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Thesis: *Mnemosyne: A Nine-Fold Tale*

Exegesis: *Restoring the Exiled Self*

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Primary supervisor: Siobhan Harvey

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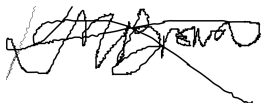
## Table of Contents

Attestation of Authorship	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3
Acknowledgements	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4
Intellectual Property Rights	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	5
Confidential Material	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	6
Ethics Approval	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	7
Abstract	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	8
Exegesis: Restoring the Exiled Self	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	9
Exegesis Table of Contents	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	10
References	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	33
Thesis: Mnemosyne: A Nine-Fold Tale	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	35
Bibliography	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	381

### **Attestation of Authorship**

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Candidate's signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'KATRINA BROWN', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

KATRINA (KATIE) BROWN

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I owe a great debt of thanks to my family, and especially to my sister Annie, for their encouragement and support of me during the process of writing this work. They were always there to pick up the pieces when the going got tough, and I could not have made it through without them.

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## **Ethics Approval**

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

## **Abstract**

*Mnemosyne: a Nine-Fold Tale* is a draft of a creative thesis, or novel manuscript, depicting the intertwined fates of Aisling, an Irish girl who loses her capacity to see daylight, and her father, Cillian, a man battling his demons. Set across 1874 to 1899 in Ireland and New Zealand, it sits in the genre of magical realism, where real-life happenings are interspersed with occurrences in the Irish Otherworld.

As a means of critically analyzing and contextualizing the work, the accompanying exegesis *Restoring the Exiled Self* explores the thesis' key themes of identity, spirituality and redemption. Within this exploration, the ideology of Celtic spirituality, especially pertaining to Irish mythology, holds particular significance, along with the concept of a threefold self.

Relating to identity, the significance of land and language is examined in the context of both Ireland and the Irish Gaelic language, and of Te Ao Māori. Tied in with this is a reference to and consideration of what it means to be Pākehā within the context of both the Irish diaspora and colonization.

Finally, a consideration of allegory within the thesis text also plays a strong part, alongside a discussion of the work's mechanical aspects of structure, voice and tense, and the key literary texts considered in relationship to this.

# Exegesis



*Restoring the Exiled Self*

## Restoring the Exiled Self

An Exegesis to Accompany *Mnemosyne: A Nine-Fold Tale*

### Table of Contents

1. Beginnings ...	11
1.1 Introduction ...	11
1.2 Synopsis ...	11
2. Building the World ...	12
2.1 The Irish Otherworld ...	12
2.2 Mnemosyne, Lethe and the Ninefold Goddess ...	14
3. The Threefold Self ...	15
3.1 Childlike Vision and the Essential Self ...	17
3.2 The Heroine's Journey ...	20
3.3 The Divine Feminine ...	22
4. Telling the Story ...	24
4.1 Allegory ...	24
4.2 Structure, Voice and Tense ...	25
4.3 Language and Place ...	29
5. Outcomes ...	31

## 1. Beginnings

### 1.1 Introduction

Creative thesis *Mnemosyne: A Nine-Fold Tale*, hereafter referred to as *Mnemosyne*, is a text exploring a central theme of identity, crafted in the style of magical realism. A motif of lightness and darkness is embedded throughout the work, and this motif is an allegory for the battle to reclaim a healed and integrated sense of self.

This accompanying exegesis, *Restoring the Exiled Self*, seeks to critically analyse and contextualise the thesis, and delves into its themes of identity and redemption through an exploration of the notion of the threefold self. Alongside this, it explains the Irish mythological ideology within the work, addresses the significance of land and language to identity, and discusses the impacts of key texts upon choices pertaining to voice, tense and structure.

### 1.2 Synopsis

In 1874 Aisling Sullivan, a seven-year-old from Ireland, is en route to New Zealand with her mother, Kitty, both in flight from Kitty's abusive husband, Cillian. On the crossing there is a great tragedy: Aisling falls overboard, and Kitty, leaping after her, drowns. Aisling's world turns upside down. From this point on it is always nighttime for her: she can no longer see the light of the sun.

Arriving in New Zealand effectively an orphan, she is taken under the wing of fellow traveler Doctor Barton. Boarding with him in Akaroa, she makes friends with Rāwiri, a boy who, like Aisling, suffers from a trauma-induced affliction: he does not speak. Aisling comes to believe that if she can build a raft and sail to the horizon line of sea and sky with Rāwiri, she will find both her missing light and her Mammy, and Rāwiri will find his voice.

Meanwhile, after committing a murder, Aisling's father, Cillian, stumbles into the Irish Otherworld, where time passes differently. Trapped, he is doomed to watch Aisling's journey play out in real life through visions in a fountain, until he pays the price for his actions.

Unbeknownst to him, Aisling also visits the Otherworld – but she does so in her dreams, never remembering these visits upon waking. There she is tasked with a quest: to heal the Princess of the Land-Under-the-Waves with water from the Cup of

Healing, and to vanquish the Fear Doirche, the Dark Druid of the Sídh, with the Sword of Light. However, after the raft sailing fails, Aisling is thrown into despair. She fails the first part of the quest, the visions cease, and she is sent to live with the indifferent and opportunistic Whittle family in Christchurch.

Reaching adulthood, Aisling flees to Wellington from the Whittles and an arranged marriage, and life settles there. One morning she rediscovers Rāwiri's gifted taonga, his pounamu necklace, and this discovery reawakens her dream-visits to the Otherworld, in turn sparking a redemptive journey that sees her return to Akaroa and face a deadly confrontation with jilted suitor Randall Harrington. Simultaneously, after crossing paths with her father in the Otherworld and fulfilling the quest, she finds her vision restored in real life, and she returns to Ireland for one final, redemptive real-life encounter with her father.

## **2. Building the World**

### **2.1 The Irish Otherworld**

*Mnemosyne* consists of nine parts across two books. These nine parts correspond to nine locations in the Irish Otherworld, and within each, Aisling visits the associated Otherworld location in her dreams, or while in a dream-like state.

The significance of the nine sections initially came from inspiration pertaining to the nine Greek muses, the daughters of the Greek goddess Mnemosyne, or Memory. Before I had settled upon Aisling and her trajectory, I had envisioned sending my main character on a series of nine reincarnations themed around the attributes of each of these nine muses, with the ultimate goal of this character gaining some sort of redemption through the process, linked to memory as opposed to oblivion, or Mnemosyne as opposed to Lethe, as the ultimate, overarching outcome.

However, as I began to work with the idea of Aisling and her story, I was struggling with how to address nine such reincarnations. I had written a couple of sequences in which Aisling encountered some kind of spiritual mentor-figure in a different dimension, but they were too vague. There was no strong framework to give them a sense of progression, and I knew that these sequences or experiences needed to align with a spiritual and emotional journey of healing, and also to fit tidily within the context of the real-life story. I wasn't sure any longer that the idea of reincarnations

would fit. At this point I became somewhat stuck. I stopped writing, and I remained in that space for a few weeks: I walked, researched and thought, and sometimes I just didn't think at all. It was something like putting a seed deep into soil and letting it be: trusting that when it was ready it would sprout. Fittingly, this pause actually tied back into a key inspiration for this work in the first place: the reason for its Irish connection.

Four years ago, I was deeply moved while listening to Irish actor and academic Dónall Ó Héalaí's TEDx talk (2018) discussing the Irish language and beauty. In it, he talks about his personal relationship to Irish Gaelic, how it has become an endangered language through the impact of colonization, the cultural displacement this caused, and the beauty folded into the language itself. Connecting all of this, he talks about our need to commune with our inner selves, and referencing an Irish folk tale, about our need to take the time to rest and allow our "souls to catch up" [1] as a means of achieving this, especially after periods of significant external change.

Ó Héalaí's talk struck me profoundly at the time, and woke a deep desire within me to find out more about my Irish heritage. As Pākehā, a descendant of great-grandparents who migrated from England and Ireland to New Zealand in the late 1800s and early 1900s, I had been struggling with identity pertaining to a lack of knowledge of my own heritage, and the feeling of disconnection this caused. I felt that growing in this knowledge would not only result in a deeper connection to my own roots, but would also better position me to do the vital work of understanding what it means to be Pākehā. The talk also awoke a hope that such a connection would lead to a kind of internal healing.

During my time of pause, I revisited Ó Héalaí's talk and these ideas, and allowed myself time for the story to brew and for my own soul to catch up in the sense Ó Héalaí speaks of. Within this space, I turned to what made the most sense: Celtic spirituality, folk tales and mythology. While researching these elements I came across the Irish notion of the Otherworld, which is made up of various different islands, plains and locations, all different from each other, and all in the spiritual dimension, considered to exist alongside the physical world. This discovery gave me a number of different locations to act as places for Aisling to visit and experience in her dreams, and the more I wrote and thought about them, the more these all made sense.

P. W. Joyce's account of the voyage of Máel Dúin (Maildun in his version) in his tome *Old Celtic Romances* (2001) was particularly instrumental within this: in the

tale, thought to have origins in the eighth century, Maildun, seeking vengeance for the murder of his father, sets out on a journey through various islands of the Otherworld, with a significant happening occurring at each. He eventually encounters those responsible, but the learnings of his journey result in him staying his hand, and rather than avenging the murder, they all make peace.

I applied this thinking to my own text. Instead of experiencing nine different kinds of reincarnations as earlier intended, Aisling travels through nine different Otherworld locations. Each is linked, and each is a progression of her journey, both in real life and in her Otherworld sequence. In this sequence she is tasked with a quest, again typical of Irish mythology, and the quest I set for her, in which she needed to heal the Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn (the Otherworld location of the Land-Under-the-Waves) with water from the Cup of Healing, and then vanquish the Fear Doirche (the Irish Dark Druid of the Sídh) with Claiómh Solais, the Sword of Light, borrows from three mythical accounts in particular. These appear in many different anthologies, often recounted a little differently. The accounts centre around Diarmuid and the Princess of the Land-Under-the-Waves, who he encounters three times – firstly, to save her from the Fear Doirche, secondly, when she is under a spell appearing as the classic folk-motif hag and transforms into a beautiful Otherworld woman again when Diarmuid welcomes her as she is, then thirdly, when, after this, she falls ill under another spell and can only be saved with water from the Cup of Healing.

Aspects of these accounts I address a little later on. I drew their inspiration from several key texts, along with further thinking around Celtic spirituality. These texts were Lady Augusta Gregory's *Irish Myths and Legends: Gods and Fighting Men* (2022), Padraic Colum's *The King of Ireland's Son* (2020) and Joyce's aforementioned *Old Celtic Romances*, along with John O'Donoghue's *Anam Cara* (1997), especially pertaining to Celtic spirituality.

## **2.2 Mnemosyne, Lethe and the Ninefold Goddess**

Despite the Irish Otherworld setting of the nine spiritual experiences of Aisling, they still fit within my original thinking around Mnemosyne and Lethe. Indeed, the idea of the nine muses is still carried within the text, though more obliquely. The “Nine-Fold” of the title refers not only to the nine Otherworld parts of the book, but to the concept of the ninefold goddess – considered to be the “triple goddess in triplicate form like the nine muses of Greece” [2], with origins in ancient religion. This goddess also

aligns with the nine sisters of Avalon, of whom Ragnell (who is represented by Lady Ragnailt in *Mnemosyne*), Morgana and Guinevere of Arthurian mythologies are generally considered to form part. In *Mnemosyne*, these sisters are reflected in the nine women in the Otherworld location of Magh Mell, the Land of Honey, which bears similarities to Avalon in some Celtic texts. This idea of the nine, and conversely of nine being one united whole, I discuss in more depth further on when I address the significance of the Divine Feminine.

In terms of Mnemosyne and Lethe, Book One, titled “Lethe”, takes place when Aisling is a child, and Book Two, “Mnemosyne”, occurs when she is an adult. In Greek mythology, Lethe is the river of forgetfulness, and according to some accounts, after death a spirit was required to drink from Lethe to erase memory of their earthly life and be ready for reincarnation, whereas drinking from Mnemosyne – also known as the pool of memory – would enable them to remember and continue on to eternal life [3]. In his work *Pathways into the Jungian World: Phenomenology and Analytical Psychology*, Roger Brooke (1999) states in speaking of Lethe, "Rather than only constituting disaster and darkness, Lethe also presents their obliteration – something like the withdrawal of life..." [4]. Book One, “Lethe”, ends with Aisling undergoing something of such a withdrawal of life, and Book Two, “Mnemosyne”, results in a restoration of life, where the capacity to remember her Otherworld experiences in her real life is tied to her ultimate redemption and healing.

Her journey is one of learning to remember, and this is very much linked to identity and a restoration of the self in exile.

### **3. The Threefold Self**

In his volume of the examination of the mystical life, *The Candle of Vision* (1918), Irish author, artist and mystic George William Russell writes:

I do not wish to write a book of wonders, but rather to bring thought back to that Being whom the ancient seers worshipped as Deity. I believe that most of what was said of God was in reality said of that Spirit whose body is Earth. [5]

I found this to be an incredibly beautiful sentiment. Whether or not one believes in God or a greater spiritual being, it is a poignant thought that a whole Being, as Russell says, writing from a perspective of experiencing the Irish Otherworld through a

vision, consists of both the earthly and the spiritual or mystical: earth, the physical, has a soul – the spiritual.

This two-sidedness to existence, and conversely, this unity, is very significant in *Mnemosyne*, especially pertaining to identity. It's mirrored in the plot: there is main character Aisling's real life, which we move through with her during her childhood and then her adulthood, and then there is her spiritual life: the Otherworld experiences woven throughout. When she finally is able to remember these, her main physical crisis is resolved: she can see the light of the sun again. This represents the integration of the two sides of her existence – her physical and her spiritual – and the resulting unity effects the resolution of a greater internal crisis. She finds healing and is able to both forgive and reunite with Cillian, her father, whose transition from loving to abusive father in her early childhood caused her great trauma.

Thus, there are in fact three aspects to Aisling's identity in *Mnemosyne*, and likewise to Russell's thinking: there is the earthly or the physical, there is the spiritual or the soul, related to the Otherworld, and thirdly, there is the unified whole that integrates both: what could be considered the connection between the two. This third plane, or connection, could be seen to pertain to the Jewish concept of shekhinah, or the Divine Feminine, which is also known as the Holy Spirit.

Maureen Murdock (1990) talks about the idea of this triple self in the concept of the triskelion or the triple spiral, common to Celtic art and of ancient origin, in her text *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*. As she says, it "reflects the energy of the Triple Goddess" [6] and the three worlds of the material, the astral (spiritual) and the causal, which represents a kind of unification of the three in a very similar manner to Russell's idea of the integrated Being. This is highlighted in Yogapedia's definition of the causal world:

Self-realization is achieved when a yogi transcends the three realms of existence. ...These are the material world, the astral world and, finally, the causal world. The causal world is the realm beyond the material and astral worlds. It is the world of thoughts and ideation, where consciousness resides once it has transcended the other two. ...Once a yogi's consciousness enters the causal world, they... become beings of pure light. [7]

In this sense, the third unified self, integrated and light-filled, also aligns with the aforementioned concept of shekhinah and the Divine Feminine.

To me, the spiritual self, or soul, is related to what author, memoirist and self-help author Martha Beck calls the essential self, versus her concept of the social self,

which could be said, in a manner, to align with the physical. There is also a strong connection between such an essential self and Murdock's concept of a "contemporary woman's search for wholeness" [8] in *The Heroine's Journey*, and this connection strengthens the relationship between Beck's two concepts of self to spirituality.

Further, it is no accident that the genesis of these Otherworld experiences is in Aisling's childhood. To me, there is less of a gap between both sides of self in a child, and it is during the transition from childhood to adulthood that the gap can either grow indefinitely, remain static and then reintegrate, or never exist in the first place (a rarity).

### 3.1 Childlike Vision and the Essential Self

The dedication at the beginning of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's poignant work *The Little Prince* (2015) reads:

I hope children will forgive me if I dedicate this book to a grown-up... All grown-ups started out as children. (But few of them remember it.) So I correct my dedication: *To Léon Worth when he was a little boy*. [9]

There is a sentiment within this implying that adults and children see the world differently, and that adults generally abandon their childlike vision. Further into *The Little Prince*, Saint-Exupéry writes about drawing an abstract picture as a child of a boa constrictor that had swallowed an elephant, and asking adults if the drawing scared them. "What's frightening about a hat?" [10] they respond, unable to interpret the drawing, and advise him to keep to geography, history, mathematics and grammar. Eventually he meets the Little Prince, a child who, when shown the same drawing after asking the story's narrator to draw him a sheep, replies, "No! No! I don't want an elephant inside a boa constrictor" [11].

The child understands with eyes of imagination and possibility: the adult sees with real-world vision and interprets only the physical. Yet there are adults, too, who can still see with boa-constrictor vision – Saint-Exupéry himself, for one. C. S. Lewis (2001) speaks to this when he writes in his dedication to one Lucy Barfield, who is no longer a child, "Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again" [12] at the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, implying that even if this capacity is lost, it can still be regained.

In my mind, part of this eyes-of-the-child journey is learning to inhabit Beck's essential self. This concept, along with that of the social self, filters through many of

her works. In explanation of the essential-self concept, Beck states the following in her self-help work *Finding Your Own North Star* (2001):

It's the personality you got from your genes: your characteristic desires, preferences, emotional reactions, and involuntary physiological responses, bound together by an overall sense of identity... it's the basic you, stripped of options and special features. It is "essential" in two ways: first, it is the essence of your personality, and second, you absolutely need it to find your North Star. [13]

By contrast, Beck's social self is the force that acts in the real world: a force "shaped by cultural norms and expectations" [14], one that is "based on principles that often run contrary to our core desires" [15]. When functioning healthily, she states, this social self can help the essential self realize its journey towards its North Star, which, to Beck, is the "ultimate manifestation of our potential for good and happiness" [16] – perhaps, in some ways, what we think of as following our heart. According to Beck, when functioning unhealthily, the social self can shut down the essential self in order to conform to the demands of society, numbing the core self. She goes on to say, "To find your North Star, you must teach your social self to relax and back off" [17]. Part of that process involves learning to listen to intuition, and to tap into what some might call the mystical: a deeper wisdom within.

Within the context of *Mnemosyne*, this essential-self thinking has been pivotal, especially pertaining to identity, and it is reflected in multiple ways. Firstly, there is the idea that children arguably engage with the world around them much more from their essential selves (the capacity to see the elephant in the boa constrictor), and how this gradually shifts into an engagement influenced more closely by the social self as the child grows into adulthood (only being able to see the hat).

In Book One of the novel, Aisling is a child of seven, and the novel begins with her in the middle of a traumatic situation: her father physically abuses her mother, and the two leave home in order to escape his violence. At this point, despite what is happening, Aisling is still thinking fancifully about the world around her – in other words, she is still connected to her essential self:

[Aisling] wondered if any fairies had seen what had happened tonight. She thought they probably would have hidden if that were the case. Under the bed, maybe. Behind Mammy's dresser? Or maybe they would just have slipped through the window, open a very little bit, enough to allow a shy breath of night air into the room. She thought she would have hidden too, if she had been a fairy. Papa was scary when he was in one of those moods and he did Bad Things to Mammy. She was scared that he would do Bad Things to her, too. [18]

The situation escalates, and although she and her mother successfully board a ship bound for New Zealand as intended, when her mother drowns en route Aisling's world is truly turned upside down: she has effectively lost both parents and is alone in the world. As a physical manifestation of this upside-down change, her vision alters: she can no longer see daylight. With the change in her physical vision comes a change in her mental condition, too – she begins to walk in her sleep, and while she does this she has dreams or experiences where she is journeying through different places in the Irish Otherworld. She doesn't remember these experiences in her waking time. This could be seen as a split between the two identities, the essential self and the social self, or, as described earlier, between the physical and the spiritual. At this point, despite these changes, she still holds out hope for restoration of what has been lost:

[Aisling] scanned the horizon line. It looked lonely. But she thought perhaps the sky was kissing the ocean far, far away at its edges – maybe away over there they weren't separate anymore, the sky and the ocean. Maybe they were together. And Mammy might be in that kind of away-place too. The kissing place. Where Summer was, with the sun. ... When she found the daylight again she wouldn't be worried anymore. She knew it. And to find the daylight she was going to need to find the place where the sky kissed the sea, because that was where Mammy was, and that was where the magic was. ... She would find a boat, she would find Mammy, find the daylight, and find her way back home. Then all would be well again. [19]

She begins to build a raft in order to try and reach the horizon line of the sea and sky with the help of her friend Rāwiri, who is also dealing with trauma and loss in his own life. But after the raft is completed the sailing fails, both nearly drown, and from this point on, Aisling neither walks in her sleep nor has her Otherworld visitations again until she is an adult in her thirties.

This sequence mirrors the struggle of the essential self in the transition from childhood to adulthood. During her transition, Aisling becomes completely separated from her essential self: she grows numb to everything around her, and lives life purely in the physical – the so-called real – world. The child has departed and the essential self is in exile. Then, after many years of psychological numbness, the recurrence of both her Otherworld experiences and the instances of walking in her sleep again in her thirties are triggered by a memory of and connection to her childhood: she finds Rāwiri's gifted taonga – the pounamu necklace – and she begins to open up to the possibility of the potential for change once again.

She is beginning to call for her exiled self to return.

### 3.2 The Heroine's Journey

In earlier days of working on *Mnemosyne*, quite by accident I stumbled across Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey*, a text offered as a counter-viewpoint to Joseph Campbell's monomyth plot template of the Hero's Journey, in which a hero sets off on a quest, faces obstacles and challenges, reaches the crisis and emerges victorious, and then returns home a changed person.

The discovery was serendipitous: on the very day we had been talking about the Hero's Journey as a plot structure in class, I happened upon a particular podcast episode on the train ride home. This episode, a conversation between author and former pastor Rob Bell, and film director, producer and screenwriter Kristen Hanggi (2022), was a discussion of Murdock's idea of the Heroine's Journey in the context of everyday life as an alternative view to the Hero's Journey. Hanggi frames it in a manner in which the Heroine's is something of the so-called feminine yin to the masculine yang of the Hero's.

For both Hanggi and Murdock, the Heroine's Journey is one that travels inward into the deepest self and into attributes closely related to the feminine, rather than orienting around the external, physical, success-focused journey typical to the Hero's. Their viewpoint is that true healing of our deeper selves comes from sacred spaces deep within that many of us have lost touch with, and that this healing can't be found through outward achievement: essentially, that such achievements often just leave us feeling empty, a sort of 'well, now what?' hanging in the air.

A stillness, a kind of passivity, even, is needed for true healing. Murdock calls this divorce from the inner self the mother/daughter split [20], where women have abandoned the feminine within themselves in pursuit of the masculine, trying to win approval of a father figure through accolades associated with the accomplishment-oriented Hero's Journey. In her original text *The Heroine's Journey*, she writes of reaching the bottom of the descent deep into self:

This is uncharted territory. It's dark, moist, bloody, and lonely. I see no allies, no comfort, no signs out. I feel scraped open and raw. I look for the dismembered parts of myself – something recognizable – but there are only fragments and I don't know how to put them together. ... It's not the conquest of the other; it's coming face to face with myself. I walk naked looking for the Mother. Looking to reclaim the parts of myself that have not seen the light of day. They must be here in the darkness. They wait for me to find them because they no longer trust. ... This journey is not about some fairy godmother showing me the way out. [21]

Gender issues aside, this way of thinking really spoke to me.

Within *Mnemosyne*, I have used a number of tropes and themes common to fairy tales, and intentionally so, both to call reference to the general fairy tale style, and because I was writing about figures in Irish mythology and folk tales. These are figures such as Lady Ragnailt, who is something of both the folk tale hag and wise old woman (and also a Sovereignty Goddess, which I address shortly), and the Fear Doirche (literally ‘Man of Darkness’ in Irish) as the dark villain, along with Aisling and the Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn bearing characteristics of the damsel-in-distress.

In writing as I did, I was thinking about these Hero’s Journey-type tropes, the potential to invert them, and the interplay between external and internal – or so-called masculine and feminine – forces in the pursuit of healing. In *Mnemosyne*, there is the outer world, where Aisling is physically dwelling: first in Connemara in Ireland, then in Akaroa and Wellington in New Zealand. Then there is her dream – or subconscious – world, where she is engaged in a Hero’s Journey-style quest to find the Cup of Healing and the Sword of Light in the Irish Otherworld. In this quest, she is the active heroine.

In her external world, she can’t be redeemed until she has healed internally, making her often quite passive, and something of a damsel in distress. In her internal world, she fails at the first pivotal test in her quest (she succumbs to temptation), she then slumbers, eventually reawakens, faces the crisis and is victorious, only her victory results in her suffering a potentially fatal wound that she can’t heal herself.

Here, Aisling’s father heals her. In real life, it is her friend Rāwiri who saves her, arriving just in time to save Randall from killing her. Prior to his arrival in her real world, and to her father’s in her internal world, however, she has already won. She has fought and conquered the darkness (the Fear Doirche) within by fighting it with light (the Sword of Light), and simultaneously, in real life she is reacquainted with the light of the sun at dawn as it begins to enter the room Randall has her trapped in. In these situations the forces of both Hero and Heroine are at play, but they are inverted in each circumstance: her passivity in her outward life, and her activity in her internal life.

In contrast, Cillian, Aisling’s father, begins very actively in his violence towards Kitty and his murder of Declan in Ireland, but he is lured into the Otherworld through the heart of a forest on Cnoc Meadha (Knockma) Hill in Galway. There, he is trapped in an underground cavern; able to see through visions in the waters of a fountain what is occurring in Aisling’s (real) life, but unable to escape from captivity. In reflection

of the internal Heroine's Journey, he is forced into an almost complete lack of activity besides from sparring with Fionn daily, who inflicts wounds on his arms with the Sword of Light – wounds that Úna, Queen of the People of the Sídh, heals with water from the Cup of Healing. These wounds and subsequent healings correspond with the healing of deep internal wounds.

Fionn and Úna, in a manner, represent this internal journey of healing. Towards the end, after being desperate to get to Aisling in real life and save her from Randall, who Cillian can see pursuing her through the fountain-visions, he finds himself in another location in the Otherworld, surrounded by a black mist, with a wounded woman lying on the ground in front of him. He recognizes the woman as Úna. At this point, he says:

But Úna – Úna. Suddenly she feels closer to my heart than its own beat that rings in my ears.

Úna.

I remember the deer I chased in the woods that first day.

She looks up at me. The wound at her neck is weeping. It is her precious life that is running from it. I wrap my arms around her. I think of all of the times she tended to my wounds after fighting Fionn. Her tenderness. How I sought her out that very first day in the forest because I'd been bewitched by her beauty.

"Hello, Fionn," she says, her voice barely a whisper.

Fionn. I am not Fionn. I am Cillian.

"It is you, Fionn. I am glad that you are here. That you came. I was waiting for you. For ever so long, don't you know. Ever so long. You fought against yourself and you won." [22]

At this point, Úna becomes first his wife Kitty and then Aisling in his arms. It's an important moment of redemption: Kitty forgives him, then she transforms into Aisling, and he applies water from the Cup of Healing to Aisling's lips, reviving her after she was wounded in her vanquishing of the Fear Dóirche.

These are simultaneous moments of healing for both Aisling and Cillian. Aisling has conquered the darkness and suffered grievous wounds, and is restored to life by Cillian, who could not help her in real life (from the attack from Randall), but who could in this Otherworld space. And within this spiritual, internal, Heroine's Journey-type space, Cillian finds his own ultimate healing and redemption.

### 3.3 The Divine Feminine

Corresponding significantly to these ideas, and in turn to that of the essential self, is a strong relationship in *Mnemosyne* to the concept of the Divine Feminine.

I grew up in a Christian home with a concept of God that was largely masculine. I still have something of a faith now, although one that is constantly shifting, morphing and expanding as the years pass, and in the process of writing *Mnemosyne* I was struck quite deeply with the idea that the God of Judaism and Christianity was never meant to be considered only masculine. The Jewish word for God is Yahweh, or YHVH. The Y, “Yod”, stands for father. The first H, “Heh”, stands for mother, the V, or “Vav”, symbolizes son, and the final H for daughter [23]. To me, this is incredibly beautiful: there is both a oneness of gender to the name of God, and an equally weighted enfolding of the feminine with the masculine. Further, the final V is associated with the Jewish concept of shekhinah [24]. In Jewish thinking, shekhinah equates to the Divine Feminine, or to the feminine aspect of God. It appears in the *sefirot* of the Kabbalah (a branch of Jewish mysticism). Film critic and freelance writer George Robinson (2001), says the following of the sefirot:

There are 10... linked in a complex figure that some have called the “Tree of Life,” significantly a phrase also often used to refer to the Torah. They are Keter (Crown), Hokhmah (Wisdom), Binah (Understanding), Hesed (Lovingkindness), Gevurah (Might) or Din (Judgment), Tiferet (Beauty), Hod (Splendor), Netzah (Victory), Yesod (Foundation), and Malkhut (Sovereignty) or Shekhinah (the Divine Presence). Each of them represents one aspect of the Godhead, a facet of the powers of the All Powerful. [25]

The beauty of shekhinah, at the foot of this tree, is that it, according to Robinson, “is the culmination and synthesis of all the attributes of God... the quality that links the Eternal Sovereign to the “real world” [26]. He goes on to say that shekhinah is the way in which the Divine – or God – is experienced; in other words, it represents the Holy Spirit, and this Holy Spirit is female.

This idea of a ministering or guiding feminine, spiritual force is a strong one throughout *Mnemosyne*. In the Otherworld, firstly Aisling meets Úna, the Queen of the People of the Sídh, who sows the seed of the quest to come. Then there is Enbarr, the magical mare who is a frequent presence and guide throughout the unfolding of the quest, and most significantly, there is Lady Ragnailt. Ragnailt aligns with Ragnell of the Loathly Lady folk motif, and she is perhaps the strongest voice in these Otherworld visits. She is a type of Sovereignty Goddess figure: in Irish mythology, such a goddess is one with the power to bestow kingship on the rightful king. In essence, she’s calling Aisling to her own sovereignty – to the restoration of her own exiled self.

As the tenth figure of the sefirot, shekhinah, the Divine Feminine, aligned with the Holy Spirit, holds all of the other nine elements of God within itself. In *Mnemosyne*, Aisling's journey through nine locations of the Irish Otherworld brings about her redemption and restoration of what was lost: this redemption being a kind of tenth shekhinah-figure that also holds all within it, the metaphorical sunlight at the tip of the nine-sided pyramid atop the castle in Tech Duinn, the last Otherworld location Aisling visits at the resolution of her quest:

I remember the last one. Tech Duinn. Where everything came together, where all of the stories reached up to that point, to that sunlit point, right at the tip of the nine-sided spire. The nine stories that became one completed tale. A place of wholeness. Of fulfillment. Where all things begin and end. [27]

Aisling has gone on an inward journey, her own Heroine's Journey, and in the process she has rediscovered her essential self. In a sense, through reconnecting with this essential self, she becomes the divine figures who have guided her in the Otherworld: Lady Ragnailt and her call to home and back to self-sovereignty, Úna, the Queen of the Sídh, and even Enbarr, the magical horse. She becomes part of the Divine Feminine, the causal world's "pure being of light" [28].

Shekhinah – the Divine Feminine – has found a home in her: her exiled self is restored, and she is a fully integrated, whole Being.

## 4. Telling the Story

### 4.1 Allegory

This integrated self directly relates to the allegory embedded within *Mnemosyne*.

The genesis of the work was a picture that appeared in my mind one evening. There was a little girl walking along docks beneath a star-spangled sky. She wore an expression that was a mixture of a sorrow and a vulnerable determination, and behind her she tugged a makeshift boat, and this boat was full of holes. An older man watched her pass, and this man was kind and sympathetic to her. He knew of her affliction: that she could not see daylight. The girl, in turn, acknowledged him, but kept resolutely on with her quest. She believed that her boat was going to take her to a far-off place that would restore her daylight to her.

This vignette was enough to form the foundations of *Mnemosyne*. As someone who often thinks in and makes sense of life through metaphor, it already carried many

layers to it: what did the darkness represent? The light? The boat? These thoughts and the vignette itself brought C. S. Lewis to mind, who, at the beginning his *Narnia* series, wrote from a set of his own images. Of these, he states:

Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument, then collected information about child psychology and decided what age group I'd write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out 'allegories' to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way. It all began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord. [29]

*Mnemosyne* has played out similarly, the writing of it resulting in something of an allegory (although Lewis himself considers his *Narnia* series to be an example of symbolism rather than allegory), rather than setting out with a specific allegory in mind. What this allegory was I couldn't put a finger on until I had completed the work and spent time analyzing it: I knew it was there, but it was a little deeper under the surface.

The allegory relates to what is, in my mind, the central question of the novel: what does the light represent? And why was I exploring such a theme? Initially, I thought what it represented was hope, but the more I pondered this (and it perplexed me – frustratingly – for some time), the more I became aware that hope is not – and cannot be – a destination or an outcome, but is rather a process through which richness and meaning is restored to life. In Aisling's journey, hope is a tool to achieve her desired outcome (finding the light), and the loss of it causes a great numbness in her life that lasts for many years, during which she no longer has these Otherworld dreams or visions. And if, in her case, the Otherworld represents her spirit or soul, then this numbness reflects a complete disconnection from it, and her engagement with and acceptance of it reflects a person who is kin to Russell's united and whole Being.

The light, therefore, takes on allegorical significance as representing the united, threefold self: the self restored from exile. Thus, the allegory embedded within *Mnemosyne* is that of the search for the true, integrated self.

#### **4.2 Structure, Voice and Tense**

While working on *Mnemosyne*, I read a broad cross-section of literature to get a feel for different ways of handling voice, tense, and a structure involving parallel plots and the weaving together of separate story lines. Within this reading, there were several

key texts that I returned to many times. These were Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014), Jenny Pattrick's *Denniston Rose* (2003), Cornelia Funke and Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2019), *The Starless Sea* by Erin Morgenstern (2019), and *The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding* by Holly Ringland (2022).

Two of the biggest challenges of writing the work were the capacity to write convincingly in the voices of different characters, and the ability to depict Aisling both as young girl and adult woman. Not having written a full novel before, and with much of my past reading centred around eighteenth and nineteenth century literature, I initially found myself writing in an omniscient perspective, and had to work very hard to transition from this to a much closer third-person limited point of view. Interestingly, the easiest voice I found to write was Aisling's as a child in this perspective. Something of a stream-of-consciousness style unfolded within it, for instance:

Mammy would always be there on the scary nights, though, when Aisling woke up screaming. She said that when death came it just meant that the soul was changing homes, moving out from the human body and into one that was in the Otherworld. Sometimes Mammy called it the Otherworld, sometimes she called it heaven. The priest at church called it heaven. She had tried to ask him about it once and he had patted her head and crouched down and looked into her eyes and said that heaven was where people went when they died if that had been their heart's best wish, and that the Otherworld was just a Fig of the Imagination. [30]

This felt more authentic to the voice of a child, and to the way a child thinks. Doerr, a key inspiration in this respect, masters writing this closer third-person limited voice, with a difference in that the whole text of *All the Light We Cannot See* is in the present tense. He pulls off this closeness to his main characters, Marie-Laure and Werner, seamlessly, although at perhaps slightly more of a remove, with an example in the following:

Congenital cataracts. Bilateral. Irreparable. "Can you see this?" ask the doctors. "Can you see this?" Marie-Laure will not see anything for the rest of her life. Spaces she once knew as familiar... have become labyrinths bristling with hazards. [31]

Doerr uses language a young child might not, but still manages to maintain a strong sense of what the child, Marie-Laure, is thinking and experiencing that feels intuitive.

Also of significance within Doerr's novel are the two timelines running in tandem. Chapters jump back and forward between the characters in childhood and adolescence. His management of this adds to the tension of the story, and he

intersperses these with short chapters written in the omniscient voice, such as the ominous – and poignant – beginning to the novel:

At dusk they pour from the sky. They blow across the ramparts, turn cartwheels over rooftops, flutter into the ravines between houses... The tide climbs. The moon hangs small and yellow and gibbous. On the rooftops of beachfront hotels to the east... a half-dozen American artillery units drop incendiary rounds into the mouths of mortars. [32]

Here, his perspective has zoomed right out, and he clearly is not writing from the point of view of any particular character.

This type of experimentation with the omniscient perspective is something I would like to readdress as I continue to work with *Mnemosyne* after the course ends, as I think a similar approach could work within the novel in order to add some moments of respite for the reader. I had initially written a few interlude-type chapters like this, which were closely linked to the forest at Cnoc Meadha Hill and to Úna as a kind of external view of the otherworldly, but within the time constraints I had I ended up removing these, as I could not integrate them with the seamlessness that Doerr does in his work. *Mnemosyne* is already a multi-faceted novel, and the challenge would be to not push this so far that it becomes problematic for the reader.

Considering perspectives, I also chose the varied tenses intentionally. The only parts of *Mnemosyne* set in the present are Aisling's Otherworld visitations, and these are from a first-person perspective, depicted in italics to indicate their separation from her so-called real life. Likewise, all of Cillian's story is recounted from the first-person present. I did this in both cases for a sense of immediacy, and also to suggest that the interactions with the Otherworld were, in a manner, a drawing-closer to the real self. In this sense, Cillian as a character surprised me. His perspective is an interesting one, in that, following this thinking, his present tense, first-person voice suggests that, in some ways, he is closer to his real – essential – self than Aisling (in her real life) is.

Relating to voice, especially perhaps to Cillian, is that of manner of speech. As part of my linguistic journey with Irish (which I discuss shortly), I discovered that the Irish language often somewhat inverts the positions of verbs and nouns, adverbs and adjectives in a sentence: for example, "it's a beautiful day" translates to "is lá álainn é" in Irish, where "lá" means "day", and "álainn" means "beautiful". Literally, this would read something more like "it's a day, beautiful, it is". In listening to the way Irish speak English, and I did this often over the course of the year through various

podcasts, films and the like, I noted a similar pattern in the colloquial way English is often phrased by the Irish: for example, the above phrase might be said, “It’s a beautiful day that it is”. To me, the final “that it is” adds more emphasis to the beauty of the day, and lends a poetry and musicality to the phrase. I found this fascinating, and also that the cadence it creates contributes to the kind of lilt associated with the Irish, a lilt that is present in both the Irish language and their spoken English. Gregory, in *Irish Myths and Legends*, writes in this songlike manner (and the following excerpt is also a useful back-story to Enbarr, Aisling’s magical horse), recounting a tale of Lugh:

And when he came nearer they knew it was Lugh Lamh-Fada, of the Long Hand, that had come back to them... and it is the way Lugh was, he had Manannan’s horse, the Aonbharr [Enbarr], of the One Mane, under him, that was swift as the naked cold wind of spring, and the sea was the same as dry land to her, and the rider was never killed off her back. [33]

Both the structure (“... it was Lugh... that had come back to them” rather than saying “Lugh came back to them”) and the use of several phrases sequentially between commas create a musicality to the writing.

Cillian’s manner of speaking, in particular, holds some of this structure: “Don’t care if it’s the very devil himself that you think I am. You’d not be far wrong. You don’t know the full of it, but you’d not be far wrong” [34]. I did my best to incorporate this in a way that seemed natural, rather than grating or contributing to linguistic stereotypes: I wanted to add the beauty of Gregory’s type of cadence to his speech. (In itself, this is something of a metaphor for part of what Cillian represents: that there is beauty in all people: no one person is completely evil.) Such cadence is present within the rest of the text, too, although less noticeably, and ties in thematically with the strong presence of song throughout.

Another key work for structure was Funke and Del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth*. It is an interesting example in that the work is a novel based on a film, rather than the other way around: Funke, with Del Toro’s contribution, wrote the novel to align with the film. In *Pan’s Labyrinth*, young girl Ofelia, like Aisling, is navigating two worlds. The tale is set in Spain in 1944, five years after the Civil War, and there is much violence occurring around her as her stepfather hunts down the rebel Spanish Maquis faction. She discovers a magical labyrinth and faun, and within their mystical world she, also, is tasked with a quest. In the film, the storylines of both worlds, the real and the mystical, are interwoven, and at the end the viewer can’t be certain whether or not

the mystical was real, or if it was just Ofelia's imagination. The novel version of the story takes a slightly different approach. The film begins with the recounting of a fairy tale as Ofelia arrives at her stepfather's and sees a mysterious stone on the ground, and throughout the novel Funke builds on this tale, with a short portion of it beginning each section, aligning with what is occurring in Ofelia's mystical world.

This approach was very helpful when I was planning the structure of my work, and again, when I continue with further drafts I plan to incorporate further sequential short tales relating to the reference mythologies surround Diarmuid and the Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn, elaborating on the tale in *Mnemosyne*'s prologue, at the beginning of each section to add more Irish mythological context to the work and to Aisling's Otherworld experiences.

In terms of structure, Morgenstern's intricate work *The Starless Sea*, another novel in the magical realism genre, was also of great help. Her plot and structure are complex: she threads different types of stories together – the real and mystical, and from several perspectives – and all interplay, joining together at the end. This thinking was useful especially as I neared the ending sequence in *Mnemosyne*, and had to figure out how to tie together all of the threads throughout the novel: Aisling's real life and her mystical, along with Cillian's journey and what his outcome was going to be.

### **4.3 Language and Place**

Further ideas in the text that require mention are those of language and place, and their connection to identity.

The idea of the aforementioned call home to the exile, associated with the Lady Ragnailt as a Sovereignty Goddess-type figure in *Mnemosyne*, also plays out in Aisling's name. Meaning dream or vision in Irish, the aisling is also a 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century genre of poetry in which a languishing poet sees a vision of a woman from the Otherworld [35]. This woman laments the state Ireland is in, and predicts that the exiled son of the King of Ireland will soon return and restore all to rights. This Otherworld figure is a type of Sovereignty Goddess herself.

If this exiled son could be said to represent the Irish who have left Ireland, especially as part of the Irish diaspora throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, then the sentiment echoes in Gregory's words at the beginning of *Irish Myths and Legends*.

She writes in her dedication to the members of the Irish Literary Society of New York:

My friends, those I know and those I do not know... it has given great courage to many workers here... to know you have such friendly thoughts of them in your minds. A few of you have already come to see us, and we begin to hope that one day the steamers across the Atlantic will not go out full, but come back full, until some of you find your real home is here, and say as some of say, like Finn to the woman of enchantments—

‘We would not give up our own country – Ireland – if we were to get the whole world as an estate, and the Country of the Young along with it.’ [36]

There is both loss and hope in these words.

In the course of my research, I used the Duolingo language app nearly every day throughout 2022 in an attempt to school myself in elementary Irish. It’s a beautiful language but a difficult one to master, especially without a real-life teacher.

According to a study conducted by language-learning platform Buduu, Irish is considered an endangered language, and likely to disappear within the century [37].

Peter Berresford Ellis (1987) discusses the genesis of the issue in his work *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology*:

In the most recent centuries, linguistic changes in Ireland nearly destroyed the continuity of the mythological tradition. Although the vast majority of people in Ireland spoke Irish until the early nineteenth century, it should be recalled that the English conquests of the seventeenth century had all but destroyed the native intelligentsia. ... Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the years of the English Penal Laws in Ireland, serious attempts were made to eradicate the language and culture. [38]

As mentioned earlier when speaking of Ó’Héalaí and his TEDx talk about the Irish language and beauty, both the Irish language and mythological traditions were directly impacted by colonization. There are disturbing parallels to what has happened with the Māori language, culture and worldview within New Zealand as a result of colonisation. The subject matter on both Irish and Māori fronts requires (and deserves) far more attention than I am able to give it here, but the relationship of both languages to land and culture has been an important aspect to *Mnemosyne*, especially within the context of identity.

Aisling’s friend Rāwiri does not speak during his childhood because of his journey with te Reo Māori, his native tongue, and associated English language-related trauma. Likewise, Aisling becomes separated from her native language when she leaves Ireland, encountering it only in her otherworld experiences until she meets Dermot:

[Dermot] looked into her face again. ...She started. “*Tá brón orm,*” he said. ...She, too, was almost too afraid to draw breath. He spoke Irish. *Tá brón orm.* I am sorry. She remembered. [39]

This occurs when she is an adult, and it is part of the journey of her reawakening to her true self.

In a similar manner, there is significance in the physicality of land connecting to culture. This is represented by the two stones in *Mnemosyne*: Aisling’s worry stone, cut from Connemara marble in Ireland, and Rāwiri’s taonga, his pounamu necklace. Losing her worry stone means losing her connection to home for Aisling, and it is the point at which she completely loses hope after the unsuccessful raft sailing. Then Rāwiri gifts her his pounamu necklace, and her rediscovery of it in adulthood is equally important to her healing. It represents her beginning to integrate both lands (Ireland and New Zealand) within herself, and her beginning to reawaken to her full self: the restoration of identity. For me, this was a meaningful part of the story too, because it represented starting to truly grapple with what it means to be Pākehā.

## 5. Outcomes

The writing of *Mnemosyne* was, quite possibly, my most difficult creative undertaking yet – it was a marathon of a work, and I realized two key things in the process.

Firstly, I bit off more than I could chew, and in doing so shot myself in the foot somewhat. The scope of the project, and the complexity of the ideas, was really too large and ambitious to be able to realize well in a one year master’s programme. Due to this, I was not able to progress the work through more than two drafts, and it would have benefited from at least a third to tighten the plot, structure, characterization and dialogue. This broad scope has resulted in it becoming a very lengthy work, far exceeding the recommended work count. Additionally, further work is needed to ensure historical accuracy, along with accuracy of place in descriptions.

Secondly, I had hoped to be able to spend an equal amount of time researching Te Ao Māori and learning te Reo Māori as I did with the Irish side of the work, but there was not enough time. However, I believe that such learning, post-study, will be a necessary part of understanding both what it means to be Pākehā and the impacts of colonization, and that this, in turn, will help me to rework the sections of the novel that deal with these issues within the right framework. I wish to ensure I do not reduce

the beauty and depth of Te Ao Māori to tropes or stereotypes in the manner Georgina Tuari Steward (2021) refers to in her work *Māori Philosophy*, citing Webster, who talks about the:

...Romantic inclination to identify ‘the Māori world’ with a functionalist or symbolic vision of a whole way of life rather than a critical history of a whole way of struggle [40].

As Pākehā, I am very wary of writing with such an inclination, and also of telling stories that are not mine to tell. To avoid this, the work would also certainly require a sensitivity read. (A note also that all instances of Māori and of Irish language I have attempted to translate from English as best I can: any errors in both languages are my own.)

Further, there is more work needed to ensure historical accuracy, along with accuracy of place in descriptions. I think *Mnemosyne* has several drafts and reworkings ahead of it yet, but I hope to be able to progress it to the point of an attempt to have it published, and this is my ultimate goal.

All things considered, this journey has been a wonderful one. Discovering and exploring my own Irish connections has been an immeasurably enriching and rewarding experience; one that I hope others might find themselves relating to, along with aspects of Aisling and Cillian’s story. Ultimately, the process of writing *Mnemosyne* was one of seeking out hope again, and, like Aisling and Cillian, learning to reach once again for my own essential self, despite the challenges I faced along the way. It has been a redemptive and restorative journey, and one that I will always cherish.

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# MNEMOSYNE



*A Nine-Fold Tale*

By Katie Brown

## Prologue

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### Book One: Lethe

- I. Tír-Uaine
  - II. Tír-fo-Thuinn
  - III. Magh an Ionganaidh
  - IV. Tír na Marbh
- 

### Book Two: Mnemosyne

- V. Magh Mell
  - VI. Tír na mBeo
  - VII. Tír na mBan
  - VIII. Magh Dá Cheo
  - IX. Tech Duinn
- 

## Epilogue

## PROLOGUE

## PROLOGUE

### The Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn

*Once upon a time in a land through the mists, past the setting sun and beneath the seas in the far, far west, a princess lay gravely ill. The place where she lay was Tír-fo-Thuinn, the Land Under the Waves. The princess was beloved by her people, from her father the king right through to the workers in the fields and the weavers in their cottages, and all were in despair as she grew more and more unwell. Her sickness was a wasting one, mystifying all the kingdom's healers who had been brought from far and wide to see if they knew its cause and remedy.*

*None could heal her. It must be an enchantment, they said, and they shook their heads. It was no good. All feared that any moment could be her last. The king was in despair. Then one day, in a fragile whisper, the princess said that she had seen a vision. If she were to drink three sips from the cup of the King of Magh an Ionganaidh, filled with water from the Well of Healing along with three portions of healing red moss from the sea caves at the portal to Tír-fo-Thuinn, she would be healed. The cup must be brought to her by none other than Diarmuid's kith, the mortal who belonged to the night – the mortal destined to carry the Sword of Light and with it to defeat the Fear Doirche.*

*This was the only way.*

*As she whispered the last words of the vision, she fell back senseless on her pillows, and entered a dreamless sleep that could be broken only by death or the fulfillment of the vision.*

*A momentary hope turned quickly to a sense of futility, and the king paced the halls in great agitation. No one knew where to find the cup, nor the moss, nor the Well of Healing. And even if they could procure these things, what was the use if they didn't come from the hand of the chosen mortal? How were they to find the right cup-bearer? It was impossible. The princess was doomed.*

*And then he, too, heard a voice.*

*Wait, came the faintest whisper from the winds.*

*Wait.*

*We will bring her to you.*

# BOOK ONE

—

Lethe

PART I.  
Tír Uaine  
*The Green Land*

# 1.

## *Cillian*

It's a bad man that I am. A right heathen. Done things that'd make your stomach turn.

Could sit you down, all peaceful-like at my hearth; have a little chat over a cup of tea and spin you grisly folk tales one by one, only gradually it'd dawn on you that maybe were true as they got closer and closer to home and then you'd be spitting that tea in my face in shock while those wild Connemara waves crash to the shore outside.

You'd like as not stumble over your very own feet in your hurry to leave, and then you'd be eagerly telling my stories into the dark climbing shadows of the night — shadows that would grow taller and taller because the people of this village, well, they're kind of fond of talk, aren't they? Talk and judge, the things they all do best; and soon a story's grown to double its stature in girth and height and a man who's a common fisherman has become the one-eyed giant Balor — and all the while I'm still sitting at my own hearth just happy that you're not darkening my doorstep any longer.

Fools, and too fond of frills you all are. But jabber on and on, what do I care? As long as you stay out of my business I'll stay out of yours, and there's an end to it.

Don't care if it's the very devil himself that you think I am. You'd not be far wrong. You don't know the full of it, but you'd not be far wrong.

Oh, yes, I'm a bad man. The children are terrified of me. All I've to do is grin and they scatter like the blessed autumn leaves in a gust of wind. Was the beating of little Reggie Donnell that did it, Reggie Donnell that dared to send my wee girl home to me with a shiner as black as the sea at midnight.

Boy screamed like nobody's business and ran sobbing to his mama clutching the back of his britches. Pitiful. Learned him good. His Da clearly didn't raise him like mine did me. No wonder. It's scum that the Donnells are. Liam Donnell couldn't even set a nail in straight, let alone raise his own boy the right way. As crooked as anything, he is. Spare the rod, spoil the child. That's the saying, isn't it.

You get what you give, so. Nobody touches one of mine. I'm the only one with that right.

That's what me Da would say. A man's got to keep his own family in line. And

it's him who I'm the spitting image of, God bless my poor mamma who shook her head and lamented to see it. *Two devils in one family, a bad business*, she would sigh – *What did I ever do to deserve this* and *Where did I go wrong* and *Please, God, save them from the fires of hell!*

Too late for that. Women. Always keening over something. Praying to a God who isn't there. My own missus included.

You'll want to be watching those words though, won't you. Never know when I'll grow tired of your chatter, and I can promise that when I do what happened to the laddie Donnell will be a mere lark compared to what I'll do to you.

Ah, yes, there's no doubt. It's a bad man that I am. Perhaps it is that one day I'll have to pay, but I can tell you right now that that day is not today.

It's only a man with a death wish who'd try to get the better of Cillian Sullivan.

## 2.

### *Connemara, Ireland - October 1874*

Aisling Sullivan cracked her eyes open the tiniest chink. Everything was fuzzy. Dark. Gloomy. She closed them again. Little specks of light danced against the insides of her eyelids. *There is more light inside my head than outside my head*, she thought. That was a puzzle. Heavy blankets pressed down on her. Scratchy layers. They smelt musty. Mammy hadn't made them dance on the washing line like she used to do for quite some time. Those days were Aisling's favourite days. When the big grey sheets had finished their dance with the wind they came inside again and wrapped Aisling up in the fresh salty air of Connemara. She liked that the best, because it was like being wrapped in Mammy's fairy stories of the People of the *Sidhe* — all earthy with whispers of a different world to this one, a different world that was right next to ours.

Wasn't it curious how fresh air made one think of fairies?

She wondered if any fairies had seen what had happened tonight. She thought they probably would have hidden if that were the case. Under the bed, maybe. Behind Mammy's dresser? Or maybe they would just have slipped through the window, open a very little bit, enough to allow a shy breath of night air into the room. She thought she would have hidden too, if she had been a fairy. Papa was scary when he was in one of those moods and he did Bad Things to Mammy. She was scared that he would do Bad Things to her, too.

Mammy said that she should never worry about that, though. That she would never let those Bad Things happen to her. That Papa was just tired, and that he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and that sometimes the weight of the world slipped off and Mammy just got a little bit tangled up in it and that's what caused the bruises.

The Weight-of-the-World made very big bruises all over Mammy's face. And it was Papa's hands that struck Mammy's face, all curled up into nasty fists or sometimes open and flat and Aisling would wince at the sound his palm hitting poor Mammy's soft skin would make.

That boy Reggie Donnell had the Weight-of-the-World too. She knew it because

Reggie had punched her in the eye one day because she wouldn't give him her apple at school at lunchtime. It made her fall backwards and at first she hadn't felt anything because it gave her such a fright, but then it hurt awfully and she ran out of school and all the way home in tears and there was Papa and Papa got very angry and he went off and said he was going to teach those Donnells a lesson starting with that little brat Reggie.

How could Papa be furious when Reggie struck her, but still hit Mammy himself? It was very confusing. That must just be what the Weight-of-the-World did.

The Weight-of-the-World was a mean man.

He was obviously invisible, but she could picture him. She thought he would be all grey and small and shriveled, but full to the brim of a nasty wiry strength. And he stood behind Papa and took hold of Papa's arms and made him do those things and whispered in his ear and made him say terrible words that made Mammy's face turn that horrible white white white colour.

When somebody died they went that kind of white. It made her very worried that Mammy was going to be dead soon too. Papa with the Weight-of-the-World behind him was bringing Death to Mammy.

She had seen a dead person before. That was how she knew. Mammy took her to Grandmammy's wake and everyone gathered around inside Grandpapa's dark cottage and sang sad songs and cried and told stories. She liked the stories, but the smoke from the candles and the fire stung her eyes and it was hot and stuffy and she had gotten a headache, and in the middle of it all was Grandmammy lying on the bed all completely still and her hand felt like cold wax when she touched it. Mammy had lifted her up to kiss her Grandmammy goodbye and she could still see the horrible whiteness of Grandmammy's face with closed eyes that didn't make even the tiniest movement when Aisling pressed her lips to the cold papery skin of her cheek. She could still feel that, even though it must have been the longest time ago now. Death on her lips.

She had had terrible nightmares for weeks afterward: Grandmammy walking towards her with her eyes closed and a funny smile on her face, but all terribly pale and gruesome with her skin falling away, and when Aisling tried to touch her hand her own went straight through it and then that horrible wailing sound came that was somewhere between crying and strange laughing of the kind that old Mrs. Myrtle made, Mrs. Myrtle who Mammy said had had a hard life and who Papa said had

almost all of her screws loose.

Mammy would always be there on the scary nights, though, when Aisling woke up screaming. She said that when death came it just meant that the soul was changing homes, moving out from the human body and into one that was in the Otherworld. Sometimes Mammy called it the Otherworld, sometimes she called it heaven. The priest at church called it heaven. She had tried to ask him about it once and he had patted her head and crouched down and looked into her eyes and said that heaven was where people went when they died if that had been their heart's best wish, and that the Otherworld was just a Fig of the Imagination. She had thought that was strange. Imagination was things one thought about that weren't real, but why would one think about make-believe figs? Figs were things in the Bible. The Bible was where heaven came from, so maybe heaven *was* in the Otherworld! It was all very perplexing. But Grandmammy's soul had gone to the Otherworld, and Mammy said that that was a very wonderful place all filled with good things and no pain and sunshine and life and song and laughter forever and ever.

Aisling liked the sound of that very much.

She scrunched her hands into the blankets and thought that she had better open her eyes properly now. Just one at a time. It was dark. Every piece of furniture in the cottage was just a murky outline. A sliver of moonlight slid through the window, like it was following that little scrap of night air. It made a bright white square on the floor and the legs of the table next to it glowed a peculiar silver. Moonlight. It always made Aisling feel a little bit strange. Mammy told stories about the People of the Sídhé stealing babies in the moonlight, and leaving their own ones behind instead. What if *she* – Aisling – was really a baby of the Sídhé? And not Mammy's and Papa's at all? She didn't think she would like that. She had asked Mammy about it once and Mammy said that women in her family – the family before Papa came along – were under the protection of the People of the Sídhé because they had a special surname called O'Carroll. And that the Queen of the Fairies – Úna – watched over them because of this, because of the special name called O'Carroll. Mammy said it was the name she used to have before she married Papa.

Why did Papa have to steal that name away? And put his one in its place – the one called Sullivan? Did that mean Úna didn't protect Mammy anymore? Mammy said no, that a surname was in the blood. And because it was in Mammy's blood it was in Aisling's blood too. Aisling pictured little letters swimming in her veins. O-C-a-r-r-o-

l-l. It was nice to be able to spell words. First Mammy taught her how to write them down every morning, and then she learned lots more about them at school.

She was protected because of the word in her veins.

But the moonlight still made her a little shivery – like if she were to really concentrate and use her Imagination she might actually find herself following that moonbeam up up up into the air. But humans couldn't fly, she knew that. It would only be in the Otherworld or in heaven that one could fly; one would have to be a fairy or an angel.

But she wasn't a fairy or an angel, she was just a little girl. She couldn't fly. She sat up in bed and rubbed the back of her shoulders just to be sure. No wings. Thank goodness. She wasn't a child of the Sídhe. But she was also just a little bit disappointed. Imagine if she *did* find wings one day. Then she could fly away when the Weight-of-the-World did the Bad Things. Only she would want Mammy to fly with her. But she had checked – Mammy didn't have any hidden wings either. She was a real-life mammy, she wasn't somebody from the Otherworld like Úna the fairy queen. Aisling thought that Mammy was pretty like a fairy queen would be, though. And kind. Fairy queens would be the kindest of all, but also strong. They would be able to make the Weight-of-the-World stop.

Mammy wasn't Úna because she couldn't make the Weight-of-the-World stop.

It was very, very quiet. That meant Papa had gone. Mammy hadn't come to the bed like she usually did afterwards, telling her not to worry and that soon everything would be all right again, *just you wait and see*.

Why had she not? Where was she?

She turned her head and stretched to see behind the head of the wrought-iron bedstead, because she thought she had heard a faint noise there. Her heart began to beat very fast. There was a shape all crumpled up on the floor, leaning against the wall just where the bed was. A shape that was beginning to make terrible rasping moaning sounds that made Aisling want to run away because it was all too scary and she didn't want Papa to give Mammy Death.

\*

Kitty Sullivan tried to move. Her limbs wouldn't cooperate. She felt as though she

were bound in iron. Everything ached. Her face – *ó Dhia*, her face! It stung as though it had been scalded by the flames from the devil’s own furnace.

“Mammy?”

A tiny, tight voice: thin, anxious.

Kitty blinked. All was blurry. She blinked again. There, if she could just ... try ... harder, she could gather the pieces of herself that she felt were scattered away in the ether, away where *he* couldn’t get to them, away on a journey to some place safer. It would be such ... a relief ... to let them just drift off – those pieces of her shattered soul. But she couldn’t yet. It wasn’t time.

Her daughter needed her mammy.

She willed her eyes to focus, and gradually soft edges began to take on sharper definition. She looked down at her hands. Thin. Almost translucent in the moonlight, from the beam falling through the window above. Bruised. Bloody. It was hard to breathe. She wondered if he had broken one of her ribs.

Her ear had been ringing earlier that day, a persistent, steady tone that had made her feel slightly off-balance, heady, dizzy. A sort of warning bell – usually the ringing preceded a terrible headache. A mercy not to have known that it was warning of something more ominous still.

Cillian. Her husband with those punishing fists and that crooked leering smile that once had been charming and gentle. Cillian Sullivan. Sullied her well and truly, stolen the O’Carroll of her maidenhood from her.

Dark eyes, dark hair, that mole on his jaw near his left ear that was all she could focus on as he’d come at her earlier that evening. She had been in the throes of the terrible jagged-vision headache the ringing ear foretold.

That mole, and two pale slips of paper in his hand. Kicked her, he had, then struck her, shoved her into the wall – and the finishing touch was the poker, glowing white hot, the whiteness of its tip melting into the soft skin of her cheek. Then he’d slowly torn the tickets in two. Thrown them into the fire. She’d watched the flames hungrily lick them up. They would, wouldn’t they. They were his kith and kin, she’d thought. Flames. Fire. Destruction.

He’d left her there in a forlorn heap on the floor. Stomped out the door and off into the dusk, swearing he’d kill her one of these days, would kill her if she ever tried anything like that again.

She had thought that that wouldn’t be so bad. Not compared to this.

It was cold. She could see her breath before her face — tiny white puffs hanging in the air. The fire had long since gone out. She tried to push herself up from the cold stone wall, the packed dirt floor. The fierce headache with its shooting pain had dulled to a familiar throbbing ache.

Her head swam. She sank back down. Too soon.

*Oh, that it could all just be over*, she sighed. Her eyes were dry. Tears had disappeared months ago. They served no purpose, anyway. Grief never got a body anywhere.

The moon shone on, its light kissing her hands again as it pooled on the floor. With her eyes closed once more, she could almost imagine that it was singing to her: a faint silvery melody ushered in on its pale beams. Enchanting, as if it were from the Otherworld of the stories she told Aisling.

But the moon didn't sing. Did it.

Fiction and reality – all a messy intermingling in times like these. It always took a few days to collect her thoughts afterwards. And in those in-between days she was always thinking she could hear and see things that weren't really there.

All in her head. Her head that he'd struck so many times now. It figured.

It was a kind of respite, to stop fighting and let the strange things flood her mind and vision for a little while. Was that how one bore such trials? One had to make up fictions just to survive. Fictions like the lake. Her lake. Her nighttime hiding place, its waters still and surface iridescent with the pearl-castings of the moonlight. The lake the silver-song in her head was singing of now, the lake forever claimed by the moon. It slept, always, her lake, lulled by the enchantment of the moon's chill beams. It slept, and even the daylight had no power to wake it, a mist unfurling over its surface as the dawn began to break. Protecting it from the fire of the sun.

Fire. The devil's by-product. Like her husband.

She wished the moon would claim her, too. Perhaps if she just followed that song deep into her mind to where it wanted to take her, deep into those obsidian waters, she could let them into her lungs – they weren't much use to her now, anyway – and by the cool light of the moon above they would lull her into a sleep she wouldn't ever have to wake from.

The moon. Luna. Úna. The fairy queen.

Oh, why was reality so hard to bear!

Trembling with the effort, she lifted her hand and stretched it further into the

moonbeam in front of her. It was as though invisible fingertips met hers – soothing, cooling, numbing, and she sighed in relief. Soon. Soon it would be over.

But – but first ... Aisling.

She stirred a little, turning her head slowly.

Aisling. Her dream-child. She had crept to Kitty's side and was gingerly reaching towards the strands of hair that had fallen across her eyes, setting fire to the welt on her cheek.

“Mammy? O Mammy! Please, please, Mammy – won't you wake up now? Please, Mammy! Please say the Weight-of-the-World didn't steal you and make your soul go away like Grandmammy's!”

Kitty opened her eyes fully. The child's face was ashen in the moonlight, wide-eyed and luminous with fear, and she recoiled as she came closer and slid her gaze from Kitty's half-open eyes to her cheek. Kitty wished she'd been able to cover it in time. It must look horrific, that welt that was still searing into her skin. Too awful for a child to have to see.

Why – why oh why – did she have to be so helpless? Why could she never stop him?

Sit up. She must sit up now. *Come on, Kitty. You can do this.* She struggled to an upright position, wincing at the pain that shot through her, and drew the slender – too slender – child into her arms. She held her close. Aisling's tousled spun-gold hair smelt like wild thyme. She could feel her ribs through the cotton of her nightdress as she stroked her back, trying to soothe the trembling child. So fragile. No. Things had to change. She would not let him near the girl for one day longer. She couldn't bear if her child began to carry the bruises she bore too. It was a terrible shock the day that little Donnell boy had hit her. She had thought it had been Cillian's work, and cried in relief when she realised it was not.

“Shh, shh ... it's all right, *mo stór*, my little one. It's all right now. Papa's gone out for a spell. I just ... had a little accident with the fire. We're safe. It's all going to be all right. Nothing's going to hurt you. I'm here.”

All right. Kitty wished it could be all right.

The child sobbed. Kitty stroked her back, brushing the fine curls away from her damp face. *There, there.*

It had to be all right, somehow. She had to make it right. Aisling had to have a better future than this.

She would do it. She would do it after all – despite him – *to spite him!* He'd torn up the tickets and burnt them, but she would find more. She didn't know how, but she had to do it. That was the single silver thread left for her to cling to, and it wasn't for her, it was for Aisling. Aisling's thread. Hope – however dim. A new life.

Declan. He would know how to find more tickets. But they couldn't stay here while they waited. They'd have to hide until the next ship left for Liverpool from Dublin. And pray God that Cillian didn't track them down, that he wouldn't be waiting there in Dublin, having guessed their move.

But that was a riddle for the morning. Right now, she had to sleep. Each movement was laced with a searing pain. Her eyes ached in her pounding head, and the heaviness of her heart was turning her limbs to lead.

Sleep. And then tomorrow they would leave.

### 3.

A cool, pale dawn introduced the next day, unfurling itself in a languid fog over the deep rusty ochres and greens of the fields and hills the Sullivan cottage was tucked at the foot of. The obscurity of its greyness was promising, Kitty thought as she stood at the open doorway, the damp chill creeping under her sleeves and permeating her skin. Strangely comforting. A good omen. A cover to hide beneath.

She wrapped her arms tightly about herself, rocking slowly from side to side. Everything hurt. And she was tired. So tired. A walking container of pain, she thought. Compliments of Cillian. How lovely. He was her sweetheart once upon a time – her kind and charming suitor, then husband. What had happened? How could the charismatic man she'd once loved have become this awful monster? And why did it still cause her heart pain?

She'd thought she was done with these feelings. The abuse had been going on long enough now, goodness knew. You couldn't love a man who did those things to you. And she didn't. Not anymore. He'd killed that love little by little – like depriving a flame of air just a fraction at a time, until one day it just quietly snuffed itself out. But every now and again she'd remember. The tenderness in his gaze in those early days. How he'd sing Aisling to sleep, how he'd dance with her in the evenings, whirling around their tiny cottage. How the three of them would collapse on the bed helpless with exhilaration and laughter. Aisling had worshipped him.

But he'd destroyed that worship too – and to see the child rescind her adoration a little more every day and replace it with fear tore her heart out from her chest.

Papa wasn't Papa any more. He was the devil.

She dug her nails into her upper arms in frustration, and turned back from the door to the dimness of the cottage with its incriminating once-were-white stone walls. Cillian wouldn't be back until late afternoon – this was always the way after one of these episodes. She had no idea where he went. She didn't want to know.

He could go to hell for all she cared. Maybe he would.

Her neck still throbbed from the grip of his hand. She remembered wheezing, gasping, fighting for her breath the night before. It spurred her into motion.

It was time.

\*

“What are you doing, Mammy? Are we going on a trip?”

Aisling was sitting on the great bedstead, swinging her legs. She didn't feel so scared now that it was morning again. Mammy was moving very slowly though and sometimes she would make a tiny gasping sound. When she did that Aisling winced a little bit too. It was clear that Mammy didn't feel very well today. Her face looked so terrible. She had tried to hide it but there was a great bright red-white-yellow welt across one of her cheeks and Aisling knew that it wasn't really just a little accident with the fire like Mammy said. It was the Weight-of-the-World. And it made her scared.

“That's right, *mo stór*. We're going on a little trip.”

Mammy had her valise open and she was putting Aisling's pinafores into it, along with her nightdresses, and the dresses Mammy wore in summer as well as her spare winter one. That was strange. Why did she need her summer dresses now when winter was just around the corner? She liked the thought of winter being just around the corner. Like if she went outside – outside their pretty little red door that she loved to see when they walked back up from the shore – and around to the corner of the house, and peeped *very* slyly without making a sound, she might see Winter tiptoeing down from the hills behind the cottage. Winter would be a lady with a great big white cloak that would drag out for ever so long behind her and it would dust the ground with snow as she walked and Summer would laugh and run away from her, run far far away across the ocean and into the sky and not come back until she had had a very good sleep. It would be nice to run away with Summer and have a very good sleep too. To curl up in the sunshine. Maybe Summer went to the Otherworld when she wasn't here anymore. She must.

Maybe that was where Mammy was taking her – to the place Summer had gone to!

Aisling jumped down off the bed, excited to think it.

“Mammy, are we going to find Summer? Is that why you are packing our summer things?”

