

The Birds of Gannet Somme

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DEDICATION

I have been fortunate to have many special people in my life. I want to dedicate this work to the ladies: my mother and sister; my aunt Irene, my cousin Kathy; my friends Deb, Bonnie, Kris, Tammy and Begga; my wonderful daughters, Brynja and Lora ; and the warm ladies in my Chat Group. Thanks, ladies, for all your support!

Ballad of Ganet Somé

(Obscure ballad from the 1400s, found by Jenny Wren while researching folk songs)

Ganet Somé greets betimes
Among the silvered bower's mien,
The moon her halo circles blue
Moon's glow silvers misty hue.

Upwelled tears remain unshed
As'd reft the heart 'i twain
And Somé ta'en and forsaken,
Light's reverse begets her bane.

Hope and light flee from the gloom
Shades forlorn encircle Somé;
Pursuit abides, his doom encroaching
Birds alone the beast be stopping.

Four and one, two and three
Somé calls, in dreams to thee.
Linked by blood, love as well
Together strong, so histories tell.

Worlds above and worlds below
Side by side, doth see her glow?
Mirror's twins in life and death
On'y chance can save their breath.

Quake and shiver, fear his might
Should Night succeed and steal her light
Yours and mine, eon's dawn;
One chance alone: to sing the song.

Voices rise, wi' soul and heart!
Empow'r light to beat the dark.
Somé's strength, guard ye well
Ere bells do ring death's final knell.

Wax now wane, by and by
See the moon fill the sky.
Welcome Moon, and bless her light
For bright is might and weakens Night.

Hoarfrost jaws, above, below
Where day is night, and space untold
No light can breach, earth's womb enfolds
Engulfs the cries made by the bold.

Loose thy shafts, pierce yon night
Wi' moon-bright beams, bared and bright
Anon he fades, his pow'r grown weak
Ere Somé's song triumphant speaks.

CHAPTER 1

Over a last cup of tea, Bennet glanced out the kitchen window. Idly she noted that over this past week, summer's broiling heat was coming to an end. This morning she had woken to a slight chill, quite different from the sweltering of the past three months that started as soon as the sun rose and lasted well after sunset. Of course, by midday the sun's rays will have burnt off that initial coolness. After all, it was still September. But now, the day's hottest hours had become more bearable, and the humidity less apt to leave sweaty palms in its wake. Car doors no longer burned to the touch. And one no longer needed to seek respite in the shade of trees and shop awnings. Now, it was actually a pleasure to walk out in the sunshine.

This was Bennet's favorite time of year. Flowers still flourished, the grass and verbiage were still bright green and lush, but one could

instinctively feel that the turn of the seasons was just around the corner. And Autumn in Ohio was a glorious riot of colors: burgundy, scarlet, orange, russet browns and bright yellows, all framed by numerous shades of green, contrasting sharply with the bright blue sky.

'I should make a trip to the caves before too much longer', she thought. 'Maybe this weekend. I could give Kit a call and see if he's free', she mused. Kit never seemed to get enough of showing her the caves. And they were well worth seeing.

Jumping up, she rinsed off her breakfast dishes and set them on the drainboard to air dry. Collecting her keys, laptop and a sack lunch, she crossed the speckled tile floor and through the cheerful livingroom, with its bright yellow curtains and parquet flooring to exit by way of the wrap around porch. She paused to make sure the door had latched properly before tripping down the 4 steps to the pathway that bisected the front yard down to the gate.

Closing the gate behind her, she saw the familiar shape of Lady May, her mare, leaning her beautiful head over the fence, awaiting her customary morning greeting. Lady May, spying her approach, gave a playful shake of her head, pawed one hoof on the ground and gave a flick of her tail and a brief whinny by way of greeting. Bennet had to smile at Lady May's antics. The bay mare was always glad to see her. Bennet rubbed her poll and behind her sensitive ears, fed her a carrot top and apple bit she had purposely saved for her. Then, with a final pat, she walked farther along the graveled surround to where her tidy Honda was

parked in front of the garage.

Dew still beaded the windshield as well as the lawn that stretched all the way to the road. Bennet could hear birds twittering and calling. She could also hear the minute sounds of their scratching and hopping about in the undergrowth. It was going to be a beautiful day.

Just as she reached the car, she saw Mute, who'd left the house on one of her early morning numerous prowls, stick her head out from under the fence, poised with vibrant attention evident in every inch of her lithe little body. Whiskers twitching, she languidly made her way towards where Bennet waited, and without more ado, leaped quickly up and into the car.

Although Mute never uttered a sound, she was clear in her interests and intents with eloquent body language and poignant blue eyes. Today, it was obvious that she intended to accompany Bennet to the college.

As Bennet climbed in and adjusted her seatbelt, Mute stretched up to peer through the window. Well used to Mute's behavior, Bennet gave the kitten's soft grey fur a caress and started the car.

Driving down the long driveway, Bennet could see her neighbor, Mrs. Sackle watching from her front yard. Mrs. Sackle 's two yellow hounds stood alert to either side of her, quivering in their eagerness to race up to and after her car, excited by the sight of Mute through the window. Given the slightest encouragement, the beasts would be

growling and baying to get at the tiny cat, so Bennet was careful to keep the windows rolled up and closed until well away from the dogs' vicinity. The ugly dogs always made her shudder. She couldn't understand how anyone could take pleasure in their company, but 'then again', she mused, 'nor was Mrs. Sackle a joy to be around.'

Mrs. Sackle was given to keeping a very close admonitory eye on her younger neighbor and anyone else who came within eye shot or vocal range. She was a bitter spinster with nothing better to do than spy on Bennet and harass anyone else who came within reach. Bennet had had several run-ins with the woman – never pleasant. Too bad she was Bennet's closest, well really only neighbor for miles around. Bennet made a conscious effort because of this to keep on polite terms with Mrs. Sackle, but sometimes it was difficult.

Their properties rested at the top of a steep hill on opposing sides of the road. Whereas Bennet's house lay a good five minutes' walking distance from the road, Mrs. Sackle's house fronted the road with the merest scrap of green pretending to be a front yard and separating the property from the roadway. Not to mention that a sharp bend twisted the road a couple hundred yards from their driveways which meant cars had to slow down significantly to make the turn safely. As a consequence, Mrs. Sackle was able to beset the postman or any other car nearing the two driveways within seconds. A single twitch of her fine mesh curtains gave her an instant upfront view of whoever came and went. And she wasn't above stopping drivers to ease her curiosity as to their intentions.

All this made Mrs. Sackle a cross to bear for someone like Bennet who valued her privacy. Even then, Mrs. Sackle would have been bearable but for the hounds. Mrs. Sackle didn't always keep them on a leash, nor safely enclosed in her backyard's seven foot high chain link fence. To Bennet's knowledge, several small pets and farm critters hereabouts had been set upon by the dogs; not all of them had escaped unscathed. Noone had succeeded in getting rid of the dogs; the fenced yard was the only concession Mrs. Sackle made in the face of her neighbor's complaints, which would have been a good compromise if she had used it once it was built; she rarely did except at night, using the dogs as night watchdogs.

At the end of the driveway, Bennet gave Mrs. Sackle a nod but did not roll down her window to accommodate any conversation, just carefully looked for oncoming traffic and eased out onto the road. Mrs. Sackle looked a trifle disappointed but they both knew that upon Bennet's return, a pause at the mailbox would provide Mrs. Sackle with ample opportunity to 'catch up on the news'.

The drive into town was a pleasant interlude. Bennet followed country roads until right up against the edges of the campus. Traffic was still light due to the early hour and the fact that most students were already inside the classrooms for their first class of the day.

Bennet drove up the graceful winding entrance to Fletcher Chapel College, admiring the red brick and stone buildings and the trees lining the drive: dogwoods and cherry trees which blossomed with cream and pink buds each Spring. Bennet was

sure this was one of the most beautiful campuses anywhere and she was happy to work here.

Bennet had worked in the library for much of the last two decades, in fact since shortly after her husband of almost two years, Tom, had died. Both she and Tom had attended Fletcher Chapel in their own time, she majoring in English and he in Botany. Upon graduation, they had married and Tom had worked for the Botany department, studying and maintaining the floral gardens and trees attached to the college. Those brief months of married life had been ideal, but came to an abrupt end one misty night when a car lost control on the slick road and hit Tom broadside as he walked along the side of the road on his way home from the gardens. The driver never saw him until it was too late, and the slick road made it impossible to avoid him. Tom had died upon impact.

Bennet had been taking on editing jobs for both students and professionals at the college. The income provided the young couple with a little extra while still allowing Bennet to easily maintain the little cottage which came with Tom's job. After the accident, Bennet knew that the editing jobs, while providing her with the chance to keep up her skills, meet interesting people and giving her direct access to a variety of fascinating topics covered in the theses and research papers she was asked to read over, were not sufficient to support her, no matter how frugally she lived.

Provisionally, the college administration offered her a job as library assistant and she snapped it up in a heartbeat. Those were the days before microfiche and computers and the Internet.

But just as the library had kept up with the times and advances, so had Bennet.

Over the years, she had worked her way up to head librarian. She knew the library's inventory and equipment inside and out and was adept at surfing the web for obscure and supplementary information which was not readily available in the stacks.

Able to easily interact with the students who worked and studied at the library, Bennet was a favorite with the campus community, unstinting in aiding staff and researchers with their questions.

With time, she had found the old farmhouse on the outskirts of town, and was able to purchase it and move out of the cottage. There was no place she'd rather be. Both job and home suited her to a 'T', as her mother would have said.

Sometimes she thought wistfully back to the days of sharing and being part of a happy twosome before Tom died, but now it was so long ago and she had become accustomed to her solitary lifestyle; the past had become bittersweet memories, nothing more.

Besides, with the varied and active cultural arts program at the college, not to mention the amenities in town, she never lacked for something to do, something new to see or attend, whether it be a play, a lecture, a concert, an art show or just dinner and a movie, alone or with one of the few who comprised the small circle of friends she had gathered over time.

Those friendships were sound, if not too intense, which was just the way she liked it. For she relished her privacy and solitary space, time to think or just 'be', at one with her surroundings. Rarely did the need for human companionship overwhelm her. She'd grown too accustomed to being on her own for that.

Still, she didn't shun people. She talked with all kinds of people every day at work. That it never got personal did not alter the pleasure she experienced in helping them and seeing their expressions change from bewilderment to relief with her gentle guidance. And often those same people went out of their way at the conclusion of their studies to let her know how they had prospered and thank her for her help. Their gratitude always brought a quick flush of happiness.

No, this was an ideal existence and Bennet was happy and thriving in its atmosphere.

* * *

Parking her car in the reserved spot, Bennet climbed the steps to the private library entrance, preceded by Mute. Most days when Mute accompanied her to work, the cat confined her explorations to the stacks; the library patrons and staff had become familiar with her curious forays and quiet meanderings. She was never any trouble.

Occasionally Mute would disappear into the lush undergrowth and Bennet wouldn't see her again until time to go home. The first time or two that this happened, Bennet had feared Mute would get lost, but each time, at day's end, she would exit the

library to find Mute sedately soaking up the sun on the top step. Sometimes an admiring student or staff member was there stroking her soft fur, to the accompaniment of an audible purr, the only time Bennet ever heard Mute make a sound. Subsequently, Bennet ceased to worry about the tiny cat, just wished her well and went inside to her own pursuits.

Entering her private office, Bennet immediately turned on her desktop computer and checked her messages: several research queries, a few special book orders and a couple of personal notes from friends about an upcoming art exhibit. She quickly worked her way through these, and walked out to the information desk / checkout counter. Today it was manned by her newest employee, Ty Fleet Eagle.

As could be surmised, Ty was of Native American descent. He had only been working in the library for a couple of weeks now, but had blended in surprisingly well and quickly. His skills with the computer were deft and assured, he was unfailingly polite and helpful to one and all and was always cheerful - all in all, an excellent addition to her staff.

There were few wandering the stacks this early, aside from two or three of the library staff competently reshelving returned tomes. So Bennet took the opportunity to find out a little bit more about her newest recruit.

“Good morning, Ty,” she began.

“Good morning, Ms. Tyler,” he beamed.

“No need to be so formal. You can call me Bennet,” she replied with a smile. “How do you like working here in the library?” she continued.

“I love it!” he enthused. “I get first crack at all my favorite books. The job is easy and I like talking with people,” he finished up with a cheeky grin.

“From your name, I can tell you have native blood”, observed Bennet.

“Oh yeah, although you wouldn't know it to listen to me,” he added with a laugh. “Still, one look... I'm Shawnee, from right here in Ohio. My ancestors were jostled about from here all the way south to Alabama and into Indiana and Pennsylvania hundreds of years ago, but we originated here and now we're back and here to stay. I don't know much more than the general history of my people,” he confided, “but this is a new era. I respect my heritage, but am just like everyone else for the most part,” he concluded.

“Are you a student here at Fletcher Chapel?” asked Bennet, with interest lighting her eyes. This boy was an open book and a fun conversationalist, she thought.

“I attend part time, trying to finish my Master's in Art History. I also paint,” he added with a somewhat shy grin.

“Do you ever show your work?” queried Bennet.

“My first show opens at Granger Gallery

this weekend,” he replied.

“Oh! I just heard there was a new exhibit! A couple of my friends sent me emails about it,” enthused Bennet. “So, I guess I’ll see you there,” she concluded, with a smile of anticipation.

“I’ll be there.” Ducking his head for a moment, Ty looked back up and said, “I hope you’ll like my work.” Then he turned his attention to the two students approaching his work station to check out their books.

Bennet left him to it, musing over the surprising encounters she had had over the years here in this library. This latest with Ty looked promising although she had no idea what kind of paintings he produced. However, based on first impressions, she hoped that she would like them, for Ty seemed a really nice person.

Suddenly the library came to life as students streamed in to choose their study carrolls, stake claims to free computers and to browse the stacks for material related to their specific interests. Several headed in her direction with questions and requests for assistance. With that, the day started with a bang, keeping her and her staff busy well until closing time.

Some days she stayed till 9 p.m. until the relief staff turned up to man the desk for the final 2 and ½ hours till closing time at 11:30. Other days she left at 5 p.m. It all depended on how busy it got and how many assistants were on hand.

Today was a long day and it was well after 9

before she and Mute climbed wearily into the Honda for the short ride home. As it was so late, she took the freeway exit, reaching home within 10 minutes.

It was already a dusky twilight out. She needed headlights for the short drive. She stopped at the mailbox and collected a handful of bills and brochures before continuing up the drive. Mrs. Sackle had already penned her hounds for the night and contented herself with peeking around her curtain, to Bennet's relief.

Ahead lay a quiet evening of a simple meal, some relaxing music and maybe an interesting book to mark the end of a long day. Tomorrow was Friday which promised to be just as hectic before the weekend's shorter open hours took effect. Thankfully, she had the weekend off. An early night tonight and the close of work tomorrow meant she could relax and concentrate on something else. 'I have to remember to call Kit tomorrow' was her last waking thought before sleep claimed her.

CHAPTER 2

The dream was so vivid. I walked through the yard that surrounded my home, the beautiful green serenity filling my soul with utter contentment. It was almost dusk, robbing much of the vibrant hues from the flowers. Yet, their heads closing for their nocturnal sleep, nodding in the slightest of breezes, the yellow, dusky pink and orange flowers stood out against their verdant backdrop.

As dusk deepened to twilight, the first crickets started their chorus, their song one I never tired of. I breathed in the scent-laden air. Fireflies briefly dotted the gloom, their tiny pinpricks of light becoming brighter as the sky darkened from midnight blue to purple black to an all-encompassing ebony. The still night pressed in upon me, warm and embracing, relieved by a few stars here and there above, and the far-off gleam of

a porch light or an occasional pair of headlights arcing around the bend in the road, becoming a quick flash of red circles before disappearing. The quiet was broken only by the approach and retreat of an engine's hum and the usual relay of barks and howls of dogs around the countryside, muted by distance.

I was not afraid to be out all alone. The night was as familiar to me as the daytime, for I was ever prone to midnight rambles through the fields surrounding my home, relishing having it all to myself. The familiar shadows of house, barn, garage, chicken coop and tree-lined fences marked my path as well as did the sun when it caressed and highlighted each leaf and surface during the day.

When the moon rose, the stars dimmed before its brilliance, A ghostly pale road meandered down to the cornfields behind the house, and forward in the opposite direction along a driveway to the mailbox at the roadside. It would take me a good 5 minutes' brisk walk to cover the distance to the road, should I choose to go there. But tonight, in my dream, I chose instead to climb the fence rails and make my way to the giant oak tree that stood silent sentinel in the field opposite to the mare's field. Lady May was not in sight, probably asleep near the tree-lined fence at the lower edge of the property.

Often during those first days, I would sit on the top fence post and sketch the mighty oak. But never did I try to climb it. It was enough for me to admire its stately trunk and widely out-flung branches from the ground. It held sway over the field, beautiful, aged; I hoped it would live many

years more, growing ever grander with the passage of time. Even now, its circumference was impressive; I was unable to span its surround even 1/3 of the way with both arms and hands stretched to their limit.

The moon bathed the tree in its silvery glow. The leaves rustled and I knew that birds slept in its upper branches. An owl, Hermit I surmised, hooted from the barn rafters nearby, and I caught a glimpse of wings in the pale light, winging across the field. The bark of the oak was rough to my touch, yet reassuring in its breadth and tactile reality.

It was almost as though this dream was no dream at all, for all that I saw, heard and felt mirrored my waking experiences so exactly.

But then, as dreams sometimes do, a touch of the spiritual reminded me that this was, indeed, a dream. From somewhere close by, its location imprecise, I heard the murmur of a young voice singing softly. I wasn't startled or surprised by this unusual encounter, merely accepting. The tones were very clear, bell-like, yet muted as though I heard it from a great great distance. The song at first was just notes, the melody simple and beautiful. I did not move, mesmerized, yet my eyes and senses searched the gloom for the source.

For what seemed forever, but must have been only a moment or two – who knows, for time in a dream is as fluid as a river and as ephemeral as mist – I saw nothing, sensed no one. Then, of a sudden, from above, a blue glow suffused the leaves of the oak, riveting my attention. A breeze played with the branches, swaying them back and forth, yet

I felt no chill. Abruptly before my eyes appeared the face of a child, haloed in blue, with enormous innocent eyes. She sang on. The song, initially bright and full of hope, became sadder, heavier, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. It near broke my heart.

I glimpsed the child whose body, dressed in a simple thin white nightgown, seemed unnaturally thin - all but insubstantial, for only a few seconds. The song died away, and simultaneously her body diffused into the moon's glow, like mist on a mountainside when the sun's rays hit it. The blue haze faded to silvered leaves and she was gone.

In my dream, I gazed upwards long and long, hoping to see her again. I listened so hard I thought my ears would burst with the quiet. But to no avail. Once again I shared the night with shadows, the empty field, the silent oak tree and the moon.

I felt in my bones that this magical encounter was significant and I was loathe to relinquish it. I knew that it had marked me, that I would never forget the visage of the 'blue' child. As time passed, her song became too vague for me to remember its particulars with any clarity. The words which had seemed full of portents, knowledge, pathos and warnings as I listened, now frustratingly lay just beyond my comprehension or recall.

When I awoke, the dream was fuzzy in many respects, but as usual with my dreams, I remembered bits and pieces and, most of all, the feel of it, the urgency and sadness. I might not be

able to remember her song, but her face, this moon child's piquant mien, was as vivid in my mind as when I had first seen her in my dream. It remained before me during the day as I went about my daily routine, and into the night until sleep claimed me.

She haunted me but I did not know then how big a part she was to play in my future nor how changed my life would become as a result of her appearance.

CHAPTER 3

As Bennet ate the last bite of her grapefruit, relishing the slightly bitter taste, she reflected, 'I must have been more tired last night than I thought. I can't seem to settle this morning.' In truth, she couldn't stop thinking about the 'blue' girl. She had never had such a vivid dream before.

She was restless. The remnants of the dream kept breaking her concentration. She'd taken forever just straightening the bed and getting dressed. If she didn't pull her scattered thoughts together pronto, she'd be late to work, something she couldn't abide. Although she gave her staff more leeway and the benefit of the doubt when they gave her a reasonable excuse, few things bothered her more than showing up late.

Tom used to tease her about that when they first started dating. Funny. She hadn't thought

about that in years. This dream was affecting her in more ways than one! She tried to brush the observation aside, but it just brought the girl to mind again. Exasperated with herself, she finished washing up and collected the usual paraphernalia to take to the car.

By the back door, Mute waited patiently to be let out. Bennet, feeling penitent, quickly opened up for her and watched as she raced around the back of the defunct chicken coop. 'Nope, Mute won't be coming with me today from the look of it – nary a backward glance or pause. Who knows what drives a cat to do what they do', she mused.

Sighing at the vagaries of cats in general, she rebolted the door and made her way to the front porch. The swing caught her eye, looking incredibly inviting in the fresh morning air. Maybe she'd sit there tonight and just vegetate for awhile. The mosquitoes weren't so prevalent now.

But first things first. Today, if all held true to form, the usual daily stream of patrons would almost double in number as everyone geared up for the weekend. Some, not wanting their research interrupted, would wish to check out books for consultation when the library closed promptly at 6 p.m. (The library was open for a short four hours, from 9 to 1, on Saturday, but was closed all day Sunday.) Others would seek a final peek at microfiched data. And still others would want computer access. Noone wanted to spend their money at the Internet cafe when they could use the library's connections for free.

Bennet was feeling rushed so her morning

greeting to Lady May was reduced to a few pats and a promise to spend more time with her on the weekend. 'I guess Lady May is used to Fridays, too,' thought Bennet with chagrin. The mare trotted away with barely a swish of her tail as Bennet hurried to her car.

As anticipated, the library was chockful from the moment it opened. Minutes later, stragglers who hadn't been quick enough off the mark were unable to find a free study carroll, and wandered away disconsolately towards the student union in hopes of finding some free space there.

When Bennet found a moment to take a late lunch, she remembered her resolve to call Kit. An instant later, she held the telephone receiver to her ear, listening to the rings. Only four short rings sounded before Kit's voice sounded in her ear.

“Kit! Hi, Bennet here. I was wondering if you had plans for the weekend.”

“Hi, Bennet.” Kit's deep baritone sounded like he was smiling. “Nice to hear from you! Were you thinking of going to the caves?”

With a short laugh, Bennet said, “You know me well. Yes. I was hoping to get there before the warm weather ends. Are you free? I was thinking of going to an art exhibit on Saturday, but I'm Sunday is open.”

“Yup. Sunday's free. Wanna bike?”, he asked hopefully.

“Well, if you promise not to race,” she

burbled. For some reason, Kit always made her laugh. And she knew well his enthusiasm for bicycling wherever he went.

Kit laughed at her rejoinder. “Okay, but bring your helmet and a water bottle. It's 8 miles each way and traffic's likely to be heavy. Everybody's probably got the same idea as you for the weekend.”

Bennet promised with a laugh. They made arrangements to meet at the campus fountain Sunday morning at 9 to get a good head start. Although Kit offered to meet her at the farmhouse, Bennet vetoed the idea. That would have added too many extra miles to his ride in her opinion.

Hanging up and still chuckling at Kit, of a sudden a few bars of music popped into her mind. It brought her up short, it was so 'out of the blue'. 'Now where have I heard that before?' she wondered out loud. And then it came to her – it had been in 'the dream'.

The momentary flash disturbed her, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. With it, though, came a vivid mental picture of the little girl who had sung it.

'Drat', thought Bennet. The day's demands had finally driven the dream from her mind. But now, relaxed by lunch and talking with Kit, it had come floating back.

'Why am I obsessing over this dream and that child?' Abruptly the uncomfortable idea of her biological clock ticking away hit her. Perhaps that

was why she was dreaming of a little girl.

Bennet had given up on the idea of having a child of her own. After Tom died, she had never gotten involved with another man to the point of considering marriage and starting a family. Gradually, as the years passed, dating basically stopped. It wasn't because no one had shown interest. Men had approached her, both eligible and not so eligible professors had sent out feelers, but she hadn't been interested enough to pursue any of them. And nowadays, the eligible men she met were generally between ten and fifteen years younger – not her cup of tea to start cradle snatching! She'd just accepted that this was her lot and thought all such speculations were behind her. It was unnerving to realize that her body and subconscious might not be in complete agreement with her resolve.

Turning away from this disconcerting idea, Bennet used the next few minutes to send a couple of emails, one to a friend arranging to meet at Granger Gallery to view the exhibit at one o'clock on Saturday. She had just finished when there was a knock on her open office door with a request for assistance. And so the day progressed.

Seven o'clock rolled around. The relief staff came early on Fridays, usually on duty from six p.m. on. But even so, it was an hour later before Bennet was able to break away.

Home! The mere thought was appealing! Again, Bennet went by way of the freeway. She wanted to get there quickly so that her much-needed weekend break could begin. She was completely

frazzled.

Bennet stopped to gather her mail and spent the minimum possible time in the obligatory few minutes with Mrs. Sackle. And then she was pulling in to her customary parking spot in front of the garage and turning off the ignition.

The instant quiet assaulted her ears. It was such a contrast to the hustle and bustle at the college. Even though the library maintained a policy of quiet, there was no way to avoid the collected sounds of machinery, coughs, whispers, footsteps, scraping chairs, and the turning of pages. It all ended up battering one's senses and after ten to twelve hours of such, the quiet of the countryside was a blessed relief.

* * *

Bennet stretched luxuriously. Ummm... It felt so good to just lie there in her bed and not need to get up and rush to work. During the week and those Saturdays when she was on duty, she invariably arose at seven a.m., arriving at the library by eight o'clock to get ready for the nine o'clock opening; there was always some task awaiting her immediate attention. She glanced at her bedside alarm. It was 9:15. Wow! She hadn't slept this late in months! But it felt wonderful! And no dreams haunted her.

'Oh no.' The momentary realization was all it took to bring to the fore the 'blue' child's face. Making a face at herself, she busied herself letting Mute out, then took a shower. Today she let the water stream over her for a good ten minutes as

opposed to her usual five. 'Such things were a free weekend made of' was her cheeky thought.

She decided to let her hair air-dry today, after toweling and combing out the long auburn locks. Usually she didn't have that luxury and had to use a blow dryer. But she preferred to air-dry – then her hair didn't feel so brittle afterwards.

That decided, the next step was breakfast. Still in her light robe, she walked barefooted downstairs. She already felt revitalized. Today she would do some cleaning, catch up on laundry, restock the refrigerator and see to Lady May, who she had been neglecting dreadfully these last two weeks. But first she intended to relax over the newspaper, a cup of tea and a bowl of creamy oatmeal.

An hour later, dressed in jeans and a blue sleeveless t-shirt, all of which made her appear ten years younger, Bennet pulled into the parking lot of her favorite grocery store. Along the aisles, she encountered many of her acquaintances from the college and exchanged 'hi's' and 'how are you's' with those she knew best. But eventually she filled her cart and ran through her list and was soon in line at the checkout counter. The clerk was new so she didn't waste any time paying and bagging her groceries.

It was just around 12:30 when house and home were in satisfactory order; she had even had time to muck out Lady May's stall. During the summer, Lady May spent more time out in the fields than in her stall, so it didn't take long to put things to right. Another quick shower, and a change

into a summery dress and sandals and Bennet was ready to go meet her friends.

They had decided to lunch together at the Gallery Tearoom before moving on to the exhibit. Smiles and hugs were exchanged and the three of them, Bennet, Susan (Bennet's best female friend) and Susan's cousin Amy, proceeded to the tearoom.

Susan worked in the administration office at Fletcher Chapel; her close cousin, Amy, was a frequent visitor. Bennet and Amy had met on numerous previous occasions and the three made a very comfortable threesome on their outings.

After they'd gotten settled at a table and placed their orders, Bennet turned to Susan and Amy and dropped a bombshell, "Guess what? I know one of the artists whose work is being shown," she crowed. She and Susan were constantly trying to one-up one another in choice pieces of gossip or news. This news was definitely choice and was going to be hard to top.

"No! Really?" exclaimed Susan.

"Who is it? And how do you know him,..her, well, whoever?" laughingly added Amy.

"His name is Ty Fleet Eagle," responded Bennet. "And he is my newest recruit (as she referred to her helpers) at the library. And get this. He is 100% pure Native American: Shawnee, he told me."

"Wow! You sure do manage to meet interesting people!" remarked Amy.

“Have you seen any of his work before?” asked Susan.

“No, he said this was his first showing. He seems like a really nice guy. So I'm looking forward to seeing his paintings. I just hope they aren't abstract. I've never learned to appreciate abstract art, and I won't know what to say to him if they are,” admitted Bennet.

They chatted on for a few minutes over their salads and iced tea, catching up and just enjoying one another's company. Then, in concert, they rose, paid and eagerly moved on to the exhibits.

Perusing a brochure about the artists and their works, Susan said “Your friend's paintings are in the gallery on the right; the other two artists' works are in the left and middle galleries. Shall we view Ty's work first?”

“Yes, let's,” replied Bennet. “I'm going to see if Ty is here. He thought he would be.”

They entered the gallery on the right and then stopped, stunned. Massive paintings hung by wires from the ceiling. Each painting featured a backdrop of mountains, canyons, rivers and a sky so blue that one just knew the air must be crystal pure. In some, eagles flew, in others, horses grazed, beaver and otter played in the streams, and in one, a bear caught fish in the rushing river. In none of them was to be found a single human. The paintings were magnificent, incredible, almost primeval: nature in all its glory and majesty.

Swallowing from a suddenly very dry throat,

Bennet could barely tear her attention away when she heard Ty's cheerful but quiet voice asking, "Well, what do you think?"

"Think? What do I think? Ty, these are the most beautiful paintings I have ever seen! That's what I think!" responded Bennet in a daze. Her friends didn't even try to speak, merely nodded their heads in emphatic agreement before turning back to gaze some more.

Bennet finally tore her eyes away to look at Ty with amazement, respect and unquestionable awe and admiration for the young artist.

"Thank you," Ty said simply, but with a twinkle in his eyes. "I always like it when my friends can appreciate my work. These are how I envision the world before man came, a time when it was clean and untouched."

"Do you ever sell any of your work?" asked Bennet. And now her friends eagerly awaited his reply.

"Oh, yeah. A guy's gotta eat, right?" And there he was, back to the breezy cheerful Ty that Bennet knew at the library. "All these are for sale. But I reserve the right to refuse if I don't think a potential buyer can truly appreciate them."

Bennet's respect went up another notch: a smart businessman, but one with integrity, loyal to his own ideals.

"The prices," he continued, "are listed in the brochure next to the number that corresponds to

each painting. See?” And he pointed to the discrete number on the side of one canvas. “I’m going to circulate some more, get a feel for what people think. Enjoy.” Then he walked away.

“Wow!” All three women looked after him and then at each other.

“Who knew such artists still existed?” whispered Amy.

“And he said he was just a regular guy.” Shaking her head in disbelief, Bennet said, “At first Ty came off as this pleasant kid working a few hours for pocket change while he worked on his master's degree. But who knew?” “No, she affirmed, “We’ve a true master in our midst, ladies.” Rallying, she said with a grin, “Just goes to show that you never know where greatness lies nor when you’re gonna encounter it.”

Susan and Amy silently nodded in agreement. Their solemn expressions soon gave way to rapt attention as they slowly moved from one mesmerizing canvas to the next. Occasionally, they remembered to find the number and corresponding price for the painting currently being looked at. The prices were high, but not too high: 'nothing like they actually deserve' thought Bennet.

As her friends, surfeited with Ty's work, moved on to the other galleries, Bennet stayed behind. These paintings spoke to her on a deeper level and she couldn't seem to get enough of them. They were almost mystical. They spoke to the vast places in her soul and eased a pain and a loneliness there that she had not even been aware existed. One

painting especially. In it, a rocky outcrop thrust upwards above a deep canyon while the thread of a river far below wound around. Two eagles soared above. The red rock shone stark and bare against the azure sky with small puffy clouds seeming to hang over the outcropping, their shadows barely visible on the ground far below. A solitary tree was visible, almost barren of leaves but solidly ensconced in the rock base from which it grew. It was so tall, that one could easily imagine that it had stood there for eternity, and that the bird's eye view of the canyon from its top branches would be fantastic. Not far below the tree, one could see the mouth of a cave.

