aisha and I face north, Ciarán south. The star-jewelled night sky forms our wedding canopy.

As my brother begins the hand-fasting, a deep stillness seeps through me, a peace I have seldom known before. It is something like the sensation a bard feels when a song is done; when the music lingers on the air and in the heart long after the final measure.

‘Under sky and upon stone,’ the druid says, “twixt firelight and water, I ask you, Conri, and you, Aisha, to make your solemn vows of hand-fasting. Aisha, repeat these words after me.’ The mulberry eyes meet hers and I feel the smallest shiver run through her body. I edge along her shoulder until my wing feathers brush her cheek, black on black. And she says it, phrase by phrase, word by sweet word, she says it.

‘By earth and air, by fire and water, I bind myself to you. Until the stars

no longer shine on us, until the earth covers our bones, until the light turns to dark, until death changes us forever, I will stand by you, Conri, my husband.'

She does not shiver now. Her voice is the note of a deep bell, strong and steady.

Ciarán draws a breath. Looks at me. His eyes are suspiciously bright. 'Conri, best of brothers. Repeat these words after me. *By earth and air, by fire and water ...*'

Oh gods, oh gods ... The change is quick. My heart has barely time to hammer a startled beat, my wings hardly manage to carry me down from Aisha's shoulder before my body stretches and lengthens and thickens, my features flatten, my vision alters with sickening speed, pool and flames, man and woman, stars and dark branches swimming and diving all around me. Stone under my cheek; stone under my chest, my belly, my limbs ... a man's limbs.

Aisha is kneeling beside me; I feel her hands, sure but gentle on my back, my shoulder. I have forgotten how to use this body. I cannot move. *Repeat these words after me ...* I struggle to my hands and knees, Aisha helping me. I think I might be sick. I am sick, retching up the meagre contents of my belly onto the stones. Aisha scoops up water, cupping it in her hands. I drink. The skin of her palms is lighter than the rest of her, the hue of fine-grained oak. Her fingers are long and graceful.

I stand. Her arm rests lightly around my shoulders, supporting me. I draw breath, open my mouth, utter a croaking sound.

'Take your time,' says my brother quietly. '*By earth and air ...*'

I understand, through the nausea, the dizziness, the utter wrongness of this clumsy man-body, that the *geis* cannot be fully undone unless I can play my part.

‘By ... by ... ah ...’ A paroxysm of coughing. The two of them wait for me, quiet, confident. ‘By earth ... and air ...’

‘Good, Conri,’ whispers Aisha. ‘You’re doing fine.’

‘By *fire and water*,’ says Ciarán, and I see that he has tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘By fire ... and water ... I bind myself ...’

It comes more easily with each word. A harsh voice, for certain, no bard’s honeyed tones, but a human voice. I stumble through the vow. I owe it to my brother for his long care and for his belief in me. I owe it to this woman, this stranger, to honour the sacrifice she’s making for me. So, turning to look into her lustrous dark eyes and seeing not a scrap of pity there, only joy at the remarkable feat we’ve accomplished tonight, the three of us, I finish it: ‘Until death changes us forever, I bind myself to you, Aisha, my wife.’ *Dearest Lóch; goodbye, my lovely one.*

Ciarán takes a cloth strip from his belt. Aisha extends her right arm, I my left. We clasp hands, and my brother wraps the cloth around our wrists.

‘By the deep, enduring power of earth; by the clarifying power of air; by the quickening power of fire; by the life-giving power of water, you are now joined as husband and wife. By the mysterious, all-encompassing power of spirit, you are hand-fast until death separates you one from the other. I give you my solemn blessing, Conri, my brother.’ He touches my brow with his fingertips and I feel a thrill of power run through me. ‘I give you my solemn blessing, Aisha, my sister.’ He touches her in her turn, and I feel her tremble.

My knees are weak. I’m still dizzy and sick, my eyes unwilling to accept the change. Aisha holds me up while Ciarán speaks the final prayers, closes the circle, then moves to add wood to the fire and get out his little flask of mead. My knees give up the struggle; Aisha only just manages to stop me from falling. She settles beside me on the stones, her arm around me in

comradely fashion. It feels good.