Mammy paused folding their clothes for a moment. She was on her knees beside

the open valise, and she was wearing her dark grey dress with the long fitted sleeves and tiny little knots of flowers scattered all over it. It was loose on her these days. It made her look very small. Like it was swallowing her up. It made Aisling feel funny to notice that \_ it gave her a strange lump in her throat because it brought along that scary thought that there was something wrong with Mammy, something more wrong than the hurts that the Weight-of-the-World gave her. She pushed it down again, the scary thought. Mammy was studying her with her pretty green fairy-queen eyes.

“That’s a nice thought, Aisling. Perhaps – perhaps that *is* what we’re doing. We’ll see if we can catch up with her, maybe!”

Aisling bounced up and down on her toes, her breath in her throat. How wonderful, to catch up with Summer, and not have to worry about the bad things that came with Winter, like Papa being home in those long long evenings!

“First, though, we are going to go and stay with your Uncle Declan for a few days. Would you like that?”

“Uncle Declan? Oh, I do love it when we visit him! But ... but ... Papa? Will he come too?”

“Papa isn’t coming with us, *mo stór*. Don’t you think he might like a little time by himself? Sometimes grown men need that. They have many things to think about, our men.”

“A little bit of time by himself ... is that like you, Mammy? Like when you tiptoe out of the house in the darkest-dark, is it because you like to have some time by yourself too?”

Mammy’s face had a very strange expression on it.

“What do you mean, child? I never leave the house at night.”

“But you do, Mammy! Sometimes I ask you if I can come too, just in a whisper so I don’t wake Papa, but you don’t seem to hear me and your eyes have a very funny look in them.”

Now Mammy was breathing heavily.

“That’s ridiculous, Aisling. You must have been dreaming. Or you’re making up stories. Child, I know you love the fairy stories I tell you, but you must remember – they’re only stories. Not real. And you shouldn’t make things up like this.”

“But ... but ... it’s not made up, Mammy! I know it! I would know if it was a dream. You really do go away. And it’s very strange. I followed you one time, just so I could see, and you walked all the way up into the hills behind us, and down a very

small pathway, and all the way to a lake that I never even knew about. And you walked into the water just a little way and you were singing a strange song. The moon was all big and white and glowing and you were looking up at it. I was scared you would be angry if you saw me so I hid. You stayed a little while and then you walked back and you climbed into bed and then you were the normal Mammy again and you put your arms around me when I snuggled in next to you.”

Aisling paused a moment. Mammy’s face was white as snow. Winter. Weight-of-the-World. She swallowed.

“I don’t think even Papa knows about the lake, Mammy! Isn’t that funny? It’s your special lake. The pathway was very hidden. I went back in the daytime and it took me a little while but I found it again and walked until I came to the lake – and it’s so pretty, Mammy! It was hiding under the mist like it didn’t want its face to be seen. But it’s really real. I promise! I can take you to it now, before we go!”

Mammy’s words started to come out all pointy like tacks.

“That’s enough, Aisling. Enough nonsense. I don’t go anywhere at night. Nowhere at all. Least of all to an imaginary lake! It was just a dream. A fancy. You’re tired. I’m tired too. Could you please stop the chatter, and help me finish packing? We need to leave as soon as we can.”

Aisling tucked her words away. Something was wrong for Mammy to bite like that. She had upset her. She wished she knew why. Didn’t Mammy like to talk about her secret lake? Maybe she was mad that she had followed her and found out where it lived too. It was funny that they had to leave in such a hurry. And that Papa wasn’t coming. It was a relief that he wasn’t, actually. She didn’t think he liked Uncle Declan very much. He was always quite rude to him. He said things people were not supposed to say in public and Uncle Declan’s face would look a mixture of angry and sad and annoyed.

She bit her lip and climbed onto the bed, crawling over the faded patchwork squares of the quilt, one hand each square – never-touch-a-join – and found Ira. She crossed her legs and sat on her favourite patch, the red one with little yellow flowers, and hugged the dolly close. Now there was Ira in one hand, and her special Connemara worry stone in the other. Her treasures. It was going to be all right. They would see Uncle Declan and he would give her one of his great big bear-hugs and then they would go and find Summer.

\*

Two hours later, the sun was high in the sky, its light watery behind the quick-moving clouds. They had kept up a steady pace, but Kitty was already growing tired. Declan's cottage was nestled far back in the hills – not far enough to isolate him from all humanity, but far enough that those who ventured those ways only did it for the express purpose of seeking him out. Far enough that it was a heavy exertion to get there in her state.

They'd needed to stop and rest several times, pain searing through Kitty's body with a fresh intensity. She glanced around nervously as they sat, senses jarring with each new sound – terrified lest Cillian should come. But he wouldn't, she reasoned. Couldn't. It was too soon. He hated being in the cottage after one of these episodes. She knew that somewhere within him he was ashamed, once the devil had gone, when he saw the irrefutable proof of his anger quietly signposting its presence in her bruises. And he couldn't handle that, could he, his shame. So he fled. Until he could pretend it hadn't happened. Typical man.

But it was better that way, better by far.

He'd not be back at the cottage until later that day, she estimated, and then – well, then ... all would not be well. They had to be gone from Declan's at that point, hidden away somewhere while he made the arrangements for new tickets. If he even could. Could he? Had she made the most dangerous mistake of all in leaving?

Aisling darted off the road beside her to a clump of white wood anemone tucked below the hedgerow. Singing quietly to herself, she quickly picked a small handful and ran back to Kitty's side, slipping her hand back into Kitty's as she gently tugged her forward. Kitty winced.

"Come on, Mammy! We can't be far now, can we? Aren't these pretty? Do you think Uncle Declan will like them?"

"We're not far off at all now, Aisling; just a little further now. Uncle Declan is sure to appreciate your flowers."

He wasn't really Aisling's uncle, of course. But the child had called him such from a young age, and Uncle Declan he'd remained.

No. Of course she hadn't made a mistake – anything to protect Aisling, to try and restore some of that innocence the darker side of life was robbing her of. Stealing her sunlight. It was a side she shouldn't have been acquainted with yet.

Declan would know how to get the tickets. If he didn't, he would find out.

He would find out because he still loved her, she knew it.

Kitty glanced down at the delicate white flowers peeping from Aisling's little hand. Such tiny things, so fragile. And growing out of place there, beneath the hedge – they should have been hidden in the safety of the woodlands. They used to find such flowers, she and Declan, in the woods of Cnoc Meadha hill. Better days, those were, when they travelled out of Connemara and into Galway and spent the afternoons roaming the countryside. Better days. With the Declan of old.

## 4.

Declan O'Callaghan always had the answers. Kitty had been relying on that these past months. He was that sort of man. A good man, a kind man, the sort of man who would never raise a hand in anger to any living creature. Gentle. Thoughtful. Insightful. And he'd had many an insight about Cillian early on.

"Don't marry that man, Kitty," he'd said. Kitty had just laughed. But Declan hadn't seen it as a joke.

"I'm serious, Kitty. Really. How long have you known him? What, three months, is it? That's not long enough, Kitty. All you know of him is that he's from Dublin – you've never met his family, nor friends, nor anyone else connected to him. There's ... there's something about him, Kitty. Something underneath that charm. He's shifty. He's ... *dorcha*. Dark."

Kitty had shrugged off his concerns and giggled again. "Ah, Declan! Don't worry. You know me – I follow my heart, and Cillian is where it's led me to. You don't know him as I do. I'm no fool. I've my head screwed on soundly."

"That's just the thing, Kitty; that's what worries me. Usually you do. Usually you'd see straight through charm like his, be able to see what was beneath it. But – it's like you're blind when it comes to him, Kitty. Like you're under his spell."

"Oh, so it's fairy tales that you're believing in now, is it – spells and such? Bless me, I never thought I'd see the day. Declan, you worry too much. And you're too hard on him. Cillian is a good man. He makes me laugh and he is kind to me. We have fun together. He earns a good living. And life's for the enjoying, isn't it?"

Declan had given her a hard look for a few moments then, a gaze that had softened into tenderness as he'd taken her hands in his.

She'd never forgotten that look. Or that touch.

"Just be careful, that's all I'm saying. You're ... you're too ... precious, Kitty. You know what I mean. I couldn't bear to see anyone treat you ill."

Kitty had grown quiet then. And pulled her hands from his. That look in his eyes, all soft and kind and ... limpid ... she couldn't bear it. Because she'd knew where it came from, and she'd known what was coming next, and she didn't want to hear it. She'd turned to leave but he'd snatched her forearm and drawn her back.

“No. You’ve got to hear this, Kitty. I know you know what I have to say. But I’m going to say it anyway, dammit. Kitty – we’ve been good friends, you and I, a long, long time, haven’t we?”

She’d turned her eyes away, hating the flame she could feel rising in her cheeks.

“Yes, Declan. It’s good friends that we are. You’ve always been a wonderful ... *friend*. Don’t ... don’t say it. Just ... just let me go!”

“No, Kitty, I won’t let you go. You need to hear it. I ... need to say it, I need to now, before it’s ... too late ... not that it’ll make any difference, will it?”

Kitty’s heart had raced. Why was he ruining everything?

“I love you, Kitty; I think I always have, right from the day I met you when we were both wee ones of five. I ... thought you were so fascinating. So clever. And so fiery. I think you were braver than I ever was in those adventures we used to go on. And – and you still are, Kitty. Even though I’ve known you for so long, you still surprise me—”

“—Like in my choice of fiancé?”

Mean. It was cruel to derail his speech while he was declaring himself. But she hadn’t been able to bear hearing the words. He’d sighed. She’d risked a glance up into his eyes and wished she hadn’t.

Blue, blue, blue, beneath that sweep of wheat-gold hair. Blue, and filled with a deep sorrow – longing – that made her writhe to see.

“Let me go, Declan. I’m ... sorry ... you feel this way, you are a dear friend, but ...”

“Well, Kitty?”

“I ... just can’t give you what you’re asking for, what you want. Can’t you see it? We’re ... we’re too ... alike, you and I, and ... oh, Declan, why would you go and spoil a perfectly good friendship?”

She’d felt her own eyes brimming over with tears then. Foolish. He’d tentatively reached a hand to her face to brush them away, a pleading expression of tenderness shooting remorse into her heart. Her hand had shaken as she’d reached up and placed it on the leathery skin of his, lingering a moment in the uncertainty of the situation, allowing herself to be held in the blueness of his gaze. And – it was only a moment, a delirious moment, but then his lips were on hers – warmth of his body and earthy scent of his sweat and the pull of his arm around her waist – salt and confusion and desperation and anger and no no no, this is all wrong! She had torn herself away and

ran from the cottage, breathless. Declan. How dare he ruin things in such a way.

She'd seen him two days later at the markets. Tried to avoid him, but he'd refused to be avoided. He'd come to her and once again she could feel her face burn and ducked her head to try and hide the telltale signs. Infuriating. He would think she felt ... *that way* ... for him. But she didn't. It was just a kiss and it should never have happened. She was furious at him for ruining things.

He'd given her that look again. "I'm sorry, Kitty," he'd said quietly. "I shouldn't have done what I did. I'm sorry."

Before she'd been able to reply there was Cillian, and Cillian's arm was possessively around her waist in an instant, and he was chewing a piece of straw and staring at Declan like he wanted to knock him to the ground.

Declan had studied the two of them for a moment. A muscle twitched in his jaw. Then he'd shrugged and walked off, and she'd not seen him again until two months after the wedding. When she was safely – no, *happily* – Mrs. Sullivan. Oh, the irony.

And then he was the old Declan again. Laughing, joking, the friend she'd always known. No sign of anything more.

But it could never be quite as it was.

\*

Aisling thought about Uncle Declan while she and Mammy kept walking. Uncle Declan was always very kind. He had nice sparkling eyes and he was very tall and his hair was the colour of sunshine. He was quite different to Papa. And he always looked at Mammy with a funny expression like she was a very special treasure. Well, Mammy *was* a very special treasure, wasn't she? She wished Papa still thought that. A tear or two *would* try to come and she quickly brushed them away with the fist that held the flowers. It was no good to be sad. She looked up at the sky. It was lovely to feel the sunshine on one's face, even if it was hiding a little bit with the clouds all wispy like that.

Everything was going to be all right. They were going on an adventure, Aisling and Mammy. An adventure to find Summer. And to visit Uncle Declan first.

And ... and ... to leave Papa alone for awhile. Maybe then he would stop being so angry, and he might miss his Mammy-treasure.

Papa's face didn't used to be always angry like it was now. He didn't used to use his hands for mean things. He used to carry her on his shoulders, sometimes, and tell her stories too; he and Mammy together, and sometimes he would sing in the Irish, and he had a big magnificent voice that made everybody stop and listen, and sometimes his songs even made funny old Mrs. Myrtle cry when all of the neighbours were gathered together. He used to whisper things in Mammy's ear that Aisling couldn't hear and Mammy's face would go a pretty pink colour and she would laugh and call him her Irish rogue ... and then his face would become very serious and he would put his arms around her and say *a chuishle mo chroí, you're the love of my life, the pulse of my heart*. Then he would look at Aisling too and pull her in so they all three were in a great big warm hug and he would say that there they were, the three of them, with one heart beating within all of them together to make them a family.

That was Papa then. That wasn't the Papa that she had left behind.

She held Ira to her chest, all snuggled in tight, and thought about what Mammy had said earlier as she kept walking, feeling the warmth of Mammy's hand as their feet made the gravel crunch.

"Mammy, why do grown men need time to themselves?"

"Well, *mo stór*, sometimes ... sometimes when you're by yourself your soul has a moment to catch up with you again."

"What's a soul, Mammy? Is it an imaginary friend?"

"That's exactly it, Aisling. It's like your dearest friend, only it's really another part of you that you can't see."

"My soul ... Mammy, do you think I'll meet my soul when we go to visit Uncle Declan? Because *I'm* away from Papa? Or can I only find her when I'm all by myself?"

"Your soul is with you always. But you'll only notice it at very special times. It's shy, your soul. Like your little friend Elspeth."

"I like people who are shy, Mammy. I like Elspeth. So I think I'll like my soul too. I hope I can meet it while we're away. I think it's hiding from Papa, Mammy ... and ... well, I ... I hope Papa meets his soul, too, while we're gone. Maybe it's because he's lost his soul that the Weight-of-the-World comes and he is so angry. Do you think, Mammy?"

Mammy looked away and rubbed her face with her hand quickly. Was she crying? Aisling hoped not. She hadn't meant to make her sad! Again!

“I don’t know, Aisling. I don’t know.”

Aisling looked down. Ira was tucked tightly under her arm as they walked, and she was holding her worry stone in her palm, tight tight tight in her fingers, and it was lovely and warm now. Ira and the stone – her very most extra special things. She thought a moment as they walked and bit her lip. She stopped walking and Mammy went on a step or two and then stopped as well and turned back to her.

“What is it, *mo stór*? Did you drop your stone?”

Aisling fingered the stone in her hand just a little longer. It made her feel calm and peaceful. Then, very quickly, just in case her hand changed its mind, she slipped the stone into Mammy’s pocket underneath the folds of her dress, hugging her briefly around the waist as she did so.

“This is so you don’t worry any more, Mammy. Ira will look after me while my stone looks after you.”

Mammy crouched down in front of her. Her eyes were all shiny.

Aisling just kept making her sad all the time, didn’t she?

“Aisling, you must not worry about your mammy. That’s not your job. This is the ... beginning ... of something new for us. You won’t have to be scared again. I will always, always look after you, my precious little one. Do you know that?”

“Yes, yes, I do, Mammy. But it’s just that ... I don’t want you to be ... sad anymore, Mammy! And I think my stone might help you to be happy again because it helps me when I hold it so!”

Aisling demonstrated with her flat palm raised, slowly curling her fingers in and tucking her fist against her chest.

“Next to my heart, Mammy. You can do that too.”

Mammy wiped away a tear. Aisling suddenly felt very embarrassed. What Mammy needed was a handkerchief, and she had given her a stone. She wasn’t anything but a silly little girl.

“Thank you, Aisling. That was very brave to give me something that is very precious to you. All warmed up from your lovely little hand, too. I feel better already. I will look after it just for now. But not for always, because I think that you might want it again.”

“No, Mammy. It’s just for you. It’s your stone now. I think it wants to be with you.”

“Well. I am very lucky, then, aren’t I?”

Aisling grinned to herself. Mammy did like the stone. It was hard to give it up, but it was like Mammy could have a little piece of Aisling in her pocket even when she wasn't right by her side.

And she would always be able to be with Mammy that way, no matter what.

Now if only Papa's soul could catch up with him too, then everything would be better. Her stone would stop Mammy from worrying and looking so white and so small in her dress, and Papa's soul would stop him from doing the Bad Things.

Everything would be as it was again. Because they would have found Summer and brought her back.

## 5.

### *Cillian*

They've gone. No surprise, is it? Gone. Destroyed their tickets, but they've gone nonetheless. Gave them a window, and the window they took. Kitty and Aisling. Two peas in a pod.

Maybe I went too far this time, if it's honest we're being. The poker. Can still smell her flesh burning. Makes my gills green a little. Was drunk as a pirate.

She was so ... shrunken. Her big eyes, green, wide, afraid. I – I – did that. Swore I'd never be that man early on, when I saw my own Ma's bruises, thanks to Da's fists. But, well, history repeats itself, doesn't it. Besides – it's all that fool Declan's fault. He's in on this, I know it. Interfering where nobody has a right. Poking his nose into our business. Thinking he can swoop in and rescue the damsel in distress. Not a chance. *My* damsel. Deserves her distress, she does. Doesn't need rescuing.

Feckin' show him what's what, I will; Kitty too for that matter, for daring to go to him like that.

It's not my fault. A man is driven to these things.

Her fault. Kitty's. So lacklustre these days. Dresses in drab colours, walks as though at any moment each limb might melt into each other in slow motion and she'll be nothing but a pool of shabby, dark skirts on the floor. That beaten-dog look in her eyes. Can't stand it. Makes me so angry. If she'd just show some spirit, some ... *something* – like in those early days, when her laugh would ring out in such a way that wee Aisling would come running in and bounce up and down in glee before her Mammy swept her up and danced her about the room. And now, when I look about, all I can see are scraps of a half-lived life. Mine or hers, who's to say?

Feck.

What've I done to her?

Nothing. I'm driven to it. I'm driven to this. Matter of pride.

Dammit, the woman is mine, that child is mine, and none shall make a mockery of me by saying that I couldn't keep my wife. Going to stop them. Show them what's what.

Gave them a chance, but I've changed my mind then haven't I.

Look at these hands. These knuckles. Don't they crack nicely. Won't they enjoy the satisfaction of connecting with that sniveling fool Declan's face.

A black day it is.

A man can't answer for his actions when his wife deserts him for another man. Think they're going to run off together, do they?

Oh, no, they're not.

She isn't going anywhere.

Neither is he.

## 6.

“*Dia daoibh!*”

“*Dia is Muire duit, Declan.*”

Declan O’Callaghan’s tall form emerged from the open doorway of his cottage and he made his way towards them, the Irish greeting rolling from his tongue in reflection of the gracefulness of the hills surrounding him. Quintessentially Irish was Declan; there was a deep earthiness and a quiet steadiness to him, and its welcoming aura spread about them, calming Kitty’s nerves, as he drew near. Aisling pulled free from Kitty and ran to him with her tiny handful of flowers, and he crouched down and wrapped the child in a hug.

Then he stood, and his piercing gaze took Kitty in from top to toe. Too keen, his scrutiny. Kitty hated feeling it. She could never hide anything from him. Even when she wanted to. His fists clenched and his knuckles whitened, emotion emanating from muscles tightened in anger.

“Did he do this to you?”

“He – he found the tickets, Declan.”

Kitty loathed herself as she felt tears begin to prick at her eyes. Now they would come, would they? Declan’s arms were around her in an instant. Warm, comforting, stroking her back like she were a small child, holding her as though she were a china vase. Kitty stood stiff. His chin brushed the top of her head and he reached out a hand to Aisling.

“Aisling, *mo stór*, why don’t you go around the back and see Bartholomew?” Declan said, ruffling Aisling’s hair. “You can give him some fresh milk from the pail.”

Aisling nodded quickly and hurried off to tend to the young lamb, the tiny white flowers dropping one by one from her clutch as she ran, a little forgotten faerie pathway.

## 7.

“How, Kitty? How did he find them? And what has he *done* to you?”

Outside the cottage, Declan smoothed Kitty’s dark hair from her face. Aisling was around the back, and he could hear her chatting away to Bartholomew. A sweet, unusual child, she was. Like her mama.

He paused as he saw the angry wound on Kitty’s cheek. That ... that ... *bastard*. He could kill him. The man was killing her. Or life with him was. Plain as day. She’d become so thin. There was barely any of her to hold. It had only been a month since he’d last seen her, and she and Aisling had been due to sail in only one week’s time. Now, he had the strangest sense of holding nothing but a wraith rather than flesh and blood. A bitter taste filled his mouth. Fear, it was. He was losing her.

“I thought I’d hidden them so cleverly, Declan. But – but it’s like he knew. I don’t know how. And not just that, but it was like he’d known for a long time. I’d taken Aisling out for a walk late in the afternoon yesterday, just before dusk, and he was sitting at the table with them in his hand when we returned.

“He swore he’d make whoever had arranged them for us pay, Declan. And said that no family of his would disgrace the Sullivan name by leaving him. And – and ... I can’t talk about it any more – only we’ve got to leave. Today. I didn’t know what to do or where to go – and I’m so sorry, Declan, I’m sorry to bring this to your door.”

She burst into tears again. Declan gritted his teeth. Cillian would have known it was he who had helped procure the tickets. And there was no doubt at all that his farm would be Cillian’s first port of call that evening. And when that man was enraged ... well. Kitty’s face showed the precursor to what he was capable of.

“Hush now, Kitty. You’ve done the right thing. He’s – he’s ... when I see him again I can’t answer for what I’ll do. He’s treated you abominably, Kitty. He’s losing control. You’re right, you can’t stay with him any longer. And you can’t stay here, either, as much as I’d love to keep you both with me. He’ll be here next, we both know that.”

“I know, Declan. I’m so very sorry. Where shall we go? What can we do? I’m so afraid that next time it will be far worse – and it’s not for my sake, it’s for Aisling’s. This is no life for her. She needs to live in safety and learn to enjoy childhood, instead

of living in constant terror of her papa. We have to sail, Declan. Somehow we must be on that ship.”

“How much does he know, Kitty? Because I think he’s likely to follow you to Galway where you were to catch the connecting train to Dublin, and to Dublin itself if he doesn’t reach you before that – even if I am able to find you more tickets.”

“All he knows is what he’s seen – the tickets from Dublin to Liverpool. He’s not aware that you’ve helped – but he probably suspects. He thinks we’re trying to run to England. He doesn’t know about New Zealand – I didn’t let it slip.”

“Then that’s a blessing, and our plan worked. He mustn’t find out about the New Zealand voyage. The tickets for that sailing are still waiting for you with my cousin in Liverpool; Cillian has no idea I have family there. It’s going to be all right, Kitty. I’ll be able to get you passage again from Dublin to Liverpool. It will just need to be a week or two later. There is time. It’s all going to be all right. Does Aisling know any details?”

“No. She thinks we’ve come on a journey to visit you – she knows it’s related to her Papa, though. She understands far more than I realise, I think. Oh, Declan. It’s so hard on her – so unfair. If only I’d heeded your warning back when it could all have been avoided!”

Declan’s chest tightened. If only, indeed.

“There, it’s no good to be thinking that way. You’ve done the best you can, and now you’ve a chance for a fresh start for the both of you. I only wish that I could accompany you too.”

“I know that you can’t, Declan – and there’s Mary, now, too. I’m so pleased for you, Declan. She’ll make you happy. And you’re right – a fresh start will make a world of difference.”

Declan thought of Mary. Mary from the Bays. Mary with sunshine in her hair and in her smile. Mary, who would make any man a wonderful wife. Mary, who for all of that, was not Kitty.

He led Kitty inside, seating her on a stool by the table, and tended to the wound on her cheek as best he could. It was fierce, deep and raw and it alarmed him. He daubed a salve into it and dressed it gently. She needed a doctor, anyone could see that. But there wasn’t time. It was too risky.

“Kitty ... you don’t look ... well.”

She tried to laugh. He flinched.

“It’s nothing, Declan, just the strain of these last months when so much has been happening. Don’t worry. I’m stronger than I look. I will be able to manage the voyage.”

“All the same, Kitty. I think it’s best we find you somewhere you can rest until I’m back from Dublin. I’ll need to be gone a few days to arrange for your new tickets. You need sleep, warmth and good food. And ... well, it might sound foolish, but do you remember that hidden mound up by Cnoc Meadha hill, over near Tuam?”

Kitty nodded slowly. “The one we used to call Ráth Cuimhne? That’s funny you should mention it ... I was thinking about it as we walked here, about our little day-excursions out there when we were younger. Those were lovely times, weren’t they, Declan?”

He looked down at her. Long dark lashes were cast down over her eyes. Her face was flushed by the steady warmth of the peat fire.

“The best days, Kitty. The best.”

“I’m ... sorry ... about how everything turned out, Declan. That day, all those years ago, when you ....”

She looked defeated. Hopeless. But she was at ease now. And he loved her for it. At ease when she was with him. That was how it *should* have been. How was he to let her go – and all the way to the other side of the world, at that?

“I was ... foolish to do what I did that day, Kitty. It wasn’t fair to you. I’m truly sorry for it. Even ... even with things turning out as they have.”

A door in her eyes closed. The warmth had faded. He had said the wrong thing. Had she wanted him to say that he still ... loved her? She shifted in her chair, just a little. Turned her back slightly. He dropped his shoulders and shook his head.

Get a grip, Declan.

It had to be this way. He cleared his throat.

“And yes, Ráth Cuimhne, that’s exactly it. I don’t know if you recall, but there’s a little cottage just at the foot of the hill – and it’s still deserted. I was over those ways but a week ago on my way back from Dublin, and peered in to see if anything had changed. Had a mind that it might come in useful one of these days. No-one’s set foot in it in years, Kitty. I think you’d be safe for a few days there with Aisling. We could leave in half an hour or so – I can pack the cart with enough peat and provisions to last for a week, just in case. What do you think?”

Kitty’s expression grew dreamy again. Whatever *that* was, it had passed. Declan

clenched his teeth to try and bury the rising warmth in his chest and the longing to hold her, just once more.

“Ráth Cuimhne ... I had forgotten that place, Declan. It always had an otherworldly feel. Like it was tucked away out of time and space. I suppose it’s a fairy mound, after all, if you believe in such things.”

“You womenfolk and the fairies! Aisling will like that, though. You’ll be safe there – you’ll be hidden from him. He won’t find you.”

“I like this, Declan. And I do hope so – it’s a blessing he was never drawn to explore much farther than the Red Lion.”

“No. Does like his whiskey, doesn’t he, that man. In an inverted way, we can be thankful for that.”

Kitty’s laughed. Then she was quiet a moment. “Declan – I’m truly very sorry to have tangled you up in this. It isn’t right. It isn’t your battle.”

He smiled at her and buried the ache, brushing one thumb over the palm of her hand lying limply in her lap. She pulled it away.

“Don’t be thinking that way, Kitty. Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself. I’m glad I could be here to help when you needed it. Just a little while longer and this will all be over. Men like him get their just deserts, always, in the end.”

\*

True to his word, Declan had packed his cart with all Kitty and Aisling might need for a few days while he travelled to Dublin to procure new tickets for the next crossing to Liverpool, and they’d left from his farm in the middle of the afternoon. Kitty was sitting with him up on the front seat of the cart, muscles taut and lips pressed together. She’d wrapped her thick shawl tightly around her, crossed over at the waist and tied to the back, and Declan was glad for it. The wind was biting cold, and had stung his hands red-raw. Perched between them, buttoned into a warm winter coat, was Aisling, her doll tucked under one arm, her head turning this way and that as she watched the familiar landscape slowly roll by. She was quiet. Unusual for the girl.

Declan’s hands were tight on the reins. He wished for any creature but the placid old mare currently pulling the cart. Her pace was leisurely at the best of times. But she ambled resolutely forward, and they were making progress – albeit slowly – and soon they’d be across out of Connemara, and hopefully – oh, how he prayed it would

be so – out of the reach of Cillian.

Declan scanned the horizon, constantly on the alert for any movement. They'd been overtaken once by a man on horseback, but other than a quick, polite nod and a cursory '*Dia daoibh*' the rider had shown no interest in the trio. He felt unusually on edge. Something just felt ... odd. Not quite right. About the whole situation. Their getaway had been too easy. A man wanting to prevent his wife from leaving him certainly wouldn't have provided an opportunity right when his suspicions were most heightened. Which meant he'd done it intentionally. He'd *let* them go, Kitty and Aisling. Which didn't bode well. Not at all. Cillian wasn't a foolish man. He would have had a reason for doing so, some other plan in mind, Declan knew it. But there was no other way. He had to do what he could despite the danger. And – well, he hadn't seen anything amiss, not yet. And Cillian surely didn't know about Cnoc Meadha hill, about the cottage. Maybe – maybe they *had* been lucky?

He turned to look behind. Just the long stretch of the dirt road, winding out from the low ochre hills, atop of which was a lowering mist. Not a soul in sight. No sound, even. That was it. That was what was strange. There was no *sound*. No birdsong. The air had stilled. It was as though the entire landscape was holding its breath. To what purpose? He looked forward again and let out his breath through pursed lips. It would be grand when the whole business was over. When Kitty and Aisling were out of Cillian's reach, off to safety. But ... Kitty. It was too hard to bear.

Couldn't think this way, though.

That all belonged in the past.

He glanced quickly across at her. Saw the way she stared vacantly ahead, how her pale hands gripped the edge of the seat. What was she thinking? The poor, forlorn creature. She should have never married that man. She should have married *him*. Shouldn't she. But no. It was pointless to keep turning that over.

Mary.

He would make a good, new life with Mary.

In a way ... this was good. Good for Kitty to start afresh somewhere new, and good ... for him. How long had he kept putting off living his own life because of her? Kept shelving his dream of having his own family – his own youngsters to crowd around the fire at night while his wife told them stories? He knew he could have that with Mary – *would* have that with Mary.

He swallowed down the lump in his throat. This was a rough business. Why did

he keep torturing himself with it? He cleared his throat and clicked his tongue, switching the reins. The mare trotted on, and in the distance he could see the darkness of the trees covering Cnoc Meadha hill sprawling out from its base towards them as though it were stretching to draw them in.

He dropped his shoulders and began to breathe a little easier. They were nearly there.

## 8.

### *Cnoc Meadha (Knockma) Hill, Galway, Ireland – late October 1874*

Late-afternoon sun slanted in through the smudged windowpanes, lighting up a patch on the worn wooden floorboards of the cottage tucked away at the bottom of Cnoc Meadha Hill. Outside, branches of slim birches scraped gently at the walls, stirred by the breeze. The sound should grate, Kitty thought, but it didn't. It was comforting. A reminder that the cottage was not easy to see, concealed as it was behind the protective screen of a swathe of trees. The trio had arrived at dusk the day before, and Declan had ridden off into the falling night so as to sooner reach Dublin. Kitty and Aisling had unpacked and made themselves comfortable in the compact cottage, and with Aisling safely tucked against her, Kitty had slept soundly and dreamlessly the whole night through for the first night she could remember in a long, long time.

The trees. Peaceful. Strong. It was strange to think it, but they felt like *her* trees. Like – kin. Nostalgia for childhood, she guessed. She remembered pressing her hands to their pale bark when she was young, running her hands over the smoothness of the trunk, gently peeling away silver-white strips and looking up to where their trunks were reaching, watching the dainty leaves twinkle against the patch of blue sky beyond. Strength contrasted with fragility. Bending, never breaking. Like women. Like her. Silently compliant, silently bending – bending until one thought one's spine would snap, but it never did. Did it. Deep roots, that was why. O'Carroll women had always been like that. Birch-like. Delicate. But strong. It would take more than a twisted man to destroy their kind.

Declan had loved those trees, too, back in their childhood days. Said she belonged to them, that he wouldn't be surprised if she *were* one of them in another life. She'd teased him, of course. Such fanciful ideas for someone who wasn't prone to fancy! He'd reddened and tripped over his tongue as he'd tried to rescind the poetry of what he'd said. She had laughed, an appreciative twinkle in her eye.

"We'll make a romantic of you yet," she'd said.

"Not a chance of it," he'd sulked.

But then he'd laughed too and tried to catch her eye with *that* look, but she would

not have a bar of it.

She wouldn't have a bar of it back then, nor years later when he'd turned that look into those words that day, nor ... now ...? If things had been different, if Cillian hadn't come along? Too uncomfortable, that thought. She writhed a little in the rocking chair she was sitting in. Nudged the floorboards with one toe to set it in motion. Creak, creak. The slanted square of sunlight on the floor reminded her of the moonlight on that last night back at home. With Cillian, she turned to the moon. And now, care of Declan, here was the sun. And there was her precious daughter, Aisling, curling herself up on the floor, tucking her knees into her chest to try and fit exactly into the patch of light and singing softly to herself. Kitty smiled as she rocked. But there was a bittersweet sensation in her heart every time she looked at her daughter. A persistent fear beneath the current peace.

She rubbed her thumb over the surface of the little sage-green stone in her palm. Aisling's worry stone. It had been hers first, and before that her own mama's, and hers before her – a special piece of Connemara marble worn smooth by the hands of generations of O'Carroll womenfolk. It was soothing still, the stone. And warm, strangely warm. She studied it thoughtfully. Pale veins of ivory ran through it, and it was spangled with darker flecks of jade. Mesmerising. Beautiful. *Éire* – Ireland – home. The rocking motion, and the green – the sunlight and the trees – all began to merge together. Green green green, dappled shadow and light, and song, sweet song – flickering visions of a laughing-faced Úna, of the People of the Sídh – the rushing of a playful breeze, water at her feet, lapping at her toes, caressing her ankles. She would close her eyes, just for a moment – everything was so deliciously peaceful and so lush and so filled with ... life ....

## 9.

### Tír-Uaine The Green Land

#### *Aisling*

*It is the funniest thing! Mammy will be cross at me for coming up here, coming up to the top of the ráth, as she calls it. I asked her what a ráth was, and she said it was an ancient burial ground, or a fairy mound. To think there might be ancient bones up there, I told her! But now that I am here it seems curious to think that. Bones beneath my feet. They must be very, very old: that's what ancient means, isn't it? Old bones. But that's not what is really funny. What is funny – and, you know, funny-odd, is that just a moment ago I thought I saw a ghost. I fell asleep before, up here on the top of the ráth, and the sun was warm all around me just like Summer was giving me a special hug. So maybe I was dreaming. Maybe ... maybe I am still?*

*But it didn't feel ... scary, the ghost. It wasn't all white and misty like you would think they might be. Well, it was misty, but the mist was a lovely sort of dark green like the hills behind our cottage, and it was singing a song that sang me up onto the ráth, even though I knew Mammy would not approve my following it.*

*The grass feels different now beneath my feet too, ever since I woke up again. Like I might sink right through it. And the light is so pretty, it makes me think of the wild lavender Mammy likes to keep in bunches hung from the window frames in our cottage. I wonder if we'll ever go back there. I think I would be scared to now. But Mammy made it so nice.*

*Wait – the mist is there again! And now it's – it's shimmering, and it looks like it's wrapped around the shape of a lady! Is it Mammy?*

*“Dia duit, Aisling.”*

*“... Mammy? Is that you?”*

*“I am not who think I am, Aisling. Don't be afraid. You are safe with me. Would you like to come and see something especially beautiful, something just for you?”*

*I can see the lady properly now. There are still little bits of mist floating around*

*her, they make it look like she will fade away at any moment. She is very pretty and she wears a dark green gown the same colour of the mist. She makes me think of the moon. Her hair is a little bit like Mammy's, only even darker, and it glistens so. It's very long, coming down and down over her shoulders. I would like to touch it; I think it must feel very soft and slippery. I wish mine were more like hers, and all flowing in such a way. I am not sure that yellow is very pretty. Or curls. They're so very difficult to keep looking smooth, Mammy says. It hurts when she takes a comb to them, even though she's ever so careful.*

*But – is the lady going to take me to the old bones? Is she a ghost? I don't want to see the bones. They would not be beautiful and I think they will make me scared. I feel a little bit scared now, even though the lady seems very kind.*

*“But ... but if you are not Mammy, who are you?”*

*“I am someone who sees you, Aisling, and your Mammy too. I am not a ghost. I know that your Mammy has been sad, and that you have been very scared. Shall we go and see what it is I have to show you?”*

*“But how do you know of us when we have never met you before? Did you meet me when I was a wee small one and couldn't remember you? Are you a friend of Mammy's? And – and ... you're not going to show me the old bones, are you?”*

*“You might say that I am a friend of your Mammy's. She has known me in a manner in days gone by, too. The old bones?”*

*“Mammy said that a ráth could be an ancient burial ground, and I know that ancient means old, and burials mean bones ... so there must be old bones up here. But I don't think I want to see them. I thought you were a ghost, you know. And maybe ... maybe there are ghosts about.”*

*“I'm not taking you to see any old bones, Aisling. I'm taking you to something that will make you feel very happy. And your Mammy isn't wrong: beneath our feet there is great history. You are standing on the history not only of this hill, but of something far more vast and important. History can seem like a ghost sometimes. It is full of things that are both good and bad. But those are thoughts for another time.”*

*“I think I can go with you if you promise not to keep me long, or Mammy will be worried. But I like you. You are kind and you are pretty and I wish my hair were like yours. And I don't mind standing on history if you will not show me its bones or its ghost.”*

*“There are times in life when we must look at such things as old bones and face*

*such things as frightening ghosts despite the bad feelings that might come with them. But that time isn't now, mo stór, so you needn't be concerned. And your hair is perfect just as it is, I should think! Nature gives us what she intends us to have – no more, no less, and what we have is just right. I will not keep you long, and you are safe with me.”*

*I like this lady. She has the prettiest, kindest eyes, too. When she looks into mine as she is now they shine with a strange kind of light that sparks them up; they're a sort of grayish-green like the lake when the sky is all covered over with clouds. She smiles, and I feel very warm and happy inside, like nothing bad is ever going to happen again.*

\*

*She took my hand in hers a moment ago, my Green Lady, and when she did everything became like the dark green mist and I felt myself sink down through the grass. But it wasn't like being sucked into the bogs or marshes like Papa used to warn me about, it was just like floating and with the floating was the most beautiful music – like the song from the ráth, only this time it was of a different sort, like many little tinkling voices singing all at once – birds, perhaps, or a choir of invisible creatures. And now I am standing not on the ráth but in the middle of a towering forest, and scattered about the foot of each tree are tiny little white flowers of exactly the sort I picked when we were walking to Uncle Declan's. The air is warm and it smells delicious – the prettiest scent I could ever think of. I look way up high to the heights of the tallest trees, and they stand so straight and proud. All of their leaves rustle together and I wonder if they are talking to each other. I think they must be. This isn't the same woods surrounding the ráth, I know it. It almost could be, only these trees look grander and more beautiful and everything around feels all deliciously sun-drenched and warm and lovely. The mist around my lady has gone too, and she is standing right beside me still. Her hand feels cool in mine and her skin is very smooth and soft. I can feel her dress against my knuckles under her hand, and it is so silky and light, almost as though it could float away in any second. It shimmers with every shade of green now.*

*The sun peeps through just everywhere. There are lots of little glades that are*

*open between the trees, like the trees decided to step back and let the sunshine wash the forest floor. In those places there is thick grass, and ever so many more of those white flowers. She is taking me into one of these glades, my lady. I look at the trunks of the trees along the way, their wood all gnarled and rough, and I think of the old bones. Are the trees the old bones? They remind me of Grandmammy. That's funny, isn't it! Could ... could this lady be taking me to the Otherworld? To ... heaven? Is that where Summer is?*

*But now we are in the glade and my eyes are closed because the sun is making me drowsy and it's warming up my hair and my skin and I feel like I am being kissed by it. I can hear insects flying about, just here and there, but they are not in a hurry. The lady laughs. Her laugh is silvery like her skin.*

*"What I have to show you is just before you now, Aisling. Open your eyes and see."*

*I open my eyes. I can't see anything but the trees and the sunlit glade. Is something coming through the trees? The lady passes her hand in front of my eyes and takes it away again, like she's taking off a blindfold. My body suddenly feels all tingly and strange. Right in front of me isn't the woods anymore, it's a castle and it's a castle like the ones in fairytales, only this one is the same green of the lady's dress, all shimmering and glassy and I think it is made of emerald. I don't want to breathe because I think it might disappear again. The sun makes it sparkle and flicker and it's tall, ever so tall, its towers stretching up into the blue sky above it. And there are people walking in and out of it, people dressed just as she is, only they look as though they are from all the world over. Everyone is so beautiful and I could look at them and the lovely castle all day long and not grow tired.*

*"Come with me, Aisling. There's someone in the courtyard who wants to meet you."*

*She takes me by the hand and we begin to walk towards the palace. The road is white and smooth like marble. We walk through the palace gates and guards smile at her and they smile at me. They are dressed in different sorts of clothes too, and theirs is of the darkest green yet – and velvet. They look like kind men even though they are the palace protectors. We come through into a big, wide courtyard, and in the middle of the courtyard is a great white horse.*

*"This is Enbarr, Aisling. She is the quickest horse in the world, and she can ride over land and seas quicker than the blink of an eye, and she can go to places that you*

*think exist only in your Mammy's tales."*

*She is the most beautiful horse I have ever seen. She shines like the moon, all pearly white and glowing. She is so much bigger than me but I am drawn to her and when I hold my palm out she breathes on it and her breath is warm and smells sweet and tickles me and makes me laugh. I like her very much. She has the softest eyes and she is looking right into mine.*

*"She can run on the sea? A horse can't run on the sea! And how could she visit places that aren't real?"*

*"This one can run on the sea, mo stór! She can visit such places because she knows that what is real and what is imagined are sometimes not as far apart as one might think. I wanted you to meet her because one day you might need to call her. When you call, she will come, and she will take you where you must go."*

*"You say such funny things, Green Lady! Why should I need your pretty white horse?"*

*"Things are about to change greatly for you, Aisling, and you might become very afraid, and think that you are all alone. But you will never be alone, and help will never be far away. You will remember when the time is right, and Enbarr will come to you."*

*"I feel a little afraid now that you are saying these things. But it's like the sunshine here makes those afraid feelings just slip away as soon as they come. Where is this place? Was it hiding behind the ráth? Does Mammy know about it?"*

*"Your Mammy might know about this place when she dreams, Aisling; she has always sensed it but she hasn't seen it with the eyes of her body. This is a place called Tír-Uaine, the Green Land, and we are what you might think of as fairies, although really we're not quite those creatures either. Ours are the places that are only visible when we choose them to be. I am called Úna — Úna of the Sídh, and I am Queen here. Enbarr is my horse, and she is now yours too, because you were always meant to ride her in your hour of need. Great things are in store for you, Aisling. But great things always come with great trials, so you must be brave — ever so brave. Do you think you can be courageous for me? And remember not to give up, even when it seems like that is all that there is left to do?"*

*"You are Queen Úna! The Fairy Queen! You are real! Oh, I knew that you had to be! Have you found me because of the O'Carroll letters in my veins? Why must I be brave? And are you going to help us find Summer? And ... and ... what is going to*

*happen that is so terrible? Is it Papa? Is he going to hurt Mammy again, oh, is he? Please don't let him hurt Mammy again!"*

*I feel a little embarrassed because sometimes a lot of words come out of my mouth at once and I can tell the lady thinks so too, but she is smiling and she has a twinkle in her eye.*

*"Many questions! No, Aisling, your Papa won't hurt your Mammy again. You are out of his reaches now. And – yes! In a manner of speaking, I will help you to find Summer. She is waiting for you, I think. But will you be brave for me?"*

*"I will be as brave as I can be for you, Queen Úna. But you say such curious things!"*

*"One day these things will make sense. But now you must say goodbye to Enbarr, because it is time to go back."*

*Enbarr tosses her head and her mane shivers all around her big big eyes and she snorts and I laugh again and touch her nose and then there is the mist once more, and I can't see her properly, and I can't see Úna, and all I can hear is the lovely song – and I am ever so sleepy ....*

## 10.

A gentle touch on Kitty's shoulder softly woke her, rocking her in her chair. She yawned and clasped Aisling's little hand for a moment, then rose slowly, stumbling as she stood. Pins and needles. She had slept at an odd angle. She moved to the window and stretched luxuriously, fingers interlinked. The bones in her neck clicked as she moved her chin from side to side and her head spun a little as she dropped her arms back down. She leaned her elbows on the windowsill, waiting for the roar of rushing blood to pass. It was dusk. How had the day slipped away so quickly?

Behind her, the empty chair thwunk-thwunked on the floor as Aisling kept mindlessly pushing it back and forward. Kitty turned toward her, just as the child began to speak. Her distant, dreamy gaze made her look as though she'd been taken over by the Síde-folk, Kitty thought fleetingly. Suddenly she felt afraid.

"Do you know, I think I have met my soul now! Just like you said I might, Mammy. Only it wasn't at Uncle Declan's. It was probably afraid of Bartholomew there, even though he's just a wee small lamb. It was when I went up on top of the mound that I met it, Mammy."

A tingle in her spine turned into goose bumps on Kitty's arms. She swallowed. Could feel her pulse beginning to race in her neck beneath the firm collar of her dress. Breathe. Just breathe.

"Is that so, Aisling? But – do you remember what I said about the hill? That it was not safe to go up there alone?"

"I remembered, Mammy. But – but I could hear a soft, shy voice like you said – and it was a kind one. It was singing, Mammy. And I followed it, and I sat on top of the grass. And while I was sitting there it made me breathe in, and breathe out, and it said that whenever I felt scared or alone I could just remember that I was all wrapped up in the coziness of my soul and all I had to do was breathe it in and it would look after me and sing me a lovely song again. And then I fell asleep up there, and it was like I was curled up in your arms. I slept for a long time. When I woke up I felt so happy, so I think I must have had a lovely dream. But I can't remember what it was."

Kitty didn't know what to think. She pressed her fingers to her temples.

Souls and songs.

The child had gone alone up onto the ráth, the ringfort.

That was troubling.

It was more exposed there, where it crested out above the tree line on the top of the hill. Anyone hiding in the woods might see her if they looked closely enough. And ... and, it was very foolish, but folk around these parts were still superstitious when it came to the people of the Sídhé – taking care to avoid the mounds for fear of disturbing the faerie folk, who, according to the tales of lore her own Mama had told her at bedtime in her childhood, were not always ... kind. Could cast spells, lure innocent folk into their fortresses, and suchlike.

She was as fanciful as her daughter telling her she visited strange mist-covered lakes at night.

Stories. Just stories.

The song from that last dreadful night in the cottage danced on the edge of her mind for a moment. The song of the moon.

No. It was all mere superstition. Fairy tales told over many hundreds of years to account for life's wrinkles. And she was just tired. Her voice came out more sharply than she intended.

“Well, I am glad you had a nice time, *mo stór*, but you mustn't go up there alone again, no matter what – song or no. Do you understand me? It isn't safe.”

The light dimmed in the child's face.

“Yes, Mammy. Yes. I won't go up there again.”

The dull ache in Kitty's head was fast turning into a fierce pounding.

Foreboding.

## 11.

*Water, all around her. Tugging at her from every angle, laying claim to arms, legs, hair, head, her torso. She couldn't tell which way was up and which was down – all was black as pitch. No light. It wanted her, the water, it wanted to enter her lungs, it wanted to take her, but oh, where was the surface? She needed to breathe, oh how she needed to breathe! Her lungs, her lungs – they were screaming inside her for air. Nothing to hold onto it, nothing to grasp, just the silkiness of water that knew no beginning and no end. She was going to die. It was the lake that had done it – she had finally followed its call into its heart. The depths of its water. But she couldn't swim. The lake, the lake, the lake—*

Kitty sat bolt upright in bed and threw back the bedding in terror. She panted, shivering, her mind still emerging from sleep, her forehead and the back of her neck slick with sweat. She reached for the reassurance of Aisling's small form sleeping beside her. Her hands shook. Her mouth was parched.

The water – where was the water?

There was no water.

It was just a dream. She was safe.

She was in a cottage – the cottage at the foot of Ráth Cuimhne.

But the dream had awoken something – memories. Of a lake. *That* lake. In Connemara. It was ... real. She didn't know why she knew it with such certainty now, after that dream, but she did.

Within the dreaming she had remembered. Not completely, just scraps of recollections all bundled together to form one messy, confused whole.

And she remembered with her body, not just her mind: shifting layers of filmy night-time cloud frosted with moonlight, icy cold water of the lake numbing her feet, fragments of song, whispers on the breeze, the soft mist – and the irresistible urge to meet the moonlight in the middle of its reflection on the surface of the lake.

The pull had been mesmerising. But she never went into the water further than ankle-deep.

The memories stuck to her even as she shook off her sleep – memories quite separate from dreaming; memories that showed that Aisling had been right. There *was*

a lake. Kitty *had* left their little Connemara cottage in the depths of the night, walking as though in a trance, always after one of Cillian's attacks, and only when he was not there. The hints that had always played on the edges of her thoughts weren't the result of injury – or worse, of madness; they were nudges toward what had really happened. When she walked in the night it had been as though some other force had taken hold of her, one that captured her body and her soul and left her mind back in the bed, asleep, until one day when it was the right time for her to understand.

Why, then, did she remember *now*?

The recalled sensations made her limbs tingle as she lay back again quietly, breathing softly for fear of waking Aisling beside her.

She could feel the tug even now – something wanting her to climb out of the bed and make her way to the top of the ráth. And a voice, singing so softly she could barely hear it. Someone. Calling to her.

Strange – to slip out from under the blankets and step onto the floor, eyes open, aware, mind fully awake now.

Strange – to decide to follow an invisible voice, to ... *know* ... that whatever anyone else might think, these things weren't just in her imagination.

Strange – that to choose to follow the voice felt like freedom.

Kitty leaned back down over the bed and brushed Aisling's curls away from her face as she kissed her forehead. She would not be long. The girl would be safe. She could sense it. Something protecting her, something protecting Kitty herself. For now. Silently she padded across the tightly-packed dirt floor, chill under the soles of her feet, and lifted the latch of the door, slipping out into the cover of a night devoid of any sound – apart from that suggestion of a voice, singing in Irish, singing her up into the moonlight, up onto the top of the ráth, just as it had done to her daughter.

\*

The grass was cool underfoot that night – pliant, silken, and alive with the spell of the moonlight as it filtered through bough and branch of the trees clustered around the sides of the ráth. Kitty stood right in the centre of the mound, alone with the darkness of the trees surrounding her below and the expanse of the black velvet skies deepening above her. The moon was hanging low in its nightly ascent, and it dusted

all beneath it with a faint and shimmering shroud of silver. The song that had called to her still trembled in the air – only it wasn't the lake calling this time, it was the moon. And there was no water to be tempted into, no depths into which she could throw herself if she obeyed the song.

No, not on the ráth. But there was a different kind of depth beneath her feet. She knelt, and pressed her face to the grass, breathing in the earth's richness, and feeling the warmth of the sun still trapped just below its surface.

On top of the ráth. She shouldn't be here. But the song – she couldn't resist it. So beautiful, so – cold. But somehow there was comfort in the coldness. A different kind of comfort. You could wrap yourself in darkness just as you could in light and warmth, and – the dark did different things. You could ... forget. Lose yourself. Be absorbed into it, drawn into its very heart and dissolve slowly into oblivion. The forgetting. That was what Kitty's exhausted heart longed to collapse into. But instead she found herself remembering.

She rose from her knees and stood. Waited.

It began slowly at first. The moonlight grew brighter and brighter, and as it did, pools of its unearthly light began to thicken and flicker with a kind of mesmerising vapour. The largest of these hovered in front of Kitty, a softly glowing sphere that could almost be mistaken for the moon itself if the real one weren't shining so zealously above it. The song still held her, and her thoughts were half-tethered to earth and half slipping away into the infinity of the ever-darkening skies. But the song centred itself within this sphere, and Kitty, sensing the invitation, stepped into its cool radiance.

So this is what it's like to fall into the moon, Kitty thought. A dream inside a dream. So beautiful, but so cold – and slipping through the fingers so. No grasping at it, nothing to hold onto.

And then she gasped. Within the sphere, an image was beginning to gather, the colours and textures swirling about before settling into a discernible form. It was the cottage. And there was Aisling, waiting at the door and calling for her Mammy. The darkness was pervasive. The vision shifted, and then she saw the foot of the hills, right where the edge of the brush began to thicken into trees and foliage. And there a man was standing, peering through the branches, before he stumbled upon the tell-tale signs of the hidden track. Lantern held high in one hand, he began to move along it, slowly, but surely. The vision slowly drew in closer to him. He carried an axe. And

there – not far in front of him, there was another man, riding a horse. He hadn't seen that he was being followed.

Kitty shrieked, a grinding fear awaking in her stomach.

It was Cillian. He was coming.

## 12.

The soft orb of glowing light began to slowly melt away from Kitty at just the moment she recognized her husband, and it retreated almost reluctantly, lingering around her face and hands. An urgency gripped Kitty as she hastened back through the twining trees as quickly as she could. He was coming for them.

They thought they would be safe, but he was coming. Nothing was safe. Nowhere was safe.

She wouldn't be at ease until they were on that ship headed far, far away to the other side of the world.

Her thoughts kept pace with the rhythm of her stride as she hurried down the hill.

*Must – leave – must – leave – must – leave.*

“Aisling, *mo stór!* Where are you?” Kitty burst through the front door of the dark cottage, breathless, sharp pain shooting through her side from the exertion, and her eyes darted about the room until they lit upon the little girl who was just stirring in bed at the noise, sitting up to gaze at Kitty with wide, sleep-filled eyes.

“Mammy? What’s wrong, Mammy?”

“Oh, Aisling! Thank goodness. I . . . I was just worried you might have wandered off to look for me, that’s all.”

“I fell asleep, Mammy. I did look for you in the darkness before, just for a little bit, but that lovely song came again, Mammy, and this time it wanted to sing me to sleep again in this great big bed.”

Kitty breathed out in relief. No Cillian. Yet. If he knew how to find the cottage, it would still take him an hour or so to make his way through to it on foot.

That was something, anyway. An hour was precious.

“I’m glad you were resting, Aisling. Mammy just had to . . . leave . . . for a little while.” A twinge of guilt hovered for just an instant as she drew her daughter close and buried her face in Aisling’s hair, holding her tightly. She should never have left her alone. The danger! The child’s curls carried the scent of the day’s warmth. Kitty fancied each fine strand held the memory of sunshine in it, and whispered a soft and quick half-prayer that such would always be so.

But right now they had to leave.

“*Mo stór*, I know you are very sleepy, but we just need to go for a little walk again. I thought you might like to see the big, wide night sky right up on the top of the ráth – would you like that?”

Strange to think of going back up there, that they could be safe on its exposed surface. But it was the only thing that Kitty could think to do – something deep inside impelled her to return back to its heights, as though being within the border of the ring of trees might yield them some sort of unearthly protection.

“Up on the ráth, Mammy? Now? You said I wasn’t to go up there. But it *is* nice there, isn’t it? Is your song telling you to go up there like mine did?”

Kitty shivered a little. “Darling, it’s just a fancy your silly Mammy has taken. Shall we go, then?”

“Okay, Mammy. I’m going to take Ira with me again, I think she would like to see the big blanket of the sky too. Then she might feel it tucking us all in to sleep as well. And you still have my stone in your pocket, don’t you? I’m glad you have it, Mammy.”

Kitty smiled softly, wistfully down at her daughter. Impulsively, she knelt down and wrapped Aisling in a tight hug again, kissing the top of her golden head. Aisling squealed in response, but hugged her Mammy back just as tightly.

Never. She would never, ever let this little one go.

And the two slipped out into the night, Kitty’s ears on high alert for any giveaway sound of crunching bracken and twigs, or the rustling of leaves out of time with the intricately choreographed rhythm of the thickening night.

\*

Kitty and Aisling stood right at the heart of the ráth, surrounded once again by the night-cooled grass. All was cold, eerie; somehow all about appeared ... sharpened. There was no better word for it. Even under the diminished visibility of night, all about had taken on a peculiar distinction. The outline of each tree zigzagged out against that of its companions. Each blade of grass was so clearly defined that to Kitty it appeared as though they were standing amidst a glade of upturned knives, brandished by an earth waiting to vanquish its foe.

They stood dead still.

An eerie glow came from the woods below.

Kitty could taste a metallic tang on her tongue.

Her blood rang with it. Ore. In her veins.

Harsh. All was harsh. Too brilliant. Where had the softness of the world gone?

Aisling clung to her hand. But she was motionless. Kitty wasn't even sure if the child dared to breathe.

They waited.

The world wound itself tighter and tighter.

Then something snapped.

The air itself, it seemed.

A howl – a long, drawn-out, terrible wail – soared out from the woods. It cut to the bone. An excruciating anguish. On it was the distinct flavour of the underworld.

Kitty stopped her ears. Aisling did the same. They screwed their eyes closed and crouched down, covering their heads with their arms.

The wailing went on, on, on. It was awful. It was enchanting. It was the darkest, heaviest, most beautiful lament.

Kitty thought her heart would rend in two from the pain of the sorrow on it.

The banshee.

Death.

But whose?

## 13.

### *Cillian*

I knew it. They're up there, up in those woods, hidden away while that puppet comes to their rescue, that sorry excuse of a man. And here I am. Can't fool me, my beauties. Going to scupper your plans well and truly, I am. I'm coming for you, and you'll rue the day you ever stepped foot outside of the Sullivan cottage, dammit.

But – will you, though? Do the dead feel regret?

Ha!

I can see the pathway, can see where they've gone, it twists up through these trees. Overgrown. Strangely so, coming to think of it, when I saw them pass through it easily only two days ago. And Declan, not five minutes ago, on his sorry excuse for a horse. Riding so slowly I can keep up with him on foot. Fool.

Shouldn't be so dense, surely, these trees.

Never mind. I've my axe.

Going to scare the devil out of Declan, aren't I, surprising him from behind like I'm about to.

Trailed the fool.

Back from Galway, after he'd returned from Dublin.

So predictable.

And here we are.

I'm going to get him, I'm going to get them, and I'm going to find out what's at the bottom of this.

This night is going to run red, and my blood is thrilling in my veins because of it.

It's time.

It's finally time.

PART II.

Tír-fo-Thuinn

*The Land-Under-the-Waves*

## 14.

### *Aboard The Nelson, Liverpool to New Zealand – late November 1874*

Doctor Barton had been watching them for several days now.

Those first days, most of the poor souls in steerage were confined to their bunks, at the mercy of the sea's incessant tossing, which upset nearly every constitution accustomed to the stability of dry land. But this sickness gradually passed as they gained their 'sea legs', and more and more would emerge onto deck, pale faces greeting the warming sunshine with an expression of relief and thankfulness for fresh air after the cloistering closeness of their quarters below.

Those two, though, were different. The child clung to her mother's skirts, and they kept themselves separate from all the others. Most of the women, separate from the men as they were, began to form friendships simply due to proximity – it was a long six weeks to spend so close together. But this woman didn't seem to share any inclination to interaction. Already, the other women had begun to overlook her – tired by the constant shunning, the difficulty of getting more than one full sentence out of her, her clear lack of desire to relate to anyone but her daughter.

They were out on deck now, finally, both hovering near the railing of the quarterdeck – not moving up onto it, of course – that was just for the first class passengers, and only at particular times of day. The woman was pointing to the sky, one finger extended, tracing the journey of a passing gull and glancing down at her child to ensure she could see it too. She was thin, gaunt. Her dress hung from jutting shoulders. Her hair was lacklustre, and tied back from her face in a simple knot. The extended hand almost looked spectral, Doctor Barton thought as he watched them, hands plunged deeply into his coat pockets. She was clearly unwell. Tuberculosis, he shouldn't wonder. Grim. Usually they didn't allow ill passengers to travel. How had she even made it on board? It was a concern. He wondered if the other passengers suspected it. He was going to have to examine her. That was why he was on board, after all – a doctor on a sailing usually proved their mettle at some point along the way. Accidents, mishaps, illness – so much could go wrong. It was a miracle when nothing major did occur. Those sailings were the golden ones, those without incident.

But rare. This was his seventh crossing. And his last. Time to settle, finally, in New Zealand – despite his misgivings.

Katherine, wasn't it? Katherine O'Carroll. That was the name the captain had given when he checked through the passenger lists. The child was named Aisling. A pretty name, he thought. They were Irish. Not that you'd know it, since barely any had heard them speak.

*Widow*, it was stated next to her name. Doctor Barton wondered what had happened to her husband. It was unusual to travel in such circumstances, too. Not really a good place to start afresh for a fatherless family.

His thumb brushed over the surface of his pocket watch as he strolled towards them on deck.

"Mrs. O'Carroll, is it?" he enquired of the slight woman standing with her back to him. Her daughter turned around and gazed up at him in fright, but the woman didn't move.

"Ah – Mrs. ... O'Carroll?"

The child nudged her mother. "Mammy?" she whispered. "Mammy? I think that man wants to talk to you."

The woman slowly turned to face him. Up close, Doctor Barton started internally, careful to hide his shock. She was more unwell than he'd realised. And she had a nasty welt on her face – one that was healing, but it was terrible. How'd one go by getting such a wound? Not by any natural means, he was certain of that. Dark, deep eyes fixed on his – eyes filled with a hollowness, edged with a fringe of haunting. Despite her gaunt appearance, she was beautiful. But it was a kind of beauty that filled him with sorrow, because he could see that it was being stolen from her, little by little, by her illness.

"Mrs. O'Carroll, I'm Doctor Barton. This is Aisling, I take it?"

She stared at him with expressionless eyes for a moment or two longer before replying with no emotion in her voice, "That's right."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both. How do you do, Aisling?"

The child looked up at him and evidently decided she could trust him as she reached out her hand.

"*Dia duit*, Doctor Barton. Isn't this a nice ship?"

Now he could hear the Irish lilt. Charming from such a child.

"Isn't it just! Have you found your sea legs, little one?"

“Sea legs, Doctor? I’ve just the one set, don’t you know?”

“Ah – but that’s an expression, Aisling! It means that you can stand up again and move about without feeling like you need to lie down. That the sea has stopped stealing your appetite.”

“Oh! Yes, yes, in that case, I think I have sea legs now, Doctor. It’s unkind of the sea to do that, though, isn’t it?”

“It’s what they call a rite of passage, little one. Something that must be gone through to get to something that is better.”

“Oh, I see. A Ritive Passage. I suppose the sea is happier with us now, then!”

Doctor Barton smiled down at her. She was a cheerful little thing, quite the ray of sunshine, behind that shy caution.

“Now, Mrs. O’Carroll, I have come to see if there is any assistance I may be able to offer you? You must forgive me, but I have noticed that you still look a little under the weather.”

“Perhaps she’s still finding her sea legs, Doctor!” the small voice piped up below him.

The mother smiled wanly at Aisling, and turned her head to look at him with more clarity in her eyes. He could almost see the inner machinations as she strove to pull herself together to present a collected whole.

“I am well, Doctor, just tired by the voyage. That’s all.”

Subterfuge. She knew her predicament, then.

“Forgive me, Mrs. O’Carroll. It is just that I suspect it may be more than that. Would you allow me to examine you? I might be able to offer assistance of some sort to make this a little more bearable?”

“No, you’re quite wrong, Doctor. Just a day or two longer and I will be myself again. Thank you. I hope you are having a pleasant voyage.”

She turned from him and tugged Aisling away with her, the two of them quickly hurrying off. Aisling turned back and looked at him. Her face wore a pleading expression.

She knew too, then.

\*

It was early the following day. Most passengers were still sleeping, but Aisling had woken before dawn, disturbing her Mammy as she sat up in their bunk. Mammy was so pale and it troubled her.

In a sleepy voice, she whispered, “Mammy, I like Doctor Barton. I think he looks nice. He has kind eyes. And his spectacles make them look even kinder. Mammy, are you going to let him help you?”

Mammy stirred, and croaked, “I don’t need help, mo stór. I’m just tired. Just you wait – in no time at all I’ll be ever so much better. Now, I know it’s very early, but will you run along and see what’s happening above deck?”

“I don’t like to leave you alone, Mammy.”

“I know, Aisling, I know. But Mammy is just going to rest for a moment or two. It’ll do you good to play a little. Why don’t you take Ira up with you and see if you can spot another gull?”

“Okay, Mammy. We’ll see what we can see and come back and tell you all about it.”

Aisling hesitantly tiptoed off, the tiptoe turning into a little skip as she moved up onto the deck. The morning light was so pretty with the breaking dawn – the sun relieving the moon of its duties, creating a magical pink-violet-orange light. She loved this time of day. No other passengers were about yet. Nobody even up on the quarterdeck, where Mammy said they weren’t allowed to go – no-one except the skipper and a sailor or two. They were very busy. They wouldn’t notice her, would they? She was just a wee small girl after all. Surely it wouldn’t hurt just to have a peep? Only for a moment.

Aisling scrambled up the steps and was soon soaring along at the rear of the ship, watching the waves beneath the sides of the vessel as it nudged its way through the vast ocean. Lacy white ruffles of waves rolled out in a great big V behind the ship, the wake stretching out for ever such a long way, as far as the eye could see. It felt like she was flying. She laughed. How funny, flying on a ship. Ireland, she guessed, was very, very far off now. And they were going to a new place, a place she’d never even heard of before Mammy had spoken of it in Liverpool two weeks earlier. New Zealand. It was very strange, wasn’t it? They were moving about like a stone skimming across a lake. Someone must have thrown them very well so that they could bounce from place to place so and not sink. She wondered if they’d skip any more, or if New Zealand were the place they would rest? And – the best thing of all was that

Mammy said that in New Zealand they would find Summer! Finally! She wondered if Summer had had to travel by ship too. Perhaps she had clung on to the railing just as she was doing.

Look, another gull! Finally! She lifted Ira up so she could see, holding her high above her head. Her chocolate coloured braids fluttered and the navy plaid dress Mammy had made for her tugged this way and that in the breeze. That naughty wind was really making things difficult – it was trying to tug Ira from her hands, she was sure of it! Well, it wouldn't win, would it! But just at that moment it *did* win and Aisling couldn't hold on to Ira anymore because the wind had snatched the doll from her grasp – snatched her and thrown her over the edge of the railing, overboard!

“Ira!” Aisling shouted.

She scrambled up onto the lip below the railing. It was quite high, but if she got one foot onto that beam halfway up the side, like so, she could lift herself up and look over the edge to see where Ira had gone. She leaned over. No sign of the doll. Ira! What would she do without Ira? And then she saw telltale threads of chocolate yarn, not a foot down below the railing on the outside of the ship. Somehow – miraculously – the ship had caught her! She was dangling from a nail. Aisling had to get her back. She heaved herself up so that she was leaning over the rail on her stomach. Stretched. There, she could almost – almost – get to her!

There, she had her!

But the doll was stuck – it was going to take a good tug to free her. It was very windy. She had to hold on tight too. She stretched a little farther. Tugged a little harder, just at the same moment as a particularly strong gust of wind ricocheted about the inner edges of the quarterdeck's railing.

\*

Doctor Barton emerged from the captain's cabin out onto the quarterdeck just after the rising of the sun. He had been discussing Mrs. O'Carroll's situation with Captain Beaufort, and the two were of one accord. Like it or not, he was going to have to examine the poor woman, and if, as he suspected, she had tuberculosis, they would have to isolate her from the other passengers as a precautionary measure. He was troubled. She was proud. Her wan face shimmered in his mind as he closed the door

behind him, and for a second he thought he was dreaming when that very same face flickered before him and then disappeared again: a wraith – only no, it wasn't a wraith, it *was* Mrs. O'Carroll, and she was running towards the railing behind him. As he spun around, bemused, he gasped.

The little girl. She was stretching over the edge of the ship, reaching at something, and as she strained a little farther she gave a mighty tug at whatever it was that she was reaching for at just the same moment as the wind buffeted the deck with unprecedented force – too much for the small form to battle.

She disappeared from sight over the edge of the ship.

Motionless, they both stood stunned, he and Mrs. O'Carroll. That could not – should not – have just happened.

Then both rushed forward in one movement. It was too late. The child was nowhere to be seen, the ship's wake quickly covering over all traces of where she might have fallen.

"Aisling!" Mrs. O'Carroll shrieked, a wild desperation on her face, at the same moment as Doctor Barton roared, "Overboard! Child overboard!" The captain came running, shouting orders as he approached, and Doctor Barton turned from the railing to quickly confer with him about what had happened. It was most likely too late to save the child – the impact of the fall alone must have killed her – but they must try.

Everything that unfolded next was such a seamless sequence of events that they held the beauty of a perfect dance. Captain Beaufort turned to his skipper, who turned to the wheel, and the ship began to turn about as the sailors spun back with life-rings in tow.

In the same motion, both Captain and Doctor turned back towards the railing and Mrs. O'Carroll, and lunged forward simultaneously to try and catch at the desperate woman as she threw herself overboard.

Three-hundred-and-sixty degrees.

The deed was done, the course of fate forever changed.

They were too late.

## 15.

### *Cillian*

That god-awful howling won't stop. Been going on and on forever, it seems; makes me want to vomit. It's right there, like some old spinster-woman wailing and moaning inside my head. Echoes abominably. If anything could curdle the soul of a man that'd be it. Bleedin' wretched song – curse her, curse wherever it's coming from, curse this devil of a trap I was so blind to fall into!