She walked around but kept coming back to it. Then, mind made up, she looked up the number and the price. It was a bit more than she was accustomed to spending, but she could manage it. Her daily expenses were minimal and her salary easily covered the mortgage payments on the farm, so she had a hefty bank balance. Buying the painting would make a dent, but not too much of one.

Ty wandered over, not saying anything for a moment, just keeping vigil with her. At last he said, "This has always been one of my favorites. I never know where the vision will take me once I start painting but this one spoke to my heart."

"And to mine," replied Bennet. "I'm going to buy it."

They smiled at one another in complete understanding and harmony. Then the cheeky side of Ty broke through.

“Contributing to my education in a big way, boss,” he grinned.

“Least I could do for my newest recruit,” Bennet quipped.

* * *

It was time to go. Bennet went straight to the cashier and made arrangements to have the painting delivered after the exhibit closed two weeks hence. She thought, with a great deal of satisfaction, of being able to gaze upon it every day when she awoke and every evening when she returned home from work. It would grace her livingroom. The lighting there, while bright, was indirect as the porch roof shielded the room from the worst of the sun's rays.

Susan and Amy had finished touring the rest of the exhibits when Bennet, emotionally exhausted and disinclined to break the spell wrought by Ty's paintings by viewing someone else's work, exited the gallery. Bennet's friends were ready to call it a day, too. All in all, they'd spent an intense couple of hours in there, not including their lunch. All three craved the outdoors, some fresh air and sunshine.

Bennet decided to go on home instead of walking around downtown. She just wasn't ready for crowds and traffic. So the three said their goodbyes and Bennet headed for her car.

Back at the farm, she was of a mind to go for a ride with Lady May. She changed back into jeans and sneakers and whistled for the mare, who

came running at the sound. Saddling and bridling Lady May was the work of moments, so well were the two used to the drill. Lady May seemed as eager for the outing as Bennet.

Bennet usually tried to ride her at least two, preferably three, times a week, but sometimes late hours at the library interfered, as had happened these last two weeks with the startup of the Fall semester. So both Bennet and Lady May were eager to make up for lost time.

It was some two hours later when they ambled back to the barn. Bennet took her time rubbing Lady May down and brushing her coat, checking her hoofs, replenishing her water and giving her a generous ration of grain. While the horse nosed at the treat, Bennet finished cleaning and hanging the tack. Before leaving the barn, she rubbed the mare's sensitive ears, murmuring to her affectionately. The door to the stall was open as was the door leading directly from the barn to the field, so Lady May could come and go as she pleased.

Satisfied at last that all was well, Bennet headed back to the house to shower and change into more comfortable clothes. Mute took the opportunity to slip inside and was happily stretched out in the bay window when Bennet reemerged to rummage in the refrigerator for something to eat. Settling on scrambled eggs on toast with raw vegetables on the side, her repast was quickly prepared and eaten.

Cleanup complete, the evening, now much cooler, lay before her. It was beautiful out: the

kind of evening where one felt comfortable in one's own skin and at one with nature. Which reminded her: the ideal spot from which to see the sun set was her porch swing. - No sooner thought than acted upon. Idly swinging back and forth, Bennet resumed her musings, thinking about 'her painting' as she labeled it in her mind. It was like Ty had seen into the landscape of her soul and transferred it onto canvas. She shivered at the thought. 'How fortunate', she mused, 'to have Ty as a part of my circle.' She had a feeling that they would become good friends. Already she could sense the way their thoughts coincided and harmonized. She smiled. It was always a plus when she found another true friend. This brought to mind tomorrow's plans, and the inevitable smile that presaged thoughts of Kit.

Kit. When she first met him, they were both students at Fletcher Chapel College. They shared a class the first semester of sophomore year and ended up in a study group together. Even then Kit had a way of making her smile or laugh with one of his roguish looks or outrageous statements. But subsequent semesters led them on different paths, he into geology and she into English. By the end of that year, she had met Tom, and all her spare time henceforth was wrapped up in him and their burgeoning relationship.

It wasn't until years later, after she and Tom had gotten married, that Kit reappeared in the form of an associate professor in the geology department at Fletcher Chapel. Tom met him there and a friendship sprang up between the two men, long before Bennet knew that Kit was back. After that, the three of them had spent many enjoyable weekends and evenings together.

It was after Tom died that Kit had quietly stepped forward, supporting her through the initial rough patch, cheering her up when the blues got too bad, and just being there when she needed a shoulder to cry on or a sounding board to bounce thoughts off of. Once she started working at the library, they made a point of keeping in touch and doing things together several times every month. Kit had become her best friend. He had never married.

Again Bennet smiled, this time in happy anticipation, both for the morrow's activities and just to see her friend. 'This weekend has been a real departure from my normal routine, and is shaping up to be truly memorable, in the bargain,' she thought.

Before she went to bed, she collected her gear and stored it in a well worn backpack. Then she pulled her mountain bike out of the garage and checked the tires, brakes, gears and chains, making sure everything was in good shape for the run up to the caves.

Finally, she crawled into bed and with a light blanket for protection from the cool night air, drifted off to sleep. Just before sleep claimed her, the 'blue' girl's face flashed before her eyes, but before she could react, consciousness and awareness departed. No dreams disturbed her rest that night, at least not to her recollection.

CHAPTER 4

Bennet woke bright and early, feeling completely rejuvenated, eager for the day to begin. Cheerfully she saw to the animals, fixed an enormous lunch to share with Kit later – his appetite was legendary, she thought with a laugh, and still had plenty of time to get ready. On a whim, she went out into the yard and inhaled the earthy and spicy smells of the flower beds and bedewed lawn. Overhead she could see the resident ravens, who she had arbitrarily named Wing and Caw, wheeling in the morning sky, calling to one another as they flew.

The sky was a washed-out blue, 'not quite awake' as she put it, like the newly risen sun. It brought to mind a primeval dawn, mist rising off the plains to the cliffs, above which eagles dominated the sky. She realized she was remembering one of Ty's paintings, juxtaposed over the more prosaic landscape of the countryside. 'A heady experience.

Dared she say 'a good omen? Now that was taking things too far!' she snickered at her fancy.

Amused at her own imagination, she started humming as she laid out the clothes she would wear today and started the water in the shower to warm. A half hour later she was dressed in a pair of her oldest jeans, a light buttercup yellow short-sleeved shirt that had a view of Old Man's Cave imprinted on the front, and lightweight hiking boots; her long hair was pulled back into a ponytail and it swung from side to side as she thumped down the stairs. The sun shone warmly, reflecting off the cream kitchen walls, making her feel as bright as a new copper penny.

Mood upbeat and expectant, she downed granola and orange juice for breakfast, rinsed out her bowl and glass, snagged a jacket and tied it around her waist for later in the caves – it got chilly there despite the heat outside – and grabbing her backpack off the floor, hurried out the door.

Securing her helmet comfortably, Bennet wheeled her bike across the gravel to the twin tire tracks leading down the driveway. Then she mounted the bike and pushed off. It was only just eight o'clock. Not even the neighbor's dogs had been released from their fenced yard yet. There was plenty of time for a leisurely bike ride into town.

Little traffic was evident on the roads. The sun warmed her shoulders but it was a gentle warmth, welcome in the still cool air. The roads wound around, never getting too steep, occasionally crossing train tracks that abounded throughout the area. In all that time, Bennet encountered only a

single truck and one car. When she reached the campus perimeter, she became more cautious of traffic until she could turn off onto one of the bike paths that crisscrossed the grounds. As she wheeled her bike towards the fountain that dominated the walkway-bound grassy stretches in front of the student union, she was not surprised to see that Kit was already there, leaning casually against the side of the fountain, soaking in the sun, for all the world like a student without a care in the world.

Kit was dressed much as she was in jeans and a t-shirt but his sported the picture of a caver with an accompanying logo which read 'cavers do it in the dark'. It made her smile. He wore the hiking boots she had given him on his last birthday; he was always wearing out his boots and always needing new ones. His honey blond hair curled slightly at the base of his neck and his lean body hinted of powerful legs and arm muscles.

Anyone who saw the two of them would not doubt that they were two of the current student populace.

When he caught the movement of her bike out of the corner of his eye, he turned his keen hazel eyes to face her, a happy grin of welcome on his lips.

“Well, hello there, Sunshine. You made good time: it's not even nine yet,” Kit greeted her.

“Good morning, yourself! You still managed to get here before me,” she rejoined with a grin as she pulled up next to him.

The exchanged a fond hug, then Bennet dismounted and joined him in leaning up against the fountain's cement perimeter. For a few minutes they just soaked up the rays, conversation unnecessary. But finally, in accord, they stood, stretched and reached for their bikes.

“That's an interesting tune you've been humming. What's it called?” he asked as he replaced his helmet and strapped it on securely.

Bennet started. She hadn't even been aware that she'd been humming, but now that she thought about it, she realized that she'd been doing it off and on all morning. With an uncertain look upon her face, she replied, “I don't really know. I first heard it in a dream a few days ago. I thought I'd forgotten it, but then I keep finding myself humming bits and pieces at odd moments. I guess my subconscious remembers it better than I do.” Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, she quickly changed the subject, flashing a quick grin. “You ready? Maybe we should get moving.”

Sensitive to her mood, Kit, curious but unwilling to push the issue, abandoned the topic and climbed onto his bike. “Let's see if you can keep up,” he challenged and led off with one powerful thrust of the pedal. Bennet was right behind him, the uncomfortable moment forgotten in the sheer pleasure of physical exercise.

Although Kit was a strong biker, he didn't push the pace. They had a fair distance to go and he knew that Bennet would need her strength for the caves, so he maintained a steady but deceptively distance-gobbling speed which Bennet had no

trouble mimicking. When possible they cycled side by side but were alert to the traffic and stayed well to the side of the road as a precaution. Here, away from the college, bicycle paths were non-existent, so all traffic – cars, trucks, horses and bikers shared the roadway. People who lived hereabouts knew to drive with one eye peeled for slower traffic, but tourists just passing through were not so forbearing; it paid to be wary.

When chance offered, they exchanged updates of their recent activities. And by the time they reached the caves, it was as though they had seen each other only yesterday. Satisfied and content, they were both ready to take on the challenge of the caves.

They parked and locked their bikes, briefly visited the visitor's center, and then began the fifteen minute hike alongside a stream that led up to the cave entrance. As they approached, they could hear other people already inside. Not surprising; it was getting close to eleven o'clock.

“Want to eat a snack before we head inside?” suggested Bennet. Kit never turned down food and was happy to accept the proffered apple she held out to him. Companionably munching the fruit, Kit reminded Bennet of safety procedures once they entered the caves. “We'll keep our helmets on. Move slow, step as much as possible in my footsteps. Did you remember your flashlight?”, queried Kit.

“Yes, it's in my backpack. Are the caves dry?” asked Bennet.

“I was here about four days ago. There were a few small puddles then but the footing should be pretty secure by now; it hasn't rained since,” replied Kit.

“Good. I'm ready when you are,” Bennet said with a grin and a bounce in her step.

“Better put on your jacket. It's pretty cool in there,” cautioned Kit.

And then he led the way inside, pausing just past the entrance to allow their eyes to adjust to the much dimmer lighting. They wouldn't need the flashlights for the first leg of their venture.

Bennet never had any problem in the caves. She'd never been claustrophobic in dark or enclosed spaces. And she trusted Kit implicitly to get her through safely. Caving was his passion, one he practiced assiduously, often traveling hours by car (he did own one) just to experience a new cave. Over the years he'd often been approached by enthusiast groups to lead them through these caves. He knew what he was doing and had a sterling reputation in the cavers' community throughout the valley.

Time in the caves flew by. One became engrossed in the wonders wrought by nature that subsequently made traversing the caves such a challenge. Stalactites and stalagmites abounded. Sometimes they had to crawl through narrow underpinnings and Bennet was doubly glad that the caves were dry. Other times they'd have to edge around sharp outcrops or through narrow gaps, or over a meandering stream. It was quiet in the caves

but for the sounds of their breathing and exertions. The air was moist, cold and fresh – many cracks permeated the walls which, though invisible to them, opened to the air outside. There was no worry about getting caught down here and suffocating.

And then, anticipation heightened by familiarity, Bennet looked forward to their sudden emergence into a vast underground cavern. With flashlight beams darting and dancing here and there, they still could not penetrate the void far enough to see the ceiling. And the chamber was so vast that their voices sounded eerily hollow, swallowed by the distant walls. It made her feel small and insignificant, but reinforced her admiration and awe at what nature could achieve. They paused there for some time, drinking from their water bottles, catching their breaths and relishing what their tiny beams could pick out in the blackness.

Past the cavern, the path out was pretty straightforward, tending ever upwards with fewer obstacles to surmount. The exit was just over the lip of a ledge that overhung the path that meandered several feet below. Kit gave Bennet a lift as hand holds were difficult and the last few feet were steep. Abruptly they erupted from the cave onto the side of a hill. A narrow path led down at a slight angle to the stream and then to the back of the visitor's center.

When Bennet checked her watch, she saw that they had been in the caves almost three hours. "Not bad," she observed. Sometimes it took longer, depending on the conditions inside.

She and Kit made their way leisurely down the hillside. They would eat the packed lunch before starting the bike ride back to the campus. After brushing their clothes down, they chose a picnic table somewhat removed from the others; they didn't feel like socializing with the many visitors at the site. Soon, the chatter of the tourists vanished as the latter went on their way, and the natural sounds of the birds and the babbling spring took their place. It was soothing and peaceful.

A slight breeze rustled the leaves in the trees, just strong enough to cut the heat from the sun. Bennet and Kit removed their jackets as soon as they left the caves, the contrast in temperature exaggerated by their acclimatization to the coolness inside, so the breeze was very welcome.

Finally Kit settled back, replete, and smiled lazily at Bennet. "That was great! Thank you."

Bennet smiled, "I knew I wasn't packing too much." She gestured at the few crumbs remaining of the substantial meal she had provided. "Hardly enough left for the birds," she teased.

"Hey, gotta replenish the inner man after all that exercise," he rebutted. But he grinned as he said it, aware that she knew his healthy appetite all too well. "Besides, you always know just what to bring and it'd be a shame to let it go to waste," he added virtuously.

Now Bennet laughed out loud. "I've yet to find something that you don't like to eat!"

"True," he replied smugly. "I do like most

everything”, he admitted, “but I do draw the line at snails and frog legs.”

Bennet laughed again. “I’ll keep that in mind.” Idly she looked around. “Won’t be long before we get our first cold snap and then the autumn colors. This place will look incredible. I love this time of year, but at the same time, I mourn it. The colors last such a short time and then start falling and turning brown. When the trees are barren, it’s so different, so empty.”

Kit said, “I love it, too, but I don’t mind when Autumn ends. I just think of it as the sleep before the dawn. Besides, I like the snow,” he grinned. “Even though I can’t bike or go caving, it gives me a chance to concentrate on my students and,” with a relish, “go cross country skiing. It’s beautiful then, too, just different.”

“You’re right, of course. It’s just that the colors are so vibrant and so ephemeral, here today and gone tomorrow. And yet I ‘live’ for those few short weeks every year,” she mused.

A bluejay started a raucous scolding behind them. It made them look up and realize how much time had passed.

“We’d better get moving. We’ve still got a ways to go and it’s a lot safer before it starts to get dark,” advised Kit.

They gathered up their detritus, scattering the last crumbs for the birds to fight over. Rehelmeted, backpacks comfortably settled, they walked to where their bikes stood. Unlocking them

and stowing the locks took mere moments and then they were rolling through the parking area and out onto the road.

The way back was luckily more downhill than uphill, requiring less effort, a distinct plus after their energetic climb through the caves. Kit motioned Bennet to lead the way and set the pace. Again, they kept well to the side of the road.

It was a good thing they rode so cautiously, for about halfway through their return journey, a car came rushing up and over the crest of the hill they'd just surmounted. The wash of its passage almost knocked Bennet off her bike, causing her to lurch and almost go down. The driver didn't stop, just shouted 'get out of the way!' before hurrying on. Seconds later Kit was by her side, holding her bike while she caught her balance.

“That was close,” she breathed tremulously.

“Yes, too close,” said Kit from between clenched teeth. “Damn tourists! Why they won't follow the posted speed limits, especially on a blind hill... It's criminal. You could have been badly hurt!”

“But I wasn't and anyway, he's gone. Let's just go on; the sooner we start, the sooner we'll get there,” said Bennet, wanting to just forget about it. There was nothing they could do about it, and she wasn't hurt, just shook up a bit.

Kit didn't say any more, just looked darkly after the long-gone vehicle. Then he made an obvious effort to shake off the thoughts that

crowded his mind, gave Bennet a wry grin, and said, “Sure. You want to lead off again? I'll be right behind you. Don't hurry. We have plenty of daylight left.” With an encouraging smile, he mounted his bike and waited for her to do the same.

“Okay. I'm ready,” Bennet said and resolutely started off. After awhile, she was able to recover her rhythm; her pace picked up and steadied, much to Kit's relief.

They arrived back at the fountain in good time and decided to go into the student union for a cup of tea, in her case, and a light beer, in his. There was always something going on at the union on the weekend. Today, it appeared to be an impromptu set by a trio playing Irish music. The trio was comprised of a girl, dressed in an embroidered vest and a long skirt, playing the flute, a lad in jeans and a black t-shirt with an oak tree on the front, playing the violin, and another lad dressed in a striped yellow and orange t-shirt and jeans, strumming a guitar. 'An unlikely trio' thought Bennet, 'but surprisingly good.' There were no vocals in the piece being played as Bennet and Kit entered, but the music soon had them tapping their feet. Their spirits rose and Bennet's mishap finally faded away as the cheery music caught hold of them.

The next song was a ballad, sung by the girl. Her voice was sweet and light and the ballad, a love song, had a merry refrain. It soon had them laughing and singing along. As the trio quitted the stage, packing up their instruments, Bennet wondered if the trio ever gave concerts. If so, it would be fun to attend. She mentioned this to Kit,

in passing, who agreed. He said, "If you find out that they do plan to hold a concert, let me know. I'd enjoy listening to them, too."

"I will," she promised and hoped the campus grapevine lived up to its usual standards. "I'll ask around and get back to you," she said. "But now I think I'd better head home. I want to get there before the sun sets."

"Yeah, me too," agreed Kit. "Do you want me to ride with you? I wouldn't mind."

"No, I'm okay. Don't worry about me," Bennet replied. The ride home is a piece of cake and you still have a goodly piece to go, yourself." Kit lived further up the hill in a different direction from where Bennet's farmhouse was situated.

"I'll call you tomorrow, and see how you're doing," Kit compromised.

"Good. I'll look forward to hearing from you. Thanks for today. I had a lot of fun!" replied Bennet.

"Me, too," grinned Kit. "See you later."

A last hug and they returned to their bikes and wheeled off, each in their own direction.

At first, Bennet was a little nervous, despite her brave words, in bicycling by herself. But soon, her familiarity with the quiet backroads and the bucolic landscape soothed her. By the time she arrived back at the farm, she was tired but in good spirits. A long soak in the tub eased her sore

muscles, and by the time she had a dinner prepared, the day's activities provided a mostly positive set of memories to muse over.

* * *

When the phone rang, she wondered briefly if Kit had decided to check up on her early, but when she answered, she recognized the voice of her niece, Bridie.

“Bridie! When did you get back?” asked Bennet, in pleased surprise. She knew that Bridie had gone home for a few days to take part in a friend's wedding.

“Hi, Bennet (as Bennet had insisted she call her)” responded Bridie. “I just got back to the dorm a few minutes ago. Dad says 'hi'.” Bridie's dad was Bennet's younger brother, J. T. Bennet and J. T. saw one another seldom, but kept in touch by phone. She was quite fond of him as well as of Bridie, who was a freshman at Fletcher Chapel College, apparently her first choice in schools.

“Thanks, tell him I said 'hi' back when you speak with him next,” said Bennet with a smile.

“I will. I was wondering if I could come out to the farm for a visit. I haven't been there in a while and I'd like to get reacquainted with Lady May, too. Do you think she remembers me?” asked Bridie hopefully.

With a little laugh, Bennet assured her, “I'm positive she does and yes, I'd love you to come for a visit. Call me at the library when you know when

you'll be free and I'll arrange to get off early that day.”

“Great! I'll know more tomorrow so I'll either call or come by around lunchtime. Okay?” queried Bridie.

“Perfect! Till then,” said Bennet and replaced the receiver when Bridie disconnected.

'Bridie.' When Bennet found out that Bridie had chosen her college to attend, she had invited the girl to stay at the farm with her. Bridie had thanked her but said 'no', one: because she knew how much Bennet valued her privacy, and two: because living in a dorm on campus would make it easier to get to know other students, and attend classes, spontaneous get-togethers and events. Bennet might have argued with the first point but couldn't, in good faith, argue with the second. So she accepted her niece's decision with a good grace and made a point of letting her know she was a welcome visitor anytime. She also made Lady May available to her. Bridie and Lady May had become good friends over the last couple of years. Bennet was hoping that with Bridie now at Fletcher Chapel, those visits would be more numerous. And she was sure J. T. would appreciate her keeping an eye out for his daughter, something she was glad to do.

She wandered out to find Lady May grazing along the fence line. The mare came close at the sight of her and Bennet spent a few minutes stroking her and telling her of the upcoming treat in store for her, i.e. Bridie.

It had been a long day so with a final pat,

Bennet headed indoors, Mute racing ahead of her, and soon the two were cozily ensconced in the recliner in the livingroom, Bennet reading her latest novel, Mute a warm presence in her lap. It wasn't long before they headed up to bed. Tomorrow would come soon enough, and the daily routine would reassert itself. Bennet was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

CHAPTER 5

Bennet was surprised when Kit called. It wasn't as though they hadn't done it before, just that it had been awhile. But after all, it made no real difference if they went caving during the day or the night – it would still be stygian black inside.

But then he suggested going there on horseback. It was rare, indeed, that she could coax him off his bike and onto a horse! Nothing loathe for a good ride, she quickly accepted his proposal and by the time dusk had set in, she had Lady May ready. Up the driveway rode Kit on a borrowed gelding, a buckskin from one of the numerous farms thereabouts.

There wasn't much conversation. Bennet climbed into the saddle and they rode off side by side at a steady canter. This time they went directly to the caves, spurning the backroads. Traffic at this

hour was practically nil and what few cars they encountered treated them with respect, swinging wide to pass them at a reduced speed so as not to spook the horses.

The night sky was in full bloom when they reached their destination. They left the horses hobbled by the picnic area where they would be able to graze and drink from the stream in peace, well away from any traffic.

For some reason, this time they approached the challenge of the caves more as a duty than as a fun venture. There was no joking about. They checked their equipment and, without ceremony, entered the caves. The pace set was grueling; they toiled steadily onward until they reached the cavern. And then everything changed.

They extinguished their headlamps for they were not needed. A blue glow suffused the cavern; for the first time they could see its boundaries. The chamber was immense; there was no other word for it, as big and lofty as a cathedral. It was shocking to realize that such a vast hollow could exist underground.

Bennet's curiosity turned to the light; from where did it emanate? For long moments, she could not see. A susurrantion, a whisper of sound split the silence. Bennet knew that it didn't originate from either herself or Kit. The sound grew, with that odd hollowness she had noted on previous forays.

As the sound swelled, the light grew brighter, more intense, and then closer. The room's perimeter was again lost as the light contracted.

Bennet grabbed Kit's hand.

And then the whisper of sound became the song Bennet was coming to know well. The blue light's core shrunk until it was a halo around the child who steadily walked towards them. Bennet could feel it when Kit first saw her, a startled jerk. But he didn't utter a sound, as intent on the singing waif as was she. For it was the same little girl that Bennet had dreamed about before.

The song became more urgent, and sadder. It was as though the 'blue' girl pleaded with and warned them simultaneously. As the notes reached a crescendo, the little singer stopped just in front of them. And when she stopped singing, it took Bennet and Kit a while to realize it. The girl beckoned at them to look back the way they had come and with a last sad look from her eyes, she faded away. The blue haze disintegrated, flying apart in wisps that floated into the vastness until even they faded away. Once more, Bennet and Kit needed to turn on their headlamps to see.

But then, another sound arose. At first Bennet wondered if it was the call of wolves echoing down from the hills through the not-too-distant exit. But, no, the sound came from behind them and it was coming closer. As it neared, they could make out the mad howling of dogs and they didn't sound friendly.

Kit pulled Bennet's hand, still grasped in his, urgently towards the exit. His intent was clear and Bennet wasted no time in following his lead. They made record time but they could hear the dogs hot on their trail. As they climbed up and out, whines

and growls reverberated; the dogs had reached the chamber.

Knowing the path well, and aided by the light of a full moon, they descended rapidly. They reached the horses in minutes and were ready to ride moments later. The dogs ejected from the cave like banshees out of hell and raced down the hill after their prey. In the moonlight, Bennet could finally make out what trailed them. It looked like the two yellow hounds that belonged to her neighbor, Mrs. Sackle. Bennet shuddered. There was no one here now to rein them in. And the slavering, baying hounds looked vicious.

They rode, kicking Lady May and the buckskin into a near gallop, the dogs running after them and not far behind. The chase was set at a frantic pace. Bennet and Kit bent low in their saddles, urging their mounts on. But the horses needed no extra encouragement. The dogs obviously terrified them and they ran as far and as fast as they could to get away from them.

At last, the terrible baying receded and was finally left behind. Bennet risked a look behind them. The dogs had stopped, lolling on the pavement, tongues hanging out as they panted their disappointment and fatigue. Safe!

* * *

With a start, Bennet bolted upright in her bed. Her heart was racing so fast that she could only gasp and try to catch her breath. Mute stood at the foot of her bed, hair raised and back humped as she all but hissed. It took a few moments but then

Bennet gathered the frightened kitten to her, stroking her over and over to calm not only her, but herself as well. It was a good ten minutes, however, before Mute's hackles had smoothed and Bennet's pulse returned to normal.

The clock registered as 5:30 a.m. Bennet knew she'd sleep no more this night, so she carried the kitten downstairs to the kitchen, turned on the warm yellow light and poured some milk into a bowl for Mute. Then she heated some water and soon sat, a cup of tea warming her hands, at the table. Meanwhile her thoughts raced as she tried to make sense out of what had just happened.

'A dream. It had just been a dream, a nightmare brought on by weariness and this stupid obsession with the singing girl. Surely!' But it was hard to convince herself, for this time she remembered every single second. And what's more, she remembered the song in its entirety. Only the words proved elusive. But she had a gut feeling that even those would come back with time.

When her mind turned to thoughts of the hounds and the chase...She shuddered again. Mute, as though following her thoughts, raised her head and one paw in feline alertness, but after a moment went back to lapping up the last of the milk, and then to industriously performing her toilet.

Bennet finished her tea but sat on in the kitchen until the first hints of dawn streaked the sky. Only then was she able to go back upstairs to get ready for work. It would take tremendous effort to get through the day today. The strenuous weekend followed by the nightmare had sapped her of her

usual resilience and peace of mind. She could only hope that the day would not be too demanding.

* * *

Bennet dragged up the steps and into the library. She sat down at her desk and, for a few minutes, just closed her eyes and listened to the dulled sounds around her. Before opening, it could be incredibly peaceful here. Only a few of her aides bothered to show up this early, and those that did busied themselves automatically, shelving books that had been returned too late the night before to process. Bennet could hear one or two in the stacks now, the wheels of the trolley on the floorboards and the slight thunk and rubbing as the books slid between other volumes. The sounds were all reassuringly normal, ordinary. Bennet could feel her body and mind relax more with each passing moment. Soon, she was able to turn her mind to the tasks at hand.

There was an email from Susan awaiting her attention; it proved to be just a note to say how much she had enjoyed Saturday. That brought a slight smile to her lips. She'd write back later.

By the time 9 a.m. rolled around, Bennet was back to her usual efficient self, if slightly subdued in her manner. Most didn't even notice, too focused on their own pursuits. Luckily, the day was proving to be one of those where the staff could catch up on the backload, for there were few patrons, and those few seemed happy left to their own devices.

By 11:15, Bennet was looking forward to hearing from her niece. Perhaps they could have lunch together if Bridie's schedule allowed. When the phone rang a half hour later, she answered, fully expecting to hear Bridie's voice on the other end, but it was Kit. To her surprise, he sounded as uncentered as she.

“Kit, hi.”

“Hi, Bennet. I assume you got home alright. No problems?” he asked, his voice concerned but fatigued.

“No, it was fine, totally uneventful.” There was no way she was going to tell him how nervous she had initially been. “I got home in plenty of time and just took it easy. I even got to sleep early,” she said, trying to sound upbeat and reassuring.

“How about you?” she asked. “You sound pretty quiet.”

“Oh,” he answered after a minute pause, “I'm fine. Didn't sleep very well so I'm sorta dragging today.”

Concerned, Bennet asked, “You're not coming down with something, are you?”

“No, no. Just had a bad dream is all.” He hesitated and then said, “Funnily enough, you were in it.” But his heart was not in his laugh.

Bennet was disturbed. This was not like Kit at all. Usually he would let something like this blow away like so much dust in the wind. But

before she could ask anything more he said, “You know that song you've been humming? Well, in this dream we were back at the cavern and this little girl was singing it at us for all she was worth.”

Bennet started to feel faint, but Kit wasn't done.

“And then we got chased by a couple of ugly dogs. Doesn't sound like much, but it sure made an impact. I woke up soaking with sweat and my heart was racing a mile a minute.”

“Kit.” Bennet stopped, trying to pull herself together. “Kit, we have to meet. I need to tell you something. Can you meet me for lunch today?”

“Well, sure. I don't have any classes till after 2 today. Shall we meet at the union?” he replied, puzzled, but willing to accommodate her.

“Yes. The union would be fine. Say about 12:15?” she asked.

“12:15 it is.” And then he hung up.

Bennet just sat there. 'What had just happened was just ... not ... possible. How could she and Kit be having the same dream?' Then an even scarier thought occurred to her. 'What if it wasn't a dream? No! She was just too tired to think straight. She'd awakened in her bed so, of course it had been a dream. So what other explanation could there be?' Bennet was afraid to pursue that line of thought.

The phone rang. With relief at the

distraction, Bennet picked up the receiver. This time it was Bridie, setting up a time for her visit: Wednesday. The call was necessarily brief; Bridie was calling between classes. When she hung up, it was already after 12. Time to go meet Kit. This was the first time Bennet could ever remember feeling apprehensive and reluctant at the prospect.

* * *

Bennet walked through the doors of the student union and began looking through the crowds for Kit. A moment later his wave caught her eye. He'd already snagged a booth for the two of them, then gestured at the cafeteria line: he'd meet her there. Bennet nodded her understanding and headed for the trays stacked next to the service counter. The line moved quickly. When it was their turn, they made their choices quickly. After paying, they made their way to the reserved booth; the high backs of the benches, topped by a plethora of potted vines, provided privacy and acted as a buffer which muted the conversations going on around them. 'Hopefully it would mute their own, too' thought Bennet.

When they had made inroads on their lunch, Kit looked at Bennet expectantly, "So, what was it you wanted to tell me?"

Bennet had been avoiding this moment but could do so no longer. "You know that song I've been humming?" Kit nodded, looking puzzled.

Speaking slowly and distinctly, she continued, "Well, as I told you, I first heard it in a dream. What I didn't tell you was that it was a

dream about a little girl with a visible blue aura.”

Now Kit seemed to sit up, become a little more alert, but he restrained himself from interrupting.

Bennet proceeded to tell him about the first dream. Then, even more reluctantly, she went on. “Last night I had another dream. In it you called me to go night caving and insisted we go there on horseback.”

Kit was starting to look a little pale around the edges, but gestured for her to go on.

