
GHOST
FINBAR
HAWKINS

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Marie

7th December

'Coming for you, ready or not!'

We're running through the woods, kicking golden leaves. I laugh as Ben whoops and does a forward roll down the slope, bouncing up with twigs in his hair.

'I'm going to beat you!'

He will, of course. My twin brother is always competitive, always doing more, going further, these thirteen years of racing to keep up with him.

'I can see it, Marie!'

Ben plunges on, jumping between trees, bounding over fallen branches. Our breath clouds in the cold December air, and I feel that excited buzz, because it's Christmas soon, presents and family and warmth and love. I can already feel it, that delicious weight of a stocking stuffed with treasures, painstakingly wrapped by Mum and Dad, and the tree guarding all our gifts. I can't wait for Ben to open his from

me, a framed picture I drew of our back garden apple tree in the summer.

'I hope it's frozen …' he calls back. 'We could stand on the ice.'

'Too dangerous, Ben!' I shout at his leaf-covered head, and he hoots, echoing my words in that annoying brotherly way.

'Scaredy cat!'

Perhaps I am. Better than a drowned one.

We reach the path in a skid of leaves and chalky stones. I look back at the brow of the hill. The trees are black against the lowering light. The sun is falling fast.

'Ben, it's getting late…'

He laughs again and singsongs my words, as he tears off into the gathering shadows.

We're alike, Ben and I, with our mops of Dad's dark hair and Mum's big eyes. 'Double the trouble,' my father's daily dad joke.

'Found it!' Ben calls, as I pull through the branches, catching like claws. And there it is: the pond, serene as anything, reflecting the overhanging trees, the setting sun, and now us, as we stand at the water's edge.

Twins looking up. Twins looking down.

Ben waves from the water.

I wave back, then watch him stoop and pluck a fallen branch. He snaps it, and the sound skims off the hushed water.

A bird cries, startled from its perch, and flies over our heads.

'Don't,' I say, seeing his reflected self about to throw.

'Why? It's only a stick.' He dangles it, taunting me.

Cheek! Cheek!

A blackbird lands close by, scuttling and hopping, pecking with its unmistakeable bright beak, like a candle flame in the gloom.

'Lon Dubh.' Mirrored Ben points his stick, and the bird jumps into the air to flit among the bare trees. 'That's what the Celts called them.'

Cheek! Cheek!

'I read it in one of Uncle Matty's books, they thought of them as doorkeepers…'

The blackbird dives to drink, the water ripples.

'To what?'

'To other worlds!' He shoves into me and does that ghost voice that makes me giggle. 'Wahaa-ha-har!'

The bird dives again. Circles and shapes across our reflections.

'Let's get back, I'm starving. Race you to the top!'

He's off, ghost-laughing as he goes, but I don't turn from the water, the diving bird that swoops faster and faster.

Lon Dubh. The doorkeeper.

Because there I am in the water that sways, then stills.

And there are two more figures, standing beside me.

A young girl dressed in a tunic, a band of bronze about her neck, a spear clutched close. Her eyes look from me to the other girl, a bonnet on her head, a basket of wildflowers in her hand.

Have we always been there together, just waiting to see each other properly?

As their hands reach to part the water…

'Marie!' Ben's voice is faint in the distance.

The bird sings.

The water breaks and ripples, the figures become something else.

A tall shape, horned, black as darkest night.

'Marie, come on!'

Cheek! Cheek!

The blackbird skims the surface and the water clears. There's only one girl now.

'Marie!'

Who I remember so well, as she turned from her frightened face and ran towards her brother, a silhouette against the setting sun.

Aine



The seventh day of Nollaig, 60 AD

'Aine?'

The water calms. The girls have gone. Yet I saw them there, as clear as I see myself. They were strangely dressed. One holding plants, like our druid. The other with hair long and flowing as the mane of Father's horse.

'Aine, what is it?'

Bron steps beside me, and I see him in the water too. He is taller than me. But I am the stronger and the faster.

'Is it another vision?'

My brother is worried for me. He fears the druid, what might happen.

'It has passed, Bron.' He flinches, will not look into the water. And I remember. There was something else. Horns, a snout. A snarl of fangs. Some beast I do not know.