A pit in the ground. The epitome of stupidity – should've seen it a mile off. Don't know how that fool, Declan, didn't fall into it himself. Never mind – he's fallen well and truly, with a little extra decoration to the back of his head.

But this hole is deceptive. Pitch black – can't see a thing. And if I stand up, reach my arm up above my head, my fingertips are only a foot or two off the surface, where that mass of branches and leaves still partially cover it over. No matter what I do, though, I can't reach them. Not even very wide – I can dig a little and get a toe into the soil on its walls, and I should be able to reach – surely – from there, but I can't. Always just a little short of it. Jump, and can't touch anything. Yet I could swear it was *that* close.

Don't like this place, anyhow; smacks of something off. Something unnatural. Like Kitty these last months. Looked like she had a foot in another world half the time. Something odd about it all. About her. Bewitched.

Wouldn't be surprised if she were witch-kin.

A curse on her.

This whole place reeks of the out-of-the-ordinary. Creepy. Feel like there are eyes on me, all the time. Can't see anyone. Kill them if I could.

Got to get out of here.

Ironic – that axe would've come in handy.

Perhaps Declan's ghost can bring it to me. What a lark that'd be.

No matter. Where there's a will there's a way.

That hideous wailing, though – if it'd just cease and give a man some peace.

Maybe it's all in my head, maybe I'm losing the plot.

No. I never lose the plot.

I never lose anything. Kitty least of all.

Be easier to get out in daylight though, won't it. Have to wait until then. No matter. Good at biding my time. Going to free myself and find the two of them. Don't care if I have to go to the end of the world to do it, I will, and I'll make them pay.

This feckin' sound, though – makes me feel like death is crawling through my veins.

Kitty.

Witch.

Death-witch.

Somebody make it stop!

## 16.

The collision with the ocean's surface knocked the breath out of Kitty's lungs and stunned her. For several moments she could make neither head nor tail of her situation – where she was, why she was in water, how she had gotten there. It was like the dream at Ráth Cuimhne.

Was she dreaming?

The water was freezing, and it was lugging her down down down.

Her lungs screamed for air. That doctor knew about her lungs. She could tell. He was the only one who had realised.

It couldn't be a dream. One woke up from dreams, and now she felt terribly, vitally awake.

It was hard to grasp at a thought and keep it.

The song. She remembered. It had returned. Not long after she had sent Aisling off onto the deck.

It cast such a spell, that song. But it held such danger in it, such a warning, that it had spurred her into action.

The deck. Aisling. Something had been so very, very wrong.

Action. She needed to act now. To kick. To breathe. Oh, Lord, to breathe. Why could she not breathe? How was she to find breath again? Everything was so slowed down here – all motion at a half-speed.

Was time halting, too?

Water. She was in the water. Not on the ship. Why?

The surface, that was it, where the light was. That was where she could find her breath. And – and, oh! Near the surface was not just the light, there was something billowing just below, surrounded by that one wide shaft of light.

The song was in that light.

It sang with an urgency – it sang with a ... rejoicing. Incongruous.

The sun. The sun, not the moon.

The song of the sun. The sun and the water and breath and running out of air.

She remembered – a kaleidoscope of rememberings, all at once, that shifted into focus and then made way for another as she swam upwards, ever upwards.

She remembered Aisling. Reaching the deck just as the child disappeared over the edge of the ship.

Cillian.

The cottage, the ráth, Declan.

Death constantly tugging.

Grief. Pain. Heartbreak.

Forfeiting her heart in a trade – one for another.

Herself for Aisling.

She must meet the sunlight, must dissolve into that beam, into that song. It was drawing her into it; she felt that if she could just be held by that light, too, the sweetness of its song would transform every single atom of her into something she had always longed for underneath, always; something deeper than that longing to disappear and to dissolve, something that could make her come together into completion rather than disintegrating into nothingness.

That perfect warmth. That perfect light. So golden. So lovely.

She had to be in its heart.

It was calling her to it, irresistibly, persistently, until she could reach that still, billowing form that had to be Aisling. She fought her way upwards, so desperately that she thought her lungs would burst before they could find air again.

Her child – the one good thing left in her world. She must save her.

## 17.

### Tír-fo-Thuinn

#### The Land-Under-the-Waves

##### *Aisling*

*It's dark down here. And it's quiet – so quiet! I forget that I can't breathe. Everything has slowed down. I spread out my fingers, feel the water move between them, and I think it's like some water-spirit wrapping itself around me, my legs, my arms; filling my clothing, making it balloon outward, my skirts up around my face instead of down around my feet. Funny. This is an upside-down world, the water-world. Everything's going the wrong way.*

*I don't know why I'm not scared. I should be scared, shouldn't I? The sea is a wild place – angry lots of the time, angry like Papa – but underneath here it's not angry at all. Just peaceful. I like the dark. It feels safe somehow. I think about the Little Mermaid as I sink down ever so far. How she was so unhappy on land. And here's me, I should be unhappy underwater. But I'm not afraid: if I weren't human, I think I would belong here. It's lovely. I would like to be a mermaid. I could swish my tail and swim far deeper than any human could go, and maybe I would find the magic mermaid castle one day.*

*Far above me lights twinkle on the surface – they're dancing with each other, and sometimes they slip down lower, but they disappear again – I wonder if they're scared of the dark? I keep my face turned towards them, even as the deep jade-black pulls me further down. But then a ray of light strikes through the water – it's not afraid like those little sparkles. It plunges further and further into the depths, and I think how funny, it must be looking for me! It comes closer, and as it nears it grows wider – a great shaft of moving light. It reaches me, and it sings to me with a different voice than the water does. My face feels warm again.*

*My body starts to scream for air.*

*I begin to panic. I think I am waking up again.*

*I start to kick – up up up. Closer, closer still – but the closer I get the harder it*

*becomes to force my legs to move. There's such a rushing sound around me. That jade-green depth is singing to me in a deep, low bass tone, and I'm so very tired. I close my eyes, just as the whooshing rush turns into an ear-splitting scream.*

\*

*The scream is my own, all gurgling and watery, and it's Enbarr's name that I'm calling out, the horse of Úna, my Green Lady – and I hear my own scream as if from very far away. I feel all dazed. Perhaps I have become separated from my body, like the shadow that becomes unstuck from the boy's heels in one of Mammy's fairy stories. Úna and Enbarr – it is strange that I should remember them only now when I have fallen into the water!*

*Enbarr. The pretty white horse. Funny that I should think to call for her, isn't it? Is it any use? Úna said she could run over the seas, but can she run under them too? It seems silly to think such a thing. On or under. Horses don't run on water. It is pressing against me. I have sunk deep down again. But I haven't thought about breathing so something must have changed. I must be dreaming. This must be how mermaids live, because they don't have to think about breathing underwater either, do they?*

*There's a white smudge far off.*

*It's getting bigger.*

*Enbarr is coming! I can see her!*

*She gets closer quickly. She swims and her legs move in circles and her mane and her tail stream out behind her. She reaches me and nudges my waist with her nose. I feel safer already. Enbarr will know what to do. I cling to her mane and then wrap my arms around her neck and she swims so quickly that everything becomes all blurry, and then it's as though she is running and not swimming anymore – and then I realise that we are not in water any longer. She has climbed up onto dry land and she shakes her head and her mane isn't even wet, and isn't that curious! In front of us are the mouths of several caves, all dark and hollow, and I am afraid, looking at them. But Enbarr is moving towards them instead of away from them. I hold on tight and my legs are shaking. We are closer now. The caves are dark but they are glowing strangely with a soft light, like the red at dusk where night has put a veil over all the*

*colours.*

*She takes me through the biggest cave entrance. My eyes are screwed tightly shut. I don't want to open them because Bad Things hide in darkness. Like the Weight-of-the-World. Like monsters under the bed. When you have one foot just peeping out from under the bedclothes, and you think something might reach up from underneath and snatch it, so you shuffle it back under the covers because you're safe when they can't touch your skin. Big girls of seven know that such things as monsters under the bed don't exist, but it always feels better when you're safe under the coverlet.*

*But Enbarr makes me feel protected, so I think it might be safe to take a wee peep.*

*Oh, my.*

*It isn't like anything I have ever seen before. It's dark in here, and the cave stretches a long way back, but the walls reach high up. It's glowing with such a lovely shade of ruby-red, and the light comes from the ground. Enbarr kneels down and I slide off her back. I don't feel afraid anymore, but I think it's partly because she is here with me, right beside me. It's a surprise, climbing down, because the ground beneath my feet isn't the cold hardness of rock, or cold sand like I thought it would be. It's spongy and a little warm – and so soft to walk on. I think it would make a wonderful place to lie down. Enbarr's nudge in my back pushes me forward and she snorts a little. She leans down again, and she nuzzles the ground with her nose. I think she is trying to tell me something about it. I kneel too and sink into it a little bit. It's spongy, and so velvety to touch, like Enbarr's coat. Now that my eyes have gotten used to the darkness I can see what we are standing on, and it looks just like moss. I think it is a kind of moss. Only it's not green, it's a dark red, and that's what is causing the red glow, somehow.*

*Enbarr buries her nose into it again and she bites some! How funny! I didn't think a horse would want to eat moss.*

*But she isn't eating it. Why is she dropping it into my hand instead?*

*I suppose she wants me to have it. Would she have me eat it instead? Does she think I am hungry?*

*No, she neighs and shakes her head a little when I try. Silly horse. Silly me. It's a little bit warm in my hand, the moss, and now I can feel a sort of liquid coming out of it. It is sticky. It oozes between my fingers as I close my hand around the spongy clods. Enbarr neighs again and kneels down, so I climb onto her back again. I wonder where she is taking me next? And what am I to do with this moss if I'm not to*

*eat it? Why does it squish so? This dream is very odd indeed!*

\*

*Enbarr seemed to know where she was going, back in the cave, because she kept going farther in instead of back out the entrance to the seashore like I thought she would. How does she know these things? But I keep forgetting – of course, this is a dream, and in dreams horses could know ever so many things.*

*We have come out into a place that is so pretty it almost makes me not want to breathe because I don't want to disturb anything about it. It's twilight time where we are. The song here is different from the song that came with Úna. Again it's all around me, all light and pretty like children hidden behind the clouds might be singing it. It's a lullaby, I think. And it's in Irish but I can only make sense of a word or two here and there. It makes me feel sleepy in a very delicious way. I snuggle my face into Enbarr's mane and I can feel her body moving underneath me, all quiet and rhythmic and gentle, and I would fall asleep but for a voice that is coming towards me and calling out. Such a voice! Who wants to keep me awake? I would rather sleep.*

*“Cé hé tusa? Cad atá tú a dhéanamh sa tír seo?”*

*Who am I and what am I doing in this land? the voice asks. But I still can't see to whom it belongs because there is a glowing mist resting on the ground and it hides the speaker from me. I have the curious thought that perhaps the mist is for the speaker like the blankets on my bed that keep me from the monsters. The person might be afraid of me! Me, just a child!*

*“Don't worry, I am only a little girl! My name is Aisling, and I don't know why I am here. I think I am in a dream, and in dreams sometimes you go to strange places, don't you? It's Enbarr with her beautiful coat made of the moon that has carried me here, the horse of a very pretty lady called Úna. Are you quite safe to talk to, too?”*

*I still can't see whom it is I'm speaking with. Just like Úna at first. This must be what happens in these places.*

*“You ride Enbarr? And you're just a little girl? That seems very strange indeed! Do you come from Queen Úna's lands? Are you of Tír-Uaine?”*

*“I have been to Tír-Uaine. I liked it very much, there was such a pretty castle all emerald green and shiny there, and that's where the lady Úna brought me to Enbarr.*

*But my home is in Ireland. Only I'm not in Ireland now, when I am not in this funny dream, that is. I'm on a ship with my Mammy on the far, far seas. I fell overboard though. And I fell asleep in the water and now I am having this dream. It is just a dream, isn't it? How come I am dreaming when I'm in the dangerous cold water?"*

*The mist has started to clear away from the speaker. It's a man, this time. He is tall and he wears a gold crown on his head. A great heavy cloak wraps him up and his face is very sad. I can't decide if he is young or old. He looks like he knows the answer to many questions. Now he strokes Enbarr's nose and she whinnies a little. I think she likes it.*

*"Well, little Aisling, you have made it to another land like Tír-Uaine. This place is called Tír-fo-Thuinn. It means Land-Under-the-Waves, and I think because you fell into the waters you were able to make your way here with Enbarr's help. I do know Ireland, I know it very well. I lived there once upon a time, many ages ago."*

*"But you don't look old enough to have lived for very much longer than Papa!"*

*"These lands are not the same as the one you know, Aisling. Time passes differently here. Mortals don't visit unless one of us opens up the way for you and brings you through."*

*"Do you mean to say you're not a mortal? You're not human?"*

*"In a manner of speaking, no. I am King of this realm, of the Land-Under-the-Waves, and my kind are different from you and yours. We are of the Túatha Dé Danann. The supernatural folk of Ireland from ancient times. The people of the Sídhe, sometimes we are called. When you pass from your lands after your mortal cycle comes to an end you might well find yourself on a different cycle that makes you as we are."*

*"How strange! Is this like heaven, then? With Figs of the Imagination? Úna didn't tell me these things. But then I couldn't stay with her for long because Mammy would have worried."*

*"These are interesting questions you ask, Aisling. I can't answer them now because we must hurry. Although time is different here, there is a serious matter at hand that requires your urgent attention. For I believe you have been sent to us. If I am to be honest, you are not who I was expecting – it should have been one such as Diarmuid of the Fianna of the days of old, but there must be a reason Úna has sent a little girl instead."*

*"Who is Diarmuid, and who are the Fianna?"*

*“Diarmuid was a great healer. The Fianna was Fionn mac Cumhaill’s army.”*

*“I don’t know of any of these people, nor of Fionn nor the Fianna, but I wish that I were the person you were hoping for and I am sorry that I am not!”*

*“You must come with me quickly now, Diarmuid’s kith or no. Perhaps his spirit has found an expression in you, child though you are, and that is why you have been sent.”*

*He leaps up onto Enbarr’s back behind me, and she quickly gallops off into the twilight land. The arms of the king are strong around me but they are tense, and I think he is very worried, although he has not told me why. He leans forward and whispers in Enbarr’s ear and she gallops so quickly that I’m not sure whether we are flying or if her feet are still on the ground. All around us rushes by so quickly that it looks like a blurry streak from a paintbrush.*

\*

*Enbarr stopped so quickly I thought surely we would fall from her back, but we didn’t – she is so clever at keeping all things balanced, my wonderful moonshine horse. Her coat has begun to glow in this place, just a little, in a way that matches the lovely soft twilight. It reminds me of being up on top of the ráth in Ireland, that last awful night when the terrible song came and it felt like the bad things in the night were going to overpower anything good and beautiful. The moon shone so strangely, that night, and I remember the light had begun to look different even from dusk, before Mammy came into the cottage all in a rush, and her lovely fair skin was shimmering strangely too. We went up the hill together because she said she wanted me to see the night sky, but I knew it was because she was afraid of something. But I remember that as we climbed it felt like we were going to climb into the moon, and it was almost as if it were reaching down to us to draw us into it. It was such a cool and pale light that it shone with, but there was something about it that felt safe, like the light would protect us from the Bad Things.*

*And now Enbarr shines with that light too, I think. I don’t want to climb off her back, because I have begun to feel that bad feeling again – that something scary is waiting for me just out of sight. I don’t know this king – is he a good man? Has he taken me some place evil? I don’t think Enbarr would have carried us here if that*

*were the case though. So it must be something else. I cling to her, but the king hurriedly climbs from her back as soon as she has halted, and he quickly lifts me down too.*

*I had forgotten I was holding onto the soft oozing moss. It is still warm. Almost as if it were alive. How could it be, though? It drips from between my fingers, and the drips fall onto the white of my dress, red red red like blood. It makes me gasp a little. The king notices and he follows my gaze, sees the red splashes, and then he crouches down in front of me and looks very deeply into my eyes, the way Papa used to before he lost his soul, when he wanted to tell me something very important— “The truths about life,” as he used to say. He reaches for my hand and gently unfurls my fingers. His touch is kind and his skin is rough.*

*“Ah! This is magic indeed, little Aisling. Do you know what it is you have carried to me here, to this place?”*

*“I haven’t a clue, only it’s the oddest moss I ever came across and I don’t know why it oozes so, just like it’s bleeding real true warm blood.”*

*“It is, in a sense, little one. This is healing red moss of the sea caves, and it bleeds with the blood of those it was destined to heal. I am so pleased that you have it, because it means that you are indeed the one we have waited for and hoped for, and we despaired that you would never arrive because the hour is late and the window for your assistance would have been closed at the darkest hour of the night tonight. Did you know that tonight is Samhain?”*

*I do not like to think that I have blood in my hands and I feel a little queasy. I want to give the moss to the king and wash my hands but he tells me I must keep it. I look down at my dress. The three bright red spots on it make me shiver because they remind me of something but I can’t quite remember what.*

*“How strange. I can’t think how it could be that I could help you. I’m just a wee small girl still. And I’m not sure why Samhain is important?”*

*“Samhain is the opposite of Bealtaine – they’re the twilight moments of the year, you might say. Dusk and dawn. Times when the borders between our land and yours grow very thin, and when those who hear the call might pass from one to the other, even mortals into ours, if it is destined. That is why you are here. You were destined. But we must hurry. Time grows very short and there is much yet that you must do. Come into the palace and I will bring you to my daughter, the princess.”*

*He takes my hand, the one without the moss in it, and leads me quickly in. This*

*palace is very different to Úna's, but it is just as beautiful. It is golden and delicate in the twilight, the walls are made of gold filigree, and as we draw closer I can see that there are many marvelous creatures woven into it, just like they were made of spun gold and might spring out into life at us – unicorns and hounds and eagles and stags and many other wonderful things. It has a song surrounding it that is ever so sweet but makes me feel a little sad at the same time because it seems to tell of things that once were right but now are not so. It makes me think of Mammy and Papa. Behind the castle is a great, thick forest, and in it flickers tiny little firefly-lights. A scent like lily-of-the-valley comes to me every now and again and I feel like I am in the middle of an enchantment. It is all too lovely and I would stop to simply gaze at everything, but the king keeps me moving on. Courtiers move out of our way as we move past, dipping into a curtsy or bowing their heads, and I can sense their eyes fixed on me. They look as if they have not seen one such as I before, even though I am just a little girl. These are a golden-haired people with such pale skin but with roses blooming on their cheeks, and they wear tunics of a gold colour too with scarlet-coloured mantles draped around their shoulders. Each wears a clasp holding the mantle in place, and it shows a golden stag with great antlers. The antlers look like they are made of pearl. Could it be so? But these people all wear the same look as the king: they are sad but when they look at me there is something of a shift in their look. A shiver runs up my spine like a little breath and I am nervous to see what the king is bringing me to. I think of the ancient bones and hope that he is not going to bring me to see those. Could this place have such things too?*

*We stop in front of a pair of great tall arched doorways. They have frames of solid gold and they are red in colour in the middle too, red like the mantles everyone wears. Is this what ruby looks like? Mammy has a little gold ring on her finger with a tiny stone set into it of such a colour that sits next to a diamond. It is the only piece of jewellery she wears. She used to say that love matters more than fine jewellery, and so she wore only that one little ring to be reminded of her love. That was before, though: before Papa became angry.*

*The doors swing open beneath the king's light touch, and he moves forward on tiptoe, bringing one finger to his lips. "Shush," he means. I wouldn't want to make any sound in here anyway, though. It would feel wrong. We are in a great big chamber with very high ceilings, and in the middle of the ceiling is a wide glass dome and it is split into nine sections with borders of gold. Soft evening light comes through*

*it and it dances with the light of the candles set about the chamber in little sconces in the marble walls. The moon is just beginning to show herself all pale in the middle of the pretty-coloured skies. She is round and full. In the middle of the chamber on a stone platform three steps high is a great big bed, one of those four-post ones that princesses in fairy tales have. I have never seen one before in real life. It has lovely big thick velvet curtains all around it, and they are drawn back on each side. Somebody is lying on the bed, very very still, but I can't see their face because the curtains hide it. I am not sure I want to go closer. Is the person dead? The only dead person I have seen was that man in the woods that night, but Mammy made me run back to the cottage so quickly that I didn't see who it was, only that there was ever so much blood around him. She said not to worry, that it wasn't anybody I knew, but that such sights were not for the eyes of little girls. It made me feel awfully creepy and scared and sad but I was too frightened to cry and then the feelings went deep deep down inside and I just didn't think about them anymore because they were so terrible.*

*"Go on, Aisling. This is my daughter, the princess. She has been waiting for you a long, long time – she foretold a long time ago that one such as you would come, and that you would bring her the healing she needs."*

*"But – but – what is wrong with her? Is she – is she ... alive?"*

*"Oh, yes, my dear. But she is gravely ill and we feared tonight might be her last. She is under an enchantment that has made her very unwell, and the only way to break it was for the destined person to bring her water from the Well of Healing in the Cup of Healing, along with three pieces of the moss you have found."*

*"But I don't have any cup with me, or any healing water!"*

*"Then you must find them, little one. That is what you have been assigned to do. I do not know why it has fallen to your lot, nor what purpose it must serve on your own journey, but all these things are never by chance. Come, now. Climb up and see the princess, whose life you are to save. She has not been conscious for many months now, but maybe she might sense your presence and you will bring her hope again, hope that all will not be lost after all after tonight."*

*The steps are low and my legs shake and I wonder if they can hold me up. The bed is tall and its mattress and coverings come to my chest. There is a little stool of dark wood set beside it. It has three steps too and it is steady under my feet. There. I can see the princess now but her face is turned from me. Her hair is as dark as the night. Her body is covered over with a great coverlet woven like a tapestry of golden and*

*ivory threads with the same pictures on the walls of the castle. As I look at her, trying to will her to turn around, I feel like I can catch the pictures moving on the coverlet just on the outside of my vision, but when I turn to look they are just still as you would expect, little figures on a bedspread. Strange. The king is behind me and he helps lift me onto the bed.*

*“Take her hand, little one.”*

*It lays there so still on top of the bedspread, and her skin is so pale that I can see the blue of her veins through it. Her arm looks very thin, as if it has almost wasted right away. It looks too delicate to touch. I feel the same shiver up my spine and once again a fear whispers through me that something is not right. But when I reach my hand to hers and touch her fingers the shiver goes away and a warm feeling comes instead. I hold her hand and it is very cold but something about it feels so wonderful that I start to cry. And then she stirs and I start but I’m not really afraid, just surprised, and so I keep holding her hand. I wonder if I am imagining it, but I think her fingers begin to feel a little warmer. Maybe it is just mine warming them up. I can’t see the king’s face but I think he is smiling and I wonder if he is crying too. Her hair slips back over the pillows as she turns her head to me, and she sighs and she smiles and the fingers in mine finally respond and hold my hand as though it belonged to her. Our hands are wet with my tears because I can’t make them stop.*

*“You ... have ... come.”*

## 18.

The *Nelson* was making what felt to Captain Beaufort a painfully slow, painfully wide arc of a turn, swinging around the central point of where the two must have fallen like a great, lumbering centrifuge. A large group of passengers were at the side of the ship now, all scouring the ocean's surface with eyes of varying levels of acuity. Plumes of white-capped spray flung themselves up here and there, constantly teasing the vision with momentary hope.

The captain was deeply concerned, his brow furrowed. Two passengers! Not one, but two! And one just a small child. This should never have happened. It made him think of his own little Annie – how terrible it would be if such a thing happened to her. His hawk-like vision plunged down into the ocean, practiced in knowing how to read each and every swell – the concave and the convex, scanning for anomalies.

The life rings bobbed still, right in the centre-point of their wide-swinging turn – hard to see, far off in the distance, but there, nonetheless. At least he knew the ship's protocol was in good working order.

The vessel drew nearer, prow eagerly slicing through the buffeting wind and waves.

Wait. What was that? Captain Beaufort leaned forward suddenly, looking glass fixed on one point.

One of the rings – its movement suddenly erratic.

The ship drew nearer still. It couldn't be! Someone was indeed clinging to the side of it – clinging, but only just.

“Let loose the life raft! Quickly now!” the captain bellowed.

Once again, the naval rhythm of rescue swung into life. Down lowered the raft, swiftly dipped the oars, and in one sweeping motion the still form with its bobbing ring was scooped from the waves and safely ensconced in the bottom of the raft, disappearing beneath a swathe of blankets.

Up, up, up, it flew, up with the heave of the sailors' arms.

A strange reversal, the boat in the air.

Raft and contents were soon once again in the embrace of the clipper ship, its sides appearing to rise higher as if to protect its contents and contain them more

securely.

The onlookers gasped as they clung to the railing and watched on. They swarmed about the lowered raft as soon as it returned.

Captain Beaufort tersely banished all but the good doctor and sent them back below deck. Those prying eyes.

What had happened on his watch was no good, no good at all.

And there was just one in the raft. Not two.

Only one half of this two-fold disaster.

The ship swung about again, a second revolution to see if it could find the missing piece of this equation, but the captain knew inside that it was futile.

## 19.

*Cnoc Meadha Hill, Galway, Ireland – May 1, 1875*

*Cillian*

Daylight. Got me out of this trap like I thought it would. Warm day. Unseasonably so. Tree roots, bulging through the edges of the pit on one side. Couldn't find them before, because it was dark. Could've sworn I ran my hand over every inch of the surface of the pit through the night though, and nothing was there. No matter. Neat little steps they made. Climbed right out again and the light of day damn well near blinded me. Feekin' forest, that spooky feeling hasn't gone away. Now that I'm out, I'm surrounded by trees again, bordering the same clearing ... but where's that old fool?

This grass under my feet is too green. Swear I can hear it making a noise underfoot with each step I take. Like it's crying.

Must've been in that pit too long. My stomach is growling with hunger. Feed the wolf and it'll kill the spook.

I've found the spot Declan fell, could've sworn it was the spot. But there's nothing here, not a trace of him, not even any blood. Damn. Was going to get my axe back.

Air around me is strange. There's a scent on it that wasn't there last night. Kind of sweet, reminds me of Kitty's lily-of-the-valley perfume ... maybe she snuck by and dealt with Declan while I was stuck. She must've. That'll be it. Didn't hear a thing, though. But that'd be right, wouldn't it. Creepy woman that she is. Damn her for setting this trap. Going to make it even worse for her when I find her again, turning those tricks. Know where they're headed anyway – they haven't outwitted me, even though they'll be sure that they have. Fools, the pack of them. I'll be there to surprise them in Liverpool. Ha. Can't get rid of me that easily.

There's a mist weaving through those trees. The light looks different, coming to think of it. Sort of a bluish tinge to it. Don't like it. Trying to get under my skin. Feekin' light. Better get out of here. Too quiet if you ask me. But no, wait, spoke too

soon – there’s a magpie chortling up there. Sounds like he’s mocking me, up high in the trees. If I had my axe still I’d have taken care of him too, mark my words. When I look up at him, he’s camouflaging himself in all of those leaves – and now instead of silence I can hear them all rustling together like they’re right next to my ears. When I tilt my head back I’d almost think they were woven together like a net.

Trying to trap me in the woods, are they? Not a chance.

C’mon, Cillian. You’re losing your marbles.

Been walking awhile now. Should be at the edge soon and out of this cursed place and I’ll never come back to it again. Burn it down. Actually – you know what? I *will* burn it down and everything in it, once I’m done dealing with Kitty.

Where is the edge of this feckin’ woods? I should be there by now. Walked long enough, God only knows, and I know I was headed in the right direction.

Getting harder and harder to get through these trees, like they’ve suddenly tripled in number just to get in my way.

Bloody hell, Cillian. Get a grip. You’re just hungry, that’s all, so you’re making things up.

What’s that? Another noise. Just up ahead. Wish I had my axe. Could it be Kitty? Feels like it belongs with the whole creepy undertone of this place. Makes me remember those fairy stories Kitty used to tell Aisling. About the *Sídhe* folk. Fairies interfering with humans going about their lives – don’t do anything to annoy them, etcetera etcetera. Be about right, wouldn’t it. They’d be a selfish set. Ridiculous superstitions some folk still carry. Never understood it.

Enough of a to-do around religion as it is, without adding that nonsense to the mix. Don’t believe in God. So many people just doing this that and the next thing to appease some invisible deity in the sky that no one’s ever seen. The Roman Catholics, the Christians. What a bunch of nonsense. All just systems to keep people in line along with lining the pockets of a favoured few. Bad news. Always has been.

Hush though, there’s that rustling again. Coming from that bush over there. Making the hairs on my arms rise, how ridiculous.

Can’t help but laugh. Just an animal it was that I’ve allowed to spook me so. Of course.

Deer. Odd. Looks like it’s stuck ... got a leg caught in these twining vines that keep springing up out of nowhere. What’s a creature like that doing in these parts? Now I really wish I had my axe – could do with some fresh meat! Maybe I can

strangle it. Going to try.

Spooked the damned thing as soon as I got near enough and it freed itself. I'm chasing, though. Now I'm glad for the density of these thick ugly trees. Makes it harder for it to escape. Got to hand it to it though, it's a nimble creature. Really quite beautiful. Reminds me of Kitty in a way. Vulnerable. White spots on its hide, fawn-coloured coat. Slender legs I could probably break in an instant. I'm almost close enough to touch it. Lucky I was always a gifted runner. Just a few more yards ... and I can lunge ... bring it to the ground from behind. That hide'll come in handy won't it. What a find.

I lunge just as it pulls up at the edge of a pit hidden in the grass – well I'll be – it's the same damn pit, I'm thinking, as I hit the ground with the warm body of the deer beneath me.

Feckin' grand. I'm back where I began.

It struggles and I reach for its neck. But we're too near the edge of the pit and the momentum sends the both of us back into it. I barely even notice, I have the blood-fever on me and I tackle it again, but this time it struggles free with a strength that surprises me. It throws me off and against the pit's wall as it leaps to a standing position. Faces me and looks me dead in the eye. Beautiful eyes, doe eyes, eyes to drown in. And they don't look afraid. They should. I mean, I'm about to kill the damn thing. Once I'm done ... being ... really quite mesmerised by it.

Those eyes look almost human and it moves closer to me, never breaking that gaze. I feel confronted. Can't stop staring into those deep dark pools. There's a glimmer in their depths, a tiny spark of a light that grows the more I look at it. Strange, I think, but it's got me under its spell, that light.

What you focus on is always the thing that grows bigger, though, isn't it?

The light grows and grows and suddenly it's not in the deer's eyes anymore, it's filling the whole pit, and its eyes begin to change, and they're rising, and that sweet sweet scent of lily-of-the-valley fills the pit and in front of me there is no longer a deer but a woman, a great tall woman in a sage green robe, and all around her is the light and all through her is the light, she *is* that light, I'm sure of it. She has long hair flowing down her back in beautiful waves. It's dark and rich in colour and it's offset by the marvelous grey-green of her eyes.

The spell breaks. I fall to my knees and my whole body is shaking. There's no woman. I'm on the edge of the woods, back on grass that looks like ordinary grass

and out beyond are the familiar peat bogs and the rolling hills. A very normal Galway. If I did believe in God I'd probably thank Him but I don't so there's none of that to be found here.

My breath comes in quick pants. Not like me. I don't get ... moved. But – God – that woman! An apparition. Not real, not real ... right? The most beautiful woman I ever laid eyes on. Could've stayed in that pit for all of time just to look on her.

If only she were real. Damn. That'd be a woman worth pursuing. Do anything for a lady like that. She was terrifying though, in a manner. No. Not to me. I don't get scared of womankind.

Not real anyway. But ... could've sworn ...

I think I pick up on that scent again, lingering almost imperceptibly.

Get a grip, Cillian.

But – what the devil! There's the deer, it's just broken through the edge of the forest too, but it bolts faster than I can run now there are few obstacles in its path. As I look after it, I'm quite dumbfounded to tell the truth; looks like it's swallowed up by a speck of light in the distance – like it's *become* the light. Gone.

None of it was real. Can't be real. I dreamed it because I was hungry and tired and damn well sick of all this nonsense.

A magpie talks to the morning from the very tip of the tallest tree behind me. I turn. I can sense it sees me and I feel that it is angry. It dives down and swoops at my head. Gets a good peck in before I drive it off with a fallen branch.

*Francagh*. Two for mirth, they say. I'm not laughing. My skull bleeds where the magpie struck, right on the back, right at the same spot I embedded the axe in Declan's head. Aisling flickers across my mind inexplicably. Along with something else – dawns on me that the warmth of the day has intensified, the sun is beating down with a heat belonging only to midsummer. The sky is blue and lazy and the fields are richly green, all the vegetation is dressed in its summer trappings.

Not right. Not right at all. There was an early October dusting of snow underfoot when I went in yesterday. Freezing cold. Couldn't feel my toes. But today I'm too warm in my coat. Sweat is dripping in rivulets down my back inside my shirt. I turn this way and that, look to the hidden and shaded folds of the countryside – places the sun never reaches. But all is green and lush. Not a trace of snow. How could that be?

This isn't winter. This is summer, or very late spring at least. What bewitching has come upon me? How long was I out for?

Curse the woods!

Curse the beautiful woman!

## 20.

*Aboard The Nelson, Liverpool to New Zealand – late November 1874*

Aisling's head ached so. She was lying down, all snuggled under a mound of warm blankets. Was that the sound of the fire crackling that she heard? It smelt good. Mammy must be cooking something delicious. She opened her eyes a little. It hurt. Dark wooden beams above her, all around. Wood. That was funny. That wasn't quite right.

And why did it feel like she was being rocked? That was funny, too. Like the cottage was on the back of a whale. Or being on the rocking chair at Ráth Cuimhne. And it was dark. Nighttime. She was so sleepy still. She thought she would just close her eyes again, snuggle in for a little bit more. Mammy would wake her up when it was time.

But then she felt fingers gently cupping her shoulder, shaking her a little. The hand felt big. Was it time already?

“Aisling! Aisling, are you awake, my dear?”

That wasn't Mammy's voice. That was a man. But it wasn't Papa either, Aisling thought, though her heart had begun to race for just a second, thinking he had found her, as her scrambled brain tried to piece all of the oddness together. It was like everything about her was a piece from a different puzzle. Nothing was quite fitting.

“That's right, my dear, you can open your eyes. You've been asleep a long time. You're safe now. I have a lovely broth for you to try. Can you remember what happened?”

Who did the voice belong to, and why was it asking her such a question? She opened her eyes a little further. Spectacles, steaming up a little on account of the piping hot bowl of broth their wearer was holding. Spectacles, housing a grey pair of eyes behind them that were looking at her with a very kind sort of expression. She remembered those spectacles. They belonged to a nice man, didn't they? Kind eyes. Concern. Oh, a doctor! A doctor ... and, and – Mammy. And – oh, a ship! They had been on a ship, hadn't they! But surely they were back at home now? A ship ... the ship ... those tumbling, rolling waves, and – Ira, where was Ira?

Ira! The doll had fallen, hadn't she, over the side of the ship? But she was pretty sure she had managed to rescue her.

But – there was this feeling, a feeling of unbearable coldness that her stiff arms and legs were trying to remind her of. Water! The great, cold, deep and dark water! Why did she know what that was like? Little tiny bubbles. Little bubbles turning into little sparkles of light. Everything upside down. Everything moving so very slowly, like in a dream. That big, warm light. Kicking towards it. Feeling like she wasn't going to be able to breathe again, a blackness closing in just as her arms reached into that lovely, lovely beam of warmth.

Hands – she could remember hands around her waist from beneath, lifting her. A mermaid, perhaps. And she remembered that then suddenly she could breathe again. But icy, salty water splashed about her face so. It fell into her lungs, which were opening for the air. And then her arms, looped about a big, funny red and white striped ring, those hands still holding her up from beneath. And then – things were getting black again. But she heard voices, more splashing, felt a hand reaching into her pocket – and then those lifting hands fell away, and other ones came from above her, raising her, pulling her away from the water and the mermaid-hands.

That was all.

A dream? It must have been a dream. It was very strange.

“Were you looking for your dolly, Aisling? Here she is. You saved her, you know.”

Ira! Oh, thank goodness. It must have just been a dream, then. Only...

“Mammy? Where is my Mammy?”

The kind eyes looked at her over the rim of the spectacles. They looked grave.

“Aisling, my dear, I'm afraid we must tell you something that is very sad.”

“Where is Mammy, Doctor?”

“You see, Aisling, you had an accident. I think you are beginning to remember, aren't you? You lost your little dolly over the side of the ship. Your Mammy and I saw you just as you stretched a little too far to try and reach her. You fell overboard, child.”

“Then – then ... that wasn't a dream? The water, it was real?”

“It was real, little one. And... well, that wasn't all. Your Mammy ... she couldn't bear to think of you in that water all alone. She ... she jumped in after you.”

“Mammy – Mammy was in the water, too?”

“Yes, little one. But ... when we found you, there was no sign of her. We waited and we watched all day, but ... she couldn’t be found. Aisling, I’m... I’m afraid your Mammy has drowned.”

“But Mammy wasn’t in the water, Doctor! There was a mermaid, a mermaid that helped me to find the air again and helped me hold onto the big ring.”

“I think that was your Mammy, little one.”

“Mammy – Mammy? But oh – no, no – Mammy! She – she ... no, she is here, isn’t she, and you’re just telling stories! You’re telling stories, or I’m still dreaming!”

“I’m so very sorry, Aisling. So sorry.”

Aisling couldn’t move. The doctor looked very sad.

It couldn’t be real. Mammy couldn’t be gone. Mammy said that she would never-never leave her and that she would not have to worry anymore. But ... but ... Mammy was not here! And – and the doctor said she had drowned! That meant the water had stolen her for its own! But why did Mammy drown when she was right there with her, holding her up, if that wasn’t a mermaid after all?

What ... what was she going to do with no Mammy anymore?

\*

Doctor Barton could hardly bear it.

The small, ashen face that had looked up into his, scanning his eyes for signs of the storyteller after he’d broken the news to her about her Mammy – she had been panicked, confused, scared. She was so small, a little wee thing, and all on her own in the world now.

On a ship, headed to New Zealand, of all the places and all the moments to be orphaned.

He’d held her delicate hands in his and kept his gaze fixed on her eyes as he’d watched the truth slowly start to dawn in them and they grew bigger and bigger, their golden light diminishing as a deepening darkness slowly took its place.

His had prickled with tears.

So unfair. She was too young.

All of the life had seemed to flow from her form, and as she’d sunk down he’d gathered the small bundle into his arms.

“Mammy. How can you be drowned, Mammy?” the small, muffled voice had whispered against his chest. And then she had lost consciousness again.

Why did life have to ache so?

Over the next days Doctor Barton kept a close watch on the girl – instead of going back to the tightly-packed bunks in steerage, she remained in the infirmary space. He was too concerned about her to let her long out of his sight. For the first two days after regaining consciousness she refused to eat a thing and lay with her back to him, face turned to the wall, curled up just as small as she could make herself with her knees pulled into her chest. Such a forlorn creature. It made his heart ache, and often he found his glasses mysteriously fogging up as he watched her.

On the third day, though, that little Irish lilt softly crept into the mid-afternoon lull.

“Doctor? Doctor Barton?”

He turned to the child in surprise.

“Yes, little one?”

“It’s been the night now for ever so long. Will the day come soon?”

“Why, whatever do you mean, Aisling?”

“It’s just – why is it still dark? The night just seems to go on and on and on. And I thought that maybe it might be morning by now. But maybe this is just one very, very long night.”

“Ah, but it’s the middle of the afternoon, Aisling! You see? You see the sun peeping his face through the doorway there? Come – it’s time you had some fresh air. I will carry you onto the deck.”

She gazed at him, perplexed, but allowed him to pick her up and folded her arms about his neck as he carried her out into the open air and deposited her onto a wooden bench, tucking a blanket snugly about her.

“There, see? Doesn’t the sunshine feel nice and warm on your face? And isn’t that breeze lovely after all those days in bed?”

“But what do you mean, Doctor? Surely you mean the moon? It’s glowing so oddly. It doesn’t make a nice warm light like the sun does. And – and well, the sky is so dark too, isn’t it? I wonder where the stars are. It’s like it was the day Mammy and I had to go up on top of the ráth in Ireland. The sun had just disappeared and there was the moon, so low above us, and making such a strange light. Will it soon let the sun back in, Doctor?”

“Dear me, child! The moon, indeed, when the sun is so warm today. Whatever can you mean?”

“But – but – there is no sunshine, Doctor! It’s nighttime again. Maybe I have been waking up only when it’s night. Are you playing pretend?”

Doctor Barton stood up straight and peered down at her in concern. This was odd indeed. Perhaps he’d misjudged things – the child clearly wasn’t well enough to be out of bed. The fever must still be causing some sort of delusion; perhaps it was still a lucid delirium? Troubling, either way.

“Never you mind, little one. Let’s tuck you back into bed again and you can get some more rest.”

“I don’t want to rest, Doctor. My legs are sick of resting. I just wish it were daytime so I could play again ... only ... I’m not sure I can play anymore. ... Doctor, every time I think of Mammy, I think that when I open my eyes she will be there. And then I open them and she is nowhere to be found. Only I’m sure – certain – when my eyes are closed – that she’s there, Doctor. It makes me feel so sad when I can’t find her, and all I can see is the nighttime. Do you think when it’s daytime she’ll be there again when I open my eyes too, Doctor?”

Doctor Barton set his mouth in a grim line. Something was amiss here. Her eyes were clear, her movements and interactions with him regular – it wasn’t delirium. He would have to address the situation with Captain Beaufort if this continued.

The child was ... not well in her mind.

Not surprising, really, given the circumstances.

PART III.  
Magh an Ionganaidh  
*Plain of Wonders*

## 21.

### *Lyttelton, New Zealand – January 1875*

New Zealand. It gave Aisling a funny dizzy, crinkly feeling when she first stepped ashore in Lyttelton. It looked very different from home: it smelt different and even the air tasted different – but something was familiar too and it made her feel a little sick in her stomach. Doctor Barton was arranging for their luggage, and the wooden planks of the pier were rocking beneath her feet still. The doctor said that was normal. They had been at sea for such a long time. But it was all the wrong way around to feel more wobbly off the ship than on it. But that was her world now, wasn't it.

Everything all wrong.

She looked up. There were hills all around hugging the harbour. Boats bobbing on the water, ships coming and going. Like the one they had travelled on. A perfect clipper ship, the doctor said. But it was a clipper ship that couldn't save Mammy. Still standing on the pier, Aisling shuddered and turned her face from the *Nelson*. She never wanted to see it again and she never wanted to go on a ship again because ships must be part of the Weight-of-the-World too if they couldn't rescue someone's Mammy when she had tried so hard to get away from the Bad Things.

Was it the ship's fault or was it the ocean's fault?

Aisling had been in the water and she had thought she might drown too, in the end, but she didn't drown, did she? Just Mammy. But it was the ship's job to keep them safe. And it hadn't. The water was just busy being water. Her heart began to beat very quickly as she thought about these things. Her hands were clammy and for a moment she couldn't breathe.

She clung tightly to the doctor as they walked along the boardwalk by the wooden buildings. The road was golden-dusty. *General Store - Bank - Post Office - Drapers* – ladies were stopping to look at window displays and some came out carrying little parcels. One brushed past her and her heart leapt for a moment because she thought she could smell Mammy's pretty lily-of-the-valley perfume. But the lady looked down at her and frowned from a face above a maroon high-necked jacket and it wasn't Mammy, of course, and a little bit of a sob came out and the doctor heard it

and squeezed her hand a little tighter.

“It’s all very new, isn’t it, Aisling? But don’t worry. Soon enough we’ll be in Akaroa, and we’ll settle in, and you’ll begin to love your new home. I promise you.”

Aisling didn’t know what to say to that. How could anyone make such a promise? At the moment, even though she thought it quite nice to look at, she hated this place. She didn’t want to be here. Alone. Without Mammy, without Uncle Declan, without the lovely hills of Connemara, or Mammy’s lake, or ... anything at all that she knew. But she couldn’t tell the doctor that. So she bit her lip very hard instead and didn’t say anything at all.

It was all upside down here. Like her watery legs. It was summer. The skies were clear and it was warm but it wasn’t the Summer Aisling was looking for. She knew it. *That* Summer was still far away somewhere, laughing in the distance and waiting for her. And in Ireland it was winter – cold and grey and dreary. Like her heart. That was where she belonged, not here. It was strange to think of and it made her head spin.

She couldn’t feel the sunshine anyway. Daylight still looked like moonlight to her.

Doctor Barton couldn’t figure that out. She could see she troubled him. She was troubled, too. It was scary, this strange night that never ended. It made her sad all the time as though something very very heavy was stuck to her heart inside and was dragging her down to the ground with ever so much weight. She couldn’t play with Ira anymore. She didn’t want to. She didn’t want to play at all, really. It was too tiresome. It wasn’t fun like it used to be. The sun had gone and it had stolen things that were happy with it.

She supposed the sun had gone to find Summer too.

\*

From Lyttelton they travelled across to Christchurch on a train later that same afternoon. A great big steam engine – chugging along with clouds of black smoke that puffed and hovered in the air. It got swallowed up by a long dark tunnel and then it was spat out on the other side, and great big plains stretched out in front of them instead of the heaped-up hills around the Lyttelton harbour, a mountain range stretching out along their left like the spiky spine of a monster. The monster under the bed, maybe. The wind was warm, and along the skies was a band of cloud in the distance – the northwest arch, the doctor said. She didn’t care. She was too warm in

the long sleeves of her day dress.

They took a steamer from central Christchurch out to the sea – there were not very many houses there at all, but the doctor had friends quartered at a new hotel called the *New Brighton*, so there they would be staying while the doctor made preparations. It was a nice hotel, Aisling supposed, but still she felt too sad to really notice very much about it at all. What was the purpose?

From there they were to go to Akaroa in the Banks Peninsula.

So many new names. Nothing familiar. It didn't matter where she went, it would all be the same – new, frightening, surrounded by faces and landscapes that were all completely strange.

But the doctor thought it would be better for her in Akaroa, and he said that the people there were waiting for him because he was going to be their doctor too.

At least she would still have the doctor.

## 22.

*New Brighton, Christchurch, New Zealand – a few days later*

Aisling sat on pale sand at the foot of a dune. The ocean stretched out in front of her for ever such a long way. There was no one else about. She rubbed her thumb over the smooth surface of the stone in her pocket. Her worry stone. She'd forgotten about it, forgotten that she'd given it to Mammy for safekeeping back in Ireland, and it hadn't crossed her mind until a woman brought it to her on the ship after the accident. It had been in her pinafore pocket, the woman said; they found it when laundering her garments after dressing her in dry clothes again. At first they were going to throw it away, but then they thought it had an unusual look. Of course it did. Because it was made from special Connemara marble, flecked and banded with all shades of green and creamy ivory, tiny little crystal-like flecks dotted throughout it. And she'd remembered the hand, then, in those final moments; the one that slipped into her pocket while the ocean roared around her ears before the sailors hauled her away from her Mammy forever.

Mammy had put it there because she knew she would need it. And she *did* need it. It was her last piece of Mammy, of home – of Ireland. Where she came from. It had surpassed even Ira in significance to her. She could tell it anything, and when she did so, she thought maybe somewhere Mammy could hear her.

Mammy couldn't hear her if she told things to Ira. Ira was just a dolly. A dolly that had made her lose her Mammy.

She clutched the stone tight.

A voice was calling out to her.

“Aisling? Where are you, Aisling?”

She clambered up from where she'd been sitting on a big piece of driftwood where the grey sand was tufted with pale tussock grass, all wind-swept and ruffling away up the dunes behind her like waves in a woman's hair. For a moment longer she gazed out across the ocean. They said it was called the Pacific. It wasn't the Irish Sea anymore. But all oceans looked the same to her. They were all made of the same water, weren't they? Her Mammy was out there somewhere, out in that great vast

stretch of sea. She scanned the horizon line. It looked lonely. But she thought perhaps the sky was kissing the ocean far, far away at its edges – maybe away over there they weren't separate anymore, the sky and the ocean. Maybe they were together. And Mammy might be in that kind of away-place too. The kissing place. Where Summer was, with the sun.

She let one last wistful glance slip away with the receding waves, and hurried back towards Doctor Barton's voice, which now had a tone of worry to it.

Everyone was always worried now. She was too. But when she found the daylight again she wouldn't be worried anymore. She knew it. And to find the daylight she was going to need to find the place where the sky kissed the sea, because that was where Mammy was, and that was where the magic was.

Out there, far, far away on the horizon. The place where things that belonged together *were* together.

She would need a boat.

The stone hummed in her hand.

She would find a boat, she would find Mammy, find the daylight, and find her way back home.

Then all would be well again.

## 23.

*Connemara, Ireland – late May 1875*

*Cillian*

That woman is haunting me. Not Kitty, the other one.

Well, Kitty too, to be honest – keeps cropping up in my dreams. Nightmares, really. I see her awful thin pale face hovering close to mine all spectral-like and her long thin fingers reach out to me, and I swear it's ice that is being run across every inch of my body. I wake up and I retch sometimes after those dreams. All black and grey and fog-ridden as they are.

Feckin' grand is what that is. Like I'm a wee young lad again. Those night terrors I used to have that'd have me sitting up and screaming in bed. Da yelling too and telling me to feckin' be a man and that only girls were scared of the night and not to dare wake him again. If it happened again he'd come at me with his fists or his belt.

Well, Da, you'd be proud of me now, I'm your son through and through, fists anger and all. Cut from the same cloth aren't we.

Ma, now, she was different. But won't be talking about her. No. That door stays closed and I'll thank you for it.

Bloody hell, Cillian. Pull yourself together, man.

But that other woman. Shows in my dreams too. And in the daytime I can't stop thinking about her. Bloody bewitched I am. Where Kitty's face is grim and pale hers is warm and alive and so damned beautiful. I swear I can feel her hair brushing my face as she leans over me, and it's fire that she brings to my limbs. She's ignited something in me and I won't rest until I have found her. If she's even real. But I don't think something could be so complete in your mind if it weren't real. Isn't that so? She has to be real.

Must be real.

I think the want of her will consume me.

Stopped even thinking of chasing after Kitty now. And Aisling.

Aisling. The only one not in my dreams. To be honest, I miss her wee face

sometimes. Begin to see that she might've been caught up in the middle of something she shouldn't have been involved in. Innocent little thing. Always singing, always chatting away. Like a lovely daisy, she was. Until this last while, when – well, when Kitty got under my skin so damned much. And then it was like the child just reminded me of her.

Nah.

A curse on them both. Still.

I think I'll take a good long walk and I think I'll take myself back to those woods. It's a ways to travel, but I have to search again. Have to see if I can find *her* there. Find that damned pit, even, if that's what it takes. Can't rest until I see her again. Think that's why I've been having those dreams.

By the saints. She's so gorgeous. At the same time, though, when I see her in my dreams part of me wants to run. Makes it almost all the more irresistible, that pull. In her thrall is what I am.

Who is she?

## 24.

*Akaroa, New Zealand, April 1875*

Doctor Barton was pacing about his room again. The floorboards creaked beneath him. He didn't notice. His body was present but his mind was caught up in a diagnostic tangle. It had been for some time now.

He couldn't get to the bottom of what ailed Aisling.

He'd never come across such a case before. Disturbances of the mind were prolific in London, where he'd lived until his mid-forties. If rest didn't cure these afflictions, those suffering under them usually ended up in the asylum and their families would not speak of them for the shame. Best tucked away out of sight. It was too cruel. But Aisling's case was different. Apart from her unusual perception of daylight and the sun, everything else about her was really quite normal.

The *Nelson* had arrived at Port Lyttelton on New Year's Eve three months earlier – a fortuitous circumstance, they'd all thought, he and his fellow passengers – ringing in the new year in a new country – what better way to begin their new life? There had been a joyous celebration on the ship the night before they disembarked. A long journey, a tragic one. It had been good to have some levity introduced. He'd watched the little girl. She'd kept herself mostly apart, replying vacantly now and then when some well-intentioned soul attempted to include her. Her eyes had been always fixed on the approaching shoreline. He could see her taking the measure of it.

Since the incident, he'd asked her several times if her vision had returned to normal. Always in a roundabout way. "Oh, would you look how cheerful the sun appears today!" and, poetically, "Would you look at that azure-blue of the sky this morning! I could fancy a dress in that colour would look splendid on you, my dear!"

The child didn't ever buy it.

At first, "It's not sunny, actually, doctor. That's still the moon. I don't now why it's so, but it is."

Then just a curious shell of an expression on her face that said simultaneously that she wasn't fooled and could see what he was doing, and that it mattered so little to her in the first place – her mind was elsewhere. She'd turn away and fix her eyes far off in

the distance. She'd become quieter over the rest of the voyage, too – the chatter had stopped.

No surprise, really.

He'd made arrangements once they reached shore; he'd already had plans as the ship drew nearer to its destination. Once they'd docked, from Lyttelton they'd crossed into Christchurch and then to where he had friends staying in New Brighton for a fortnight for preparation and supplies. Then they'd gone back to Akaroa, a small town on the Banks Peninsula. It was a beautiful place – much of the countryside's native flora and fauna had been cleared to make way for the growing town, but pockets of land still flourished with bands of native trees and bush between the various bays of the peninsula. The town was small, quaint – picturesque, like a painting. And it wasn't too long of a journey to pass across to Christchurch when needed – one could take a train from Lyttelton these days, taking the exciting journey through the tunnel they'd hewn through the Port Hills. It was lauded as quite a feat of engineering, that tunnel. And Christchurch was getting prettier every time he saw it. Not sanitary, though. Smog hung low all winter long, and that only grew worse the more it was populated. Not good for those with lung complaints.

Akaroa was the place for the girl. A charming little town with a French flavour, care of the arrival of the French some forty years earlier. Fresh sea breezes. Quiet. Safe. Only a handful of kilometres further around lay Ōnuku, a site that was barely a village, yet still populated by a thriving community of the New Zealand tangata whenua – the people of the land — the Māori. He'd thought he would take her there to visit, too.

When they'd arrived, he'd planned to arrange for a nurse for her until he could find a family to take her in permanently. He'd thought he would stay in Akaroa too until all was fulfilled satisfactorily. He had been offered the town's medical practice for as long as he wanted it. And he'd wanted to get to the bottom of her condition. Thought that maybe the jarring effect of being in a new location would loosen something within her. Maybe.

But it hadn't. And it was proving more challenging than he'd thought to find a family willing to take her in. English families didn't want to concern themselves with a working class Irish child, particularly one who needed special care. Too messy. They'd enough to deal with adapting to their new lives, they all said. No thank-you. And there were looks cast at her. People wondered. They whispered about her. *That*

*poor little orphan girl ... lost her mother out at sea, you know ... it's no surprise she's – not quite – well ....* And then they avoided her. They didn't want whatever was afflicting her to rub off on their own precious cherubs, God forbid. Maybe it was something spiritual. Maybe it was ... the *devil* – the girl lived in so-called darkness after all, didn't she? The Catholics made the sign of the cross. The Christians primly buttoned their lips and tugged their children away.

Doctor Barton always glared at the gossip-mongers with all the fury he could muster behind his lowered glasses. The devil, indeed. The poor child. But still – he didn't know what to make of her case. He only hoped that the fresh salty air and daily exercise would cause her to come right over time. Goodness knew the child needed a friend. But friends were hard to come by when none of the Akaroa townsfolk let their children near her. The children themselves mocked her behind her back. *The mad little Irish girl*, they called her. And laughed at her as she walked slowly along Beach Road, dragging pieces of driftwood behind her. But she never seemed to hear, never tried to make friends. She reminded him of how her Mammy had been on board the ship before ... well, before the great tragedy happened. Aloof. Detached. Subdued.

Yet determined.

What she needed was a child of her own age, one who wasn't like the rest of them. One who would be kind to her and teach her how to play again. But it seemed such a child didn't exist, not in Akaroa.

Doctor Barton sighed. What was he to do? Things plainly were not working as he'd anticipated or hoped as far as Aisling was concerned.

His practice was going well, however. Always a need for an experienced doctor. His clinic was just off the Rue Lavaud, and it was busy. It was very close to the Bruce Hotel where they were staying at the far end of the Akaroa township on Beach Road – she in one room and he in the next. It was costly, and he couldn't keep it up much longer. The hotel was pretty, though. Willow trees towered protectively behind it, and it looked right out over the ever-changing waters.

During the days as he attended to his new practice he had to leave Aisling in the charge of a nursemaid, but the woman was young and he suspected her monitoring was lacklustre. He also suspected a young Scottish tradesman was part of the cause of this unsatisfactory behaviour. But for now there was little he could do. It made him nervous. The child needed a permanent home; she needed proper care. She needed a woman's tenderness. A woman who knew how to be a mother – if he could only find

a family who would take her in, then perhaps things might improve for her.

He was going to have to look further afield, in Christchurch, perhaps. Yes, that was it. Folk might be more charitable there for such a case as she.

He would begin to make enquiries the very next day.

## 25.

### Magh an Ionganaidh Pt 1

#### Plain of Wonders

##### *Aisling*

*I'm a wee bit dizzy. I think I have been walking a long time now, always in this strange thick mist. This place isn't like the ones before, like Tír-Uaine or Tír-fo-Thuinn. It's whispering about me, this mist. I think there are invisible things hiding in it. So I just keep walking. I wonder if because I can't see them, they can't see me either? It's like being underwater again. Only the water wanted me to fall asleep. I think this mist doesn't want me to see, but it doesn't want me to fall asleep either. It wants me to listen.*

*I think about the princess lying all still on her bed. And about the moss, and about the Cup of Healing, and about the King of Tír-fo-Thuinn with his kind crinkly eyes. It must be time to find the Cup. But how can you find a special cup when you don't know where to look for it and you can't see anything?*

*There are sounds around me, of course. Way up high I can hear some sort of bird calling – but I think it's very far away. I wonder if it's misty up there too. It must be nice to fly to where there is no mist – and then still to be able to come back to the mist if you wished it!*

*I think that's why wings are magical. I used to dream I could fly sometimes. I would never go far, and I wasn't ever far above the ground. But in those dreams it was as though it were something I'd always been able to do – I'd just never succeeded before. I wonder if that's a true thing. Can I fly? Do I have wings tucked away somewhere, after all, special Sidhe-wings? Or is flying something hidden in your mind, and when you think the right way your body begins to float?*

*It's still so misty. It would be nice if I could come to the end of it.*

*Before he got angry all the time, Papa used to say that mist was really a cloud, just a cloud that'd gotten too low to the ground. Maybe it's sad clouds that come down to the ground because they're forgetting how to fly. If I'm walking in a cloud,*

*then perhaps that really is like flying! I could be flying, couldn't I? Only I don't think I would still feel the ground beneath my feet. I think this misty cloud is sad. It makes feel a wee bit sad too. I don't think you can fly when you're too sad.*

*"Aisling!"*

*"H-hello? ... Who's there? ... How do you know my name?"*

*"Dia duit, Aisling! Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you. And I know many things, and the names of my favourites I like to keep tucked away in my mind like secret, special little treasures. Do you keep your treasures, Aisling?"*

*"I don't have many treasures, actually. I had to leave them behind at home in Ireland. Mammy made me take only my very-most-precious things, and that's my dolly called Ira, and my special worry stone my Mammy gave me when I was a wee small girl."*

*"Where's your worry stone?"*

*"I keep it tucked underneath my pillow at night so I can tell it the things that have happened during the day. In the daytime I don't feel scared, but in the nighttime sometimes it feels like bad things will happen."*

*"What's the daytime like for you, Aisling?"*

*"It's different from how it used to be, actually. And I think that daytime for me is different than it is for other little girls now."*

*"Why's that?"*

*"Well, you see, for me it's quite dark all of the time. It's like it's night all through the day as well as the night. People point to the sun and tell me I am being silly and telling stories, but all I see is the moon and the dark. And then when it's truly-truly night, I can always tell, because it feels different. It feels... bad. And I think that somebody is going to get me. So that's when I have to talk to my worry stone because Mammy isn't there anymore."*

*"That's difficult, isn't it? I'm sorry your Mammy isn't there to hold your hand through the day-night and the night-night. Do you miss seeing the daylight, and the sun, and the blue skies?"*

*"I would like to see them again. Actually, they're what I'm trying to find. I think that's why everything feels all wrong. Because the light got left behind after I fell off the ship. I don't know why it got left behind. But I'm going to find it again. I've been building a wee boat, and when it's finished I am going to sail off and I know that's when I'll find it again."*

*“How’s the boat coming along?”*

*“Slowly, actually. It’s hard to make one all by yourself. But I know that if I just keep trying I can finish it.”*

*“It sounds like a difficult project for just one person. Perhaps someone special will show up to help you. Would you like that?”*

*“I would like that very much! But – but, the thing is, the other little children think that I am strange and they laugh at me. They think I am ... mad ....”*

*There is a pause. My throat feels funny and the corner of my eyes prickle. It makes me feel all horrible inside to think of those children and the way they look at me.*

*“Children can be cruel, Aisling. But don’t give up. I think help is closer than you think, and you’ll get your boat made yet. I think that just the right kind of friend is waiting around the corner for you. Someone who needs you, too.*

*“Now, we’ve been walking for a while, haven’t we? We’ve a little farther to go yet, but over this next part I’m going to tell you a story, and I want you to pay close attention. You must follow my voice, and you must keep walking straight ahead, one foot in front of the other. Do you think you can do that?”*

*“I’m good at walking in straight lines, actually. But what if my feet decide to go their own way?”*

*“I think your feet will keep to where you want them to be, child. Are you ready? Let’s begin. That’s right, just one step in front of the other, and follow my voice. I’m right here, even though you can’t see me.”*

*Her voice sounds like it has a wonderful sort of magic in it. It is easy to walk when there is such a voice to guide you.*

\*

*“The Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn spent many a day wandering the land of Ireland after the Fear Doirche struck her with his druid wand and caused her to take the appearance of a haggard old cailleach whom all fled from in horror,” the Lady-voice begins.*

*“It was up hills, down valleys, and across the plains and bogs that she wandered, and none anywhere would offer her shelter because of the terror her appearance struck into their hearts. There came a time in the depths of winter when she thought*

*that she could not bear her loneliness for one more day. Bitterly cold it was, and the snow was falling, and as evening fell she came to the light of a lodge tucked into the folds of the hill of Teamhair. She thought she would try to ask for help just one last time. If none here would take pity on her, she would go on no more — the Fear Doirche would have won, and he would come to claim his prize, and his prize would be that of her death.*

*“She knocked at the door. It opened, and the sound of revelry greeted her ears — there was a bright glowing fire that lit the large room, and all around it were lounging a large group of men. She started as she recognised their faces. For this was a gathering of no ordinary men: these were the Fianna, the great warrior-folk of Ireland.*

*“Fionn the leader of the Fianna it was who opened the door to her, and he looked her over from top to toe.*

*‘What do you want?’ he asked. His voice was not kind.*

*‘Oh, sir, I have been wandering in the cold for so long — all I ask is for a night of shelter, and for some food and warmth.’*

*“Fionn laughed at her and went to close the door, but the princess would not give up. She put a foot in the gap and his face was hard but he let her through, yet he offered her no further help. It was the same disgust of her appearance that she read in his face. Inside, Caoilte it was next who she approached. He stepped back from her and turned his face away.*

*‘Please, sir, won’t you help me to just a little bowl of stew?’*

*“There was a long table standing against the far wall, upon which was a great cauldron, and bowls, and bread. But he would not help her to it, and not a word would he say in reply. It was the same disgust that she read in his face.*

*“The princess felt her face redden and she heard the low whispers and mocking voices. They were watching her to see how she would make a fool of herself. But then one rose and stepped towards her, and his face did not wear the same expression of the others. ‘Allow me to help you,’ the man said, and she knew him to be Diarmuid. For they had met before, the first time the Fear Doirche, the Dark Druid of the Síde, had sought to capture the princess, and Diarmuid had saved her by crossing through to her land through the River Shannon.*

*“Diarmuid led her to the table, and he helped her to the stew, and he sat her down by the fire. Soon the men began to retire for the night, and she turned first to Fionn as*

*the men's leader, and then to Caoilte, to see if they would offer her a place to rest. Again, they spurned her. But a quiet voice in her ear told her not to fear, and it was Diarmuid, and he took her by the hand and led her to a quiet corner and saw that she was covered with a warm blanket and a pillow at her head. He himself lay near her, so as to keep her from harm. The princess cried silently, and in the darkness Diarmuid's hand stretched out and took hers and she fell asleep.*

*"The next day the princess awoke to the sound of voices clamouring around her and looked up. The men of the Fianna were circled about her, and they were gazing upon her in astonishment. She sat up and looked at her hands. They were smooth-skinned, fair and unworn. She touched her face. It was the same. The spell had been broken.*

*"One face there was that was different from the rest, and that face carried a kindness that sprang from the heart, and it came from a heart that knew how to love regardless of appearance. It belonged to Diarmuid.*

*'It is you, oh Princess of Tir-fo-Thuinn! I knew that there was something familiar to you.'* The men murmured amongst themselves, much struck by her beauty.

*'Diarmuid! It is indeed I. The Fear Doirche returned, and because I would not go freely with him he placed a curse upon me to take the appearance of a hag that could not be broken unless a true son of Ireland should give me his love. Is it true, Diarmuid, would you give me your love?'*

*'That I would, my lady: my love and my life were it required, and both of those with all of my heart,'* said Diarmuid.

*'Then so shall it be, and you shall have the house you most desire to live in, and my father the king will bless our union. But one thing you must never do: you must never call up to me three times the appearance I had when I came to this place last night, or all will be lost,'* the princess replied.

*"Diarmuid took the hand of the princess and he kissed it, and he looked deeply into her eyes and it was clear that his love for her was true, and so was hers for him.*

*'I will never do that,'* he said.