“We went through the caves faster than we've ever done it before. And when we got to the chamber,” here she paused, “it was filled with a blue light which got brighter and brighter until we saw her, the same little girl who was in my first dream.”

Kit was looking downright grim now but still held his peace.

Bennet continued, “She sang to us and, I think, warned us, and when she disappeared, two big yellow hounds chased us out of the caves and halfway back here. And then I woke up.” She looked at her watch and said, “It was...” and Kit joined her in saying “5:30.”

He looked at her to be sure she wasn't going to add anything more. When she didn't, he said, “You do know that this is not possible, for two people to have *exactly* (and he emphasized the word) the same dream and wake up at *exactly* the

same time afterwards.” Bennet just nodded.

“And yet we did. Which means...what? Any ideas?” he asked.

Bennet confessed, “I’d gotten this far on my own, but...” She shook her head in confusion and no small amount of uncertainty.

Slowly, Kit said “We’re going to have to give this some thought. I think there’s more involved here than we can hope to explain at this point.” Then noticing the time, he grimaced and said, “I’ve got to go. A faculty meeting was called at the last minute, and I have that 2 o’clock class afterward. I’ll call you later tonight, okay?”

Bennet nodded again, seemingly incapable of speech.

“Don’t worry,” he coaxed. “We’ll figure this out.” He gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze and smiled reassuringly before he hurried across the hall and out the door.

* * *

Bennet walked slowly back to the library. Although they hadn’t been able to rationalize the dreams away, she felt a little better in just having shared it all with Kit. She didn’t know what more the two of them could do or reason out, but the fact that Kit would be there with her made it easier to face.

Climbing the steps, she entered the main doors and saw Ty in conversation with a young girl

dressed in the usual jeans and tank top. When he glanced up and saw her, his face lightened with relief and he gestured the girl to follow him, meeting Bennet half way across the floor.

“Hi, Bennet. I was just telling Jenny here”, with a quick smile in the girl's direction, “that you hold the key to the rare books collection. She needs access to one of the books there,” he concluded with a smile.

“Hello, Ty. Yes, of course”, the latter directed at Jenny. “Come with me. The key is kept in my office.” Bennet took a closer look at Jenny for she looked familiar somehow. And then it came to her – this was the flautist from the student union the night before. It had taken a few moments to place her because of the difference in dress.

“Oh! I just realized.” exclaimed Bennet while she rummaged through her desk. “My friend and I saw you sing and play at the union last night. You were wonderful! We were wondering afterwards about, well, really hoping for, a possible concert. We'd love to hear your trio again,” she said with a smile.

Jenny flushed with pleasure. “Thank you. I'm glad you liked it. Actually we have been thinking of holding a concert. We just have to work out the details of where and when. I'll let you know, if you like, what we decide.”

“Thank you. Yes, that would be wonderful. We'll look forward to it,” responded Bennet.

Her curiosity peaked by Jenny's lilting accent,

Bennet couldn't resist asking, "Where are you from, Jenny?"

Jenny replied shyly, "I'm an unofficial exchange student from Dublin, Ireland."

"How fascinating," remarked Bennet with a smile. "You've come a long way."

By now they had reached the metal mesh door that guarded the rare books. Bennet made short work of opening the padlock.

"Now, which book were you interested in?" she asked.

Jenny handed her a scrap of paper with the author, title, and library code written on it. "I'm studying myths in folk music," she volunteered. "I heard there were some possible references in this book to a ballad I'm researching," she added hopefully.

Bennet found the book, a very large, very old, outsized tome written sometime in the 1600s. She carried it carefully to one of the study carrolls. "I'm sorry, but these books can't be checked out. They're very valuable and, in this case (gesturing at the book), very old. But you are welcome to study it here for as long as you like, or till closing, whichever comes first," she added with a smile. "I hope you don't mind, but I have to lock you in here with the book while you are studying it, but you need only press this buzzer" - here she pointed out the button to Jenny - "and I'll be here in a jiffy to let you out."

Jenny smiled. “That's fine. I've encountered such precautions many times before. I'm just glad that the books are so well protected.” Then she eagerly bent to the book.

Bennet was relieved to see how carefully she handled the ancient tome and its pages and felt no qualms in leaving Jenny in here with it. She went back to her office, but during the course of the day, passed by the caged stacks on several occasions. Each time she could see Jenny deeply immersed in the book, sometimes making careful notes, sometimes mouthing the words as she read.

When closing time rolled around, Bennet hurried to the rare books section. Jenny was just closing the book and storing her notebook in her backpack. She looked up with a triumphant smile as she saw Bennet approach.

Bennet unlocked the door, and looked expectantly at Jenny. “How did it go? Did you find what you were hoping for?”

“Even better!” crowed Jenny. “I found the ballad itself and the musical score to accompany it! It took me awhile to understand the words; they are written in a very old dialect. But I think I deciphered them correctly. And now I'm just aching to practice the tune. It's so exciting!”

“Congratulations,” smiled Bennet. “I'm glad you were so successful. You've made a rare find.”

“Yes! I think I can even use it for my final project!” grinned Jenny. “And maybe we can use it in our concert. It's going to take a bit of work to

convert the score to our instruments, but it'll be worth it," her eyes already focused on some distant plane.

They headed for the front door where Ty waited to let out the last few patrons before locking up. It was obvious to Bennet that the two young people were happy to see one another. Ty's grin grew broader and his eyes lighted up upon their approach, but his eyes were all for Jenny. Jenny, on the other hand, blushed slightly and hugged her arms tightly around herself, not taking her green eyes off Ty for the few steps it took to reach him. Then she paused and looked up into his face with a smile and said "Thanks for your help. Maybe I'll see you at the union. My band plays there sometimes." Here she glanced quickly at Bennet who was watching all this with a pleasant smile on her face.

Jenny said, "Thanks, again" to Bennet and then exited the library. Ty stood there a few moments, just gazing after her. Then he seemed to recollect where he was and turned with a sheepish grin on his face to Bennet.

"Nice girl," he commented.

"Yes, and she sings and plays beautifully," murmured Bennet. She kept a smirk to herself but knew Ty was aware of her humor.

"Well," he cleared his throat, "the art show went well. I sold quite a few pieces in addition to the one you bought, Boss," this last with his trademark cheeky grin.

“That's wonderful!” Bennet replied seriously. “Are you already started on something new?”

“Yes, I'm working on a winter series now,” he replied.

“Ty, you are a superb painter! I can't wait to see more of your work!” Bennet assured him earnestly.

“Well, it takes quite a while to finish each canvas. But I'll let you know when I have something to share,” Ty told her. “I appreciate your interest. I can tell you're sincere,” he added with a smile.

“Yes, I am. And I intend to spread the word about your work. You deserve a much wider audience. I pity the people who haven't had the pleasure of seeing them”, said Bennet emphatically.

“Thanks,” he said, “ but a few who really 'get' my work and like it mean much more to me than my work being viewed by many who just see another landscape and walk on by.”

“Yes, I can understand that. But at the same time, those few are only representative of the many who would truly admire your art, and if they never get the opportunity...,” hinted Bennet.

“I hope you're right. But regardless, I'm happy where I am for the time being. I am finishing off my Master's in my own good time, and have the freedom I need to work on my paintings. And, the canvases I sell keep me in peanut butter,” he added

with a grin. "I'm secure here for the time being, and then there's the added advantage of the people I meet." Here he looked at Bennet pointedly and when she had gotten the point, he couldn't help staring out the door, too.

Bennet smiled. She'd been right. 'Ty was a wonderful addition to her circle of friends.'

"Well," she spoke briskly, "time for both of us to get out of here. I'll see you tomorrow if you're on duty?" He nodded. "Fine. See you then. Have a good evening," she concluded.

"You, too. See you tomorrow," he replied, collected his backpack and headed out the door and down the steps.

* * *

For a time, Bennet forgot her concerns. She drove home and even blithely talked with Mrs. Sackle for a few minutes. But she was glad that her neighbor's dogs were nowhere in evidence. That would have taxed the limits of her hard won serenity.

It was while she ate her solitary meal that it all came flooding back. If these had been ordinary dreams, or nightmares, surely they would have faded away by now.

Kit called and said shortly that he was on his way. Bennet didn't say anything other than, "See you."

When he drove up in his ancient VW van,

she had finished washing up and setting the kitchen to rights. Kit walked up the path and they settled quietly on the porch swing. Together they had spent many hours on this swing, watching the sun set, laughing and talking, and although they went through the motions now, neither was able to appreciate it properly.

“I've been pondering this all day,” said Kit quietly. “If this was an ordinary dream, we wouldn't have both had it. So it must be something more. Unless you've turned psychic?” He glanced at her almost hopefully. She shook her head in brief denial. Abashed, he continued, “It obviously has something to do with this child. Do you recognize her?” he asked.

“No,” replied Bennet. “I don't. But I think you're right. Maybe if we knew more about her song..”

“I've never heard the tune before, but I'm pretty sure I'd recognize it if I heard it again,” said Kit. After a moment, he added. “Do you think she's real?” he asked.

“I don't know. But I've wondered the same. What can be making her so sad?” Bennet's voice wobbled.

Kit looked up at the wobble in her voice. He put his arm around her comfortingly, and she rested her head on his shoulder. “We'll find out and if she's in trouble, we'll help her. Somehow.” he reassured her.

They sat on until the sun was long gone and

the moon had risen in its place.

Finally Kit said, “I'd better be going. We'll talk. Try and get some sleep.” But as he said the word *sleep*, they both flinched a little, for it brought to mind the horrifying nightmare chase of the night before.

Bennet watched him drive away and for the first time thought that living alone might not be the best. It would certainly have been a comfort tonight to know that someone else – Kit – was here. With a sigh, she went indoors. Mute appeared as if by magic and accompanied her up the stairs, cuddling close to her once she'd settled in her bed. The heat emanating from her little body helped Bennet relax enough to fall asleep; she slept soundly and peacefully.

CHAPTER 6

Bridie jumped up as the bell sounded. This was the last class of the day. Weaving her way through the throng of students, she reached the door and sidled around a group too intent on their own conversation to realize they were blocking the exit. Bridie was small and slender so it was relatively easy to squeeze around them. Free! Her pace picked up speed as she headed for her dorm room to drop off her books and collect a few things for her visit to the farm. She was so psyched!

Her roommate, Maggie, wasn't there. Actually, they saw little of each other; their schedules were so different. Plus, Maggie had a boyfriend so when she wasn't in class, she was invariably with him. Sometimes Bridie would go for days without seeing her. Maggie tended to come in late and leave early. On those few occasions when they crossed paths, they had little to

say to one another. A generic 'hi' and 'how are you doing' sufficed.

It wasn't exactly what Bridie had been hoping for when she opted to stay in a dorm rather than with her aunt. She'd envisioned late night gossips over hot cocoa with her 'roomie', and joint jaunts to the union or various events on campus, maybe even studying together. But it hadn't worked out that way. They shared no classes and couldn't seem to find any common ground upon which to build a friendship.

Bridie was interested in languages, particularly those which were 'dead', like Latin, or 'dying' like Gaelic. She already had three years of Latin under her belt. But what she really wanted to do was become proficient in old English dialects. She had run across manuscripts that were beautifully illustrated but the hand-scribed texts were illegible to her. She wanted to be able to decipher them.

The language department here at Fletcher Chapel had an excellent staff and an impressive reference library. And at the main library where her aunt Bennet worked, several ancient tomes, heavily illustrated, were housed in the rare books collection. All this influenced her decision to come here for her undergraduate studies; that her aunt was here, too, was a bonus.

As for the Gaelic, Bridie's family was of Irish descent. She had even traced their ancestors back five generations. She hoped to look up some of their 'cousins' if and when she ever got to Ireland. All her life she had been drawn to anything Irish:

music, literature, holidays, names, mythology (she collected Irish myths and fairy tales), and leaned heavily towards the color green. She couldn't wait to go to the 'fair isle' itself, and listen to the brogue! Which reminded her.. She meant to ask around and see if anyone knew of a likely instructor to teach her Gaelic. Maybe her aunt might know of someone or else one of her professors. She made a mental note to look into it.

Bridie loved spending time with Bennet and at the farm. And she had fallen head over heels for Lady May. Together they had gone on many a long ramble whenever Bridie could get away for a visit. Now that she was here at Fletcher Chapel, she was determined to visit a lot more!

* * *

It was almost three o'clock, the time she had set to meet up with her aunt at the library. Bridie dashed out of her dorm and along the tree-lined walk that meandered all over campus to the various department buildings that dotted the green. Turning off onto one of the many offshoots, she arrived at the steps of the library just as Bennet walked through the front doors.

With mirrored smiles, they gave each other a warm hug before making their way to the car. On the short ride to the farm, Bridie chattered non-stop about her studies and her recent visit home. Bennet listened with interest and prompted her with insightful comments and queries. When they pulled up in the driveway, Bridie jumped out and ran to the fence, whistling for Lady May. The mare came at a trot, dancing across the field until she was close

enough to thrust her massive head over the fence and butt against Bridie's shoulder. It was obvious that Lady May was as fond of the girl as Bridie was of the horse. Bridie wrapped her arms around the mare's neck and whispered to her, low. Then with a toss of her mane, the mare bobbed her head, snorted and danced a few feet to the side, nickering as if to say 'come on, let's go!'

With a backward grin shot in Bennet's direction, Bridie rushed to the barn to fetch the tack. Scant minutes later, she led the mare to the tree stump used as a mounting block. Once astride, she waved a cheery goodbye and horse and rider moved off onto the back trail.

Bennet had encouraged her niece to go for a ride with Lady May as soon as they arrived, telling her that Lady May had been severely neglected recently and, privately, because she needed a break from her niece's bubbly chatter! Bennet's mood was still low, making it hard to respond to Bridie's enthusiasm as she normally would. She was hoping that Lady May would distract Bridie so that she wouldn't notice.

However, in this, Bennet was unsuccessful. Bridie had noticed and deliberately rambled on, determined not to intrude on Bennet's thoughts. She figured that Bennet would tell her what was bothering her if and when she was ready.

Bennet sat for a while on the porch swing, soaking in the sun and listening to the rural sounds around her: the sougning of a soft breeze, the twittering birds in the trees, the croaking of the ravens as they patrolled the sky, and what might

have been Mute or possibly a wild rabbit rustling under the bushes that ringed the yard. Every once in a while she could hear the distant rumble of a tractor or the hum of an airplane high above. The sounds conjoined into a pleasant background buzz that finally left her dozing in the sunlight. The jangling of the kitchen phone woke her. To her surprise, it was Ty calling.

“Hi, Bennet. Sorry to disturb you at home, but I wanted to tell you about a special art sale some friends of mine have organized; the proceeds will go to charity. I thought you might be interested. It's tomorrow night at 8 o'clock in the Crier's Patch.”

“Sounds good, Ty. Yes, I'd like to come. Thanks for letting me know,” answered Bennet.

“If you know anyone else who you think might be interested, bring them along. The more the merrier,” he added with a smile in his voice. “Gotta go.”

Bennet said, “I'll spread the word. Bye.”

She retreated to the kitchen. It was time to start putting together a dinner for Bridie and herself. She felt much better after her nap. 'Maybe all I needed was to catch up on my sleep' she thought idly. She didn't pursue the thought, just busied herself with the task at hand.

Outside, she heard Lady May's hoofs on the path as horse and rider approached the barn. They came at a slow walk and, when Bennet glanced out the window, she observed that both looked like they

had enjoyed a good run. Bennet waved but didn't go out. She knew Bridie would take care of Lady May and her tack before she came in, and that she'd release the mare back into the field where she could graze at will. There was a stream that trickled along the backside of the field; Lady May could slake her thirst at any time rather than wait for someone to fill the trough by the barn. The grass in the field was still lush. The mare would be fine.

When Bridie came in, she headed straight for the shower; she was prepared and had brought some spare clothes in her backpack. When she came back down in fresh jeans and a lime green sleeveless shell, she pitched right in chopping vegetables for the salad and setting the table. The two had established a comfortable routine during previous visits and worked easily in tandem.

While they worked, Bennet told Bridie about the sale the next night and also about Ty and his exhibit at the Gallery. Bridie was interested and promised to spread word of both among her crowd the next day.

“Why don't you tell Susan, too?” suggested Bridie. “I'll bet she would like it.” Bridie knew the two women were good friends.

“Good idea. I'll give her a buzz in the morning,” replied Bennet.

After eating, they shared the washing up and then settled into the porch swing. Their conversation was sporadic, interspersed with comfortable, companionable silences. When the sun set, Bridie darted here and there around the

yard, catching fireflies only to let them go again moments later. The hooting of an owl sounded softly in the night. “Is that Hermit?” speculated Bridie.

Bennet ventured, “It does sound like her.”

When they tired of being outside, they turned on the warm yellow lamps in the livingroom and watched a couple of silly sitcoms. Mute alternated from one lap to another, but when they climbed the stairs to go to bed, Mute followed Bennet without hesitation. Bridie continued down the hall to the spare room which was always in a state of readiness for whenever she might visit.

In the morning, they were quick off the mark. Bennet wanted to get hold of Susan as soon as possible and Bridie needed to stop off at her dorm to collect her books for the day's classes. Bridie remembered before they parted to ask her aunt if she would keep her eyes peeled for a possible Gaelic tutor. She was long gone before Jenny's face came to mind.

* * *

“Susan, Bennet here. I just heard about an art sale opening tonight at the Crier's Patch. It starts at 8, so if you get a chance.. Oh! It's being run by some friends of Ty's and the proceeds go to charity.” Bennet hung up after leaving the message on Susan's answering machine. It was still at least a half hour before Susan would show up for work; she'd get it first thing when she checked her messages.

That done, Bennet printed up a quick flyer detailing the sale and directing people where to go and when. She made several copies and posted them throughout the library. Hopefully, the word would spread.

Lastly, she called Kit, but ended up leaving a message there, too, when he didn't pick up.

Finally, she turned to her own messages of which there were quite a few. Most were work-related, but one was a repeat from Ty, obviously recorded before he'd gotten hold of her at the farm, and another from Kit, telling her he'd be gone for a couple of days on a field trip with his students. Ruefully, Bennet thought 'I should have checked my messages first.' But no harm done. She'd just talk with him when he got back.

A little later, she could hear the staff arriving and was not surprised when Ty poked his head around her door.

“Morning!” he greeted her with a smile. “I saw the flyers you put up. Thanks! Would you mind if I copied a few more and ran them over to the union?”

“Hello, Ty. That's a good idea. Sure. Here's the original,” handing it to him. “Can you tell me what to expect tonight?” she asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine. They're not giving me any hints,” he admitted. “But I have high expectations.”

* * *

That night a large crowd had gathered in front of the Crier's Patch, mostly other students but dotted with professors and other campus staff. Bennet saw Ty talking and laughing with a young girl, and when she moved closer, saw that it was Jenny. She called out to them with a pleasant grin, "Good evening."

They turned together at her voice and grinned back. "Quite a turnout," observed Ty. "Your flyers made a difference. My friends never hoped for so many to show up."

"How's the musical score coming along, Jenny?" asked Bennet.

"Slowly. But on another note, we did decide on a time and place for the concert. "Here," waving at the Crier's Patch, "as a matter of fact," replied Jenny. "It'll be Friday night at 9. I think we'll follow your example and print up a few flyers to post."

"Be sure and save a couple for the library," answered Bennet. "I just hope we get here early enough to get seats!"

"I'll save a couple," broke in Ty. Bennet was sure he blushed a little, but it was hard to tell in the dusky light.

"That'd be great. Thanks, Ty," she answered sweetly.

Suddenly the doors to the Crier's Patch opened with a flourish. The Crier's Patch had originally been a hall for student lectures in the

early days of the college. But as the college grew, the building was replaced by larger structures and renamed. Eventually it became a multi-purpose site for all kinds of student-related extra-curricular activities. Students needing a place to hold meetings or concerts or, like tonight, some kind of show or sale, simply requested the key from the head office, and if it was not already reserved, walked away with it in hand. The hall was a good sized rectangle, empty but for heating pipes, but wired for electricity and sporting two bathrooms. Chairs and tables were easy to borrow, so the interior could be set up in record time for any kind of event.

The crowd streamed in and spread out to take in the montage of paintings, sculpture and jewelry stalls that broke up the room into easy aisles and rows. Brochures were handed out on either side, giving a little information on each item for sale, and any provenance that was available. In big print at the bottom, people were reminded that the proceeds were all going to charity.

While circling the pieces, Bennet saw quite a few faces that she recognized. But most of her attention was focused on the art. The sculptures particularly drew her interest. Of stone, copper and wood, they ranged in size from 6 inches all the way up to 5 feet in height. Some were representational, some abstract. Her favorite was that of a seated child carved in wood whose hand rested on the cat that lay in her lap. The piece was made out of a honey chestnut which seemed to radiate warmth; it stood just over a foot tall. Bennet quickly checked the price tag and then flipped it to the 'sold' side and retrieved the matching ticket to hand to the cashier.

She paid with a check and continued on to look at the paintings.

During the course of the evening, she had naturally become separated from her friends as each spied a particular find, taking them in opposite directions. But as she moved past some collages into an area dominated by portraits, she could see Ty and Jenny just up ahead. Bennet moved slowly from one canvas to the next. The subjects varied: male or female faces lined with time and experience; a clown whose eyes belied the cheerful face that had been painted on; a ballerina exquisitely balanced 'en point'; a woodsman, leaning on his ax in weariness next to a fresh tree stump.

She had almost reached the end of that particular row when she caught up with Ty and Jenny. They were standing in front of a portrait of a whimsical little girl. As Bennet got closer she could see that the child had huge sad eyes; leaves were caught in her fair hair. Behind her was a hint of denuded tree branches. She was outlined in a pale blue. Bennet almost fainted when she saw her. The picture was a faithful rendering of the 'blue' girl of her dreams. Ty noticed her distress and was quick to catch her around the waist, supporting her until they could find a place for her to sit down.

“Are you alright?” he asked her with concern.

“That painting. Please, flip the reserve tag,” she gasped faintly. Jenny hurried to do so, getting their just in time before another customer reached for it, moving on with a grimace of disappointment

as she beat him to it.

“What's wrong, Bennet?” they queried.

“I'll...explain. But first, could you take this check to the cashier and pay for me?” she requested.

“Of course, no problem,” said Ty. He hurried off to complete the transaction. Jenny hovered over Bennet, rubbing her hands and trying to reassure her. Bennet was grateful, but unable to do more than sit there, pale, eyes closed against the noise and the crowds. Ty brought back her receipt in good time. Once she knew the painting was irretrievably hers, she was able to relax a little. Some of the color came back into her cheeks. Jenny brought her a glass of water which she drank slowly.

The crowds thinned. Bennet waited until the aisles were completely abandoned and then climbed unsteadily to her feet, and made her way slowly to where the painting rested on an easel.

“Ty, what does the brochure say about this piece?” she asked.

Glancing at the text, he related, “It only says it is a piece donated from an estate sale, nothing more. What's so special about it?” asked Ty.

“I will tell you, but if you two don't mind, I could sure use a cup of tea first,” she admitted. “At the Student Union..?”

Ty and Jenny looked at one another and seemed to reach an unspoken agreement.

“Sure. We could both use a drink, too,” said Ty good-naturedly. Jenny nodded agreement and smiled.

As they passed the jewelry stalls on their way out, Bridie darted out when she caught sight of her aunt, intent on showing her what she'd found. But when she saw how pale Bennet was, and how the others supported her, her bright smile faded away.

“Aunt Bennet! What's wrong? What happened?” she cried.

“Bridie. It's okay. I just felt a little faint in there. Ty and Jenny have been helping me.” Bennet tried to reassure her, but Bridie insisted on accompanying them to the Union when she learned that's where they were headed. She thought back to her aunt's somber behavior of the day before. She wondered if it had anything to do with her condition now and was determined to get to the bottom of it. No way she could just walk away when Bennet looked the way she did!

The statue and painting were carefully wrapped in tissue and secured with twine. Ty and Jenny helped stow them in the trunk of Bennet's car and then they all climbed inside the Honda for the drive to the Union. Bridie insisted on driving. The way wasn't far on foot but roundabout by car and Bennet didn't want to leave the car sitting there.

At the Union, there were many students taking advantage of the long open hours. This late, it was still possible to get something grilled, and a plethora of beverages, not to mention snacks, were

available. It wasn't long before the four of them were seated around a tiny table with tea or coffee and a plate of brownies for Ty, Jenny and Bridie.

With an uncertain look in Bridie's direction, Bennet began her recitation of the past few days. It took awhile to tell, and Bennet was unsure of what reactions to expect. Her experiences, after all, required a great leap of faith to swallow whole. She so wished that Kit was here to back her up! But as she concluded with the painting, and looked around at their faces, she did not see any sign of skepticism. On the contrary, they each showed interest, concern, and a burgeoning resolve to delve into the mystery with her.

Resolutely, Bridie said, "I want to see this painting."

Bennet promised, "You will, but first it's not in very good shape. The girl can be seen but the background is grayed with dirt and age. I need to have it professionally cleaned. I was thinking of asking the people at the Gallery if they could do it."

Ty interrupted. "Actually, I've been cleaning and restoring paintings for extra cash for a couple of years now. Would you like me to take a crack at it?"

"Ty!" exclaimed Bennet in surprise. "Yes! That would be perfect! Thank you."

And then, upon reflection, she asked, "Do you think it will take very long?"

"Maybe not. It looks like someone had

already made a start before it was put up for sale. What's left is the background and it looks pretty uniform so it should go quickly, barring any 'little surprises'," was Ty's opinion. "I'll get started on it right away. This is important," he concluded.

"Thanks, Ty. I'm really grateful. Just let me know what you usually charge," replied Bennet.

"Oh, by the way, Bridie, Jenny here is from Dublin, Ireland."

Bridie turned to Jenny, eyes wide. Jenny smiled. Within seconds the two girls were huddled together, Bridie's dark crop contrasting sharply with Jenny's soft red-gold curls. Ty looked on ruefully.

"I knew I couldn't keep her to myself for much longer," he said with a smile. Then turning serious again, he addressed Bennet, "I'll let you know by the end of tomorrow about the painting. You want to walk with me to the car?"

"Sure," said Bennet with a grin. Then, on impulse, she addressed them all: "Would you three like to come to my house for a barbecue tomorrow?" They all happily accepted.

The foursome left the Union, the girls lagging behind, still deep in conversation. Obviously, they each had found a new friend. After Ty took possession of the painting, he and Jenny headed for her dorm, but Bridie stayed for a few words with her aunt.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come back with you to the farm?" she asked. "I don't

mind. Really.”

“No, I'm fine now, Bridie. Besides, you have an early morning class, if memory serves, and the trek back and forth could make you late. You go on back to your room and I'll see you tomorrow,” said Bennet with a fond smile and a practical air.

Bridie though Bennet did look and sound much better, so she took her at her word, gave her a hug, extracted a strict promise that she would rest when she got home and finally took her leave.

As Bennet watched her go, she thought, 'I am so fortunate.'

CHAPTER 7

Planning a barbecue. It had been awhile since Bennet had had to worry about cooking for more than herself. This would require preparation. The first thing she did was to call Kit. If he was back, she wanted to invite him as well. If she was going to hold a party, she wanted to do it up right. She dialed his number. No answer. Disappointed, out of all proportion, she decided to leave a message. Halfway through, he picked up.

“Hi, Bennet. I just walked through the door,” he said. “What's this about a party?”

Bennet started all over. “I'm holding a barbecue. Can you believe it? And I called to invite you.” Then suddenly, the calm facade that had seen her all the way home cracked. Her voice grew faint, “Then I realized. You and Tom always handled the grill. I don't even know if it is still

usable. Maybe it's just a rust heap after all these years. Oh, what was I thinking?!"

Kit broke into her thoughts. "Bennet...Bennet!"

Bennet realized she had been obsessing so hard that she had stopped vocalizing. "Oh! I'm here, Kit. I'm sorry. I can't seem to think straight. I..."

Kit abruptly said, "I'll be over in a half hour. I'm just going to change out of these grubby clothes."

"Okay," she answered faintly.

True to his word, Kit rolled into the driveway a scant thirty minutes later. "Now," he said, "Tell me. There's more here than just a barbecue."

Bennet smiled feebly, and settled next to him on the swing. Hands grasped tightly together, she told him about finding the painting. "Kit, it was her, exactly as we saw her. I don't understand what's going on. But she's real, Kit. She's real."

"Alright, Bennet. Now we know. She is, or was, real. That's a step in the right direction. Where is the painting?" he asked, looking towards the house's interior.

Bennet apologetically explained about giving it to Ty to be cleaned. "You weren't here and..."

“That's okay. I'll see it later,” he soothed her. “Do you know anything else about it?”

“Just that it was donated from an estate sale,” she confessed.

“Well, we'll take this one step at a time,” he consoled her. “Now, about this barbecue. As I recall, we stuck it in the garage when you moved out here. Have you ever used it?”

She shook her head 'no'.

He continued, “Then that's where we'll find it. The garage is pretty solid, so it should be in good shape. Let's go take a look.”

Bennet fetched the key to the door and they walked out to the garage. Kit turned on the light, which luckily hadn't burned out. Bennet rarely came out here. The garage was a hodgepodge of boxes, shelves stuffed with obscure bundles, gardening tools, a power mower, Bennet's bike, and way in the back, a huge covered oblong which proved, upon closer inspection, to be the grill. After removing the very dusty cover, Kit looked it over and said it looked to be in pristine condition. He pulled it out to take it back up to the house.

“You'll need to buy some briquets and coal oil tomorrow, but it looks just fine,” Kit decided. “I'll come by around 5 and get the coals started.” With a quick smile, he said, “This should be fun.”

Bennet smiled back, a little uncertainly at first, but then with renewed confidence. “Yes, I think so, too.”

* * *

When Kit left, Bennet felt much better. He always seemed to be able to steady her nerves and calm her fears. He never belittled her foibles or concerns, nor teased her about them (here, for some reason, Tom's face flashed before her eyes, making her feel a momentary twinge), just helped her work through them, so that what had initially seemed insurmountable, ended by being perfectly manageable. She hadn't realized how much she had come to depend upon him over the years. But he was always there for her, and yet never overstepped the line she had unconsciously drawn in their friendship. Thinking about it, she began to marvel at just how well their relationship worked. And she began to wonder why, in all those years, someone hadn't snapped him up. Kit was incredible!

All this speculation was forcing her to view him, and their relationship, in a new light. And she wasn't quite sure how she felt about that, or even what to think. But it was beginning to make her feel – open – to what, she wasn't sure. Possibilities seemed to be multiplying before her eyes. And then she stopped. What about Kit? Did he feel any of this? He was as solicitous as ever and still joked around and made her laugh. On the surface, nothing had changed. But she felt a change. He hadn't indicated by word or deed that he felt anything different. So maybe it was all in her own head, ..and heart, she admitted to herself. That made her shift uncomfortably.

It might be better to just nip all these speculations in the bud now. She didn't want to chance losing his friendship, or her best friend, by

looking for more. And when all was said and done, she wasn't sure what she was looking for. 'Enough' These were just idle thoughts based on her imagination, the emotional trauma of the dreams, and a sympathetic shoulder. 'Nothing more,' she concluded, but couldn't help noting that the thought lacked a certain resolve.

Bennet resolutely headed up to bed, making a mental list of everything she'd need to pick up at the store tomorrow. She decided to use her lunch break to do the shopping and drop it all back here at the farm before returning to work. She'd have to buy generously; aside from Kit's healthy appetite, based on Bridie's visits, she was certain the three young people would be able to pack away quite a bit of food! Smiling at the thought, she snuggled deeper into her covers. The more she planned, the more she thought it would turn out to be a really fun party. As she fell asleep, the smile lingered on her lips.

* * *

The next day passed quickly, serenely. In the morning, Bennet cleared her desk in record time and guided several students through the complicated procedures to find the references they needed. She even had time to call Kit briefly to ask him to bring his softball gear, just in case; he promised to do so. At lunch time, she found a parking space directly in front of the market and quickly made her purchases. She dropped the packages at the farm and was back to work with time to spare to eat a sandwich and down some of the sun tea she kept on hand, before anyone came asking for her assistance.