Ciarán pours mead into cups. For a while, the three of us sit in utter silence.

‘Don’t look at me,’ I say eventually. ‘This was your crazy idea; yours and hers.’ I glance from the sombre, pale Ciarán to the silent Aisha. Before either of them can speak a word, I burst into tears. I sob and shake like a child, my head clutched in my hands. Aisha kneels up and wraps me in her arms, cradling my head on her shoulder and humming under her breath. *Gods, oh, gods ...* The worst of it is to be so helpless, so feeble, so unmanned before this woman, this extraordinary woman who surprises me at every turn.

‘Weep now, Conri,’ she says in a murmur. ‘Weep for Lóch; weep for your young life lost; weep for what could not be. Weep all night if you need. Weep until those sad tears are all gone, husband. And in the morning, know the good gifts that you have. The most loyal of brothers. A wife who will stand by you forever and always tell you the truth. We will not long be strangers, Conri. Family, at Sevenwaters and in Xixón. When you are ready, we will go to meet them.’

Still the tears flow; I cannot stop them. This does not mean I do not hear her.

‘The sunrise and the moonrise,’ says Ciarán. ‘The forest and the lake. The stars in the sky. The flight of birds; the secret paths of fox and badger. The company of friends. The wisdom of elders. The laughter of children; perhaps, in time, your own children.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ Aisha puts in dryly, but there’s a smile in her voice.

‘A song by the campfire,’ says Ciarán. ‘The notes of the harp.’

That stirs me to speech. ‘No,’ I hiccup against Aisha’s shoulder. ‘Not

that.'

'Hush, Conri,' says my wife. 'Hush, now. It's a long road ahead, and we must learn to walk before we can dance. I've one more thing to say to you.'

I manage a sound of query.

'You're a much finer specimen of manhood than I was expecting,' she tells me. 'I think it possible my father may approve.'

Ciarán splutters on a mouthful of mead; he's a man who rarely laughs. I lift my head. Before I can wipe my streaming eyes, Aisha's fingers come up and brush the tears from my cheeks, sweet as a mother tending her child. But different. Quite different.

'I might see if I can keep a sip of mead down,' I say in a whisper. 'Long time since I ...'

'Here,' says Aisha, holding out the cup. 'Tomorrow is a new day. A new dawn.'

I can barely speak, but I must. 'This is a gift beyond measure,' I say, taking the cup. She knows I'm not talking about the mead. 'I'm not up to much just now, and I may never match it. But I'll do my best.'

Raven no more, I came to rest

Then set forth on another quest.

What might I be before the end?

Brother, husband, father, friend!

My brother's patience shielded me

And Aisha's courage set me free.

*‘Twas hope that saw me come at last
Out of the shadows of the past.*

*As I take up my harp again
I do not sing of death and pain.
In my song, love and courage rise.
These are the gifts that make us wise.*

* * * *

AFTERWORD

“Twixt Firelight and Water’ ties in with my *Sevenwaters* series, of which the fifth novel, *Seer of Sevenwaters*, will be published in December 2010. Thanks to the remarkable longevity of the Tuatha de Danann, the story of Conri and Ciarán spans almost the entire time frame of the *Sevenwaters* books, which cover three generations of the (human) family. Two of the most commonly asked questions about the series are: What exactly is Fiacha? and: What happened to Padriac? This story answers both those questions. I was finishing “Twixt Firelight and Water’ when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The story’s triumphant happy ending reflects my vow to stay positive in the face of challenge. It’s a tale brimful with courage, hope and love. The story’s title comes from a folk song, ‘The Tinkerman’s Daughter’, written by Mickey McConnell.

— *Juliet Marillier*

About the Author

Juliet Marillier was born in Dunedin, New Zealand and now lives in Western Australia. A graduate of Otago University, she worked as a teacher and public servant before becoming a full-time writer.

Juliet has written ten historical fantasy novels for adults and two books for young adults. Her books have won a number of awards including the Aurealis (three times), the Sir Julius Vogel Award and the American Library Association Alex Award. Her most recent novel is *Heart's Blood*, published in November 2009.

Juliet is a member of the druid order OBOD. She shares her home with a small pack of needy dogs and a sweet-tempered cat.

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