*"And lo, when the men of the Fianna stepped outside into the bright sunlight of the morning that was setting the snow to sparkle, what should have appeared on the top of the nearest hill but a beautiful and shining mansion, glorious to behold, with all manner of good things in it besides? The princess and Diarmuid walked off to the mansion hand in hand, and happy was their marriage.*

*“But the men of the Fianna were jealous of Diarmuid’s good fortune. To be truthful, it is both jealous and ashamed that they were, both for not having seen through the spell, and for treating one asking for help with so little respect. It was Fionn especially who felt the shame, because it did not befit the leader of the Fianna to have so treated someone in need. But instead of allowing his shame to lead him to repent, without quite understanding what he was doing he sought to separate the happy couple. For he had heard the words of the princess: that what had passed must not be recalled.*

*“So he sent to them the gift of a greyhound, and a beautiful greyhound it was, and soon she had a litter of pups, and Diarmuid was proud of the pups. But while he was away hunting one day, Fionn came to the princess and asked if he might have one, and she, thinking to try and mend the friendship that had suffered between the men upon her marriage, gladly offered a pup to him.*

*“Later, when Diarmuid returned, he was upset to see that one was missing, and learned the cause. ‘You would not have done such a thing if you had remembered the state in which you came to me,’ he said.*

*‘Oh, Diarmuid, for shame! You must not say such things! You promised never to mention it. If twice more you speak those words, then all you have here will be gone from you.’*

*“The next day, it was Caoilte who came to the princess and asked for a pup, and once again, seeking to remedy the ill feelings between the men, she gifted one to him. Diarmuid returned, and he was angered, and he said again, ‘You would not have done such a thing if you had remembered the state in which you came to me.’ The princess was sad and she said nothing.*

*“The third day, along came Oisín, son of Fionn, and the same transaction happened. When Diarmuid came in the door and saw that there were no pups remaining, his eyes took on a strange light, and before he really knew quite what he was saying the terrible words flew out of his mouth again. The princess let out a great, heartbroken cry, and in an instant she had disappeared along with the mansion and all of the good things it held.*

*“Diarmuid fell to his knees in anguish and shame. He had undone what had been done; he had chased away goodness with evil. Fionn, Oisín and Caoilte came to him, and they were now truly ashamed of their deeds, and upon their urging, so it was that Diarmuid set off, not to rest until he could find the princess again and try to right the*

*wrong that had been done.*

*“It was many a month that Diarmuid had been wandering when at last word came to him that the Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn lay gravely ill back in her castle, and her father the king feared for her life. Many a time had Diarmuid tried to pass back into her land as he had the first time, but alas, the River Shannon would not take him because he had betrayed the princess. He grew desperate. But it was to no avail. He could not find the way through to Tír-fo-Thuinn.*

*“And so he did not come. The princess waited, clinging to hope and to life with the last of her strength, but it was no good.*

*He did not come.*

*He did not come because he could not.”*

\*

*I wait, but there is no more. The story is finished. This voice telling me this story makes me think. She speaks of the Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn, of the Land-Under-the-Waves. And I know that this same princess lies ill in this strange world. And in the lady’s story it is Diarmuid who the princess loves. It is very confusing. And ... the King of Tír-fo-Thuinn said that it was Diarmuid who was supposed to break the spell over her, the ill princess. But this tale sounds like an old, old old story, like one of Mammy’s, like one from History or from storybooks. So I’m not sure how I have come to be tangled up in it. Is it a different one that I have fallen into? Or the same? Am I just dreaming it, because maybe Mammy did tell it to me once?*

*I think about my little boat now, while I keep walking. I know I’m in the dream-place again, so things like boats are different here, and you don’t need them, because you have horses like Enbarr and Enbarr is ever so much better than a boat. I wish I had Enbarr in my waking-time too. But I never remember these dreams in the waking-time, in the long days when all I can see is the day-moon. I wish I could remember the dreams. They might make me feel differently if I could. I wish they weren’t only dreams.*

*But where is Enbarr, coming to think of it? She should be here, shouldn’t she? I wonder who she is, this lady who has told me this strange story about the Princess?*

*“You wish to know who it is who tells you these things, don’t you, Aisling?”*

*“I ... yes, actually – I think you are not Úna of Tír-Uaine, because you have a different voice and you don’t have that lovely dark green mist about you. And you are not the King of the Land-Under-the-Waves, because your voice is that of a lady. So you are someone I haven’t met yet in these dream-lands. But I know from your voice that you are good and kind, and that you are here to help me, and to help the princess who is unwell.”*

*“You are right. I have had these mists hide me for a reason, Aisling, but in a moment they shall fall away and you shall see who I am and where we have come to. It’s a place I must leave you, but know that there is always a way even when it seems like there is none. Remember the story – that things are not always as they seem, and that what the eye beholds is not always the deepest truth.”*

*“These things you say make me feel quite afraid, mist-lady. Why must you leave me?”*

*“Because this is something you are to face alone, little one. But when you think you are alone, you are never truly alone. Remember that.”*

*The mists are thinning now, just like the lady said they would. I can see what looks like a dark shape before me, and when I turn to look behind the vapour has all but gone and I nearly fall over in terror. Behind me stretching for the longest, longest way is a path no wider than two or three steps, and on either side of it falls away into a deep ravine that I can’t see the bottom of! The mists are collecting themselves far, far below. I feel ill all of a sudden and my legs tremble so much that I think I might faint.*

*“Two steps more, Aisling, and you’re safe. Come to me.”*

*But when I turn around, the mists have cleared around her and now what I see in front of me is more terrible even than knowing that I could have fallen into those depths at any second had I stumbled or changed my direction even slightly from where her voice kept me walking. She is a woman and she is very, very tall, almost like a giant, and she wears a heavy, worn cloak over a shapeless sort of dark wool dress that is all filled with holes. Her hair is tangled and grimy and falls to her feet in a knotted mess. I look at her face but I don’t want to, and it’s more terrible than anything I have ever seen – she looks like an awful witch – a cailleach from Mammy’s stories – with skin all wrinkled and hanging down, with eyes all watery and red. She reaches out her hand but it is so crooked and gnarled and her nails so yellow and sharp that I can’t help but shrink away from her and I start to back down the narrow*

*path, but I am so afraid that I will fall. I stand frozen in place and I think I can't breathe anymore because my breath comes so fast. The stars are coming into my vision and I think I am going to faint.*

*"Don't be deceived, Aisling. Listen to my voice. If I were still covered you would not be afraid. Listen to my voice. Come. Remember the story. Step towards me again. You will fall if you try to go back by the way you came."*

*I screw my eyes tightly closed and focus on the blackness behind them. I can hear a rushing in my ears. I don't know which way is worse – to the awful cailleach, or backwards to the ravine.*

*"If you never look at what is difficult to see, you will always remain stuck in this place, child. I know my appearance is frightening, but I am not what I seem. Come, Aisling."*

*My eyes are still closed. I don't want to go back, all alone, when I might fall at any moment. She has led me this far with a story that has sunk into me and there must be a reason for it and – and – is she the princess made to look like an ugly old crone? No! She can't be. That princess lies ill.*

*Doesn't she?*

*I keep my eyelids shut but I hold out my hand. I am afraid of how she looks but for all of that I think I must be for believing what she is saying. I feel her take my hand in hers and I expect her touch to be rough and unpleasant but it isn't. Her skin is soft and warm and she squeezes my hand in hers and the warmth from it flows into me and up my arm and into my body and I feel like I am surrounded by light, even with my eyes closed still as they are.*

*I open them. The lady still holds my hand and I look at her expecting to shudder. But she doesn't look the same. She is glowing so brightly that she is like the sun, and her dress is the purest white. I can't see her face properly because she shines so, but I think that if I did I wouldn't be able to bear it because the light around her is so bright it begins to hurt my eyes. She is too beautiful.*

*"You see, Aisling? Thank you for trusting me. This is why I hide myself, because my light is too bright to bear. My name is Lady Ragnailt, and you will meet me again. I have led you over the ravine that separates the Land-Under-the-Waves from Magh an Ionganaidh – the Plain of Wonder. It's here that you must win the Cup of Healing from the King of the Land-Under-Mountain, which this place is also known as. Will you be brave and not give up, though you might face difficult challenges?"*

*I look up at her and it's like a veil has come over her face – I can see her more clearly because the light around her has dimmed a little.*

*“Is it ... is it ... you, are you the princess from the story? The one who loves Diarmuid?”*

*I can't stop looking at her. It's as though in the way she looks at me I can see a little piece of every single person I have ever met – the laugh in Mammy's eyes, the fierce love in Papa's before he changed, the protectiveness of Uncle Declan, even the warmth and concern of Doctor Barton. How is it possible? All of the beautiful things, none of the bad. But then her expression changes and now it's the fear in Mammy's eyes, the desperation in Papa's, the wistfulness in Uncle Declan's and a sorrow of Doctor Barton's that hides just behind his smile. I close my eyes and begin to cry. I feel so very alone all of sudden. She touches my cheek.*

*“One day you will know who I really am.”*

*I open my eyes, and she is not there anymore. I am alone, in this strange, strange place, with that awful peril behind me, and a land in front that is not beautiful like Tír-Uaine and Tír-fo-Thuinn. It feels dangerous.*

*“Enbarr! Enbarr, where are you?”*

*She doesn't come.*

*All is silent.*

*But then a sour wind begins to make a funny whistling sound by my ears and I start to hear the sound of the waters far below, rushing, rushing, rushing as though they are angry and in a great hurry and hurling themselves against anyone who dares to get in their way.*

*Magh an Ionganaidh, she said. The Plain of Wonders. I am on its edge. I turn away from the ravine and its scary roaring river. All that can be done is to take a very deep breath and keep walking, I think.*

*That is what a brave girl would do, isn't it?*

## 26.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – late May 1875*

Aisling could feel dim light dancing on her eyelids like tiny fairies. *Wake up, wake up!* they might have been saying. *Wake up, Aisling!* She felt very cold. The coldness was seeping through her body from below. Normally the mattress beneath her was a little cool, but never as much as this. Why was it so? It was hard to think because her mind was all fogged over. Sleepily she reached for Ira. But instead of the doll and the smoothness of the sheets holding her close, she could feel a dank, chilly softness creeping under her fingernails. Prickly, pliable, needle-like strands. How strange! She must still be dreaming, mustn't she? Because she thought she was lying on the earth and not her bed, and that above her were big, tall trees. How funny!

She looked up through her eyelashes. They made everything such a blur. The mild light of dawn filtered through treetops, cast over with a moonlit glow as it always was for Aisling, and she almost fancied it was looking for her. She studied the towering trees a little longer. They're knitted together, she thought. Just like Mammy's shawls. But who knits trees together? That would take some very big needles.

A moment or two passed. Her awake-mind traded places with the sleep-groggy one.

She sprang to her feet, tossing her head now one way, now another. She wasn't dreaming. She wasn't in bed. She was in a forest – a forest quite different from the ones in Ireland. This had trees all cut from the same mould – all tall and straight and shaped like cones that reached ever so high. The air smelt different, too. Sweet, a little spicy. Her breath came more and more quickly and her legs shook. How had she come to wake up in such a place? Where was she?

She began to cry as she looked all about her, searching for a path, a way out, anything that looked remotely familiar.

Had she been walking in her sleep? Had she wandered off like Mammy did in the nighttime, when she would go to the lake on those nights when Papa wasn't there? When Mammy climbed out of bed those nights her eyes had a funny expression in them. She never heard when Aisling tried to ask where she was going. It was like

Mammy had emptied herself out of that body and was still in the bed. And the body went off while Mammy stayed behind. And then Aisling went off too to follow her.

Aisling thought about that sometimes still. She wondered if when Mammy disappeared at sea it had just been that kind of sleep-walk body that the water had stolen away. And if that was so, where was the real Mammy, the one without a body? Had she stayed on the ship? Was she with her now? She didn't think so. Sometimes when she talked to the stone she thought so. But mostly she thought she must be in the kissing-place still. Out on the horizon. It was lucky she had begun to build her very own little boat. Little bits of wood and string and anything else she could find. It was very hard work alone, though.

Aisling thought some more.

If she had been sleep-walking too, then how came her body *and* her real self to both be in this place now? Shouldn't she have woken up back in bed? It didn't make sense. There must really be something quite wrong with her after all. She brushed needles off her nightgown and tucked disheveled hair behind her ears. She exhaled in one long, ragged breath. And breathed in again. She couldn't feel her feet. Or stop shivering. She was very cold. And very scared. Little girls shouldn't be alone in forests, should they.

How was she to find her way home again?

She wrapped her arms about herself, snuggling them as close as she could, wishing that she were wrapped in one of Mammy's shawls. It was no good to cry. You couldn't make your way out of a bad situation just by crying, especially when there was nobody to notice. She would just have to start walking, and hope that the feet that kidnapped her and took her into the forest would know the way out again. They must. She began to walk. For the most part the needles strewn all about actually made something of a nice carpet to walk upon. And so it was that only once or twice she winced as her tender feet struck against a little stone or ill-placed root.

It was very quiet. The day hadn't begun to clear its throat yet; it was still waking up too. But just then a multi-toned call reverberated through the trees, quite beautiful and quite eerie in its solitary nature. *Francagh!* Aisling thought. Magpie. And she recited to herself the little verse:

*One for Sorrow,*

*Two for Mirth,*

*Three for Marriage,*

*Four for a Birth.*

It had been Papa who had taught her that one, in those earlier days when she was still very little (of course, she did not think of herself as especially little now. She was seven-going-on-eight, and seven-going-on-eight was practically ten, and when you were ten you were practically an adult).

It was one of those extra-special days before he got angry and he had taken her down to the bay. They had walked along the dusty road and he'd scooped her up and swung her onto his shoulders and they felt so nice and strong and safe underneath her. She remembered that she had had a lot to say about things like all of the little flowers and the sheep and her friend Elspeth's big dog Pádraig that was always trying to knock her down. Naughty dog.

They had passed through a little knot of trees that were all standing in a group around the road on the way down, a glade that Aisling thought must be somewhere you could make your way through to the fairies if you stopped in just the right place and said just the right words. They had stopped, and right then a magpie had piped up very close by. He was hiding like a watchman in the bough of one of the trees, all black and white and shrewd with his pointy beak and beady eyes. She had pointed him out to Papa and Papa listened close to the clever song it was singing. He'd raised a finger to his lips.

"Hush, *mo stór*," he'd said. "That's the *Francagh*. The Frenchman. A magpie." She had kept quiet because perhaps the fairies were hiding in the magpie's song. There had been such a funny feeling running through her fingers as they dug into Papa's hair, holding on tight as she listened closely too. She thought that probably the feeling was that invisible thing called magic.

And then the bird had suddenly swooped down out of the tree, right at them, but darting off at the last moment – once, and then again, and Aisling felt that it was angry. The second time it tried to peck at her hair with its big pointy beak but Papa knew how to outwit it. She was off his shoulders and at his feet in an instant, and he was swinging his arms about like a windmill. "Off, off, you devilish bird!" he shouted at it.

The bird had been scared of Papa. It had flown off because Papa's arms frightened it. Was that the Weight-of-the-World then? Perhaps it had been. But perhaps it wasn't. The Weight-of-the-World had bad feelings with it. *Those* twirling arms made her feel safe.

“That’s what you do, *mo stór*. You can use your arms, a stick, anything you can find – that’s what you do if a magpie attacks you. But they only do it when they’re protecting their young.”

He’d scooped her up again, a short clasp against his chest on the way back up to his shoulders to still her because she was shaking. Then he’d recited the poem, teaching it to her as she had tried to wrap her mouth around the words and the melody.

“One for Sorrow, two for Mirth – we’d better hope we see another along the way, hadn’t we?”

She had searched the trees, looking very, very hard. And then she had closed her eyes for a moment, sending a little prayer to the angels to bring another one across their path like Mammy had taught.

And then Papa had bounced her up and down in glee - “Would you listen to that, Aisling! There’s another!” Aisling had been thrilled. There indeed had been two, and they were darting around together like they were protecting their own precious little one. She understood them, even back then, when she was so small. Papa looked after her and they needed to look after what was special to them too.

The rest of the day had been a wonderful one – rare, a treasure. If only Papa had continued to be that Papa.

She was busy remembering the feel of the waves lapping at her feet on that day as she walked on through the forest accompanied by the magpie’s solitary call.

Just the one. One for Sorrow. Would another come? She thought it made sense to just have Sorrow accompanying her. She felt sad nearly all of the time now. Sad, and very, very alone. She wasn’t afraid that the magpie would attack, though. She used to be. But they never came as close as that one had that day.

She had been walking for a little while and the light was changing. Drizzle found its way down to her under the tree cover, and her nightgown was damp. She felt funny. Something didn’t seem right, and made her walk more quickly, taking care not to stumble. Her feet were completely numb now. Everything still looked entirely unfamiliar, and she couldn’t see where the edge of the forest might be. She was beginning to feel more and more afraid, a different fear than the first one she woke up to. This one felt heavier. Bad. She felt like she was being watched. The back of her neck prickled. She began to run.

As she ran, an accompanying rustling began to splinter its way into earshot and

her heart leapt to her throat. Something was out there and it was following her and it was catching up. Her numb feet misjudged the surface, and she stumbled over a tree root hiding beneath the rust-coloured needles, but she didn't quite fall. She ran on. The rustling was getting closer. She could hear heavy breath right behind her. A thud to the middle of her back. She was down on the ground. Pressure on her shoulders. She was pinned to the earth, her face pressed to the forest floor. There was a frenzied barking. A dog. She screamed and tried to get up. Sharp teeth sunk into her arm as it dragged her back down. She screamed again as she twisted her head around. A pair of angry, crazed eyes with huge dilated pupils met hers – they were red and – and *mean* – and its foaming mouth dripped with saliva all white and red too because it was mixed with her blood. It was going to kill her. She curled into a ball and put her arms over her head and kicked her legs out again and again. Be the windmill. It'll fly away. *Francagh*. Magpie. Hound. Maybe they were the same.

One for Sorrow ...

Two ... for ... Mirth ...

Was that two, then: magpie and dog?

Her legs stilled of their own accord. The next bite hadn't come. She couldn't hear or feel the heaving breath anymore. The bad feeling had gone. Shaking, she sat up. Right in front of her was a new pair of eyes.

They looked at her. She looked into them, astounded. Dark, dark brown, wide with exertion and fright and curiosity and hesitancy. It was a boy. He had a big, big stick in his hand. He must have hit the dog. The dog had gone. It was just like the time with Papa. The boy was Māori. He seemed to belong to the forest in some way that Aisling could not quite describe. Like he was one of the trees come to life. He wore a white shirt that was open at the neck, half-tucked into dark trousers that were rolled a turn or two at the hem. Over the shirt he wore a worn, patched jacket, and a soft cap on his head. His feet were bare too. Around his neck on a black string was what she had learned was the pounamu. Beautiful and jade green and softly gleaming like her worry stone. It swung out as he leaned forward, and the sight of it made her realise that she was clutching her own stone tightly in her hand. All of these observations rolled together with the terror of what had just happened and the shock of waking in the forest rather than in her bed, and her head buzzed and felt very strange all of a sudden.

A hesitant hand gently shook her shoulder. She had fainted. She opened her eyes

again, and shy, concerned ones looked back into hers. He helped her to her feet.

Neither had yet said a word.

“Th-thank ... you ...” Aisling said, now shivering uncontrollably.

Her companion didn’t reply but looked at her curiously. He took off his jacket and put it around her shoulders. It was warm from his body and its fabric was rough but comforting in its well-worn state. She clutched it close.

“What is the way out of the forest?” she said. “I am lost, you see. I don’t – I don’t know how to find my way home, I – I think I must have wandered in here while my mind was still asleep.”

Again there was no response. But then he gestured to himself, and then to her, and pointed off through the trees into the distance. He pointed in a direction that was quite different from the one she had been heading in.

He took her hand and tugged her forward. He would show her the way out.

Blood dripped from her punctured arm. She was in too much pain to think any further about it.

She let him lead her.

\*

It didn’t really take long at all to come to the forest’s edge. It had tumbled down to a pebbled bay, with tiny waves lapping at the shore. *Strange*, Aisling thought. *I never was very far from getting out at all.* But she didn’t know where she was. None of the landscape looked familiar. Still the boy led her on, picking their way over the stony shore until they reached a path that hugged the gentle curve of the bay right on the forest’s border. To their left the trees housed a myriad of forest life beneath their cover. Tall and kingly trees – kahikatea, Aisling later learned. Along with tōtara. Matai. Vines, all looped and wreathed around the trees like an intricate network set up to help or hinder, depending on how you looked at them. There were a wealth of ferns of all descriptions. Aisling in her tired state liked to see how the smaller ones were curled in on themselves. They weren’t ready to stretch and wake up yet. She felt like curling up in a ball now too. She still could not feel her feet, but now she did not feel so cold.

She had forgotten about her arm, more or less. She was too distracted by thoughts

of the trees and the ferns and the morning day-night sky. Even with her peculiar night-tinted vision she could see the broad expanse above their heads was covered with scrubby clouds tumbling and chasing each other across it, now that the earlier drizzly rain had passed. She breathed in deeply. Rich, earthy air filled her lungs, fragrant with the blend of life and decay.

As they walked on, she studied the boy. He walked with confidence, like his feet didn't even have to look at the ground because they knew it so well. He whistled every now and again. High up in the canopy over their heads a bird would respond in a melodious echo. He still had the big stick – he was using it as a staff and it tapped the ground rhythmically. Tap, step. Tap, step, Tap, step. One of the legs of his trousers had unrolled slightly and hung a little lower than the other. She thought his body and his whistling and the stick and the ground were all making a kind of magical music together.

Did he know about the magpies?

One, two. One, two. One, two.

What *did* happen to the dog?

Why was he not speaking to her?

27.

*Cnoc Meadha Hill, Galway, Ireland – June 1875*

*Cillian*

Well, I'm back. Easier this time to make my way through. Before, the trees and the vines and the undergrowth felt so much thicker and heavier, trying to block my way, could've sworn it. But today I can even see a damned path. Rolling out the welcome are we then m'lady?

Going to find you, I am, if it takes everything out of me.

There's that lovely scent again. Lilies. Doesn't remind me of Kitty now, though. Reminds me of *her*. Calls me to her.

Quiet in here. Peaceful-like. Lots of birdsong. If a man were poetically inclined he'd probably compose some words. Not me though, that man. Nonsense, all that jibber-jabber. Like those fairy stories. Well ... there are fairy stories ... and there are fairy stories.

Bless me, maybe my woman is the fairy queen.

Ha! It's a riot that you are, Cillian. She's the fairy queen and you're the fairy king and you'll both wander off and live happily ever after in your little feckin' fairy castle. That's the tale isn't it!

Ah, too hilarious. Traipsing around like some fool after a petticoat.

What a petticoat though.

This birdsong, it's begun to change a little. Like – like it's almost some sort of a real song. Could swear it's human voices singing it, not birds anymore. Is she out there, then?

Imagining things, clearly. More sleep-deprived than I thought.

But it sounds like – well, like Irish. Gaelic. Words. Never spoke the language much. Not now, anyway. Used to. More in that fool Declan's field. Nowadays I prefer English. Language of the future, and all that.

Kitty and Aisling used to babble in the Gaelic sometimes.

And now I'm listening, the song and those words are actually ... well ...

beautiful. Mournful, like. Making the hairs on my arms stand up. Turning me into a sap, it is, isn't it. That'll never do.

Who's put a spell on the birds, then?

It's not real, that song. There is no song is there. I'm just tired.

...You know what? Let's pretend. Let's pretend that the feckin' birds are singing a song. With *words*. In the Gaelic, no less. What a laugh. If I close my eyes for a second, and to be honest they feel so ridiculously heavy it's getting harder and harder not to, that song sounds like it's closer and closer to me. Like it's taking the form of tendrils, vines, wrapping themselves about my wrists and drawing me in. Alluring, like.

Delicious, the feeling that I'm having. Couldn't fight it even if I wanted to. Don't want to.

That scent is getting stronger.

So damned drowsy.

Don't think I can keep my eyes open then can I.

Oh, bless me, it's her.

I can see her, I think I can see her but ...

I can't keep my eyes open to see her—

and oh by the saints it's such ...

such ...

a ...

tease ....

## 28.

*Ōnuku, Banks Peninsula, New Zealand – late May, 1875*

The boy led Aisling up a path that branched off the more defined one they had been following. They came out into a clearing that stretched right on down to the water again. A cottage was tucked at the back of the clearing as if held in the arms of the trees surrounding it. To its right a creek tumbled past it from where it had been hiding in the forest. *Where do creeks come from?* Aisling thought absently. *Do they come from a great big pot of water that never runs out?*

The boy beckoned to her. His eyes said come. Come, girl.

She could feel the wound in her arm again now. It hurt very much.

As they walked through the grasses towards the cottage her head felt dizzy because she remembered Ireland and walking up to Uncle Declan's that day after Papa had done those terrible things to Mammy. But this time it was Aisling that was hurt and not Mammy. And it was a great big dog and not Papa that had done the hurting. This cottage reminded her a little of the ones in Connemara. It had a thatched roof. To one side was a pair of goats kept in a pen, and they looked at her curiously out of their funny eyes with the lines in the middle as she came closer, tucked behind the shelter of the boy and merging into his shadow.

There was a twitching of curtains at the window. A Māori woman at the door jumped when she realised the boy sheltered a little girl behind him. She crossed her arms across her chest. Her dark hair fell in long, thick waves over her shoulders and her eyes were dark too. They were stern and strong and maybe they might be kind also, Aisling thought.

“Rāwiri, taku tama! Who is this? What has happened?”

The boy still said nothing. The woman looked deep into his eyes for a moment. She was looking for something in them, Aisling knew. Like fishing, fishing for a truth. The pair held their searching gaze a moment or two longer.

“Well, girl? Who are you?”

Her tone was sharp. She took in Aisling from top to toe, shoeless, disheveled, wearing Rāwiri's jacket. Aisling saw the pointed look at the jacket and she suddenly

felt embarrassed and shrugged it off, nervously pushing it against the boy as she stood behind him. He turned around, surprised, and Aisling pressed it into his hands.

Then the woman saw the blood. Blood staining Aisling's white nightgown, blood dried on her skin. Blood blood blood.

“Don't be scared, girl. I am Hinewai. This is Rāwiri. He is my son. I'm not angry. You are hurt. Let me see, come inside, we will help, get that arm tended to. Eh girl, don't cry.”

But Aisling couldn't stop the great big tears that started to roll down her face. They started and they kept up, flowing like the creek beside the house, and she thought that maybe *they* came from a pot that was never going to empty either. She had not cried for a long time. She did not cry when Mammy drowned. It was like the pain had been too solid inside her to become liquid. It was packed down very tightly inside.

She didn't really know why she was crying now. Hinewai was gruff but she was kind. And Rāwiri looked at her again with his great big warm wondering eyes too. They were like a blanket, both of them.

Soon the woman had her seated on a low stool, a basin of water at her hands, and she was gently dabbing at the wounds on Aisling's arm. She paused a moment when she saw the puncture marks.

“Rāwiri, go find your kuia. I need her help to make a poultice for this wound.”

He disappeared out the open door and reappeared a moment or two later with an elderly woman on his arm. She was stooped and wore a thick shawl around her shoulders. Her silver hair was meticulously twisted and pinned back into a chignon at the nape of her neck. She shuffled in the door, one foot scraping the ground slightly as her other leg carried her weight. She was muttering, a steady stream of words Aisling didn't understand. She spat on the ground when she saw Aisling. “Pākehā,” she said. Aisling recognised that word. But the tears were still silent rivers streaming down Aisling's face, even as she looked up at the elderly woman with her muscles tense. The woman softened.

“Eh, mokopuna. Kaua e tangi.”

“She says don't cry, little girl.”

The boy's mother lingered with her hand on Aisling's back for a moment before she moved back, and the older woman took her place on the other stool beside Aisling. She turned Aisling's arm over so that one hand cradled the back of her palm

while the other pushed back the soiled fabric of the nightgown, exposing the damaged forearm. She looked at the wound closely, her eyes measuring it.

“It was a great big dog,” Aisling said. “It knocked me off my feet and it bit me. But – but – the boy ... Rāwiri ... came, and it didn’t bite me again. I think he made it run off. The dog was scared of the boy and his big stick.”

Hinewai with the flowing hair translated. The older woman tsk-tsk’ed and another torrent of words flew from her lips. Rāwiri hurried out the door again, determination in his movements.

“She says the teeth of dogs carry the devil in them when they bite. They make the madness come. But she knows how to heal this bite. She will make a special poultice and the devil will flee. Rāwiri has gone to collect the herbs.”

Aisling shivered. She didn’t want the devil in her arm. Maybe a dog had bitten Papa. Mammy sometimes said the devil was in him when she didn’t think Aisling could hear her. Was she going to become like Papa too? She crumpled. The elderly woman held her against her chest and stroked her back.

“Eh, mokupuna. Ka pai katoa, mokupuna.”

She smelt warm too, like fresh bread and herbs and a little bit of wood smoke. She smelt like comfort, Aisling thought.

Rāwiri returned, a great big bunch of all kinds of different plants in his hands. Aisling didn’t recognise any of them. Some had tiny little flowers, some were clusters of miniature leaves, and she could smell their combined fragrance as he drew near, crouching in front of her and passing on the bunch to the elderly woman. The elderly woman looked deeply into his eyes too. Without a word, she stood, leaning heavily on Rāwiri’s waiting arm. Deft fingers denuded each stalk of their leaves and flowers, just the right amount, and with a mortar and pestle she ground them all into a paste. She shuffled over to Aisling again and lowered herself to the stool. She gently smoothed the paste over the wound. Aisling winced. It hurt: sharp, strong pain. But only for a moment – soon her skin began to tingle, and then she couldn’t feel anything at all. A pad of soft white gauze was placed over the wound and a strip of white cloth wound around it, tied in a neat little knot on the inside of her forearm.

The woman smiled at Aisling. Aisling could see Rāwiri in her eyes, and Hinewai too. Dark eyes, deep eyes, stern eyes, kind eyes. Sorrowful eyes.

“Ka pai,” the woman said.

Her knees creaked as Rāwiri helped her up.

She shuffled out of the door and out of sight.

Aisling felt awfully sleepy. Words danced in her mind, swirling and bouncing around like partners in a ballroom.

Ka pai nga mea katoa — *beidh gach rud go maith* — all will be well.

“Mammy,” she murmured as her eyes began to close.

She felt strong arms pick her up and lay her on a mattress in the cottage’s single bedroom. She could still feel the wetness of her tears on her face because she couldn’t make them stop.

“Ko wai koe?” she heard a voice murmur, and it sounded like it came from far, far away.

“Who are you? What have you brought across our hearth?”

The devil and the dog and the magpie and Papa and fairies and sleep, sleep, sleep.

## 29.

### Magh an Ionganaidh Pt 2

#### Plain of Wonders

##### *Aisling*

*It is not long that I have been walking, but already what is about me has begun to change. The light is becoming brighter and brighter, even though I can't see any sun to be shining and giving it light. How can there be light with no sun? But it seems as if that must be so in this place. I suppose it is like me in the waking-time, when I can't see the sunlight either. But this is not the same light of the day-moon. It's the light of the sun that has lost the sun itself, like a little girl without a Mammy. Like me. The grass begins to grow green and soft beneath my feet again. It was all prickly and yellow and dry by the ravine. I like this much more and I feel a little bit better. This land can't be so bad as I thought.*

*It's not much further that I have gone, and now there is another castle before me. This one is different again from the other two. It glitters in the sunless light like it is made from crystal, each wall cut in different angles so that it catches the light and sends it sparkling off in ever so many different directions. It is capped by a great big angled dome that reminds me at the same time of the diamond that sat next to the ruby in Mammy's ring, and of the glass dome in the chamber above the Princess of the Land-Under-the-Wave's head. It is split in nine ways too but here each is flat and narrows up to a point where they all meet. What a strange place! This time there is no Úna or Enbarr or King of the Land-Under-the-Waves to bring me inside.*

*But I think I must go in, mustn't I? Only the back of my neck prickles so. There is a great tall wall around the palace and it's made of a grey stone, all square and harsh and seeming like it doesn't belong to the beautiful palace beyond. There is a curved gate made of metal bars, but it is closed.*

*I stop suddenly. Something is coming towards me from the gates. Only I can hear a sound behind me. Why do not the two match, the sound and what I can see? I spin around. There is nothing there. But I can hear rustling in the grass. I spin back. What*

*is approaching is getting closer but I can't hear it. I don't know which way to turn. I think of the lady and I think of her ugliness and I think of her beauty.*

*I turn back to the sound because I think she would want me not to let my eyes deceive me. The instant I do so the sound begins to take a shape and I nearly fall over backward as I see a huge big man standing before me with eyes that glow as red as fire. He carries a shield and a sword and he wears armour, and his sword is raised, and all I can think when I look at him is "fight." A cloud of darkness trails behind him and he makes me feel so very cold and frozen inside that I don't think I could move even if I wanted to. How could I, just a little girl, fight a great powerful soldier with red glowing eyes? I have no sword, I have no shield, I have no help. He will surely kill me. With every movement he makes his armour rattles. I should have gone back over the ravine. If I had been very, very careful I could have found my way back. Surely.*

*"What's the matter, little girl? Are you afraid? You should be afraid!"*

*I clench my fists and squeeze my eyes closed as tightly as I can and think of the shining Lady Ragnail. His voice sounds like gravel, like somebody opened his mouth and poured it full of evil things.*

*"You do not frighten me. I am a little girl and you are a great soldier but I am not afraid."*

*"Then open your eyes! Fight me!"*

*I crack open one eyelid and he's there, a melding of the colours of fire and darkness and meanness and cruelty all in one. But I don't feel afraid any more.*

*"I have no sword to fight you with, soldier. But I will defeat you all the same. Because this is only a dream and in dreams little girls can kill big tall soldiers."*

*He laughs at me and his laugh is so full of cruel sounds that I put my hands over my ears. He is a bad man, I know it. I think of Papa when he is about to hit Mammy.*

*And then I think of the times before then when he wasn't that way.*

*"You have lost your soul too, haven't you soldier? I think you must be very sad to treat a little girl the way you are. You should be ashamed of yourself, you great big bad man."*

*I stand as tall as I can. I think I am like one of those little woodland flowers of Úna's Tir-Uaine, and then I think about being a very tall oak tree even though I am so little. The little things and the great things.*

*"Is that so, little girl?"*

*He is so quick that he whisks his sword through the sleeve of my dress and scratches my arm, a deep red-oozing scratch, before I even notice that he has moved. The black mist surrounds the wound. It is a tease. What is he doing? I am shaking but I will not run.*

*He laughs again and then he slams down the visor on his helmet and slowly he walks toward me, swinging his sword, slowly, so slowly. I stand still, as still as I can, and I close my eyes again and think of Enbarr and the princess and the princess's hand holding mine and all of the tears that came then.*

*I wait. Nothing happens.*

*I wait a little longer and then I open my eyes. I can't see the soldier. I can't hear him. I turn around towards the castle and I nearly fall over backward because in front of me isn't the soldier, it's Enbarr! Enbarr has come! I can taste the great salty tears falling down and into my mouth and Enbarr puts her head over my shoulder and pulls me against her body and I feel as safe as ever I could feel. She came when I needed her even though I didn't scream. I was brave and she knew. She neighs and her hoof paws the ground and her muscles ripple under her shining white coat. She kneels and I climb up on her and she slowly trots toward the palace gates.*

*I don't know what she did to the soldier but he is gone apart from a dark cloud that lingers a little, curling around my feet as I climb onto Enbarr's back.*

*It makes me shiver. It is cold like ice.*

\*

*There is a click and the gates open, and through them comes a lone man. His mantle trails behind him and he wears a look that is a mixture of anger and sorrow, I think. But I am not afraid of him either. He is not frightening. He wears a vest of chainmail and he has a crown on his head too, one that is like the King of Land-Under-the-Waves', only more intricate.*

*"What did you do to my best knight?"*

*His voice has a very hard edge and now I am not so sure what to think of him.*

*"I am just a little girl. I did not do anything to your knight because I could not. And you should feel ashamed for letting such a knight threaten such a small girl. He has hurt my arm. That was not right, surely."*

*“Not right, is that it? And what does one such as you know of right and wrong?”*

*“I know more than you think, actually! I have come a long way to be here and I have come because I must save the life of the Princess of the Land-Under-the-Waves. I know that sometimes what you look at isn’t what it seems, and I know that when I look at you, you are not what you seem. You wear a great sadness underneath your angry eyebrows. They are very bushy, your eyebrows. You shouldn’t knit them together so.”*

*He looks at me a moment and he looks very surprised and his eyebrows un-knit themselves. He looks much better. I can see the ocean-gray-blue of his eyes when they are not tucked away beneath his anger and they reflect the light of the land around him.*

*“You are the king of this land, aren’t you? Because if you are, you are who I have come to see.”*

*“Is that so! You are very free with your speech, little girl! Did no-one ever teach you to respect your elders?”*

*His eyes sparkle as he says this and I can’t help but laugh because he is about to and he laughs too and then we are both laughing together, and I think I like the king of this land very much. It is no wonder that he would have such a thing as a Cup of Healing. His eyes drop to my sleeve and the blood on my arm. His voice is gentle.*

*“I think you must come inside the gates, little girl — you are wounded, and we must bind you up. It seems you have much to teach me and to tell me about! Did you know that your hair shines like the sun, and you remind me of someone I lost a very long time ago?”*

*As he talks he hurries me inside, and his crystal palace is as pretty to look at in its heart as it is to look out from outside. It is all clear, all transparent, all of the walls, and the courtyard is filled with all manner of trees bordering it. It is beautiful and so peaceful. The king smiles at me. A maid comes with strips of cloth and she carries a silver cup filled with water. He takes it from her and cleans my wound. It stings as he dabs at it but soon the sting disappears and I feel as though nothing had happened to it at all.*

*“I am not sure who I could remind you of because I don’t come from this place, you know! The King of the Land-Under-the-Waves told me about how this land is different from the one I come from, that I have somehow crossed over between your lands and mine, so you’d have to have met someone like me, and that isn’t likely, is*

*it? He didn't seem to think that many people like me came across, because he thought that I would never ever come."*

*He looks at me again with the warmest look and I feel like I will sail off in his sad blue-grey eyes to find out what he is hiding away that is making him so sorrowful.*

*"You know not of what you speak, little one, but I love you for it. You are right, I am the king of this place; I am King of Magh an Ionganaidh, or the Land-Under-the-Mountain. What is it that brings you to me and makes you, small as you are, dispatch of my most terrifying knight?"*

*"Well, King of the Land-Under-the-Mountain, I couldn't hate your knight, you know. Because I don't think he was what he seemed either and I think that's why Enbarr came, because she knew, but she still wanted to make sure I was safe. And anyway, I don't know what happened to him. I closed my eyes tight because I thought he was going to kill me, but when I opened them he was gone. It's an odd trick to play, don't you think? And we have come for your Cup of Healing because the Princess of the Land-Under-the-Waves is very very sick and she will die, I think, if she can't drink the special water from it."*

*The sadness in his eyes shifts a little and a tiny path of light seems to open up like the light from the lighthouse we saw on our way into shore just off New Zealand.*

*"She is ill, you say? The princess? Oh, I wish I had known sooner, because I would not have sent out my knight against you. I only send him out in defence, you know. We expect attack from dangerous quarters at any moment, and, as you say, all things are not as they seem – and what better decoy than a little girl? But – the princess! Gravely ill, you say? She might die, you say? Oh – that does make my heart grow quite weak within me. If I were not bound to this place I would take it to her myself and raise it to her lips, no matter the cost. You must take the cup, and quickly, and I wish I bore better news, but it is empty because that is what we just used to mend your wound. You must take it and fill it with water from the Well of Healing, little girl, and that is in a place that is much scarier than the knight who came out to you."*

*When I listen to him he reminds me a little of someone too, only I can't place it. I want to cry, a little bit. I don't want to go to the place that is scarier than the soldier.*

*"Here is the cup, little one. You must make haste. Take it to her, and take it with my blessing. Tell her the King of the Land-Under-the-Mountain has not forgotten, and that he would have brought it himself if he were able."*

*“Why don’t you bring it to her? Why don’t you come with me? It is hard to have to go to scary places alone.”*

*“I can’t, little one. I can’t, because I am bound to my kingdom, and I am bound by the princess’s words herself – if it is you who has been sent to retrieve the cup, then it is only you who can bring it her, and only you who could have, and who could give her the healing she needs. It was not for me to do it, no matter how much I could have wished it.”*

*He wears a very wistful look in his eyes and I wish I could make him happy again.*

*“I am sorry for you, King of the Land-Under-the-Mountain. I think that you love the princess, don’t you? And maybe she did not love you back or she could not because your lands are separated as they are. But maybe she does love you, only she is as bound to her place as you are to yours?”*

*He is quiet, and his chin rests in his hands as he sits before the cup standing on the long marble table before us.*

*“It is time you left, Aisling. If ... if there were ... such a love between the likes of she and I, it could not be understood by one like you. But ... well. The paths we take are never straight, are they, child? And now you must take your leave, and I will speak to Enbarr, who I know well. I will ensure that she takes good care of you when you reach the place that holds the Well of Healing.”*

*“... I wish you would come too!”*

*“I know it. And I desire it above all else. But it is enough for me to know that you are here, and that you will bring it her. And I hope that you will come back to me and tell me all of the stories of your lands, because you delight my heart as I haven’t been delighted in the longest time.”*

*I throw my arms around him. I can’t help it. He is big and warm and gentle and his arms hold me close, so close that I can hear the steady beating of his heart, and it’s a memory that I think I will carry back with me and pass on when I can hold the hand of the princess again so she might feel it too.*

*Then the cup is in my hand all cold and gleaming. My arm tingles lightly, strangely. Then we are in the courtyard behind the open gates, and Enbarr is there and comes to me and we are both off, running, running, running, just as something like the sun begins to peep its face above the horizon as if looking for its missing light.*

## 30.

*Akaroa, New Zealand, July 1875*

Doctor Barton was perplexed. The latest development with Aisling hadn't been an improvement – at least, not one that he could see.

The child had begun to walk in her sleep at night. It had given him quite a turn the first time it happened. He'd gone to her room to wake her for breakfast one morning, but was surprised to find her not there. Her bed had been cold. He'd grown alarmed when she wasn't in the dining room, or out on the seashore, nor anywhere else to be found, and no one had seen her. He had spent the entire day walking the length and breadth of the small town, up and down every mud-packed street, peering in at each cottage, and walking further around the bay along Beach Road before the pathway disappeared. She was nowhere to be found. A heavy anxiety had weighed on his heart, and he had gone to bed filled with trouble and not slept a wink.

But the next morning, just as he was about to turn to go back to the hotel after walking along the beachfront again, searching for Aisling in vain, he'd spotted a trio emerging onto Beach Road – just as if they'd materialised out of thin air. He'd paused and waited, hands nervously rubbing together. They'd drawn nearer. His heart had lightened. It *was* the little girl, still in her nightgown but with a thick jacket wrapped about her, accompanied by a Māori woman and a young boy. The woman had been holding Aisling's hand, and Aisling was leaning against her side. She'd run to the doctor as soon as she'd recognised him. Feeling her soft fingers slip into his, he'd drawn her close to him and looked up again at the pair accompanying her.

“Hinewai!” Doctor Barton had said in surprise. “And Rāwiri! It appears as though you are the guardian angels of my charge! And you, Aisling – you've given us all quite a turn! Where did you run off to? You mustn't do that, you know.”

Hinewai had looked at him with a long, cool stare. He'd felt uncomfortable beneath her scrutiny. He had met her only two months earlier – she and her son, when she had come to consult him about the muteness of the boy.

Another curious case.

“The girl was attacked by a dog. My Rāwiri found her, brought her home. His

kuia bound her arm. Dog bites are evil. But the wound will heal. Who is the girl, Doctor? Why is she wandering on her own through the night?"

Aisling had stared up at the pair of them, eyes fixed now on one, now on the other.

"Doctor, it wasn't my fault. I woke up in the forest. I was scared because I didn't know where I was. And a big dog came and chased me and knocked me down, and then Rāwiri came and chased the dog and the dog was scared instead of me. There was a magpie. Then we came to the cottage and they saw to my arm for me. It has felt ever so much better since. The other lady made it so. Did I walk in my sleep, Doctor?"

She'd been panting, the words had tumbled out in such a rush.

"Walk in your sleep, my dear? Yes, yes, I suppose that is possible. We can discuss this a little later. Why don't you and Rāwiri head down to the shore for a few moments? I think you will find the sea has brought in some very pretty new shells. Maybe even a starfish or two."

Then, addressing Hinewai as the two had run off, he'd said, "Thank you for tending to the little one. She is in my care at present – she was made an orphan on the journey over from England. A tragedy. She fell overboard, her Mama jumped after her. They were able to rescue the child, but not her mother. She is alone in the world."

"A child should not be without parents, without family. It is wrong. She must find a new family. A family would protect her. She should not be out in the forest alone at night. It's not safe. There are those out there who don't take kindly to Pākehā. A Pākehā child is an easy target. Keep her safe, Doctor. She needs a family."

Hinewai's regard had been stony. He'd seen how unimpressed she was. But what could he do? No family would take her. Then she'd spoken again.

"You send her to us in the daytime. We will look after her. She will be a friend to Rāwiri. But you must watch her at night."

He had been taken aback by her abrupt tone at first, and had been on the point of politely declining her offer. But then he'd seen how she'd looked at the girl.

"I ... ah ...."

"She is like a plant without sunlight. Needs warmth. We will give her warmth."

He'd hesitated a moment or two longer. But something had prompted him to agree. She needed companionship, after all. And a child of similar age to spend time with.

“That’s – that’s very kind of you. You are right, she needs extra care, and I am unable to watch her all the time. My practice in the township keeps me busy during the day. She stays with me at the hotel. I’m looking for a family to take her in permanently. But your assistance during the days would be greatly appreciated and would take a load off my mind.”

“We will help. But she can’t live with us. My husband would not allow it. He is away at present. Rāwiri will come for her tomorrow morning. The Bruce Hotel, yes?”

She’d regarded him with calculating eyes a moment or two longer, and then spun on her heel, calling to Rāwiri as she went, “Haere mai, Rāwiri! Come!”

The two had disappeared off into the afternoon sun as mysteriously as they’d arrived. Doctor Barton had almost felt like he’d been dreaming as the child had slipped her hand in his again, all fresh from the seashore, the hem of her nightgown wet with seawater and her face glistening with its spray. Something had been different about her, as though a tiny corner of the immense load she was carrying had been lifted off.

He noted a sense of similar relief in himself. This could be just what she needs, he’d mused.

Since, Rāwiri had come to fetch her nearly every day. He still never spoke a word, the doctor had noted. But his eyes were extremely expressive. The boy had suffered too, he’d thought.

But the somnambulism hadn’t been a one-off circumstance. It had happened several times since, always in the same manner. He’d taken to keeping the door locked, but somehow she always got through it. And she always went to the forest. He didn’t know what to make of it.

He would bring it up at the meeting of the Literary and Scientific Society tonight. There was a new fellow in town, a Doctor Baumann, who’d arrived recently from Germany. He was a scientist. Much of his extensive study had revolved around psychology and psychiatric disorders, diseases of the mind – still a relatively new field. He was also fascinated by the child’s case. Wondered if it might be the phenomenon they called nostalgia – a curious condition noted in a plethora of Swiss soldiers kept away from home for extended periods of time. Homesickness. But Doctor Barton didn’t think so. Homesickness came from being away from somewhere safe and secure – somewhere one could go back to. Aisling didn’t have a home anymore. And he’d gotten the sense that the home she had come from in Ireland had

not been a happy one.

He sighed. It was the end of a long day at the clinic, and he poured himself a scotch, long, sensitive fingers curling around the cut crystal of the tumbler.

Perhaps soon the cracks would appear and the light would start to peer through for the child again.

There had to be a way.

## 31.

### *Akaroa, New Zealand – July 1875*

After their meeting in the woods, Aisling and Rāwiri had become inseparable. They understood each other. He had lost his words, she had lost her daylight. It was so nice that somebody else knew what it was to lose things, Aisling thought.

She was eight now, and he was helping her with her raft. He was much better at the craft of it than she. He was a little bit older and so his fingers worked more efficiently. Sometimes that was annoying. But not really. She admired how clever he was with such things.

She had first realised it at the local school they had started attending together. Hinewai had not wanted Rāwiri to go. Aisling could hear it in her voice when the doctor came to talk with Hinewai about it. But Rāwiri made it clear that he very much wanted to attend with Aisling, and so, with troubled eyes, Hinewai let him go.

But it wasn't to be for long.

Aisling had only attended school for a year in Ireland, and here it was quite different. The schoolroom was a small, single-room building heated by a pot-bellied stove, and they were all arranged in rows, boys on one side and girls on the other, the youngest at the front and the eldest at the back. They wrote with chalk on slates, and the schoolmaster, Mr. Altham, was very stern. Quite mean, actually. He wore spectacles perched right on the tip of his nose, so far down that Aisling wondered sometimes if they were going to slip off and crash onto her slate when he leaned over to check her sums. His black hair was slicked down against his head, parted off to one side in a manner that she didn't think was natural. There were always little bits poking up that looked like they were going the wrong way. She wanted sometimes to smooth them back down. He was tall, and he reminded her of the skinks she would see scurrying off under the paving stones outside the hotel. All long and limber and slithery.

He was oily. His hair, his manner, even the prints left when he turned a page in her primer. She thought he seemed ever so old, even though really he must have been about Mammy's age. He struck his desk with his ruler up the front of the classroom

every time someone got something wrong, whether in geography, mathematics or spelling. The ‘thwack’ on the desk would be accompanied by a shouted “WRONG!” and a piercing glare at the unfortunate wrongdoer. Sometimes he struck a pupil’s hand when he was especially cross. The ruler left nasty red welts across the palm. Aisling knew, because she had experienced the sting of the Viper several times. That was what they all called it, the ruler. *Better look out, the Viper will get you!* they’d say. *You and your dumb friend! There’ll be the Viper for the both of you!*

The other children stayed away from her and Rāwiri. But they didn’t mind. The other children weren’t like them.

One day, the day that changed many things, she had made the mistake of answering a question in Irish, because they were beginning to learn French and she had gotten tangled up.

“*Cónas atá tú?*” she’d asked, but she was supposed to say “*Comment allez-vous?*” There were similarities, it was undeniable.

And to complicate the matter, out had rushed a tumble of Irish phrases hot on the heels of the incorrect question, trying to remedy the wrong – fishing for a language, but drawing up the wrong one. One she didn’t even think she remembered anymore.

Out had come the Viper. “There are to be no other languages but English spoken in this classroom! Do I make myself clear?”

She’d thought this was unreasonable. “But why, sir? Why, when we are learning French?”

This hadn’t gone down well. The Viper had bitten her palm six times and drawn blood before Rāwiri had sprang up in anger and rushed forward to Mr. Altham, wresting the ruler out of his hands. The whole classroom had watched on, holding their breath, as Rāwiri held the Viper up in front of the schoolmaster, shaking it in his face, which had rapidly been turning a very funny shade of purple. Mr. Altham had made to snatch it back, but Rāwiri had stepped closer, closer still, and Aisling, just off to the side of the pair, had wondered how she’d never noticed how tall her friend was before. There had been a burning anger in his dark eyes, and it was making Mr. Altham afraid, she could see, although he was trying very hard to hide it. In his usual silence, Rāwiri had held the ruler right at the level of Mr. Altham’s eyes, and in a deliberately slow motion, snapped it in two. The wood had splintered with a delicious crackle. Mr. Altham’s spectacles had tumbled off his nose just at that moment. The glass held captive by the thin wire frames had shattered as they hit the floor.

The Viper was no more.

Mr. Altham's breath had come in tiny tight gasps, and, quaking with fury, he'd screamed, shrilly, "OUT! OUT WITH YOU, AND NEVER COME BACK, YOU MĀORI SCUM! YOU ARE EXPELLED, EXPELLED DO YOU HEAR ME, EXPELLED, YOU IDIOT OF A BOY!"

And with that he had stalked down the aisle between the rows of desks and hurried out the door, his black coat twitching behind him with the nervous agitation of his long limbs.

Rāwiri had turned slowly to the class. A wide grin had stretched across his face and his eyes sparkled. Aisling delighted to see it. He'd brandished the two halves of the vanquished Viper high in the air. The class had fallen out of their shocked silence and into a tumultuous applause of newfound admiration. Aisling had looked up at him in adoration. Her hero.

Then he'd left.

Aisling, palm throbbing, had collected his things. Beside his slate was a stack of papers, and they were filled border to border with minutely detailed drawings of flora and fauna, of the coastline, of the township and of its buildings. They'd made her gasp as she picked them up. They were beautiful. He had always come top of the class in sums, even though he never spoke. And up until that day he had borne his fair share of Viper strikes, too – Mr. Altham hated to have him top of the class in any subject, and always made an effort to hide or disparage his results.

Every head had turned to watch her leave. She'd shivered a little, feeling so many pairs of eyes fixed on her, and as she stepped across the threshold of the classroom and out into the open air she'd felt like she had crossed from one world into another, and that some big transition had just happened – but she didn't know exactly what.

Back at the hotel, the shock wearing off and in tears from her stinging hand, Aisling explained what had happened, including Rāwiri's intervention and expulsion. Doctor Barton took one glance at the fiery destruction of her palm, swore a string of nasty words under his breath (although this he denied when Aisling later asked about it), applied the necessary ointments and bandages, and tight-lipped, disappeared out of the door, fury trailing him like a hound of hell.

Aisling never went back to the school again.

By the end of the week, neither did Mr. Altham.

So had ended their schooling journey for the time being, but Aisling had kept

Rāwiri's drawings close ever since. They were so pretty to look at. And the same fingers that could work a pencil so cleverly to draw such pictures were helping to craft her very special boat. No, *their* very special boat.

It sent a thrill through her body to think of it.

Because he was going to come with her too, to the horizon, to the kissing place, where things that were lost were found again.

## 32.

*Akaroa, New Zealand, August 1875*

Aisling knew her strange moonlight-vision troubled Doctor Barton. And that she walked in her sleep. He had brought his other doctor-friend, Doctor Baumann, to see her one day, and to talk to her about it. But there wasn't much to say. Doctor Baumann was a different sort of doctor than Doctor Barton. He wore round spectacles and he had very round grey eyes and his hair was the colour of the rocks on the shore. There was no colour to him. He was very thin. And he didn't like to talk much. He liked to listen. When he listened it felt as though he was climbing inside your words and into your mind to have a little peep inside. Aisling wasn't sure how she felt about that. It made her feel like she wasn't ... normal.

But, well, how she saw *wasn't* normal, was it: no one had had such a thing happen before.

Doctor Baumann wouldn't say what he thought, but she knew that he was intrigued.

She had writhed under his gaze and wished he wouldn't keep asking her so many strange questions. He made her feel funny. All squirmy. All wrong.

She wondered instead if something was wrong with her eyes. That maybe when she had been in the water that horrible day, kicking up to the surface and thinking she might not ever breathe again, something had happened to her vision. It must have. Only – nothing else was wrong with the way she saw. Nothing at all.

And – well – she had felt different ever since that day, too. She always felt tired during the day because the day-moon was so sleepy and tired. And at night her sleep was restless. She would toss and turn and often find herself so twisted in her sheets that it took several moments to unpin herself from their clutches. And she felt so afraid at night. Like there was always something bad lurking. Not something that could be seen. A feeling.

A feeling that would begin to take on a form in her imagination, if she dwelt on it too long. A dark and terrifying form all angular and long and jutting in and out with teeth like daggers and a leery grin and poker-red eyes. But dark dark dark, a shadow.

In her mind.

Could things from the mind fall out of it and become real? Were the shadows on the floor of her room, as the moonlight crept around the edges of the thick, heavy curtains, ever part of that shadow? Sometimes those shadows would shift and move unnaturally as she watched them, and she was never sure if she was awake or dreaming. In those times she would try to scream, but nothing would come out; she would try to move but it was as if she were pinned down to her bed. And her whole body tingled with pins and needles.

Then she would feel the Connemara worry stone clutched in her hand and she imagined that the thoughts in her mind could travel right the way through her veins and skin and bones and talk to it, and that it would help her. So she would talk to the stone in her mind, willing that Mammy or an angel or a saint or God or somebody might hear, and that they would chase the Shadow away from her.

And then her palm would begin to feel warm and the tingle would start to subside: first she could move the hand that held that stone, and then normal feeling would sweep over the rest of her body and she could move again. The spell would be broken.

These were the fears she had during those restless nights, and they made her cling to the stone more than ever.

She had to keep the scary shadow locked away inside.

If it came out like she feared it was beginning to, it would hurt her, and not only her, but the new people she was beginning to care about very much.

Doctor Barton, Rāwiri, Hinewai, the Grandmother.

Imagine if Doctor Baumann knew about the Shadow. She never talked about it, not to anyone. But had he seen it anyway? Was that what made his eyes glitter sometimes when she felt like he was trying to climb inside her mind?

No. He could not have. What she had to do was try her very best not to think about it, to ignore those dark jutting shapes that wanted to stab into her brain, right through it and into her skull and into the world beyond.

But she was afraid.

She was afraid that it was the Shadow that was making her sleep-walk, and if it was making her do that without her knowledge, what else might it be making her do? These thoughts were too big for her. She felt very weighed down by them and there was no one who could understand. There was no help. At least, there hadn't been, but

it had started to feel a little different ever since she had met Rāwiri and Hinewai. When she spent time with them, the dim day-moonlight would shift the tiniest little bit and she would feel like she could breathe just a little easier.

Just a little.

PART IV.

Tír na Marbh

*The Land of the Dead*

## 33.

### *Ōnuku, New Zealand – September 1875*

“You want to know why Rāwiri doesn’t speak, girl?”

Hinewai had Aisling seated on the ground before her in the cottage, braiding Aisling’s long, unruly curls to keep them out of her face. It was late in the afternoon, and Aisling could feel the approach of twilight in her blood. Her skin tingled. She was afraid of what Hinewai was going to say.

“It’s not an easy story, girl. But your Doctor Barton told me what happened in the schoolroom; he told me about the strikes on your palm because you spoke your own language, the language of your home. I will tell you this, because you need to know the importance of your tongue. The language of your land comes from deep, deep within. It is connected to your spirit. Your ancestors. Those who have come before. It is part of you.”

She paused, and Aisling waited. Her spirit and her language. Her soul had sung in Irish, that day up on the ráth back home in Ireland. She wondered why she hadn’t heard the song since. Did it mean her soul had stayed back in Ireland, too?

“When white people came here to Akaroa, Rāwiri’s grandfather, he was quick to welcome them. He admired their trade, their skills, their weapons. He saw opportunity. Change. Quickly he learned to dress like them, and learned their languages. First English, then French. He stopped speaking the language of the tangata whenua. He made his family learn English too, didn’t allow them to speak their own tongue. He wanted the family to rise in prestige. To be great.

“To Rāwiri’s pāpā, a strong Ngāi Tahu man, it was like a betrayal. They argued all the time. He couldn’t stand being home anymore. He left and he went up to fight in the wars of Te Ika-a-Māui. At that time, we had only been married two years. I was with child. Rāwiri came into the world with the rising of the sun in November in 1865. A special child, a strong child. The only child I was able to bear. My treasure.”

“Where is Rāwiri’s pāpā now?”

Hinewai’s hands stopped moving and she shifted on the stool behind Aisling. “Sometimes he is home, sometimes away. He doesn’t like being around so many

Pākehā. He thinks Akaroa has become too white. That Pākehā should never have come. That they stole everything from our people.”

Aisling sat quiet. The words rang in her ears. She did not know what to say.

Hinewai’s hands began to move again. Noone could tame her hair like Hinewai could.

“So did Rāwiri grow up here with you and his grandmother?”

“Not until he was four. I stayed with his pāpā’s parents to begin with. His grandmother and I, we always spoke te reo. Māori. That was the language Rāwiri grew up hearing. We spoke it secretly. But his grandfather found out and was not happy about it. He took Rāwiri from me and sent him to a special boarding school to learn English. He came back on holidays and always looked so sad. The light had gone out of his eyes. No sun anymore.

“Then one day his grandfather took him to meet an important English man, a man of business, to show him off. Wanted him to speak perfect English, for the business man to take note. Prestige. But when Rāwiri spoke, he spoke Māori. He was nervous, scared, too young. About the age you are now. The reo was what came naturally. It was what *should* have come naturally. His grandfather was so angry. He came home, and he ... punished Rāwiri. I couldn’t stop him, he locked me out. After that, he forbade any of us to speak our own language.

“Then Rāwiri would not speak at all. He has never spoken since. But his grandmother and me, we decided enough was enough, and we left. We took Rāwiri with us so he never went back to that bad school. His grandfather cast us off, washed his hands of us, said he was ashamed of his family. And so we live here now. Rāwiri’s pāpā comes when he can.”

Hinewai was stroking Aisling’s head reflectively. Aisling sat still and picked at the plaid fabric of her dress.

“... My Papa used to hurt my Mammy. That was why we left home. Mammy said that Papa needed some time alone. That he had the Weight-of-the-World. I was sad to leave Ireland. Mammy didn’t think I knew as much as I did but I always knew. I knew that she needed to get away from him. I think ... I think ... he might have ... killed her if we stayed.”

The corners of Aisling’s eyes prickled and a lump rose in her throat. Mammy had died anyway.

Hinewai’s hand stopped moving again. It was her turn to be silent for a moment.

“He hurt you too?”

Aisling’s eyes were downcast.

“... No. But ... I think he would have. I think ... Mammy always stepped between us if he ever looked like he was going to come for me.”

“Eh, girl. I’m sorry. You should not have had to experience such things.”

Hinewai held Aisling close. Aisling could hear her heartbeat. She was warm and comforting.

“These are hard things. Maybe when you think about Ireland, the place you are from, you only remember these hard things?”

Aisling thought a moment. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“It was scary sometimes. But Mammy – Mammy always made everything right again, even when it wasn’t. She made our home pretty with vases of wildflowers. She took me over the hills in Connemara and told me ever so many stories about the fairy folk and about angels and about God and the saints. I miss Mammy’s Connemara, actually. And Uncle Declan. He had a sheep called Bartholomew and he was always very kind. Uncle Declan that is. Well, and Bartholomew too. It makes my heart feel so heavy to think of it all. But I’m glad Papa can’t find us now. Well ... he can’t find me. I wonder what he would think if he knew Mammy had drowned? Do you think he would be sad or happy?”

“A big question. People are never just one thing. I think he would have loved you, and loved your māmā, underneath. But life is not easy. Sometimes things happen, sometimes the balance inside becomes wrong. Sometimes the shadows grow.”

Aisling’s heart began to pound.

“But ... but what if *I* have a shadow?” she whispered, and slunk down away from Hinewai’s touch, wrapping her arms around her legs and tucking her face between her knees. She thought about the creeping darkness in her room at night.

“The shadow is in everyone, Aisling. But not everyone can master it. You are strong and you are kind. You are connected to the good of the earth. The shadow will never take you.”

“But how do you know it won’t? I ... I feel it, at night time, and it scares me very much.”

“What would your māmā have said about that?”

“I... I guess she would say that there wasn’t ever a need to fear because the light always wins in the end.”

“Wise, your māmā. I wish we could have met her.”

“I wish that too. I miss her so much that sometimes I don’t think I can even get out of bed. I think about her all of the time. And sometimes I think I can hear her voice still. Does ... does that mean I am ... mad? I know that the doctor thinks there might be something wrong with me. And the children whisper it sometimes and they laugh.”

Hinewai’s eyes grew hard. “People are always casting judgments about what they do not know. This doctor, he is a good man, but he cannot see anything other than what is right in front of him. People like you, you have eyes for things that can’t be seen. You are not mad. It is a gift to have this vision.”

“Do you think I will ever see the sun again?”

Aisling’s voice was small.

“I think when the time is right you will see the sun again.”

“I hope the time is right soon. I hope Rāwiri will find his voice again soon, too. I am sorry that he was beaten for speaking his ... his reo.”

“Just remember, girl. This is why I have told you these things – things that maybe are too big for small girls, but one day you will remember and understand. The language and the land, te reo and te whenua, they are in your blood, always. The ones who have gone before you speak to you through them.”

“I will try to remember. But I am already forgetting the Irish. At home we spoke it often – and now here there is no-one to speak it to because no-one understands.”

“You must find a way to hold onto it. You must not let it slip through your fingers. Not just for your sake but for those who are to come. You remember your Irish and you will find your sunlight again one day.”

\*

The next day, Aisling and Rāwiri were down at the bay. They were walking slowly together along the seashore. The tide had drawn itself away and sodden sand oozed between their toes the closer they got to the receding water. Aisling dragged a long piece of driftwood behind her, singing to herself and watching Rāwiri swing a bucket filled with all sorts of seashore finds: shells, bits of net, seaweed, stones – anything that looked like it might be useful. She was glad he was part of this special project

too.

They were working on their boat, and it was nearly finished. It was hidden around the corner from the main Akaroa harbour, away from prying eyes. They kept it tucked just under the tree line where it approached the shore, beneath a makeshift cover of bracken and branches. A clever disguise, Aisling thought. Anyone walking past it wouldn't blink twice. For a moment she thought of the little fibs she had been telling the doctor when he asked what she and Rawiri did all day. It wasn't *really* bad to tell such fibs, was it? The doctor couldn't know about the raft. He would stop them. She knew it.

Did that mean it was a bad thing that they were doing? No. She had to try find her Mammy where the sea met the sky. Grown-ups didn't understand such things. Sometimes you just had to hide things because it was for the best.

Doctor Barton couldn't help her. So she had to help herself. It looked like that was how life was arranged.

When they reached where the boat was hidden, Rāwiri hauled off its covers. There it was, the product of their combined efforts. It made Aisling's heart so happy that she could almost believe in sunlight again. It was Aisling's boat, but Rāwiri's too. It wasn't really a boat. It was a raft. They'd lashed together branches and driftwood, and it was turning into quite a sizeable affair – almost measuring three yards in length. In its centre Rāwiri had figured out how to lash a branch as a pole to stand upright like a mast with a horizontal branch acting as the boom – he had even figured out a clever system to allow it to rotate and swing about. This whole aperture could be removed and laid flat in order to keep it hidden when they were not working on it. They had fixed a makeshift sail to their mast, made from an old piece of calico Aisling had found hidden under her bed. It even had a rudder – a small slat of wood below, connected to a handle of sorts above the surface – again, the product of Rāwiri's clever engineering. It was a proper little sailing structure, and today they were going to test it for the first time. Aisling could barely contain her excitement, and she jumped up and down on her toes.

“Oh, do you think it will work, Rā? Will it float? Can we sail?”

He grinned at her and gestured to one end of the raft, tugging at the other. They lugged it down to the water's edge. Aisling removed her shoes and stockings, and Rāwiri rolled up his trouser legs. They both looked around to make sure they were alone. There was no one in sight, and they breathed a collective sigh of relief, both in

a state of high excitement. It was a mild spring day, but the water still carried the icy frigidness of winter. They waded in knee-deep, Aisling yelping at the bite of the freezing swells but bravely ploughing in anyway, and they dragged the raft onto the water's surface with them. They watched as it bobbed up and down with the roll of the lapping waves. Aisling clapped her hands. "It floats, Rā! We did it!"

They both clutched its edges, and with Rāwiri's assistance Aisling hauled herself up onto it. It still remained afloat, seemingly unfazed by the new weight. With a heave, and an anxious moment or two as one corner dipped far below the surface, Rāwiri hauled himself up onto it too, quickly sitting opposite Aisling so their weight was evenly spread. Still it floated. They grinned at each other, panting. Rāwiri's eyes carried a special gleam, and it made Aisling think of the place far on the horizon where Mammy must be, where the light must be. They were going there. Not today, this was just a test voyage. But soon. Once they had everything they needed.

"Rā, will you come with me as far as the horizon?"

He looked at her quizzically for a moment or two. He nodded. He pointed to his mouth, and then to his heart, where his pounamu hung.

"Do you think your voice will be there too, with Mammy and the light?"

He shrugged. She understood. Maybe. It had to be worth a try.

A thrill ran through her body. This was really going to happen! She laughed out loud and then they unfurled their calico sail, lashing the boom in place. They waited expectantly. Nothing. The raft just bobbed up and down on the spot. Aisling's face fell. Rāwiri's brow furrowed a little. Oars, that was what he had forgotten. He would have to make some somehow. They would need them if there were no breeze. But then a light puff of wind swept up across the surface of the waves, as if with the express purpose of filling their little sail, and it picked up the structure, which tilted dangerously for a moment or two from the sudden thrust of air. But then it magically righted itself and they began to shift along the shoreline, keeping to the shallower water. Rāwiri grabbed the handle of his rudder, and Aisling shouted out in glee. They were sailing! It had worked!

For half an hour more they drifted along the shoreline, and then Rāwiri pointed up to the sky, which was beginning to grow dim with the fading afternoon. Time to go back. They drew near to the shore and scrambled off the raft's edge and into the knee-deep water again, drawing it out after them onto the sand, where they dismantled the mast and hid both under their forest coverings again. Aisling's face was flushed, and

Rāwiri was buoyant. They made a good team, and they had made something that worked. This was going to change everything.

And one day soon in the coming weeks they would set sail properly. It was decided. The boat needed some final touches and a couple of adjustments, and then they just needed to arrange for provisions, but those would be easily procured.

They were going to find Aisling's sunlight and Rāwiri's voice. Soon.