The gods continued to smile down on her. For once, when 5 o'clock rolled around, she was out the door and on her way home on time. Kit pulled in right behind her. Kit arranged the coals in the grill and soon had them ready for the steaks and foil-wrapped potatoes she had gotten. Then he helped her bring out a couple of tables and some chairs. Bennet busied herself setting out the salads, chips and dip, beverages, condiments and tableware. And then there was nothing left to do but sit back and relax and wait for the guests to arrive. Ty had arranged to borrow a friend's car for the evening, Bridie volunteering to show the way.

Bennet couldn't help thinking that this was like old times when it had been she and Tom and Kit. She must have sighed audibly for Kit looked at her questioningly. She repeated out loud, "I was just thinking how much this felt like the old days, you know, before Tom died. We had such fun then," she added almost wistfully.

Kit gazed across the lawn. "I remember those days, too. They were a long time ago. Maybe it's time we started making some new memories." With that obscure statement, which caused Bennet to frown in puzzlement, the sound of a car turning into the drive announced the arrival of Ty and the girls.

With much laughing and teasing and jostling, the trio tripped up the path to the house, arms full of what turned out to be a jello mold, a tub of ice cream, a plate of homemade cookies, Jenny's flute, and a large bag – as long as Ty was tall. Intriguing.

Introductions and greetings were quickly made and as the steaks and potatoes were ready, everybody dug in with a vengeance. As Bennet had surmised, they made ample inroads into the food, but eventually everyone seemed to have gotten enough. Pleasant chatter gave way to a companionable silence. Jenny got out her flute and played a few Celtic airs. Then Bridie dragged her and Ty to meet Lady May. It developed that Jenny and Ty were also avid riders, given the opportunity, and they made plans to hire some horses sometime soon and go for a day's ride. Then Bennet told them some of the adventures she'd had going caving with Kit and that sparked their interest in giving it a try the next time they could sort out their schedules.

Bennet gave way to curiosity and asked Ty about the mysterious bag he'd brought. He opened it and pulled out a beautiful bow and a beaded quiver full of arrows. The bow was a mellow yellow in color, obviously aged, carefully preserved.

“These belonged to my grandfather. It was made for him by his father. It's been passed down from generation to generation since then,” explained Kit. “Shooting this is the one skill I put down to my Shawnee heritage.” He lovingly rubbed the wood. “I thought you might like to see it and maybe even try shooting it,” he added with a smile.

“We can use the old chicken coop for a target,” decided Bennet. “Isn't it difficult to string it? It's huge!”

“It does take a bit of strength, but I've gotten

stronger over the years, and now it's become second nature,” replied Kit. He lowered the quiver to the grass, and extracted a gut string from the bag. Then he bent the supple bow until he could hook the gut loop over the lip and into the groove at the top of the wooden limb. He showed them all how to nock an arrow, hold it in place, sight, and let fly. When he released the shaft, it penetrated the soft wood of the old coop with a twang of the bow, an incredibly fast whoosh of air and a meaty thunk as it hit. It was impressive to say the least.

Next he invited the others to try. Jenny tried first and was able to send the arrow a few feet before it wobbled to the ground. Next up was Bridie. She surprised everybody with her air of competence, especially when her shaft hit very close to the spot where Ty's cast had landed. It turned out she had taken some lessons and had a proficiency for it. But she admitted the bow was quite a bit heavier than she was accustomed to. Kit gave it a try. It was obvious the weight of the bow was not a problem, but he was all thumbs when it came to nocking the arrow and guiding its path. When Bennet stepped up, noone knew what to expect, least of all she herself. She followed Ty's instructions meticulously, sighting long moments before she let fly; the arrow flew swift and true straight to the bull's eye. Silence reigned. Then they all turned as one to Bennet with surprise and admiration.

“I've never shot an arrow in my life,” she protested.

“You're a natural,” said Ty. “I've been practicing all my life and still can't hit the bull's eye

more than two out of five tries. Try it again.”

She did. Again the arrow pierced the center, millimeters away from her last cast. This was amazing!

“Wow!” exclaimed Bridie. “Now I know where I inherited my skill. Way to go, Aunt Bennet!”

Kit looked at Bennet with pride in his glance and chagrin at his own ineptness. “Yes,” he said softly, “Way to go, Bennet.” Bennet flushed at the praise but also shot a curious look at him. His manner this evening was both disconcerting and confusing. But no one else seemed aware of the undercurrents; none of them knew Kit the way she did, or found anything unusual in the way he addressed her.

It was close to dusk. Bennet asked if anyone wanted to play softball, but no one was inclined to do so. Instead, they all hunkered down on the porch, Bennet and the girls in the swing, Kit and Ty half reclined on the steps, and chatted idly as they watched the sun go down. Mute wound around their legs, finally jumping up to rub against Jenny's hand, prompting her to stroke her. A purr welled up and the kitten curled into a ball in Jenny's lap to take a nap.

It was inevitable that the mystery of the 'blue' girl would come up.

“I've made progress,” said Ty, “and found something pretty interesting. In the lower right corner of the canvas is a date: 1493. I think there

might be some writing below the girl, too, but haven't uncovered enough yet to read it. But the grit is coming off easily enough. I should know more by tomorrow."

"1493. Do you think the painting was made then?" asked Bennet.

"I'm not sure. You'd have to run a battery of tests on the paints, the canvas and maybe even the frame to determine that. But the coloration looks the same as elsewhere in the painting so it might be valid," Ty replied.

"If the painting is that old, that means the girl must be, too," reasoned Kit. "Which makes it very strange that we would be dreaming about her now. But at least we know we don't have to worry about some little girl in danger somewhere in the present. That's one positive note."

"Yes," sighed Bennet. "but it gets us no nearer to the how and why of our dreams, or even if they have any import at all."

"It's quite a coincidence, though, that you found the painting right after the sightings. I think that must be significant," Jenny observed.

"What about the rest of the dream?" queried Bridie. "You said that in both dreams, she sang to you and that at first the tune was bright, but then changed to a sad one. And she warned you. Don't forget that. She warned you of impending danger. The dogs might have only been symbols of something else."

Everyone looked at Bridie with respect at her reasoning.

“But we don't know what that danger might be, nor who might be its target,” said Ty. “Have you seen your neighbor's dogs since the dream chase?”

“No, come to think of it. And Mrs. Sackle hasn't been coming out to waylay me since then either. I haven't even heard any barking,” noted Bennet.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” quipped Bridie.

“Two dreams and a painting. Three incidents in rapid succession. Maybe they're a foretelling. And maybe there will be more later, something to tie all this together,” speculated Jenny. Her voice was almost prophetic in the gathering gloom.

Everyone jumped at the hooting of an owl.

“That was our resident owl, Hermit,” said Bennet. “Asleep by day, huntress by night.” Her light voice broke the tense moment. Then she reached inside and turned on the porch light. A warm light bathed their faces and everyone relaxed.

It was time to start cleaning up before it got so dark they'd be tripping over their own feet. Everyone lent a hand so it didn't take long. Bennet had them pile the dirty dishes in the dishwasher; the few leftovers were stored in the refrigerator. The table and chairs were stowed away and the grill cleaned of its cooled ash and covered against the

overnight dew.

“Not many such golden days left,” sighed Bridie.

“The leaves have yet to turn and Indian summer is just around the corner,” rebutted Bennet. “Plenty of time for horseback rides and caving trips. You're going to love our Indian summer, Jenny!” she added enthusiastically. “Warm weather, fantastic colors...my favorite time of year!”

“Yes,” said Ty. “We'll have to take you to the caves then. The colors are phenomenal there. Maybe we could take a picnic.”

“That sounds like fun,” smiled Jenny.

“I hate to break this up, but I've got to return the car soon. I think we have to get moving,” said Ty apologetically. “It's been a great evening. Thanks, Bennet!”

Bennet said, “I've enjoyed it, too. We'll have to do this again, soon.”

The girls expressed their own thanks and goodbyes and collected their things. Jenny shyly reminded them all of her concert the next night. They all assured her that they'd be there. Then they loaded up the car. As Ty drove back down the lane, both girls stuck their heads out the windows and waved. Sight of them was quickly extinguished in the twilight.

“I'm afraid I've got to be going, too. I have to prepare for class tomorrow – an exam,” said Kit.

“I’ve had a great time tonight. You make a lovely hostess,” he added with a smile. Then he did something he’d never done before: he kissed Bennet lightly on the lips. The next instant, with a smile, he was gone.

Bennet touched her lips softly where he had kissed them and stared after him, wide-eyed. That answered her question as to whether Kit was feeling the shift in their relationship. She decided she liked it, and the idea of it. It felt right. The past was past. Tom was dead but Kit was here and had been for a very long time.

With a bemused smile, she went inside, automatically followed her usual nighttime ritual, and settled into bed. Mute was there, as always. But tonight, Bennet didn’t fall asleep right away. She lay there for a long time, reflecting on the many surprises and revelations the evening had revealed. She thought about the past, of its bittersweet hold on the here and now. Finally, she turned her thoughts to the future. She felt giddy as a girl on her first date, and just as full of hope.

CHAPTER 8

Friday dawned bright although the fields were banked in fog; the sun would burn it off in no time. Meanwhile it looked as though the house rested on the peak of a remote island, sticking out above the clouds. The air was cool and moist, the grass dripping with dew. There was an actual bite to the air this morning. Bennet could hear the ravens already flying high to greet the sun and escape the cool mist. Their croaks resounded as they flew back and forth, crisscrossing over the house and barn, alighting on the roof beams for a few minutes before setting off again.

Today, for the first time in a long time, Bennet didn't rush to get to work. Her usual urgency was replaced by a languid desire to dawdle over breakfast, gaze out the window, to meander out in a little while to greet Lady May and fondle her ears and rub her poll. It would be grand to go for a

ride or else for a long slow walk down the back trail to the berry bushes that dominated one corner of the field. The blackberries were already picked over this late in the summer, the remains now food for the birds, wild rabbits and field mice. It was one of her favorite spots on the farm. Each year since she had moved here, she had gathered the berries, freezing some, making preserves and a few pies that she then shared with her friends.

Bennet sighed. Since last night, her whole perspective had changed. It felt like her life had been put on hold all these years. She had immersed herself so deeply in her job that she had held any deep feelings at bay; it had been easy. But now... Last night was an awakening. Kit's kiss had sparked something inside her that she had thought long gone. And suddenly her job didn't seem so important, or rather it was no longer the be all and end all of her existence, no matter how much she liked and excelled at it. Life had more to offer.

Bennet sighed again. No matter her preferences, she had obligations and meant to live up to them. But she resolved to rethink her priorities. Maybe she wasn't as irreplaceable at the library as she'd led others, and herself, to believe. Maybe cutting back a little wouldn't be such a bad idea. It might be nice to lead a less frantic pace and spend more time with family and friends – food for thought.

She noted as she drove down the lane that Mrs. Sackle's house was quiet. No lights showed. Of the dogs, there was not a sound. And as she drove slowly past, she took a peek into the backyard; it looked empty. As Bridie had

commented, 'curiouser and curiouser.'

She still managed to arrive before anyone else, but not by much. She took the time to walk out and greet her staff and poured herself a cup of tea before she settled to the day's demands. It was busy; every Friday was. But she was able to keep the frantic pleas for assistance from overwhelming her. She helped, but did not allow herself to get caught up in the urgency. And when Kit called midmorning and asked if she'd like to go to dinner in town before the concert, she instantly said 'yes'. Kit sounded surprised at her decided tone but also pleased. They arranged to meet at the Italian restaurant, Luigi's. She took time for a normal lunch rather than a quick sandwich eaten on the go. She dared to relax whereas usually she was on pins and needles, expecting an emergency at any moment. As a consequence, when five o'clock registered, she was not as exhausted as usual. She deliberately delegated last minute requests to the relief staff. They were all competent. Why not let them do their jobs?

Jenny's concert was set to start at nine p.m. There was plenty of time for Bennet to go home, take a long soak in the tub and leisurely decide on an outfit for the evening, something a cut above her usual dark blue skirt and matching jacket, but something not too fancy either. She didn't want to look, and feel, out of place at the concert. She settled on a long peasant skirt with a matching spaghetti-strapped top and a light lacy shawl to ward off the evening chill. Strappy sandals completed her ensemble. She left her long hair down with a clip to one side. Feminine, pretty, but casual enough – just right. She hoped Kit would

like it.

Bennet pulled into Luigi's driveway and found it was almost full. It was a popular place; the food was excellent, the portions generous, the service congenial – many of the staff were students from the college. And the prices were not too high. One didn't need a reservation but, once inside, people waited to be seated. The tables sported clean white linens, fresh cut flowers in vases, discrete booths for those who preferred that over a table, lots of green leafy plants and lavender-tinted lamps to provide ambiance: all in all, relaxing and inviting.

Bennet had arrived a few minutes early but Kit was already there. He lounged by his car, on the lookout for her arrival. And when she had parked her car, he opened her door and handed her out, retaining her hand once she was upright. Kit was dressed in dark slacks, as opposed to his usual jeans, a pressed shirt and a sweater casually tied around his neck. He was freshly shaven and wore some light lime-scented aftershave that quickened her pulse.

“Hey there, beautiful. Right on time. Shall we go in before all the tables are gone?” Kit smiled at her, a warm look of appreciation in his eyes.

Bennet smiled back and they moved off, her hand comfortably enclosed in his. Inside the restaurant, they were quickly seated at a table by the window; menus, water glasses, and fresh rolls with butter were provided. Then they were left alone to make their choices at their leisure.

The dinner was excellent. And the

conversation flowed easily. Kit told her about the latest crop of students and the field trip they'd gone on. This flowed into a recounting of a caving trip he'd gone on in the same area, and a humorous story that involved a cat, a monkey and the campus fire brigade. They laughed together and time passed. When they had finished their postprandial coffee (for him) and tea (for her), it was time to head back to the campus and find parking places before the concert crowd hit.

Jenny had remembered to save some flyers to post in the library. Over the course of the day, Bennet had heard several people announce their intentions to attend. With the campus grapevine at full throttle, she thought she and Kit would be lucky to get seats, and was sure many people would end up standing around the edges as well.

Back on campus, she and Kit parked by the library and walked the main path past the Student Union and on to the other side of the campus which, aside from the Crier's Patch, sported a chapel and several dormitories. It was a pleasant night for walking; the walkway was well lit, broad and beautifully lined with trees and numerous flowerbeds. As they crossed over the bridge, which linked the two halves of the campus, while arcing over the driveway entrance to the college, they encountered several other couples and groups of students headed in the same direction. Thus, they were completely unsurprised by the vast number of people milling around in front of the doors to the Crier's Patch. Bennet was pleased to see that several faculty members and their spouses or dates were also present.

Ten minutes before the hour, the doors opened. Flyers, announcing the Celtic Chords, were handed out as people started filing into the multiple rows of chairs. As Bennet had expected, generous space to either side and in back of the rows were allocated for those who preferred to stand (and possible dance-in-place to the music).

Ty was there, seated in the front row in the exact center with reserved cards conspicuous on the two seats to his left and the first to his right. When he saw Bennet and Kit enter, he waved and gestured them in his direction. He had not only saved them seats, as promised, but also one for Bridie. It was fortunate for them that he had done so, for the rows completely filled up within the first five minutes, and more people were arriving all the time. It was decided to keep the wide doors open; it wasn't cool in the slightest with all these bodies pressed together, and those who couldn't fit inside would still be able to hear the music from without.

Ty looked around and beamed his delight. "Jenny and the guys are overwhelmed that so many came. But happy." he grinned. "Advertising pays!"

Bennet and Kit settled into the two chairs on Ty's left. "It was sweet of you to save us seats, Ty. Thank you!" said Bennet, Kit echoing his thanks.

"Jenny insisted," said Ty.

An impromptu stage had been set up in front of the hall. Three chairs and microphones graced the stage, grouped loosely together, not quite center stage. A spotlight had been positioned above, and bathed the stage in a bright light. The Crier's Patch

had a high domed roof which made it acoustically perfect for lectures and concerts. Sound bounced and reverberated throughout the room.

Seconds before the band walked out onto the stage to enthusiastic applause, Bridie slipped into the seat next to Ty, grinning at them before her attention focused on the musicians. Jenny and her friends climbed the three steps up, with their instruments in hand. This time they were coordinated in their dress in colorful green vests, embroidered in rose and black. Jenny wore a long black skirt, matched by the boys' black dress jeans.

The audience settled down expectantly as the threesome bowed and positioned their instruments. At the violinist's nod and a 3 beat plucked out on his violin, they burst into a rollicking jig which soon had everyone clapping and tapping their feet. A surprise was in store: after the first few bars, three couples slipped up onto the stage and danced in time to the music; this had obviously been choreographed in advance. It was a feast for the eyes as well as the ears, getting the concert off to a rousing start. The band alternated between cheery instrumentals and ballads, sung by Jenny, that were sad or bawdy in turn. All of the numbers shared a common Irish theme.

After several numbers, there was a short break, allowing the musicians to catch their breath and stretch their fingers. A flushed Jenny slipped out to greet her guests and receive enthusiastic approbation from them accompanied by wide grins, a warm hug from Bridie, and an even warmer embrace from Ty. Her band members were busy greeting their own personal friends who stood or

sat, their choice, close to the stage.

Some ten minutes later, the violinist, Grey, signaled to Jenny and their guitarist, Joel, and the three broke away to emerge on the stage moments later. The hush of the audience was immediate; everyone strained forward to catch the first few soft guitar notes. Then Jenny's flute mimicked the same notes and the violin echoed in their wake. Thus setting the tune which flowed throughout, Jenny alternated between flute and singing the verses of a new song, one they had composed themselves. With the last note, a breathless silence gave way to roaring applause; the band was in no doubt that the song was liked.

Several merry jigs followed, fingers moving unbelievably fast, Jenny's trills running up and down the register, allowing them all half breaths here and there before all three brought the third song to an abrupt end. The stamping of feet, thunderous clapping and whistles piercing the cacophony had the band bowing and grinning in turn. It was a full minute before the crowd settled enough for them to continue. Finally, Grey lifted his violin in a sign all had come to recognize and the audience quieted in expectation. Jenny spoke into the microphone.

“This next number is a little different. It is a ballad that I recently found. I've taken the liberty of changing some of the words from the original archaic English into something that is a little more understandable.” Here she smiled. “The music is a simple approximation of the original score. We haven't fully adapted it so Joel, here, indicating the guitarist who bowed at his introduction, is going to

play the basic melody. We call this song 'The Portent of Ganet Somé.'”

Bennet felt a frisson pass through Ty, seated to her right. She thought it was mere anticipation and gave it no more thought.

A moment later, Jenny's voice rose in an eerie wordless chord that mimicked the guitar's notes. Thus began the ballad. Interspersed between each verse, the eerie trill was reiterated, sending goosebumps up and down Bennet's spine. The piece was unusual. It left her feeling slightly on edge and glad when the band went on to play something more cheerful. And yet, although she couldn't quite place it, she had the feeling she had heard that tune before. She completely missed the tightening of Kit's shoulder muscles at the conclusion of the ballad. Subsequent numbers made her forget her momentary unease. The concert ended on an upnote with the crowd demanding, and getting, several encores. The trio obliged until they played the last notes of an instrumental jig, finishing it with a flourish, bows, and voiced 'thank you's' to resounding applause as they exited the stage.

It took awhile for the crowd to disperse; everyone wanted to personally congratulate one or another of the band, but finally Jenny, Grey and Joel were able to turn their attention to stowing their gear, stacking the chairs and dismantling the stage. Ty, Bridie, and several of Grey's and Joel's friends had stayed behind to help, so the task was quickly accomplished. Meanwhile Bennet and Kit gathered up discarded flyers and bagged abandoned candy wrappers and numerous empty water bottles.

It was half past eleven when they all exited the building and locked the front doors. Grey and Joel went off with their friends for an after-concert party, while Ty, Jenny and Bridie stuck around for a few last words with Kit and Ty. Some time was spent rehashing their favorite parts of the concert before Kit landed a bombshell.

“That last ballad you sang... The tune was a very simple version of the song Bennet has been humming all week,” he said. Bennet glanced at him, startled, and then realized it was true. That was why it had sounded so familiar! It was the guitar chords which had disguised it. She was used to it being sung. The tune, as played tonight, was lower in pitch and complementary chords enhanced but didn't changed the basic melody.

Jenny swore it was a faithful rendering of the basic score she'd found alongside the ballad. It had all of them musing silently for a minute. Then Ty dropped a second bombshell.

“I finished uncovering the lettering on the painting. It reads 'Gannet Somme', the same name as in the title of your ballad.”

“I was right. The clues are mounting up,” mused Jenny. “The ballad was recorded in the late 1400s according to the book where I found it. I think there's a good chance that the date on the painting is accurate and true. It would seem our 'blue' girl, Gannet Somme, was a child in the 1490s.” Then she said, “So why is she singing in your dreams in the here and now?,” voicing out loud what everyone else had been privately wondering to themselves.

It was after midnight. Everyone was tired and not ready for a long discussion at this hour. They decided to meet at the farm the next afternoon. Then Ty, Jenny, and Bridie left for the walk back to their dorms, and Bennet and Kit headed in the opposite direction towards where their cars waited.

Bennet was glad she'd brought her shawl. She was feeling unaccountably chilled in the mild air. Kit saw her involuntary shudder and put his arm around her shoulders. A half moon provided extra light, following in their wake to the library parking lot. Their walk was a quiet one, neither inclined to break the silence.

When they reached the library, it was to find it with lights blazing and the campus security guards searching the building's perimeter while more were evident inside, visible on the stairs through the tall windows. One guard saw Bennet and Kit approaching and, recognizing them, came over to speak with them.

“There's been a break-in, Ms. Tyler – the rare books collection. Looks like a cyclone tore through it.” he commented.

Bennet hurried up the stairs, Kit right behind her, to where another guard barred the entrance. Even though he knew who they were, he wouldn't allow them inside until he received clearance on his inter band radio. Even then, he insisted on accompanying them to the site of the break-in.

The padlock on the iron mesh door had been snapped off like it was a toothpick. The door hung aslant, hanging from only one of its hinges. Inside

the cage, the book stacks had been knocked off balance and most of the books were dumped helter skelter all over the floor. At first glance, none of the books seemed to have been tampered with. But on closer inspection, they found that the small collection of ancient musical scores had been devastated, pages ripped from the tomes, even shredded in some cases. The loss was incalculable. Bennet looked at the mess in shock. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Why someone would do this was unfathomable.

The security team said that while on their routine rounds, they noticed the library doors ajar. Knowing the library was always locked up tight each night after closing, they had investigated and seen that the doors had been forced open. Then they heard a ruckus coming from inside. Rushing inside, they had found this mess, but the perpetrator(s) must have been aware of their approach and no one was to be found when a search had commenced.

Bennet looked around. It would take hours and a lot of work to straighten this up. It would take even longer to assess the damage to those few books that had been torn apart. Perhaps some of them would be salvageable. There was no way to tell at this point.

The security team leader wouldn't let her do anything with it until after the weekend. They wanted to process the site and see if they could find any clues that would lead them to those responsible. A guard was posted and Bennet was assured that a close watch would be kept in the unlikely event that the perpetrators would come back.

Kit steered Bennet away from the scene. He could feel her distress and kept his arm around her to comfort her as they headed out the doors and down the steps to their cars. Kit led the way to her car but when she would have automatically seated herself in the driver's seat, he took the keys and led her around the car to the passenger side. Bennet, in a daze, could only follow his lead, not questioning, just sitting there, stunned. Kit climbed in, made sure her seatbelt was in place, latched his own and drove towards the farm.

“Bennet, they'll find the people who did this. It was probably another case of random vandalism, and the vandals chose the rare books to drive the point home. It'll be all set to rights after the weekend. And then you, and your staff, will be able to assess what can be done to repair the damage,” he reasoned.

Bennet knew he was probably right. It just seemed so senseless! She was aware that vandalism had been on the rise here on campus. The security force had even increased its rounds and added people to its roster. The destruction had never been directed at the library before, so it was a shock for her to realize that it was no longer immune.

She was just coming to terms with this when they entered her driveway. Immediately, she sensed something was wrong. Closer, she could see that the garage door lay incongruously on the ground, completely broken off its hinges. As they got nearer, they could see that the light was on in the garage and the interior reflected the same whirlwind destruction as they'd witnessed at the library.

Lady May was snorting and racing back and forth along the fence line in a frenzy, but calmed somewhat when she saw Bennet. After Bennet had petted her for a few minutes, she looked beyond the mare and saw the barn doors open wide. She raced to look inside, but little was disturbed. The barn contained little more than Lady May's tack and some hay bales in the loft. Hay lay scattered in the stalls but nothing more.

But then Bennet turned towards the house. She dreaded what they'd find there, after seeing the shambles of the garage. It was as bad as she'd anticipated. Cupboards had been opened, the contents dumped on the floor. The refrigerator had been pulled away from the wall, its door hanging open. In the livingroom, seat cushions had been ripped and tossed aside. All her books had been swept from the shelves, and the freestanding bookcases wrenched away from the walls.

Upstairs was no better. The mattresses had been ripped off the beds, covers pulled off, dressers dragged from their usual places, drawers emptied, their contents unceremoniously dumped on the floor. No place escaped unscathed, not even the bathroom; the shower curtain had been pulled off its rod and the hamper upended. But upon closer look, Bennet could find nothing missing. Either the vandals had trashed her property just for the thrill of it, in spite, or... they were looking for something. 'Now why did that thought come to mind?' she wondered.

Then she noticed something odd. Only places which could provide a likely hiding place or places which could store something relatively

shallow and small, had been attacked. It explained why the dressers and bookcases had been dragged from the walls. The contents had been dumped to make it easier to move them. But what could they have possibly been looking for? Bennet shared her hypothesis with Kit, but he was no closer to understanding it than she.

They called the police. When they arrived, they took note of the damage, but when Bennet admitted nothing had been taken, they put it down to vandalism, and warned her that such cases were rarely solved, unless there was an eyewitness. They sent an officer to knock on Mrs. Sackle's door but he reported no one was home; it looked deserted. Bennet didn't mention her alternate theory to them; it was pointless as she had no idea what they have been looking for.

Thanking them, Bennet saw them on their way and looked ruefully around her. It would be possible to set things to rights fairly easily, only requiring time. It was late though, well after 2 a.m. before the police left. She lifted a book or two from the floor but set them on a nearby tabletop a moment later. It was late and she was tired – too many shocks one right another.

After a moment, Kit led her back to the car and they just sat there. “Well, it's been a real roller coaster ride today, hasn't it?” reflected Bennet. “Do you think that maybe the two break-ins are related?”

“Upon first reflection, 'no', but when you look at it from the point of view of a frantic search, it makes sense,” admitted Kit. “Do you ever take any of the rare books home?”

“Oh, no!” she exclaimed. The books are always kept in the cage, even for cleaning and repairs. Then another thought occurred to her: “It’s obvious that whoever searched my house wasn’t looking for a book – they completely ignored my collection.”

“Well, then, if not a rare book, then what?” Kit asked.

Changing the subject, Kit said, “In the meantime, why don’t you bunk down in my spare room tonight. We can start in cleaning this up tomorrow.”

“Thank you. Sounds good,” said Bennet shyly. “I’ll just fetch a few things from the bedroom.”

She was there and back again in a jiffy, carrying Mute with her upon her return. “I hope you don’t mind. She was hiding under the bed and when I came in, she jumped into my arms and refused to be left behind,” looking at Kit in appeal.

“Sure. Not a problem. But I draw the line at Lady May!” he teased.

Bennet smiled in appreciation. Mute climbed into the backseat as if she’d traveled with them a hundred times before. Soon they were parking next to Kit’s bike on the road above his hillside cottage. One had to descend a staircase to reach the front door. Inside, the interior tended heavily to wood. The rooms were spacious and neat; they’d be bright and cheery in the daylight. At night, with lamps lit, the wood-covered walls and

floors reflected the yellow light, making it radiate warmth and welcome.

Bennet had only been here a handful of times since Kit had moved in. They generally met elsewhere. But she felt comfortable inside his home. The rooms fairly screamed 'Kit'. Dotted throughout the rooms were interesting rocks and crystals he had found over the years, sometimes on his field trips with students, some from caves he had explored, still others from mountain climbs. The latter dated back to his undergraduate and graduate years. Since then he had concentrated more on caves, his primary interest. Glossy prints of caves and rugged terrain covered the walls. One photograph held pride of place on top of the television; it was of the two of them standing next to their bikes in the middle of a road, smiling and blocking the sun's glare with raised hands. Tom had taken it years and years before.

Bennet stowed her bag in Kit's spare room, which was identical to the master bedroom, only smaller. She quickly changed into her nightgown, and brushed her teeth. Too tired to focus on anything more, she drifted off to sleep with Mute snuggled up beside her, comforted to know that Kit was only a few steps away.

CHAPTER 9

The moon's glow barely penetrated. The trees were thick with leaves which looked almost black in the dim light, mere shadows of their daytime selves. Bennet had walked this path a thousand times. She could almost walk it in her sleep. The air was cool but not cold. Nearby, she could hear the hooting of an owl. Idly she wondered if it was Hermit. This was pretty far from the barn owl's roost, but owls were strong flyers and nighttime was their prime time to hunt and search the surrounding countryside. To a bird, she supposed, this was just a hop, skip and a jump away. It was nice to think Hermit might have accompanied her all the way here. Then she needn't feel so alone.

For with the thought, she felt aching alone, abandoned in fact. Kit was supposed to meet her here. But he was late. As were the others, Ty,

Jenny and Bridie. She hated it when people were late! Tom was always on her case, teasing her and sometimes becoming very impatient with her about her insistence. Punctuality was not his forte. She couldn't remember the number of times they had made arrangements to meet at a certain time: She'd be there, on the dot, but it was often a half hour or more before he ambled in. His excuses ranged from: he'd run into a friend and they'd gotten to talking and he'd lost track of the time, to: he'd been studying a particular species of root rot and gotten so involved that time had just flown out the window.

The first few times this had happened, she had been tolerant and accepted his excuses with as good a grace as she could muster. But after months of it, she had been unable to contain her hurt and impatience. His response was 'relax, it's no big deal'. But the problem was that to her, it was. After that, facing the reality of the situation, she knew he'd never change and did her best to ignore the habit, but it had an undeniable affect on their relationship. Even at their wedding... she turned away from the thought; it was too painful.

Her mind snapped back to the present. Maybe the others had gotten here first and gone ahead. Maybe she was the one who was late! This prompted her to lengthen her stride and up the pace. It wasn't long before she broke through the trees onto the dirt 'porch' that fronted the entrance to the caves. There was noone in sight, but she could hear voices inside. Why hadn't they waited for her? She had to catch up!

She hurried inside, remembering to turn on

her headlamp and put her jacket on. If she concentrated, she was sure she would catch up with them in no time! But no matter how fast she went, taking chances that she never would have if Kit had been with her, those she followed were always just around the bend ahead of her. She could hear their voices, but never caught sight of them. And she was too out of breath to call out. She struggled on. At last she reached the underground cavern. Her friends were all there, waiting, but not for her. When she stumbled into the chamber, she saw them. Hands linked, their eyes were transfixed on the blue light emanating from the halo that surrounded Gannet Somme. And when Bennet saw her, she became entranced, as well. She moved just enough to reach for Bridie's hand; the moment they touched, they cleaved together. 'Stick together!' It was almost a chant in her mind.

Gannet Somme's song rose; it seemed a live thing. As it touched them, each in turn reached down and picked up a small baked tile that lay on the ground in front of them. The song became more intense, pleading and warning them. 'The time approaches. Hurry!' Gannet Somme pointed emphatically, warningly, at a beautiful dark plant. Tom's voice whispered in Bennet's ear: 'deadly Nightshade. Be careful!'