'Come, Bron.' I shiver, but it is not from the winter that surrounds us. 'You saw the boar, lead on, brother.'

He nods and hefts his spear, signing for me to follow, as we stoop beneath the black trees, taking care with our steps, not breaking branches, not making a sound.

We reach a clearing, where we stand and listen. There's nothing but our breathing. Not even birdsong. Those girls I saw in the water, were they spirits? What did they want?

Bron touches my hand, brings a finger to his lips then points. A toppled tree lies near, its vast body a blanket of green moss. Quietly, we creep, lifting our feet above the dead leaves. Then I hear it.

Panting. A low whine. The den of the she-wolf, our grey guardian, our mighty hunter.

I bend, press my ear to the trunk.

'Up,' I mouth to Bron, and we climb carefully, quickly, sibling squirrels together. My heart thunders. This is her territory, given by our tribe for her protection of us.

Lying in the shade of the tree, the heaving, breathing body of the wolf. Her panting fills the air. Below her, pulling at her teats, her newborns mew and suckle.

'She brings new wolves to the world,' Bron whispers. 'Truly a sign, sister.'

Without warning, the boar breaks cover, tusks tearing the air. I raise my spear.

'No, Aine!' Bron pulls me back, glaring. 'It is too close to her!'

But the boar is charging, roaring. I have to defend the den, help the wolf.

I jump, driving my will, my desire, down through the shaft, aiming for that mean heart.

The wolf springs to her feet. She leaps, as my spear plunges. A howl, a squeal, a flurry of fur.

I roll, my knife drawn, ready to strike. The boar turns tail.

The wolf, though, does not move beneath my buried spear, her life pierced through.

'What have you done?' Bron bellows. 'Aine, what have you done?'

Bron lands beside her still body. The cubs mewl for a mother who does not hear them.

'To kill a wolf is forbidden, Aine!' He points at her brood that will not live long.

'I…' My voice is a croak. 'I did not…' But I have no words. They lie in the dust with the dead wolf.

'So desperate to be a warrior!' Bron pushes me hard. 'You are as blind as these pups!'

'Wait, where are you going?'

'Where do you think?' He trembles in anger, in worry. 'The druid must know of this.'

He runs, but I do not watch him go. I stare at what I have done. A dead mother, her orphans drinking her last milk.

I have killed a wolf. I have cursed us all.

Sarah 

7th December 1783

'Two girls in the water, you say, Sarah?'

I nod, as she moves about the kitchen, stirring and tasting.

'Describe them to me, little one.' She sprinkles salt.

'I am seventeen, Mother – no longer so little.' My cheeks flush, as she laughs, and reaches to pinch me, her fingers tipped with flour.

'I mean no harm.' She doesn't, I know. Goodness flows from her like the sun's rays breaking through the clouds. It is this quality that makes me feel lacking. How will I ever live up to her?

'Come now, I'm listening, the master's dinner can wait.' She moves the simmering pot from the stove, and sits, bringing her smell of baking, of freshly cut herbs, of all her industry. Since she became cook here at Kingcombe House, she has never tired, never wavered. She has taught me every

day, patiently shared her knowledge these ten years past, here at this kitchen table.

'They were both…' Mother's eyes on me are blue as a jay's feather, '… not of this time.'

'Because of how they spoke?'

I shake my head. 'No, I did not hear them. It was their attire. They were not dressed as we…' I motion to our long dresses, our hair curled and kept. 'One wore a short tunic, her own hair cropped and ragged, a necklace of bronze.' I remember, as her fierce gaze turned on me. 'She carried a spear!'

Mother nods. 'Ah, a warrior then. Tell me of the other.'

'She was quite tall. Wearing blue canvas breeches and a jerkin puffed all about. Her hair was long and lustrous, her eyes large.'

Mother reaches to clasp my fingers, the way she always does when I look within.

'You have done well, Sarah.' She presses my hands. 'Spirits would not come to you if you were not ready.'

I blush, this time to be praised by her.