## 34.

### Tír na Marbh pt 1

#### The Land of the Dead

##### *Aisling*

*I am down the bottom of a great ravine. There is not much room for me to stand on the side of the rushing river; it boils so as it tumbles over the rocks. The handle of the silver Cup of Healing is very cold in my fingers. The water is white and icy, but the colour of darkest midnight in the middle where it must be very deep. It runs very quickly and the river is so wide that I can hardly see the other side; it's all hidden behind the mist the water throws up. There are many big stones and rocks on the river's edge, and I am standing on a small patch of grass just beyond them. Behind me are a few scraggly trees that reach up the sides of the ravine like they wish they could get out of here too. I can't see any path that I might be able to climb up and out from. I think this must be the place I saw from up high with the Lady Ragnailt, after we crossed that awful narrow bridge. To think I might have fallen from it to my death!*

*Can you die in your dreams? If you die in a dream, do you die in real life? Maybe in dreams if you die it's like your soul dies, your soul that sings the sweet song and makes you feel like everything will be all right and you will find your Mammy again. That is sad to think of. I don't want to die in my dreams because that would make me even sadder in the waking-times, to not even have my soul for comfort.*

*Papa must have died in his dreams and that's what made him lose his soul.*

*That makes me sad to think of too.*

*There is such a sweet scent of Mammy's lily-of-the-valley about me again. It seems so out of place here that I wonder if it's just a thought and not the real scent? I miss her so. But I know I will find her again if only I can get my boat to the Kissing-Place on the horizon with Rawiri. It is not long now and then we will be gone, and we will see her in the place where the light is, and everything will be the way it was meant to be again. But here in this magical dream-place it's different again. I wish I could visit here during daytime, too. It somehow feels ... right to be here. I feel so*

*much more awake - ten times, a hundred times, even. A hundred is very many times, isn't it? I remember when I thought it was a great accomplishment to count to one hundred. Now I can count a long, long, long way. It's funny to think you could just keep counting and never run out of numbers because they don't stop. Those thoughts make me feel a little afraid, actually. It's hard to think of things that never run out. That's like 'forever', isn't it. Like eternity, that's what Mammy called 'forever'. Eternal life. What people get when they die. But I don't know if I would like to just keep going on and on and on like the numbers that don't run out.*

*But when the numbers and eternity and the on-and-on get much further than I have ever been before, I think that surely that is where everything begins to change and you can find traces of the people you lost again. Mammy. The Kissing-Place where the light lives. Imagine finding the home of the light. Does someone really drive it across the sky in a chariot like the stories say? But then what would happen if something happened to the person who was driving the light? That would be terrible. Perhaps there is a different light-driver for every person, and something did happen to mine, and that's why I can't see the sun anymore? Maybe in the Kissing-Place I will find out what happened to my light-driver. I don't know if I want to find that out, because what if my light-driver is dead? Then will I always only have the moonlight?*

*I wonder if Lady Ragnailt will come to me soon. I must be here for a reason, and I know that I have to fill the Cup of Healing with water from the Well of Healing. That's what the King of the Land-Under-the-Waves said. And then I will have to figure out how to take it back for the princess.*

*I have to shut my eyes for a moment because the brilliant white of the river hurts them so. It is good to just listen sometimes.*

*There is the roar of the river, of course. And the scratch-scratch of tree branches scraping against the great rock face they stand before. Something else new - so faint it is nearly drowned out by the raging of the water. It's the sound of a blackbird, I think, or some other bird that sings at dawn and dusk. It seems a little out of place, so I wonder if I am making it up. But no, it is becoming clearer. It sings a very pretty song and makes me drowsy. It reminds me of home, of walking back over the bogs at dusk with Mammy and hearing the birds singing as if to say goodbye to the day.*

*It would not be a good idea to fall asleep here, though. I open my eyes again.*

*There is something there that wasn't there before - something right on the edge of the waters, clinking against the stones with a soft tink-tink that could almost be the*

*song of the blackbird, it's so strangely musical. I walk closer, taking care not to slip on the water-covered rocks. My foot loses its hold for a moment; I nearly drop the Cup of Healing and my ankle twists and there's a sharp pain and my heart races because for a second I thought the waters would steal me away and sink me very quickly. But I manage to stand up again, even though my ankle hurts so, and I lock my fingers even more tightly around the handle of the cup. Now I can see what it is that's making the noise.*

*It's a wee round boat, a curricle, that is what we called boats of such a shape in Ireland. But this one looks like it is made out of glass or of crystal, all cut with lots of flat surfaces like the dome to the King of Land-Under-the-Mountain's palace. It looks ever so light and pretty, like it could float off into the air at any moment. It is tied to a branch farther back by a fine piece of golden rope, and there are two little golden oars in it that look just the right size for me. It seems very strange to me that it should float, and stranger still that the rocks it keeps tumbling against do not smash it. I know that I must climb in, and I do, but I am shaking, because I feel like it will tip over at any second. But it doesn't. Once I'm inside it feels so steady, almost as though it were on the calmest of lakes rather than this tumultuous river and all its braided strands. Not even one splash of water touches me, and the inside of the curricle is completely dry too. I untie the little bit of gold rope and it slips through my fingers in such a way that I barely even have to struggle with the knot that looked impossibly strong before. I wrap my skirts around my legs nice and snug and I take a hold of the oars. The curricle drifts into the centre of the river of its own accord: I try to direct it a little with the oars, but it seems to know where it is going without my help.*

*Where are we going?*

*I look down. Below me is the cool deep blue of the river, I can see right down to the pearly coloured pebbles far below on the bottom of the riverbed. There are tiny fish of many different colours swimming just underneath, gold and red and green and multicoloured. Bigger salmon too. They all swim together like they are dancing, racing around and around the bottom of my little crystal boat as though they were directing it. I think they might be. Funny little fishes. There's the song of the blackbird again, melding so prettily with the rushing of the water, which is now not nearly so terrifying, because it has slowed right down and we are drifting ever so quietly down the wide, wide river. Up ahead there is an island, exactly in the centre of the waters. I could not see it before. It is surrounded by clouds that hover just above the river's*

*surface. The curricle seems drawn to it of its own accord, but I use my golden oars nonetheless to help steer it when we get close. The fishes disappear as the bottom of the boat scrapes against the white pebbles of the island's shallows. A new place!*

\*

*I go to climb out of the curricle and onto the pretty white sandy shore, but something stops me: I can't tell what it is but it feels so unsafe, despite the island looking so lovely and peaceful and dreamy, all tucked into the low misty clouds as it is. There is nothing to do but sit back down, and to think. I think I must be imagining fear, probably because of the scary soldier last time. But there isn't a scary soldier in sight. I think I will climb out after all, and I go to dip my foot into the cold waters, but all of a sudden there's a great neigh, and Enbarr is here again, which of course really isn't a surprise because she does keep showing up!*

*"What is it, Enbarr?"*

*She drops her head low and shakes it from side to side and her mane tumbles about. She steps into the water until she is right beside the curricle and she kneels as low as she can.*

*"I think I understand, Enbarr. I'm not to touch the ground, is that it?"*

*She nods vehemently and looks at me intently. Her look tells me that I must heed the warning. So - I must not touch the ground. That seems very unusual. But then this is all very unusual, isn't it? Here I am, in my dreams, carrying a silver cup from one king to fill with a special healing water to take to another king. That is funny, isn't it. But I climb onto her back. She stands up quickly and moves onto the shore. It is very quiet here. I can't even hear the river anymore. I turn around to see if my curricle is safe, but the misty clouds have closed in behind, as though they were a secret gate that opened just to let us through. But will they let us back out again? I have a lump in my throat as I try and swallow and my hands suddenly feel very clammy. Enbarr walks up off the shore, and on its edge are many stumps of blackened trees. The grass beneath them is charred and black too and all around feels very ominous. The skies look like they will burst into heavy rain at any moment and the air feels thick to breathe. There is a terrible smell, like something rotting. I don't want to inhale. It makes me feel sick. The ground begins to ooze beneath Enbarr's hooves, a funny*

*yellowy colour that looks putrid. She begins to gallop anyway, and soon it's as though her hooves aren't even touching the ground. I cling on tight and screw my eyes closed again. This place is not safe. It feels like death.*

\*

*There's the song of the blackbird again. As out of place here as it seemed against the crashing of the wild waters. But now the landscape is changing again. Slender birch trees twinkling with their delicate leaves are becoming all mixed in with the burned ones, and there are more and more and more of them, until there are no burned trees left at all. The air smells sweeter, sweeter by far, and Enbarr has slowed to a trot and there is fresh green grass beneath her feet. The birches are dressed in their autumn leaves and it's like walking through a forest painted in gold that shimmers with a silvery white. I think it might be the most beautiful place I have yet seen. How odd: it is so different to the burning and the horrible stench. How could two such different things stand side by side so?*

*Then I remember the Lady Ragnailt. All is not as it seems. The life and the death. The dying. That's what this place reminds me of now. The autumn birches and the dead, burned ones - dying, death. Farewells. But something is surely amiss for the trees to have been burned.*

*"This is Tír na Marbh."*

*The voice startles me and I nearly fall from Enbarr's back in surprise. And when I turn to where it came from, off to Enbarr's left, there is a figure in a dark midnight-coloured cloak, face hidden behind a billowy hood.*

*"Tír na Marbh, that is where you are. I know you were wondering it. This is the Land of the Dead."*

*The figure moves closer and I wish Enbarr would run off. I dig my heels into her sides a little to try make her move on, but she stands resolutely still. I don't want to speak with this person. There is something not right about them, whoever they are.*

*"You are very welcome here, Aisling. You must get down off your horse and follow me."*

*I remain as though glued to Enbarr's back. I don't want to climb down. A waft of that horrible odour reaches me at the same time as I see eyes glowing red-ember-hot*

*under the hood as the person steps up to Enbarr and strokes her mane with a black-gloved hand. I can feel her muscles tense beneath me. The speaker is a man, but a very strange sort of man. I shy away from the nearness of his touch. Enbarr does too. I wish she would run off! Why does she not?*

*“What’s the matter, Aisling? Come, now. You can climb down and I will take you and show you things better than anything you have seen yet. You don’t have to be afraid of me. There is nothing to fear in this place. This is the place where dreams come true. Don’t you want yours to come true, Aisling? Don’t you want to find your Mammy again, and to see the sunshine again? I can take you to the sun, Aisling.”*

*“Who are you? I won’t get down off Enbarr. She doesn’t want me to even though she can’t say it. I know. And Enbarr is my best friend. I don’t know you.”*

*“Ah, Aisling. But you do. I’m there in the dark every time you are afraid, don’t you know? And the dark isn’t always bad. But you know that, don’t you? You’re a little girl who lives in moonlight. My favourite is the moonlight, too. The sun is so garish; I can’t think why anyone would prefer it. But regardless, I can bring you to it if that is what you most desire. The place where the light lives.”*

*I have to consider a moment or two. I don’t trust him. He is not like Lady Ragnailt or Úna or Enbarr or the kings or the princess. And the voice reminds me very much of the soldier in front of the palace at Magh an Ionganaidh. But – but ... I do so want to see the light again! And Mammy! And could he really take me to them, this person?*

*The place where the soldier scratched my arm with his sword is throbbing. It makes me feel a little dizzy.*

*“Won’t you climb down now, Aisling? I can see you want to. There’s so much goodness in this land just waiting for you – a table all laden with delicious food and treats, anything you want. A tree where to take a bite of any of its fruit means one of your dreams comes true. This is a magical place, Aisling. Come!”*

*I start to slide down and the man reaches up to lift me, but the image of Papa striking Mammy comes to my mind and suddenly all I want is for Enbarr to ride far, far, far away – I want to wake up, to be back in bed even in the waking-time where I only see the moon. I shout at Enbarr to run and she springs into motion and runs so fast that all becomes a blur, trees and skies and grass. In my ears echoes a great mocking laughter and I can hear the voice still.*

*“Ah, I see how it will be! You think you are on a noble mission. But this will be your downfall yet, the Land of the Dead. I will be waiting for you. This is your*

*destiny.*”

## 35.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – Early October 1875*

Lately, both Aisling and Rāwiri were going about with such secretive expressions on their faces that both Doctor Barton and Hinewai were mystified, and wondered what was afoot. When the doctor questioned Aisling, she would only say that nothing was amiss and he was imagining things. It was just the excitement of summer being near, that was all. *Silly doctor dear*, she would say. He didn't like it. She had been secretive in the past, but never false, and this smacked of falseness. It wasn't like the child. She was a good girl. He resolved to keep a closer eye on her.

Hinewai came to visit him while the pair were off playing together.

"I do not want the girl playing with my Rāwiri anymore, Doctor. Something is not right. She is a bad influence. Something has a hold on her. Something spiritual. Dark. I can feel it."

The doctor was shocked. Even given his private concerns, Aisling was the farthest from a 'bad influence' he could think of. This was such a sudden change to how Hinewai had been treating the child – she'd been caring for her almost as though she were her own. He protested to such effect, but deep down he was concerned too. Aisling wasn't herself. An air had been developing of late: along with that slightest tinge of subterfuge there was even a touch of insolence on occasion.

"Hinewai, please – I am so close to securing a position for the child, one I will have confirmation of this very afternoon, as matters stand. Don't separate them just now. This new family is the perfect fit for her – they are respectable, there's another girl of a similar age, and she will attend school with her in Christchurch. They will be able to do right by the child, and she will have a proper, decent upbringing. Please. It will go hard enough on the girl as it is if this comes to pass, and I believe it will, as soon as early next week."

"I don't like it, doctor. It was a bad moon that brought the girl to us, broken though she was, but something has changed in these last weeks. Rāwiri is disobedient. He hides things from me. He did not do this before. It is the girl. But I will not part them until the child goes, if she is to go with this family as you say. If she does not,

then I will prohibit my boy from seeing her again. Do you hear, doctor? She has had too much liberty here and I can sense the spirits in her.”

Doctor Barton sighed. Spirits. Nonsense. The girl was just struggling to cope with what had happened.

“I understand, Hinewai. I understand. I think you are being too hard on her – she’s just a little girl, and it’s no wonder she is suffering after what she has been through. But if I don’t succeed in securing this place for her then I will keep her from seeing Rāwiri again.”

Hinewai looked at him with a hard expression in her eyes, her lips a thin line.

“You watch her, doctor. I will watch my boy. I will watch you.”

## 36.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – October 31, 1875*

“Are you ready, Rāwiri?”

Aisling stood on the seashore, toes dug into the cold sand like little anchors reaching for stability.

Rāwiri’s dark eyes glittered in the late afternoon light. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and dampened his curls. There were dark clouds overhead. The air was too still and unseasonably warm. It felt unnatural. Alive. He jumped from one foot to the other and his thumbs were looped into the waistband of his trousers. He was nervous, Aisling could see it.

“Don’t worry, Rā! This is what we have been waiting for. The weather will not stop us. I will find my light and my Mammy, and you will find your voice, because we are going to the Kissing-Place on the horizon.”

He tilted his head to one side and looked at her and off into the skies, his eyes reflecting their purple-charcoal swellings. He shrugged, shook out his arms and bounced up and down on his toes as if to shake off a bad feeling. One corner of his mouth tipped up into a nervous smile and he exhaled loudly. Then he swung into motion and Aisling quickly fell into pace beside him as the duo lugged their peculiar raft down to the water’s edge, where it bobbed uncertainly for a moment or two as they loaded it with all their supplies.

Rāwiri climbed up. Aisling followed. She knelt beside him, and the wood they had bound together was rough beneath her knees, cutting into them. She jumped suddenly, thinking she heard a sound on shore, and a splinter shot into one knee. She ignored it. They slowly unfurled the sail again. They pushed off with Rāwiri’s new set of makeshift oars and the raft began to drift. The tide was in their favour. It was drawing the raft out, despite the lack of wind. They would have to row, but they would make it out of the harbour and then around to the open seas and they would find the horizon. It was meant to be. Rāwiri’s hands were steady on the oars while Aisling took it in turns to help and to steer with Rāwiri’s rudder. This was going to work! A shudder of anticipation — or fear, or ... something ... flooded her for a

moment, like tens of thousands of little pins pricking into her skin all over her body.

Like someone – or something – was watching them.

Someone not of this world. She too drew a deep breath, and inhaled slowly.

Nothing bad was going to happen.

## 37.

### *Cillian*

A trap, all right. Who'd fall into such a thing twice? Knowingly? Me, as it would seem. Grand, that's what it is. Just grand. She lured me in with all her singing of songs and enchanting perfume and such, and I, being the dull-witted fool that I am, fell for it well and truly. Well done, Cillian.

Saw her again. Of course. That was her plan all along, wasn't it. I fell asleep, and when I woke, I wasn't in the same forest. A forest, but not the same one. This one is much more grand, much more ... ancient. Dense. Trees are taller. Flowers everywhere, if you're about such things. In every clearing, under every tree, and the sun seems to find all of them. Magic, I hate to say it, but magic is what it is. Only way to explain it.

She was even more beautiful than I imagined. Shudder to think of it. She's actually terrifying. Chilled the blood in my veins to ice. Not any regular woman who could do that, I'll tell you that right now. Spent a day stumbling over roots after her in thrall, I did, like a little lovelorn puppy. Humiliating. She didn't turn around, not once, and time and time again I'd go to reach out and touch her skirts all shimmering in the colours of the dark forest, but always it was just as though there were only air to touch – because she'd be gone, two, three steps further ahead. We went on for a time this way and then she stopped suddenly in a clearing. I clean nearly walked into her, I did, and if I had I can't answer for what I would have done, she was so tantalisingly close. She stopped, and she turned around slowly, and she looked at me and once again I was spellbound. Mortifying to think of. But I was. Couldn't move. Transfixed by her gorgeous face, all pale and shining in the light of the sun, the light glinting off her hair so, the ... the *essence* of her. So ... substantial. That's all I can call it. She looked at me, her mouth closed, and her eyes were so sad. Made me feel unbelievably uncomfortable, it did, to be stuck so, under that gaze – that gaze that felt like it was plumbing the darkest depths of my soul, right down to its most despicable and miry heart.

I'm a murderer, after all. Don't like much to think of that now, though. Murder

and all. It wasn't meant to go so far, if it's honest we're being.

But – but I'm a grown man, I don't need a heart, not any more, and mine went years ago now. Much better to have the upper hand in life. And that's something you don't get given, you have to grab it with all your might yourself lest someone get there before you, or, you know, kill *you* themselves. It's not a balanced game. It's the strongest who win, who get ahead, and thank the good Lord that I found my own strength away from all of that blathering emotional carry-on and such.

Anyway. I digress. She reached up to my face and bound a strip of fabric around my eyes. Her touch was so soft it nearly undid me. Would have done anything for her if she'd asked it of me right then. Well, after that, she took me by the hand and led me (greater fool am I for having let it happen!), and I could tell the light was growing dimmer, but in my foolhardy heart I thought she was taking me to a secret chamber somewhere so we could ... be together. *Fool*, Cillian! She wasn't. The ground underfoot changed, wasn't the forest floor anymore, some sort of stone. Cold. Couldn't see any light through the blindfold. But there was the sound of running water, a fountain, or suchlike. Not any other sound, just that, and her steps and mine seemingly linked. That's when I began to grow uneasy and thought I might pull away, pull down the blindfold, but mercy me, the grip of that woman was stronger than any man I have come across, and that's saying something! A woman has no business being that strong. Went to raise my other hand to free my eyes, but lo, couldn't even move it! Witch had me under a spell. Didn't believe in the fairies before, but don't see as I have any option but to now. She is supernatural, that's for sure. Not a regular human woman.

Understand the stories now. Doesn't do to mess with the fairy-kind. Lord help me.

She stopped again, just in front of me, and, still under her spell, I couldn't do anything else but stop too. She reached up and took off the blindfold. Her cool skin set mine on fire. Not with desire any more, mind, but with panic. Not a regular situation.

We were in a great underground structure with stone walls and a paved stone floor, torches flickering in sconces all around the walls. In the middle was a great circular fountain, water flowing ceaselessly over the bricks. Atop it was a statue of a pair twined together, a woman and a man; it looked like her and another, I know not who. But their hands were intertwined and reaching up, ivy around their wrists and trailing over their shoulders and into the fountain, and between their outstretched

fingers the water spouted upward and ran down. Creatures of the green world, I thought. She already had a lover, then. Whoever that man was, he was the one who she must reach for at night. If such as she were capable of such feelings.

What had she led me there for?

I looked around, trying to see if there was a clever way I could slip past her and out, not that I had any idea how I might find my way back out to, you know, regular Galway, but there was none. Even the pathway we had taken wasn't visible anymore. We were surrounded by the curved stone walls, a great big, closed-in chamber. At set points around its edges grew a number of trees, leafy and green and silent. Don't know how they got by with no sunlight. Feckin' spooky things.

And then in the fountain the curtain of water began to take on an odd appearance. I could *see things in it*. Not leaves and dirt and what have you. *Things*. Visions, I suppose that's what you would call them. Figures moving. Not clear enough to glean much from, but there nonetheless. Made my skin crawl. Too creepy. I turned back to her to try convince her to lead me back out, but she had gone. Vanished into thin air, not a trace left, bar that deceiving scent that lured me back into the forest in the first place. I'm not a desperate man, as a rule, but I grew desperate then. Was like being stuck in that ridiculous pit again, but this time there was no way out at all, that I could feel in my bones.

\*

And that's where I am. Still. No idea how many days have passed. Going out of my mind, just quietly. That's what she wants though, isn't it? Suppose she thinks it's some sort of payback perhaps, payback for embedding my axe in the back of old Declan's head. Would I have done it again if faced with the same situation now? Maybe. Probably. Maybe not. Who's to know. They'd driven me wild, the pack of them, he, and Kitty, and Aisling as a by-product. That's God's truth. Not Aisling's fault though, really, was it. Just a child, stuck in the middle of grown-up problems.

Nonetheless, it's pretty torturous having no idea what to expect in this place, what she might do to me, if I'll ever get out.

And the pictures in the water curtain of the fountain! They've begun to get clearer. Obviously they're there for a purpose, and she means to use them to torment me, I'm

sure of that.

But – wait. What is that? Footsteps. Eerie when you can't see where they're coming from because there's no bloody *path*, that's for sure. Not hers. Too solid. Sending a guard then, is she? I've scoured the walls with my eyes and can't see a thing, but then I can feel a presence-like, right behind me, and I spin around and nearly jump out of my skin because there *he* is – the man from the top of the fountain, but in his living form, right in front of me, and he is very tall with very broad shoulders. He has a wreath of greenery on his head, his hair is dark, and he wears a long black cloak. Black boots. A dark green tunic the colour of my mystery woman's gown. I exhale slowly. This is not good. His eyes are hard and the bones in his face are sharp angles that make him look like someone hewed him out of a slab of granite and didn't bother to smooth down any roughness. An angular man. He stares at me. I try and meet his gaze because by the gods that's what you should do, when someone challenges you, but it's a difficult ask.

“Do you know why you're here?”

Finally. Someone has something to say in this nonsensical place. Deep voice. Sounds angry. Grand.

“Bit difficult to know why I'm here when I don't know where I am then isn't it.”

“Insolence won't get you anywhere here.”

“Ah, it's insolence then, is it? Well, you'd be insolent too if you found yourself held captive in some bizarre fairy prison instead of out in the fields like a regular Irishman, now, wouldn't you! Are you going to tell me where I am?”

The man doesn't even bat an eye.

“You are somewhere you will not be freed from of your own accord. Remember that. You had the ill fortune to anger the queen of these lands, Úna. You're in the heart of Tír-Uaine, the Green Land. And you're right, it is not a human realm. You shouldn't even be here. This place is too good for the likes of you.”

“Well, if she's the queen, and I'm in some... *mystical place*, that's what I suppose you think this is, don't you, then who are you?”

“Ah, Cillian. If only thinking could change reality, isn't that right? Here, in this *mystical place*, I am Fionn, King of Tír-Uaine. And I won't be generous with you as Úna has been. She shies away from violence, believes it unnecessary. I don't have such scruples. You are here to pay a price, the *eric-fine* for Declan's death.”

The man is serious. Bet he's never cracked a joke in his life. I snicker. Can't help

myself. But this isn't going well is it. Rather nervous, to be honest.

"The eric-fine? Blood price? What are we, in the mythological times then?"

"You take a life, you pay the price. Don't speak of times you have no understanding of. These things are sacred. You take the life of a good man like Declan who cared for the land and the people in his life with great tenderness, then you pay the greatest price."

"The ... ah ... greatest price?"

"You will see. You will not leave this place, and your doom is to watch what is happening to your daughter from afar but you will not be able to lift a finger to help her."

"My daughter?"

"Yes, Aisling. What happens to her you will feel the pain of too. One hundred-fold. That I promise. I set up a link between the two of you right now whereby you will feel every minute pain she faces, and scald with the burning of it with an intensity you will not be able to bear. You will not be able to help her although you will want to with everything within you, despite the hardness of your heart."

"This is a strange fine to pay. What makes you think I care about Aisling? She's a brat, the daughter of that woman I no longer love."

"You say one thing but your eyes say another. We know the truth. You will learn it too. She's the only one who could be the fulfillment of your eric-fine, but she won't be, because she will not ever know that you are here, and if she did, she would do anything in her power to stay as far away from you as she could."

"Ridiculous. This is like a child's story – you expect me to believe you? You don't know me. You know nothing about me. If this is your torture, then by all means, proceed with it. I'm not buying it, though: you won't get me that way. I'll just ... sleep ... until it's all over, one way or another. I'll find a way out. You fairy-folk think you know it all, that your tricks are the final word, but your fairy tricks never met a Cillian Sullivan before and you'll be remembering that before I'm done here too."

He smiles a strange smile and his eyes retain that same hard look as though he sees right through me, this odd granite man. Then he disappears before my eyes.

They like to do that, don't they. What a strange folk.

Fionn.

All right then, do your worst. Seems a bit light, to be honest. Was expecting battle

to the death or the like. Prefer that, if we're speaking the truth. Quicker resolution. This – this'll not have any effect on me. Might as well settle into it, then.

The images in the fountain water-wall are growing clearer still. I peer more closely at them. And start. I'm feeling less sure of myself, because I can see very clearly now. It's *her*. My wee golden-haired girl, and she's on a seashore I don't recognise, standing with a boy of a similar age with olive-coloured skin and dark curls. She turns her head this way and that. Feels like she stops and stares straight at me, but no, can't be so. Looks just as I remember her. A touch older. Those eyes look sad. Not like the ones back ... back when things were different, they used to sparkle with joy then.

Gives me something of a pang in my heart, it does.

She's safe then, the wee girl. For now.

I stole her joy, didn't I.

Kitty's fault. I'll not be feeling bad. Things were what they were.

But I don't like that look in her eyes. Something has happened. Where's Kitty, then? Where *is* the child? Doesn't look like Ireland. Sea is different. Skies are different. The boy looks different, not from this part of the world I wouldn't think.

Damn. Why can't I just fight the strange fairy-man and have it done with? Be over in a jiffy, I'm sure of it. Thinks he strong but I'd have the better of him. Didn't he say he doesn't shy away from violence? C'mon then, man!

## 38.

*Akaroa, New Zealand - October 31, 1875*

A heavy, swollen drop landed squarely in the middle of Aisling's head and she gasped as it exploded, water flowing down her forehead. The biggest flash of searing white light shot from the skies at the mouth of the harbour, which the raft was getting closer and closer to, and then a loud crack sounded through the early evening like gunshot. Another drop fell, and then another, and then another. The rain was ripe, plump, menacing. It grew stronger and stronger, soaking the girl and the boy as they clung to the straps they'd nailed into the wood. Around them the waves were rolling higher and higher and they were capped with white foam, tiny white riders frothing as the stormy winds began to whip the ocean into a frenzy.

Rāwiri's eyes were wide and afraid. He gestured to Aisling in circular motions with his hands towards the shore they'd left behind. Turn around! Turn around!

The pained expression on the doctor's face that morning flashed through her mind when she'd lied again about where she was going.

It wasn't wrong, what they were doing. He didn't know about such things, the doctor.

"No! No, we can't, Rā! This is what we have been waiting for – we must ride out the storm, and I know that it will pass! We must! I won't go back, I won't, I won't!" Aisling turned away from him and picked up her oar, dipping it again and again into the wild sea around her that nearly drew her off the raft's edge time and time and again – a tiny white figure in the middle of an overwhelming force – a game of cat and mouse. Her heart felt like it was going to gallop right out of her chest. By now the raft was riding up and down, up and down, as the swells grew bigger. Most of what they had packed had already fallen off – they had not thought to tie it down.

Rāwiri's face was ashen. The sea was angry. It was wrestling with them. His knuckles, clinging to the straps, were tight-gripped-bony-white. He let out a great, hoarse cry.

Aisling turned to him, wide-eyed, yet defiant.

"No! I won't, I won't turn back! Look, can't you see, you are beginning to find

your voice already! This is our destiny!”

Rāwiri looked at her in desperation for a moment or two – still, silent, frozen. Then before she could reach out to him he turned around and dove off the raft, straight into the seething black waters.

Aisling screamed. Everything spun, the raft was caught on a huge swell and it was too powerful. She could not hold on any longer. She slipped, and as she fell the raft fell back too, catching her across the back of her head.

Everything went black.

## 39.

### Tír na Marbh pt 2 The Well of Healing

#### *Aisling*

*Enbarr has been riding for what seems like an age - still so fast that I can't make sense of anything around us. My arm is hurting, more and more, and the black mist does not go away, no matter how fast we ride. It is by my feet. Enbarr seems to know where she is going though, and she doesn't get tired either.*

*I feel tired.*

*I feel like something bad is about to happen, something really bad that's worse than all of the things before. Something as bad as Mammy falling off the ship and drowning.*

*But Enbarr's body is warm beneath me and that makes me feel a little bit better. Her rhythm is perfect. I wish I could bring her back to the waking-life with me and ride her along the beach at Akaroa. Rāwiri would love her, I know it. I think they would be able to speak together in the language that isn't carried by words, like the one between him and Hinewai.*

*I don't think she likes me anymore, Hinewai. I don't know why. She wears her lips so tightly closed together when she looks at me sometimes and her eyes look very serious and strange. I know she does not want Rāwiri to come and play with me, but he wants to and so he does. Sometimes she tells him 'no', but then he pretends things and comes to find me anyway. I know that that is not a very good thing, for him to be deceitful like that, but how could we finish our boat otherwise? The boat is the most important thing.*

*Sometimes I have to trick the doctor too. He looks at me in a strange way like Hinewai from time to time, usually after I have come back later than I was meant to. I can't tell him about the boat so I just pretend that I stayed at Rāwiri's cottage for longer than I realised. I think he thinks we are up to something. He asks, but how could I say? He would stop me from going. I know it. So would Hinewai. So it has*

*always been our little secret. It's not good to lie, I know, but it has to be this way. I won't give up.*

*Sea, dark waves, angry white riders and great crashes of thunder and lightning spitting from the sky. That's what it is to leave a place and go after your destiny.*

*Enbarr shudders a little beneath me. I stroke her mane. She begins to slow and the landscape stops whirling about. All around us are the beautiful golden-leaved birch trees still, and they rise beyond us up onto a hill ahead. The ground is strewn with their fallen leaves and a lovely warm light drenches the air about us. It feels magical, there is no other way to describe it. Enbarr picks her way between the trees, winding up the hill, slowly, slowly. The blackbird is back, and two others are with him. They keep us company and they sing their lovely song, all together, and I wish that they would never ever stop because it's the sound of the light, I think, the sound of finding Mammy again, of all things that are right and meant to be.*

*We are near the top now. The birches give way to grassy ground right on top of the hill, and it reminds me of Ráth Cuimhne and of Úna, and, at the same time, of Lady Ragnailt. Such ladies belong to such a place. In the middle of the grass is a great big tree stretching out its branches like ever so many arms that say come, come, come, my shelter is good and my fruit heals the world. This tree is thick with golden-orange leaves too. Its boughs carry the biggest, reddest apples I have ever seen and my mouth waters. I can tell they are the sort that are lovely and crunchy with white flesh just beyond their rosy surface. The tree stands over a brick well – I think that is what it is. The blackbirds fly ahead of Enbarr and settle on the well's edge.*

*This, then. This must be the Well of Healing. There is a golden bucket that sits on its edge, attached to a long golden rope. Enbarr walks close, and I start to climb down but she shakes her head again with such vehemence that I stop. That's right. I am not to get off her back. But I don't know why. This place looks ever so lovely. Why should I not climb down? I can't see anything that will hurt me.*

*I look down at my arm. The wound is open again, and it has started to weep a little. I think that is very strange because when the King of the Land-Under-the-Mountain used the special water on it, it was practically all better again. But the warmth of the late afternoon is too delicious and it's not the time to be worried about arms and wounds. I want to feel the grass beneath my feet. I want one of those red, red apples and to eat it and to lie down in the middle of the grass with a covering of those beautiful golden leaves and to have the blackbirds sing me their song of all*

*things right forever.*

*No, I must fill the cup, the cup, the cup. It sings in my hand and it thrums a little and the vibration makes my wound hurt. I feel ever so strange. Like I am asleep but awake. I reach for the bucket, Enbarr has brought me right alongside it. I have its rope in my hand. So silky. I lower the bucket down into the well and it goes down very far, but the rope never runs out because it knows. It knows what is needed. I hear the very faintest of sounds when it plinks into the water far below and I can feel that it is heavier again so I begin to lift it back up. It flies up quickly, so quickly, and soon I see it returning to the mouth of the well and it is filled with clear water that reflects the golden-fleeced clouds overhead. I look into it a moment and I see a little girl looking back at me and I jump a little. Her hair matches the clouds and the leaves and the light. She is very pale. She needs one of those red apples to put the roses back in her cheeks.*

*“Ah, so I see you found the well, Aisling, and you are very near to completing your task! Congratulations!”*

*I turn away from my reflection and my head feels very dizzy. It’s the red-eyed figure again in his midnight cloak. He stands right next to the well and my full bucket, and all of Enbarr’s muscles tense beneath me once again.*

*“Who are you? Why are you here? Have you come for the water, too?”*

*“I have no need of such water. Neither will you when you climb down off your horse, and your arm will be mended too.”*

*“But the water could mend my arm again, couldn’t it? Enbarr does not want me to climb off her back. And you haven’t told me who you are.”*

*“I am lord of these lands - the Lord of Tír na Marbh. Some call me the Dark Druid of the Sídh. Or the Fear Doirche.”*

*“But what is Tír na Marbh?”*

*“Why, it’s the Land of the Dead, Aisling. I thought you would have known that by now. It’s the place where you can leave behind everything bad that’s happened, and not even remember it anymore, if that’s what you want. It’s where you can find what you’re looking for. But only if you let yourself really experience it. And how can you from up there, then, child? Come. Take my hand. I will bring you to the tree and you can have one of those lovely rosy apples. You would like that, wouldn’t you? I imagine you are very hungry after your journey, and they are very sweet and juicy.”*

*The cup vibrates in my hand so strongly now that I think I might drop it. I reach to*

*dip it into the bucket and my fingers tremble around its handles. The Lord of Tír na Marbh. That black cloud surrounds him. Not a lady, not a king, something – someone – who is at once nothing but everything. That is what I think as his words flow down into my heart and I can't help but feel it's as though I have swallowed a thin black thread. But I think he might be right. I do so want to try an apple. I want to lie down on that grass and close my eyes and not think about all of the things I have to fix anymore. The light. Mammy. Bringing the cup back to the princess. Healing her. That should not have been my task. I'm just a little small girl. That should have been the King of the Land-Under-the-Mountain's quest. They are linked, those two, I know it, the beautiful princess and the King of Magh an Ionganaidh, of the Land-Under-the-Mountain. I look at the Lord of Tír na Marbh and my eyes lose their focus as the red of his glowing eyes grows and grows and burns and burns and my arm grows ever so much more painful but I want to walk into the pain, into the red, into the heat, not away from it, because if I walk into the red I can eat the red apple and that is all that I want right now.*

*Red, red, red. He reaches out his hand and I take it, the black glove is warm and my palm is folded into it in an instant and I couldn't pull it out even if I wanted to. But I don't want to.*

*Just a bite of just one apple, and then I will take the cup to the princess. She can wait. It will be okay. I swing one leg over Enbarr's back and begin to slip down. She stamps her hooves and tosses her mane. She does not want me to do this. The Dark Druid helps me, his other hand at my waist. His touch sears through my dress.*

*There.*

*The grass is cool underfoot as I knew it would be.*

*There is a great shriek – I think it is Enbarr, and I turn, and she is gone! I look down to my feet. I am standing on ash, not on green grass. I look back up at the red-glowing eyes and now a huge hollow dread comes into me from them on that terrible black thread I swallowed into my heart. There is laughter surrounding me from every side, not kind laughter but the kind that mocks, the kind that is nothing but evil. The kind that comes from bad men. All of the trees are burnt stumps again and the great big tree is a bare skeleton, scarred with black too, and she bears no fruit at all. Only the well remains, with the gold bucket on the edge and the cup beside it.*

*“Too late now, little girl! Too late! You will never leave this place. That is why Enbarr did not want you to set foot on its soil. You will never bring the cup to the*

*princess now, and she will die. Ha! To think you thought you could save her, you foolish child! You are just a girl.”*

*Tears prick my eyes and run down my face and they are warm and leave salt in my mouth. What have I done? I hate this terrible place! I will not be trapped here, I cannot be, this is not how things were meant to turn out!*

*“Enbarr? Enbarr! Please – come back, come back!”*

*“There is no use calling to her! She can’t come back to you now, not even if she wanted to, because you put a veil between her and you by touching the ground here, something no magic can lift. So – here you are, Aisling, welcome to the Land of the Dead. I’ll be taking that cup now. Thank you for bringing it to me!”*

*“No ... no!! You mustn’t take it! Oh, please, don’t take it! I will get out, I will get back, I know it!”*

*“Oh no, you won’t! You’re done for, little girl. I could kill you now, but what would that change – you’d reach the same doom anyway – that wound in your arm is never going to heal and I will enjoy seeing you suffer while I watch her fade away too, the Princess of the Land-Under-the-Waves! Thank you, you have been instrumental in sealing her fate for good. And her lands too. And those of the King of Magh an Ionganaidh. A nice service you have done them all! Not until everything is dark will all be right again. I’m going to burn it all – everything, all through these worlds and everything through your world all at the same time. That’s where true life is. The purging. The lowering of the darkness. The absence of light. So garish. But you know that already, don’t you, little girl of the moon. Ha!”*

*He disappears in a cloud of darkness, the cup in his gloved hand, laughing, laughing, laughing. He sounds like a madman. I am aghast. This is all my fault. All my fault, all my fault! I sit on the ash-covered ground beneath the barren tree and wrap my arms around my legs. What is to be done? I don’t feel sleepy any more, I feel so terribly awake that I don’t think I can ever sleep again. My hands are grimy, covered in black ash. But this is just a dream. I will wake up soon, and I won’t remember, and it will all be okay. And then surely I will dream again and Enbarr will be back and all will be made right. It can’t matter, it’s just a dream. It can’t ... can it? Oh, please let me wake up. Please.*

*Oh – there is the sound of the blackbird again! And there they are, the three of them, they sing in the great sad leafless tree and their song is so mournful and lonely that I just want to die and not hear it or anything else anymore. But it makes me*

*sleepy, so very sleepy. I have to lie down. The ashes are a soft bed and my eyes are all blurred but through them I can see black, black, black, stretching forever.*

*I ... must ... sleep ....*

*I hope I ... never ... wake ... again ...*

## 40.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – November 1, 1875*

Little specks danced strangely behind Aisling’s closed eyes. She didn’t want to open them yet. No. Too soon. This time was not like the other time. The other time she was on a great big ship. This time she was tucked back into her normal bed in her little room at the Bruce Hotel. She could tell. There was Ira beside her. Her fingers crept under her pillow, clutching for her worry stone. It was not there. That was strange for it not to be there. She always left it there while she slept. *Always*. No. She wouldn’t worry, not yet. It must be in the pocket of the apron she was wearing the day before. The day before ... the day before ... what had happened? Something was not as it should be.

The ‘harrumph’ of a throat being cleared jarred her thoroughly into the day. She opened her eyes. Just a little. A sense of foreboding swept over her from her tousled curls right through to her bruised toes.

“You gave us quite the scare, Aisling.”

She scrunched her eyes as tightly closed again as she could and bunched the sheets in her closed fists, something to hold onto.

“I know you are awake, child. It’s no use pretending.”

Aisling opened one eye. Doctor Barton was sitting right next to her bed, his chair pulled up close. His elbows were on his knees and she could smell his aftershave. His face looked unhappy and ... and ... angry, she thought. His eyebrows were grey and bushy over his milky blue eyes, which studied her with a serious expression behind his spectacles. She remembered waking up on the boat, him being there too, kind and concerned with a bowl of warm stew. Today he was different. She turned her back to him and pulled the blankets up around her chin and over her ear. She didn’t want to hear what he had to say, not this time. A sense of foreboding filled her, as though pumped through her veins by her heart itself.

“You are very, very lucky, child. Do you know what happened?”

There was no response, apart from the blankets being pulled even more tightly around her face.

“I know that you do. You could have died, Aisling, and not just you, Rawiri, too. It happened that a fishing vessel on its way back in from the storm saw the boy swimming back to shore, and he was not in a good state when they pulled him from the water. And then he made them understand there was someone else out there, just in time for them to turn and see you swept off your raft. They saved your life. Rāwiri’s as well. It’s lucky the boy is still alive, he was so chilled. Hinewai is very angry.”

Aisling’s chin trembled beneath the covers. It wasn’t her fault. She was just trying to find the light. Mammy – and the light. She hadn’t wanted Rawiri to get hurt.

The doctor saw that her shoulders were trembling and leaned over the bed to peer into her face. It was wet with tears. He sighed.

“I just want to understand why you did it, child. What were you thinking? You have been so secretive these past weeks, and now I know why – and, well, frankly, I have to say that I am disappointed in you. I expected better. You knew that such an undertaking could be nothing but foolish. Why would you ever think it would be wise to take out such a raft in a storm?”

Aisling sniffed and sobbed a little. She knew he wouldn’t understand.

“I ... I ... just wanted to find my Mammy again. And the light. And the stone told me it was at the place where the water’s edge meets the sky. So I wanted to get to that place. With Rawiri too in case his voice was hiding there as well.”

“Oh, Aisling. These fancies have gone on for long enough. This, and the sleep-walking, and the way you’ve been hiding things from me – can’t you see that it is not good? I can’t help but think that they are all linked. It’s all gone on for long enough, child. I know that you miss your Mammy very much, and I am truly sorry for you, child; it is no easy thing to lose one’s mother, especially in the way that you did and at such an age. But there comes a time when you have to put a brave face on and turn to face the future instead of looking to what has been lost. You have to decide to look ahead, Aisling. You have to leave the old things behind. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“How could I leave Mammy behind, though – when my missing light is living where she is? I can’t leave her behind if it means that I will never have the light back, doctor!”

“There’s another way to look at it, Aisling. What if your search for your Mammy – and the light – is actually what is stopping you from seeing normally again? I know

that is hard to hear, little one. But sometimes just what we think is the worst is actually what is the best. Do you think you could try and see if letting go of your search might help?”

“I don’t think I ever can, doctor. I just *know* that I am right. I know it, because the stone told me so ... not ... not in words, exactly, but I just *knew* it when I held it ... and it thrummed in my hand, and every time I talk to it, it makes me feel better. But, doctor, where is my stone? Is it in the pocket of the dress I was wearing?”

“Your stone? Oh, child, it’s exactly this that I’m meaning. It’s time to let go of these superstitions. It’s for the best. I’m ... I’m afraid there was nothing in the pockets of your dress, child. The laundry woman has checked. You talked about it in your sleep while you were tossing and turning last night, said that the stone always gave you the answers and that it was in your pocket. But it was not there, little one. The stone is gone.”

Aisling sat bolt upright in bed, eyes wild and bright with fear. Her cheeks were flushed and her fingers trembling where she still held her sheets twisted in them.

“No! It’s not gone, Doctor! It just isn’t! How can it be? You have taken it, then! You have taken it! Where have you put it? You must give it back to me, oh, you must, you must!”

She leapt out of her bed, small feet landing on the cold floor with a decisive thud. Her whole body shook as she clutched the doctor’s sleeve with all the force she had within her. He was shocked.

“My dear, the stone has gone! I certainly didn’t take it. I know how connected to it you are, and how much it means to you because your Mammy gave it to you. But I haven’t taken it, and I am sorry that you have lost it. It must have fallen out of your pocket when you were swept off the raft.”

“No! No! I cannot lose the stone! The stone is all I had left of Mammy and of home and I hate you and I hate this place and I hate that I can’t see the sun and I just want to go to sleep and never wake up, never ever ever again. I hate you! It’s all your fault! It’s your fault Mammy drowned! If you hadn’t talked to us on the big boat things would have been different, I know it, you made her drown!”

The doctor flinched with each accusation the girl spat forth. She was panting as the words flew out of her mouth in an angry, rushing torrent and she was bristling with a nervous, overexcited energy. This was not good. Then with one final shake of his sleeve Aisling spun around, her hair swirling about her as if it were possessed –

electric – and fled from the room. The doctor started up and ran after her. There was no knowing what she would do next. He was familiar with the look that had been present behind the anger in her eyes. Desperation. He had to stop her before she did he knew not what.

## 41.

The stone was lost. The words slammed through Aisling's mind with each step she took as if her whole body was becoming filled with just that one word, packed all through each limb: lost.

Lost, lost, lost.

Everything, lost. The stone. Mammy. The light. The horizon. The raft. Rāwiri. All gone. There was nothing left. She had nothing, now. Nothing at all. She would never see the sun again and she would never feel Mammy's arms around her again, holding her ever so tight, and singing her the Irish lullabies she loved so much. Papa, lost to the anger. Everything lost. Her face was covered with a shimmering curtain of tears. Everything was blurry as she ran. She didn't know where she was going, didn't care. Back to the beach, maybe. There was a chance, wasn't there? That the stone might be on the sand? There was a teeny little chance, surely?

Her heart was pounding in her chest and her throat was all choked up and she could hear the strangest sounds coming out from her that didn't even sound like her at all. Big horrible sobs.

The packed dirt road was cold under her feet as she ran as fast as she could. Get away from them all. Get to the beach.

Find the stone, and then ... then ... then, what?

There, there was the beach, the sand, the quietly lapping waves talking to the morning light. Not her light, though. They knew the sun. She didn't. She never would, now. She stopped running as she reached the soft grainy sand. Better under her feet. But still cold. So cold. She was cold. She walked slowly. She didn't feel so sure now. Here. Here was where they had begun to lug out the raft. She looked down, all around, shells here and there, sand, wet sand, sand still oozing with the water it had tried to keep. But the water always went back after it came in. It took things with it.

It had taken her stone. Aisling knew it with a cold certainty as a sudden feeling of futility washed over her. She knew she wasn't going to find it again.

It was all over, then.

It was done.

It was gone.

She collapsed in a white-shrouded heap on the sand, her nightgown fluttering softly as the gentle breeze passed over the small form with a light caress.

Bereft.

## 42.

It was Hinewai who found her there – a forlorn figure on the beach, looking like something the seas had quietly washed in and left behind. Like the little mermaid the girl herself talked about sometimes, Hinewai thought as she stood there for a moment looking at her.

Anger still beat in her chest, anger that the girl had put her boy in danger. Anger – and fear. Fear because of the spirit she could sense around the child. The aura of a thing unnatural, something foreign. Something clinging to her. Bad. Not the child's fault, though. Caught up in something she shouldn't have been. Too much tragedy.

She drew a deep breath and then she marched forward. She didn't relish what she was going to have to do, but it must be done. She had to protect her boy. She crouched down when she reached the child, one hand clutching her shawl protectively against her chest as the other shook Aisling's shoulder.

The girl turned her face to Hinewai. It was ashen. Tear-stained. Her hair hung in damp sea-salted strands about it. Sea-creature. There was something different in her expression. Something had changed. It was clear that a flood of emotion had overtaken the child, but now, instead of the warmth and friendliness that usually were present in her eyes, there was ... nothing. No expression at all. Her eyes were blank, empty. Her lips were pale, her hand limp when Hinewai took it in hers.

Hinewai shivered. She pushed down the compassion that had been rising. This – this was worse. It was eerie. The spirits were winning, she could see. She muttered under her breath as she hauled the girl to her feet. Had to protect her home, had to protect Rāwiri.

She didn't say a word as she turned and led Aisling from the beach, who followed wordlessly behind her without any resistance. As they reached the edge of the shore and climbed up to the road, Doctor Barton came running up to them, hair teased into remarkable disorder by the same breeze that had tried to comfort the little girl. He wheezed, out of breath, as he paused a moment or two, bending over with his hands on his knees.

\*

Doctor Barton stood up slowly. There wasn't much need for words. He could see everything he needed to see. He was relieved – greatly relieved – that the girl was safe, but he could see from Hinewai's expression that a line had been crossed that could never be un-crossed.

He stepped forward and reached for the girl. Hinewai dropped Aisling's hand like it was acidic.

“Get her away from this place. If I see her face again anywhere near my house or my boy I will take matters into my own hands. She is possessed. She doesn't belong here.”

The doctor sighed. It was time.

“It has been arranged, Hinewai. Aisling will be leaving today.”

Aisling looked up at him with a momentary surprise on her face, a fleeting expression of hope mixed with confusion, which quickly melted back into blankness.

“She will never return? She is going to live with the family you spoke of?”

“She is. They are taking her in, and she will be moving to live with them in Christchurch.”

Hinewai's eyes sparkled with anger.

“Don't you ever let her near my boy again. She will not visit. She will not say goodbye. She should never have come to this place.”

The doctor sighed again. “Very well, Hinewai. Thank you for finding her just now, nonetheless. She was very upset. She has lost a precious stone she had brought with her from Ireland. Lost it on the raft, I think. And thank you for allowing her to spend time with Rāwiri anyway, despite how everything has turned out. She's a motherless child and she will have great need of friends in this life.”

“This I know. She is sad. Too sad. But when sorrow is taken over by the spirits it is dangerous. Maybe the stone was involved. It is for the best that it is gone, perhaps. Haere rā, Doctor Barton, Aisling. You make sure this new family takes care of her.”

Aisling was studying the doctor's face again, surprised, as she heard him speak. This time it was painted over with one feeling only. Betrayal. His eyes were sheepish, awkward, embarrassed as he saw the shock and hurt flicker across Aisling's face and then vanish. He turned to her to take her hand and lead her back to the hotel, and Hinewai left them to walk back down the beach.

“I'm sorry, Aisling. I'm sorry you had to find out this way. But it is for the best. I

have found an English family for you who want you to go and live with them. You will have a good life that is much better suited for a little girl your age. They are the Whittles. They have a daughter who's only a couple of years older than you. A friend for you, Aisling. Won't that be nice?"

In vain the doctor tried to insert some enthusiasm into his words. But even he could hear them ringing with a brash and false positivity. She stared up at him with that same hollow, blank expression.

"I don't want to live with anybody else, Doctor Barton," she said quietly, casting her eyes downward again.

He hated himself for adding yet another hurt to the child's expansive collection.

"I know, little one. But this will be better for you – better for you by far than life here. You will have regular schooling, and the family will treat you as their own child. They are well to-do, and they have a beautiful home, I'm told. Won't that be nice?"

"I don't want a new family. I don't want to leave you. I'm sorry I said that I hate you. Is it because I said that? I didn't mean it, actually. I was angry and sad and scared all at the same time."

"I knew you didn't mean it, child. It's not because of that. But you will see – you will feel so much better in just a few months."

"It's because of what I did. I know. I'm sorry that I lied about where I had been and what I was doing. I'm sorry that Rāwiri was in danger because of me. I was selfish. I know it was all wrong."

Oh, if it didn't have to be so! If he could just heal the hurt hiding behind those words – but he couldn't. Not when he couldn't reach to the bottom of what was going on within the depths of the child's psyche. She had believed that what she was doing was necessary, and what must it have done to her perception of life for it to end this way?

"... But I will go if that is what you want, Doctor."

He looked down at her. Her eyes were grey like the overcast skies, her poor tired face suddenly void of emotion again. Quiet. Still. Acquiescent. He had the strangest sense that a shroud had come down over her.

A shroud that was to remain for a long, long time.

## 43.

### *Cillian*

Don't want to watch this, but can't look away. Dammit. Everything in this ungodly place is unnatural – under the same spell. Makes a body do what a body doesn't wish to. So I'm stuck. Watching a curtain of water from a bleeding fountain, because in it is a vision of my daughter. *Is* it even her, though? Not just some trick of Úna and Fionn's? I mean, come on. Given everything else about this place it's the only thing that could make sense.

Aisling. First day was the worst. First day was when I saw her on a beach with that boy. They took a raft out onto the water. Daft. Storm was coming, any fool could've seen that. Surprised a daughter of mine would be such an idiot to do such a thing. The look on her face, though. Wild. Like something else was controlling her. I know that look. I know it because I know that feeling. Wildness. Crawls through me like a flame that wants to eat me from the inside out unless I give it some release. So I do. The release is good. It works. All I do is channel my anger into it and then it takes over. I don't even have to think. Fascinating what happens, when you stop thinking. Body just takes over. Surrender to it, to the anger, let it do what it will. Let it kill a man. Let it hunt your wife. Let it terrorise your child.

All in the name of ... what?

No. Doesn't do to think this way.

Was surprised to see it in Aisling's face, that was all.

Father's daughter after all. Makes me squirm a bit though. And something else. Couldn't work it out at first. Realised the further out from shore I saw them go, into the black clouds on that absurd raft. Worry. Didn't know I had it in me. Only a tiny bit, mind. And only because I'm stuck here and there's no other bleedin' thing to do now is there. S'pose it's natural to worry about your kid. Unnatural not to. Thought I was more the unnatural sort.

If I'm being completely honest, it didn't feel good to see that look in her eyes either. The wildness. Doesn't fit. Doesn't suit her. Shouldn't be there. She's just a little lass. Didn't want to keep looking, to keep seeing it, but I did. Made me feel

something else too. Sorrow. Just for a moment. Because I could see it flicker there underneath the defiance in her face. I don't do sorrow. Lock that feeling up precisely where it came from. Grown men have no business with emotion. Hope the girl learns that too – better to channel the wildness than to leave a door open for that namby-pamby business of *feeling* things.

\*

Been sitting here awhile now since it happened. Vision has gone dark like a curtain was pulled over it. Stupid, stupid kids. Storm broke. That little raft had no chance. Bobbed up and down on the waves like they were toying with it. Could see the boy was filled with terror. Looked like he'd seen the devil. Bleedin' jumped off it then didn't he, leaving my little lass to fend for herself. If she was afraid she didn't show it. Was like she ... *wanted* it, in a way. Showdown with the elements.

But by the gods. Not easy to watch. Thought she was going to drown. Must be more in this old heart of mine than I'd thought. Where the bloody hell is Kitty? Why didn't she stop her? Is she looking after the kid now?

The raft overturned. Hit Aisling on the head, she was out cold, limp like a little rag doll at the mercy of vindictive waves.

A flicker of lights, fishing boat I think, came into the picture just before it went dark.

What happened? Is she dead?

Feck.

“She is alive.”

Bloody green man again with all his angles, reading my mind. Black cloak looks like death today. Grand. Got a pair of swords in his hands. Didn't hear him arrive. Gives me the shivers, this. What's it all about?

“Aren't you pleased to know it?”

He swings one of the swords. Mouth in a grim straight line. Of course.

As if I'd tell him if I were. Nothing to me, really, is it. Staring at me with those creepy eyes. Fionn. King of the fairies. Ha. Does the man know how to smile? Doubt it.

“What the feck are you about then? What is going on? Did you do this to her? Is

this even real?”

“Oh, it’s real, all right. You don’t ask the right questions. Everything you see is a result, a result of the moment just before it, and the one before that, and before that. It isn’t anything to do with me.”

“Right. Not anything to do with you. Yet here you are, and here I am in this ... this... fairy land, and you’ve the power to show me what’s happening in ... where is she?”

“She’s in a land far away.”

“Where’s her mother?”

He looks at me again and for a moment his eyes actually look sad. Like ... even like he pities me a moment.

“She too found herself in the waters.”

I know they took a ship to Liverpool. From Dublin. How could anyone in their right mind manage to fall from that? Such a short distance.

His eyes measure me.

“This isn’t the first time the girl has nearly drowned. The journey was a long one. Aisling is in a land far away, now. Kitty tried to save her.”

“She ... drowned, then?”

That’d take care of that then, wouldn’t it. Serve her right for fleeing. But ...

Fionn doesn’t say anything. Just keeps his eyes fixed on mine. Hard to look away. Just like it is with Úna. Everything else around gets blurry because it’s all I can focus on. His face. Drowning. Death. The girl, my wife. Something clatters onto the ground at my feet. Breaks the spell. It’s one of the swords. He’s got the other one in his hand, raised.

A rustle behind me. Úna. Carrying a silver cup. Full to the brim. Strange pair, these two.

“Fight.”

Command. Step, one, two.

Pick up the sword at my feet. His flashes in an instant. Not used to sword fight. But I’ll be damned if I’ll be beaten by a *fairy*. His blows are steady. Hard to fend them off. His sword glows oddly with light. Blinding, as he swings it about. Fills this chamber with the strangest brilliance. I’m sweating. Out of breath. He gets faster and faster. My arms feel heavier and heavier and I feel the force every time I block his blows. Too much power in them.

His sword nicks my arm. Sears – hurts like fire. Want to drop my sword, but I won't. He does it again. And again. And again. Can't keep it up. Too tired. Drop to my knees, drop my sword. Hang my head. The shame. Why doesn't he just kill me?

Gone, he is, when I look up again.

Hand on my shoulder. Get up.

I get up. The scent. Makes my wounds sting a little less. Shirt is covered in blood. Gashes all through it. Úna. She takes me by the hand. Sits me down on a bench between two of the guardian-trees. Can almost hear their leaves talking to each other in whispers. Do you see? Do you see?

She dips a cloth into the cup. Dabs at my wounds. Stings like hell. Then – then, it doesn't, not at all. Can see the wounds knit themselves back together before my very eyes. No pain anymore. Just leaves a fine scar.

What is this? While she's next to me I can feel the warmth of her body. She feels ... peaceful like. Makes my heart slow down, can catch my breath again.

Then I've a fancy I'm seeing those great waves passing in front of my eyes, can almost feel them at my feet, the sheer rage of them, the icy cold; for a moment I see a pale hand – I reach out to it and for a moment I think I can feel the softness of the skin, but it is cold, so cold. Lifeless. I try to hold onto it.

Then I realise my eyes are closed. I open them. There's the chamber, the fountain, the curved stone walls, the trees. Nothing more.

Just a vision. In my mind. Is this how it's going to be, then?

Reach up to rub my eyes, try and clear it all away. Úna is beside me still but she just sits. Silent. Waiting.

My face is wet.

Grown men don't cry.

## 44.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – November 3, 1875*

It was approaching evening. Aisling had been sitting on her perfectly made bed all afternoon, legs dangling listlessly over its edge. She had barely made a rumple on its quilt-covered surface. Her hands were clasped together in her lap, thin fingers intertwined. The housemaid had carefully dressed her in her best frock, and it was buttoned up high around her neck, a fresh pinafore tied over top. She hadn't worn it at all in New Zealand. It still smelled faintly of home – Connemara – earthy, a little musty, with just the faintest scent of Mammy's perfume. They were to pick Aisling up soon, this new family – the Whittles. The ache tried to rise again for just a moment but it dissipated as soon as she noticed it. The oddest thing, it was. Since the beach that morning all she had felt was numb. Feelings tried to come but they just went away again. They must have all gone off with the stone. Yes. That's what must have happened. So for the rest of her life – and it seemed such a long, long time, life – she was going to have no light and no feelings.

She swung her legs lightly and looked down at her hands. Oh well. She unentwined her fingers. The numbness was almost better, anyway.

A light knock at the door – hesitant, cautious – and a head of brown curls peeped around through its opening. Rāwiri! Odd, Aisling thought. She wasn't meant to see him again. His māmā had made that very clear. She looked at him and felt ashamed. She'd nearly caused him to die by insisting they take the raft out in the storm. She hadn't thought he would want to see her again, even if he could.

His face looked scared, unsure. But also concerned – she felt like his lovely brown eyes were gazing right through hers and down into her still, still heart. What would they see there? For a moment a little bit of warmth tried to come back and a tiny lump began to rise in her throat.

“What are you doing here, Rā? You are not allowed to see me. If your māmā finds out she will be very angry.”

Rāwiri moved closer to her. He had his favourite walking stick with him again. The scent of the bush clung to him. She remembered the day with the dog in the

forest. The bite. The blood. His rescue. The herbs to heal, the kindness of mother and grandmother. Why had everything changed so much?

“Rā – I’m ever so sorry I put you in danger like I did. It was wrong. I am so glad that you are all right.”

He said nothing, of course, but shyly took her hands in his. His touch was reassuring. He smiled softly at her. There was light in his expression. And something was different about him. She couldn’t place what it was.

There was a sound outside in the hallway and they both jumped. He quickly reached into his pocket and pressed something into her palm before squeezing her hands lightly again. A moment longer, a steady gaze between the pair. Ka pai nga mea katoa, all will be well, the gaze said. Rawiri fled, slipping out the open door noiselessly just a few moments before footsteps approached from the other direction. Aisling’s breath caught in her throat. Had someone seen him? But the swishing of skirts passed her doorway and moved on. Just the housemaid. She looked down at her closed palm. What she held was cool to the touch. Smooth-edged. Soothing. She turned her hand palm up and curled back her fingers slowly.

Jade-green, almost black in the lowering dusk. Not her worry-stone, but oddly comforting nonetheless, even in her numbness.

Rāwiri’s pounamu.

## BOOK TWO

—

### Mnemosyne

PART V.  
Magh Mell  
*The Land of Honey*

## 45.

*Wellington, New Zealand – late September 1899*

Aisling yawned and stretched in her bed. It was morning. Her head ached. A pale light crept tentatively through a gap between her curtains. The gap in the curtains ... the gap! Why was there a gap? She always made sure to close them so carefully at night to avoid any light from the moon creeping through while she slept.

She hated the moon.

She padded over to the curtains, confused. She drew them back. Soft, yielding in her hands. *Open me.*

Thick fog made the trees across the road look spectral, as though they were floating, all edges softened and concealed. And then she began to remember. The too-bright, piercing moonlight during the night before ... standing in it while it bathed her in its pearly glow ... the way her skin had shimmered ... the way she had felt drawn to it, as though under a spell ... what had happened? Had she been dreaming?

No, there was the gap. But she could have done that while sleep-walking, or something of the like, couldn't she? She never let the moonlight touch her. And didn't she sleep-walk when she was a child, back in Akaroa with Doctor Barton?

That poor doctor, she mused. A right run-around she'd given him all those years ago. She was embarrassed to think of it. Of her childhood belief that if she could make it to the horizon line on a raft, she would find her dead mother and her missing daylight. Thinking a poorly crafted raft could possibly make it more than a hundred metres or so at sea without endangering those upon it! Mortifying to look back upon. She rarely did.

These days, she doubted she really saw light *so* very differently from anyone else. It was just the childhood colouring of grief that had made her believe that anything had changed back then. Nowadays, she took great care to avoid the icy glare of the moonlight, and never really felt like the sun warmed her, or that it shone with the cheer and yellow warmth that other people seemed to think it did. She *did* see things a little strangely, she was aware of that. And she never had much energy, she was so often tired. An apathetic ghost, her foster-father jokingly called her sometimes. There

was never any affection in his voice. She knew she irritated him.

Her foster-parents. The Whittles. She sighed. Tried to muster up more than a dull, dutiful appreciation for them, but nothing further would come. Nothing further came for *anything*. She doubted she had the capacity for a strong attachment. Nothing excited her, nothing really warmed her, nothing caused her to rush about in a thrill from room to room like her foster sister Margaret as she expounded her latest passion.

Margaret – Maggie – Whittle was the exceptional one. Bright, dashing, daring, constantly moving – she was dizzyingly brilliant, both in mind and in her appearance: full, red lips, a fair English-rose complexion, dark hair flowing in gentle waves when she unpinned it in the evenings after she'd tiptoe to Aisling's room to tell her about her latest flirtation. Always so many flirtations for Maggie. It was no wonder her parents had had no trouble marrying her off to a certain Captain Ashby – a young man who'd quickly advanced through the ranks in the English Navy and had migrated to New Zealand just two years before the fair Maggie crossed his path. Aisling didn't know whether to pity the good captain or to applaud him on his fine conquest. It didn't matter either way. He hadn't roused any stirring of emotion in her, at any rate.

She didn't think she was capable of falling in love.

The Whittles had been good to her. In a manner of speaking.

Well, they had ... tolerated her.

She remembered that day they came to collect her from the Bruce Hotel in Akaroa with a sharp clarity that still made her wince if she allowed herself to dwell on it. It was the final severance of any attachment – having to leave behind her little friend Rāwiri, and the kind Doctor Barton, who'd tolerated her oddities with such grace – losing them after everything she had already lost had been nigh on unbearable, or it would have been, if she'd been able to feel anything much at all after the raft accident.

She *did* remember the animosity in Hinewai's eyes. She had never had someone look on her in such a way before that moment. Then, she felt as though the dark shadow of the nighttime *must* have made a mark on her. A little piece of the devil, living right inside. She must have been bad, terribly bad, terribly not *good*, for one such as Hinewai to look at her as she had that last morning.

But then came the Whittles. Mr. Jonathan Whittle was tall and debonair, a classic English gentleman who could charm with his white-gloved talk like nobody she'd ever met. He was an astonishingly adept business man, and with his silver tongue and

deep pockets that never seemed to empty; he succeeded at whatever he turned his hand to. Sometimes Aisling wasn't sure exactly what he *did* turn his hand to. He was a merchant, that was certain, and owned the Whittles Drapery stores that had opened up in Christchurch and Auckland – but Aisling suspected he also had a finger in less reputable pies. There were rumours. Very hush-hush, but sometimes the servants would whisper amongst themselves of various untoward associations and enterprises. The servants didn't notice Aisling, or if they did, they paid her no heed, so quiet was she, practically invisible. They could say what they pleased in front of her. She would never tell.

Jonathan Whittle was a wealthy man, and his wife, Agnes, loved him for it. Loved him, or the wealth and opulence; such things were indistinguishable in the Whittle residence. Love was money, money was love. They had taken Aisling back to their big manor house in Riccarton in Christchurch after collecting her from Akaroa that evening so long ago. True to Doctor Barton's word, she had wanted for nothing after they took her in. Nothing material, at any rate. She was well fed, respectably dressed, and had everything a little girl could need. There was no word from Doctor Barton from the second the Whittles whisked her out the front doors of the Bruce Hotel. Aisling had supposed he had washed his hands of her. She had caused so much trouble for him, after all.

They introduced her everywhere as “the little Irish orphan we simply *had* to take under our wing, the poor creature, nobody else wanted her.” Aisling would creep behind them to hide from the curious eyes of their peers who wanted to catch a glimpse of the Whittles' unfortunate foster child, and then Agnes would pinch her lips together and pull Aisling's arm to drag her out in front of them again, holding her in place with fingers that left bruises. “Behave,” she would whisper through clenched teeth into Aisling's ear before she straightened again with the most charming of giggles— “Oh, isn't she a poor, dear little *stray!*”

They dressed her differently from Maggie. They dressed her well, of course – it wouldn't do for their reputation if she wore unfashionable clothing, but hers was simple – austere, even, as a child. Clothing that marked her out as the charity case. Maggie's dresses were filled with ruffles and flounces, and as the years passed and they both grew from children to women, Maggie's skirts slimmed over the hips with fabric drawn up behind into pronounced, excessive bustles while they kept Aisling's cut in a simple A-line silhouette which she'd tuck her shirtwaists into. She hadn't

minded. Not really. Fashion was for the wealthy and for those who wanted to attract a husband. She might live with a wealthy family, but she did not like their pretensions and shrank from ostentation. Back then, she could not wait to begin to earn her own living and to be out of their clutches and control. And really, what could they want with an orphan girl who only added to their expenditure? It didn't make good business sense to Aisling.

That is, until she came of a marrying age two years after Maggie, and she suddenly realised what *was* in it for them. The dresses changed. She was hauled to the dressmaker twice a week in season to be fitted for the latest gowns, her hair pinned up elaborately, and jewels strewn about her person like little pieces of taste-me confection at every societal function they could bring her to. And then the “poor little Irish orphan” was “our dear Aisling, so precious to us we consider her our own daughter and treat her as such!” with the inference that, of course, there would be an inheritance – no-one need know that this would only be modest. What mattered was trapping the husband – and his wealth and power. That was the game. And Aisling was beautiful, in her own, understated way. She knew that, because people would keep telling her. Maggie envied her for it, she thought sometimes; but possibly the envy really had been due to seeing another receive the same attention while she was ensconced safely away as a married woman. Maggie would roll her eyes and ask her what clever tricks she'd been trying lately to dull down the orange of her hair, while the ladies at the balls would gush over her ‘golden waves’ and her dance card would be filled up in an instant by any number of ogling gentleman eager to have the delicate Irish beauty on their arm.

And that had been the way of things, until Randall Harrington had arrived on the scene.

Aisling shivered as she remembered. Mr. Harrington. “Mr. *Harrington*, my darling,” Agnes Whittle would say. “The richest bachelor on the scene, don't you know. So handsome! So wealthy! So – so *suitable*! It was a shame he hadn't been available when Maggie was on the market! But of course Aisling would have to do, wouldn't she!”

\*

Randall Harrington made Aisling's skin crawl. His eyes glittered whenever the Whittles pushed her towards him, and she could feel his gaze on her even when her back was turned. She couldn't bear him. Maggie, on the other hand, always managed to stand up with him for a waltz, and flirted with him abominably. Captain Ashton would frown, but turned a blind eye. He indulged his wife. Mr. Harrington would pretend to ignore Maggie's coquetry, but when he thought no one was watching his hand would slip a little lower and he would squeeze her a little closer to his chest, hungry eyes on her lips as he breathed in her ear. Disgusting. And then he would see Aisling, and the behaviour would cease: he would take on a stern and detached expression, and set Maggie back at the edge of the dance like he was brushing off an annoying insect. Maggie's hand would linger in the crook of his arm a moment or two, and then she would roll her eyes in distaste and flounce off, eyes casting venomous daggers in Aisling's direction.

And this was who she'd been destined to marry. Mr. Randall Harrington. She had protested in vain. The Whittles would have none of it.

"A marriage is a business transaction, dearest. We can't all marry for love. But – my – if I were twenty years younger, wouldn't Jonathan have had a run for his money! So *handsome!*" Mrs. Whittle would giggle, fanning at her cheeks and pretending to swoon, and Mr. Whittle would hide his displeasure behind a humouring chuckle and a swat at her backside. And so they had been betrothed, and the engagement was announced in Christchurch newspaper *The Press*. "Sing it from the rooftops," Mr. Harrington would exclaim, swinging Aisling about the Whittles' parlour like he already owned her.

The worst day, the day that had decided things, was on one of Mr. Harrington's visits ("call me Randall, my darling! Enough of these formalities!") soon after the engagement had been announced. Mr. Whittle was absent on business, and Aisling was alone with Mrs. Whittle, who was bemoaning her boredom on the rainy winter's afternoon. Mr. Harrington arrived unannounced, and with a little knowing gleam in her eye, Mrs. Whittle invented a paltry excuse for leaving the room. The door clicked closed behind her. The look in Mr. Harrington's eyes was one of a cat with cornered prey.

"Ah, and finally we are alone, my love, my beautiful Mrs. Harrington!"

"I am not your Mrs. Harrington yet."

"Coy! I like it."

He had the audacity to lick his lips. Something switched in his expression.

Aisling's heart began to pound. How to escape? She made towards the door, but he stood in front of it.

"Oh, no, you don't." He smiled at her. The smile didn't reach his eyes. "You're mine, now, and a woman does what her husband wants. A fiancé is as good as husband, so you'll do what I want."

Aisling laughed nervously. "Ah! But that isn't how things go in polite society, is it! I know that you only joke, so, please, will you let me pass? I am soon to be yours, as you say."

"That's where you are wrong, my love. You *are* mine. Sold to me by your foster-parents, as it were. Your ticket wasn't cheap, you know. And you didn't come with much. So, if I want to take what I want to take, I'll take it as and when I please."

Wide-eyed, she backed away from him. He followed her, eyes tracing a too-intimate pathway from head to foot. She was trapped: there was nowhere to go.

Thud. Her back met the wall opposite the fireplace. Nervous fingertips clutched in futility at tiny wallpaper posies.

"No – no, you can't ... do ... that. It isn't right."

He just grinned, pinning her against the wall with one hand on either side of her shoulders as he leaned in to kiss her. Claws. Frightened little mousey.

"Can't I? I've got you now, my pretty butterfly."

She turned her face away, but he grabbed her chin and wrenched it back so she faced him. Eyes glittering and menacing – dark, wild, red poker-hot, closing in on her like the dog all those years ago, then his mouth on hers, searing pain, and oh Lord not being able to breathe, his hand on her throat—

At just that moment the door opened and a maid entered and then quickly backed away, stammering an apology. "I'm ... I'm sorry, ma'am, mister, pardon me ...." She made to close the door again, but Aisling took advantage of the distraction and darted out from under Mr. Harrington's arms, which had temporarily relaxed in surprise, and out of the door and upstairs to her room, where she locked the door behind her.