* * *

Bennet awoke with a start, mumbling 'nightshade'. She opened her eyes, still feeling the urgency of the dream. She made a conscious effort to relax; her hands were clenched so tightly, they hurt. She looked at her left hand, willing it to open and allow her fingers to flex. When it did,

something fell onto the bed. She bent to look and felt faint. It was the tile she had grasped in her dream. Baked onto the face of the tile was the outline of a red-breasted robin.

Bennet got out of bed. It took her a moment to remember where she was and why. But this was superseded by coming to terms with the impossibility of the tile. She put on her robe and walked into the livingroom. She wished Kit was awake! As if in response to her fervency, he strode into the room moments later. He had his hand outstretched; on his palm rested a tile, twin to her own. Again, impossibly, they had shared a dream. Wordlessly, she opened her hand to show him her own. Then they realized that the tiles weren't identical after all. On Kit's was the figure of a peregrine falcon.

They sat together on the couch, sipping the tea Kit had brewed.

"It would seem Gannet Somme isn't done with us. Did you understand that business with the plant she kept warning us against?" asked Kit.

"Yes. Tommy whispered in my ear, 'deadly nightshade. Be careful.'" answered Bennet.

"She's drawing in others. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that she'd use Tom, as well," he observed. "And what about the handclasps? It felt like we were glued together!" continued Kit.

"I'm convinced it all means something. We just have to piece it together," asserted Bennet. "Do you think the inclusion of the others means that

they've shared the dream, too?"

"The way things have been going, it wouldn't surprise me," affirmed Kit.

"So... so far we've got the tiles, the warnings, the song, and the painting, all connected with Gannet Somme. I wonder if the plant – the nightshade – he corrected himself with a glance, means to beware of poison or something else?" said Kit, musing out loud.

"Maybe we should consult the history books, see if there is anything there about this Gannet Somme," suggested Bennet.

"Perhaps the vandals meant to prevent us from doing that very thing when they ransacked the library," reasoned Kit.

"But then why focus on the musical score section?" objected Bennet.

"Lots of history and legends have been passed down in the form of songs and ballads," said Kit. They looked at one another. 'The portent of Ganet Somé' they said in unison.

"It's got to be! The vandals were just looking in the wrong section!" said Bennet, excited to have found a logical reason. "It makes sense if someone wanted to stop us from helping her."

"Wait a minute! We're talking about a little girl who lived and died centuries ago! How can that be relevant now? And why would a girl, long dead, need anybody's help now anyway?" Kit sounded

unnerved and almost angry.

“When you take away the possible, then the answer must lie in the improbable,” murmured Bennet.

It calmed Kit and he stopped pacing, sitting down and giving her an affectionate squeeze on her shoulder. “Right you are!” We’re already dealing with the impossible. A little more won’t make a difference,” he concluded with a grin.

“Alright. Let’s assume that the dream was giving us explicit instructions.” Counting off on his fingers, he enumerated “1) Stick together, like glue; 2) Beware of nightshade.” In an aside to Bennet he said, “You’ve got to admit that one’s a bit obscure.”

“We’ll find out. I think she’ll be certain that we do,” asserted Bennet ruefully. “We need to get hold of Jenny and have a better look at that ballad. If it is full of portents, then it might also provide clues on how to handle whatever she’s warning us against. I can’t say as I understood it at the concert. But the ballad did give me goosebumps. I was relieved when they were done with it! Oh!, and the tiles. They are significant, obviously. But we don’t know of what yet.”

“It’s six a.m.” observed Kit. “Judging from our own experiences, I think we will be hearing from all three of our young friends sooner than late. How about some breakfast?” he added with a grin.

Talking it out and making actual headway in understanding the impossible had taken much of the fear out of the experience for Bennet. She felt

energized. "I'd love some breakfast," she said. They worked together, like a couple of long standing. He cut some grapefruit, heated more water for tea and coffee, and set the table. She whipped up some eggs and milk and make golden brown French toast. They shared it all, lingering over the hot drinks, before washing up.

Kit said, "I could get used to this!"

And Bennet, smiling, replied, "So could I."

They returned to their respective rooms and got dressed. Bennet made up the bed and smoothed down the coverlet, a beautiful quilt made up of hundreds of tiny squares that his grandmother had sewn together and given Kit when he had first gone away to college. He'd used it and kept it all these years. Bennet was touched by the obvious affection, both in the gift and Kit's subsequent care of it.

Tiles stowed safely, Mute following sinuously behind, they climbed the stairs to Bennet's car. First they drove to the library and retrieved Kit's vehicle. Then they drove in convoy to the farm. The vandalism didn't look any better in broad daylight. But repairs mostly involved repacking, restacking and folding away. Kit helped Bennet to place the heavy pieces of furniture and mattresses back in their proper places, then left her to it while he worked on the garage. By noon, both house and garage were in order, bar the broken door. The hinges needed to be replaced before the door could be rehung. Kit nailed a piece of plywood over the entrance as an interim measure. It would keep out all but the really determined.

He had just driven in the last nail, and pulled on the wood to make sure it was secure enough, when he heard Bennet calling to him from the porch. She was talking on the phone and gesturing to him. He ran up the path double-time to hear her saying:

“Okay, Ty, we’ll see you and the girls as soon as you can get here. Oh, and don’t forget to bring the things we talked about. Bye.”

“They’ll be here as fast as they can”, she reported. “They have some things to tell us – here she raised her brows in mock surprise – and to show us. About ready for some lunch?” she asked.

“By all means. The garage is squared away. How about in here?” he asked.

“All in good order. But I’m going to have to make some new slip covers for the couch cushions. Right now the torn sides are down, so everything looks normal. Oh, and I’ll need to get a new shower curtain, too.” she remembered.

“Your vandals could’ve done a lot more. I think you lucked out, Bennet. But since they haven’t found whatever it is they were looking for, maybe I should stay here with you or you at my place for a few days (‘or forever’ he muttered under his breath), or at least until this is resolved,” he suggested.

Bennet looked at him intently. He had the guilty feeling that she might have heard what he had muttered. But she only said, “Let me think on it for awhile, okay?”

She led the way indoors where she had set the table for five. By this, he assumed Ty and the girls would be joining them. While he washed up in the bathroom, Bennet put the finishing touches on a giant salad, which also contained fresh shrimp and bits of cheese. She was pulling freshly baked rolls out of the oven when Ty and the girls arrived. Their exodus from the car was not the boisterous laugh-filled one of a couple of days before. Instead, their faces were somber, pale even. They trekked up the pathway, almost reluctantly. Ty carried a flat oblong that Kit surmised must be the painting of Gannet Somme.

“That's it!” Kit cried. “That painting must be what your vandals were looking for,” he insisted. Bennet nodded in agreement. Ty, Jenny, and Bridie were close enough by then to have heard the outburst, and as one, asked “what vandals?”

Bennet ushered them all into the dining room and while they ate, she and Kit related the experiences of the night before when they had said goodbye at the Crier's Patch. They listened, eyes agog.

“That's why security was so tight when we left campus! They were randomly stopping people and checking IDs this morning,” said Bridie.

Then Bennet and Kit told them of their hypothesis of what the fake vandals had been after. “It only occurred to me as you carried the painting up the walk, that it must have been what they were looking for,” said Kit, “as well as the ballad at the library. Bennet thinks that they were looking in the wrong section and may have missed it when the

guards surprised them.”

“We'll know for sure on Monday,” added Bennet. “Did you bring your copy of the ballad with you, Jenny?”

“Yes. I have it. But I'm not sure as to why you wanted to see it,” Jenny said.

“We'll explain that in a minute,” Bennet assured her.

She nodded at Kit and they turned to the others together. Bennet said, “Last night, because the vandals had trashed this place, I stayed in Kit's spare room. And..we shared a dream again.” She proceeded to relate the dream and when she got to the part in the blue-lit cavern, three pairs of eyes were focused on her face as intently as they'd looked upon the 'blue' girl in the dream. And when she got to the part where she awakened with a tile grasped tightly in her hand, you could have heard a pin drop, it got so quiet.

Ty reached his hand into his pocket and pulled forth a tile. His sported an eagle, wings outspread. Jenny pulled hers out; it pictured a little brown wren. Bridie was last. She dug into her bag and placed hers gently on the table; hers had a lark on a branch. Kit, in turn, showed his peregrine falcon, and Bennet her red breasted robin. For awhile, they all just stared at the five tiles that lay before them. Kit took up the tale and told them the rest of what he and Bennet had figured out, and why they wanted to see the ballad.

Ty unwrapped the now clean painting of

Gannet Somme. They all stared at it. Everyone could now understand Bennet's reaction when she had first seen it. Fresh from their own first encounters with the child, they devoured the painting with their eyes. It was uncanny to see how precise the rendering of her was.

Then Jenny pulled out her copy of the ballad. "Please remember that this is just my own inexpert translation of the original. I may have misunderstood some of the words or gotten some of the meanings wrong," Jenny warned. With that, all five crowded around the table to read the text.

Verse 1) Ganet Somé greets betimes
 Among the silvered bower's mien,
 The moon her halo circles blue
 Moon's glow silvers misty hue.

"This is a word picture of how she first appeared to me in my dream!" said Bennet.

"Yes," said Bridie, especially if you remember that the word 'greet' can also mean grieve or weep in old English. The others looked at her in appreciation. She didn't even notice, so intent was she on the text.

Verse 2) Upwelled tears remain unshed
 As'd reft the heart 'i twain
 And Somé ta'en and forsaken,
 Light's reverse begets her bane.

"This one's harder, Bridie murmured. The first two lines are pretty clear. The third line seems to say that if Gannet Somme is taken, and noone comes to her aid... Light's reverse. The opposite of

light is dark. So... then it would mean that Dark will destroy Gannet Somme – be her bane.”

Verse 3) Hope and light flee from the gloom
 Shades forlorn encircle Somé;
 Pursuit abides, his doom encroaching
 Birds alone the beast be stopping.

“Now comes a warning of what to expect: the loss of hope and light. Sad ghosts encircle the girl – maybe it means she dies. Pursuit I think refers back to Dark, and that he is getting close. The last line is easy although how the birds trap Dark is hard to understand.”

Verse 4) Four and one, two and three
 Somé calls, in dreams to thee.
 Linked by blood, love as well
 Together strong, so histories tell.

“Line one is obscure. But line two refers to the girl approaching us in dreams, like last night! Line three: if you think about it with us specifically in mind, then we here are linked by both blood and love.” Here Bridie paused as if waiting for a possible objection but, although some faces pinked up, noone denied her surmises.

“Line four is then self-explanatory except for the bit about 'histories'. But generally, people are stronger working together than apart.”

Verse 5) Worlds above and worlds below
 Side by side, doth see her glow?
 Mirror's twins in life and death
 On'y chance can save their breath.

“This verse is weird, metaphysical. It seems

to suggest that there is more than one world and that what happens in one, happens in the others. The last line is another portent indicating only one chance is given to save all the worlds from extermination.”

Verse 6) Quake and shiver, fear his might
 Should Night succeed and steal her
 light
 Yours and mine, eon's done;
 One chance alone: to sing the song.

“This continues along the same lines, indicating that if Night, who I'm assuming is the same as Dark, succeeds in capturing and killing Gannet Somme, and all of us in the process, our only chance is to sing. How strange! Hold on!” Bridie went back to verse four. “I'm wondering if line one in verse four might be referring to us?! Five can be four plus one, or two plus three. But then the last line in verse three is confusing.. Birds are supposed to do the singing. Yet in the next verse, it refers to us. Confusing!”

Ty interrupted. “I have an idea about that. When I awoke with my tile, the first thing that came to mind was that it was something like a totem, an eagle for me, kinda obvious given my blood and my last name. And Jenny's is right for her, too: a wren. Her middle name is Wren. How about the rest of you?”

Bridie said, “My middle name is Lark, just like on the tile.”

Bennet said, “My first name is Robin.”

Everyone looked at Kit. He shrugged. “My

middle name is Peregrine.”

“Okay, so I guess we are the five birds: Eagle, Wren, Lark, Robin, and Peregrine Falcon. Go on.” encouraged Bridie.

Verse 7) Voices rise, wi' soul and heart!
 Empow'r light to beat the dark.
 Somé's strength, guard ye well
 Ere bells do ring death's final knell.

“We're supposed to sing with all our heart and soul, which will somehow enable the Light - I think that means Gannet Somme, to beat Dark. And we have to guard her well or we'll hear 'death's knell' - die.”

Verse 8) Wax now wane, by and by
 See the moon fill the sky.
 Welcome Moon, and bless her light
 For bright is might and weakens Night.

Bridie continued. “Seems to say the moon's light is powerful and can help weaken and beat Night.”

Verse 9) Hoarfrost jaws, above, below
 Where day is night, and space untold
 No light can breech, earth's womb
 enfolds
 Engulfs the cries made by the bold.

“This is a puzzle. I can't make heads or tails out of it. Does it make sense to any of you?” asked Bridie.

Kit spoke up. “Hoarfrost' makes me think

of ice, and 'jaws, above, below' could refer to stalactites and stalagmites. Also, in a cave it is always black as pitch, so it doesn't matter if it is day or night. The rest reminds me of the cavern. It's a big hollow hole in the ground – earth's womb? - and sounds certainly do get swallowed up inside it. So maybe this verse is telling us to think of caves,” he concluded.

“Wow! That was great, Professor! I wish I could do that,” said Bridie enviously. “That's what I'm training for.” Bridie had no idea that she had done that very thing with the previous verses! “Well, that leaves us with just the last verse,” she sighed. “It must be pretty important; last words tend to be.”

Verse 10) Loose thy shafts, pierce yon night
 Wi' moon-bright beams, bared and
 bright
 Anon he fades, his pow'r grown weak
 Ere Somé's song triumphant speaks.

“The first two lines make sense when you put them together. Flashlights pierce the night, i.e. Dark. Line three: 'he' refers back to Dark/Night again and his power weakens and fades when Gannet Somme's song 'speaks' which I think means when it is sung.”

“So.. if we put it all together, the five of us need to go into a cavern and sing Gannet Somme's song with flashlight beams to cut Dark, which will then weaken and defeat him, allowing Gannet Somme to triumph and live, which incidentally allows us and our world (among others) to live. Oh, and we only have one chance to do it right,” she

finished with a flourish.

“Well done, Bridie! That was impressive!” Only then did Bridie realize that, in becoming engrossed in the puzzle as was her wont, she had carried them along in her musings and they had heard all that she had speculated. It brought a flush to her cheeks, which changed quickly from embarrassment to pleasure when she realized they were serious in their praise.

Jenny interjected, “I was thinking that maybe the line 'wax and wane' might give us a sort of time line as to when this singing has to take place. Maybe it refers to the moon's cycles. Maybe it means that the moon has to become full and then dwindle to a sickle moon before we can sing. That gives us about five weeks to prepare, around the end of October. And I think the song we have to sing is the ballad I found. We have to find that book! Because I have a feeling we'll need to sing the original, not my translation,” she added.

“Okay,” said Kit, “we have a plan of action. We also have to realize that this nemesis may be able to reach helpers here just as Gannet Somme has with us. In fact, I'm willing to bet on it. I think these vandals are his thugs, and they may not be the only ones. Nor should we assume they've given up. Which means we have to be doubly careful. It's probable that all five of us are potential targets so we all have to be on the lookout.”

Everyone nodded solemnly.

Ty was concerned about the painting. “It's obvious these thugs want it badly. Maybe we

should store it somewhere safer than here on the farm. In fact, it shouldn't be kept by any of us since we are all targets. Any thoughts?"

"I know of one place," said Kit. "I go on a lot of field trips. On one I found the entrance to an abandoned mine. I think most people have forgotten it ever existed. It's dry, and in good shape. There are lots of levels but the top one has several rooms with huge built-in vaults and they're lockable. The mine couldn't be traced to any of us, so it wouldn't be a logical place to look."

Bennet said, "Okay, but more than one of us should know how to get there and how to find the vault, not to mention the lock combination."

"Sound thinking," said Kit. "But let's spread it around. Two of us will know the site, but only one of those two will know which vault will be used. Two others will each know $\frac{1}{2}$ of the lock combination. That way no one of us would be able to give it up in the event we got caught. Agreed?"

Again, everyone nodded. It was decided that Ty would go with Kit. Jenny and Bridie would each possess part of the lock number. They did it this way as it was obvious that Bennet was the primary target. And the only thing she would know was that the painting was hidden in a mine. There were many kinds of mines around; she didn't even know what kind of mine was to be used. Each of the five would have to be rounded up and forced to divulge his or her bit before the clues could be put together to divulge the location of the painting and how to get it. It was the best plan they could think of at the moment.

Ty rewrapped the painting, adding another layer, this time one of thick plastic, to the outside. Immediately after, he and Kit left with the painting. Their first stop was at a specialty hardware store where they bought the strongest combination lock possible. Then Kit drove them as close to the mine as they could get by car. They hiked a further three kilometers before they found the mine's entrance. It was a wonder that Kit had ever found it in the first place. Trees and bushes had grown up around the entrance, effectively obscuring it from the casual eye. Only someone like Kit, trained to study land features and anomalies, could have spotted it. Ty memorized what he could of their path and the entrance. Then they entered the mine.

As Ty had said, it looked solid. There was no creaking of the wooden supports. The mine shaft was clear of debris, and it was obvious that no animals had made use of it for a den.

Kit told Ty where, in general, he could find the vaults. Then he settled to the floor to wait patiently. There was no light so Ty had to illuminate his path using his flashlight. He had gone some distance before he found the first one. It was, indeed, huge. But Ty thought this was too easy, so he explored further. He found three more rooms with vaults and chose the third in which to stash the painting. He placed the painting inside, upright, leaning up against one wall. Then he closed the enormous vault door and applied the padlock. To further confuse would-be thieves, he closed and latched the other vaults as well. He couldn't lock them, but it would require close scrutiny to make out his deception. Then he retraced his steps on the hard packed floor to where

Kit waited. Without conversation, they trekked back to Kit's car and Kit dropped him off on campus where Ty handed over half of the still-sealed lock combination to Jenny and Bridie in turn. Each memorized her part of the number and then destroyed the bits of paper. So far, so good.

* * *

While Kit and Ty were off on their errand, Bennet gave the girls a ride back to campus and then went on to buy new hinges for the garage door. She had made her purchases and was headed out the door and back to her car when she almost bumped into someone outside. It proved to be her postman, who was on his way to his truck with more deliveries. He recognized her and stopped.

“Ms. Tyler. How are you this fine day? I don't see you so often lately. But I do see your mare. She never fails to trot on over and greet me. She's a fine looking horse,” he grinned amiably. Then his expression changed. “Unlike those dogs of your neighbor, Mrs. Sackle. But I guess they won't be bothering us ever again. That was a horrible thing that happened!”, and he shook his head.

“What was that, Mr. Weldon?” asked Bennet.

“Hadn't you heard? The other day she woke up and found them in the backyard, so tired they hardly moved. When Mrs. Sackle went closer to find out what was wrong, they upped and attacked her! They mangled her right arm and shoulder and took a huge bite out of her left calf before they

expired on the spot. The vet said their hearts exploded. Mrs. Sackle's in the hospital and likely to be there for weeks to come and in therapy for a long time after that. Way I heard it, she's thinking of selling her place and buying something small here in town. ...Well, I've got to get moving or you'll never get your mail," he teased a little, mounted the driver's seat through the open door and drove off.

Bennet was aghast at the news but couldn't help wondering if the dream chase had anything to do with the dogs' collapse. Weirder things had happened, literally! Still, she would send a 'get well' card and some flowers to Mrs. Sackle. It was the least she could do.

CHAPTER 10

Kit had promised to attend a faculty dinner Saturday night so after he dropped Ty off, he gave Bennet a quick call to let her know he and Ty had successfully carried out their errand. Making sure she was okay, he arranged to see her after the dinner and drove home to prepare an exam before getting ready.

Bennet used the rest of the afternoon to sew up new cushion covers; she had extra material from when she had made the first set. She strung the new shower curtain as well. It was well after six before she finished. She decided that some fresh air would be just the thing. Going outside, she saw Lady May grazing at the far end of the field. Alternately, the path that descended behind the house looked inviting; the sun was still bright in the sky, so she opted to go for a walk.

She'd reached the blackberry bushes and was idly picking and eating the few she found when she heard the ravens croaking above her. Unbelievably, they dived at her, chasing her away from the bushes, darting and cawing until she was some distance away. Then they dived at the bushes again and again until one of them rose with what looked like a long supple branch in its beak. Then Bennet saw the 'stick' undulate. It was a snake! The raven wrenched the head in its beak back and forth for several minutes before flying high and dropping it to the ground. It didn't move. Bennet picked up a long stick, making sure it actually was a stick before she picked it up, moved closer and poked the snake. The snake still didn't move. She concluded it was dead.

She went a little closer to examine it. It was about 18 inches in length, the skin was dark with an hourglass pattern picked out in brown, but strangely, the head was a coppery color. Bennet knew nothing about different species of snakes. It didn't have a rattle, so she was pretty sure it wasn't a rattlesnake. And it wasn't anything like the puny little garter snakes she'd seen in gardens while growing up. Other than that, she didn't have a clue. However, based on the savage attack of the ravens, she had a suspicion it might be poisonous.

She looked up. The ravens wheeled in their usual fashion, cawing and croaking, and generally keeping her in view. They had saved her, at the very least, from a possibly painful bite. She waved at them in gratitude. Nearby, she spotted an old empty cardboard box caught under some bushes. She cautiously pulled it out with her stick, turning it over to be sure nothing was hiding inside, and

upended it over the dead snake. Then she climbed back up the path and put in a call to animal control to have someone come out and retrieve it. Whoever they sent would know if it had been potentially dangerous or not, and whether to worry about a possible nest of vipers on her land. Henceforth, she resolved to be more careful about where she stuck her hands and feet when out in the fields!

Animal control arrived quickly, confirming the snake was poisonous, although its venom was rarely deadly. He pointed out the triangular head, indicative of poisonous snakes. Judging by the size of the snake, a nest wasn't anticipated; it was thought that the snake was not fully grown and, therefore, not mature enough to mate. But he was surprised to find it here; it usually frequented parts further south and east. He bagged the snake and carried it away to his van. Bennet was glad to see it go. And even more glad that the ravens had come to her defense.

By the time Kit returned that evening, the incident was over and done. She told him about it, and he took it more seriously than she had anticipated. "We don't know but that this is another attack instigated by Gannet Somme's nemesis. What I find interesting though, are the ravens. They aren't pets and yet they came to your defense, at the risk of being bitten themselves."

"Yes. To me, the ravens are more significant than the snake. The snake could have gotten here in a variety of ways, but the ravens... well, I've never heard of them coming to a human's defense before," replied Bennet. "Here's a wild

thought. Perhaps Gannet Somme is looking out for us and used the ravens to intercede.”

“That is one possibility, I suppose,” said Kit. “But I still say the copperhead may have been more than a coincidence. Look, why don't I stay her tonight,” he coaxed. “I'll feel better, sleep better if I'm on hand for any more of these incidents.”

“Alright. You can stay. I wouldn't want to deprive you of your sleep,” she replied with a grin.

“Thank you,” he replied, trying vainly for a dignified mien, but failing miserably. They both broke out into peals of laughter.

“Oh!” exclaimed Bennet. “I found out today why I haven't seen Mrs. Sackle for so long.” Then she told him what Mr. Weldon, the postman, had told her. She added her own speculations relating to the dream chase.

Kit said, “There! You see? Nemesis can and has influenced animals to attack. Now I'm more convinced than ever that the copperhead was sent by him!”

“Anything's possible,” she admitted.

They were both tired by then so Bennet showed him to the spare room, lent him a toothbrush, and blushed a little when he declined the loan of some old pajamas, that Tom had owned, to sleep in. “I don't bother with pajamas,” he said with a tantalizing grin. He gave her a long kiss goodnight and retreated into his room, leaving her standing in the hallway with a bemused expression

on her face. It was a few minutes before she went into her own bedroom and got ready for bed. She had settled under the covers when a soft, persistent scratching caused her to leap up and open the door to let an affronted Mute stalk in. Bennet had to pet her for a long time before the cat forgave her and purred her way into sleep.

Sunday they slept in. It proved to be a quiet day which they spent together in conversation, first seated on the porch swing, then on a long walk, becoming used to the idea that their relationship had evolved. They remembered the past when they had first met, the subsequent three-way friendship with Tom, and the past ten years plus, all of which might have gone on unchanged if Gannet Somme had not invaded their dreams. But she had and they were both old enough and wise enough to recognize the changes between them, and to embrace them. That night, three, not two, retired to Bennet's bedroom. Mute had to content herself with sleeping at the foot of the bed, at least until her humans had fallen asleep.

* * *

Monday morning they were up and ready to leave for work by eight. Today was important. Bennet wanted access to the rare books as soon as possible. She had to oversee the repairs, but mostly she wanted to find the book in which Jenny had found the ballad. It was vital. They had to find it before Nemesis' cohorts did. Bennet was resolved to squirrel it away in her office until the end of the day and then smuggle it out of the library in her briefcase.

Security had not yet removed the tape from around the rare books' cage when she arrived at work that morning. However, they showed up by nine, the official opening time, to report that they'd found no clue to the perpetrators and were not honestly very optimistic about finding them. They removed the tape and assured Bennet that they would maintain a watch.

When they left, the locksmith who handled campus calls, was arriving to work on the front doors. Bennet was assured the doors would be in good working order before the end of the day. Then he would turn his attention to the rare books' door. Half the available staff concentrated on sorting books and putting the cage to rights. Bennet worked alongside them. A professional book restorer was on call; Bennet would give her a call when the damaged tomes had been set to one side, along with all the collected bits and pieces of the torn pages. Everybody was shocked by the violent attack, but not totally surprised as vandalism had become a part of the darker side of campus life.

Luckily, it was discovered that only three volumes had been seriously damaged. Each of them was predictably, at least to Bennet, collections of musical scores from the 1300 to 1500 AD time period. Unfortunately, they were pretty heavily shredded, a shame as it would be next to impossible to replace them or resurrect more than a fraction of the affected pages.

Bennet purposely confined her efforts to the tomes in the area approximating the location where the book she searched for had originally been kept. Most of the shelves had been knocked over after the

books had been swept away – the same as at her house; the exception, of course, was those stored in the musical score section. But that was several aisles away from where Jenny's book had been shelved. With any luck, the volume would be in the pile that lay almost directly below that original location. So that's where she crouched and sorted.

When enough books had been placed in neat stacks, it was possible to restore the shelves to their upright positions which, in turn, made it easier to sort and stack the books. The work proceeded steadily. It was backbreaking labor, tiring and tedious. They had to move the volumes carefully, slowly, so as to preserve the spines and not add any further damage. Still, a few volumes needed their spines reattached and were set aside for later attention.

It was at the very bottom of the pile that Bennet found Jenny's book. That made sense; it had rested on the very end of the shelf. It had probably been one of the first to be dumped. The book's cover was distinctive. It seemed to have survived its ill-treatment fairly well. A few pages were crumpled and creased from landing so awkwardly, but the spine and covers were intact, not even loosened. They'd been lucky.

Bennet looked around. Noone was paying her any attention. She slipped the book under one of the upright shelves, far back so it would not be easily spotted, and calmly continued sorting. When lunchtime arrived, she shooed all her co-workers out of the cage, grabbed a box of books that needed minor repair work, slipped the secreted volume in with them and casually carried it to her office. A

guard was posted to watch over the cage until its door could be fixed and it would again be possible to lock it. Once in her office, Bennet tucked the volume in her briefcase and stored it out of sight in the lowest filing drawer, which she then locked.

After lunch, instead of rejoining the others in the cage, Bennet began work on the minor repairs. She had done such many times before, although seldom on anything so old. But she had been well-trained and her efforts saved the college from hiring someone from the outside. An expert would be required for major restoration, but minor jobs came under her domain.

At five, she called a halt to the day's efforts. Much progress had been made. All the books were neatly stacked. Books needing work had been sequestered. The severely damaged collections and loose papers were already in the hands of the professional restorer, and a start had been made in restacking the remaining volumes in their accustomed order. Bennet, too, had made progress; several volumes she'd worked on would be repatriated on the morrow. Till then, they were locked in her office. A new guard took over at the cage. The front library doors were in perfect order again, though still in need of some cosmetic touches. And security called to say they would post an outer guard as well until the cage was repaired.

Bennet was satisfied that all that could be done had been done, and left with a calm heart if not quite a calm hand; she carried her briefcase in one hand, her laptop in the other as she exited the building. She felt as exposed as 'the telltale heart' in the famous Edgar Allen Poe poem! She had never

removed a book from the rare books collection from the library in all the time she had worked here, and she felt like a thief in the night. Stealth was not her forte!

Plans had been made for everyone to meet at the farm. In fact, Bridie, Jenny and Ty were waiting by her car when she walked down the library steps. Waving a cheery goodbye to the guard, the four piled into the car and drove slowly out of the parking lot.

“Did you find it?” asked Bridie.

“Yes. It's in my briefcase. I'll show you when we get to the farm,” she replied.

The others were itching to see the book and the original ballad, but restrained themselves. When they got to the farm and were inside the house, Bennet opened her briefcase and carefully placed the book on the dining table. Jenny came forward, hands encased in skin-tight gloves as per usual procedure, located the page she'd found the ballad on, and lifted the oversized leaves delicately so as not to crumple, crease or tear any of the pages inadvertently, until she reached the right page.

They all bent over, trying to decipher the ancient script and archaic language. It wasn't easy. Their respect for Jenny's translation rose accordingly. It had taken a lot of time, expertise and effort to achieve what she had done. Bridie, especially, appreciated her efforts. This kind of work was exactly what she hoped in time to be able to do herself. She poured over the ballad, but it was no use. She had many years of study ahead of her

before she'd be able to understand it in its original form.

“The hard part with this text will be the pronunciation. We'll need to be precise when we sing it. I'll do my best, but I'm going to have to guess on some of it. What we need is an expert,” sighed Jenny. Then she turned more eagerly to the accompanying score. This will be easier. I'm pretty sure we can all learn the melody fairly well, especially after the dreams.”

Kit pulled into the driveway and parked next to Bennet's car. He looked approvingly at everyone's presence and the heavy book on the table. He pulled Bennet close and gave her a kiss before turning to study the book. Everyone looked a little startled but just took his actions in stride. Kit and Bennet acted so naturally about it; it made it easier for them to do the same. Bridie looked happy for her aunt. Ty and Jenny moved a little closer to one another.

“How about we order pizza before we tackle this?” suggested Ty. Everyone liked the idea and Bridie made the call.

“I think the first thing we should do is to make several copies of both the ballad and the score. That way, we'll have more chances of holding onto them in case the vandals try again,” recommended Kit. “Jenny, do you have any musical composition paper with you?”

Jenny smiled. “I always have some with me! I'll get started on the score. Then we can just run off some zerox copies. Who wants to work on

the ballad?" she asked.

"I will," volunteered Bridie. "Do you have some paper I can use, Aunt Bennet?"

Bennet quickly rooted out some paper and pens and handed them over. The girls had almost finished their drafts by the time the pizzas arrived. Bennet looked out the window to see Kit paying off the delivery boy. He and Ty had used the time to work on the garage door, exchanging the hinges and rehangng the door. Bennet, meanwhile, had busied herself making a salad, lemonade and iced tea to have with their pizza. While they ate, Bennet told them what she'd discovered about Mrs. Sackle, and Kit insisted she relate her experience with the ravens and snake, too.

Most were of the same opinion as Kit, suspicious that it might have been a deliberate attempt (since the snake wasn't common to the area) prompted by Nemesis, as they had taken to calling Gannet Somme's foe. They were intrigued with the unusual behavior of the ravens. But they didn't know what to make of the dogs' demise. That might have been influenced by Nemesis, but maybe not. They'd all heard stories of animals dying after over-exertion.

They were obviously reluctant to lend total credence to everything that had happened in the dream being literal. Some of it could be merely symbolic. After all, Lady May was fine after the dream, and how about the horse that Kit had ridden? These were details that neither Kit nor Bennet could provide. Bennet hadn't really seen much of Lady May the next day, what with one thing and another,

and neither of them had thought to track down the second horse. So they conceded the point.