'Sarah, I have taught you all I know. Now, I have this last gift…'

From her apron, she draws an egg and places it next to a bowl of water. Into a dish, she spoons honey. Then darts forward, as she loves to, as I in turn love her for it, and pretends to pluck something from behind my ear.

'What do I find here, little one?' She pauses and locks her lips as she might her purse. I consider the plant she holds.

'It is yarrow.'

'And…?'

I smile, understanding as only we might. 'Tansy.'

She nods. 'And for what do *we* use it?'

'Love, courage, and…'

Her blue eyes blaze.

'Protection.'

'Yes, good. Some call it Devil's Nettle for it casts away evil.' She sprinkles the leaves into the honey.

'And the egg, Sarah?'

Outside I can hear the croon and fidget of the chicken that laid it. I take up the egg and turn its speckled body in the soft sunlight.

'The egg is life. Past, present and future.'

Mother nods, takes the egg and rolls it between her fingers. 'It is all elements.' She circles it with her nail. 'The shell is earth, and inside…' She rattles it by my ear. I can hear a shifting, a moving. 'Air, a membrane that protects its heart of fire in the yolk, and water in its white.'

Earth. Air. Fire. Water.

'In the name of the great Spirit, who keeps us safe.' Her eyes hold mine. I try not to shake, as slowly she moves the egg across my head, saying, so quietly that I can barely hear,

'A little from me
More from the Spirit.
Sarah is your name…'

She moves the egg down my shoulders, across my chest,

'Here for darkness,
For fear,
For demons…'

A shiver passes through me. The circles of the egg, soothing and strange. I feel stroked by wings.

'For all that is wicked,
For the secrets buried in you.
Begone, like dust in the air,
Like pollen, like seeds sown.
Begone to the reaching woods,
To the wild river,
To the end of time.
Begone.'

I tremble. The air is still, nothing stirs. There is just my mother and me at the end of time. With a single, swift tap, she breaks the egg into the bowl of water.

'There is something ahead of you, Sarah…'

She points into the bowl, where the egg lifts into two points, like the ears of a hound pricking to listen.

'See, there are eyes…' I do see them, as they seem to see me. 'And teeth…'

The yolk twists into a smile, a curdling tongue.

'What…' I stutter to speak. 'What does it mean?'

She frowns as she scoops honey, adds it to the water.

'To feed the beast.'

The beast.

I study the face that seems to sneer and snarl. No longer a dog, now a goat, a stag.

'Am I cursed, Mother? What is it?'

She dabs and touches my forehead, my lips, the tops of my hands. I smell the honey and yarrow, and I want to cry, frightened of what I do not understand. She cups her dry hands about mine.

'I cannot tell you not to fear it, Sarah, for fear makes you fast and watchful…'

She sighs and takes up the mix of honey and leaves, its scent filling the air as she adds it to the bowl and I find myself saying, 'To sweep all ills.'

So many weeks and months and years have I listened to her, learned from her. This is different, though. Dangerous. Dreadful.

The face bares fangs that grow longer and longer, as she murmurs,

'You will know it, Sarah, when the time comes.'

The honey feels tight on my skin, I want to lick my lips, but I dare not.

'But on your road you will meet it, somewhere it will find you.'

The face laughs. Yellow teeth.

'What – what can I do?'

My mother's voice is serious and sad.

'Fight with all that you know…' She points to the eggshell, to her heart. 'With all that you will know.'

I hold back tears that want to fall.

'Why me?'

'Because you are strong, my little one.' Her eyes glitter like jewels. 'Because you are good. Because you have such magick in your soul. That is what this darkness hungers for. It hunts those who shine like you. For there are others you will find, sisters in…' She coughs suddenly. '… spirit.'

I want to dash the bowl away, but watch her caught in her coughing.

'Mother? Are you ailed?'

'Only…' She straightens and smiles. 'Only for a little air.'

She moves to the window, pulls up the sashes, and bright December rushes in, its frosty breath blowing into the corners, turning out the gloom. My heart lifts, because there are no monsters here, just a bowl of water, a broken egg, some herbs. I step outside to where the day waits, crisp and clear, free from demons in the dark. But I cannot help a last look back to the remnants of Mother's spell.

'You will know it, Sarah, when the time comes.'