God bless that maid.

Her whole body was shaking, her skin crawling. She wanted to scrub her mouth with soap. Her lips stung from where her teeth had cut in under the pressure of his mouth. Men were all the same. To have beauty meant to be a prize to be won, to be possessed, to be boasted about. A woman wasn't sought for anything else. She had

seen it so often.

She rapidly wrought different scenarios in her mind. How was she to escape the marriage? The Whittles would not allow her to call it off. She'd not even been allowed the dignity of a proposal to accept or turn down. It was to be. Marriage. *Sold off*, as he had said. To that hateful, hateful man. A tidy bargain for the Whittles. So little did they truly care about her.

She had to escape from all of them altogether. That was her sole thought as she hurriedly threw a small selection of her plainest clothing into a valise.

She stopped and listened. The house was silent. Where had he gone? Was he waiting outside her room? She cracked open the door just a little. All was quiet. A little further, and peered out into the hallway. Nothing, not a sound. She tiptoed down past the Whittles' bedroom, past Maggie's old room, and the guest bedrooms. Down the stairs. Chatter, far off in the kitchen. The maid must have recounted what she'd seen. The scandal.

The parlour door was closed again. There was a muffled sound of voices. She stopped to listen a moment. Mrs. Whittle and Mr. Harrington.

"Of course," Aisling heard Mrs. Whittle say. "Of course we can move the date of the wedding to Saturday next." And then, after a low titter, "You know, I understand the way of these things, Mr. Harrington! One wants to ... experience to the full one's hard-won goods, doesn't one! Makes remember my own early days with Mr. Whittle, it does ... oh, a lady shouldn't talk so, should she; it puts one quite to blush to recollect it!" The grating titter again. Aisling shuddered and rolled her eyes in the wide red-carpeted hallway. So improper. She was to be fed to the wolves.

Then there were footsteps inside the room, and the voices drew near.

She fled out of the front doors, down the pathway and off to the side of the manor house, where a narrow footpath led through a small grove of trees and out to a side road just past the picket fence, praying they hadn't seen her. Crouching in the bushes, she heard the doors slam and the clop-clop of Mr. Harrington's horse as he lashed it quickly into a canter down the driveway. Gone. She breathed a sigh of relief. The doors opened again.

"Aisling! Where are you, you foolish girl? He didn't mean any harm! Come inside now, there's a good child!"

Mrs. Whittle, her face a little too ripe from a few too many pastries and her afternoon tippie, stood in the open doorway, hands on hips. The girl was too obedient

not to heed her, boring, insipid, placid creature that she was. She would be back soon. She turned on her heel and languidly wandered back inside, the door closing behind her.

Aisling let free the breath she'd been holding. Free!

But what was she to do? She had no money, and no friends – no one to turn to, least of all after the certain offence and mortification that would fall to Mr. Harrington's part.

He would not let her go without a fight. He'd stop at nothing to find her once he realized she'd gone. She felt it with a sickening certainty.

She stood up tall, dusted off her skirts and squared her shoulders, and as surreptitiously as she could, walked hurriedly into the city centre.

## 46.

Escape had been remarkably simple, after all that. After arriving in the heart of the city, she happened upon an advertisement pasted to the boards outside a dressmaker's on Colombo Street. Not the one the Whittles frequented, thankfully. A different place – one servicing the middle class. Too low-brow for the Whittles. 'URGENT: Help wanted', the sign said. 'Business seeks store person for dressmaker's premises in Wellington. Passage paid.' Why was a business in Wellington advertising in Christchurch? Surely there would be a myriad of applicants there? Aisling furrowed her brow and peered into the window. The store was dark and appeared closed. But as she gazed in, a figure came flying towards her and through the hurriedly-opened door.

"Pardon me, but I noticed you reading my advertisement. Are you seeking employment?"

The figure was a woman with silver hair caught up in a serviceable chignon, and she wore a smartly tailored two-piece skirt and jacket combination in a dark navy. There were lines about her eyes and forehead that suggested anxiety, but the woman looked kind, despite a rather stern facade and her hasty approach.

Aisling paused a moment before responding. What was she doing? This was insanity. Someone was bound to see her at any moment. But what else could she do?

"Yes," she answered breathlessly. "But why Wellington?"

"Oh, my dear, I'm closing up business here. My competition is cutting my clients out from beneath me. It just won't do anymore. I hear there is more need up there for dressmakers, and I need someone who can assist with the store and a little sewing while I make up orders. How's your workmanship?"

"I – well, I'm afraid to say that most of my wardrobe was made for me, but I do sew a little – and I enjoy it. I – I would say I am quick to learn. My mother used to make lace back in Ireland, and she taught me a little of that, too. It has been a long time, but I remember some of the simple methods."

"You've a pleasing face; you look honest – and honesty and good, hard work mean more than almost anything, I'd like to think. I have a good feeling about you, despite the hastiness of this. I would hire a woman when I arrive up there, but I'd rather bring someone with me – help me to pack all of the fabrics and tools here, and

settle in together when we arrive. There are living quarters above the store. They're a good size and well furnished, and if you don't mind setting up house with me, you could live with me there for as long as you wish. You'd have your own room and you could fend for yourself as much as you pleased."

She paused a moment. Aisling's mind whirled with the suddenness of it all.

"Bless me, I've not told you my name. I'm Mrs. Bellamy. Mrs. Jane Bellamy. I'm a widow. My husband Toby, God rest his soul, passed a few years back and I've been lonesome since, I must say. I've no children and I'd love the company. What's your name, child? I do apologise – this must all seem very untoward!"

"Oh, no – not at all, you've no idea how wonderful this sounds to me. My name is Aisling, Aisling Wh... Aisling O'Carroll. I would be so very delighted to accompany you and to take up the role if you'll have me."

"You're not running away, are you, child?"

Aisling blushed and she looked away.

"No, no ... I ...."

Mrs. Bellamy studied her for a moment.

"Never mind. I've no need to know your story, but I can sense you've a need to get out of here, and you've a trustworthy face. So, Aisling O'Carroll, consider yourself hired, and let's get to packing these trunks, shall we? The ship departs from Lyttelton in two days' hence, so we've not much time. You can stay with me here while we pack."

"Oh, thank you ever so much, Mrs. Bellamy! This is ... just wonderful."

Relief swept through Aisling palpably. Tensed muscles loosened. A new beginning, and on her own terms.

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And that had been that. An easy, fortuitous escape that had felt too good to be true, and too perfectly timed to turn out well. Yet it had. After a whirlwind of packing, Aisling and Mrs. Bellamy had left Christchurch without a backward glance and had arrived in Wellington not long afterwards, where the store and studio were quickly set up. Aisling worked in the shop manning the fabrics and haberdashery and helping with fittings and finishings, while Mrs. Bellamy worked in the room out the back,

cutting and constructing orders.

Strangely, there had been no word of the Whittles, or of Mr. Harrington. It took some time for Aisling to shake the constant need to look over her shoulder; the expectation that they would arrive in Wellington expressly seeking her out, to wrench her out of her new life and force her into her promised marriage with Mr. Harrington.

But no such pursuit occurred – or if it did, it had failed. All the same, it had seemed odd to Aisling.

During the months that followed business grew steadily, as did the Bellamy Dressmakers reputation. Mrs. Bellamy's work was exquisite. She favoured practical pieces – “You've got to be able to *live* in your clothing, my dear! What's the use if you can't breathe!” – but they were always cut in such a way as to flatter the wearer and introduce a nod to fashion with an unexpected twist. She was a forward thinker, she loved to experiment, and she was constantly sketching new ideas, many of which made their way onto Aisling as Mrs. Bellamy tested out her designs. Aisling was the perfect model in the store front for Mrs. Bellamy's workmanship, and as the years passed Mrs. Bellamy taught her more and more of her trade, and soon she was able to drape and construct beautiful ensembles almost as well as Mrs. Bellamy herself.

Days had turned into months, which had slipped into years, and life in Wellington was a peaceful balm after the tumult of Aisling's childhood and youth. The two lived a quiet lifestyle contentedly together above the store in a four-room apartment. A maid would come in to help with household chores twice a week, and all in all, it was a very satisfactory arrangement.

But the calm always comes before the storm.

## 47.

### *Cillian*

It's fire. Fire all through my arms, every day. Every day he comes, every day we fight. Every day he adds another laceration to the network on my arms. I look like a map. A map of swordplay. Every day Úna heals the cuts but leaves the scars. Reminders, she says. Grand.

But I am growing stronger. I feel it. He feels it too, Fionn. Could still beat me with one hand tied behind his back regardless. Ridiculous.

Breaks up the days, though. Actually beginning to look forward to his visits. Never says much. Man of few words. Can relate to that, I can. I like the swordplay. Like working up a sweat. Feel like a man again. Everything else about this place takes that away from me.

It's the aftermath of the cuts I don't like. Every single one of them makes me remember my past. Da, Da with his belt, beating me until I bled. Hitting Ma. The way she just bore it and tried to shelter me. Little lady, she was. Didn't stand a chance. Hate thinking of that. But thought that was just the way of things. Fathers hit their kids. And their womenfolk. All their anger had to go somewhere.

My childhood friends never had bruises, welts, like mine though. Nor did their mammas.

Violent, angry man was my Da. Thought I'd left it behind me, I did. Vowed never to hurt my own like he did. But the devil that was in him is in me too. Bitten with those same teeth.

Bleedin' devil. Some days I think I understand him. Da. The anger. Got to have its vent. Other days I'm appalled. Hate him for it.

Actually, hate it for him regardless.

Feckin' ridiculous, all of this. What's the use in thinking these thoughts? It's Úna that's doing it. Bringing it all out as she puts whatever her little lotions and potions are on my wounds. I watch them close over, and then out come the tears, all over again – mortifying, it is. Every day the same.

And still the fountain is dark. Is my girl dead?

Boys don't cry. Boys don't feekin' cry.

*Don't you forget that, son, you worthless whelp.*

## 48.

*Wellington, New Zealand – Early October, 1899*

Winters in Wellington were a miserable affair, Aisling thought. Different from Christchurch. Here, the wind blew the rain almost horizontally, and it found its way into everything. An umbrella was useless, turned inside out in seconds. To be outdoors in such weather meant to be soaked through. It was often biting cold, and the chill winds stung roses into everyone's cheeks with no partiality. But for all that, she loved the cosy yellow glow of the lamps lighting up the shop fronts in the drizzling evening gloom, the freshness of the sea-salt air, and the stillness of the days when the skies cleared and the sun shone – even though those days were still dim for her.

Miserable, the winters, but always with an antidote. Poetic, romantic.

From time to time she felt a pang at the lack of romance in her own life. Her twenties had slipped by so quickly that she'd barely registered each passing year, until she suddenly realised that in society's eyes she was quite the spinster at the ripe old age of thirty-two. She'd heard nothing of the Whittles or Mr. Harrington since she'd made her escape – all had been blissfully quiet. Unexpectedly so. She'd made the perfect escape. She felt a little guilty from time to time that she'd had to leave in such a manner, but then she would remember the leer in Mr. Harrington's eyes and Mrs. Whittle's malicious titter, and she would feel the relief of her rescue anew.

It was a week now after the incident with the moonlight and the curtains. Aisling had felt odd ever since. Not quite herself. That was the way of the moon, wasn't it? But only in stories and folk tales. Ridiculous.

And unsettling. There was a feeling she couldn't shake, no matter how hard she tried to brush it aside. It was an unease, an anticipation – that something was about to happen, good or bad, she couldn't say. Just ... *something*. Mrs. Bellamy noticed the change.

“What's come over you, Aisling? You've been away with the fairies all week, I should say. You've stitched and unpicked that same seam five times now!”

“Oh! So I have. My fingers are all thumbs this week. But nothing is amiss – I'm

just a little tired, that's all."

"You do look a little peaky. But don't you go ruining Miss Albury's gown now, will you! She would be very upset not to have it for the Milton's ball."

Aisling laughed. "Don't you worry, Mrs. Bellamy. It'll be done in no time. I'll chase these fairies away and this gown will be the perfect model of stitch-work."

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The 'fairies' lingered. Everywhere she went, she felt a little tingle up her spine and her spirits would suddenly lift like they were about to float off. It was an unusual feeling for her. She was so accustomed to little emotional variation. Three more days passed, and then she had a sudden penchant to look for an old shawl of her mother's she'd kept from her childhood days, and had packed in her valise when leaving the Whittles. It was still in it, she was sure. She'd kept it stowed there for safekeeping. It was a classic Connemara shawl peculiar to the region in its colour and detail, and she wanted to copy the knit pattern.

There! There it was, neatly folded at the bottom of the valise. She took it out and shook out its folds. It smelt a little musty, but a gentle laundering would take care of that. It was beautiful. She'd never really realised how special it was. It brought back very faint memories of the petite, softly spoken and strong willed raven-haired woman who'd worn it. Her mother. Mammy, she'd called her. It was harder to remember her now. She was obscured, the edges of the memories blurred like the trees in the fog after that moonlit night. Mammy.

Aisling had been so young when she had drowned. She buried her face in the wool of the shawl a moment, and something stirred inside. A memory, but she couldn't bring it to the surface. How lovely it would be to have a mother at one's side. Mrs. Bellamy was wonderful, but there was no mother quite like one's own. She stood up, clutching the shawl to her chest. Something fell to the floor, and Aisling glanced down, surprised. She'd not remembered packing anything else in the valise. Had she accidentally taken a piece of the expensive jewellery she'd intentionally left behind, so as to not be under any obligations to either the Whittles, or Mr. Harrington?

She leaned down. And gasped. It was the greenstone necklace. She had

completely forgotten about it. The worn piece of waxed black string was still threaded through the tiny hole in the smooth, perfectly carved piece of pounamu, and it made Aisling's breath catch in her throat as long-discarded memories flooded through her.

Rāwiri. Her friend whose life she had endangered all those years ago, and who had risked his mother's anger by giving her this precious gift on her departure from Akaroa, because he must have heard she'd lost her worry stone. Bless his heart. She wondered what had happened to him. Had he grown out of his muteness? Did he ever leave Akaroa, and Hinewai? Where had his life led him? Thinking of them, she almost fancied she could smell the particular freshness of the Banks Peninsula bush life and forests, and the sea-salt tang of the Akaroa harbour waters ... that salty blend of fresh air and seawater and native flora and fauna. It wasn't quite the same here.

A dull ache rose in her chest. She slipped the necklace around her neck and tucked it inside her blouse. For old time's sake. Nostalgia.

That raft. Why on earth had she ever thought such an undertaking wise? It was mortifying to think of the things one did in childhood. Whatever had happened to Doctor Barton? Was he still in Akaroa? Was he still ... alive? She hoped so. It was so strange that he had never come to visit her when she lived with the Whittles. It was out of character. He had been kind. She knew she had puzzled him. He was a man who'd liked to figure everything out, but who'd most of all liked to help people and see them restored to health and happiness. But that wasn't always possible, was it? She hadn't been a solvable puzzle. Still wasn't, as far as she could tell. She remembered that there had been something about him, too – almost as if in helping others he was avoiding the need to attend to his own happiness. *Had* he been happy? She couldn't remember.

Maybe puzzles weren't always meant to be solved. Maybe they weren't even puzzles in the first place.

She sighed. The pounamu stone was cool against her chest, lying next to her heart. It made her feel a little less agitated. Like the calming effect of Rāwiri's deep brown eyes all those years back. So long ago. Time passed so quickly, didn't it? But it didn't do to reminisce. Things were what they were, and all had not turned out so badly at all, all things considered. Still, she felt as though she were living with a damper over her life, like the pedal on the piano that stopped each note from ringing out, but she was so accustomed to it that it would have felt almost unbearable – too ... *much* – to live any other way.

She went downstairs, humming a little tune.

“What’s that you’re singing, dear?”

Aisling paused. Her humming had been mindless. The tingles returned to her spine as she realised what the song was.

“It’s ... just a lullaby ... I didn’t actually think I still knew it! How odd that it should have come back to me so. My mother used to sing it to me many years ago back in Ireland before we left to come here. It was in Irish. I don’t remember the words now.”

“Oh! Well, it’s lovely, dear. So pretty. Rather haunting. Doesn’t surprise me it’s Irish. Always something a little melancholy and otherworldly about you Irish folk. Shame you can’t remember the words. Do you still speak any of the language?”

“I wish I did, but I can only remember the odd word or phrase now. I have forgotten so much. Mammy used to speak it at home, but after I arrived in New Zealand there was no one to speak it with.”

Hinewai’s warning about not forgetting her language came back to her as she remembered her time in Akaroa, the schoolroom drama with the confusion between Irish and French, and the angry schoolmaster’s reaction. Strange. She’d not thought of that in years.

“A shame, dear. Perhaps it will come back to you someday. Will you ever return to Ireland, do you think?”

“You know, I have never even really thought about it. Things weren’t ... good when we left. Bad things had happened. And I was so young. But all the same ... I think I would like to at least see it again. To see how it felt. To see if I feel like I ... belong there. Does that sound odd?”

“Not odd at all. You were born there, after all, even if you might have had a difficult time of it. I think a land gets into your bones. Especially when your parents and grandparents, and theirs, and so-on, have lived there for such a long time. Your ancestors. Hard to forget that. I think your bones remember, even when your mind doesn’t.”

Bones ... ancient bones ... why did that ring with familiarity, too? She could not place it.

“That’s an interesting way to think of it. It’s strange to not really feel you belong in any place especially. When did you migrate here for England?”

“I came a good decade before you, dearie. Toby and I, we came out in the early

1860s, and let me tell you, Christchurch was a different place back then. So much changed so quickly. Even now, things change with such speed it's hard to keep up sometimes."

"I'm not sure I like how much things keep changing. It makes one feel as though one's being left behind."

"That's the nature of life though, isn't it! The older you become the more you feel it. I do still miss England, too. It was home, after all, and many of my family and relatives are still there. But you take it with you, home. You remember, and you forget. The new lands start to find their way into you, too. But it is different. A little like a marriage, I like to think."

Aisling's brow flew up.

"A marriage? How so?"

"Well, one person can't be two people, but two people can join and live their lives together. Share what each has. Neither can be or have exactly what the other has, but together you make a new kind of whole."

"I think I understand ...."

"Yes. Although it's not quite that simple here, is it? I can only imagine how hopeless it would have felt to have another people arrive and, to all intents and purposes, take over your land. Impose their heritage on yours. It makes my blood boil to think of it sometimes, the extent our people have gone to here. But then I realise I'm part of it."

"I feel that too, sometimes. Like we really shouldn't be here at all. We don't belong. Not really. It's hard to know what to do."

"I think we just have to remember who we are and where we came from, and try to right what has been wronged where we can. To honour both parts. There must be a balance."

"Yes. A balance. The most difficult thing to find, though, isn't it – true balance?"

"You're quite right, my dear. It's the trying that's the best beginning, though. You've a head that's screwed on well. I can see that things will be different for you."

"I think I've grown too old for things to change awfully much."

"Ah! You're so very young, yet! Once you've lived a good decade or two longer, you'll see that everything can change far more quickly than you'd ever imagine. You just have to keep a window open, if it feels too risky to leave open the door."

Aisling smiled an odd little smile. Such strange things swirling about their

conversation this week. It was those ‘fairies’. That moonlight.

The pounamu.

There was something in the air.

## 49.

Since her discovery of the pounamu necklace, Aisling had been wearing it safely tucked away inside her blouse, out of sight and away from questions. She could feel it, always. It was now warm with the heat of her body.

That sensation that something was a little off-balance in the well-ordered tedium of her quiet, unexceptional world was lingering. It made her jump at the smallest sound. *Keep a window open if you can't keep open the door.* Neither door nor window had been open for many years. It had been stifling, breathing in that same, stagnant, still air year in, year out, but reassuring in its familiarity and predictability for precisely that reason. Fresh air was disturbing, enervating. It carried too much on it. Too much possibility.

It was the possibility of bad things that Aisling dreaded. Although, if she really thought about it, good things were equally disturbing; could be equally chaotic. She felt like she had been drifting in a quiet, tidy, safely numb dream for the longest time. It had become remarkably comfortable.

And now the moonlight and the pounamu had opened that hitherto tightly-sealed-closed window just a tiny notch, and she couldn't close it again. She told herself this, anyway. *I can't close it, can't close it, can't close it.* But windows can always be closed, if the desire is there. It is easy to bury things again, even things that are alive — things that would be alive. Deprive them of air, they die. So one thinks. But under the soil things grow, things grow without awareness. Roots creep and spread and reach and tendrils stretch and climb and seek, until one day, one day — they break the surface, and then nothing can be the same again. The roots of those plants go too deep: they can't be pulled out, they simply refuse to die.

Winter's hibernation runs its course.

Things awaken.

## 50.

*October 10, 1899*

It made Aisling restless and snippy, this metaphorical new fresh air. Mrs. Bellamy was concerned. Along with the inattention to her work, the girl was often short and terse with her responses. It was so unlike her! She was a dear creature, most of the time; never an unkind word, wouldn't hurt a fly. She was even more peaky than usual; she looked like she hadn't slept well in a month, even though it could have only been a few nights. Her appearance was neat and considered, as always. A ruffled white blouse tucked into a dove-grey skirt, a black belt tastefully cinching her neat waist to perfection. Yet in each detail something was a little amiss. A strand loose of her usually well-tamed golden hair. A button caught halfway in a buttonhole. A sleeve cuff turned up ever so slightly. The cheeks with uncharacteristic colour.

Everything about her bespoke a quiet agitation.

Perhaps – a man? Had someone come into the store during the day, some private little interaction Mrs. Bellamy hadn't been privy to? Goodness knew it was high time the child met someone. She would be delighted for her if such were the case. It couldn't have been easy, seeing her youthful years slip by the way they had. But she had never seemed to show any interest in any men at all. A shame: she was so pretty, in her delicate way. Mrs. Bellamy had grown accustomed to thinking that she just wasn't intended for such things.

Which was why it would be all the more remarkable if a man *was* the cause of this new, uncharacteristic behaviour. It was as if the girl had woken on the wrong side of bed after a sleep of many, many years.

Did one ask questions? She didn't want to interfere, not if there were delicate matters of the heart concerned. Such a good girl. She would miss her ever so much if the girl *were* to up and marry. She had become quite as accomplished as Mrs. Bellamy herself in the art of dressmaking. Only she didn't seem to have any ambition beyond assisting her the way she had been. Which had suited both perfectly well – they were a steady, complementary team.

A man ... that must be it. She must keep a sharper ear during the days, listen a

little more closely to the ins and outs of the storefront. A man. She hoped he was a good one. Her Aisling should only leave her for the best. Someone who'd treat her like a veritable queen. Her Toby had been such a one. She sighed.

Love. It did set everything upside down and all at odds so. The biggest disrupter of them all.

\*

Later that morning, Aisling was in her usual place behind the counter in the store. Behind her, colourful bolts of fabric were ranged in stacks – orderly, neat, arranged by material types and colours, nothing jarring to the vision, everything as it should be. Baskets of ribbons, trims, and other miscellaneous haberdashery items lined the edges of the counter, leaving a long, wide space for yards of fabric to be measured off and cut into required lengths. Usually Aisling found the repetition of the day's tasks – always in the same order, at the same time – steady, satisfying. Predictable. Today, the sameness annoyed her to no end. She pulled down every single bolt of fabric, laying them haphazardly in a precarious tower on the counter. Mrs. Bellamy came to see what the commotion was. Her questioning face appeared between the curtains separating the storefront from the workroom behind. Aisling jumped in fright. The rest of Mrs. Bellamy followed her visage, the order of her trim and compact self seemingly berating the growing disorder of Aisling's surrounds. The curtains fluttered behind her. Disturbance. All was slipping out of synchronism.

“Aisling, dear! What has gotten into you? What are you doing – whatever was the matter with all of those fabrics, that you've pulled them down in such a manner?”

Aisling's hands flew to her flushed face. She twisted and danced on her toes in agitation. “Oh! I – well, nothing at all, Mrs. Bellamy. Only I just – I just, it felt like something needed to change, that things could use a little refreshing in here, so I thought I'd rearrange the bolts a little.”

“Are you quite sure that's all that is going on, dear? I don't mind the ... reordering, although goodness knows it jars a body a little when one is taking one's tea in the quiet of the morning. You've been at a loose end all week. It's a wonder you *did* get Miss Albury's dress finished without setting a sleeve in back to front!”

Aisling laughed a little. Short, frustrated. She drummed her fingers on the

countertop.

“I am quite well, Mrs. Bellamy. It’s only that ... that, well, I suppose I just haven’t been feeling quite myself. I feel as though someone reached into my mind and gave it all such a big stirring-up that nothing has figured out how to settle back into its right place just yet.”

She coloured. “That sounds foolish, I know... I’m not even certain what happened to cause it. Do you think something is wrong with me, Mrs. Bellamy?”

Mrs. Bellamy arched one curved eyebrow.

“Aisling, dear, is there something you are not telling me?”

Aisling thought of the pounamu necklace. Did she know? No, that was her secret. Besides which, what would such a thing matter to Mrs. Bellamy? She would think it quaint. The pounamu was almost hot now against her chest, like it was trying to burrow into her heart.

“Something concerning someone ... perhaps ... close to six feet in height?”

A man. She thought a man was causing all of this upset. To think it!

“Oh, Mrs. Bellamy! You wonder if I have a suitor. No. If ever such a thing happened, you would be the first to hear of it. But no. No one irregular has visited the store of late! I think it’s too late in the piece for such things, anyway. I’m rather too old for that. I don’t quite know what’s wrong with me. Only – things – just feel so ... *close*. Like the walls are closing in. And – and I don’t mean to say that’s because of this lovely store, or the business, or you – I love it here, I love living with you! It’s just ... I haven’t felt in the longest time like I wanted or needed anything more, but lately I’ve just begun to think that ... maybe there *is* more to be discovered, to be found! Do you know what I mean? Am I going quite mad?”

Mrs. Bellamy looked disappointed and her shoulders dropped.

“Oh, my dear. It’s only natural to feel as you do. Especially given your position, and what life has dealt you. And – I’ll have you know that I’m glad to hear it, too. You’re a true blessing to have around here, and I’ve been only too lucky to have you as long as I have. I’d hate to lose you. But there’s so much more living out there to be done, and you’ve such a knack with whatever you put your hand to. You could be setting your sights higher. I’ve a sense there is ever so much out there for you, dearie.”

“But I don’t want to set them higher, Mrs. Bellamy. I do so love this way of life!”

“Ah, but you are not satisfied, not deep within. I think your heart is telling you so.

I get the strangest sense that something is coming your way, Aisling. I couldn't say whether it was something good or bad, just ... something. A change. Makes me shiver a little, I couldn't tell you why. Whatever is stirring you seems to be catching, child." She wrapped her shawl more snugly around her shoulders.

"I feel the same way, Mrs. Bellamy. It's made me ever so on edge. Ridiculous. I'm sure it's nothing at all. What could ever change? I don't *really* wish for anything to change, I don't!"

"Change comes whether you'll have it or no, my dear. You just have to embrace it and fall into step with it when it comes. If it comes. Now – let's sort these bolts out again, shall we, before some unfortunate customer wonders what untoward enterprise they've stumbled into!"

## 51.

*Wellington, New Zealand – October 10, 1899*

Randall Harrington stood opposite Bellamy Dressmakers in Wellington, gloved hands in pockets. He whistled to himself, dark hat pulled low over his brow. He leaned a little on a cane. Which was just for show. And ... other things. The store window reflected the lamp-lit street behind him, lamps that projected his exaggerated shadow onto the premises' weatherboard walls. Sleek. Lean. Limber. A sour wind blew. He did not heed it.

*Well, he thought. Here we are. Here we are, then. It's been awhile, hasn't it, Aisling, my dear? But it all comes out in the wash, doesn't it, in the end. I knew I would find you one day. I've found you. You don't know it yet. Can't wait to see the look on your face.*

Tight-pinched lips pulled back into a sneer, a straight-lined sneer mirrored by a harsh, square jaw, which he rubbed with a gloved palm. He waited. He would wait as long as it took. He could wait forever. He folded himself away into the pitch as a light illuminated the shop. It moved, hovered. A woman, carrying it, running her hand over bolts of fabric. Was it she? Could be. Glints of gold-copper hair flared in the glow of the lamp.

He looked more closely. It was. It was she.

But it wasn't time. Not yet. He would keep watching, and he would wait. She would be his yet. He was married now, but that didn't matter, he purred to himself. Randall Harrington never lost anything he had a claim to. He had a claim on Aisling back then. He still did. He'd take care of her like he took care of the Whittles. Ran away, she had. From him. Her husband-to-be. And they'd let her. That was not acceptable. He'd shown them that.

Yes, he was going to take care of her. But not before he'd had some fun first. He might like to keep having some fun. He'd see. Little mousey had come scuttling back.

No.

Clever stealthy kitty had found poor little mousey's hiding place.

How he was going to relish unsheathing his claws.

## 52.

### Magh Mell The Land of Honey

#### *Aisling*

*This is truly strange. I am dreaming, I know it. But I feel awake in this dream ... is such a thing possible? And it strikes me suddenly, oddly, that I've not dreamed – at all – since I was a child. Me, a grown woman of thirty-two! How can I have not dreamed since childhood? Why did it never strike me as strange before now? And – and, oh, what have I missed?*

*I am standing in the middle of a field of grass. I'm somewhere I don't recognise, but somewhere so achingly beautiful that it makes a lump rise in my throat. The light is dim. Violet-tinged. Dusk. The kind of light my eyes understand. Everything softly lit. Quiet, still. Tiny purple flowers grow between the blades of grass. They move almost imperceptibly. The grass grows on a hill sloping upwards, ever upwards, and it reaches towards a great glass castle set atop the rise. The glass glistens in the dusk light, each panel and angle catching and reflecting a different colour in such a manner that it looks like it holds the complete sunset itself within its walls. It is too beautiful. I cannot move for the loveliness of it. Or the colours. Such colours I can't see in my waking days, because my vision won't allow it. There is music. Gentle. Lilted. So sweet that it begins to lift something within me and I feel like a cover over my heart is being moved aside. This shifting is an opening. A doorway in my mind, I think as I dream – it is but a dream, isn't it? – And then the remembering comes. I have had dreams like this before. And such dreams were the last I dreamed, the last before that terrible evening on the raft. And here, in this space, with those little flowers brushing at my ankles, I remember the dream I had on that final night. Such rememberings I never kept in my waking hours. Will I recollect this one?*

*A darkness rises in my chest and into the back of my sight and it bristles with a visceral glowing redness within it. I look down at my hands and I see a shroud of charcoal begin to wrap itself around me and it is thick and it is suffocating and it is*

*obscuring my vision and hiding that beautiful castle and the sunset it holds and oh, Lord, I cannot bear it and there is a terrible terrible sound, a shriek – a cry – a wail – and I am on my knees with my hands over my ears and all of my body is rigid with the fear of the Dark Shadow, of the Fear Doirche – now I remember the name of the Evil One. The Shadow inside me I can never rid myself of.*

*Anguish! It is bitter, oh so bitter, to remember failing in my childhood quest and slipping from Enbarr’s protective back and into the clutches of evil itself and consigning the Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn to certain death, all for an apple and the hope of seeing my mother again.*

*Tír-Uaine and Queen Úna – the Green Lady – flash through my mind, and Tír-fo-Thuinn where the princess lay ill, the King of Magh an Ionganaidh and his Cup of Healing, and – and – Tír na Marbh, where death was disguised in life.*

*A voice comes and it cuts through the darkness and disperses the shroud and its tones are familiar and sweet and frightening all at the same time. I know that I know the voice, but I cannot place it.*

*A hand on my shoulder. Peace flooding through my limbs. Folding into myself. Breathing.*

*The cry of the banshee stops. And I realise it was my own voice. My cry. My despair.*

*“It’s over now, Aisling. And you have returned after so many years – we can’t tell you how wonderful it is to see you again.”*

*The voice rings with gladness. How is it so familiar? I raise myself up. I am kneeling at the feet of a figure clothed in the same violet of the flowers. Her skin is fair, her hair illuminated like the sunset in the castle that rises up beyond her.*

*“Do you remember me?”*

*She smiles. Her smile is filled with warmth but also a depth of sorrow.*

*And then I do remember. I remember beauty shrouded in ugliness. The opposite of Tír na Marbh. The voice that led me through the mist in that dream so many years ago.*

*It is the Lady Ragnailt. And she isn’t alone. Eight women stand ranged around her in a half-circle, clothed each in a different colour, and they each appear as different as the colours captured in the castle, their skin both dark and fair and all shades between, and each is marvelous to behold – each with a quiet majesty.*

*“We have been waiting a long time for you,” Lady Ragnailt says. Her lips don’t*

*smile but her voice does. “This is Magh Mell, the Plain of Honey. In your world, you might also know it as Avalon. King Arthur’s final resting place.”*

*Those with her look on, curious, vivid, brilliant. Together they are nine potent matches ready to strike into life a new blaze. A sisterhood.*

*The Lady takes my hand so that I can stand. My knees shake and it is difficult to still the trembling.*

*“Lady Ragnailt! I ... do ... remember. Only – it has been such a long time since I’ve had such a dream as this. It’s – so strange. I have not dreamed at all since that last time back when I tried to sail that ridiculous little raft all of those years ago. Why ... why am I dreaming this way now?”*

*I feel silly to ask the question. One doesn’t ask questions in dreams, because they are not real. Just pictures tucked away, swimming in the deep recesses of my mind.*

*“Don’t you remember that, too, Aisling? What is dreamed and what is real are not so far apart as you realise. You remember now because it is time to.”*

*“But – but back then, it went so horribly wrong, didn’t it? Did ... did that all happen? The cup, and Enbarr, and failing, and that awful, dark creature? It didn’t really – happen, of course. Because of it just being a story somewhere in my mind while I slept ...?”*

*“In this place, it did, Aisling. It did happen. Remember that this is the Otherworld. You accepted it without question as a child, and I know it is much harder to grasp it now as an adult. That is the shame of such things. A grown mind finds more questions than answers and has a much more difficult time living in the idircheo – the spaces between what is black and white.”*

*“But an adult carries so much more knowledge and wisdom than a child. Childhood is for make-believe and stories. Not adulthood.”*

*“It’s much that you lost early in your life, Aisling. So much. And you shut the door to your grief and to your heart on that last night when everything went wrong. You were so young to do that. The light was still there, however dim, but you stopped seeking it out after that, didn’t you?”*

*Silent tears roll down my cheeks, salty in the corners of my mouth, little rivulets of the sea I twice fell into. All I can think is that hope is too heavy a door for my arms to push open.*

*“That door opens from the other side, Aisling, mo stór.”*

*The Lady can read my thoughts.*

*Mo stór. No-one has called me that in years. Not since — since Mammy.*

*The anguish in my heart grows. It is unbearable. I have to close it down because it will rise in me like a flooding river and overflow into everything in my life and all around me will drown because of its weight.*

*“What if you allowed it to burst forth?”*

*She hears my thoughts.*

*My words are torn like scraps of paper. That flood must not be let loose.*

*“I – can – not – allow – it.”*

*“I think it’s that you will not allow it, mo stór. But perhaps this is not the right time for that. Yet. That time will come. But, precious girl, you are here now, and you are here because you allowed that heavy door to open just a crack again, the one in your heart.”*

*How could it be so? I didn’t push any door.*

*I think of the pounamu. The Irish lullaby. Mrs. Bellamy.*

*“Hope is very light of foot, Aisling. It isn’t the heavy door you think it.”*

*I am here because something has shifted – something very small, but something I knew had altered within me after finding the necklace, after stepping into the moonlight between the edges of the curtains that night.*

*“But ... why now? Why am I remembering, why have I stepped back into ... the same dream?”*

*“Ah. You still don’t believe me, do you? Not a dream. The Otherworld. But it is enough for now that you ask the right questions. You are here because you must still fulfill the same quest of old.”*

\*

*As Lady Ragnailt speaks, she moves closer. I hadn’t noticed before, but in her hands is the silver cup, the cup from before, the one I was supposed to deliver to the Princess of Tír-fo-Thuinn, of the Land-Under-the-Waves. The Cup of Healing. I try to shake off the foolishness I feel.*

*“We have been waiting for you for a long time, Aisling. Here in Magh Mell. The Land of Honey. Do you remember what happened last time?”*

*“Well, I ... that is to say, in the dream I last had of you and these places, I had*

*failed my task and fallen into a deep sleep in a land of ash and darkness. There was ... the Dark Druid, and he relished my failure.”*

*“You did fall asleep. And you did fail. But the pathway to success isn’t always a straight one. Time here isn’t the same as it is in your other world.”*

*I think about it, and I suppose that makes sense. It’s a dream, after all. One day could have passed, a million years could have passed, such things are all in one’s mind, one’s subconscious, aren’t they? But then – isn’t it odd to be thinking such thoughts in a dream? Does one usually know one is dreaming in the middle of a dream? I wouldn’t have thought so. Then why – why – am I thinking as I am?*

*“You need to let go of your thinking. Use your senses, Aisling. What can you see, hear, smell, touch? What do you feel? Thinking too much is the source of much strife. Here it will get you nowhere. Take it. Take the cup. It’s time you held it again.”*

*It’s in my hand in an instant – cold metal, gleaming. It feels at once familiar, yet completely strange. It begins to thrum, and I can feel its vibration run into my arm. That old, old wound tingles once again.*

*I will not think about it.*

*“What am I to do? Surely if I failed back then, the princess has now died?”*

*“Remember what I said about time? I cannot say if she has died or not. Only that now your quest has changed. You will take the cup with you, and keep it, and when the time is right it will serve its purpose once again.”*

*“That sounds awfully vague.”*

*“The living is in what is unknown.”*

*“What is this new quest?”*

*“Do you remember how you used to look to the horizon as a child, and that you believed if you reached the place where the seas met the skies, you would find your light again?”*

*“...I do remember that, but I was so young then – it was just a foolish childhood belief. Like ... thinking if you watched long enough, you’d see a fairy in the garden.”*

*“Fairies do like gardens, it’s true! But what if what you thought back then was some sort of truth?”*

*“It couldn’t be.”*

*She ignores my words.*

*“There is a sword. The sword goes by several names. It’s called Fragarach – the Answerer, or Claiomh Solais – the Sword of Light. The sword of Nuada. Do you*

*remember the stories?”*

*“My mother might have mentioned Nuada in tales when I was a child, but it was so long ago ....”*

*“It’s a powerful sword. One of the four treasures brought to Ireland by the Tuatha Dé Danann when they first arrived. Nuada owned it. Fionn of the Fianna wielded it. It’s been fought for, stolen, moved through different places in the Otherworld ... you might even know it in its different incarnation as King Arthur’s Excalibur.”*

*“I ... see? But what has all this to do with me? These are stories – myths – lore from long, long ago.”*

*“Couldn’t myths spring from some kind of truth?”*

*“I ... suppose? But I always thought of them as fabrications. Stories that explained things about life – to make sense of it. Not to be taken as truths in and of themselves.”*

*“It is possible for them to be both of those things, Aisling. To be true and to contain truths. But regardless of what you think, that sword, Claiómh Solais, the Sword of Light, is also known as what separates dawn from the day as a thin line of light on the horizon.”*

*The light along the horizon separating dawn from day. Darkness from light. The moon from the sun.*

*My heart begins to race.*

*“You have to find it, Aisling. And then you must take it to Magh Dá Cheo, the Land of Mist, and use it to kill the King of the Land of Mist. The Fear Doirche. Only then will your darkness truly turn to light.”*

*“But ... how can I find it? And why must I kill anyone? I can’t kill. Even in a dream I couldn’t kill. I wouldn’t.”*

*“You’re in a different place, Aisling. You must kill the king to free the woman he has held trapped under an enchantment.”*

*“Another enchantment, another entrapment? You’ll remember it didn’t go so well the first time around.”*

*Lady Ragnailt grows frustrated.*

*“You are older, now, Aisling. You are not a child. You are a woman. You don’t understand what is at stake here, but you must believe that it is more than it seems. I can’t give you any more details. And you won’t see me again, not until your quest is complete. And, Aisling, if you fail this time, you will never see these places again. You*

won't return."

*Right now, that doesn't sound so terrible. Only when I think this, the cry rises up from inside me again and all I can hear is that awful piercing shriek coming from my own lungs again.*

*The nine women close in a circle about me. They link hands. They close their eyes, and they hum a low, low hum. A drone. It's dizzying. I close my eyes too. And feel like I am sinking, down down down, and I have the oddest sensation that it's a tomb I am being lowered into.*

*"You must – you must – find the light, Aisling. If you don't, what is wrong will never be made right. You must keep going, keep searching, keep fighting, until you find what it is that you are looking for. It might not appear as you expect it to, but when you find it, you will know."*

*Her voice evaporates. There is the sound of roaring water. Waves.*

*Not a tomb, a cave. Echoes. Dark, dark, dark – but there, over there, just a tiny pinprick of light.*

*I think of a feeble bird breaking out of its shell. An essential struggle.*

*I have to find the light.*

PART VI.

Tír na mBeo

*The Land of the Living*

## 53.

*Wellington, New Zealand – October 11, 1899*

Damp, dew-laden grass. Cold morning air. Still, perfectly still. A lone magpie breaking open the dawn with its call. Eerie in its familiarity – familiar, yet discordant. Aisling had been sitting on the park bench for half an hour or so. Her knees were tucked up against her chest, arms wrapped around them. She was still in her nightgown, and the morning was cold – it turned her breath into tiny wisps of cloud – but she barely noticed it. Her mind was busy tracing back pathways of thoughts and memories, trying desperately to recall the dream that had led her to where she was. The mystery, the ‘why’ of it all.

Sleep-walking. She had done it again. How many years had it been? Twenty, twenty-five? Ridiculous. It had not happened since her days in Akaroa with Doctor Barton.

Frustrating. Frightening, actually.

How had it happened? Was it to keep happening, again? And where *was* she? She untucked her feet and stood up from the bench, looking around her. A small park, a reserve. Up Tinakori Hill, behind the growing network of stores and roads. It was up a pathway that led off the road further below, a path that wound up between towering trees and bush cover. One lone lantern stood in the grass clearing where the park bench was, and the clearing was bordered with roses, only just beginning to bud. Behind them native ferns and creepers curled and sheltered at the feet of swathes of trees, tall and protective: matai, rimu, kahikatea. Maumaharatanga Reserve. She remembered it now. She had stumbled upon it during an afternoon ramble three years ago, and had been surprised about how peaceful it was, and how untouched it seemed – the pathway was overgrown and appeared little used, and once inside the reserve, the city wasn’t visible at all. It was infused with peace and quiet – a hidden sanctuary. Like a fairy land, she’d thought back then.

The magpie called again. Like it had all those years ago in that other forest.

One, not two. Sorrow, not joy. And then the dog had bitten her.

The back of her neck prickled. Premonition? No, just memories. Surely.

The practicality of her situation and location began to sink in. She was not at home, in bed, as she should have been at this time of day. She was outside, up in the hill above the town, and she was wearing only her nightdress. How was she to get back unnoticed? The cold air began to creep deeper, beneath skin and into bone, and she couldn't feel her toes. She hugged her arms around her chest and began to walk cautiously towards the pathway, looking all about. Not a soul in sight. Thankfully.

Then the magpie swooped – once, twice, thrice; each time so near her head that she could feel the wind from its wings on her face. She threw her arms up around her head and began to run, heedless, down the pathway. It gave chase. A sharp tug, a peck, on the back of her head. Then warmth trickling down the back of her neck. She kept running, numb feet doing their best to avoid the overgrowth and roots caressing the pathway.

A collision – a sharp cry – falling backward, down into the earth, down to the matted creepers below.

## 54.

“Easy. Easy, now. You’re hurt. You’re bleeding.”

A man. Tall. Dark cloak, dark hair, ivory-pale skin, strong jaw and ocean-grey eyes. He was leaning over her, leaning over Aisling, peering into her face, and at first she couldn’t move for the fright of it, of the fall, of the magpie, of the collision with a stranger.

A stranger, a stranger. There was a tiny bell tolling in the back of Aisling’s mind, a bell of memory, a bell saying you know, you know, you know this man. But it rang as though it were disconnected from what it was meant to trigger. Empty. A receptacle with all of its liquid gone. The cup with no wine.

Who? Who was he?

He crouched down by her, touched her shoulder, brushed a curly tendril from her face. Reached out his other hand. She took it and sat up; he slipped an arm behind her back to help her. Warm. Her heart pounded. His did too, only she didn’t know it.

*Oh, the shame*, she despaired. She was in her nightgown. What must he think?

*Beautiful*, he thought.

But said, “You’ve hurt your head, I believe?”

He touched her hair tentatively, apologetically; parted it at her crown. Cabernet-dark blood, matting the curls at the back of her head. She started at the unexpected touch. He saw the gash, pulled out his handkerchief, dabbed at the wound. She winced. “A magpie,” she whispered.

“Ah. Fierce, those, if you cross them at the wrong time. Would you allow me to help you ... home, Miss ...?”

“Ais ... Miss O’Carroll.”

“Well, Miss O’Carroll, I’m Mr. Doyle, and I think it’s best we get you to where you can rest – it looks as though you’ve been having something of a time of it.”

Aisling coloured, bright flame red, from her neck to the roots of her hair, a glowing ember fire that made his hands tingle with an inexplicable longing to touch and soothe her self-consciousness.

She shrank into herself. “Please ... do excuse my appearance ... I think I walked in my sleep. I used to as a child, only for a short while. It’s ... it’s completely

mortifying, actually. To be out here like ... this. Thank you, but I can find my own way back home.”

He smiled. And understood. “It’s no trouble. You shouldn’t be out here alone at this time of day. Somnambulism – the mind taking the body on a journey without its knowing it. An alternate way of experiencing reality, wouldn’t you think? Do you remember what you were dreaming?”

A look of confusion spun its way across her face like a scuttling spider, one tiny silken thread left behind to try and follow.

“No. No, I can’t remember, not at all. It was the same when I was younger. No memory. So strange.”

“Dreams are curious things. Not what you’d think them. You’ll remember when you need to remember.”

Aisling shivered a half smile up at him. What he said sounded oddly familiar. Remembering when she needed to remember. What did he know about dreaming that she didn’t? Who *was* he?

He took off his cloak and wrapped it around her. The heat of his body was still trapped by the thick fabric permeated her skin. Warm. Living. Intimate.

“Now, where can I accompany you to, Miss O’Carroll? Where is home?”

“I live above Bellamy Dressmakers. On Tinakori Road.”

He looked into her face again – the bright flame had reduced to two rose-spots on her cheeks. Golden curls – loose, tumbled, wild, seasoned with leaves and bracken – framed it. He plucked a kowhai leaf from the strands. She started. “*Tá brón orm,*” he said. *I’m sorry. Forgive me.*

Her hand, pale and small in the crook of his arm. He could feel her hip brush against his as they walked, their steps in time. *Almost like we’re waltzing*, he thought. He held his elbow a little closer to his side, a pretense of drawing her in for safety. She leaned against him lightly, he almost didn’t dare breathe. He had an angel on his arm. So light, so delicate. Perhaps he was the one who was sleep-walking.

She, too, was almost too afraid to draw breath. He’d spoken Irish. *Tá brón orm. I am sorry.* She remembered. The warmth of him kept her both comforted and strangely, wildly awake. The roses in her cheeks didn’t die. What was she doing, she thought? Why was she allowing this stranger to guide her?

He helped her over the trunk of a fallen tree. They both walked as though dreaming: floating, nearly. Neither spoke anymore. Her words had been lulled to

sleep by the presence next to her and she could barely piece two thoughts together, beyond the noticing of the proximity of his person and a sense that somehow this was dreadfully improper but she couldn't do a thing to stop it because – because, well, because she didn't want to.

He simply smiled to himself.

Midnight silver-moon angel. *Aingeal na gealaí*. Under his arm.

Home. He was taking her home.

55.

Mrs. Bellamy's hands fluttered like the small sparrows Aisling saw outside on the footpath every morning.

"Aisling, my dear, what is the meaning of this! Where have you been, and – and in your *nightgown*?"

She saw first Aisling, then the nightgown, then the blood that had coloured it and her hair. "Bless me – is that blood? Were you ... what happened?"

Mrs. Bellamy bustled about, brimming with motherly concern, and she had procured warm water, a blanket and a towel before Aisling had even had time to reply.

She tsk-tsk-tsked to herself and Aisling sank to a chair because her legs would not hold her up anymore. Mrs. Bellamy turned pale and rushed to assist her.

"The doctor – we need the doctor. Oh, we need the doctor! Child, what happened? You must tell me."

Aisling turned in the chair because surely he would explain, surely the tall dark-haired man would explain, and how come Mrs. Bellamy hadn't even spoken to him yet? But when she looked towards the doorway of the store he wasn't there. He wasn't behind her. He wasn't beside her. She could still feel where his leg had brushed against hers as they walked. Her skin tingled. But he was not there. He had gone.

"What... where... where did... the man go?" Aisling said, her voice weak.

"The man? The *man*? Oh, Aisling, did someone do this to you?"

"No, no, Mrs. Bellamy, it isn't like that. It's not. I walked in my sleep last night, I think. I used to do it when I was younger, just for a few months when I first arrived in Akaroa. And ... that man ... Mr. Doyle, I think he said, found me up in a reserve on Tinakori Hill and helped me home."

She reached for his cloak. And found herself clutching only the sleeves of her white nightgown. The cloak had gone too. It was too strange.

"But there was no-one with you, Aisling! Did he – did he ... he didn't ... hurt you?"

Aisling was puzzled. He had walked her through the door only a moment ago. But

she registered the concern in Mrs. Bellamy's voice, the question behind it.

"He was a perfect gentleman. He assisted me with the cut on my head and helped me down the hill. It is strange, though. He was here only a moment ago."

"Did you fall, when you were up there, dear? That is a nasty gash to your head."

"No, well, I – I did, but the gash was from a magpie—"

Aisling's words dropped off as she began to question the whole occurrence too. She *had* fallen. She *had* hit her head. Had she conjured him up from the same strange dreams that she couldn't remember, the ones that made her wander in the night?

"I don't like this, dearie. Now, you just rest, and you drink that cup of tea. I'm going to pop out, I am, and I'll be back in just a few minutes with the doctor. One can never be too safe, just to make sure nothing is amiss with that cut."

Aisling nodded weakly and wrapped her hands around the mug. It was too hot and her fingers burned but she didn't unfurl them.

## 56.

Mrs. Bellamy, still compact and trim of figure at fifty-nine years of age, soon came rushing back through the store's open door with a man – a doctor – in tow. He was older, in his mid-seventies, this doctor. He wore a pale grey three-piece suit, and carried a chestnut-coloured case. He limped a little. The years were hard on a body. He paused a moment when he saw the woman curled in the chair, blanket draped around her shoulders. Her golden hair reminded him of someone, a little girl, from long, long ago.

Mrs. Bellamy took his elbow and steered him forward, and he leaned over the woman in the chair. She looked up at him. She started.

He had not changed so much as she had changed: she had grown from child to woman, he from middle-aged man to elderly.

“Doctor ... Barton! It can't be! Is it, is it really you?”

The doctor's hand trembled as he reached to feel her forehead. The little girl from long ago. It *was* her.

“Aisling! Can it be you, after all of these years? How you have grown – and how pleased I am to see you!”

He took in the tasteful store and surroundings, the colours, the organisation, the general atmosphere – and Mrs. Bellamy, with her kindly face and concerned disposition. All suggested care, nourishment – love, even. The child had grown into a healthy woman. All of these years he had held a concern about her in the far recesses of his mind. A niggling sense that he abandoned her when she most needed him. But he had done it because he thought it for the best, hadn't he?

Hadn't he?

She had been a troubled child. Did the same troubles still plague her now?

He looked down at her with a fatherly tenderness. He carefully tended to the wound on the back of her head. Nasty, but clean. It would heal nicely. The woman, Mrs. Bellamy, mentioned the presence of some confusion. A fall, hitting the head. That was concerning. Reminiscent of her childhood affliction.

“Why did you never write, Doctor? I was so sad that I never heard from you when I was younger. I would have so loved to have seen you during those years.”

“Oh, but I did write, Aisling! Many a time! I never received a reply from you – nor even from the Whittles.”

“But I never received any letters!”

Doctor Barton was a little stunned. A feeling of remorse took over him. He should have done more, tried harder, suspected something was unusual about her lack of communication. Although ... if he was completely honest with himself, he did wonder back then, just every now and again, if the girl was being prevented from keeping in touch with him. Only he'd thought it for the best. The Whittles were her new family. He hadn't wanted to interfere.

“It seems that they may have kept my letters from you, Aisling. And if you wrote, they mustn't have sent yours. I am sorry for it. I should have realised, I should have come to you. Indeed, I did once, when you would have been around twenty, but they had moved from the homestead, and no one seemed to know exactly where they had moved to. There was some talk of strange circumstances, a broken engagement, I remember; I assumed they had moved to another city, since they have branches of their stores all across the country, now. Do you still keep in touch with them? Do they visit you? And how came you to live here in this manner, anyway?”

“That is so very strange. Why would they have kept me from seeing you? It doesn't make sense. And, well, things became ... difficult with them, difficult to the point that I had to leave, quite suddenly. The broken engagement was mine, I am afraid. I haven't seen or heard from them in years – not since I left Christchurch.”

“You were to be married? What happened?”

“He – it was an arranged marriage. He was not a kind man, or a good man. If he had been, I think I would have married him, because maybe that might have worked. But I couldn't. I couldn't do it. Things became ... too difficult to bear, and I happened upon Mrs. Bellamy in the city. She was about to relocate here to set up her business anew, and needed an assistant. So I left with her. I'm afraid I couldn't let the Whittles know that I was leaving, nor where to, because I'm certain they would have prevented it. You ... you won't tell them you have seen me, will you, should you happen upon them again? I mean, it's been many years since I left, and perhaps they might have washed their hands of me, but ....”

Doctor Barton grasped the situation almost before she had spoken it. Regret began to bubble up from where it had been quietly simmering for many years.

He spoke quietly. “I am sorry, Aisling. I should have checked on you. I should

have followed my instincts that something was amiss. But I didn't want to interfere. I wanted you to have the best chance of adapting to your new life. You had encountered great tragedies at such a young age. And – and you had your unusual condition to contend with ....” He cleared his throat and peered over the rims of his spectacles at her. “Does it still plague you now?”

Aisling looked up into his Doctor Barton's face. She laughed a little nervously.

“Do you mean the way I saw daylight?”

“That, yes. And ... the sleep-walking? Did that occur again when you lived with the Whittles? I had hoped that those experiences might stop when you were in a settled environment?”

“Well – it's only too odd that today, of all days, is when I should encounter you again, doctor. It ... the sleep-walking ... happened again last night, I think. Before this, it hadn't happened again after that last time, the night before Rāwiri and I took out the raft.” She stopped for a moment. Her cheeks colour. “Do you recall that? I made things so difficult for you back then, didn't I? For you, and for Hinewai, and for Rāwiri ....”

“I remember. You were just a child. And you had suffered such loss. It wasn't your fault, Aisling. You were too small to know better.” He looked at her with compassion. Remembered the small ashen face all tumbled with tears and curls that last morning. Such pain. But – this sleep-walking business. Hmm.

“Where did your sleep-walking take you last night? And your vision? Did it ever return to normal?”

Aisling looks down at her hands, folded and still, in her lap. White, fair like the moon.

“I woke up in a reserve up behind us on Tinakori Hill. I was lucky – it was early, and there was no one about. A young man helped me down ... at least I thought that someone did, but ... well. He vanished. And I *had* hit my head. It was strange. Strange that it happened again after all this time.

“And my vision hasn't changed from back then ... not really. But I came to believe that perhaps it never *was* abnormal. That it was something I had ... made up, that how I see is the way I had always seen. And that I just *wanted* it to be something else, something brighter and better. That would be the probable scenario ... wouldn't it?”

“Mmm. Interesting. That certainly could have been the case. Only – you did seem

so sure, back then. So confused that you couldn't see the sun, when you were on the ship. I think something – even if it wasn't what you thought it – must have changed then, for it to impact you so. Has there been any change at all, over the years?"

"Well, no. It's as it was then. But ... I'm just not sure, now. I've only begun to question it again very, very recently. It's been a strange couple of weeks. Doctor – do you ever see Rāwiri? And Hinewai? Did they remain in the Banks Peninsula? It's just that I came across this—"

Aisling pulled out the pounamu necklace from where it had been hiding, nestled in the folds of her nightgown. "He gave it to me. You didn't know. On that very last day, the day the Whittles came to collect me. I had forgotten all about it, but it fell out from the folds of an old shawl of my mother's I had kept just last week, when I went to shake it out. So strange to find it again – and so strange that you should show up at the same time, too. Isn't it?"

Doctor Barton took the necklace in his hand. Deep, deep jade in colour. There was something about it. Mesmerising. Akaroa, Ōnuku, rose in his mind. He could smell the salt on the air. The richness of the earth.

"This is indeed curious. Hmm. Rāwiri left. Hinewai was distraught. We didn't hear from him again. I moved from Akaroa ten years ago, at first into Christchurch, and then up here, to Wellington, where I have been training a new doctor to take over my practice here. It is strange I haven't encountered you here sooner. But I wonder where Rāwiri is, and what he is up to? A clever boy, he was. I wonder if he ever began to speak again?"

"Did he leave because of what happened?"

"It wasn't for a couple of years after you had gone. He had been restless for a long time. It was clear that something was plaguing the boy. Hinewai could not work out what it was. He withdrew from her. And I'm sorry to say, Aisling, that she did lay the blame for it on you. But you were just a child. It wasn't your fault. You were dealing with so much change, so much grief."

Aisling was quiet a moment.

"I am sorry to hear Hinewai felt that way. And that Rāwiri left in such a manner. Oh, I do hope all is well with him. I hope he came into his own. He was so clever with his hands. And so kind. He looked after me like a brother. I ... I wish ... I could go back, and speak with Hinewai. Is she still in Ōnuku?"

"She is, as far as I know. But she wasn't the same woman, not when I left. Grief

shook her hard, and it did something to her mind.”

The doctor studied Aisling’s face. Pain flickered across it, a sorrow in her eyes. There was an ache just below the surface, he could see it. Closer than it had been back then.

“I have the strangest feeling, doctor. I think I need to go back. I need to see her.”

Behind them, Mrs. Bellamy cleared her throat. She had been listening all along. The doctor turned to her. She wore a mixed expression on her face as she turned to Aisling, still curled up in the chair. “You should go, Aisling. You should go back to Akaroa. Visit for as long as you need.”

The doctor studied the two women – Aisling, and Mrs. Bellamy.

What an unusual morning. He felt all at odds within. Like a great, heavy door had been cracked open, one that had been closed for a long, long time. There was a fresh breeze stirring, he thought. It made him feel thirty years younger.

What of it? Why not? He didn’t have anything to lose. The young doctor could take care of things for a little while. This – this had the ring of something momentous. For both of them. Something that must be done.

“I will go with you,” he said.

57.

Aisling's words rang in Mrs. Bellamy's ears.

"I need to go back," she had said.

And when the doctor had said that he would go too, she had responded with a smile carrying a joy in its curves that Mrs. Bellamy had not seen in a long, long time.

She had been mystified as she'd listened to the conversation between Aisling and Doctor Barton. These things – all of these things – Aisling had never spoken of. Such tragedy. She had never wanted to pry, figured the girl would speak of her life if she ever wanted to. She didn't want her to leave. Not one jot. But it made sense. It was like this was where the turmoil that had been hovering over them of late was leading – the missing piece of the puzzle.

She sighed. The back of her neck prickled. It had been doing that lately. She had the strangest sense that they were being watched. But she brushed it aside. It was only a fancy because everything had been so unsettled.

She smiled wistfully as she led Doctor Barton to the door.

Something irreversible had happened. Change had come, like it or no.

## 58.

*Wellington, New Zealand – October 19, 1899*

Randall watched them leave Bellamy Dressmakers on a Thursday afternoon, Aisling and the doctor. Off to the port. For a little trip to Lyttelton. How lovely. Back to the scene of the crime, then, was it?

Easy to track. So easy. Followed the doctor the morning he'd gone to visit after Aisling's little ... excursion. Randall had followed her, then, too. Somnambulism. Walking in her sleep. Had walked out the front door of the shop and right past him in the dead of the night. He hadn't even noticed at first – given him the fright of his life, because she'd caught him off guard. Something she could only do in a soporific state! What a laugh.

Such easy prey she would have been then, if he'd decided that was his moment. But it wasn't time. So he'd just hidden and watched.

Watched while she walked, mind asleep, up into the hills.

Watched as she entered that wonderfully secluded reserve. He'd noted the place. Might come in handy, he'd thought.

Watched her as she stood there, talking to herself. Heard her god-awful cry. Hideous. Would she make that sound when the time came?

Watched her as her mind finally sent her body to sleep and she lay on the park bench like it was her own bed.

But that would have been too easy. He didn't like things that were too easy. All things weren't in alignment then.

Then Randall had watched as the other man came just as she was running from that magpie, the man whose chest she ran full-tilt into. That wispy, anaemic looking one. If she'd only run full-tilt into Randall's chest. That would've kicked things into action regardless of his well-laid plans.

The man had assisted her. Randall saw the effect he had on her. She liked him. She preferred ... *that* ... to him. He was going to have to deal with him too, he could see.

He'd followed the other man after he vanished from the dressmaker's door upon

delivering his charge there. Why had he done that? Odd.

The man had entered the doctor's house after leaving Aisling. Only three minutes later, the older lady came flying up the same path and into the doctor's door. She exited with the doctor. Left the pale man behind. Had she even seen him? Very unusual.

Who was he?

Never mind. It would only add to the fun. Little lover-boy would be easy to take care of. Consider him bookmarked.

Randall had returned to the dressmaker's behind Mrs. Bellamy and the doctor. Waited. Followed the doctor. For several days. And then came the moment. The doctor hurried into the United Steam Shipping Company's office that Friday morning. Randall stood behind him in the queue. Heard him order the two tickets to Lyttelton, sailing one week from then on a Thursday night.

Too easy. Now he had his own ticket for the very same sailing in his coat pocket.

Wasn't that nice?

He sauntered down the road behind them, swinging his cane before it met the pavement in his own particular rhythm.

Tap, tap, tap.

One, two, three.

The pale man, the doctor, and Aisling.

## 59.

*Wellington, New Zealand – October 18, 1899*

It was the night before Aisling and Doctor Barton were due to board the United Steam Shipping Company's *Penguin* steamer, bound for Lyttelton harbour directly from Wellington. Sitting on her bed in her room above the store in the lowering dusk, Aisling thought she could hear a soft voice singing that same lilting lullaby Mrs. Bellamy had heard Aisling sing two weeks earlier. Her hands tingled. Rāwiri's pounamu at her chest seemed to pulse with the quickening beat of her heart. She was hearing things. She put her hands over her ears.

Squeezing her eyes closed, she shook her head: *no-no-no*. But still it remained. Then it changed. The ráth rose in her mind, the place she and her mother had fled to so long ago in Ireland. The tiny cottage at the foot of the hill. Its whitewashed walls. The wrought-iron bedstead. Curling up in the sunlight.

Sunlight-sunshine-sun-bright. That warmth. One of the last times she ever felt it. Then the song that came to her that afternoon fills her mind, the song she believed was calling to her and leading up onto the ráth. Her soul's song, she had thought at the time. She thought of being up there, so safe and warm and sheltered. The song wrapping her and holding her close. It had slipped down inside her and into her heart and she'd thought she would have that feeling for always, back then.

And then there was that awful, awful night. A night Aisling did not ever think of because it was too terrible. There was the shrieking, terrible cry that she thought would split her head in two. A cry that was so filled with pain that she had thought it was killing the new song of her soul in her heart. And then fleeing, running, Mammy being so terrified but trying to hide it for her sake, for Aisling's sake, because she was only a child, and a child shouldn't have to see such things.

Such things as a body lying face-down on the ground, an axe in the back of the head, wet-oozing blood still dripping from it, dark dark dark, staining the grass.

A child shouldn't have to see such a thing and then have it dawn on them that the person was someone they knew. Someone they loved. Uncle Declan.

Death. Aisling's second experience of it.

And Mammy never said a word about it.

Aisling knew her mother had thought she'd managed to prevent her from seeing him like that. But she hadn't. Aisling had seen it all, and it had crept into her, into her heart, insidious, black, terrifying – tainting everything. Trying to choke her. Ever since. But because Mammy was unwell, and Papa had been so cruel to her, Aisling had hidden that she had seen that terrible horror. She had pushed it far, far, far below the surface of her mind and if ever the image of that terrible waxen skin all coloured with red blood tried to rise she squashed it far down again.

And then it had only come out in her room at night. The dark shadow. The one that haunted her and tried to pin her down as a child. The one that she had been afraid would make her do bad things, too. The one she had thought was stealing her soul's song. Stealing her soul. If it stole her soul, she would be like Papa, she had thought. And so she wouldn't think of it. Ever. She would not be like Papa. Nothing could steal her soul. But it could numb it. And it had.

These were Aisling's ruminations while the gentle lullaby continued to swirl about her senses. She nervously smoothed the striped fabric of her skirt over her knees and jiggled a foot, next to which her valise was packed and waiting for their early-morning departure.

It must just be in her imagination, she thought. The song.

Because she was returning to Akaroa the very next day.

Returning to her troubled past.

But it – whatever it was – was awakening all of those old, sinister thoughts. In vain she tried to push them back down again, but the image of poor Uncle Declan's body wouldn't disappear, and then the image shifted, and the dead man was Randall Harrington, only he began to stir, and then he raised himself to his hands, his knees, and he climbed to his feet with an axe still embedded in his skull and oh horror horror horror he was looking right at her, he was walking towards her in a great cloud of black mist, *he* was the dark awful shadow, and he reached behind his head and pulled out the axe – sickening, squelching – and he was looking straight at her, laughing maniacally, and he was going to kill her!

## 60.

### *The Penguin, Wellington to Lyttelton – October 19, 1988*

The smoke stacks of the *Penguin* puffed wraiths of darkness into the skies, and as Aisling watched them curl into the falling night, she leaned against the steamer's railing, feeling the brisk night breeze filling her with an inexplicable new vitality. She drew the air deep into her lungs. And smiled to herself, as against the rhythmic chugging of the engines, her thoughts turned to the man who she had met on Tinakori Hill.

Mr. Doyle. Dermot, his name was.

The antidote to those awful thoughts of the night before.

She hadn't imagined him, hadn't conjured him up from the effects of a bump on the head, as Mrs. Bellamy had thought. Thank goodness. No. He was an associate of Doctor Barton, of all the odd things! He'd come by with the doctor two days before she and Doctor Barton had left for Akaroa. And as they all sat in Mrs. Bellamy's small parlour, the same thing had happened again as it did on Tinakori Hill: she had lost her tongue, lost her senses. She'd felt connected to him as she had not felt connected to anyone, ever. Not even to her own precious Mammy. Or Rāwiri back when they were children.

Dermot hadn't spoken. But he'd looked at Aisling, not often, but often enough. His gaze made her remember him staunching the wound on the back of her head, and there was something in that remembrance that made her feel... safe. Protected. And she'd felt warmth rise in her cheeks.

She'd thought he had been a little nervous, actually. His knee was bouncing up and down. But then he'd met her glance with his piercing grey eyes. He hadn't smiled. But in their held gaze his knee had grown still and oh, there was magic in that moment. It held worlds, his gaze. There was something *other* about him. Like – like the moon. And instead of that turning her from him, it made her feel like he was ... *home*.

She turned from the deck to head inside to her bunk, willing her thoughts of him to travel back up the sea along the side of the South Island, and meet him wherever he

was, whatever he was doing, back in Wellington. And she sent a fanciful wish out into the chilly night air that please, oh please, might he be thinking of her, too!

## 61.

### *Cillian*

It has been clouded over for months, that fountain, that strange, thin screen of water. But only days ago it began to shift. Saw the dark clouds begin to disperse. Fell to my knees before it to try and catch a glimpse of her, my wee girl, to know the worst. Did the sea best her, or did she live?

Can't stop thinking of those last days. The terror in her little face on the evening I hurt her Mammy so badly. I made my wee girl feel what I had felt as a boy. Turned my hand against a woman, had been using it in worse and worse ways. Was going to kill them, the *pair* of them, for Christ's sake. I was going to kill them. And I killed Declan. Never liked the man, but ... *I killed him*. Why? How? How did things get so out of hand? When did my own hands become so – so evil?

Feck. Can't even think back on it. What's done is done. Got to leave those thoughts where they lie.

My wee girl, though. My heart. Nigh on breaks to think of the fear I awoke in her. My wee Aisling, who used to follow me everywhere. My little girl, who'd come down to the shore with me and help me with the fish. The one who'd gather her little flowers, sing her little songs, and talk to the birds and the critters like they were all her especial friends. Oh, my lass.

There. The mist has completely vanished! Vision in the water-curtain is crystal-clear! And now I can see images again – a woman on a ship – it's night, she's at its stern, I think, there's a great wake stretching out behind it. Can't see her face. But long fair hair streams out behind her. She's alone. In a nightgown, I think, some thin white thing that can't be doing much to protect her against the cold. Something's off about this. Don't like it. Who is the woman?

The vision is shifting, moving, she becomes farther away – now I can see her, but from what must be nearer the prow of the boat. Not a make of ship I'm familiar with. Nothing about it is familiar at all. Looks ... newer than any vessel I've ever seen. Not that that's to say much. Never travelled far myself, no farther than Liverpool in my boyhood days before I met Kitty. But now in the vision I'm behind a man's form, he's

standing like a shadow, and he's watching the woman, hiding behind some sort of funnel.