“Ty, I've been meaning to ask. You've gotten waylaid by all this. How're things going at the Gallery?” asked Bennet.

Ty smiled at her interest. “As a matter of fact, I've gotten a couple of offers for three more paintings. I'm meeting with the potential buyers tomorrow morning.”

“Congratulations, Ty! That's wonderful!” cried Bennet. The others added their congratulations. “Let us know how your meetings go,” added Bennet.

As they talked, the girls finished their copying; Bennet closed the book and restored it to her briefcase.

“I was wondering about this weekend for a caving trip,” mentioned Kit. “Are you all free? I'm going to have to show it to you sometime soon; it's better to get a feel for it all before the big day.”

“I'm free,” said Ty.

“I don't know yet,” said Jenny. “We may have a gig sometime this weekend, I think. I'll talk to Grey and get back to you.”

“I don't know either. It depends on how well my studies go this week,” confessed Bridie. “I'm working on a paper. I'm hoping to finish it by Friday, but I'll have to get back to you, okay?”

“Sure. Either Saturday or Sunday is fine. Just let me know before the end of Friday,” said Kit with a smile. He was well used to the varied schedules of college students and had learned to be flexible when setting up field trips or caving ventures.

“Bennet, how about you?” he continued.

“I think so. At least so far. If another emergency pops up..” she replied, privately glad their new relationship hadn't caused him to start taking her for granted. He was still his usual, courteous self.

Ty turned to Jenny and Bridie. “Want to come with me for a run tomorrow? After classes?”

Bridie grimaced and said, “I'll pass. I need to concentrate on my paper.”

Jenny replied, “Sure, how about I meet you at four o'clock?”

“Sounds great,” answered Ty with a grin.

“Which reminds me,” said Bridie. “I really should be getting back to my books. Could one of you give me a ride?”

Ty and Jenny decided they should be going, too. Kit offered to drive them. Bennet cleaned up, then, on an impulse, stowed the precious book in among her own volumes, hoping this would be disguise enough, and went out for a visit with Lady May, taking her some carrot pieces left over from dinner. She stayed there until Kit returned. They

sat on the swing for a few minutes but then moved indoors and up the stairs.

* * *

Ty was psyched! But he kept his emotions under control. Two more sales would be great but he had to check out the buyers first. His first appointment was due in ten minutes. He'd arranged to meet both potential buyers here at the Gallery. Ty wanted to assess their physical reactions to the paintings as well as sound them out in conversation.

He moved into the showroom. A good two thirds of the paintings sported 'sold' stickers. Attendance had been steady all week and generally he'd overheard positive comments. That was encouraging. Of course there had also been a few who looked briefly and exited the gallery within moments. He had heard one or two who had labeled his work as too stark or derivative. He'd just watched them leave with satisfaction. They were entitled to their opinions. As long as they moved on and let others make up their own minds, he had no quarrel with them.

Walking around the show room like any other visitor, Ty kept an eye out for his first appointment. A couple of minutes later, still before the time Ty had set for the first meeting, a woman dressed in a corduroy skirt and matching vest entered. Ty remembered having seen her here a couple of times before. She checked her watch, and purposefully moved to stand in front of the painting that was the potential sale. She gazed on the painting with eyes totally focused. She drank it in. After a few moments, Ty moved to stand next to

her.

“Isn't it gorgeous?” she murmured. “I can close my eyes and feel the sun's heat on those cliffs. And when I look at those otters at play in the stream, I almost feel like I'm there. It's like I have my own private window.” Her voice was happy, full of wonder.

“Yes, that's how it makes me feel, too,” Ty answered. “Are you R. Brachs?”

“Yes. Rose.” She turned and got a good look at him. “Oh! You must be the artist! How do you do, Mr. Eagle?” she greeted him. Barely allowing him time to respond, she said, “I love your work! If I could, I'd buy more than one but I'm afraid that's beyond my means for now. I have a check already written,” digging into her purse. Triumphantly, she pulled it out and thrust it at Ty.

Ty smiled. He was happy to see the painting go to such an appreciative person. He accepted the check. Rose beamed.

“The show ends on Friday. You'll be able to take possession then or, if you prefer, it can be delivered,” he told her.

“Oh, I'll be here. I want to be able to enjoy your other work till the last possible moment,” she assured him happily. “Thank you, Mr. Eagle.” Then she became engrossed in the painting again. Ty left discretely.

'One more satisfied soul,' he thought to himself. Now if only the next appointment ended as

happily. Ty checked his watch and consulted the card on which he'd written the name of the man he now awaited: Dan Heights. He was expected in a few minutes. Ty resumed his stroll around the room, stopping every once in a while in front of this painting or that, remembering how he'd felt when he'd worked on each. Occasionally he'd join a person or group and listen to their comments, sometimes responding, sometimes just moving on.

He checked his watch again. The man was late. Not a good sign. He looked towards the entrance. A tall beefy middle-aged man strode into the room as if he owned it. Gold cuff links glinted under a tailored suit that seemed more appropriate for an executive boardroom than an art gallery. The man pushed his way through the crowd, expecting one and all to make way for him, rather than politely moving around them. He stood importantly, and now impatiently, in front of one of the two paintings he'd expressed interest in buying. Ty approached.

“Are you Mr. *Eagle*?” queried the man, accenting Ty's name with an almost sneer.

“Yes. And you are?”

“Heights. Dan Heights. I'm here to buy two works, this one” jerking a thumb above and behind him, “and that one over in the corner. They'll show up pretty good in our new offices in Houston,” he concluded with a self-satisfied smirk.

“What made you choose these two?” asked Ty, curiously.

“They're the right size and will blend in with all that desert country down there. Yup. They'll make a good impression on our clientèle,” he finished with a chortle of satisfaction.

Ty had made up his mind. “I'm sorry, Mr. Heights. These two are no longer available. You'll have to find your paintings elsewhere.”

Mr. Heights turned beet red. “What do you mean? The check is right here. We made a deal!” He was obviously angry at being thwarted.

Ty responded. “I'm sorry, but I always reserve the right of refusal and I'm afraid I am exercising that right with you.” He looked at Mr. Heights steadily, resolved.

Heights angrily pushed past him and bulled his way through the crowds. He cast one dark look back at Ty and left. Ty hoped he'd seen the last of him.

A young couple approached tentatively. “Mr. Eagle? We just wanted to tell you how much we like your work.” Then, hesitantly, the man continued, “Is the painting in the corner, the one with horses running in the valley, really no longer for sale?”

The three gravitated until they fronted the painting in question. Ty said, “That depends. Why do you ask?”

The woman broke in. “My dad has a horse ranch in the valley. He loves horses! But he had an accident and can't ride any more. He misses it more

than anything! This painting...the horses are so vibrant! I know Dad would feel the same and if he could look at it, he mightn't mind not being able to get out so much. Looking at this painting is like being there," she concluded.

Ty smiled. "In that case, the painting is for sale – to you." The couple beamed and thanked him profusely. A check was written and handed over. Ty told them they could make arrangements for delivery with the cashier. With a shaking of hands all around, the couple left to confront the cashier.

'Well, better two paintings to the truly appreciative than to someone like that Heights character' he thought to himself. Before he could quit the room, he noted in passing a Japanese gentleman standing before the painting of the bear that Heights had tried to buy. The gentleman was visibly excited and moved off to wait his turn impatiently to ask the cashier some questions, gesturing repeatedly at the painting, but having some difficulty in making himself understood. The cashier looked at Ty pleadingly, and Ty approached to help out.

The Japanese gentleman, eyes shining, asked haltingly, "You paint?" Ty nodded 'yes'.

"Oh!" He bowed deeply to Ty. "Is very good. Very real!" Unable to contain his enthusiasm, he rushed back to the painting, pointing at the cliffs, the river, the bear and the sky, in turn. Ty could understand maybe one word in ten, but he understood the man's enthusiasm and body language clearly. Here was another who obviously

was touched by his work.

Ty smiled. "I'm glad you like it."

The man seemed to understand that for he grinned. Then he pointed out the price in the brochure and back at the painting with a question in his eyes.

"Yes, that is the price."

The man beamed. He pulled out a huge wad of cash and said, "I buy?" Ty nodded once more. The man was all smiles. Ty led him back to the cashier who took over. Ty made sure the gentleman realized the painting couldn't be picked up until the following Friday. The gentleman nodded firmly. "Friday. I come." He again bowed deeply to Ty, smiling from ear to ear and went back to gaze again at his painting. It had been a profitable morning, in more ways than one.

At four o'clock, Ty, dressed in shorts, a muscle shirt that made his bronze muscles stand out, sneakers and a sweatband, was jogging in place in front of the Student Union, warming up for the coming run. He smiled with pleasure when Jenny jogged into view, dressed similarly but with a brim on her head and wearing a sports bra rather than a tank top.

"Ready?" she asked, with a smile. Ty nodded and led off. He wasn't sure how often she ran nor what her stamina was like, so he started off at a slow steady pace to see how she'd do. After a few minutes of this, she called out, "How about picking up the pace?" Ty smiled and obliged.

She'd be fine.

He headed off campus into the hills beyond via one of his favorite trails. Soon they were well away from all sounds of traffic and people. The only sounds that broke the quiet were their shoes hitting the dirt path and the steady sounds of their breathing. Ty was pleased that hers sounded just as steady and deep as his own. They ran until they reached the top of the hill. Here, the trail petered out. Before them lay unmarked territory. Ty stopped and Jenny joined him to take in the view.

“It's here that I get my inspiration for my paintings,” he confided. “It's so untouched here, like it must have been eons ago. Or at least in the time of my ancestors,” he grinned.

Jenny said, “It's beautiful, like a lovely ballad written by nature. It reminds me a bit of the fells back home. It's just as wild and free.” Ty could tell she was serious. It was one of the many endearing qualities which attracted him to her: her sincerity and the poetry in her soul. He stole a kiss and wrapped his arms around her as they stood there.

“I'm glad you walked into my life, Jenny Wren O'Shannon,” said Ty. “I hope you'll never leave. You are the part of my soul that I didn't even know I was missing.” He tilted her face up to kiss her again, “I love you, your musical soul and...” with a grin, “your freckles.”

Jenny hugged him close. “I never expected when I left home and flew to this country that I would find someone like you. I love you, too, Ty.”

They stood together there at the top of the hill, happy in the moment and in the place.

Then, “Hey lady, we'd better get moving before our muscles start to freeze up,” Ty said practically. This time Jenny took the lead, running easily down the gentle decline, Ty bringing up the rear. As they neared the campus, they could hear some kind of disturbance. They slowed to a walk and approached to find out what was going on.

A security guard was blocking a group of students from leaving, insisting on seeing each and every campus ID card. When he spotted Ty and Jenny, he impatiently gestured for them to produce their cards. When they couldn't, he asked if anyone there recognized either of them. When nobody admitted to knowing them, the guard's expression changed to a suspicious frown.

“You'll have to come with me,” he decided. “There have been a number of break-ins and incidents of vandalism the last few days. Anyone without a good and valid reason to be here on campus is a suspect.” The guard turned deaf ears to their pleas to be allowed to fetch their cards from their dorms. “We'll sort it out, but for now, you'll accompany me to the security office.” he said. And he hustled them off without another word.

Not until they were seated before his desk in the office would he listen to anything they had to say. Grudgingly, he agreed to let them each make a phone call, but first he took their fingerprints and a detailed history of their supposed whereabouts over the last few days. He wasn't abusive but obviously suspicious and determined to check out their

bonafides. He called the admission's office to ask if any students with their proffered names were registered and requested, demanded actually, that any relevant files and photos be brought to him.

Luckily, it was Susan, Bennet's friend, who took the call. She assured the guard that they were indeed students at Fletcher Chapel College and that she'd met them both. But he refused to release them until he had their pictures in hand to verify their identities. Susan hung up only to pick up the receiver again and call Bennet. She told her what was going on, then raced to collect the files and pictures to deliver to the guard.

Bennet lost no time in calling Kit; frustratingly, she was forced to leave a message. Then she locked her office and headed out the door towards the security's field office. She got there quickly and both Ty and Jenny were relieved to see her. Bennet assured the guard that she knew both students well. Even then, the guard clung to his officiousness and refused to accept her vouching as sufficient for letting them go. Bennet was steamed by his attitude but there wasn't much she could do about it, so she just plunked down on another chair next to Ty and gave the guard a disapproving glare. The guard ignored her as best he could, shuffling his papers and trying to maintain an appearance of efficiency and 'busy'ness.

Susan arrived minutes later, nodded to Bennet, Ty, and Jenny and handed the guard the requisitioned files. He, in turn, scrutinized both their pictures, comparing them meticulously with the two seated before him. He checked their campus status, too. Finally, reluctantly, he closed

the files and said, “It all looks to be in order. But...,” and here he looked admonitorily at them, “be sure in future to carry your ID cards at all times. You can go.”

Ty and Jenny wasted no time in leaving. Bennet stayed long enough to thank Susan for her help, pointedly ignoring the guard. But she did make a mental note of his name. She fully intended to have a word with his boss. Then she flounced out. Ty and Jenny waited outside to thank her for her support. But neither of them was in a mood to linger, so promising to be in touch, they said goodbye and headed for their dorms. Bennet, still outraged by the guard's behavior, jotted down his name, Tad Highens, before she could forget it. Then she walked back to the library.

It was like walking into a rerun. Security surrounded the building. The doors were unharmed – unnecessary to break them down since it was still opening hours, she supposed. But it was obvious something had happened to call together all these guards. She hastened up the steps in time to meet the captain of the security team coming down.

“Ms. Tyler.” He looked both uncomfortable and slightly embarrassed. “I'm afraid there's been another incident, this time with your office.”

Bennet was aghast. “I've only been gone for a half hour,” she protested.

“Yes, well, it looks like our perpetrator took his chance when you left. I'm afraid there's quite a mess inside,” he continued.

Bennet hurried inside. The door to her office had been jimmed open. Everything inside had been turned topsy turvy. The filing cabinet drawers were hanging out, contents scattered. Her desk had been rifled and the drawers pulled out and overturned. The box of books she had been working on had been upended on her desk, but although the books lay in a scattered heap, none of them had suffered the kind of damage as had been done in the caged area.

“Someone sure seems to be looking for something,” commented the captain. “First the rare book collection and now your office,” he observed shrewdly. (Bennet hated to think what more he might have said had he known of the break-in at the farm!) “Any idea what they're looking for,” he asked.

“No”, said Bennet. Her lack of fervor could be excused by shock, but she knew if she didn't say something else quick, he would begin to wonder at her brief reply. “I have no idea, but a book would seem to be a good guess,” she added wryly.

“Yes,” he replied with a bark of laughter. “By the way, where did you go? Did you notice anyone watching you as you left?”

“I don't remember seeing anyone in particular,” she replied. “And I was at your field office.” Then she told him all about the incident with Ty, Jenny, and the security guard.”

“Tad Highens,” he acknowledged reluctantly. “We've gotten a few other complaints about him. I'm sorry about your friends. I'll have a

word with him. His enthusiasm for this job is a mite high.” He looked around. “Do you have any security cameras covering this area?” he asked.

“No, only around the rare books collection. And they were sabotaged during the last break-in,” Bennet observed. “The repairs are in the works, but we never thought it was necessary to have a camera here.”

“It probably wouldn't have done any good anyway. The perps seem to know how to cover their tracks,” he admitted. Then he left to consult with his troops.

Bennet knew her office would be off limits so that any trace evidence could be gathered; she wandered over to the checkout counter. The clerk on duty gave her a sympathetic look but had a long line of customers to attend to. A guard sat there, recording everybody's name and looking to see that their faces matched their ID cards. Finally, she wandered back outside.

Kit bounded up the steps. “I got your message. Are Ty and Jenny okay? What's going on here?” He wrapped his arms around her as she related the past hour. “Persistent, aren't they?” he murmured. “Good thing you removed it yesterday.” She looked her gratitude and agreement.

“Let's go to the Union and get a cup of tea,” he suggested. Bennet was glad of a purpose, relieved to get away from the controlled hubbub.

“I'm glad the girls made those copies last night. I almost brought the book back this morning.

Now I'm glad I didn't," she said.

"We're going to have to hide it, too, I think," said Kit.

"Yes. We can't take any more chances," agreed Bennet. "I'm going to send it to my brother, J. T." she resolved. He'll keep it safe for us until all this is over."

"Just be careful how you send it. We're being watched." observed Kit.

"Yes, I'll have one of my staff include it in the regular outgoing parcels. That shouldn't spark anyone's suspicions."

"Good," he approved.

"I think I'll go on home. They're not going to let me near my office and I just don't feel up to facing the cage right now," said Bennet.

"Do that. I'll be out as soon as I've fetched some clean clothes and let my office know I'll be gone for the rest of the day," responded Kit. He walked her to her car and once she was out of sight, hurried back to his office. Shortly thereafter he left the campus, too.

* * *

Bennet felt drained. She lay down on the porch swing. So much had happened so quickly. It was starting to wear her down. She longed for peace and quiet! She wanted this bizarre situation to be over! She slept, not even wakening when Kit

pulled into the driveway. He settled on the porch steps, guarding her rest, thinking much the same thoughts as she. But he also counted his lucky stars: finally, he and Bennet were where he'd known they should have been all these years: together.

CHAPTER 11

Friday could not come too soon! This echoed through all their minds, although for different reasons. Bennet had worked hard all week. There had been no more disturbances at the library. The book had been sent off as planned and T. J. had already gotten it and tucked it away in a safety deposit box. But even with this major worry taken care of, there was plenty more to occupy her mind.

The mess in her office was one. It was a much more time-consuming task putting it back together than that in the cage. The papers in the files that had been dumped had become hopelessly intermixed. It would take hours, probably days, to get it all sorted before the files themselves could be rearranged in their drawers. Bennet also was responsible for overseeing repairs; she was the contact for enumerable phone calls from the artisans

hired to work on the doors, cameras, and locks.

When she wasn't involved with one of these tasks, she was working on the minor repairs to several more rare books; she wanted them back in their cage as soon as possible. And then there was the day to day management. People still came seeking her expertise for their research problems. She delegated as many as she could, but couldn't turn everyone away; half the staff was still preoccupied in the cage, so there were fewer available to handle the daily load.

In whatever spare time she could find, she tried to memorize the pronunciation of the ballad's text. Jenny had made a CD for each of them, but it was still slow going. And she still hadn't visited poor Mrs. Sackle in the hospital. She felt guilty at the passage of time.

Friday loomed large, offering two bright spots. One was obvious – the end of the week and the start of a much-needed break! Second, but not by much, was the promised delivery of her painting.

Bridie looked forward to Friday as the completion of her paper. She had put all her free time into it and would be glad when she could turn it in and get her schedule back to normal. She'd had no chance to see her friends or devote any time to Jenny's CD and that bothered her. Additionally, she craved going on a long ramble with Lady May.

Kit looked forward to Friday as the harbinger of more time with and for Bennet. He was worried by how tired she'd been this past week. And his own academic load kept him so busy, he

found it hard to get away as often as he'd like. Also, on Friday he would know if the caving was to be a part of the weekend agenda.

Ty's exhibition ended on Friday. As much as he'd enjoyed it, he was ready to move on to other things; he wanted to devote more time to his new series; he definitely wanted to spend more time with Jenny; and he wanted to visit his family. He missed them. It had been a few weeks since he had last heard from them.

His father, Cal, was a computer programmer and had taught Ty to be as at ease and adept with them as he himself. His mother, Sarah, made and sold all kinds of pottery. She specialized in flower pots, painting elaborate native designs on them before firing them in the kiln. Her pots were in great demand in their community. When Ty had left for college, his father was in the process of developing a web page to advertise and take orders for Sarah's wares. And he wanted to know how it was going.

He particularly wanted to tell them about Jenny. Ty also needed help with the ballad. Singing did not come naturally to him. Chanting? Yes. But singing came out more as a series of croaks. Friday signaled a fresh start, and time to concentrate on other things; he wished it would get a move on!

Jenny was looking forward to a change of pace. On the weekend, there would be a gig; that would be fun! She also wanted to go caving, spend more time with Ty and their friends, and delve deeper into the musical score. She also planned to

make another CD for everyone, this one with the melody they all needed to learn. The past few days she had been inundated with classwork. It was as though all her professors had gotten together and jointly determined to assign more projects and exercises than was humanly possible for one poor student to finish!

Most of all, she was missing her gran. Jenny had grown up with her gran. It had been just the two of them. Her parents had died when she was only three, her mother in a car accident, and her father a few months later when his boat had capsized in a storm. Gran didn't have a computer or even a house phone in the small village where she had lived for as long as Jenny could remember. It was frustrating because Jenny wanted to talk with her, share what was going on in her life. She wanted, needed, to tell her about Ty. Sometimes "snail mail" just didn't cut it.. But as it was her only option, she wanted time to sit down and compose a long letter. So, while the weekend promised to be just as busy, it was in a totally different way and Friday was the key.

* * *

Unbelievably, Friday arrived. They'd all gotten through the hectic week and seen considerable progress in their various pursuits. When Jenny got hold of Grey, he told her that Sunday looked better for their gig. She was pleased. An entire day to pursue other things!

Ty watched as the sold paintings were crated and made sure the correct addresses were on each label. Both Rose and the Japanese gentleman were

on hand, thrilled to finally take possession of their individual choices. The few canvases that hadn't sold were also crated and transported to Ty's rented studio for storage. Ty shook hands with the gallery managers. They were mutually pleased by the last two weeks. Ty was assured that future exhibitions of his work would be anticipated eagerly.

Bridie finished her paper and turned it in. She was so happy, she did an impromptu jig. The students around smiled empathetically; they knew exactly how she felt! She deposited her bookbag in her dorm room and practically flew to the library to catch a ride with Bennet back to the farm. A very frisky Lady May awaited her and the two left as quickly as Bridie could put on the tack. Bennet watched them go, somewhat envious. But, on second thought, the allure of just putting her feet up proved much stronger.

Kit was held up back on campus. To his frustration, and for some insane reason, a faculty meeting had been called for five o'clock! He only hoped that it finished quickly.

Jenny and Ty met at his studio loft where he showed her the rough draft of the painting he was currently working on. Crags were partially obscured by a heavy layer of ice and snow, which for some reason made the crags stand out even more sharply. This would make as powerful a statement as his summer series! They went on from there to share a candlelit dinner in town. Before heading back to the dorms, Ty called Kit and relayed the message that a caving venture looked good for Saturday. Then he and Jenny went back to his dorm room for some intense work on the ballad. They

must have spent a good two hours at it. At the end, they were both exhausted and more than ready to take a break. But they had made significant progress. Jenny was teaching him the melody simultaneously; somehow that made it easier for Ty to remember.

Jenny said, "You're doing well, Ty!" Then she teased a little, "less like a frog and more like a crow now."

Ty grinned at her joke, and said, "You're a good teacher, Jenny." He pulled her close for a long kiss. "I was thinking about my parents. I was thinking of visiting them soon. Will you go with me?"

Jenny rolled over in his arms (they were on the bed). "I'd love to, Ty. I've been writing to my gran, telling her about you." She flashed a smile. "She'd like you and would love your paintings. She loves the heath at home; she's always out walking. She says she can breathe better in its open spaces and unspoiled nature. She'd appreciate your work."

Ty smiled. "I hope to meet her someday."

Jenny replied, "I look forward to it, too, the two people I love the most getting together."

* * *

Bridie spent the night at the farm. Mute, surprisingly, chose to accompany her up to bed. All three, Bridie, Bennet and Kit, retired at an early hour. They wanted to get an early start the next day.

* * *

“Now, make sure your flashlights work.” They all dutifully turned them on and off. Kit continued, “Did you all remember extra batteries?” Nods replied. “Everybody have a water bottle and something to eat packed?” At their repeated nods, he smiled. “Very good. You'll need both before we're through. Remember, we'll stop just inside so your eyes can adjust. Make sure your helmets are securely attached. Now's a good time to put on your jackets, too,” he suggested gently.

“Follow where I lead and be cautious of your footing. We're here to have fun, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be careful,” he continued. “I'll go first, Bridie next, Ty in the middle, Jenny after him, and Bennet, if you'll bring up the rear?” At her assent, he said, “Next to me, you're the most experienced here,” he smiled. “Keep your eyes peeled, everybody.”

“Final questions. Anyone here scared of the dark? Claustrophobic? No? Excellent!” he finished. “Then, I guess we can get started. I'll let you know what to expect as we approach obstacles and how best to handle them. Take your time! Don't rush. It's when you rush that accidents happen. And don't worry that you can't keep up. The rule in spelunking is that the pace is set by the most inexperienced, so when you need to stop or slow down for any reason, just call out. We have all day,” he ended with a smile. “Everybody ready? Follow me.”

Kit led them at an easy pace, warning them of tricky spots. He was a natural leader. The group

had no real problems although Bridie got stuck once and had to be talked through a few maneuvers before she could free herself. Ty banged his head once on an overhang, but his helmet kept him from injury. And once Jenny slid, losing control for a moment when going under and through a narrow passage, but Bennet was there to steady her until she could find her footing again. Her and Kit's calm manners kept any of them from panicking.

When they reached the cavern, everyone was glad to take a break, but also exhilarated by the trek to that point. It had been fun! But also strenuous, which was made more so by the newness of the experience. A break was a good idea. Their flashlights pierced the gloom, but it was only in their imaginations that they could envision its breadth and vastness.

“Earth's womb,” murmured Jenny. “Apt.”

“So this is where we will be singing,” observed Ty, standing close by Jenny's side. “Is there any way, other than with Gannet Somme's halo (in a cheery aside) that we could add more light? It's a bit eerie thinking about singing in pitch blackness, and these flashlights don't reach very far.”

“I think so, too” confessed Bridie. “Besides, if light is Night's enemy, then the more light we have, the better, right?” she grinned.

“It's something to think about,” admitted Kit.

“I'm going to sound out the acoustics,”

announced Jenny. A moment later, her voice rose in song. Although the sound swelled, it was soon swallowed up. "Weird," was Jenny's judgment.

They munched on the snacks they'd brought and sipped on their water bottles. Kit had been right when he's said they'd need them. They had all expended a lot of energy. It was good to refresh themselves in this way, too. When everyone felt ready to go on, they focused their beams around Kit who proceeded to give them a general idea of what to expect the rest of the way. Then he led off.

Everything was fine until Bridie flinched and dropped her flashlight. Kit turned back at the hollow clunk and Bridie's startled exclamation. Bridie was off balance and instinctively grabbed at Kit; a second later, Kit lay on the ground. The others hastened to join them, shining their beams down to illuminate the scene. Kit was holding his ankle. Bridie was bent over him in obvious distress, saying repeatedly, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I was startled, that's all and then I lost my balance."

"It was an accident, Bridie. Accidents happen. I'll be fine," Kit said, but the slight grimace on his face suggested the latter was a premature assessment.

Bennet said calmly, "Why don't you three see if you can locate Bridie's flashlight. Kit? How bad is that ankle?"

"I think I just twisted it. Help me up? I'll see if I can put any weight on it," he replied.

Bennet helped him up but it was obvious he

would not be able to walk unassisted. Meanwhile the other three had located Bridie's flashlight, and something else.

Ty said, "I think you two should see this." He shone his own beam on a patch of wall close to where Kit lay. There, picked out painstakingly, were the outlines of five distinctly different birds encircling a sixth which, in turn, was encapsulated in a circle. Around the circle radiated lines in all directions, like the rays of a sun or moon. The beaks of all the birds were open and lifted upwards. Below the central bird had been scratched the initials G. S. It couldn't have been clearer; it was a symbolic representation of Gannet Somme and the five of them.

Bennet reached forward to touch the carving. "It's old. See how the lines are eroding away and filled with grit. There's no way of telling how long it's been there," she commented. "No wonder you were startled, Bridie!" she concluded with a sympathetic smile for her niece.

Kit was as intrigued as the others. He leaned forward, balancing against Bennet's shoulder. "You're right, Bennet. It is old. We could take samples and run them through a spectrometer to get an actual date, but as worn as they are, we can surmise they are pretty old. Look how smooth the wall is. It's a wonder that the etching hasn't been totally effaced. You have sharp eyes, Bridie!" exclaimed Kit. His enthusiasm caused him to almost lose his balance, and he couldn't stifle a slight groan when his foot touched the floor.

"We'd better get you out of here," said

Bennet firmly. “Ty, Jenny, can you support him? I guess I’m leader now,” she said ruefully. “I’ll lead us slowly and stop by each obstacle so that you’ll be able to prepare to maneuver around them as we go. The exit’s not far. Bridie, be ready to spell Jenny periodically, okay? Meantime, everybody keep their lights trained forward and down.”

They moved at an excruciatingly slow rate, but even that taxed everyone. They rested often. It was with multiple sighs of relief when they spotted the dim light that marked the way out.

“This last bit is going to be hard. Ty, you and I will have to haul Kit up to the ledge. Girls, you’re going to have to support him from below, but be careful not to knock his ankle. Ready?” Bennet instructed.

Ty gave Bennet a leg up, and then climbed up beside her. Together they bent down to where Jenny and Bridie supported Kit. Kit raised his arms and grasped Bennet’s and Ty’s hands, kicking off with his one good foot until he, too, rested on the ledge. Then Ty and Bennet eased him out onto the path and helped him lean against the side of the entrance. Then they went back to assist the girls.

Soon all five were out, drinking in the fresh air and sunshine as though they’d been out of it for days instead of a few hours. After a short rest, Bennet and Ty helped Kit down the hill to one of the picnic benches that dotted the visitor’s center. Bennet eased off Kit’s boot and they took a look at his ankle. It was swollen and bruised, but as he’d surmised, only sprained. Some cold packs and rest would set him to rights.

They had come together in Ty's van as it easily accommodated the five of them and their gear. Ty brought it as close to the center as he could get. Then they helped Kit into one of the seats. Bennet took the wheel, dropped Ty and the girls by the Student Union, and then drove home with Kit to the farm. After she'd helped him into the house and settled him on the couch with his foot propped and covered by an ice pack, she said, "I think you're going to be sleeping on the couch for a day or two. But if you're good, I might visit," she added mischievously. Ty grinned, then grabbed her, and pulled her down for a kiss and cuddle.

"That was some find Bridie made," he commented.

"And it makes this mystery even bigger," added Bennet.

"Yes," he agreed. "What do you think of the idea of extra lighting?" he asked.

"It would make things easier, and maybe even be beneficial to our cause," admitted Bennet. "But I don't think using a noisy generator would be a good idea. We need something bright but otherwise non-invasive."

"I agree. I suppose we could haul in a dozen or so camp lanterns. They aren't heavy. And it's possible to buy the kind that runs on batteries. I don't want to carry any gas down there, either," said Kit. "Of course it will still only illuminate a small patch, but it might do for our purposes."

"I think that it's a good idea," said Bennet

approvingly.

They snuggled together a bit. “I can't help but wonder how long that etching has been there,” mused Bennet. “It's a wonder we never saw it before, considering how often we've been down there.”

“True,” said Kit, “but there is a bend just there and a small outcrop half obscures sight of the drawing. One has to focus a light on just the right spot at just the right angle to see it. What I'm wondering,” he resumed a little later, “is who put it there.”

Bennet leaped up to fetch the book. She looked for the date on which it had been printed and bound: 1463. “This doesn't make sense either. Here we have a ballad about a little girl who wasn't even born until thirty years after this book was printed, unless it's a typo. And now, some five hundred plus years later, we are dreaming about her! It should all be shrugged off as a bad dream, and yet... somehow, I can't.” she confessed, sounding both frustrated and a little scared.

“Especially after you take into account the multiple break-ins. We're not the only ones obsessed with a five hundred year old mystery,” pointed out Kit.

“Yes. And the break-ins give a lot more credence to it all, as well as the etching we found. But it's just so impossible! All of it!” she protested.

“All we can do is go on with what we've been doing. At least we know it will end, one way

or another, and within a month, give or take a few days,” he consoled her.

“Yes, if we've read the clues right. I'll just be glad to get back to normal,” she answered fervently.