What am I seeing? It's not Aisling, because Aisling's just a girl.

And what's this man doing, then, watching her as she is? Makes my spine tingle. Makes it tingle because I know the feeling. Well. I remember it.

He's watching his prey.

Who *is* the woman? She's in danger.

This is too strange. It's not Aisling.

Is it?

It can't be.

Where is Aisling?

Did she survive?

## 62.

### Tír na mBeo

#### The Land of the Living

##### *Aisling*

*It is so bright here that I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it because my eyes do not see the sun. And this place feels like it is the sun. Or born of it. I feel incongruous here, like I never did before. If Magh Mell was all things gentle and kind and soft – gracious, not giving me more than I could bear – like I was born into it and for it and meant to be there – this is the opposite. It is too much. Not evil, not bad, not dark – too ... light. Too substantial. I can't open my eyes. Can't – or won't, a voice whispers in my head. My body feels thick, leaden. Everything surrounding me is fragrant, but it is too fragrant. It makes me feel ill. The grass beneath my feet feels like tiny steel blades. Not soft, plush. Too concentrated.*

*And then – hands. Placed over my eyes from behind. I jump. Try to turn, try to free myself.*

*“Shh,” a voice says. “Bheith fós.”*

*Be still. I know the Irish, even though my waking mind doesn't any more. I stop struggling. The hands are cool, soft. A light pressure on my temples.*

*“Open your eyes.”*

*Slowly – just a chink – then all the way. A red-rose light, quiet, between the fingers over my eyes. The roaring in my ears subsides, my hands stop shaking.*

*“Now it will be easier for you.”*

*The hands disappear. I am standing on a land of endless grass, stretching as far as the eye can see, far away out to a blue, blue sky – magical, light, pale. Golden. My skin glows golden. The air shimmers with it. My lungs fill with it. Is this the sun? Am I inside the sun? All at once all of my senses feel impossibly alert — I feel alive as I never, ever have before. How can this be? Is this a memory? Is this sunlight? It is like those old, old memories, but it isn't, at the same time – and I am only dreaming, isn't that so?*

*But – oh, oh, it is blissful! I never want to forget this. Never. The warmth on my skin. A light so bright I can't look at it – only now I am, because whatever those hands did made the unbearable 'too-much' of the light bearable. I look around, thinking to see the globe of the sun, as bright as it must be, but I can't see it. How strange, when I can feel its warmth and see its light! Finally!*

*Where is the sun?*

*"It's me you're seeing, Aisling."*

*The voice belonging to the owner of the hands. Behind me. A man. Too bright to look at. I face him but I have to turn my head away. He is too much. He raises his hands to my eyes again, a cool gentle pressure, then removes them, and then I can see him. But only for fleeting glimpses. His face, his hair, his skin, glow bright golden yellow: sunflowers, honey, the heart of daisies, buttercups. He is golden. With azure-blue eyes that counter the brilliance like the deepest still heart of the ocean.*

*The golden light emanates from him. It is he who shines. The power around him is so present, so potent, so visceral, that I tremble all over, and fall to my knees.*

*"I am Lugh," he says.*

*Lugh. Another figure from Mammy's stories, but I have only fractured memories of them, of him. He is one of the Tuatha Dé Danann, I think. But also the Irish sun-god. Is ... he the sun?*

*He is smiling down at me and holding out one hand. I take it and the warmth of his touch sweeps through my fingers and into my palm and up my arm and I could swear it has shot right into my heart, and that something in there is beginning to melt. But it's not a fiery heat. It's gentle. Persuasive. Kind. Good. The sun coaxing the coat from the man's back rather than the brash wind, like the fable says. Gentle – once one can bear to let it in. It rings of ... of truth. Truth – what is. The essence. For some reason, everything about this place rings of it.*

*"Do you remember how you used to think of someone driving the sun across the sky? And that each person had a different sun-driver, and perhaps something was amiss with yours?"*

*I laugh. I feel self-conscious. "I do. What a silly fancy that was."*

*"There's a kernel of truth in every such fancy, I would think. It wasn't that your sun-driver went missing, it was that you forgot how to see him."*

*"So ... there is ... such a person, one who drives the sun across the sky? In these lands?"*

*“In a manner of speaking. Yes. Only it isn’t as you think it. Nothing is, is it? I know you have been lost in your world for many, many years. And that you lost your light there. You began to believe you never had it in the first place, isn’t that so?”*

*“Well ... yes. I suppose so. But ... this is only a dream, and magical and wonderful as this place is, I know that I will awaken, and nothing will have changed there. I never remember these dreams, only I fancy this time I will awaken with a strange longing that will make me so very sad. Sad in a manner I have not been for, well, the longest time. Because ... because I have found something here I thought I would never see again – and then, even if I can’t remember, to wake and know, on some level, that in reality I don’t have that thing ... it will be unbearable. It will wake within me what I have tried so hard to avoid feeling. What is this place?”*

*“This is Tír na mBeo. The Land of the Living. It welcomes you. It knows you. It sees the life in you,” Lugh says. “Your sorrow has been too deeply buried, Aisling. It absorbed the light. You can find it again, that light. In your world, too. But your sorrow is the key. And what makes you so sure that this is a dream?”*

*I can’t help but laugh. “You are like the Lady Ragnailt. How could it not be a dream?”*

*How could it not be a dream? A blessed, beautiful dream that I do not want to wake from, because here, for the first time since I was a little girl, I have known what it is to feel the warmth of the sun again and to see its light, even if I haven’t yet seen the sun itself.*

*Lugh smiles again. It’s a smile that holds a universe behind it, I think. The kind of smile where, were the lips to open and the tongue to speak, many mysteries would be revealed, but they do not and the secrets remain secret and that is as it should be.*

*“Come, Aisling. You are here because of the sword, aren’t you? You have been sent by Lady Ragnailt to find it. Fragarach. The Answerer. The Sword of Light, the Sword of Truth, the Sword of Nuada. Claiómh Solais. I wielded it once: I was its minder until another needed it more. And now it is guarded in Tír na mBan, the Land of Women, by the seven cailleacha – the seven hags, who protect it day and night. They will only release it to the rightful new bearer.”*

*“Lady Ragnailt said I must kill someone with it. Kill them. It’s unthinkable. Isn’t it? And ... how will I get there, to Tír na mBan? And how will I get the sword from the – the cailleacha?”*

*“Killing is sometimes necessary. You will see. It too will not be what you think it.*

*And you will find your way to Tír na mBan just as you found your way here. There, you will have to prove to the cailleacha that you are indeed the rightful bearer.”*

*“What if I am not?”*

*“Well, that remains to be seen, doesn't it? But remember this: that seeking leads to truth, and that truth leads to light. Then Claiomh Solais will find its way into your hand if it is meant to be there.”*

*He places his palm on my chin. That same warmth. Tender. I can see it like golden tendrils traveling through my veins, golden tendrils that are seeking out the black thread, seeking it out to set it alight, to melt it, to banish it. I remember the Dark Druid. The Fear Doirche. My failure, my disobedience, all becoming darkness and ash. I look up into the cornflower blue of his eyes and I am sailing there on the vast oceans of his truth. He knows what I am thinking, what I am feeling, I can see it. The loveliness of the light, seeking out the darkness inside me, wanting to banish it. His thumb brushes my cheek. He answers the question in my own eyes. Will this light really free me of the bitter black thread I swallowed so long ago?*

*“It will, but only if you allow it to, mo stór.”*

## 63.

### *The Penguin, Wellington to Lyttelton – October 20, 1899*

It was dark when Aisling awakened. A murmuring swell, a rising and falling, slowly introduced her to the waking world again. Her hands clutched the steamer's banister. She was at the stern of the *Penguin*. The silver full moon hung high above the vessel, and pearly-capped waves below scattered its reflected luminosity – both waves and light in constant motion, the pearly glow skating along behind the ship as if to usher it to its destination.

Eyes unseeing, at first. Then registering. The night. The waves. The sea. The steamer. She had walked in her sleep again. The combination of elements shocked a recollection of freezing cold water into Aisling's bones as she stood and shivered in the night winds. The sensation of nearly drowning. The tugging pull of water wanting to claim her, to draw her far down into its heart of utter darkness. To steal her breath. It didn't, though. Her mother had seen to that, or so she had been told back then. Her hands. Lifting her. But it stole one other thing from her, didn't it, the water – it stole her light. Aisling was certain of that now, those adult doubts folded away into the blackness of a night nearly passed. She couldn't say what had changed, she only knew that something had. And a fierce, burning longing to know the sun again gripped her bodily and she filled her lungs with air, sucking it in as deeply as if she'd just been pulled from the waves once again.

The steamer cut its way through the waters, bound to the right by darkly rising mounds of land, jutting out in a jagged ridge. To the left was the horizon – and as she turned her head to it and watched, slowly, so slowly, the sky began to pale and a rosy glow tiptoed along its edge while the night slowly retreated; dawn reaching for him, he slipping out of reach, until it was his turn to stretch for her again and she eluded him in the evening.

Cyclical, Aisling thought absently. What is at the top shifts to the bottom and what is at the bottom comes back to the top.

She wondered if today was the day. If this deeply embedded longing would bring to pass what she was daring to hope it might that morning.

The sky paled further. Light and colour.

But shrouded, veiled.

Her night was still too strong.

It would not yet make way for the day.

## 64.

### *Cillian*

An older man has come out from what must be the sleeping quarters. The dawn is rising. The woman has her head turned to the horizon for a little. But her shoulders sink. As she turns towards the older man the other one watching her disappears, he slips back into the shadows. Dripping with devilry, he is. And then after the older man has put a blanket about her shoulders – right grateful I am; too cold, for sure, to be standing in the night air clothed as she is – the two of them turn around. She lifts her head and it’s as though she’s looking right at me, and there’s the song of the magpie in my mind, the song I taught my wee girl on the day we came across the pair trying to attack us, and then I realise this *is* the lass, this is Aisling, only she’s not a wee girl anymore, she’s a grown woman!

My heart beats heavily within me. Can’t breathe for several moments.

“Time is not the same here, Cillian.”

I can’t breathe.

“In, and out. Slowly.”

“Is that ... is that ... *Aisling*?”

“You know the answer already.”

“How – how is that possible? I’ve been here, what – weeks, months, maybe, certainly not years! Not enough for Aisling to have grown from a little girl of six to a woman of ... of ....”

I’m gasping for air.

“Thirty-two.”

Panting. My heart is about to run on out of my chest, out into goodness knows where, it’s racing so fast I can’t even make out separate beats. Thirty-two. Only six years younger than I am myself.

“No. Never. That’s not really ... Aisling, is it?”

“All is as it should be, Cillian. It is Aisling. These things are complicated. There are things you do not know and will not understand, not yet, maybe not ever. But time passes differently here. I’ve told you this before. Remember? A day here can be

months out there. And then weeks, and months here ... well, years can pass, out in the mortal world.”

“Then ... then ... if you ever let me free, and I don’t know what you’re planning on doing with me, past this fecking dance with the sword every day, what will the world be to me? Will I be ... as I am now, or older?”

“Perhaps you’ll find that out one day. Perhaps you won’t.”

So frustratingly elusive. But that’s some sort of ... hope. Isn’t it? And it’s Aisling. It’s *Aisling*. Grown up. Gives me the shivers. Fairy devilry of this place.

Is she married? Does she have her own little ones? What is going on? Why was she in a nightgown, on a ship, alone?

“Who is that man? Who is watching her? Where is she?”

Oh, I’ve got to get out of here, I’ve got to get to her, because she is in danger. That man. Going to kill her. I could feel it all through him, in every single aspect of him. Takes one to know one. Got to help her.

“You have to let me go, you have to let me help her!”

“It’s no use, Cillian. She’s on the other side of the world. It would take you six weeks to get to her.”

“Then let me go! Now! Look, I’ll pay you whatever price I have to pay to get out of this, to satisfy you; by the gods, I’ll even promise to come back if you’ll just let me go to her! You’re powerful, you can make sure that happens, can’t you? Let me go, let me go!”

“It’s not time, Cillian. I’m sorry, but it’s not time.”

Then the idiot has the bleeding nerve to disappear.

My girl! My wee girl!

Got to help her before that devil-man harms her!

PART VII.

Tír na mBan

*The Land of Women*

## 65.

### *Akaroa, New Zealand – October 20, 1899*

Aisling and Doctor Barton arrived in Akaroa at noon the day following Aisling's sleep-walking experience on the *Penguin*. Quiet waves lapped languidly at the pebbled shore of the harbour. It had changed much since Aisling's childhood days. There were more stores, the network of streets and roads had expanded and grown, creeping with hungry fingers up into the hills surrounding the bay. But there, there was the Bruce Hotel, just as she remembered it. It had had a fresh coat of paint and it sported a new sign, but there it was, just the same. Doctor Barton had booked rooms. Aisling walked through the doors in trepidation. She was unsure how it would feel to be back. So many years had passed, and so much had changed. But inside, not much about the Bruce had. Its carpets, with their mustard coloured swirls, was just the same – more faded, worn over the years. Her head gave her that odd dizzy sensation, just as it did all of those years ago when she first arrived in New Zealand. A moment of pause. A strange knowing of a place you'd never been before, and conversely, not knowing a place any longer that you used to know well.

She was grateful that the rooms were not the same as those they had had back then. They were on the second floor, now, and the windows looked out on the beachfront and the harbour. It was very peaceful. Not so many people stayed there, now, the concierge informed them. The township was changing very quickly.

Thin dun-coloured curtains hung at the windows, as tired as the carpet they sank down into. Aisling placed her valise on the salmon-quilted bed and sat. The frame creaked beneath her.

A gull cawed outside. One, then two, then many. Crying into the afternoon.

And then once again all was quiet.

She had returned.

\*

The next day, Doctor Barton was already gone when Aisling awoke. She took her

breakfast in the dining room overlooking the beachfront, and as she ate her buttered toast she studied the hills far in the distance across the water. The Banks Peninsula, she mused. How strange it was to be here again. It all felt much ... smaller, despite all of the changes. That was being an adult for you, she supposed. All of the magic disappeared. The horizon, indeed, she remembered. How on earth could she have thought she could sail a raft to it, back then? They'd have had a long way to go before they got out of the harbour and anywhere near the open sea! And then, well, the horizon was a place that didn't exist. You could never reach it. It was a mirage. Like a rainbow. Hope, always just out of reach.

She sighed. Toyed with the spoon in her hand after she cracked open her solitary boiled egg with a knife. Golden yolk stained the blade.

Hope. Such a feeble thing. It always disappointed one. Like awakening after sleep-walking on the ship two nights before. That feeling that perhaps the light would have changed, despite not remembering the dream. But it never changed, did it? Then why – *why* – did it feel as though it was something *within* her that was the problem? Something that she wasn't doing – that she wasn't ... allowing? It was immensely frustrating. Not being able to put a finger on whatever that was. But – there was something there, she knew it. Something tucked away, a closed compartment in her mind that held all of the secrets. She couldn't find such a compartment to even begin to think about opening it. It was what made her feel so heavy, and the light so dim. Still. She knew it.

She had to find it. Find that place. That hidden place in her mind.

She stirred again in her chair and her skirts rustled with the movement. A man sitting at the table opposite looked up at her over the top of his newspaper. He shook it out and gave her another pointed stare before resuming his reading. Her restlessness was contagious. Irritating, clearly.

This wouldn't do at all.

Hinewai. She would go and see Hinewai today, if she could. Her pulse fluttered in her throat at the thought. How would Hinewai react to seeing her? Could she really have changed so much? Could she really still hold such animosity towards her?

She stood up and smiled politely at Newspaper Man. He frowned and shook his head slightly and buried his head even more deeply in the paper. She rolled her eyes as she turned away. Some people were so finicky. Pulling on her gloves, she could sense someone else looking at her. She turned around, curious, but all the other tables

were empty. A server, perhaps? No. She must be imagining things. But a feeling of unease wrestled with her mind, and shaking it off as best she could, she stepped out into the day at just the moment Doctor Barton was returning, both of them giving each other quite a start on the paved footpath.

“Doctor! I was wondering where you had disappeared off to so early. Have you been exploring? Did you go and visit the old clinic ...?”

Something in his eyes gave her pause and her words trailed off.

“No, my dear. I – well, I went to visit Hinewai. To see how she was ....” The doctor paused.

Aisling smiled wryly. “To see if she would see me?”

“Ah – yes, well, ... yes. I wanted to – pave the way, so to speak.”

His eyes were full of pity. Aisling’s heart sank.

“Mm. I see. It didn’t go well, did it?”

“No, my dear, it did not.”

“She won’t see me?”

“My dear, you have to understand, the years have been hard for her. With Rāwiri gone, you know, and her husband too – I believe he passed away not long after Rāwiri disappeared. And her mother-in-law passed then too, Rāwiri’s grandmother – she was advanced in years even when we were there ... they all went at a similar time. It was hard for her.”

Aisling was quiet. So much tragedy, so much loss. She knew it. She knew it well. But it ached nonetheless.

“She still blames me for Rāwiri leaving, doesn’t she? And perhaps for what happened to the others, too?”

“... She does, my dear. Grief does strange things. She won’t see you. Not yet. But don’t despair. I believe we will make our way through yet.”

Suddenly the day had lost its sheen. Her body felt weighted down. If Hinewai wouldn’t see her, what was the point of this journey? And why couldn’t she shake the feeling that she *had* to see her? She couldn’t explain it. Only that it was related to that locked-away compartment in her mind. And – and she wanted to offer the woman some comfort who had comforted her all of those years ago. To make amends.

“It never is easy, my dear. These things take time,” said the doctor. He had guessed her thoughts. In a manner.

“No, I suppose it isn’t,” she replied, and sighed. “It might just take a little longer

than I had hoped.” He smiled at her. There was relief in his face. She noted how white his hair had become. The breeze lifted wisps of it above his head. He seemed much shorter than she remembered. She guessed it was because, to a child, every adult towers high above. Her heart flooded with affection for him. He was so kind. He always had been. Right from that very first moment she’d seen him on the *Nelson* so long ago, when his eyes had been filled with compassion for her poor dear Mammy.

Quite suddenly, his eyes lit up. “Oh, Aisling, I almost forgot! Come, child, come – there is something I must show you!”

His enthusiasm was catching. *Child*. She smiled internally, and tucking her arm in his, drew close to him, and together they strolled down the boulevard. He was precious. Perhaps the day had some potential after all.

## 66.

Doctor Barton was so excited that he had nearly broken into a jog, wheezing slightly, as he and Aisling traced the boulevard around to the forest. It had changed over the years, of course – it was now a cultivated woodland area, garden-like, planted with a mixture of native flora and fauna, intermixed with imports. Like themselves, Aisling thought, as she hurried along behind the doctor. They passed through it and beyond, farther around the shoreline, farther than the little bay where she and Rāwiri had launched their boat on that fateful day.

The doctor's face was red and shiny, and he mopped his forehead with a striped handkerchief. "Nearly there," he said. Aisling was bemused. What was he taking her to? They were en route to Hinewai's, if she remembered correctly, but he couldn't be taking her there. So what was it? Where was he leading her?

"Just up here!" he announced, and veered off up past three scattered houses set back from the bay. There was a patch of trees behind them, and sheltered in the trees was a small shed. The doctor pulled Aisling along behind him, and stopped suddenly just before the structure. Aisling nearly walked into him, out of breath herself. He had turned and was studying her face again. He had been doing that a lot.

"Now, my dear ... I hope this is not unwise of me, to take you here, to show you this – I stumbled upon it quite by accident, you see. A little boy from one of the houses below was chatting away this morning about his find in this very shed, and I had my suspicions while he was talking, and, well ... you will have to see for yourself."

With that the doctor took Aisling by the hand. A common sort of shed, she thought, scanning its tin walls. The wind sighed in the trees above it and they creaked a little.

There. On the ground. Something covered with sackcloth. The doctor went to it, and slowly tugged at it.

Branches – miscellaneous planks and pieces of wood. Bound together with strips of flax and lengths of string. A dismantled sail lying flat against it – the calico mildewed and rotting. A makeshift rudder.

*Rā - do you think it will work? Rāwiri — we are sailing! Rāwiri — we will find the*

*horizon, and my Mammy, and the light, and your voice! Rā — don't worry!*

Crashing waves, furious wind, terrible skies and the pitch of those climbing swells. The darkness. Oh, the darkness.

Memories, crowding in, filled her mind, her ears, her heart as she sank to her knees beside the curious little apparatus. The raft. Their raft.

She couldn't speak. There were no words. She could feel the doctor standing behind her, shuffling a little nervously. She turned her face up to him. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I hope this was the right thing to do, my dear."

Aisling crossed one arm across her chest to lay her hand on the doctor's on her shoulder. She squeezed it.

"Now, I just need to pop down to find my new little friend for a moment – I will leave you to reacquaint yourself with *this* old friend yourself."

She smiled at him. He was giving her privacy for the emotions roiling within. The sackcloth was rough in her hand as she pulled it completely away.

And there it was.

Everything came flooding back. All of it. Tears blinded her eyes as she climbed into the centre of the little structure. The roughness of the branches was uncomfortable beneath her, but it didn't matter.

*I must find the horizon, the kissing-place, because that's where the light is and where Mammy is.*

She remembered.

Mammy in the waters, lifting her to the life ring. Mammy's pale, wan face when they left Ireland, disfigured by that awful welt. Papa, striking Mammy, even though Mammy had tried to hide it from her. Papa – swinging her about when she was younger, when things were still happy, laughing and singing and chatting and embracing Mammy. The hills, the cottage in Connemara, the beautiful mists and the soft light, the stories – the people of the Sídhé ... and those final days, up on the ráth, Ráth Cuimhne, Mammy and Uncle Declan had called it – that awful, awful night when there was the terrible sound of someone wailing, keening, and they'd hurried down and there was Uncle Declan. Murdered. By her Papa. Her very own Papa who had wanted to kill Mammy, and probably her, Aisling, too.

Aisling wept, her face against her bent knees.

She remembered the song. She remembered the Irish.

Softness, beauty, magic. Comfort. Her soul-song.

She remembered.

Rāwiri. Her one friend in Akaroa. Losing him, losing Hinewai, losing the doctor, after everything she had already lost.

The Whittles, and Randall, and the horror of that last afternoon in their home.

Mrs. Bellamy. Help. Hope.

Aisling's face felt raw. *A right sight I must look*, she thought.

Another wave of grief hit. Subsided. And then it was done.

Sniffing, and trying to catch her breath, she opened her eyes and ran her hands absently down the length of the branches beneath her. She picked at the combination of string and flax still lashing them together. It was matted with dirt, and disintegrating. Her fingertips brushed against something smooth. She paused. Her breath caught in her throat.

It couldn't be. She dug into the pieces of string more eagerly, and they came away in her hands. And then – there. There it was.

Pale sage green and grey, intermixed with dark jade. Ethereal.

Worn into smoothness by generations of O'Carroll women. Mammy's voice echoed in her ears.

It was her Connemara worry stone.

She picked it up and wrapped her fingers around it and clutched it to her chest.

There were no tears left to cry.

The stone sang once again.

## 67.

Doctor Barton did not let Aisling go from him in a hurry that evening. He paused at the foot of the stairs inside the Bruce Hotel when they were heading up to bed. He took one hand in his, and his eyes misted up behind his spectacles. His voice was thick as he said, “Aisling, my dear, you have no idea how wonderful it is that we have crossed paths again. It’s a silly fancy, and you’ll forgive me for being a sentimental old man, but ... you were the closest I ever had to a daughter, and you were precious to me. Still are, you know. You’re ... well, you were always ... special. I ... hope you know I never left you with the Whittles because I didn’t want you. I did. I just thought that you would be ... better off with a family who could look after you in the proper fashion. And ... oh, had things been different—”

She squeezed his hand back. She knew. Understood. It was an apology.

“Will you forgive me, my dear? Will you forgive me for not taking better care of you?”

“Oh, Doctor, there is nothing to forgive,” she said. “I knew, even back then, that you did what you thought you had to. And – and you had given me so much comfort after what happened. I never forgot that, never. And I am so happy that I found you again.”

Tears pooled in her own eyes then, too. He wrapped her in a fatherly embrace. Tight. Warm. Secure. She noted how feeble he felt, and let him go off to a bed with a lump in her throat.

She slipped her hand into the pockets of her skirt and rubbed her thumb against the smoothness of the stone.

What a day it had been.

## 68.

### Tír na mBan pt 1 The Land of Women

#### *Aisling*

*This place is the strangest of them all. It's an island, but it's not a normal island. Within it, the earth hollows downward, ever further downward, and it is dark. A pathway winds around, a spiral cut into the turf, and the grass that grows is sparse and punctuated with gorse. There is no sunlight. Which is fitting, isn't it? Of course there would not be. I hold the Cup of Healing once again. It is empty. My arm throbs. The pain grows stronger and stronger, until it's almost all I can think about. Pain. In my arm. The teeth of the dog. The grip of the Dark Shadow. The Fear Doirche. With every step I nearly slip. The pathway is not accommodating. It does not want me to go further. I can feel it. And like the pathway, a brisk wind circles around the inside of the hollow cone, cyclical, disorienting – my hair flies in every direction. There is nothing to hold on to. But I keep going, because I must keep going. This is the next place, this is where I must find Claiomh Solais, the Sword of Light.*

*I don't even know where to begin.*

*The colours here seem ... faded. Old. Tired. Like they have been robbed of their essence. Robbed, by something malevolent. Someone malevolent. It would fit, wouldn't it?*

*Tír na mBan, that's what Lugh and Lady Ragnailt said. The Land of Women. It doesn't fit.*

*How could a place ruled by women be so desolate?*

*My thoughts fly again to Enbarr. I have not seen her since my childhood. Would she come if I called her? It can't hurt to try. I shout her name, and the echo of it ricochets around the hollow, until suddenly the sound disappears as though the earth has swallowed it up. I wait. Look up to the grim skies above me. Cloud-covered. Ominous. It figures. I pull my shawl closer. The air is frigid, cutting into my skin.*

*There is nothing. Not a sound, not a sign of any other living creature but for*

*myself. No song, nothing of beauty to soften the gloom.*

*And so I grit my teeth. Keep walking. I remember Rāwiri. Think of his footsteps that first time I met him. The stick he had with him. A stick for fighting, a stick for walking. One, two. One, two. My feet keep time and I can almost hear his whistle fill the air.*

*Keep going, girl. Keep going.*

69.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – October 24, 1899*

A sour southerly blew, unseasonable for November. It cut through Aisling's jacket and she clenched her teeth as though to brace against the cold. Shards of shell crunched beneath her boots as she picked her way along the shoreline of the bay in the lowering dusk, and the first fat drops of rain began to fall. The gulls, still crying, circled overhead, despite the buffeting winds. Three. Raucous. What creatures for companionship.

There was not a soul in sight. A strange time to be out, perhaps. Fishing boats bobbed in the waters, tossed by the wind-chopped waves, dark indigo in the falling darkness. Dark indigo, like the fabric of her skirt and jacket. Dark indigo, like her sunless world.

That same tang of sea-salt ripened the air, and it brought back memories. A night like this, all those years ago.

A night with a storm sitting heavily on its shoulders.

A night when a little girl and a little boy thought they could sail a raft to the horizon and find her light, find her Mammy, find his voice.

A restlessness, an agitation, had her in its grip. It had begun to stir earlier that afternoon, after a morning spent quietly strolling the boulevard with Doctor Barton. They'd arrived back at the hotel, and Doctor Barton had retired to his room to rest. Aisling, likewise, had gone to hers, thinking to sleep too – but sleep didn't come. Instead what met her were shadows. If she closed her eyes, they were there, like they were back then. Dark shapes lurking behind her eyelids. Dark shapes with undetermined outlines. Dark shapes that disappeared when her eyes were open, but that lingered like suggestions of memories she couldn't quite grasp at any more. They'd hovered, the shadows, while the pair dined that evening – Doctor Barton making small talk about the changes in the township since he'd last visited, about the hotel, about the intervening years for him – but there they were, those shadows, just waiting waiting waiting.

Waiting, while she tried to answer the doctor's questions about the Whittles, tried

to talk about that man – about Randall – but she couldn't, not now, because instead of feeling like something from many years ago it felt as though it had only happened yesterday and she could feel the grip of his fingers on her neck again and it made her heart race with that old fear she thought she was free from.

*I can't breathe*, she had thought. *I can't breathe. It is not good to be here. I can't breathe.* And as soon as she'd been able to she had bidden the doctor good night, and hurried out, trying to out-walk the restless anxiety that was flooding her with nervous energy.

It was so long ago, she thought, as she began to reach the far end of the bay. So long ago that it happened. Why, then, did it suddenly feel as though it were yesterday? Was it because she had returned, even though she was in Akaroa, and not in Christchurch? She was older now, wiser, stronger – surely she had nothing to fear from the likes of him. And besides – she hadn't heard of him since. He would have married someone else. God help the woman. She, Aisling, had just been a passing obsession.

Randall. What a man. He was like these shadows. Darkness. Thank goodness she'd had the good fortune to slip from his clutches back then.

Memories. There they were. The dark shadows beginning to take clearer forms. She kept walking, climbing up the shore, crossing the road, and stepping into the edge of the woods again. Her skin tingled. Bracken crunched underfoot. The wind couldn't get at her as she moved into the shelter of the trees. Her cheeks stung still from its bite. The trees – it was almost as if they had been waiting for her, she thought. A strange sensation overtook her. It was two-sided, the sensation. A great peace flooding through her limbs and calming the nervous energy, but juxtaposed by an inexplicable sense of being in grave danger. How? How could both things exist together? But they did. She stood still and looked about. Soft outlines of tree and bush. Darkness. The scent of pine, stirring memories of awakening that morning of the run-in with the dog – the morning she first met Rāwiri.

The dog. She could feel it again, like back then. The air thick with danger. Dread. Run run run – you have to run.

A twig crackled behind her and she spun around, heart racing. There couldn't be anyone there. Could there? It was just a creature of the night, a hedgehog, a rabbit, a cat ...

*Run, girl, you must run.*

*Me oma koe.*

Hinewai flashed in her mind. Then Rāwiri. The bandaging of the dog's puncture wounds in her arm.

Demons and dog bites.

*Run, girl, run.*

*Caithfidh tú rith.*

The trees sighed, fighting back the wind.

Another crunch – from a foot not her own. A low, sinister laugh.

It wasn't. It couldn't be. It was impossible, she gasped, as she saw his outline emerge from behind a sheltering tree.

Randall Harrington. The dark shadow come to life.

She turned, and she ran.

## 70.

“That’s right, little mousey, run as fast as you can,” Randall called as he followed behind Aisling, keeping an easy pace, keeping her in his sight, keeping close, but not too close. This was too fun. The chase. That was the way it should be. One liked to toy with one’s prey, after all. Where was the girl going? She ran like she knew where she was headed. Farther away from the township though, that was all that mattered to him.

How funny. Here they were.

It wasn’t going to happen here, though. It had to happen back there. Back at the scene of the crime. Back in Christchurch. Here, he’d just subdue her. If he could ... stop himself. And he’d take her to Christchurch. And then he’d make her pay. He’d make her see the folly of that little misstep of hers all those years ago. She’d never leave him again. Hell, she’d never do *anything* he didn’t want her to do again.

Naughty little mousey.

There, it was time to put an end to this. He picked up his pace. She ran quickly, just ahead of him now, but she was tiring. He could hear her breath coming in gasps. He was so close he could smell the faint scent of her perfume. Like a princess from a fairytale, she was. No happy endings for her, though. Her hair shimmered faintly in the gloom, strands like finely spun gold falling loose from her chignon. He couldn’t wait to touch it, couldn’t wait to see it loose and free. His bounty. He licked his lips.

Time to knock the little mousey down.

## 71.

*October 24, 1899*

Doctor Barton couldn't sleep. His arm ached. He rubbed it and stared blankly out of the window into the midnight sky, enveloped by the warmth of the lamplight within, in stark contrast to the pitch black of the night. He pulled his robe close around him. Something felt wrong. Had felt off all day, behind everything, behind the conversation he'd been having with Aisling throughout it, even as they'd wandered along the beachfront earlier, exploring old haunts.

It was strange to be back. That much he knew. Everything looked much the same – yet different. Different names hanging over store fronts, different faces in familiar houses, little alterations here and there – and of course, the continuing growth of new buildings. It was disorienting. Discombobulating. He'd always liked that word.

He took off his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Moved from the window and put the volume of the latest medical journal he'd been reading back down on his bedside stand. Padded back to the window. Cracked it open slightly. It moved stiffly. Was it so little used? The storm that had threatened earlier had stilled to an ominous silence. The winds had died right down. It was so still that he could hear the waves softly lapping at the shore.

Was Aisling awake still, too?

He would check. He tied his robe at the waist over his pyjamas and quietly opened his door, moving out into the corridor, and knocked three gentle taps at hers. Waited. There was no answer. She must be asleep, then. Mustn't she?

He waited a little longer, fingers creeping to the doorknob, a moment longer – and then they fell away. No. She would be sleeping, that was all. He wouldn't disturb her. He was just a foolish old man being kept awake by the eeriness of the night. Such nights came and went again, and in the morning one felt awfully silly when the dawn broke and light filled the day once more.

Was he to be so easily spooked?

He climbed back into his bed and pulled the covers up under his chin. A sharp pain twinged in his chest. It had been bothering him all day. But it was nothing to be

concerned about. He was just tired. He shivered a little and his neck prickled. Like there was a presence in the room. But there was not. He had checked.

He closed his eyes.

Branches stretching towards him, calling, reaching, laughing, shrieking ... upside down, walking on the waves below the surface of the ocean as though the water were the air and the air were the water ... everything wrong, everything right, a sweet, sweet voice, a glimmer of white far, far away, was it Aisling? And then ... then—

72.

*Cillian*

It's chasing her that he is, that man, the one who hid on the boat. Knew he was up to no good. Chasing Aisling, my little girl, and here am I, stuck, on the wrong side of this bleeding fountain when all I want to do is climb into it, climb *into* that veil of water and find myself there too so I could kill him, kill that bastard, kill the man who would dare lay a finger on my girl like he is aiming to.

But I can't. I try, I try again and again, and I have called out to Fionn, but Fionn does not come, Úna does not come, and I can't save my little girl from her pursuer. I must do something! I must, I must, I must!

But what can be done, other than to curse the day that ever brought me to this place?

To curse the circumstance that ever brought me to this place?

To curse the man who ever brought me to this place?

Curse ... curse ... my own self!

It's me. It's all my doing that it is. She'd never be in whatever far-off land she is if I'd never raised the hand to Kitty that I did.

Oh, but could I just be in Aisling's place – I would give anything. Anything, do you hear that, Fionn? I would give anything! It's my own self – my own life – that I would be giving to take her place!

Let me do it, let me go to her! If you've let me see her in the fountain as I can, then I know you can get me to where it is that she's gone!

But that bleeding Fionn never comes when a man needs him, does he? Makes me writhe inside to *need* him. I'm not the brand of man to be needing help. But this strange place gets inside the head so. And it's only supernatural help that can be of any use, isn't it!

Anyhow, he'll come only for the fight. And it isn't time for that yet.

My hands are tied.

Oh, that I could take my wee girl's place. I wronged them both so greatly, Kitty and Aisling. It's my life that should be the price. Not Aisling's. She's lost so much

already.

Fionn. I could kill him for allowing this to be so.

“Well, Cillian, maybe it’s now that you’ll have your chance.”

Of all the bleeding things. Of course, here he is now, that infuriating Fionn, king of the fairies. Reading my mind as he keeps doing. But it’s too late, then, isn’t it. The water’s gone dark. Can’t see a thing.

“It’s too late. I can’t see her anymore. Too late – no thanks to you!”

“I think you’ll find that lateness is relative, Cillian.”

“What on earth can you be meaning by that? How could ... how could you show me such things and then expect me to stand by? How can you? I mean, Aisling ... and ... Úna ...?”

“We warned you, Cillian. You know it yourself – it’s your own actions that brought you here. You had to pay the eric-fine – you had to pay the price. We told you that. This is the price. It is heavy, but this is the price.”

“But how is that fair? It’s not the girl who should be suffering! This is my own doing. I know that. So let it be on me. I know you can stop this. I know it. You’ve brought me here, you’ve shown her to me, so you must be able to get me to her. It’s not too late ... is it? Please, I’m not a begging man, but by the gods I’ll beg it of you if I have to!”

“I won’t do that, Cillian. This is how things have to be.”

“You murderer! She’s an innocent girl! How can you stand by?”

“She’s a woman, now, Cillian. She’s not your little girl anymore. She wasn’t your little girl from the moment her fear of you swallowed her love for you.”

“How dare you! She’s ... she’s ...”

“... doomed.”

“Never! I won’t allow it!”

The man – this stupid oaf of a man – this... this... *fairy* – just stands there and looks at me with no expression in those grey-green eyes. It’s beyond infuriating. My blood is seething in my veins and by the gods if I had my axe ...!

“But you don’t have your axe, do you?”

He just stares at me, then, doesn’t he. Knowing my thoughts again. Uncanny. And there’s something else there now. The corners of his mouth twitch just slightly. Amused. He is amused. An evil bastard is about to attack my daughter, and Fionn, the fairy king, is amused.

“It’s time, Cillian.”

He steps forward. Our daily sword fight. Now. Of all times. It’s joking that he must be. And there’s just the one sword. His. Where’s mine, then?

“No sword for me, then, is it? ... Right. I see how it is. The fine. It’s me who you’re going to kill, then. Well, if that’s what you’re planning, then I beg that you’ll rescue my lass. Aisling, as the exchange.”

He hands me the sword, and he doesn’t answer my question. His eyes are dark now.

It’s *his* sword, not the one I have been fighting with.

Why would he be giving it to me? He holds no other.

This sword ... it’s ... it’s like nothing I’ve ever held before. Light as air. It begins to glow in my hand, to glow brighter and brighter, and it gets hotter and hotter, and I think I won’t be able to bear the heat but it ignites something in me and instead all I want is the pain that it’s causing, the heat of the fiery blade that’s beginning to blind me with its brightness.

“Go on, then, Cillian. You’re holding *Fragarach*. The Answerer. *Claiomh Solais*. The Sword of Light. The sword of Nuada, the sword of Manannan mac Lír, the sword of Lugh. Not many weapons can hurt me, but that one can,” he says. “Kill me.”

The blade sings in my palm. A chorus – deafening, it melds with the blinding brilliance, that song, and it’s all I can think of, it takes over everything, along with the brilliance and the pain; they’re so intense – so overwhelming – that I feel like I’m part of them, all of them, stepping into them, becoming the sword – I *am* the sword – and I’m going to kill him, Fionn, the one who is keeping me from my daughter, keeping me trapped here, and then I’m going to find her and kill the man who wants to kill her.

The blade. The blade wants to sing with blood. I will make it sing. Damn will I make it sing.

“Kill me, Cillian.”

It’s in my name. I’ve got to do it. It’s a mind of its own that it has, anyway, this sword.

Fionn stands so still. An easy target.

The silver of his tunic reflects the light from the blade – no, absorbs it – and he is brilliant too, shimmering as bright as the blade, inviting it, inviting it into his chest where its tip belongs.

Can almost taste his blood. Sets my veins on fire.

His eyes don't hold that amusement any longer. In them is a sadness. It's a sadness that for just a second makes me think its source must be the deepest depths of the world; the farthest stretches of the universe. It's a sadness that fills me with an ache and a dread like nothing I've ever felt before.

"Kill me," he says again.

But the song the blade is singing is mournful, dark, despairing now.

It's a song that I know.

It's the song from the ráth that night.

The song I heard the night I killed Declan.

The song of the banshee.

The song of death.

Can't do it.

I can't kill him. If I kill him, I kill Declan all over again, I kill Kitty, I kill Aisling. I live up to my name. I am a murderer – again.

But there's a death that's needed here. The very air around me demands it. A life for a life. It can't be anyone else's. I fall to my knees. The stone beneath me is cold, cold, cold, like it's holding on to all the death that ever was. That's where I belong.

The sword clatters to the ground beside me. It looks ordinary now, its blade just regular steel. Can barely speak. But it must be done.

"No, Fionn. I can't be killing you. It's you who must kill me. You must kill me and you must save my girl."

He stoops down slowly, and he picks up the sword by its jewel-strewn hilt.

It sings again.

## 73.

Run run run – the only words pulsing through Aisling’s mind as her feet took on a mind of their own and she sped through the woodland. Randall was close behind. The same distance, always, never closing in – she could not shake him. He was breathing easily. She could hear it. Hers was coming in great heaving pants and she knew that she could not keep up the pace.

Magpie – run.

Hound – run.

Boy – run.

She felt the rhythm in her legs like those of the little girl so long ago running through these very woods. The same breath behind her. The same knowledge that an attack was coming. Her hands tingled. The sound of rushing blood filled her ears.

And then it came.

He knocked her to the ground.

Hound – bite – no escape.

“Got you, little mousey.”

Voice in her ear, breath hot on her neck, she wanted to vomit.

Dirt in her mouth, the air shocked out of her – horror horror horror, what was he going to do to her? He had straddled her and pinned her arms behind her back, knees either side of her. He was laughing. She could smell the whiskey on him. She struggled. He held her firm.

A sickening crack.

Her arms went limp, loose, free.

A shriek, a scream, a wail.

Her body tingled all over.

The night on the ráth all over again.

She suddenly felt so light she distractedly wondered if she was going to float up into the trees. Everything spun as she raised her head. Stars – the moon – tall trunks and branches and – and – a face, all a blur, a painting, not real, somewhere else, she was somewhere else, she was in that other place ... the Other place ... what was it ... the ... Other ... the Otherworld!

Then all went black.

## 74.

### Tír na mBan pt 2 The Land of Women

#### *Aisling*

*As I circle down lower and lower into the heart of this island, the silence begins to be punctuated by the sound of soft sobs. It spooks me, that sound. It's in the air, and it comes from every direction. I couldn't even begin to trace its source. It is mournful, the sound. Unbearably sad. It speaks of loss, great loss. It makes me feel so heavy-hearted that even my limbs take on the weightiness, and soon I think I will sink into the ground. Only it isn't much further, not at all, until I have gone down as far as I can go, to the point right at the bottom of the hollow. My feet slip over the dirt, which barely holds a pathway at all now, and the light is so dim that I can barely discern anything at all. But faintly visible is a mound right in the centre, right at the heart. It is covered with faded tufts of tussock, and it rises up to my chest in height. Within it gapes a pitch-black opening. And now the sound of the sobbing seems to issue from inside that gaping opening into the ground.*

*I can feel my pulse racing in my neck, my heart thudding, and I have to bend, hands on knees, to catch my breath.*

*I cannot go into that opening. Everything inside me screams to beware of the unknown.*

*I close my eyes. Breathe through my nose. The air around me smells earthy, dank. I move closer to the opening. The sobbing voice disappears. Complete silence reigns again. How can this be the right place? How can it feel so ... hopeless? How can I walk into that utter darkness with nothing, no light, to guide me? What is inside?*

*Lugh's face appears in my mind. Lugh-of-the-sun. I begin to feel his warmth as I picture him. The ache in my arm begins to subside. Light in dark places. The Sword of Light. Hidden in darkness. It is fitting, isn't it, I suddenly realise. I open my eyes. Crouch down to avoid hitting my head on the boulders set into the mound around the opening. I creep inside, one step, now two, my arms stretched in front of me, feeling*

*for the sides, which should be within an arm's span, judging by the size of the mound from the outside. I shouldn't be able to stand at my full height, either, but I can. And I can't feel anything with my arms stretched out, not in any direction. I turn, and all is completely black. The opening has disappeared. I begin to panic. I feel as though everything is closing in on me. The only sense of direction is from the solid ground under my feet. I focus my attention on it. Stand completely still. Listen. Silence. I close my eyes, even though I cannot see anything with them open. I need the attention of my mind alone, something tells me. And so I listen. Harder. And finally – that sound of the sobbing again. It is beginning to turn into a quiet song. Still so sad. I think of the sirens of the old tales. Luring sailors to their doom. Is she luring me to mine, this voice? It is so faint I can barely hear it. But it is away somewhere to my left, and so I turn, and I follow it.*

*I follow, and follow, and follow. It is a cave, I think, but a massive one, or a network of such. Tunnels. Only this makes no sense, given its appearance from the outside. But that is the Otherworld for you, isn't it? I have stopped even questioning the nature of these spaces. Or even the nature of dreaming – what is real and what isn't. All there is to know is what is right here, now, and somehow, what I am doing feels completely vital and of the utmost significance and importance.*

*All of a sudden the voice is right at my ear and it becomes a whisper and it says "anois an t-am - now is the time." And it is gone. And with its going comes the faintest of lights, and the light is surrounding a pedestal set right in the centre of a great, gaping cavern. The cavern is like a gigantic dome, and in its walls are nine openings. I have come from one of them. And then as I look around, seven figures appear in seven of those other openings. The other two remain empty.*

*I remember Lady Ragnailt's words again. The seven cailleacha who guard the Sword of Light.*

*I swallow.*

*Where is the sword, and how will they test me?*

*One of the figures steps forward. She is ancient. As old as time, I think to myself. One gnarled hand reaches out to my chin. I stand still. She speaks.*

*"Welcome to Tir na mBan. The Land of Women. I can see that this is not what you were expecting, is it?"*

*The question feels rhetorical. Stern, serious eyes seek out mine.*

*"It is barren, here, because that is the plight of women in the place you come*

*from. It will become the beautiful place it once was when the Ninefold Goddess wields the Sword of Light.”*

*She pauses. “You are in danger, child,” she says.*

*I have no words in response. Who – what – is the Ninefold Goddess? The cailleach reads my mind.*

*“She is the three multiplied by the three. And the man who seeks you will take your life.”*

*She strokes my face before dropping her hand and grasping both of mine in hers. A fear grips my mind.*

*“It’s Claiomh Solais that you have come for, isn’t it? The Lady has sent you.”*

*I swallow again, and nod.*

*“She said I must get the sword and use it to kill the Fear Doirche. And she gave me back the Cup of Healing too, only – do you mean that it is Randall who is going to kill me? That can’t be so. How can you know such things? And surely if I know it, I can prevent it from happening?”*

*“These are questions I can’t give you the answer to, mo stór. The sword will be yours if it answers you when you call. Fragarach. The Answerer. It is not us who decide. It is the sword itself.”*

*“Then where – where is the sword?”*

*She studies me.*

*“You can’t see it?”*

*I look around. There is nothing else in the cavern save for the women and the stone pedestal. Nothing. Despair begins to fill me. It isn’t here.*

*“I can’t see it.”*

*“Are you sure, mo stór?”*

*The six other women step forward. They group themselves behind the seventh. The light begins to shift, change. It grows ... warmer. And I have the strangest sense that Lady Ragnailt is here, although I cannot see her. That this place ... belongs to her. I walk towards the pedestal. The women part to let me through.*

*I reach it. It is empty. I run my hands across its surface. They come away covered with a chalky dust.*

*The melancholy song returns. In Irish, the words are. It is so beautiful, now. Filled with longing. I can feel the seven women behind me. They begin to sing too. And then I realise that the first voice singing is my own. I can feel the reverberations*

*of my own voice in my chest, the feeling of creating sound, of a song that is beautiful, of music that comes from within with no thought at all, because it is what is right and what is needed. It is overwhelming. My own voice. I have never known such a feeling before. It as though I myself have risen up inside my own body, and for the first time my rational mind has taken note. I feel as though I have ... met ... myself. My true self.*

*We sing on. The light shifts, brightens. Then on top of the pedestal the air begins to shimmer, to swirl, and it pulses strangely with an ever-growing glow. It becomes so bright that I have to shield my eyes. Our voices stop all at the same time, as if of one accord. The light dims again.*

*And there. There it is. Suspended in the air.*

*A double-edged sword, luminous, its hilt jewel-strewn, with finely-wrought detailing.*

*Claiomh Solais. Fragarach. The sword of Nuada.*

*I reach for it. Its hilt is cold in my hand. It is light, as light as air. As I hold it, it shines brightly again, brighter and brighter and brighter.*

*“It is the Sword of Light, and it has answered, mo stór.”*

*The voice of the cailleach is hushed, reverent. I turn to the women and the same expression fills their faces.*

*Wonder. Awe.*

*Fear.*

*And then there is the sound of hooves.*

## 75.

It was just like the last time. Aisling's whole body shook. In the forest, on the ground, only this time it was the wrong end of the day – night rather than dawn. Fatal attack never arriving.

Again.

Too many moments like this.

And this time – this time she'd taken herself into the woods. No sleep-walking involved. And there had been Randall. And Randall was going to – she didn't know what he was going to do. Only that now he was gone and a warning rang in her ears that it wasn't over no not yet and don't you dare think it because I'm going to get you little mousey. She pressed her hands over her ears. *Make it go away.*

Her mouth carried a tang. Blood. Her tongue. She had bitten it when she fell. What had happened to Randall? Where had he gone? Why could she still sense someone close? Was he still there, after all? Waiting, so as to savour the experience?

She climbed to her feet cautiously, looking all about. Nothing. Everything spun, and she thought she would collapse. She clutched her worry stone close in one palm. As she bent, hands on knees, to still her spinning vision, the pounamu necklace swung out from the collar of her blouse. She had unbuttoned the top two buttons as she ran so she could breathe.

She still couldn't breathe.

There was the sound of a gasp. A throat being cleared. Footsteps crunching over the dead leaves – hesitant. Too hesitant to be Randall.

Aisling quickly straightened up, senses on high alert, ready to run again.

Dark brown eyes, dark hair curling over olive-coloured skin. Tall. Limber. A man. Māori. Concern combined with abashment dancing across his face. Her stomach fluttered with recognition. But it couldn't be – could it?

He spoke. "Aisling? Is ... is that you?"

Voice deep, melodious, warm.

"Maybe you wouldn't remember me – if it is you ... but it must be you ... that necklace ... your hair, I could never forget it ... Rāwiri, it's me, it is you, isn't it?"

The voice stopped, as if colliding with the words that had spilled out in a jumbled

heap.

She touched a hand to the pounamu – warm from her skin. Rubbed her thumb over her worry stone in her other palm.

Rāwiri. Words. It was he. Her old friend. He had found his voice.

Aisling stared at him. She could taste tears in her mouth, mingling with the blood. He took her hand. Tentatively reached for the pounamu. Held it a moment before he slipped it back inside her blouse. *Safe. Protection.* She looked up into the warmth of his eyes. The sun, the sun was in those eyes back then, and it still was. He smiled. Awkward, a little nervous, but with his smile her body stilled.

Safe. With Rāwiri. Just like old times.

PART VIII.  
Magh Dá Cheo  
*The Land of Mists*

## 76.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – October 25, 1899*

As Aisling slipped through the front doors of the Bruce Hotel, the grandfather clock in the dining room chimed once. One o'clock in the morning. All was shrouded in silence, apart from the ticking of the clock. Steady. Like a heartbeat, she thought. Like Rāwiri. He had escorted her home, and left at the doors. *We will talk*, he'd said. Oh, the marvel of hearing his voice. There had not been much conversation on the way back. It had been too close a call with Randall. The more she thought about it, the more afraid she became. He was still out there. Still in Akaroa, most likely – and probably had watched the pair as they had made their way back. He must have known where she was staying. He wouldn't drop it. She knew that. She was in danger. And probably the doctor too, by association.

“You're the sleep-walking girl, aren't you?”

A thickly-accented voice jarred her out of her reverie as she tiptoed through the lobby towards the stairs.

There. Beside the French doors with their frosted glass, opening into the dining room. A man – the same one who'd been studying her disapprovingly over the top of his newspaper that morning. How could he possibly know that? She was sure that it had not happened again since leaving the ship, her sleep-walking.

“Excuse me?”

“You're the girl. The one who used to sleep-walk many years ago. The little child who couldn't see the sun. It's you, isn't it? I knew you were familiar when I saw you this morning.”

And then Aisling remembered. Round glasses, round beady grey eyes, sallow skin. A way of looking at a person like he could see into secret places where he was not invited. Her skin crawled as she felt rather than saw him studying her. The doctor's acquaintance from her girlhood. The German scientist. Doctor Baumann, wasn't it? Thought he might be able to help with her condition. He hadn't. He'd always looked at her as though she would be a most fascinating experiment could he just prise open her skull and peer into her mind. Dissect it.

That same look was in his eyes now. Calculating. Thirsty.

She avoided his gaze and turned to go upstairs. “I’m sorry, I’m not quite sure what you mean. You have mistaken me for somebody else, perhaps.”

“Oh, it is no mistake. You are here with Doctor Barton. Just like before. I could help you, you know. I have helped others like you.”

No. No, he could not. She wasn’t anyone’s problem to solve. Especially not now.

“Thank you, but I do not wish for your help. I must bid you good night, now.”

So saying, she hurried up the stairs, feeling him watching her ascend the entire flight. She reached their rooms. The doctor’s door was closed. He would be sound asleep. Good. He had been looking so tired since they arrived. She hurried into her own. Her hand shook as she turned the key in its lock. Prey. That is what she felt like. Randall’s prey, the German doctor’s prey – people, men, rather – thinking they had a right to her. No. No one did. She softly approached the window in the dark room, and carefully looked out into the boulevard below. It was empty. The threatening skies of earlier had cleared and the winds had stilled. The turbulence had passed. The moon soared high in the darkness. It didn’t trouble her now, the moon. It felt like a friend.

No sign of Randall. It didn’t mean he wasn’t watching. She drew the curtains, turned on the lamp and sat on the bed. Her mind was racing. Too many things to think about. The terror of the attack, the wonder of Rawiri having been there at the right time – how had he managed that twice? It seemed too great a coincidence. And then the scientist in the lobby when she got back. Had he been watching her too, waiting? Did he think she had sleep-walked that very night?

It was all too much. She would not be able to sleep. Would the lock on the door be enough to keep her safe? She drew her knees into her chest and hugged her arms around her legs. Breathe. Just breathe. The Irish lullaby Mrs. Bellamy had remarked on floated into her mind. She began to hum it to herself. Comfort.

Drowsily she remembered the song that had sung her up to the ráth back in Ireland the day Uncle Declan had died. Her soul song, she’d called it. It came before the other song. The wailing one. The one that felt too familiar. The one she had felt rather than heard earlier that evening. The song of anguish.

She let the loveliness of the lullaby take over instead. Rested her head on her knees.

*Everything will be all right. Everything.*

Just breathe.

\*

Shuffling footsteps in the hallway outside the door woke Aisling the next morning. There was an urgency to their movement. A low hum of voices – and interjected exclamations. A knock at her door. The doctor, probably. Groggy with sleep, she slipped out of bed and wrapped her robe about herself. A beautiful day it was going to be, she thought distractedly. If only she could experience the sun. They would go walking, anyway, she and Doctor Barton. And discuss further about Hinewai. And – and Rāwiri! The recollection of everything that had happened the night before flooded through her again and she paused a moment, one hand on the dresser, to catch her breath, feeling adrenaline surge through her limbs.

The knock came again. “Miss O’Carroll?”

It wasn’t the doctor. She unlocked the door.

Mr. Houghton, the hotel’s concierge, stood before her, nervously twisting a handkerchief in his hands. He was not a tall man, and today he looked even shorter than he usually did. Shrunken into himself. His eyes darted to her face and then away. What was he about?

“Ah, Miss O’Carroll, good morning—”

Aisling was bemused. She could hear footsteps hurrying about in the doctor’s room. What was going on?

“Good morning. Is everything all right, Mr. Houghton?”

“Ah, that is to say, no – I am afraid I have to break some bad news to you. It’s Doctor Barton, you see—”

“Doctor Barton? Is he unwell?”

Mr. Houghton looked at her with pitying eyes. His face glistened with sweat. She felt sorry for him because he clearly did not want to tell her what he was about to, and what she could feel the truth of creeping up her spine.

The cry of the banshee.

“I am afraid Doctor Barton has ... passed ... during the night. I’m awfully sorry, Miss O’Carroll. You have my sincerest condolences—”

“But – but – how can that be? He was perfectly well yesterday, perhaps a little tired, but – how? What ... what can have happened?”

Randall flickered through her mind. He couldn't have. Could he?

“We have another doctor staying with us, Miss O'Carroll, a Doctor Baumann, and he is with Doctor Barton now. He says he thinks it was probably a heart complaint or something of the like. He says it looks as though he went peacefully.”

It was too much to bear. The doctor. He was – he had been – like a father to her. How could he be gone? He couldn't be. He had only just come back into her life. It was too soon. She rushed from her room, brushing past the concierge so awkwardly inhabiting his skin, and into the doctor's room. Doctor Baumann rose from where he had been leaning over the bed as she entered and turned to her. It was not sympathy that she saw in his expression as he raised an eyebrow at her, it was – what was it? Opportunity? She pressed her lips together and ignored him as he smiled politely – cloyingly – and left the room.

The concierge stood close behind her, waiting, uncertain.

Brimming over with emotion, she almost bit his head off as she snapped, “Leave! Leave us alone! Close the door behind you!”

Stumbling over his feet, he turned and fled, pulling the door noisily closed behind him.

77.

*Cillian*

There's Ma, she's on her knees again, sweeping up broken crockery. Da is behind her, yelling, screaming, *Clean it up, clean it up you useless woman!* He grabs another plate from the shelf and he throws it at her and she dodges just in time and it hits the wall. Smash. Then it's her hair he grabs, and her face that he hits, and all I can do is sit quiet in the corner, quiet so quiet and hope that he doesn't see me because I don't want him to hit me next.

But he does see me. He comes to the corner where I am and I can practically see my knees knocking together in front of me with them drawn up as they are. He leans down and his oily hair falls over his forehead and his suspenders are tight over his white singlet. His chin is stubbled and his skin is pale and he looks – he looks – unwell, and *Son*, he says, *Son, you mark my words, you got to keep a woman in line, you got to keep a woman in line or they'll think they own you, and it's not a woman's place to be owning anything, let alone a man.*

He pulls me up by my ear. Drags me over to stand by me Ma. *See?* He bellows. *See? I keep her under control. Got her own plans she does, got her own plans, Mrs. Sullivan, thinks she can leave me, leave me and take you, but now she knows that can never happen. You see, son? You keep your Ma under control now too won't you.*

He sees my lip trembling and how I can hardly stand up straight and then it's his fist against my own face it is, and the muscles in his jaw tight and his lips tight and his eyes hard and then he's for spitting on the floor and he's saying *You're as bad as her, you are, as bad as a girl, you've got no backbone to ye and I'll have none of it.* One more belt. Then the door's a-slammin' and he's off and my Ma and me, we stay there all quiet-like for several moments, and then there's the sound of her sobbing and I wrap my arms around her neck, small boy though I am and try to stroke the hair from her face that is all red in the shape of a hand where he hit her. *Don't worry, my boy*, she says. *Devil is in your Pa, but he's not in you yet. Don't let him get into you, son, don't you be listening to him. You mind my words. Don't let the devil get you.*

But the devil got me, didn't he.

Just as Da wanted.

My poor Ma.

You try to run from the devil and the devil runs faster to catch you. Guess he wants what's not too easy to get now doesn't he.

Hard to say exactly where it began. Hated it, hated what Da did to Ma. Hated being helpless to stop it. Suppose that was it. I was so angry. Took my anger to school and connected it to any situation I could. *Fight fight fight*, the boys would all cheer, and I would come out the victor and sometimes I would be hit hard too but that would only make me more thirsty for the victory.

Then the red in my vision would clear and somewhere in me I would know it wasn't good, that violence, but there it was all the same. Made me feel better. Like a man, so. Like – like I could fight my own Da one day. Ma, she never said anything, but her eyes were sad when I came back with my tales. Made me writhe inside. Not my fault then was it.

Then I met Kitty. Full of life, she was, but delicate so. Beautiful. Like a butterfly, so pretty but so ... fragile. Think even back then I knew it would be too easy to crush her. But she made me hope for a better life. A happier one. Wanted to protect her like I'd wanted to protect me Ma.

But I never did, did I. Protect Ma. Couldn't. And ... then it was too late. She passed. Was a fever, an illness, but she'd never have had it if her body had been in better shape. Da didn't bat an eye. Laughed at me for cryin' as a grown man. Should have ended it then and there but I couldn't because he was my Da and I think I just wanted him to – to be – proud of me. Oh it shames me to say it, it does.

And so the anger was still there.

Tried to hold it back.

She was too precious to hurt, Kitty. And Aisling, the wee one, like a little beam of sunshine back then.

Then came the drink.

Was the drink that did it.

Understood, then, how it came to be with me Da. Liked the drink too, he did, and only ever hit her when he was deep in his cups. Whiskey. Reeked of it. And then I reeked of it. And because I couldn't take out all that anger on him I took it out on her, the love of my life, my Kitty. And she'd never done anything. Just so – so *vulnerable*, she was. Couldn't stand it. The weakness. Like fuel to the flames it was. And that

business with Declan who was so clearly in love with her, moonin' about all the time, and it was in her eyes too, that look, that look that said there was a space for him in her heart too, a space that should have only been taken up by me, her husband, me – Cillian Sullivan. Thought she could leave me, Mrs. Sullivan, leave and take the girl, but oh no oh no she could not. History repeated.

And there was an end to it.

The red never left my vision. Took over with the whiskey.

Devil in my veins.

Couldn't see clearly until – well, until ... now. Here. With Úna and Fionn.

Ashamed it is that they make me feel. Deeply ashamed. Did what I swore I'd never do.

Hit a woman.

Killed a man.

Became me Da.

And now there's Fionn, and Fionn's going to kill me, he is. With his shining sword. That I gave back to him because I would not kill *him*. Couldn't, so.

Funny how everything flashes before you when you're near the end. Can sense Fionn there, right in front of me, his sword in his hand still, glowing bright so bright, the angel to kill the devil in me.

Funny how it all fits in just a few seconds – those memories, those thoughts.

The light from the sword grows and grows and it's filled this whole cavern until I can't see a thing but the light, and there's the sound, that awful sound of the banshee again, and a great whooshing, and the feeling of a torrent of wind against my face and my body like it wants to pull me apart because it's angry like Da – but then it stops and I'm on my knees and I'm alone in a great open barren space with the wind whistling and the grass blowing horizontal and the sky so grey it seems like it'll crack with the heaviness. Sharp and heavy they are, wind and sky, like the deepest grief, is all I can think as I stare up.

Aisling fills my mind. Kitty is there too, her memory soft against my heart, my heart that I wish I could tear out for what I did to her, to them both.

Kitty. My beloved.

And then there's a voice in my ear.

“It's time to pay the eric-fine, Cillian.”

I spin around but of course there's no one there.

I can't see Fionn. Or the cavern.

The darkness begins to arrive.

## 78.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – October 25, 1899*

Later that morning, Aisling sat on the park bench in the grass-covered area outside the Bruce Hotel with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and a hot cup of tea in hand. Rāwiri was beside her. His elbows were on his thighs and he stared pensively off into the waves of the harbour, chin in his hands. Neither of them spoke for a time. Then he broke the silence.

“I’m so very sorry, Aisling.” His voice, gentle like the earth. “I know that he was very dear to you.”

“Thank you, Rāwiri. He was. I’m not sure I realised quite how much. And – we’d only just crossed paths again, not even a month ago, after so many years; after that last day when I left....”

“I remember that day.” He stroked his chin, gaze fixed on the hills across the water. “You looked so small and so alone, sitting on that bed when I came to say goodbye. It made me so sad, Aisling. So sad to see you like that. And – I felt awful for abandoning you, for jumping from the raft that night. I knew better. You were just a child—”

“Oh, Rāwiri – we both were. Just children. And it was my terrible idea in the first place that put us both in such danger. That caused – such a rift between you and your mother. I’m so sorry for that, Rā – I truly am.”

His hand paused in its motion and he moved his jaw from side to side, his muscles tensing.

“Have you ... seen her?” Aisling asked.

He was quiet for what felt like an eternity. She heard him inhale deeply. And wished she could take his hand.

“No. Not yet.”

“Will ... will you?”

He brushed the question off, standing and linking his hands in front of him in a stretch.

It wasn’t the right time. She was prying into his private affairs. And she didn’t

know this man, this grown version of Rāwiri. It was wrong to assume a familiarity with him when he – when he probably did not wish for such a thing.

He dug at the grass with the sole of a brogue as he turned back to her. He plunged his hands deeply into the pockets of his charcoal-grey coat, which he wore in such a manner that evoked nonchalance with style. Just as he had dressed when a small boy, the very first time she met him in the forest.

“I am worried about you, Aisling. I don’t like this. I don’t like that this man – Randall – is out there somewhere. He ran off last night. He’s – I have heard of him, in Christchurch. There are stories. No one will talk about them publicly, but all the same – they’re there. He’s married, but there have been dalliances. One with Maggie, your foster-sister, so the rumours go. And, well, rumours about a broken engagement from years back, with an Irish orphan girl fostered by Maggie’s family ... I wondered if that was you, Aisling. I tried to find out more, but I always arrived at a dead end.”

Now Aisling was silent. More had gotten out about her situation than she was aware. And Randall – she hated to think of him with Maggie. But she remembered their flirtation. Had he hurt her, too?

“Rawiri – what ... happened to you for all of those years? Where did you go?”

He smiled a little wryly and shuffled his feet, looking tentatively down at her.

“Remember how you kept my drawings after our little interlude at school together, in the days of the Viper?”

Yes. Of course she remembered. The broken ruler. Lizard-like Mr. Altham. Those pictures. They were still sitting at the bottom of a drawer in her dresser up in Wellington.

“I do, Rā. You had such a gift. No one could draw quite as well as you, no one was as good with their hands.”

“Well, I ran away. Not immediately, not for two years after you had gone. I was so angry that you’d had to leave, angry at myself for what happened, and angry at the world in general. I think my mother told you about my childhood once – about what happened with my father, with my grandfather?”

“She did, yes. I’m really sorry, Rāwiri. That must have been terrible.”

His eyes flickered away from her face.

“It was. You knew loss, Aisling, great loss, but so did I. And my people. But anyway – I left home, and I went to Christchurch. Not far at all. I thought maybe I might see you, that we might cross paths. But I didn’t hear anything about you in a

long time. Not for years, not until the rumours were swirling about Randall.”

“That breaks my heart! That you should have been so close! But what were you doing?”

“I took more of my drawings and showed them to an architect who was designing new buildings. He was a man of great vision. Loved new ideas, new ways. And old ways, too. Understood something of my people. Of our history. I ended up apprenticed to him, and over the years I took on greater and greater aspects of his projects, and now – well, you’re looking at a fully-fledged architect.”

“Rāwiri! That is so wonderful! I am not surprised. Not at all. You were meant for such things. And – and ... forgive me for asking, but when—”

“When did I begin to speak again?”

“Yes—”

“Honestly, it was not long after I arrived. Could hardly get by without being able to talk. People wouldn’t take me seriously when I was mute.”

He grew pensive again and glanced down at her.

“It was that night, you know. It was that night that did it.”

Aisling’s pulse quickened and her mouth grew a little dry.

“The – the night on the raft?”

“You had such faith, Aisling. That if we could just get to your horizon then you’d find your light and I’d find my voice. And that was part of it, your faith, but I also realised what I’d lost. I realised what it meant to me. What it had been to not speak at all – and to not speak my own language. Te reo. The language of this land. I never wanted – never *want* – to lose that again.”

His language. The language of this land. Hinewai and her words.

“Your mother said similar things to me long ago. About language. Your language. Mine too – the Gaelic. It is different, I know. But she talked of not losing our connection to our past, our ancestors.”

“Āe. She knew all along. I will talk to her of these things one day. But that is our story. What about you? Do you still see the light the same way?”

She toyed with the ruffles at the cuff of her sleeve. The light.

“Yes. It hasn’t ever changed. Not really. Everything is still dim. I don’t know what it is like to feel the sunshine or to ... see it. It just looks like a lighter moon. Not bright. Not warm. And – I think for a long time I began to believe that it was normal, that I’d never seen any differently, that it was all in my head ... but around the time I

found your necklace something shifted, it was as though some part of me somewhere inside remembered, no – reminded me of what sunlight is, or was. As though somehow unconsciously I had felt it and seen it again, as if I'd had a dream about it. It was so strange.”

Rawiri studied her face. She read a deep curiosity in his sun-holding eyes.

“And Wellington? How is life for you up there?”

Glad for the change of subject, Aisling explained about Mrs. Bellamy, and the shop, and the fabrics, and their little apartment above it, and her hands flew as she talked about their clients and the types of clothing they made, about living on Tinakori Road, the great hill behind it, the quiet reserve, and then that night—

Her hands dropped and her face drained of colour. She could suddenly feel it and it sucked the life from her. Randall. He had been there. That night. Watching. How she knew it she couldn't say, but it rang through every fibre of her being.

“Rāwiri, I think he might have been there. That night on the hill. I had walked in my sleep again. And the young doctor – Mr. Doyle—”

“You still walk in your sleep? And – the ... Mr. Doyle?”

“It's the strangest thing, Rā. I hadn't done it in years. I had felt so ... unsettled ... for a week, and then I found your pounamu necklace when it dropped out from the folds of Mammy's shawl – you will have to forgive me, but I hadn't worn it since the Whittles took it from my neck when I was a child. I hid it away from them after that. But when I found it I put it on again, and I haven't taken it off since. It ... sounds so foolish, but it reminded me of you, and those happier times, and how you ... were always there for me. I never thanked you for that, Rā.”

She took his hand, rough in hers. Ink-stained fingertips. Warm. Vital. Strong. He squeezed hers back gently.