“I was thinking,” she said after a while in a completely different tone of voice, and looking searchingly at Kit, “Would you be interested in moving in..here?”

Kit looked at her with a smile in his eyes. “I thought you'd never ask.” He kissed her and held her close, the pain in his ankle all but forgotten.

* * *

Sunday they decided to devote to working on the ballad. They listened to Jenny's CD over and over, trying to get the inflections just right. Both of them made progress, helping one another, making a game out of it. The words had a lilting quality, often found in poetry; that's what the ballad was, really, several lines of poetry set to music. Bennet hummed the tune off and on to get a feel for how it would sound put together. But they didn't try to sing the words. It was too soon.

Bridie came for a visit in late afternoon, bringing Kit some chocolate by way of apology. He was feeling much better, probably better than Bridie. He accepted the chocolate with a good grace, sharing it with her and Bennet, joking around until Bridie was laughing uncontrollably. And when Bennet told her that they were going to live together, Bridie was delighted and congratulated

them warmly. After a while, she went for a long ride with Lady May and came back tired but content. She decided to spend the night and ride to the college with them in the morning. They spent a cozy evening chatting and playing Scrabble, and admiring Bennet's new painting which held pride of place over the mantle.

By Monday morning, Kit's swelling had diminished and he could hobble around. His ankle was still sore but he thought he could manage his classes that day. He promised to rest it as much as possible.

Bennet, accompanied that day by Mute, tackled the tangle in her office. The weekend had made a huge difference; the task no longer seemed insurmountable. She felt both energized and optimistic. When she checked, she found that the staff had almost completed restacking the rare volumes. Her office door had been fixed on Friday after she'd gone home. And this morning the cage door was scheduled for repairs. Things were finally getting back to normal. Bennet was pleased at the progress.

Ty was on duty today. He popped his head in to say hello and give her another CD from Jenny; this one contained the melody they needed for singing the ballad. He didn't stay long. Everyone was still working double time while the cage was being put to rights, which kept everyone very busy.

At the end of the day, Bennet drove the circuit drive to where Kit's office was located. He hobbled out before she could get out of the car, pausing to give her a warm kiss before continuing

around to the passenger side. Once he was seated and belted in, she drove them to his cottage where he packed a couple of bags. They lugged them back up the stairs and stowed them in the backseat, reserving the trunk for his bike. The trek up and down the stairs had started his ankle to throbbing again; it would be a few days before he would be easily mobile.

“What will you do with the cottage?” asked Bennet shyly.

Actually I was thinking of asking Ty if he wanted to use it,” he replied. I don't need the rent. It's paid in full. All he'd have to pay is utilities. And he might be able to use the extra rooms to paint and store his work.”

“That's a wonderful idea!” cried Bennet. 'Ever thinking of others' was her thought. Kit was a wonderful person and a good friend.

When they had gotten his things squared away back at the farm, Bennet made him lie down again to rest his ankle. They chose to use the porch swing, Kit reclined with his foot on a pillow in Bennet's lap. They idly swung and chatted, watching the sun set. The colors were glorious. Both of them felt the need for a sweater in the cooler air. Fall was definitely on the way!

They went to sleep that night, happy and feeling the rightness in sharing a room and a home. In fact, it felt so natural that they could barely remember how it had been when they'd been apart.

* * *

In the wee hours, Bennet awoke, instantly awake; she had heard something. She lay there, listening to Kit's quiet breathing. No – it had been something else: a tiny sound as though some distance away. Bennet glanced to the foot of the bed. Mute lay there curled in a ball, so it hadn't been her. When she heard the muffled sound again, she thought it sounded more like crying. Intrigued, she quietly left the bed so as not to awaken Kit, put on her robe and, barefoot, slipped down the stairs. At her first movement, Mute wakened, instantly alert as cats become, jumped off the bed and followed her mistress.

'There!' The sound came again. It was coming from the barn. Grabbing an old pair of sneakers from beside the kitchen door, Bennet grabbed a flashlight and eased quietly out the door, Mute right behind her. Mute raced ahead to lead the way, trotting unerringly towards the barn. Somehow the sound did not seem threatening so Bennet wasted no time in following the little cat.

The closer they got, the louder the sound, yet it was still curiously muffled, a quiet sobbing interspersed with a few snuffles here and there, hardly louder than a kitten might make. Bennet opened the barn door and entered, almost tripping over Mute, so rushed was the cat to get inside. 'There it is again, up in the loft', observed Bennet.

She climbed the built-in ladder up to the loft. A soft blue glow caught her attention. Was someone camping up here? Bennet shone her flashlight towards the light, stopping where a mop of blonde hair showed above one of the hay bales. She tracked across the hay and looked down to see a

small child crouched in the hay, shivering and weeping. Bennet's heart went out to the child. She made her way around the stacked bales until she could enter the little bower that had been made. Only then could she see that it was a little girl. Getting closer, she thought she recognized her. Impossible! It couldn't be! And yet.. it looked to be Gannet Somme!

The little girl raised tear-filled eyes somewhat fearfully at Bennet's approach until she saw the gentle concern in Bennet's eyes. She stopped crying but couldn't stop her shivering.

Bennet couldn't wrap her mind around the fact that Gannet Somme was here, in her hay loft. But she could do something about the little girl's shivering.

“Come on, love, let's get you out of here. It's way too cold up here!” The little girl wore only a raggedy short sleeved top and a thin pair of cotton pants. Bennet picked her up - she was as light as a feather, and carried her to the ladder. There she had to put her down and ease her down one rung at a time. The child showed no fear. Once at the bottom, Mute wove around the little girl's legs and, for the first time ever, mewed over and over. Bennet thought 'one surprise at a time!' She again lifted the child into her arms and bore her quickly into the house, Mute vociferously tailing the two of them.

When Bennet lowered the child to the couch, Mute jumped up beside her, mewling and insistently climbing into the child's lap until an involuntary hand began to stroke her; then she

purred her content. Bennet left for a moment, returning with a blanket and a warm nightgown that, once donned, hung to the child's feet. She had not said a word throughout, although Bennet had addressed her a few times.

Dressed in the gown, wrapped in the blanket, Mute warm in her lap, the little girl's eyes drooped and finally closed; she fell asleep where she sat. Bennet lowered her gently until her head rested on a small cushion, then pulled another blanket over her. Then she just sat there, watching her sleep, drinking in her small form and face.

There was no doubt that the child bore a striking resemblance to Gannet Somme and there had been that blue light. But her clothing was everyday modern. Plus, the real Gannet Somme had lived centuries before. Therefore, this couldn't be Gannet Somme. But if not, then who was she? And how had she ended up in Bennet's barn? And what had caused the blue glow? Bennet's thoughts whirled and circled. She must have sat there for an hour when Kit came limping down the stairs, wondering where she had disappeared to.

When he saw Bennet sitting on the edge of the couch, he didn't identify the bundle as other than a pile of blankets. Then he heard Mute's loud purrs. He couldn't see the kitten though. He came closer and followed Bennet's gaze, expecting to see the cat. Instead he could just make out some blonde hairs that had escaped the blankets, and then a small hand. Considerably startled, he started to say something but an admonitory finger raised to lips in the time-worn gesture for silence stopped him. When he registered that a child lay there, he looked

his surprise at Bennet.

Bennet rose, gesturing for Kit to follow. A clock in the kitchen glowed 1:35 a.m. They sat at the breakfast table and leaned close until their heads almost touched. Bennet whispered, telling Kit how she'd found the little girl. She grabbed his hand, "Kit, she's the spitting image of Gannet Somme," she whispered vehemently. He started. They both returned to stare down at the sleeping child. After a considerable time, they went back to the kitchen and huddled again.

Kit said, "There are a million questions but we won't get any answers until she wakes up. It's late. Why don't we get some rest, too? We may be glad of it later."

Bennet could come up with no good counter to his counsel, although her inclination was to sit by the child all night. 'No, what Kit suggested was practical'. Bennet wasn't sure she'd be able to sleep, but she followed his lead. After checking to make sure windows and doors were secure, they quietly ascended the stairs and got back into bed. Bennet listened for any small noise for the longest time but heard nothing more than the usual night sounds. She closed her eyes to listen more intently.

When she opened them again, it was morning, just after seven. Bennet leaped to her feet and hastened downstairs. It hadn't been a dream. The girl really lay on her couch. Bennet stretched out a hand to stroke the golden strands that lay atop the blanket, then pulled her hand back without touching, afraid she might waken her. She turned around and went back up to the bedroom. She

could hear Kit in the bathroom. She put on her robe and slippers and went back down to the kitchen where she started some water to heating and began to whip up a batch of pancakes. Within minutes, she had several baking on the griddle. Then she pulled out some oranges and squeezed enough juice for three glasses. She soon had a stack of pancakes ready and started some bacon frying. By the time it was ready, Kit was hobbling into the kitchen. He gave her a kiss and a hug, and gestured at the child, raising his eyebrows as if asking 'any sign of waking?' She shook her head 'no'. Then they sat down together to eat.

“I'm calling in sick today,” she said quietly.

Kit just nodded. “Shall I stay?” he asked.

“No, let's let her get used to one of us at a time. I'm convinced it's her. Her face, and that light.. I don't know how, but she's here and we have to take care of her. If the ballad is right, she's in great danger,” responded Bennet.

At that point they heard a muffled thump. It was Mute, looking for her breakfast. Bennet took care of her and then waited to let her out, but Mute just sat on the floor, cleaning her paws, and showed no interest in leaving the house. A few minutes later, the quiet patter of feet approached. Gannet Somme stood in the doorway arch in the nightgown Bennet had dressed her in, not saying a word. Her hair was tangled with wisps of hay here and there. She no longer emanated any light – perhaps she didn't during daylight. Her attention seemed to be focused on the remnants of the breakfast.

Bennet beckoned her with a smile and Gannet came closer, seemingly happy to snuggle into Bennet's embrace. Bennet seated her and brought the reserved, still warm bacon and pancakes and set them on a plate in front of her. Then she brought a glass of milk and another of orange juice. Gannet needed no urging. She dug in with a will. One might have thought she hadn't eaten in days! 'Maybe she hadn't.' Bennet remembered the raggedy clothes she'd been wearing. Who knew how long Gannet had been here or where she'd been before that. So many questions! But she and Kit voiced none of them, just let her eat in peace. Gannet showed no more fear of Kit than she had of Bennet. She seemed to know they had her welfare at heart.

When she was sure someone would be there to answer the phone, Bennet called the library and said she wouldn't be in for the rest of the week. This was accepted readily. Things were well under control. Kit didn't have any classes until eleven so there was no pressure.

When Gannet had eaten, Bennet took her upstairs for a bath. Leaving her splashing happily in the warm water, she went to retrieve Gannet's clothes. Although worn, they were clean and whole. They'd have to do until she could find some more later in the day. And shoes. Gannet had been barefoot when Bennet had found her. Bath done, dried and dressed, Gannet resumed her place on the couch, petting Mute who seemed inclined to stick to her like a shadow. Bennet and Kit smiled at her and then tried to ask a few questions.

Bennet said, "My name is Bennet. This is

Kit. Can you tell us your name?"

"Gannet," she responded

Well, at least they'd gotten that right! Bennet resumed, "How did you get here?"

"I woke up in the barn. It was cold. I was crying. Then you came and brought me here," she smiled.

"Are you all alone?"

"No, I'm with you and Kit and Mute," she answered.

"But before the barn?"

Gannet just looked at them in puzzlement and shrugged her shoulders. "Can I go outside?"

"Sure you can. But just onto the porch for now till we can get you some shoes. The grass is cold and wet." answered Bennet with a cautionary smile.

Happily, Gannet tugged on the porch door. It was locked. Kit quickly unlocked it and Gannet slipped outside, Mute at her heels. The two were quick to spot the swing and were soon rocking happily back and forth, Mute secure in Gannet's arms. Gannet made no move to leave the porch; she seemed content.

Stores opened at nine. Kit volunteered to stay with Gannet while Bennet went shopping. At the store, Bennet guessed sizes and bought several

outfits, underwear, a light jacket, brush and comb, a couple of nightgowns, a pair of flipflops, a pair of sandals, a ball, a couple of children's storybooks, and a stuffed penguin.

After Kit left, promising to return as soon as classes were done, Gannet insisted on trying on all her new clothes. She especially loved the flipflops, traipsing back and forth on the floor and listening to the funny sounds they made. The sandals proved to be a little big, but the adjustable straps made them usable. (Bennet would get her sneakers later.) The clothes fit overall, a little long in the leg, but it was easy to roll them up. And she loved the penguin, hugging it close.

When she had put on the sandals, Bennet took her out to meet Lady May. Gannet's eyes grew large at the size of the mare, but Lady May's soft brown eyes and gentle snuffles soon had Gannet climbing the fence to pet her. Bennet handed her an apple bit and showed her how to offer it to the mare. Gannet laughed, saying Lady May's lips tickled. When Bennet asked if she'd like to go for a ride, Gannet clapped her hands for joy and hopped excitedly from one foot to the other as Bennet bridled and saddled the mare.

Then Bennet led the mare to the mounting stump, climbed into the saddle and hoisted Gannet up from the stump to sit in front of her. Lady May stood stock still throughout the procedure, and moved off at a slow steady pace once woman and child were on her back. She seemed to know to be extra careful. To no surprise, overhead the two ravens crisscrossed the sky, floating on the air currents and calling out their day's greeting.

Gannet looked up at them with a smile. She said, “Wing, Caw,” and she cawed musically and waved at them. Bennet could have sworn that the ravens dipped their wings in reply!

They took the path that led past the berry bushes but were careful not to come too close to them. As they passed by, Gannet pointed at the bushes warily, “That was a bad snake.”

Bennet leaned closer and asked, “How old are you, Gannet?”

“I’m seven,” she said proudly.

“Do you know where your parents are?” asked Bennet gently.

“Gone,” said Gannet sadly. “Can I stay with you?” she asked hopefully.

“For awhile,” replied Bennet. The specter of social workers coming to take Gannet away suddenly loomed large in her mind. “For awhile” she repeated. She didn't want to lie to Gannet. She didn't know what was going to happen. But she meant to keep her as long as possible!

* * *

Piece by piece, with a simple query here and there, Bennet was able to put Gannet's story together. Gannet remembered vaguely having parents but it had been a long time ago, a time they couldn't pinpoint – not surprising since Gannet was only seven! She 'knew' things, for example the names of Mute, Caw and Wing; she'd known about

the snake, too. She knew that Kit and Bennet were benevolent and caring. She did not know how she had ended up in Bennet's barn. She just remembered waking up there. And, most important, she knew she was in danger.

They'd just come back from their ride and dismounted when they saw a dog as dark as a shadow racing towards them at full speed. The dog slavered, jaws pulled back to show wickedly sharp teeth. But it didn't make a sound which, somehow, made it even scarier. Bennet tried to pull Gannet behind her in a hopeless impulse to protect her. But Gannet, for all that she was so small and slight, stood firm. Bennet couldn't budge her. And then her voice lifted in wordless song. It was beautiful and eerie. And it made the dog stop in its tracks and just fade away. Afterwards, Gannet acted as though nothing unusual had happened. She turned to Bennet and said, "It was fun riding Lady May. Can we do it again tomorrow?"

Bennet was stunned. She crouched down in front of Gannet and almost stuttered, "Did you just make that dog go away?"

Gannet answered simply. "Yes. He was bad. Tigne Sh'dah sent him. He's bad, too. He wants to take me away. Please don't let him take me," she pleaded, suddenly just a frightened little girl. "I like it here."

"Tigne Sh'dah," enunciating the name slowly and carefully, "is that the name of the man who wants to take you away?" asked Bennet, trying to make heads or tails out of this.

“Yes. He's been trying for a long time. He made Måthair and Athiar go away. He's really mean,” Gannet concluded.

“Oh, honey, I'm so sorry,” said Bennet.

“He knows I'm here now,” said Gannet sadly. “He'll try again soon. He's always trying. But the birds make him go away”, her face brightened. “I like birds. Like my penguin. He's soft and he's got a funny nose,” she giggled.

“I'm glad you like your penguin,” said Bennet with a smile. Deciding that was enough for now, she went on, “Are you hungry?” Gannet nodded.

“Okay. Let me put Lady May in her field and hang her tack and then we'll go make us some lunch.”

Gannet nodded again happily, and that's what they did. Bennet introduced Gannet to peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Gannet was delighted. She ate two and drank endless glasses of milk with them. When she was done, she said, “I'm sleepy. Can I go lie down now?”

“Of course, sweetie. But why don't we put your things upstairs. You can sleep in the room next to mine,” suggested Bennet. Gannet liked that idea very much. She ran to get Penguin and then mounted the stairs in Bennet's wake, skipping down the hall until Bennet indicated where her room would be.

“Ooh, pretty flowers on the wall. And on

the bed, too. I'll dream I'm in a garden!" Then she climbed up on the bed, still holding Penguin, and fell fast asleep.

Bennet removed her sandals and covered her with a light summer throw. Then she backed out of the room and went back downstairs. Her head was whirling from everything Gannet had told her. 'Tigne Sh'dah.' She wrote it down phonetically since she had no idea how to spell it. They now had a name for 'Nemesis'. Gannet said he'd gotten rid of her parents. Poor little girl. What she must have gone through!

It was hard to get a sense of how long this man had been trying to catch Gannet. But it was interesting that 'the birds made him go away'. It made her wonder how many other 'birds' there had been before herself and her friends. It turned their dream task into a very real perspective for Gannet was a very real little girl. Bennet was totally committed to saving her. She'd fallen in love with the tyke. She'd never imagined how it would be to have a child to care for. Now she knew what the expression 'as fierce as a mother tiger' meant; it was precisely how she felt. Deep in her heart, she already thought of Gannet as hers; it was no exaggeration to say that she'd defend her to the death.

CHAPTER 12

The ravens were making a ruckus with their raucous calls. Perched on the gables of the house, they chattered and squawked and snicked until Gannet opened her eyes and yawned with a tiny gasp. Then she crawled off the bed, padded over to the windows and whistled a single note. The ravens lifted off into the air, wheeling about and continued their usual flight patterns over the farm.

Bennet heard them from the porch swing. Their familiar antics reassured her. She was confident they would raise the alarm if anything untoward threatened. She heard Gannet coming down the stairs and called out to let her know where she was. Mute slipped off the swing in anticipation. When Gannet opened the door, she had barely made it through before the cat was twining around her legs. She bent to pick up the kitten, rubbing her cheek against Mute's soft fur. "Hello," she said

happily. Then she hopped up onto the swing next to Bennet and snuggled up against her. Bennet put her arm around her and they swung gently back and forth.

This was how Kit found them. It looked so natural, as though he'd come home from work a hundred times to this same scene. He had to blink to remind himself that it wasn't. He bounded up the steps to join them with a grin, happy to listen to Gannet tell him about her day. Then he and Gannet played with her new ball in the yard while Mute tried to snag it from its path in passing. Soon they were all laughing at the kitten's playful lunges and mock attacks on the ball.

After awhile, it was time to make supper. Gannet insisted on helping, too, carefully carrying plates and glasses and silverware to the table and setting them around. When dinner was done, they went back outside. As it got dark, the fireflies made their appearance. Gannet ran to and fro chasing their elusive lights, laughing and exclaiming whenever she caught one. She'd hold it cupped gently in her hands, whispering and then releasing it with a laugh only to chase after the next one.

When she tired of this, they went inside and Gannet played with the kitten until she started yawning again. Then Bennet took her upstairs and helped her get ready for bed. Then Kit read her a story from one of the books Bennet had bought. Gannet sighed happily and drifted off to sleep. There'd been no blue glow this evening. In fact, all day in every way Gannet had seemed just like any other little girl. But Bennet and Kit knew she was more.

They pulled the door partially closed, then went downstairs. The night was still young. They sat together on the couch and Bennet told Kit what she had discovered and what happened.

“So. She really is our Gannet Somme,” he mused. “And this Tigne guy is the one after her. I wish I had seen her vanquish that dog. I wonder where it faded to – perhaps back to him? She said this guy knew she was here now. I think we're going to have to be even more vigilant.”

“Yes. And we need to let the others know, too. Maybe we should call a meeting,” suggested Bennet.

“I agree. Maybe they could come here tomorrow; I could drive them here after classes,” said Kit helpfully.

Bennet fetched the phone and called first Bridie and then Ty. Both were available. Jenny was with Ty and said she could come, too. They arranged to meet Kit at his office after three o'clock. Bennet did not tell them about Gannet. Kit would clue them in on the ride the next day. That concluded, Bennet and Kit called it a night around ten and went up to bed. Gannet slept soundly, Mute by her side.

* * *

The next day Gannet woke them with giggles and kisses. Soon it developed into a game; she laughed and rolled about as Kit tickled her. She'd then dive under the covers, he'd find her and threaten to tickle her again. She'd laugh gaily and

hide behind Bennet. And this went on until it was time to get dressed. Then they all trooped downstairs to eat breakfast together, Mute included. Kit had early classes that morning, so he left soon after and the day stretched before them. Bennet told Gannet that they'd be having company later that day and who'd be coming. She pointed out the painting Ty had made and pulled out a photo album to show her a picture of Bridie.

Gannet murmured 'the birds gather' in an odd tone of voice and then stooped to scoop up Mute and hold her close for a moment. She looked at Bennet. "I can feel him. He's close." And she shuddered slightly.

The ravens hadn't given off any warnings. Bennet stepped to the window and looked out but it was quiet and everything appeared normal. A moment later, Gannet was playing as though she'd said nothing so Bennet concluded 'close' was a relative term.

They spent the day much as the one before until it was time to prepare for their guests. Gannet was an enthusiastic helper, full of anticipation. They made a huge fruit salad, Gannet stealing berries and apple bits to Bennet's amusement. Later, while Gannet napped, Bennet made a couple of lasagnes and salad. She was just popping the lasagnes into the oven when Kit arrived, the others hard on his heels. Simultaneously, she could hear Gannet running down the stairs, still rubbing sleep from her eyes, yelling excitedly 'They're here, they're here!' She raced out the kitchen door, then stopped abruptly, suddenly a little shy.

She looked up at tall Ty and said “You're the eagle.” Then she smiled and said, “I'm Gannet.” Next she looked at Bridie, “Oh, you're the lark. Bennet has pictures of you in a book.” Bridie smiled. Lastly she spotted Jenny. “Oooh, you're the wren and the bard. Will you play a song?” and clapped her hands hopefully, enthusiastically.

Jenny replied, “Of course,” and smiled at Gannet's gaiety.

There had been no time for them to become reserved with the child. Despite her uncanny addresses to them, she was so obviously a vivacious little seven year old that they automatically responded to her as such and almost forgot the impossibility of her existence. Thus, it was a happy party that sat down to dinner and later played in the yard. Jenny played several bright tunes on her flute and Gannet danced around and around. When it was time to go to bed, she gave each a happy hug before saying goodnight obscurely, “I like my birds. They'll keep me safe,” with a smile for all of them and off she went. Bennet soon had her settled and came back down to a stunned group of faces.

“This is uncanny!” said Bridie. “And yet she's here and knows all about us. You didn't tell her anything about us, before we came?” glancing at her aunt and Kit. With their denials, she just shook her head. “Uncanny.”

Then Bennet told them of all that had happened over the last two days and what she'd gleaned from talking with Gannet. They all just sat there, trying to take it in.

“She said he was close this morning. I didn't see anyone but I think we need to be on our guard,” said Bennet. The others nodded in agreement.

Since they were all together, Jenny took the opportunity to see how they were doing with the ballad. They held an impromptu practice, Jenny stopping them every few bars to correct a line here, a note there, a turn of phrase a little later, until she was satisfied they were becoming comfortable with both pronunciation and melody. They hadn't completely memorized it yet, but had made much progress and she was pleased. Her directions and suggestions had been pertinent and helpful, and her encouragement well received; she had a flare for teaching. Everyone felt well satisfied afterwards.

Before they broke up, Kit said, “Ty, I wondered if you'd be interested in taking over my cottage. It's pretty big and bright so you could use it for both living and studio purposes, and it's an easy bike ride to the campus. All you'd have to worry about are the utilities.”

Ty flushed with pleasure. “Thank you. Could I see it?”

“Of course. I have to fetch the rest of my things on the weekend but that won't take long. Want to come along?” Ty agreed and so it was decided. By then it was late so Kit gave them all a ride back to their dorms with plans to meet around noon on Saturday.

When Kit got back, he and Bennet sat together on the couch for awhile, discussing the day in desultory tones. Just before they went up to bed,

Bennet caught the sound of Hermit hooting just outside the window. For some reason, she felt the owl was letting them know it was alert and on guard, just as the ravens were during the day. She felt comforted by the thought and went upstairs in a relaxed frame of mind.

* * *

In the morning, the sound of a car crunching gravel had Bennet, Kit and Gannet peering out the bedroom window down the lane to Mrs. Sackle's property which had sported a 'for sale' sign for the last few days. Someone was there, perhaps to view the house. It was a man but they couldn't tell any more from this distance. The interruption, however, made them realize they were hungry so they quickly dressed and went downstairs where they were soon scarfing down scrambled eggs and toast. When Gannet had drunk the last of her milk and juice, she went out onto the porch but was curiously quiet. She sat with Mute on the swing but instead of her usual bouncy play in the yard, she kept an eye on Mrs. Sackle's place. The strange car was still there.

Abruptly the man came out of the house, locking the door behind him and climbing into the car. He started the engine but instead of going out onto the roadway, he crossed it and drove up Bennet's driveway. Gannet rushed indoors and into the kitchen where Bennet and Kit were cleaning up, wrapped her arms around Bennet and said, "He's coming..up the drive. Please don't let him take me."

Bennet looked at Kit and he at her. They could hear the car coming up the drive now. The ravens were making a racket, wheeling and

crisscrossing above the farmhouse. Bennet picked Gannet up, cradling her close. Kit exited the kitchen door and strode down the path to meet the car. He carried himself resolutely, shoulders squared. Bennet and Gannet waited by the door, out of sight but within earshot. The man climbed out of his car and approached. When he would have opened the gate to enter, Kit casually blocked his path.

“Morning! My name's Dan Heights. I've just been looking over the property across the road. I'm thinking of buying it. Thought I'd meet the neighbors as well.” he professed heartily.

Kit responded, “Hello,” but did not offer to shake hands or indulge in any conversation.

Heights continued, seeming oblivious to Kit's reserve. “Nice place you've got here. Is it just you and the missus, or maybe you've got a family? Certainly got lots of room here,” looking around and spotting the ball where it had been neglected on the lawn.

Kit said, “You say you're thinking of buying the house across the way. We heard the owner was in the hospital. It's pretty quiet out here. We're hoping to keep it that way. Especially after her dogs died. You don't have dogs, do you?”

Heights pulled back, his hearty attitude a little subdued. “I heard about the previous owner's accident. Too bad.” But he didn't sound very sincere. “I've got a couple of hounds but they're no bother.” Looking around some more, he observed Mute meandering around the corner of the porch. “I

see you have a cat. Don't worry, my dogs wouldn't hurt a fly.” When this elicited no response either, he said “Well, guess I'd better be going.”

Kit continued his stoic stance, as unmovable as a rock and just as quiet.

Heights made his goodbyes, “Maybe I'll meet the missus and... Later,” his speech sputtered to a stop. He turned and lumbered back to his car, taking time to observe everything around him before shouldering his way into the car and racing back down the drive. This time he turned out onto the roadway and was soon lost to sight around the bend. Only then did Kit turn around and go back up to the house. The ravens were quiet now, still patrolling the sky but in wider and wider spirals.

Inside, Bennet and Kit exchanged a long poignant look. Gannet no longer clung to Bennet, but she was still subdued.

“Gannet, was that Tigne Sh'dah?” asked Kit.

“One of his hunters,” whispered Gannet.

“He didn't see you, sweetheart, and he's gone now,” soothed Bennet.

“He'll be back and with dogs,” asserted Gannet, still whispering fearfully.

“We won't let them hurt you or take you,” said Bennet firmly.

“I know. But I'm scared. I don't want to go....not yet,” continued Gannet, the last in a voice

so low, Bennet wasn't sure she hadn't imagined it.

“You don't have to go anywhere, Gannet. And we're here. We'll keep you safe,” said Kit.

“My birds. My friends,” said Gannet with a smile. Then she seemed to revert to just being a child again. “Let's go say 'hi' to Lady May! Can I take her a carrot?”

“Sure,” said Bennet, glad to see Gannet distracted from her fears. “Let's go choose a really big one.”

Soon Gannet was skipping down the path and out to the barn fence where Lady May hung her head over the rail, ready to greet the child and accept her treat. Gannet laughed at the whiskery softness on her palm and rubbed behind Lady May's ears while the mare crunched the pieces of carrot. Anyone looking would not have recognized the scared waif of moments before in the cheerful little girl now balancing on the fence.

Bennet said, “He's getting close. Do you really think we can keep her safe?”

“We'll do our utmost. I'm going to stay here today. There's only one class and my assistant can cover for me. I intend to be here in case that clown does return. He won't try any funny stuff as long as I'm here.”

Bennet was glad Kit was staying but knew it was just a stopgap measure. Eventually he'd have to go back to work, and so would she. They had to resolve this issue and soon.

In the meantime, they decided to make the farm as secure as they could. They called Ty and asked him to join them as soon as he could. This was luckily one of his free days, so it wasn't long before he wheeled his bike into the driveway. The three of them held a conference.

When they'd filled him in on the latest occurrence, Ty remarked, "This sounds like the obnoxious executive who tried to buy two of my paintings. The name is the same. Was he tall, middle-aged, beefy? To their affirmative nods, he said, "I was hoping to have seen the last of him. I wonder what he's doing here? He was talking about setting up offices in Houston."

"Perhaps that was just a ploy to explain his presence. Maybe this house buying is more of the same. Gannet called him one of Tigne Sh'dah's hunters. So maybe he's just looking for ways to get closer to this group and so to Gannet," reasoned Kit. "He never actually saw Gannet here. Nemesis must be aware that we are helping Gannet. Maybe he's waiting for us to lead him or his hunters to her."

"Which means we have to keep her out of sight or at least not visibly with us," said Bennet.

"Maybe I should bunk out here and help keep watch," suggested Ty. "At night, especially, a third pair of eyes might come in handy. The farm is far enough back from the road and this yard is lined with enough trees and bushes that noone can see what happens up here, not even with binoculars. But if someone managed to get close enough..."

“Yes, the privacy here is one of the things that made the farm so attractive when I first bought it,” admitted Bennet.

“And we can use that to our advantage, at least during the day,” chimed in Kit. “It’s going to be harder at night but whoever tries to get close will have to come in from the front, either up the drive or through the fields. Lady May won’t let anyone into her field if she doesn’t know them. The driveway is obvious, but the other field with the oak tree might be a way in.”

“Yes, a third pair of eyes would be a good idea, Ty,” decided Bennet. “Thank you! You can have the couch; it’s comfortable. We’ve all slept on it at one time or another and it’s quite long,” asserted Bennet.

“Perhaps we should watch in shifts,” suggested Kit.

“Good idea,” agreed Ty. “Then noone will get too tired and nod off while watching.”

And so it was decided. While Bennet drove Ty to pick up a few things, including his bow and arrow, Kit stayed with Gannet. Ty called Jenny.

“Jenny, things have been happening out here at the farm. I think it’s best if I stay here for a few days to help watch over Gannet,” said Ty.

Jenny said, “I’d come, too, but I have too many classes that I just can’t miss today and tomorrow. Plus, I have a band practice tonight. I’ll come tomorrow as soon as I’m free. Keep her safe,

Ty, and you be safe, too!” she admonished.

“I will,” he promised. “See you tomorrow. Sleep well.”

Ty told Bennet what Jenny had said and then Bennet called Bridie. At first Bridie wanted to come right away, too, but Bennet convinced her to wait until the next day, Friday, after classes and then coming out with Jenny.