“And after that, it happened again. The sleep-walking. I woke up in the reserve up the hill. I went to leave, there was a magpie, and then Mr. Doyle happened upon me and helped me home.”

“Hmm. But you didn't *see* Randall?”

“No, not directly. I don't know why I feel so sure he was there. That he was probably watching the store. But I do. Perhaps my sleep-walking self knew.”

There. They had slipped back into the old manner of talking. She could be free with him again. He was still being guarded, but she understood. There were things

that were not for her to know.

“He’s a dangerous man. And now – now you have lost your guardian, your friend. You will need friends, Aisling. You will need help. I will help you.”

She had forgotten. It had not been two hours, yet in speaking with Rāwiri she had become so caught up in their conversation that the doctor’s passing had slipped from her mind. She sank back down to the bench, crippled by the sudden ache in her heart, and Rāwiri leaned over her.

“I am truly sorry, Aisling. It is a difficult loss. You will get through this. This is so much that is happening. For you. In your life. But you are going to get through it. I won’t let that man hurt you.”

A watery smile for him. He was kind. To be so solicitous still after so many years apart. But at the same time – a quiet voice murmured in her mind.

*This is your battle to fight. Yours. You wield the sword.*

What was that?

## 79.

Little mousey got away for now, didn't she. Another saviour in the mix, Randall thought, and a Māori one at that, with a nasty right hook that he could still feel in the back of his brain.

It didn't matter. Made it all the more fun didn't it. Plot twist. Complications. And that old man, her companion, the doctor, had upped and kicked the bucket! Couldn't have planned it better if he'd tried! One down. Now he'd have to deal with the Māori boy too, but he had his ways. He might have to be more direct. Perhaps a bullet. Yes. That'd take care of him if he got too close again. He'd watched them having a nice cosy little chat outside the hotel earlier, so clearly he was going to linger like another love-lorn pup, just like that other chap in Wellington, the insipid one. Regular little love-triangle she had going on there then didn't she. Hussy. Making all the lads fall at her feet wasn't she, spinster though she was? Not Randall though. She'd be falling at *his*.

There would be the funeral for the doctor next – though God knew who'd attend – and then she'd probably return to Wellington. Well. She wouldn't be doing that, would she.

Old Māori woman wouldn't see her. That was what she came down for. A bizarre business. He'd found out when he went to have a little chat with the Bellamy woman while Aisling was off on an errand after that night on the hill – he'd pretended to be a customer, even went so far as to order a coat, had to coax the secrets out of the old lady somehow. All it ever took was a smile and a wink and a compliment or two and you had them eating out of your hand, the womenfolk. It was laughable. Pathetic.

Fascinating, all of it, really.

He couldn't wait to get these claws out again.

He was watching, waiting. He was ready to pounce when the time was right, and it'd be soon, he could feel it all the way through his body and he could already taste it. Her blood.

Kill the boy and then the coast would be clear.

Next time there wouldn't be any messing around.

## 80.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – October 31, 1899*

A small funeral was held for the doctor the Tuesday morning following at the Methodist church up the back of the township. Aisling sat alone near the front, her hands clasped in her lap. The unsympathetic pew was hard and uncomfortable beneath her. Light streamed in through the stained-glass windows, decorating the floor with patches of saint-shaped colour. She fidgeted as she let her gaze follow the beams back from floor to source. It made her ill at ease. Another reminder that things were not as they should be. Not in how she saw, not in how things were panning out. First Hinewai wouldn't see her, and then the doctor – her friend – had passed away. It was all wrong. She was tired of the tragedy. Tragedy that only seemed to raise its head when she tried to stir herself from the weightiness of her apathy. But there was Rāwiri. That was a wonderful thing. And the raft. Finding her worry stone again. It was in her hand now, its oval surface smooth and warm. Funny how now it felt more foreign than the pounamu, yet – like home, at the same time. A home she'd forgotten how to know.

She thought about Rāwiri as she heard rustling sounds behind her. People were filling the pews. She turned around in her seat. There were so many! How could that be? She turned back and studied the pulpit with its red plush carpet and communion table. The candles on top of it, unlit. The white lilies. And – the coffin. Closed. Remembered her grandmother and her fancies about death and the Otherworld and heaven and that awful dream and the piercing cry. The keening of the Connemara womenfolk. This was a world apart. Everything far more – subdued. Tame. Polite. Detached.

There was a sound next to her, and Rāwiri slid in beside her, dressed in dark colours, a black neck tie loosely looped around the collar of his white shirt with its rounded tips. He brought with him the scent of fresh air, of the pines. Aisling breathed in deeply. He touched her hand lightly. It was all going to be all right.

The service was a blur of motion – words – benedictions, the muffled sounds of sobs and handkerchiefs being drawn out, and then it was over. The burial would

happen that afternoon.

Aisling stood just outside the door with Rāwiri. Imagined she saw a dark shadow slipping behind the surrounding trees. Looked again – nothing. A trick of the light.

And then a familiar voice behind her.

“Aisling, my dear! Oh, Aisling. We came as soon as we heard. It isn’t good to be alone in such times.”

Mrs. Bellamy! And with her, his face sympathetic and eyes soft, was Dermot. Aisling’s chin began to quiver and Mrs. Bellamy enveloped her in a lavender-scented hug. Dermot stood just behind, at the ready.

“How – how on earth did you hear, did you get here in time? And what – what about the store, and Dermot – the practice?”

“There, there, dear. We booked tickets shortly after your telegram came through. The doctor was dear to Dermot too, of course. He has closed the clinic for a week. And I’ve done the same with the store. We’ve come to help sort everything here, and then we’ll take you back, my dear. We’ve already arranged for the tickets. If that’s what you’re wanting, of course.”

“You are too kind, Mrs. Bellamy. I am so happy that you are here. And yes. Yes – things here ... have not worked out. Hinewai, she ... wouldn’t see me. And then – you remember me talking about the man I was engaged to in Christchurch? Randall? Well – he found me, somehow, and he – he attacked me the night Doctor Barton passed, and ... oh, it was awful. I think he is still around, and I am afraid of what he will do next.”

“Randall? How could he have known? That is so peculiar.”

“I think he might even have been in Wellington – might have been watching us, Mrs. Bellamy.”

A recollection flickered across Mrs. Bellamy’s face.

“Tell me, Aisling, what does this man look like?”

“He’s – tall. Dark hair. Athletic sort of build. Well dressed, wears gloves and a derby hat. Carries a cane, I think.”

Mrs. Bellamy drew her breath in sharply.

“Charming? In a sort of ... in an ... *oily* way?”

“Yes. That’s him exactly.”

“I think he visited the store, Aisling. Asked questions about you on the pretext that you were an old friend. Already knew then that you were going to Akaroa. I found it

so strange. But I mentioned Hinewai. Lord knows why I said it, but I did.”

“Then he *was* in Wellington! And he must have been watching the store, and – he must have been there up on Tinakori Hill that night, just as I’d suspected!”

“I think he may well have been, child. I’d the feeling the whole week before that someone was watching the store. But thought it was just a fancy.”

Mrs. Bellamy’s face had become grey and drawn.

“I’m so sorry, child. I should have known.”

Dermot’s jaw tightened and his eyes flashed. He’d plunged his hands deep into his pockets in frustration. His voice was quiet when he spoke.

“I saw him, too, I think. The morning you came to fetch Doctor Barton, Mrs. Bellamy; after I’d helped Aisling back down from the reserve. I didn’t think much of it, but remember a darkly dressed man following not far behind you, and he paused a moment at the gate while you hurried inside. I was at the window. Then he moved on, swinging a cane.”

Aisling began to breathe heavily. How could this be happening? How had he found her in the first place?

And where had Rāwiri disappeared to?

\*

The thud of earth hitting the doctor’s lowered coffin brought the shift. That, and a wailing keen that had commenced the moment the preacher began to speak. It came from behind a tree at the back of the cemetery. It continued for the entire burial. It continued while the small group of mourners dispersed, talking quietly amongst themselves, and evaporated off back into the fabric of their usual afternoons. Dermot and Mrs. Bellamy stood either side of Aisling throughout the ceremony. Rāwiri was nowhere to be seen. It was odd. Aisling had one hand at her neck, touching the pounamu, and the other in the pocket of her skirt, wrapped around the worry stone. Both were warm to the touch. Both almost seemed to vibrate, and the vibration became a buzzing in Aisling’s head that wrapped itself around every word, every movement, every glance in her direction. It wrapped itself around the sound of the keen.

And then she was alone. Mrs. Bellamy and Dermot left her to stand off at a

discreet distance so she could bid her own private farewell. She knelt at the edge of the grave. Silent rivulets of tears fell from her cheeks to her hands to the ground. Doctor Barton. Friend. Almost a father. The hollow, yearning ache rose within. The knowing and the not-knowing. The loss of all those years apart. Mammy. The fading of the light. The heaviness of life. And Papa. Now it was Papa's face in her mind, contorted with rage, then transformed by joyful laughter and song as he danced with her on the sand of the shores of Connemara. Papa. Anguish. Hurt. Betrayal. Loss. Defeat.

The sobs wrung themselves out of her body. The lament of her soul.

And then they stilled. Her eyes opened a little. The sound of the keening had drawn close. Her tear blurred-vision saw bare feet next to her on the grass, bare feet coloured with the richness of the soil, bare feet below a plaid skirt, and then the sound stopped. A hand on her shoulder.

“Eh, mokopuna. Kaua e tangi.”

Little girl, don't cry.

It was Hinewai, and right behind her was Rāwiri.

The air was thick with something. Spirits. Mysticism. Aisling felt as though Doctor Barton were standing right there with them. Smiling. Standing between Rāwiri and Hinewai.

They had brought the proper farewell.

\*

“It has changed, girl. The spirit that had you back then. It is different now. It is – trying to leave.”

Hinewai sat with Aisling on a bench at the foot of the cemetery behind the church. It was late afternoon and all was still. Rāwiri had left them to talk, promising Mrs. Bellamy and Dermot that he would escort her back to the hotel later.

Aisling shivered next to her. Spirits. The dark shadow. Clinging to her, the one she used to feel as a child. Those thoughts and feelings had faded with her youth.

“What do you mean, Hinewai?”

“Remember, girl? You worried that you had the darkness inside?”

“I ... do remember, yes. But that feeling ... changed. For such a long time all it

has been is this – this heaviness. Like my body is heavier than it should be. Like everything just takes so much effort. And – I couldn't feel excited about anything. I couldn't *feel* anything. Not until things began to change when I found Rāwiri's necklace."

Aisling glanced across at Hinewai. She still wore her hair loose, but it was deeply streaked with grey. Her face was lined. Her eyes were serious still, and wore the wounds of many years in their depths.

"Can I see it, girl? Rāwiri's taonga - the pounamu?"

Aisling slipped it out of her blouse and over her head. She handed it to Hinewai. Hinewai wrapped her fingers around it slowly.

"My boy. Gave you this."

"He did. Before – before I left Akaroa."

Hinewai stroked it. Then handed it back.

"I think it has protected you, girl."

Aisling silently let its string fall back over her hair, feeling the weight of the stone fall back next to her heart.

"I think so, too."

And then she drew out the other stone, the smooth piece of Connemara marble. This she placed in Hinewai's open palm too.

"Ah. This is the other stone. The one you lost. You found it again. This means it too was waiting for you."

"Hinewai?"

"Āe?"

"Why – why was it that you ... changed so much in how you saw me, back in those days? I know I had encouraged Rāwiri into doing things you didn't approve of ... the raft ... but was that all it was?"

"There were things you couldn't understand, girl. Things you couldn't see that were around you. And him. Dark things."

"Are – are they still there?"

Aisling's skin tingled as Hinewai took her chin in her palm, and looked deeply into her eyes. She writhed internally. This gaze also was seeking into the depths of her being, but in a completely different way to the opportunistic German scientist.

"I don't know, girl. It is like I said. I think it is time for it to leave, the darkness. I don't think it has a hold on you anymore. But I wonder if you know how to let it go."

You were so sad back then. It held you down, that sorrow. Grief is a heavy weight. But now – you have the sadness still, but the sadness is growing lighter. Because there is something else beginning to grow.”

“Then why – why does everything feel so ... upside down? In disorder?”

“It’s what happens when change comes. Change is never comfortable. But it’s necessary. I think now you begin to have some hope again.”

“Funny. Mrs. Bellamy and I were talking about change not long ago. And she said that she thought something was about to change in my life. And I suppose it has – I mean, I have met Rāwiri again, and you, *and* Doctor Barton ... just in time, really, now that I think of it that way. But – I am not sure that I have much hope beyond any of this now. That – that ... I could see again as I once did.”

“To truly know hope, you have to truly know the darkness. You have to know what it is to have no hope at all. To have been at the bottom of the pit. You know what that is. You were there. For a long time. For many years. Because of the things that were taken from you, the things you lost, when you were so young – too young to know how to carry them. But it is time to move away from that, girl. You will find the way.”

A lump in her throat. Frustrating. How could she find the way through it all? You couldn’t just *will* such change to happen.

“Just allow it, girl. Don’t try. Allow.”

And then Hinewai stood, and Rāwiri emerged, and all three began to walk back to the Bruce Hotel.

They didn’t see the dark shadow following them close behind.

## 81.

*This is the beginning of the end.* The words fluttered into Aisling's mind at dinner that evening with the glowing of the lamplight around the dining room. Mrs. Bellamy and Dermot were dining with her, and Aisling laid down her knife and fork as the thought took hold.

Outside the window, the waters glimmered in the evening light, lit up by the setting sun. That Aisling couldn't see. Sun and moon, always the same. The moon that stole the sun. The thick night sky that swallowed the daylight.

She thought about the horizon. The way the skies met the water when one could see out to the far ocean. The kinship of two different things. The kissing-place, she had called it.

She felt Dermot's eyes on her and she turned her head back to the table, her face downturned.

She had not spoken with him yet. She had been too shy, too hesitant, too unsure if what she had felt had been just ... a mirage. Like hope. So she had been avoiding catching his eye. And there was the complication of Rāwiri. Rā – so close at one time that he had been like a brother. And now he was back. And they still shared the same bond, even though it had changed. What was he to her now? What was she to him?

She glanced up at Dermot. His gaze arrested hers. Eyes dark-grey-soft, shimmering like the waves outside, lit by the lamplight instead of the sunset. Neither of them spoke, neither smiled. She could sense him as though he were in her mind. *Beidh gach rud go maith.* All will be well. She let the Irish words swell and subside in their soft cadence. Then he smiled, and she felt herself carried away on the tide of the warmth it carried. As though he were holding her with his thoughts.

*Beidh gach rud go maith.* All will be well. I am here.

He was completely different to Rāwiri.

If Rāwiri were the earth, Dermot was the sky. If Rā were the sun, then Dermot was the moon. But – she had spent her whole life held captive by the moon. Did she still wish for that?

Eyes locked, both stood simultaneously. Mrs. Bellamy laid down her cutlery too,

and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin.

“Well, I suppose you young ones have some catching up to do. I’m dead beat, I am, so I think I’ll retire for the night. Mind you don’t keep her up too late, Dermot, and I need not remind you of the danger out there.”

Both snapped out of their reverie and Dermot assisted Mrs. Bellamy with her chair. Mrs. Bellamy drew Aisling into another tight embrace.

“He’s a good one, this young doctor fellow. So is this other young man, Rāwiri. But mind you keep to your own path, my dear,” she whispered in Aisling’s ear. “Keep true to your heart. Don’t think too much. Let it lead you where it will.”

Allow. Don’t try, allow.

She lifted her hands to her cheeks. They were flaming hot. And all of a sudden all she wished was to be out under the moonlight with Dermot and to tell him the whole story and to hear his Irish and to know that he understood, that he would always understand.

He moved around the table to her. *Mo aingeal na gealaí*, he whispered under his breath. *My angel of the moon*. She slipped her arm into his elbow. Just as she had on Tinakori Hill. He drew her close as they walked slowly out of the dining room, through the lobby, and into the enchantment of the falling night, and her whole body tingled because being with him did that to her.

Like he belonged to the place her mind went when her body walked in her sleep.  
The beginning of the end.

## 82.

What a lark – there were the two of them now. The two lover-boys. The other one had come. With the dressmaker-woman.

But Randall had a plan. And a pistol. And a vision.

A deadly combination, he liked to think.

Aisling had left just left the hotel. Her hair was all twisted up and pinned to her head. She shouldn't wear it that way, Randall thought. Hiding its light. He couldn't wait to loose it. To run his hands through that river of gold. Wrap it around his fist.

She was with that pale, insipid one. The young doctor.

He wondered what the Māori boy thought of that, then. He was the one to worry about, really. He could still feel his knuckles in the socket of his eye. All the more reason to get rid of him then wasn't it.

Soon. Soon, Mr. Harrington, soon. Get rid of the lovelorn pups and the girl will be yours. And you'll make her pay for running away, oh yes you will.

It's time, little mousey. It's time.

## 83.

It felt as though everything had eyes. The trees, the boulevard, the park bench, the sand, even the pebbles themselves on the beach. Beady eyes, watchful eyes, judging eyes – a network of communication to feed back to him, to Randall.

Aisling shuddered. Dermot felt the movement and closed his hand over her fingers tucked under his arm. She nestled in closer. Exhaled. Her breath made a silver-gossamer cloud in the night air. Dermot reached out his other hand as though to catch the mist of it.

“You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

She peeked up at his face, illuminated by the moonlight. His grey eyes seeking out hers, sparkling with stars like the night sky. Concerned, sympathetic.

“I suppose I am, yes.”

“I wish I could just – just take it all into myself, your fear, so you didn’t have to feel that way anymore. I wish – that man would be after me instead.”

The matted hair around the back of Uncle Declan’s head where the axe was embedded flew unbidden into Aisling’s mind. Her stomach turned.

“Oh, don’t say that. Never say that. No. He’s terrible, Randall. He’s an awful man. But – he could have killed me already if that was his purpose. He has had many opportunities. I shudder to think it. I’m – I’m not so much worried for myself as I am for everyone else.”

Dermot leaned closer, as though to whisper in her ear.

A crack shattered the still night.

He fell to the ground, ripped from her grasp.

Everything went black.

84.

Magh Dá Cheo Pt 1

The Land of Mists

*Aisling*

*I have fallen into the moon, it's all I can think, so long have I run from it and so long has it been all I have known, the moon and her light, and now it is that I have fallen into it. How does a person fall into the moon?*

*You have not fallen into the moon, a voice inside my head says, you're not in the moon, you're not in the moon because you are the moon, you are the moon the moon the moon —*

*I am not the moon.*

*You are Úna.*

*I am not Úna.*

*You are Lady Ragnailt.*

*I am not Lady Ragnailt.*

*You are Enbarr.*

*I am not Enbarr.*

*A shriek in my ear, coming as though from the inside out instead of the outside in.*

*Bright bright light – this cannot be the moon.*

*It is not the moon, and I am not the moon, because here is Lugh, I can see him, he is walking towards me and he smiles and he carries the sun with him and in him because he is the sun. He touches my eyes and I close them and then I think it is just best if they stay closed because I don't want to see what might happen next, what I dread is going to happen next, what I know is going to happen next.*

*I'm holding the sword. And the cup. And I feel as light as air, so does the sword, and the cup is full, full full full to the brim of don't-spill-it healing. Cup of Healing. Heal the princess. Free the captive.*

*Heal your heart. Free yourself.*

*There's a sound of panting that fills the air, like a dog after running quickly, a*

*thirsty dog, and oh, it's me, it's me who is panting, and it's me who is out of breath.*

*Two women – the Lady Ragnailt and Úna, it's they who come towards me now, the sun and moon themselves too they are, the Lady with her golden hair and Úna with her dark – and they smile too and they reach out their hands together and touch my arms, my arms with my burdens, and I can feel their words slipping through my skin and into my veins and into my heart—*

When the time comes don't run Aisling don't run but face the darkness and hold the sword, hold it high high high let its light shine, the sword will know what is needed and you will know what is needed and you will be the one to end it and don't worry because you will not be alone because the host will be with you, the whole host hiding hiding hiding in the mist, the host that you cannot see—

*All of the words bounce around my mind and then the sword lights up in my hand and the water in the cup glows a strange gold and the two are linked, I know, the water and the light, and then the darkness begins to roll in and I can hear Papa's voice and this time I am not afraid of him because I can hear the fear in his, the fear in it for me, something there that says sorry sorry sorry for what I did to your Mammy and to you and now it is time for me to be your Papa and to make amends—*

*The sword is light but now I begin to feel heavy and there's the black mist at my ankles and it wants to swallow me and it feels like death and it is creeping up my legs and up my stomach and soon it will reach my head, my mouth, my eyes, and there's the Voice, that horrible Voice, the Voice of the darkness because it is the darkness, it is the Fear Doirche, the Dark Druid himself and he has come to claim his prize, he says—*

*Run run run, say my feet, stay stay stay, says the light in my veins—*

*Aisling, where are you where are you where are you echoes Papa's voice in my head—*

*It's here that I am, Papa, tá mé anseo, oh please oh please won't you come and help me?*

*Teastaíonn do chabhair uaim! I need your help—*

*I'm coming, mo stór, I'm coming—*

## 85.

It was late. Aisling was sitting in a chair. Her wrists hurt. They hurt because of the twine that cut into them and held them trapped to the wood of the chair's back. She thought no, no, this is a dream – this might be the sort of dream I have when I walk in my sleep – this can't be real, it is too horrible, if it is real then what happened is real and Dermot is dead and Randall has me and oh, God, this can't be happening—

But it was happening. There was the taste of blood in her mouth again. Her head ached abominably. There was a sticky wetness to the side of it. Ah. That was where the taste came from. She struggled. But he had tied her down too tightly. Her ankles too. She was in a dark room. He was not there. Not right then. She would have sensed him if he was. His darkness. Evil. Her head spun still. But she looked around and her eyes began to focus and what was blurry started to take on form. Picture frame on the wall. A great mirror above a fireplace. It was too dim to make out the pattern on the wallpaper but it looked like it must be tiny floral posies. Why did this feel familiar, why oh why oh why—

Back against the wall, pinned to it by him, a hand at her throat all those years ago and please don't do this Randall, please don't, it isn't right, and that leering smile and that voice in her mind that says *got you little mousey got you got you you can't run now—*

He had taken her back to that place. Oh, God. To the Whittles' house. Only it was clear no one had lived there in a long time. Everything was in disorder. Covered in thick dust. The room smelt dank and stale.

She struggled again. It was no use. Her breath came in short gasps. She closed her eyes. Imagined the sun oh the sun the warmth of the sun – it filled her mind and her skin began to know its warmth too and with the warmth there was the tempering of a coolness that was the refreshment of water, the two together, the two meeting in the middle, the water below and the sun above, the water and the light, the light and the water—

Then the door opened slowly. She kept her eyes closed. Heard footsteps. A languid laugh. Close, by her ear. He pulled out her hairpins. Ripped Rāwiri's

pounamu from her neck. Where was her worry stone?

It didn't matter now.

*Got you little mousey.*

Papa, oh Papa, was all she could think, and wasn't that strange because Papa wasn't here and Papa had the Weight-of-the-World that made him do Bad Things and that made her so afraid back then and why should she call for him—

Papa, oh Papa, please help!

*Bheith fós, mo stór. Mura bhfeicfeá ach an t-óstach atá in éineacht leat.*

Be still, my darling. If you could only see the host that is with you.

86.

*Cillian*

Oh, God, where's my girl, then? Where's Aisling? I can sense her as though she's right nearby, but I can't see anything, because all around is this infernal black mist and it's wrapping around my wrists and my body and my mind and it's all dark – but I know she's in danger again, my wee girl, and if I'm here it's because I can help her, and oh curse this all, where is she?

Aisling, my girl, where are you?

Hold on, wherever you are, Papa is coming!

## 87.

### Magh Dá Cheo pt 2

#### The Land of Mists

##### *Aisling*

*In the end, when darkness comes at you all you can do is be still. When everything else falls away, as it has, there is just me left with the sound of my own breath, and what I hold in my hands, and the black mist that swirls. I'm not falling anymore. I'm standing.*

*Life is in the standing.*

*I am in Magh Dá Cheo, I have realised. The Land of Mists.*

*And I am here to defeat the Fear Doirche. And heal the captive princess.*

*All my senses are focused on what is happening around me, now. I have sent out my cries for help and help has not come so now it is up to me, and the words still shimmer inside me that I must let the sword do the work.*

*Don't think. Allow.*

*I remember the soldier outside the King of Magh an Ionganaidh's castle. It was the same then. I stood, and it was enough.*

*Only – I think that was the soldier's plan back then. It wasn't time.*

*Now it is.*

*The mist begins to take on a form again. I remember him. The red flames for eyes. Everything else about him black as pitch. The Fear Doirche. The Dark Druid of the Sidhe. My own Dark Shadow. He is here.*

*It begins to rain. Thick clouds have gathered overhead – are they thick with anger or with sorrow, and is it their wrath or their grief that is overflowing, I wonder, as I turn my face up to feel the water falling on it.*

*Menacing. Heavy. Cleansing.*

*I drop my head back down. He is here now. The moment has come. I am wrapped in darkness and I am breathing it in and he stands close so close so close that I can feel his breath on my forehead. My feet will not move. My arms will not move. I*

*cannot move them to lift the sword. I cannot even blink. I am frozen because he has used his darkness to paralyse me and oh, how can I fight if I am paralysed?*

*I close my eyes. There is a song in the darkness. The song rides on Enbarr's back, I think, in the corners of my mind, and her beautiful silver-white coat gifted her by the moon fills my eyes-closed vision like a waft of fresh air in this godforsaken place.*

*The song makes its way through my body and it's the song that I am breathing now and not the darkness and then it begins to come out on my breath, my breath that should be exhaling what is toxic.*

*But it is the song, it is my song from the ráth, it is my own Irish lullaby, but there are other words too, words I don't know, words that sound like Rāwiri and Hinewai and I can feel them there too, like the ground beneath my feet, and up above there is Mammy and Declan, and here I am in the middle being held by the earth and the sky, me with my Sword of Light and my Cup of Healing, and the water and the light are all that is needed.*

*I still can't move but it doesn't matter. I am at peace inside. The sword glows again. Brighter brighter brighter. And the darkness grows darker darker darker. They have taken the war inside me, the darkness and the light, and it's a fierce war because the light has to cleave the darkness in two so that the sun can rise again.*

*The sword hums. It is filled with the song too. The song and the light. It is ready.*

*And then I hear the chorus behind me. They sing the song also. A myriad of harmonies. There is a deep voice I know that is so familiar but so unfamiliar because it has been so many years since I heard it and then I realise it is Papa, Papa is here, and Papa is leading the singing with his beautiful Irish voice singing the Gaelic and there, I can hear Mammy's voice too, and she is with him and if I could see them I know that they would be holding hands—*

*And there is Úna and Lady Ragnailt and Enbarr and Lugh—*

*If you could only see the host that is with you—*

*The princess is waiting, they sing, she is waiting for you to free her—*

*There is triumph in my body, all through it, every muscle and sinew and bone and my skin tingles with it and my mind reverberates with it and then there, there is the call, the Dord Fian, the battle cry of the Fianna, and there is the sound of many many hooves, and oh, it really is time and I have broken from the trance and my arm plunges the sword forward, deep deep deep into the heart of the Fear Doirche, but just the split second before I reach him I can see that this he has not expected because*

*who could ever break his trance, who could ever free themselves from the darkness  
when it was so absolute?*

*I could not. But the light could.*

## 88.

### *Cillian*

That darkness, it takes over everything. Draws down so deeply inside of me that I can scarcely breathe. The devil, it is; the devil in his blackest form, the devil that fills my mind and tells me of killing and of death and of the dark way being the only way because life, life isn't for the light because the light is false and hope is false and nothing ... *good* ... can come of such things.

But it's beginning to clear, it is. That mist. Comes out on my breath. Don't want to draw it in again. Put my hand over my mouth to try and stop it. Think I will retch.

And then there's a song I can hear as though it's coming from far, far away, so beautiful, so – so lonely, it is. The voice of a woman, singing. It aches. Oh, how it aches, that song.

It's a song that I know.

It's a song we three used to sing when Aisling was just a wee one, her and Kitty and me. Her own lullaby, we called it. We'd sing it when she called to me in the still of the night, scared and shaking, suffering from the night terrors, so Kitty would say. I'd hold her close, so close against my chest, until I could feel her heartbeat slow and hear her breathing slow too – until the shadow had passed. Used to have them too, I did, those night terrors – only in mine there was a great big black dog with teeth bared that would always be chasing me for the biting of me in my dreams.

But that song. That song. The mist is beginning to clear, as though it's pushing it away. I can't help but sing too. My hands are shaking. And then there are other voices, voices all around. Another that sounds so familiar. I'd know it anywhere.

Kitty.

The mist clears further still. Barren branches from barren trees stretch towards me. It is as though life has fled from this place. Not even a blade of grass in sight.

I can't look behind me because what's in front of me stops my voice and my feet in their tracks.

A still, fallen form on the ground. A woman. She doesn't move.

No. No, no, no.

## 89.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – October 31, 1899*

The doors to the Bruce Hotel burst open just on the final stroke of ten at night. Mrs. Bellamy turned from the bottom of the staircase. What was this? A man, breathing heavily, carrying another who was unconscious, stood in the lobby. Blood dripped from the unconscious figure, a dark pool quickly forming on the lobby floor. For a moment she stood rooted to the spot as a chilling understanding flooded through her.

“Help!” Rāwiri shouted, stumbling towards her. Jolted back into herself, Mrs. Bellamy felt her body begin to move as if of its own accord, felt her hands reach towards the figure Rāwiri carried, felt her arms support Rāwiri as the two of them hurried upstairs and laid the unconscious man on the bed in his room.

It was Dermot. And he had been shot. They quickly removed his jacket and his vest, and then there beneath them was the white of his shirt tainted thickly with the red of his blood. It was not good. Her hands trembled as she gingerly lifted the shirt. He had been struck to the left of his abdomen and the wound still bubbled with blood.

“He doesn’t have long,” Rāwiri panted. “But I can’t stay – Randall – it was him, and he has Aisling, he took her, I have to find him, find where they went before it’s too late—”

His eyes were wild and filled with fear. Mrs. Bellamy reached for him and took his hand in hers.

For a moment silence filled the room, a blanket of temporary peace.

“Go, Rawiri. Go. And may God be with you. It’ll be a miracle now if you can get to her in time.”

Her hand to his chin, his eyes dark and glimmering with tears, intermingled with anger. And determination.

“I will find her. He will pay.”

As he hurried from the room, Mrs. Bellamy rang the bell. Not two minutes later the concierge was at the door, panting.

“Houghton – you must find a doctor, and quickly. This man does not have much time. It is of the greatest importance.”

Mr. Houghton surveyed the scene and paled and backed out of the room, stammering, “Yes, yes of course, yes – I will call for Doctor Baumann.”

It would be hopeless, of course. If a miracle would be needed to find her precious Aisling, then a miracle would most certainly be needed here. She could see from looking at Dermot that his time was running out. He had lost too much blood.

Her pulse rang in her ears as she pressed a folded pad of cloth to the wound to try and staunch the flow.

Everything felt desperate. Futile.

Who could have foreseen that this – *this* – was the great change she had sensed in her bones not two weeks before when it all began, when Aisling had been in that strange temper?

What had they awoken?

She sighed and brushed Dermot’s hair back from his forehead with her free hand. He was as white as anything. The dear boy. He mustn’t die. He mustn’t. There was some link between he and Aisling, that was as clear as day. But then there was that other boy, Rawiri, too ... how was it all going to end?

Her fingers fluttered to her throat. Aisling. Oh, the precious, precious girl. She prayed that Rawiri would reach her in time. The thought of her with that man – with Randall ... it was too awful. It made her stomach turn.

But right now, there was nothing she could do. Except to help Dermot battle for his life.

Where was that doctor? What was Houghton doing?

The thought apparently begot action, because at just that instant Doctor Baumann strode into the room, doctor’s case in hand, beady round eyes fixed on Dermot. She didn’t like the man, but he was going to have to do.

## 90.

*Christchurch, New Zealand – November 1, 1899*

There was a knife, its blade bright in front of Aisling’s eyes. She focused on it. The silver of the metal glowed luminous in the pre-dawn light beginning to creep into the room. A knife. Everything had slowed, each second ticked by like a minute, Aisling thought absently. Her mind had slowed too. It was filled with an inexplicable peace. It was this place, this situation, so clearly mirroring the one she could now remember.

She remembered every single one. Every dream. Every experience. Every night-wander. The duality of walking amongst trees and feeling the carpet of leaves and needles and grass at her feet at the same time as being in the *other* place – the beauty of Úna, Enbarr, the Lady Ragnailt, Lugh, the Cup of Healing, and oh, the Sword – the Sword of Light! Claíomh Solais. She could picture its blade even as her eyes were fixed on the sharp edges of the knife Randall was brandishing before her in that slowed-down time. Claíomh Solais – its blade a million times more brilliant and lustrous than this paltry thing in front of her.

She fixed her mind on the brilliance of the Sword of Light.

She laughed.

He tried to hide it, but he was angered.

“Funny, is it? We’ll see how you’ll be laughing soon, my dear.”

He had pulled a chair in front of hers, its back to her, and he straddled it, sitting down and crossing his arms over its top, resting his chin on them and studying her. He had removed his jacket, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up to the elbow above muscled forearms. He still wore his black derby, pushed back on his head at an angle. Strands of dark oily hair had escaped and fell slickly over his forehead. His eyes glittered. The corner of his mouth twitched. He was enjoying this.

*It’s the play before the kill*, she thought. She did not care. Her mouth was dry, her throat parched. It was hard to speak but she did anyway.

“You don’t scare me, Randall,” she said. And smiled.

Strange – her body felt so light. Her mind felt vaporous – as though it could slip out through her eyes and her mouth and off into the ether, off into the Other—

She closed her eyes again. Light was beginning to dance behind them with the growing light of the dawn in the room. There were colours there that she had not seen in a long, long time. Colours swirling and dancing with such joy, such delight—

She began to sing in Irish.

And she could hear other voices begin to fill the room.

“Shut it!”

Her voice, thin, melodic, beautiful in the stillness of the room. He didn’t hear the other voices. Just hers.

“I said, shut it!”

She was annoying him. She was not afraid like she should be. He hated it. She could feel that through every inch of her body, tied down though she was. He lived his life to dominate others. To force them to submit to his will. But she would not bend to his will, oh no.

She opened her eyes and met his gaze. She would not stop singing. Not for him, not for anyone.

Too far. He snapped.

He leapt from his chair and it fell to the floor with a loud slam, and there was the blade flashing again, and in the other hand was a pistol, and he was leaning over her and he had grabbed her hair and was pulling her head back, her neck stretching in a graceful arch beneath him—

The light! The light! The light!

Golden liquid honey, rose-coloured with the dawn streaming through the window—

The sun! The sun! The sun!

The other voices swelled and grew and there was a great chorus all around her and the delight, oh the delight—

The door crashed open, its handle hitting the wall behind it, and a shout shifted through the beautiful golden light and then a loud shot ripped through both the shout and the light and there was pain like nothing she had known before—

PART IX.

Tech Duinn

*The House of Donn*

## 91.

### *Cillian*

Kitty as a young lass, beaming at me with such pure joy on our wedding day, flowers in her hair, that simple white dress made for her by her own Mammy, the sun choosing that morning to break from the grey gloom of the days before – we danced, oh how we danced, and I thought back then, *Cillian*, I thought, *Don't you dare go and destroy this, don't you dare become your Da*. Her face – lit with a beautiful glow such as can only come from within, a glow that danced out on her eyes as I swung her about the floor with the music of the fiddle behind us. Mesmerised, I was; couldn't believe my luck to have such a girl on my arms, to have such a girl wish to marry me. Yet she did. Chose me over Declan. *He's like a brother to me*, she'd said. And maybe that was how it was.

Let my jealousy run wild I did.

Let it steal her away from me.

Let it kill Declan.

And my bride. My poor, beautiful bride. My Kitty. *A chuisle mo chroi*. The pulse of my heart.

It beats loud in my ears now, my heart.

The woman on the ground, no longer hidden by the black mist.

I can feel my voice in my chest – singing, it is strange because I can feel it rather than hear it, and it's the feeling of it that undoes me. My own voice. As though the singing were becoming a healing. From the inside out. This voice of mine does not sing a lament. It sings joy and it's a joy that feels incongruous with this situation, because how could there be joy in the same space as death, as it's surely death that's lying in front of me.

I kneel down by the form of the woman. She is still, her back to me, curved into herself.

Blood. Pooling below her head.

I can't see clearly any more. Tears cloud my vision.

I reach for her shoulder, this woman.

Aisling, Kitty, Declan, all the damage I ever did swims through my head and now my song is thick with the grief of it and so are the voices of those behind me, those who have never stopped singing for as long as I am singing, even though the voice of this woman – this fallen woman – has stilled.

He dealt her a horrible blow, did the Dark Shadow. There was a great flash of light but before it I could see him towering over her and she holding her hand up high and such light there was coming from the brilliance of a blade, a sword, I think, and then it flared out like lightning with such a crack as though of thunder, and both were so complete, the light and the sound, that it felt like the world – this strange world – must have been riven in two with it. But just before that he had struck her. I felt his strike as though it had pierced my own flesh. And such a sick sense of knowing it brought with it.

Death. The price paid for life.

I shake her shoulder a little. There is no movement. I turn her gently onto her back. Oh – oh it is too much. Golden hair, eyes closed, skin fair, and a horrible horrible red line at her throat.

It is Aisling. My wee girl who is small no longer – Aisling at the age her Mammy was when I last saw her.

I look up to the skies and howl. There is nothing else to be done. How can I bear it? The pain of loss? And suddenly I know that that is what I have done all along – pushed everyone near me away so I didn't have to bear losing them. And then – I lost them anyway.

There is a slight movement beneath my hand.

She is not dead!

I look back down at her but it's hard to see properly because my eyes are fogged so with tears.

*Boys don't cry.*

I shake her shoulder again but then it occurs to me that her hair is not golden now, it is dark, black as the night sky, and it seems to me that it is Úna lying here, and Úna who is stirring slightly, Úna who still lives! But what of Aisling? Why – why had I thought this was her? Where was she?

But Úna – Úna. Suddenly she feels closer to my heart than its own beat that rings in my ears.

Úna.

I remember the deer I chased in the woods that first day.

She looks up at me. The wound at her neck is weeping. It is her precious life that is running from it. I wrap my arms around her. I think of all of the times she tended to my wounds after fighting Fionn. Her tenderness. How I sought her out that very first day in the forest because I'd been bewitched by her beauty.

"Hello, Fionn," she says, her voice barely a whisper.

Fionn. I am not Fionn. I am Cillian.

"It is you, Fionn. I am glad that you are here. That you came. I was waiting for you. For ever so long, don't you know. Ever so long. You fought against yourself and you won."

"Shh, shh," I say, because my throat is thick and suddenly I understand.

I look at her face again and there's that beautiful rich scent of lily-of-the-valley, and then it is not Úna in my arms but Kitty, my own darling Kitty, and there's a great weeping welt on her cheek, a welt that I know the origin of exactly, and I bow my head over her in shame.

"I'm sorry, Kitty, my love, I'm ever so sorry."

She is so thin in my arms that I fear the wind will snatch her away from me. I lift a hand to the welt – to my handiwork. She grasps it feebly with her own. Silent tears stream from the grey depths of her eyes.

She smiles at me.

"All is forgiven, Cillian."

But it cannot be. I deserve no forgiveness. This – *this* – all of it – is my fault.

Then another voice breaks the stillness of the air.

"Give her the Cup of Healing, Papa."

A hand reaches over my shoulder and in it is a beautiful silver flagon. It is empty.

And Aisling – my wee girl Aisling, a child, as she was when last I saw her – kneels beside me. Her eyes are solemn as she looks up at me, her curls flowing over her shoulders. Oh, but how my heart aches. The two most precious parts of my life.

She raises the flagon to me.

"Papa, you must give it to her before it is too late."

She reaches to Kitty's neck and her hand comes away wet with the brilliant scarlet of her blood. She holds it over the cup, and drip-drip-drip, three drops fall into it.

"You know what is needed, Papa."

I know what is needed. I, a grown man, cannot stop the great sobs that are coming

from my lungs – I don't sound like myself, not at all. But I know what is needed. I put the cup of the ground and my face is above it and there, it is my grief that is beginning to flow into it, and it mixes with the blood, and then there is water – bloodied water – in the Cup of Healing.

“Papa, you must give it to her right now.” Her voice is trembling, my wee girl's. I put an arm around her shoulders and draw her into my side, close, ever so close, and the warmth of her little arm is around my back and it gives me such strength as I've not known before.

I raise Kitty's head a little. Her eyes are already growing dim. Her face is like the moon, and I think to myself that the moon it is that's had the claiming of her, all those years ago, even right now, because I stole the sun. And then hid from it myself.

I take my arm from Aisling's shoulders and tilt the cup to Kitty's lips. A little flows between them and into her mouth and the rest runs down her chin and her neck and over that awful, awful wound.

There is a lilt in the air. The song has returned. And it is Aisling and me who are singing it, her tiny child's voice threading through mine like a thread passing in and out of fabric.

We stop of one accord.

It is done.

I look to my side but the child is gone and then I look to the woman in my arms and it's not Kitty, it's not Úna, it is the grown Aisling again, and the roses are beginning to come back into her cheeks as her beautiful golden hair is lit with the rising of the sun.

“*Go raibh maith agat, Papa,*” she looks up at me and says in Irish, the warmth of the sun in her eyes.

“Thank you.”

92.

Tech Duinn pt 1  
The House of Donn

*Aisling*

*Everything clears. The darkness dissolves into the air, and the air itself shivers, and it begins to glow, and the ground beneath is kissed by the light, and it too begins to glow, and then it's as though a black and white world remembers what it is to know colour again for grass begins to grow, and it is green, green, ever so green, and it floods upwards and outwards, unrolling over the hills like a blanket and there is the sound of the stars laughing even though it is now daylight and the moon, the moon is kissed by the sun, and the sun, oh the sun is rising, and she is covering everything in her golden light and warmth as she creeps over the surface of first the ocean and then this new green earth little by little – she is rising because she cannot help herself, because she can't be held down any longer, because she is buoyant with the joy of living and being the light. And then the grass begins to beget bushes and trees and brooks and rivers and lakes and then there are the insects and the birds and the animals, and oh, it is all filled with life, precious life! And the moon – the moon tiptoes away. She knows her moment has passed.*

*It is time for Samhradh. Summer.*

*Summer has come back.*

*I have found her.*

*And then I am not on land, I am standing on the waters at the very edge of the ocean, they hold me up as though I were as light as a breeze, and they wet the hem of my skirt and they caress my feet, and all around me is the light, wrapping me in it, its life all around me and the infinite waters below.*

*I laugh. And laugh, and laugh.*

*I have found the horizon. Where the sky kisses the ocean. The kissing-place.*

*I can see the sun.*

*I can see the sun.*

*It is so very warm.*

*Everything is golden.*

*I am golden.*

*My breath comes out in golden clouds. The edges of these clouds shimmer with all colours of the rainbow. A rainbow itself dances through the air – ethereal, every colour melting into the next, swirling and dancing with the joy of the new day.*

*And then I am back on the land again. In a new place. A rock-covered island, rising up to a sun-golden castle at the highest heights. It is like the castle of the King of Magh an Ionganaidh - nine perfect facets rising to meet to one point, but here, at the point, is the brightness of the sun itself.*

*Nine facets. Nine locations. And this place is the ninth. The last I will visit. I know it, I feel it, and it settles with a finality in my veins. Soon the doors to the Otherworld will close to me. For the rest of this life.*

*And the Fear Doirche has gone. For good.*

## 93.

*Akaroa, New Zealand – November 5, 1899*

It was a curious thing how quickly all could change. And how it had changed. Randall was gone. Rāwiri hit him square in the back with a bullet a split second after Randall had sliced Aisling's neck with a blade. She didn't remember much of it – it was all hazy and it swirled about her mind in snippets of images that for a second would flare up and then die away again. A mercy, she thought. Dermot said that Rāwiri must have startled Randall so that his hand lifted just enough for the slice of the knife to not be fatal. And so her life was saved. By Rāwiri – again. The third time. It made her think of the magpies as she lay quietly in bed. Black and white. Sorrow, joy. Never just the one thing. Always mixed.

The bandage at her neck itched. She was tired of lying still. There were plans in her mind, plans she'd not brought up with Mrs. Bellamy or Dermot or Rāwiri yet. She didn't know how they would react. But the more she thought about it, the more she was resolved.

She needed to go back to Ireland. It called to her. After all that had happened. Especially now that she could remember the visions or dreams or ... *were* they really visitations?... that she had when she sleep-walked. Especially after the last one. Where she saw Mammy, and Papa, and even Uncle Declan again.

She must go home, she had to know what it was like now. She missed it. Even though she had been so young when she left. But it was in her spirit, so. And in her bones. Ah, she remembered that too. The conversation with Úna when she and Mammy were staying in the cottage at Ráth Cuimhne, and she had gone up alone on to the hill. Ancient bones. History. And those thoughts mingled with Hinewai's words about land and tongue and ancestors, and she knew that Ireland was where she needed to be. To begin to make sense of being *here*. Where she was. In New Zealand.

It could just be a visit. She might come back again. Who was to know? But it seemed to her that life was for the living, and now that there was *such* living to be had, she wanted to live it to the utmost.

The sun streamed through the open window and she threw back the covers, being

careful not to move her head too much, and she went to stand in the warmth of the light. Liquid honey colouring her skin gold. So beautiful. So novel. She thought of Dermot. He was beautiful, too. A moonlit beauty from the poetry of his soul. Doctor Baumann saved his life the night Randall shot him. She had no recollection of that at all, she did not remember walking out into the night with him.

It was funny that this sunlight should cause her to think of him. Her sunlight. The miracle of it. And he, the moon.

There was a soft toc-toc-toc at her door. “Aisling?” a voice called quietly.

It was Dermot, as if by thinking of him she had conjured him up. He moved slowly. His wound troubled him. It had only been a week, so he should not have been up at all.

“Ah, but I am a doctor, Aisling,” Dermot smiled, reading her thoughts. “I know when enough’s enough.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you certain of that?”

He laughed and then winced and moved to stand close behind her as they both gazed out to the harbour. She closed her eyes. The warmth of his proximity and that of the sunlight filled her with a steadiness and peace.

“Dermot?”

“Yes?” He had moved closer, his voice was at her ear and his chin brushed her cheekbone. He slipped his arms around her waist, tentatively.

Aisling swallowed. She leaned back against him a little despite what she was about to say. He drew her close.

“I am going to go back home.”

“Yes – and so am I, and Mrs. Bellamy. We’ve pushed the sailing back another week, I hope you don’t mind?”

His thumb stroked the fabric of her shirtwaist.

“I don’t mean *that* home, Dermot.”

“Then – then ... you can’t mean ...?”

“I do. Ireland. It – I can’t explain it, but it ... calls to me so, Dermot—”

She could feel the pulse in her neck flickering quickly, ever so quickly. She did not want to lose this – whatever this was – but she would not change her mind.

“Ah. I see. I ... see. And – this means we have to decide ...?”

“I – I’m sorry to land this on you, and at such a time, but I *have* decided.”

“You have decided ... what? To go? To go, but ... without me?”

His voice had dropped. She could feel the question in it in the way his arms had tensed.

“I must go alone. And there is a sailing Monday next.”

And then his arms dropped away too.

“No, Aisling. You can’t mean it. I would go with you too, you know that.”

“I do know that, Dermot, and I know this seems so ... sudden, especially after what has happened, and after we ....”

“Will you come back?”

She turned to face him. He had stepped backward, just out of her reach. His face was bewildered, sad – resigned.

“I don’t know. I – don’t know, Dermot.”

A battle flickered in his face. Then it was gone. His shoulders sank but he stepped forward again and closed the distance between them.

“You must do what you need to do, Aisling. I understand. Really, I do.”

He took her chin in his palm for just a second, eyes on her mouth and then back up to meet her watery, anguished gaze, and then he was gone, and her chin and her room held the memory of him and she wanted to cry out for him to wait, that maybe she had it wrong – but she didn’t, and it was too late, and the next morning he had already packed up and left by the time she made her way down to the dining room for breakfast.

\*

Mrs. Bellamy shook her head at Aisling.

“Dermot shouldn’t be travelling yet. I tried to tell him as much. Too eager to get back to that clinic of his, he is. Said that things had changed. What happened, my dear?”

And now Aisling had to tell her too.

Her arms shook as she leaned on the back of a chair.

“I’m going home. To Ireland. I don’t know when – if – I’ll be back.”

There. The deed was done.

Mrs. Bellamy’s face – bewildered in mirror of Dermot’s.

“But the poor young doctor? And – Rāwiri?”

“I told him. He understood. Rā – he has a sweetheart, Mrs. Bellamy.”

“Does he indeed? But he—”

“He remembered me from childhood. That was all. He was like a brother to me back then. He still is. And he looked after me as though I were his sister.”

Nonetheless, Aisling’s eyes prick with tears. Mrs. Bellamy gazed at me with puzzled eyes for a moment before her gaze softened.

“My dear – forgive me if I’m overstepping, but as I see it ... you have learned very well to avoid letting good things into your life. Are you certain you are not running from ... from happiness?”

It was hard to speak. Aisling’s throat was so full of tears and pain and sorrow that her words would not come for a moment or two. Was she doing what Mrs. Bellamy said? Was she fleeing from something good? Was she reliving the past to avoid the future?

“I ... don’t think that is what I am doing, Mrs. Bellamy. I know how it must look. I just feel as though Ireland is calling to me to come and know it again. In a way I didn’t before. To know my parents in a way I didn’t before. And Papa – I need to see if he is still alive. I need to talk to him. I need to know if ... if he really *was* there on that last night, somehow, even if it was just in my dreams.”

Aisling had never told Mrs. Bellamy about her dreams. Her visions. They were too precious – too personal. She had not even told Dermot. But she had a sense that he knew anyway. Knew, and understood.

Mrs. Bellamy sighed. Her face was sad when she spoke again.

“I understand, my dear. I will miss you. We all will. You have become like a daughter to me over these years, you know. But you need to do this. I see it now. But please – leave a space for home. While you’re gone. Think of Dermot. Rāwiri. Think of me! Leave the door open, won’t you, dear girl?”

Leave the door open. Aisling would. She would leave it open. But she knew that this was a thing she must do for herself, because for so long it was men who had controlled her destiny. She didn’t wish for that any longer. She would be in control of her own. And the more she thought of that, the more she felt the mysticism of the Otherworld creeping back in and she knew, deep in her heart, that this was the right thing to do.

To be free. She was going home.

*Éire* – Ireland.

*Teacht abhaile chugam*, she calls. *Come home to me.*

## 94.

*Connemara, Ireland – January 1, 1900*

*Cillian*

I know what it is I have to do. What can I say? After all that's passed, after seeing my Kitty and my Aisling again, I know what it is I have to do.

After that wonderful, wonderful moment when Aisling's life came back into her body while she was there in my arms, everything shifted once more. Nothing around me at all for what seemed like the longest time – just air, and that mist, but this time a faint one tinted the colour of Úna's eyes. Suppose it's floating that I was. And I fell asleep. Ludicrous to think it after what had just happened but that's what I did.

Must've been the magic of the Sídhe. Well, when I awoke, where would you think I found myself but back in the woods by Cnoc Meadha hill. Of all the things. Was cold and wet in there, I tell you. Was hard put to find my way out again, didn't know exactly where I was, because it didn't feel the same as that first time after the night in the pit. After I'd killed Declan.

How long ago that seems now. Yet – only a matter of weeks, I think – so hard to keep track of time in that place though, with all of the fighting with Fionn and the waters of Úna. Did something to my mind, it did. There are scars on my arms still. A network of them. So many. When I stroke a finger along one it brings back a memory. As though each were connected to a separate moment in my past. That Fionn awoke in my mind, and Úna had the healing of. So I can't be regretting them, these scars.

But I'm getting distracted.

Yes, I got out. I got out of the forest, because the little deer showed up again, and this time she walked at my side, close enough that I could lay a hand on her head, and she looked up at me with her big soft eyes and there was such a trust in them that it almost made my heart rend in two inside of me. To think I ever thought of killing the creature. Well, she led me out, and she led me out into a Galway that had moved on by as many years as had Aisling. So much changed. Made me feel dizzy, like. Almost turned around to go back and try and find the pit – find my way back to the

Otherworld again – but that little deer nudged the backs of my knees with her wee head and I knew that those days were over for me. And so I kept on. And on, and on, all the way back into Connemara, and it too had changed, new homes and buildings and businesses and enterprises – but so much was still the same. The landscape. Timeless. A balm to the heart.

And then there was my cottage, the one with the red door, with the hills rising softly behind it so, and the remains of long-dead lavender still hanging at the window, brittle and woody. The place was untouched. Dust and cobwebs everywhere and in the midst of it all flickered the memory of Kitty and Aisling and that last night and all I could do was drop to my knees and weep.

\*

“...Papa? Is that... is that you?”

It was a voice – soft, cautious – one that I knew.

A waft of lilac and wild thyme.

My beautiful girl. How could it be! I climbed from my knees and turned to the door and then there she was, standing right in the middle of it as pretty as a painting with eyes that were sad but that had something else in them behind the sorrow, a kind of ... life. Hope, maybe. As though she had learned to live again.

“Aisling. It’s you. *Mo stór.*”

And then the girl was in my arms, warm and full of the living, and I was proud, so proud of her.

“Papa! Oh, Papa.”

She wept too and bless me if I didn’t start afresh. It’s a baptism of tears we shed on the floor of the place that evening, and with that baptism came the lowering sun casting her gorgeous red-gold rays through that little window as if to give us her benediction too.

We talked long into the night, we did, she sitting on the bed on that faded patchwork quilt and me at a chair by the table, the moon coming through that same window and pooling over my feet, and it made me think of Kitty and feel that she was here, too, in that moonlight, and oh, but it brought such a feeling of peace. All of us – together again. It was sweet. Yet bittersweet. How could it not be.

We spoke of many things. First we tiptoed around the edges of it all. But then we

drew closer and closer, like tracing a spiral inward. There was New Zealand and her life there to have the knowing of, there was the ship and the journey over and Kitty drowning, and oh how I wept afresh at that story, and there was Aisling's sleep-walking and what she would see during those times – and then I had to tell her how the past months had been for me, how time was different there (yet it was strange that it hadn't affected her the same way as me), how it had only been a few months to my understanding yet here I was now with age-wrinkled hands and grey hair and strange aches in my limbs that never were there before.

And then we were there, so very near the centre of it all, and I dreaded to talk about it. But knew I had to.

“Aisling – you've no idea how very sorry I am about what happened. About – about what I did.”

She looked at me with those big green eyes of hers and I thought I could almost reach out and touch the sorrow in them now. She took my hand and held it between both of hers, her soft skin like a balm. She saw the scars but she said nothing, she just quietly touched them, all thoughtful-like, with those gentle fingertips.

“I can't completely explain it to you, Aisling, the way I was then. Only know that it came from a place of anger – anger that really had nothing to do with Kitty, your Mammy, or with you, *mo stór*. My own Da was the same and I was so angry at him for it but I took that anger into myself and it ... it ... twisted me into something else....”

I didn't know what more to say, then. Aisling dropped my hand and stood up and walked to the doorway, a silhouette in the moonlight.

“I was so angry at you, too, Papa. Only ... I didn't realise that, either. I was scared. It was ... it was awful to see what you did. To Mammy. Oh, Mammy. I thought that we had done things that had made you angry ....”

I went to stand beside her. Laid a hand on her shoulder. She didn't shrug it off.

“You never did anything wrong, Aisling. It was me. All me. And you were caught in the middle of it. Like your Mammy. Oh, how I wish I could take it all back. All of it. Go back to those happy days when you were just a wee small thing and we would have such wonderful times together.”

She turned her face to mine then, eyes wistful, cheeks tear-stained. She leaned her head on my shoulder, her body relaxing against my side.

Such a lump in my throat there was then. I held her tight. My wee girl.

“Papa, I forgave you, you know. I forgive you. Still. I always will.”

I didn’t – don’t – deserve her forgiveness.

“I used to think that you were the way you were because you needed some time alone for your ... soul to catch up with you again. Back when we were leaving. Mammy had talked to me about souls, you see ... and I thought that deep, deep down you were really sad too and it was because you needed your soul to come back.”

I sighed, then, right from the deepest parts of me. “What a thought for a child to think.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. Her spirit-words were spinning in my mind, so, and there was Úna and Fionn and the deer and the sword and the wounds and then it struck me. I squeezed her shoulder.

“You know what? It – it *did* catch up with me, *mo stór*. My soul. How odd to think it. But it – it did.”

Aisling laughed to herself. And wrapped an arm around my waist too.

“Oh, Papa. Look at us. I lost touch with mine, too, you know, after Mammy died. But I found it again. And – and I found *you* again. And not just you but ... *you*. The real you. As you were. I think it was the finding of you that brought it back — my soul. The ... the light.”

She touched her throat. There was the thin line of a scar there and I gasped because then I really remembered – that last moment, kneeling at her side, the darkness and the light battling and the darkness trying to steal her life forever, and I didn’t know why, but I had already been beginning to forget and it had been starting to feel like just a dream, all of it, a dream—

I looked down at her and she up at me and there was a knowing in her eyes.

“It was you, Papa. You who saved me.”

The Cup. The bloodied water. Kitty, and then not Kitty but Aisling. Aisling’s little form beside me telling me what to do. I thought a moment.

“No, *mo stór*. It wasn’t me. It was you yourself.”

She studied me a little longer and the green of her eyes was like the green of Úna’s forest. She smiled a strange half-smile and there was a shimmer to her that made me think that we were still there, still in that magical place.

“Aisling. There is something more.”

I hated to have to say it. But it was so.

“I’m going to turn myself in.”

She turned white, as white as the moon high up above us.

“But, Papa! It was so long ago! What good could it possible do now?”

“It’s the right thing to do, *mo stór*. I owe it to Declan and I owe it to Kitty. Fionn spoke about the eric-fine, you know, he said that I would have to pay it. I think I paid it in a manner in ... that place, but I know deep in my heart that it has to be paid here too.”

“But ... but Papa! You will hang for it!”

“Aye. I will.”

The thought didn’t please me, I’ll tell you that much. But when I made that decision there was such a peace that swept over me that there was no way I could change my mind.

“Papa – oh, Papa, and when I’ve just found you again!”

She cried. Fell asleep on the bed with her face wet with tears. Reminded me of when she was a child and there she would lie curled up in that same place with her Mammy’s arms wrapped around her and I cried again too.

We spent the rest of the week together, Aisling and I, and oh but it was a precious one. We talked in Irish. I’m rusty myself, I’ll not lie, but she has forgotten much. It’s coming back for her, though, and the words and the way they sound, well, they just suit her tongue so well that I think she should never speak anything but.

We visited all the old haunts and we found that same little green glade we’d seen the magpies in when I’d carried her on my shoulders, and we saw them again – two, immediately, and they flew around us both, and they cawed but then they returned to a branch way, way up high and they sang their chortling song together and it raised the hair on my neck it did. Magical.

She told me all about her friend Rāwiri, and the lad Dermot, and Mrs. Bellamy and her Doctor-friend who’d recently passed, and I was grateful to them for looking after her.

Rāwiri and Dermot, though, there was a different tone to her voice when she spoke of them. Couldn’t tell if she had fallen in love, but I suspected she had, and maybe with Dermot, but it’s conflicted that she was. I asked her if she was going to go back.

“I’m not sure, Papa,” she replied, her face serious.

“It sounds like you have built yourself a lovely life in Wellington. My girl – it will be good for you to be with friends again.”

She was quiet for a moment. “I suppose so. I will go back if it feels right. After ... after ....”

She couldn't say it. I knew what she meant.

After her Papa was hanged for murder.

\*

The week was over too soon. I slipped out in the thick of that last night, not even the moon saw me leave, hidden as it was behind a layer of cloud that looked to stretch all the way to the horizon. We had said our goodbyes the night before. She asked me if she could come. I told her no. There is no way I would have her see such a sight, after all she had already seen. No child should have to see their parent ... die. They'd never have let her, anyway. The police.

And so it is that I have faced what it was I needed to face.

The constable I spoke with wore a grim expression. Though it had been many years there were those at the station who still remembered the body in the forest and the axe and the horror. Said they'd thought it was me but that I'd run off to hide and they never could find any trace of me beyond what the dogs sniffed out in a shallow pit in the ground in the forest.

I'm in my cell now.

It's to happen this morning, very soon, they say. They have given me a good breakfast. But the grimness surrounds me. Can't swallow a mouthful. Sticks in my throat so. I put my hands on my knees. Close my eyes and lower my head.

And there's the sound of a song. Sweet, beautiful, just outside, I think it is coming from. Aisling's lullaby. In Irish.

It accompanies me as they come for me and lift me to my feet.

It accompanies me as I walk down the bleak corridor between all the cells, curious sympathetic faces looking out to watch me pass.

It accompanies me to a small room where there is a noose and I don't look at it because what is the point, and then I'm on the stand, and the noose is around my neck, and that song positively fills the room and it's not just Aisling's voice now, it is Kitty's too, and there's another voice there, is it Fionn's? Then I feel the vibrations in my chest again and I know it is my own voice that's the third thread weaving in and out of their two, the beautiful braid we always were meant to be restored to balance

again.

Oh, but it is beautiful. Too beautiful.

*Níl ag teastáil ach a bheith socair.*

All that is needed is to be still.

## 95.

### Tech Duinn pt 2 The House of Donn

#### *Aisling*

*You are home, you are home, you are home – it echoes all around me, the call, and I can feel it all through my body. I am home. I am in Ireland. In Connemara. Sleeping in the same bed I used to sleep in with Mammy when she would slip out and into the night. And that’s what I myself have done now, slipped out quietly, past the chair by the fireplace that is still haunted with Papa even though he left yesterday morning never to return – oh, I cannot think of it because it hurts too much – and out the door and behind the cottage into the hills, following that path I once knew so well because it belonged to Mammy – the path to the lake and the mist and the moon!*

*I am not walking in my sleep, although I did not have the good sense to put on my boots. The dew wets the hem of my nightdress and a sharp-edged stone has cut my foot a little but it doesn’t bother me.*

*What matters is that I am here. The low-hanging mist covers the surface of the lake. It furls and unfurls in and out of itself, and the lake whispers come, come, come.*

*In its very heart the mist clears and the surface of the waters, obsidian-black in the dark of the night, begin to glimmer – it is the moon, the moon reaching down, and the lake looks back at her nurturing her very own reflection right in its centre. All is very still. If I close my eyes a little it is almost hard to say which is the real moon – the one high above me, or the one reflected in the waters.*

*Come, come, come, the moon-holding lake calls again.*

*There is such a presence about me. I feel that I am not alone. The presence is a beautiful one, an unearthly one.*

*Mammy. She stands there, on the waters, right in the middle of the reflection of the moon, I think. She is ethereal and light and beautiful, looking as she did when she was well and happy, and she beckons to me.*

*Come, mo stór, come.*

*I walk out to her and I am walking on the surface of the waters rather than sinking into their depths and I don't even wonder at it.*

*I reach her just as she holds out her arms to me and then in each other's arms we sink down, down, down into the depths of the water, far below its surface, and I am not afraid because of the miracle of being here with Mammy. Around us floats the white of my nightdress and of Mammy's wonderful gown – spectral, ethereal. Magical. The safety of her arms makes me remember the waters before – when she surrendered her life to save my own, so long ago.*

*Oh, Mammy.*

*Then the scent of the earth just after rainfall. Petrichor. A warm breeze on my face. Dry land, leading to a rock-covered hill. The light of dawn. Mammy, my hand in hers, leading me forward, a tall golden castle atop the hill beyond us.*

*The ninth place. Tech Duinn. The House of Donn.*

*The meeting-place of souls after death.*

*We begin to climb.*

*The hill of the island leads up to a grass-covered plateau from which rises the glimmering golden castle. And standing on the lush green of the grass is a small group of people, and as Mammy leads me closer I gasp because there is Papa, oh the joy, and Declan, and – and Doctor Barton! All look – impossibly – as though they were about thirty years of age. Mammy too. And there is such a lightness to them, such a joy, such delight, that it is infectious. They turn, all of them together, to enter the castle gates. But just as I go to cross with them, a voice calls out.*

*“Aisling,” it says. “If you cross, you will never return to your earth-life. To Ireland. Or New Zealand. You will not be able to go back. And if you go back, you will not return to the Otherworld again. Not until it is your time to cross.”*

*Beyond the gates, everyone waits for me.*

*Come, come, their eyes beckon.*

*I step forward. One for sorrow, two for joy.*

*“You can choose to remember, or to forget.”*

*But which choice leads to which? If I go forward, will I remember or forget?*

*And if I go back?*

*The sun sets the tip of the castle's nine-sided summit alight.*

*Tír-Uaine, Tír-fo-Thuinn, Magh an Ionganaidh, Tír na Marbh, Magh Mell, Tír na mBeo, Tír na mBan, Magh Da Cheo.*

*Tech Duinn.*

*The ninth place. The ninth visitation. The last.*

*And then I can see the nine women from Magh Mell, and with them the seven cailleacha of Tír na mBan, the seventh of whom steps forward and walks toward me — and it is the Lady Ragnailt.*

*There is Enbarr beside me. And now Lady Ragnailt to my other side. They stand close, so close. I hear the sound of running water. I remember the brilliance of the flashing light from Claiomh Solais. I remember the joy of seeing the sun rise that very first morning after – or perhaps despite – Randall’s violence and the horror of that final moment tied to the chair.*

*The two, linked – pain and joy.*

*I turn to Enbarr. She snorts at me and tosses her head. Her breath is warm at my neck. My heart stills within me. And then I turn to Lady Ragnailt. For an instant I see her as that old, old woman back after crossing the ravine when I was a child, the woman who was too terrible to look at. Then the vision is gone and she has taken on the form of a beautiful woman again.*

*Everything is not as it seems.*

*There is light in the darkness.*

*Mammy, Papa – they smile at me from inside the palace gates. Follow your heart, Aisling, I feel them say.*

*Declan, Doctor Barton – their eyes hold a peace that says time does not matter, not here. Live your life.*

*All of them begin to fade, as though they were becoming the mist.*

*The mist of the Tuatha dé Dannan.*

*It is not time.*

Dul abhaile

Dul abhaile

Dul abhaile—

*The Irish reverberates in my ears.*

*Go home.*

*And then a new voice, earthy, rich, sonorous, and it sings—*

*Hoki mai ki te hau kāinga*

*Hoki mai ki te hau kāinga*

*Hoki mai ki te hau kāinga—*

*Return home!*

## EPILOGUE

## EPILOGUE

### *Aisling*

*Through the water, to the light.*

It's a dream, but oh, is it such a beautiful one! I am underwater again. I recognise it and I know its touch, I remember it from that fall so many years ago, and I remember how Enbarr swam to me through it. Enbarr. My beautiful horse. Only – not really mine. She comes when anyone really needs her, I think. I told my children about her. And their children after them. Their eyes grew as bright as her coat when I explained how she runs in water as though it were land. Every child should know such a horse.

But – for now, I will surrender to this dream.

There is no need for breath in this water. And the light comes not from a distant sun above its surface, but rather it is threaded all through it, tiny bubbles – threads – of shimmering light. And they form a pathway, one that it is easy to follow. Such gladness fills my spirit. I remember those visits from my girlhood. The Otherworld.

I remember the last one. Tech Duinn. Where everything came together, where all of the stories reached up to that point, to that sunlit point, right at the tip of the nine-sided spire. The nine stories that became one completed tale. A place of wholeness. Of fulfillment. Where all things begin and end.

And it was true. I never dreamed such a dream after that – never walked in my sleep again, never saw any of the islands in the Otherworld. But here, now, I think that perhaps I am being ushered back in.

Ah, yes. Here is Enbarr. Of course. She has lost none of her vitality and she swims – runs – through the water as though it were dry land. She comes to me and her mane is liquid, fluid, like the water. My hair is loose, too, and white as it now is, it mixes with her mane until it's how to tell which is hers and which is mine, and I find myself on her back, leaning against her beautiful strong neck, my arms close about it, and she is running again and carrying me far, far away, and then we are on the land again, and the land is golden, and it is unbearably beautiful, and there is the sound of laughter and children playing and the sweet heavenly scent of summer's flowers all in bloom

at once, and then there, it's my old friend Lady Ragnailt, and with her stands Úna, and Lugh, and Mammy, and Papa, and every dear friend I have lost over the years!

"Welcome, Aisling," Lady Ragnailt smiles, while her gown of emerald green flows out behind her.

"Welcome to Tír na nOg. The Land of Everlasting Youth."

In one hand she carries a blossomed bough, heavy with apples. I climb down from Enbarr. She nudges me forward, nose to the small of my back. Lady Ragnailt plucks an apple from the branch and hands it to me. It is red, crisp and delicious, and its juice runs down my chin after I bite from it.

I look down at my hands and gasp. There is not a wrinkle in sight. Nor a blemish. My arthritis-thickened knuckles are small and flexible again. And I am standing tall as I did in the days of my youth, the pain of the stoop from my latter years quite vanished.

I close my eyes and can barely contain the joy inside my heart. There is such a song all about. And I understand with a blessed understanding that is such a relief to my life-worn heart.

They have sung me across the chasm. For the very last time. I won't be returning to my tired earthly body. Not this time.

I am here to stay.

*Fáilte abhaile.*

Welcome home.

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