“At this rate, I'm going to have to use the daybeds in the office and sewing room so we'll have enough beds!” said Bennet amusedly. Luckily, the old farmhouse had a surplus of rooms and Bennet had them all comfortably outfitted, so a houseful of guests was no problem. Bennet called to make sure things were okay with Kit and Gannet; they were fine. So before they returned home, they stopped off and bought groceries. They were going to need them.

When they got back, it was already lunch time. Bennet and Ty had bought lots of yogurt; Gannet decided her favorite was blueberry. After lunch, Ty offered to take Gannet for a ride on Lady May in the back pasture. Bennet was pleased at the offer and watched while Ty expertly saddled and bridled the mare. Lady May also seemed to recognize his expertise so that while this was their first ride together, it looked like they'd been partners for years. Soon, Gannet perched before Ty, they ambled off down the lane behind the house.

While they were gone, Bennet and Kit used the time to make up the couch and the daybeds and haul out the grill; Kit planned to grill hamburgers

and hot dogs for dinner. It was fun for Bennet to share these homey tasks with Kit. It made it feel more like their home instead of just hers. Kit's ankle was completely healed now so he had no problem going up and down stairs on repeated errands. Between the two of them, even with playful interruptions, they were soon finished and the house as ready as it could be.

Ty and Gannet were gone for over an hour; when they returned, they were both laughing. They'd obviously had a good ride.

Ty let Lady May go fast!" burred Gannet when he'd lifted her down. "And we went bumpety bump in the saddle. It was fun!" Ty grinned down at Gannet and said, "we'll have to ask Lady May to do it again next time." Gannet smiled in anticipation, but then a yawn caught her. It was time for her nap. Bennet led her up the stairs and took off her sandals; Gannet hugged her penguin close and fell asleep smiling.

After Ty had rubbed down the mare and hung her tack, he released her into her pasture, and she ambled off, blowing a snort by way of goodbye and flicking her tail at the bothersome flies. He climbed into the loft to get a look out the window there. It held a good view over the field and the land beyond, one field after another. The only approach without crossing a multitude of fences and ditches, livestock and streams was by way of the solitary winding road that curved around to meet Bennet's and Mrs. Sackle's driveways before it plunged down a steep hill, eventually winding further towards other farms at the base. It was the only road not transected by anything other than

driveways to the few houses and their barns far below until it wound out of sight several kilometers distant, only to be bisected by another long country road. Ty was satisfied.

Ty went back down the ladder and looked across the field where the solitary oak tree stood sentry. No livestock grazed the pasture so the grass was high and lush. It would be easy to hide in but difficult to traverse. A long row of trees and bushes lined the fence between the field and the yard around the house, but freshly mown grass extended from the house yard fence all the way to the road, bounded on one side by the driveway and the fenced pasture on the other. So anything or anyone approaching across the grass would be easily spotted.

On his ride with Gannet he had noted that the path in back of the house led down and terminated in more fields. There was no inlet or outlet for truck, tractor or car except the driveway in front of Bennet's house. Bennet had told them how Lady May had reacted to the vandals and the shadow dog so it was reasonable to suppose she would let them know if something or someone entered her field, long before the house could be broached. As Kit had said, the only clandestine approach would be through the field.

Having finished his recognizance, Ty went back to the house to retrieve his bow and arrows. Then he went behind the house to the chicken coop and commenced target practice. After awhile, Bennet came out and joined him. Between the two of them, they hit the target so often that Bennet had to draw a new one before the old wood could just

fall apart.

Kit stayed at the front of the house, keeping his eyes peeled for any intruders. But the only vehicle he saw was the mail truck. As Bennet and Ty were busy, and Gannet still slept, he walked down the lane to fetch the mail and bring it back up to the house. He bent to pick up one envelope that had fallen, and it was this move that saved him. A car approached. The mailbox was partially in front of him, somewhat between him and the road. The car leaped off the road to sideswipe him but the mailbox on its post took the brunt of the impact; Kit was hurled down and behind as the mailbox was uprooted and knocked sideways, landing partially on top of Kit and partially beside him. The car sped on past and down the hill in a cloud of dust.

By now the ravens were screaming and wheeling above him. Ty and Bennet raced around the house and looked to see what was going on. They called Kit's name but when he didn't answer or appear, they rushed into the house and up the stairs. Gannet was sitting up sleepily saying "the falcon, he's hurt the falcon". Ty rushed back down the stairs and down the lane to where the ravens whirled over Kit's prone body. Running all out, Ty was there in under a minute. Kit was trying to sit up but he was still disoriented and the mailbox was hindering his efforts. Ty pulled it off him and reached down to assist him. Although shaken, Kit was unhurt. He stood and brushed himself off while Ty gathered up the mail which had flown in all directions. The two of them made their way up to the house.

Bennet and Gannet awaited them at the gate.

Bennet had been torn in two directions: to guard Gannet and to race to Kit's side. So when she saw him get to his feet and move unassisted, she was able to control herself and wait the few minutes it took for Kit and Ty to reach them. Once through the gate, she hugged him so long and hard, she never wanted to let him go. But finally she did, long enough to walk with him to the porch.

He told them what happened but it had all occurred so quickly, the dust flying, so that he had not actually seen the car or the make. All he could recall was a vague tan color. But they were all sure that this had been another attack orchestrated by Tigne Sh'dah.

“Gannet, can you tell us anything about him?”

“He's strong. Soon he will come himself. He always looks for others with his name. It's easier to use them,” she explained.

“What do you mean, 'with his name'?” asked Kit.

Gannet considered how to explain. “Tigne Sh'dah. Nightshade. Death's Nigh. The same.” She looked at them, a small frown wrinkling her brow. “He calls what is like, soul to soul, and their names.”

Ty tried, “He tries to get hold of others who are strong and mean?”

Gannet said, “Yes, but there's more. The same 'name' gives him power over them. He can

call them then. And he can use them, like he was in them, like he was here, but he's not. I called you – you're all birds, like me,” and she smiled. “But the names are different so I could only call in dreams,” she explained. She grew frustrated at their continued lack of understanding. “He is stronger now. The moon is getting smaller.” And she sounded afraid. Then she huddled against Bennet and wouldn't show her face for awhile. Bennet shook her head at any more questions.

Kit and Ty decided to work on the grill. Soon the activity and novelty drew Gannet's attention and she forgot her fears. She jumped down off the porch and went to watch. “Oh! This is like my màthair's hearth!” she exclaimed. “Only it's outside,” and she laughed. She watched closely while they got the coals lighted and banked. When Bennet brought out the hamburger patties and hot dogs, her eyes went wide. “What kind of meat is this?” she asked.

“Have you never had a hamburger or hot dog?” asked Ty.

“No. Sausages once at Festival, but never this.” she replied.

“At Festival?” he queried.

Gannet nodded her head. “We'd dress in our nicest. I had a new brat gùn - Màthair made it for me special, and a léine sgiort and my leathar brògu. I 'member her saying 'for our wee Gannet's first Festival'. Athair carried me on his shoulders so I could see and not get trampled. Then he gave me three sausages, 'one for each year I was his bonny

Gannet'." Her eyes were lost in memories and glistened a little with unshod tears.

"What did your mother wear?" asked Bennet.

"Ooh, her best gùn and earasaid, and her pioraid with the new laces. Her leathar brògu weren't new but she shined them with grease. And Athair had a new léine sgiort she made for him. He was so proud. His brat treubhas were brown and his leathar brògu had extra long tips. And his straw pioraid had a brim all around. But he took it off when he carried me so I could see," she concluded.

They looked at one another. Occasionally Gannet said a word none of them understood but they didn't want to interrupt the flow.

"Did you have a brother or sister?" asked Kit.

"No, but Màthair said soon and then she'd rub her belly. It was fat so I couldn't sit on her lap anymore," she said matter-of-factly.

A sizzling sound erupted from the grill, recalling their attention. The meat was ready. Bennet helped Gannet put a bit of everything on her plate. She looked in wonder at the bread-filled sandwiches, just as she had at the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches Bennet had introduced her to before. She couldn't eat everything; she took a bite here, a nibble there to try, but they knew she was just experimenting. Mute got to try a few bites, too, slipped to her by little fingers, but not of the beef, rather of the hot dogs. When neither child nor cat

could hold any more, they crawled up onto the swing and idly watched the adults finish their meals.

It was almost dusk. The food was packed away, the grill cleaned out and stored away. Everyone was getting nervous, wondering what the night would bring. They didn't linger outside this time. Instead they went in and occupied Gannet with some puzzles that Ty had brought her. Then it was off to bed and a bedtime story. It took her awhile to settle down; she, too, was nervous. But slowly she gave in to her weariness and drifted off to sleep, penguin under one arm, the other tucked around Mute.

When Bennet went back downstairs, the men were hunkered over a hand-drawn map that lay on the kitchen table. Looking closer, she could make out the general layout of the farm with its strategic landmarks labeled: house, barn, coop, tree, Mrs. Sackle's house. The road was delineated by a heavy black line, fences by dashed lines, fields were crisscrossed squares, and streams were wavy lines. They were arguing over where it would be best to set up a watch post. Ty was in favor of the upstairs sewing room window which gave a fine view of the right hand field but did not have a front-facing window to monitor the road's bend or Mrs. Sackle's house. Kit favored the barn as it gave a more panoramic view. Unfortunately it was partially blocked by the garage. Bennet suggested the roof of the house: it was tall enough to see past the hedges, and over the garage. The barn blocked a total view of Lady May's pasture, but gave an excellent view of everything and everywhere else. There were nailed down ladder steps up there so

they need not worry about sliding down, and a trellis along the side of the porch made it easy to climb up and down.

The men conceded that it was by far the best idea. Then they decided how to give warning, and subsequent tactics. All that was then left to do was to assign watch shifts and the order. Bennet volunteered to take first watch but was vetoed by both Kit and Ty. They unilaterally decided her role was to whisk Gannet to safety while they confronted the danger, at least long enough for she herself and Gannet to escape. Bennet didn't argue. Gannet looked to her first so it was natural that she be picked to be the child's last line of defense.

Kit took first watch. It was pretty cool outside at night now, so a sweater and jacket would not be too much in the night air. Vision would be difficult as the moon was much diminished but that worked both ways: neither watcher nor watched would be able to see well. But Bennet thought they had an ace up their sleeve: Hermit. The owl had excellent night vision and lately had been guarding the property at night as did the ravens during the day. Bennet was confident that the owl would alert them of any intruder.

Soon, at the regular time, they turned off the downstairs lights and Bennet retired to her room. Ty crashed on the couch, one of those people who can sleep instantly wherever, whenever the opportunity arises. Kit climbed onto the roof and gazed from road to driveway to tree to Mrs. Sackle's house in random order so as to stay alert and spot any untoward shadows. He could hear Hermit hooting every once in a while, and catch the

occasional movement of her wings as she flew through the star-studded night. Hermit never came close to where he perched, concentrating her own attention on the field. Sometimes she would disappear into the upper branches of the oak tree, often she skimmed just above the grass, possibly seeking her meal in addition to guarding. She never stayed long in any one place.

Kit's shift finally ended; nothing unusual occurred. He climbed down, woke Ty who came instantly alert, watched him climb up the trellis and then made his way up to bed. Bennet woke as he climbed in, but at his muttered 'nothing', fell asleep again. Kit joined her in slumber. It was then 2:30 a.m.

A rap above their heads woke them. It came again: the warning signal. Something was happening. Kit and Bennet dressed hurriedly and Kit quietly, quickly climbed up the trellis to join Ty. Bennet made ready to scoop up Gannet at the first sign of danger and run with her to the car. The time was 3:40 a.m.

Ty pointed to a shadowy bulk that was making its way with difficulty from the road to the tree. Hermit flew repeatedly over this shape, hooting with each pass. It was her hooting and strange behavior that had caught Ty's attention and now focused Kit's. The owl never flew low enough for the shadowy figure to take note of it.

Once the figure gained the tree, it paused. A moment later they made out a long thin dark shadow, something like a stick, held by the figure. Neither Kit nor Ty believed it was a mere stick. It

was probably a rifle. Ty reached down next to him and picked up something long and oddly bent and another shorter rod-like object: his bow and arrow. The bow was already strung. Ty quietly nocked the arrow and trained his eye on the wide shadowy figure. When it moved away from the tree, it was easier to mark. He pulled back on the arrow until it was flush with his cheek. He sighted once more on the shadowy figure and then let fly. They heard a muffled oath, and the shadow lurched and dropped the long thin shadowy something it had held. Ty already had another arrow nocked and when the figure did not retreat, let fly again. This time he was not so lucky; the arrow thunked into the tree behind the figure. But it was enough. In the gloom, the 'shadow' couldn't tell where the shafts came from. With another muffled oath, the figure shuffled back towards the road. Hermit took this opportunity and dove down to attach sharp claws in the uppermost point of the shadow. Hermit pulled and the figure shrieked in pain. Kit and Ty surmised Hermit had pulled hair, probably from its roots, judging by the scream. Hermit let go but prepared to dive again. The figure had had enough; it ran for all it was worth. Moments later, a car's engine fired up; the roar receded as it drove away, lights dimmed.

Kit climbed down and whispered to Bennet that all was well. Ty remained on the roof to finish his shift. So it wasn't until morning that he learned that his first rap had not only alerted Kit and Bennet, it had also awoken the blue glow around Gannet, a sign she was aware of danger even in her sleep. And that by the time Kit had descended, the glow had faded away.

CHAPTER 13

It was a subdued group at the breakfast table. Even Gannet. It came as no surprise that Gannet knew there'd been an attempt the night before. She just said, "They'll be back."

With the first light of dawn, Ty had gone into the field to retrieve his arrows. One lay broken on the ground; the arrowhead had been broken off and was nowhere to be found. Presumably it was still in its victim. However, in its stead lay the abandoned rifle which was fully loaded. Ty carried it back to the house and stored it on the mantle until it could be put someplace safer.

After breakfast, Kit and Ty walked down the lane to fix the mailbox. The box itself was dented but still usable. They reattached it to its pole and then pounded the pole back into the ground in a slightly different spot than it had been before.

They filled in the original posthole with excess dirt from the new hole.

Jenny and Bridie, were expected to join them around noon. But Bridie called at ten to see if they could be fetched earlier. Kit obliged. Well before noon, they were all aware of the current situation, and discussing what to do next.

“There are more of us now so we can split the watches into more shifts,” asserted Bridie.

“Yes, and we also have to continue our preparations,” said Jenny. “It's only about two and a half weeks till we sing.”

“We'll be ready. It's the time between then and now that we need to worry about,” said Kit grimly. “Last night was a pretty brazen attempt. Tigne Sh'dah seems to be getting more serious in his attempts.”

“Yes, and our schedules are going to make it difficult to keep a constant watch,” worried Bennet. “I can take my vacation time so I can be here during the day, but the rest of you...”

“Actually not a problem,” said Ty. “I can paint here just as easily as at the loft, so if you don't mind my crashing here..”

“And that goes for me, too,” said Bridie. “Truth to tell, I'd rather be here than at the dorm. Things are not going too well with my roomie,” she admitted. “I can ride into classes with Kit. And meantime, I can spend more time with you and Lady May,” she finished with a smile.

Jenny said regretfully, “I can do the same except for Thursdays; then I have band practice until late.”

Bennet looked at all of them gratefully. “I appreciate all of your efforts. Maybe we can make this work without disrupting your schedules too much in the process.”

Gannet smiled, “My birds. Nice birds!”

Considerably cheered, they held another preparatory song session. They needed only an hour's practice before Jenny professed herself satisfied. From now on, a daily practice would be enough to keep the song in mind and memory.

They turned their attention to other matters. Kit and Ty went to look at the cottage. While Kit packed his last belongings, Ty explored. As surmised, it would be possible to use some of the rooms for storage and painting. Ty was well satisfied with both the lighting and the space. This would make it much easier for him to concentrate on his work and also save him considerable money he'd had to put out for rent up to now. He decided to move most of his things here as soon as possible although he intended to stay at the farm for the next couple of weeks.

When Kit was all packed up, he handed Ty the key with a grin. They took Kit's things back to the farm, and then headed back to Ty's loft. Luckily Kit's van was roomy. Ty's paintings and painting paraphernalia filled it. They deposited the paintings at the cottage before stopping off at his dorm room

where he hastily packed his few belongings. By dinnertime, the transfer was complete and Ty's painting tools and extra clothes were situated at the farm. He would use the enclosed part of the porch as a temporary studio. The porch swing was shifted to the opposite side of the door to make space.

While Ty and Kit were gone, Jenny, Bridie and Gannet took turns riding Lady May, keeping the child happily engaged. Bennet took the opportunity to shop for more groceries. She was amazed at how much they got through! She was back in a jiffy and started chopping vegetables and grating cheese for burritos. In the middle of these preparations, the girls came back, took showers and were soon back down to help her put the finishing touches on the meal, Gannet insisting on helping, too. Gannet seemed to be thriving these days. Her giggles were infectious and all of them were very fond of her, mesmerized by her wide-eyed gaze and pleasant attitude.

When the guys returned, they sat down to a festive meal. Everyone was determined to forget the dangers that had dogged them the last few days, at least for a few moments; they concentrated on enjoying each other's company and the tasty food. It wasn't hard. Conversation flowed and spontaneous laughter erupted all around. Everyone pitched in afterward to clean up and put the kitchen and dining room to rights. It was so organized and natural, that it was like they'd lived together for a long time.

Gannet requested some more tunes on Jenny's flute and soon everyone was tapping a foot in time with the beat. Gannet jumped up,

improvising a dance. Before long Bridie joined her; the tune came faster and faster until the girls collapsed in a heap on the floor, exhausted but happy.

Dusk gave way to night and their mood became more somber. Gannet went up to bed, yawning. This time Bridie obliged her with a story. When she came back down, she said, "It's like having a little sister! She's adorable!"

It wasn't until now that the opportunity to discuss the previous night occurred. Although it was obvious that Gannet knew, at least in general, what had happened, it didn't feel right discussing it in front of a seven year old.

"She's asleep?" queried Kit.

"Out like a light," assured Bridie.

"Okay. The girls know an attempt was made last night, but I didn't go into details," said Kit. Then he and Ty related exactly what had occurred and what Ty had found in the morning.

"We're lucky the owl and ravens are also on watch," said Bennet. The others still had a little difficulty coming to terms with the idea, but seeing is believing and there was no denying what had happened on several occasions.

Then Bennet told them about Gannet's blue glow that morning – one more warning sign of danger, they concluded.

"I doubt any hunters will try coming through

the field again, at least not by night,” said Ty. “Although,” he continued, “as the moon returns, they might chance it.”

If Heights was serious about having hounds, we have to be ready for them. The previous three dogs were pretty threatening, especially the shadow hound. Gannet took care of that one, but if more than one attack at a time... well, we have to be prepared,” said Bennet.

“Now, when there's no moon, is when Tigne Sh'dah is most powerful. He may show up himself. We have to be ready with lots of light, as that is what weakens him,” commented Ty.

“Along those lines... Bennet and I came up with a way to increase the lighting in the cave,” said Kit. “Tomorrow we can pick up a dozen of those camp lanterns. They're pretty lightweight so we can easily backpack them in. And I was thinking two or three spotlights around the house would add to the security here.”

Everyone liked the ideas. It was fast approaching the time for lights out, so watches were assigned. Jenny would go first, followed by Bridie, then Kit and finally Ty. This would give the guys a chance to catch up on their sleep and noone would have to be on the roof for more than three hours before dawn arrived. Of course, they hoped nothing more would happen, but were alert to the possibility.

Everyone went to his or her room to allow Ty to sack out on the couch. He was definitely feeling the wear of the night before. Jenny gave Ty

a quick kiss and brief hug. The she bundled into her warmest clothes and climbed the trellis. The watches proceeded as planned, but nothing happened that night. All was calm; all was quiet.

Sunday was a day of relaxation. Kit made a quick run to buy the lanterns and spotlights, but it was a simple task to attach two to the house and one to the barn. Bennet called round and managed to borrow enough horses that they could all go for a ride that afternoon. Gannet took turns riding with each of them. Much later they arrived back at the barn, laughing and in good spirits. They rubbed down the horses after which Bennet and Ty returned the borrowed mounts to their rightful owners. When everyone had showered, they sat down to a stew that had been simmering all day, with fresh rolls on the side.

The watches that night proved eventless once more. Monday morning the girls rode into the college with Kit and back out again that afternoon. Ty spent the day painting while Bennet and Gannet went for their usual ride in the afternoon. A routine developed. More cars were noted stopping to look at the Sackle place, but noone approached Bennet's. So the week went until Thursday. That day, Jenny didn't come back with Kit and Bridie, for she had band practice late that evening; she would stay the night in the dorm.

* * *

Jenny had just exited the deserted music room where she, Grey and Joel had held their practice. Grey's and Joel's dorms were in the opposite direction from hers. She carried her flute

in one hand, in no hurry to put it away. The night sported only the faint gleam from the solitary light next to the path. Suddenly there was a growl from in front of her. Jenny could barely see the hound; it blended well with the night shadows.

The hound took a threatening step in her direction. Jenny stopped, heart thumping, unsure what to do. There was no one else around. The guys were long gone. The music room door had locked automatically when it closed and, anyway, Grey had the key. There was no place to hide and running would have the hound on her heels in seconds. Then she had an idea. She lifted the flute into position and started to play. At first just a few light notes, but soon it segued into the ballad. She reasoned that if the song could defeat Tigne Sh'dah, it might affect his hounds as well.

Gratifyingly, the hound stopped at the music. Its growls turned into whines and as she continued to play, it finally faded away. Jenny continued to play but started walking, darting glances in all directions. She played until she got to her dorm's door. Once inside, she made sure it was locked, then ran up to her room. It wasn't until its door was also locked, that she felt safe. Then reaction set in. She started to shake and had to sit down on the edge of the bed before she collapsed. Jenny wanted badly to talk with Ty, even more to feel his arms around her. His touch soothed her, calmed her; she knew his presence would ease the panic and fear that coursed through her. But it was late, too late to call. She would have to wait until the morning. It was some time later before she was calm enough to crawl into bed and much later still before she could fall into a troubled sleep.

Meanwhile, things had been happening at the farm, too. Kit and Bridie were home well before dusk. Ty had put his paints away; Bennet and Gannet had returned from their ride and were involved in preparing chicken for dinner. There were some extra carrots left over after making the salad and Gannet wanted to feed them to Lady May. Ty and Bridie accompanied her to the barn fence. They'd been gone only a minute or two when Ty's voice raised in warning. Dusk was fast fading to unrelieved darkness.

Bennet and Kit raced out the kitchen door to see four shadow hounds encircling the others. Lady May was bucking and plunging in her fear. Ty and Bridie were backed up against the fence with Gannet between them. Gannet's voice was raised in song; as feared, it was enough to keep all four hounds at bay, but not enough to vanquish them. There were just too many of them.

Bennet ran back inside, Kit at her heels. She switched on all three spotlights and grabbed a flashlight. Kit grabbed the other flashlight, a bat and the rifle. He wouldn't be able to fire the rifle for fear of hitting one of the besieged, but they could use it as another blunt weapon. Above, the ravens were keening and diving at the hounds, keeping them from concentrating wholly on Ty and the girls. It appeared to be a stand-off.

When Bennet switched on the spotlights, the hounds whimpered; it was obvious they were uncomfortable with the additional, but diffused light. And they even started to fade a little. It wasn't until Kit, still some distance away, turned his flashlight directly towards them that the four

hounds gave up. Snarling, they backed away from the light and then were just gone. Bridie said in broken humor, "The light is mightier than the bat."

Gannet ran to Bennet who scooped her up in a big hug, not putting her down until they were safely back in the house. The others followed close behind.

Gannet's voice wobbled: "I was so scared! They were really mean and big, and I couldn't make them go away."

Bennet soothed her, rubbing her back in comforting circles until her shivering subsided and she was willing to sit with Ty and Bridie on the couch. Bennet hastened to put dinner on the table, figuring routine would best raise people's spirits; it did somewhat.

That night, the watches were kept in company with the spotlights. From now on, they would be turned on well before dusk and kept on until well after sunrise. They had learned.

* * *

Next morning the phone rang early. It was Jenny. Ty took the call, eager to hear her voice. She was glad to hear his, too; her relief was palpable. She told him what had happened the night before. When Ty, in turn, told her about the showdown by the barn, she said, "It was a two-pronged attack. But at least now we know that both song and light can vanquish them. I'll be back at the farm tonight."

“I’ll be waiting, love” he replied. “Stay safe.”

During the day, Ty stayed with Gannet while Bennet made yet another run to the store. This time she stocked up on batteries and extra flashlights as well. It was apparently one of their strongest weapons against Tigne Sh’dah’s hounds.

When she returned, she noted Height’s car parked in her driveway. Trouble! She parked in her usual spot and approached the gate. The house looked deserted. Heights was jiggling the kitchen door handle, peering through the window.

Bennet said, “Can I help you?”

Heights was startled but rallied quickly. “Ah! You must be the missus. I knocked but nobody answered. I was just making sure noone was home,” and he smiled his oily smile.

Bennet repeated, “Can I help you?”

Heights replied, “I was just looking at the Sackle place again and thought I’d pop by. Is your husband here?” and he peered around.

Bennet didn’t answer directly. She asked, “Did you decide to buy the Sackle place?”

Heights answered adroitly, “I’ve almost made up my mind. I was hoping to talk a little more with your husband before I made an offer. Is he off somewhere with your daughter?”

Bennet, startled, said, “We don’t have a

daughter,” before she could stop herself. “I’m afraid you’ll have to talk with my husband another time. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” looking pointedly from him to the gate, “I have work to do. Good day.” Then she stood there waiting for him to leave.

Heights, having succeeded in needling an involuntary answer out of her, looked smug. But at her adamant expression, he hurriedly said, “Good Day” and left, taking his time to look all around the yard before he went through the gate to his car and drove off.

Bennet noticed that he seemed to favor one leg while he walked. Perhaps he had been their shadowy attacker a few nights ago, she surmised.

A half hour later, Ty rode up on Lady May, Gannet perched before him. While Gannet was occupied in scooping Mute up to pet, Bennet said in an undertone, “Heights was here, snooping around.” Ty responded in the same low tone, “Gannet insisted we come back early. She kept saying ‘the hunter is close’, and wouldn’t be swayed until we turned around and raced back here. Now we know why.”

Kit returned with both Bridie and Jenny late that afternoon. They now had a little more than a week before the final confrontation was to take place. Kit had been thinking about it. He said, “Perhaps we should try entering by the exit. We have to take Gannet with us and I’m not sure she’d be able to manage the trek from the entrance.

Bennet admitted, “I’ve been worrying about

that, too.”

After dinner, Gannet got into a conversation with Jenny after she heard her teaching Bridie a few words in Gaelic. Gannet surprised them when she corrected the pronunciation of one word that Jenny had been teaching, and did it all in perfect Gaelic. Jenny answered her back in Gaelic and soon they were holding an enthusiastic conversation, everyone else listening in appreciation and astonishment.

Jenny noticed and said, “Her dialect is a little different from what I grew up with, but totally understandable.”

Gannet laughed and said something else.

Jenny looked a little miffed but said Gannet was criticizing her choice of words and the use of 'slang'. “I guess she speaks a more archaic version.” Again, they were faced with another piece of the puzzle of Gannet's history. Bennet had Jenny ask about clothing. According to Gannet's answers, Jenny said it sounded like those common to the early Middle Ages: mostly woolen clothing, with linen underneath and thin leather shoes tied on their feet, all consistent with the same time period boasted by both ballad and painting.

She asked Gannet about her family and reported that Gannet's máthair (mother) and athair (father) worked on a laird's estate, she as a seamstress and he with the livestock. She was not quite four years old when they had disappeared and didn't remember what happened after that, just that she was always being chased by Tigne Sh'dah.

Kit asked Jenny about that name in an aside. “Is it Gaelic, too?”

“No,” admitted Jenny.

By then Gannet had gotten bored with the adult conversation and wanted to play and dance. Jenny played a Gaelic ditty and taught the words to Gannet. Soon the two were singing and playing together, laughing all the while. The others watched and listened and after awhile Bridie made an attempt to sing along, too. Her clumsy pronunciation soon had Gannet rolling on the floor and trying to correct Bridie through her laughter. So it went until bedtime.

When Gannet had been settled, Bennet and Kit recalled the conversation they'd had with Gannet about Tigne Sh'dah. They related her curious explanation about that name being the same as Nightshade, although different. And that he could even enter and take control of them as though he was present if they had the same name, while she could only call to 'her birds' in dreams for they all had different names.

Bridie had been sitting quietly while she listened to this. She'd idly written the names Nightshade and Tigne Sh'dah on a piece of paper. Suddenly she sat up a little straighter, as if noticing something. Then she began striking out letters, first in one word, then in the other. When all the letters had been stricken, she exclaimed, “Yes! I know what she meant!”

Everybody's curiosity was peaked. They bent closer, giving her their undivided attention.

“Anagrams! She's talking about anagrams! See? The words contain exactly the same letters, merely arranged differently.”

Then she wrote down the name of the hunter they knew: Dan Heights. “Yup, that's another anagram. That's why he's been so persistent and why Gannet refers to him as one of Sh'dah's hunters.”

Bennet and Kit looked at each other. Bennet said, “If he ever finds out for certain that Gannet is here...”

Kit responded, “We have to make sure Heights never does or Tigne Sh'dah will take him over and we'll be in serious trouble.”

Bennet recalled she had yet to tell him and the girls about Heights' visit that day. She did, and they realized that they had to keep watch over the farm, too. No telling what Heights would do if he found the place deserted again. He might not content himself with peering in windows and rattling door handles!

It was Friday night. The spotlights had been on for some time. The house lights were off and had been for some time. A shadow approached behind the barn. Its route wound long and wide around the far corner in order to avoid the spotlight. It even went some distance down the hill in order to come back up behind the house, this time by the chicken coop. The current watcher, Bridie, was seated on the roof to the front of the house; they had never expected anyone to try from behind. The shadow approached and got as far as the back side

of the house itself before Hermit, on one of her usual patrols, gave repeated hoots, diving at the shadow and alerting everyone to the danger. Inside the house, Gannet's blue glow permeated the entire upstairs, yet she slept. Bridie climbed higher up the roof until she straddled the beam and could see where Hermit fought with the shadow. She rapped loudly on the roof, calling for reinforcements, yelling, "By the chicken coop!"

Within seconds, flashlight beams cut the dark from the never-used back door and the windows of the equally unused room that faced in that direction. Hermit continued her efforts. Faced by the owl and the approaching flashlights, the shadow tried to make a run for it. But there was nowhere to run to. He was effectively boxed in. Soon, four flashlights illuminated a cowering figure; it was someone two of them knew very well: the college guard, Tad Highens. He crouched there, trying to avoid Hermit's attacks and simultaneously shield his face from the bright lights. Kit and Ty pulled him to his feet, relieving him at the same time of a dropped handgun and a backpack full of rope, rags, and a bottle of some kind of liquid. The label read: chloroform. He'd obviously been prepared to attempt a kidnapping.

They used the rope to tie his hands behind his back, before hustling him to the front of the house. The girls went inside to call the police and tell Bennet what was going on. Gannet's glow had diminished but was still apparent. It probably would not fade entirely until Highens was far away. Some minutes later, a patrol car pulled up and two patrolmen got out. One was named Gilliam and the other Belcher. They didn't need to worry that these

two could be taken over by Tigne Sh'dah!

They told the cops that they'd found Highens sneaking around the back of the house and showed them the backpack with its contents, which now included the gun. The policemen hauled him away without releasing his hands from the ropes that bound him until they were able to replace them with metal cuffs. They took everyone's name and were respectful of the fact that one was a professor at the college, another the head librarian there and the other three, students. Campus personnel were looked on favorably by the town folk.

It seemed improbable that anything else might happen that night, but they took no chances. Kit took over watch duties and the rest tried to settle down to their rest, but it wasn't easy. Gannet's glow finally faded away, so they knew no danger was close. But the past hour's excitement had all of them on edge: Tigne Sh'dah was increasing his efforts, putting more hunters on the scent. So far they had succeeded in foiling their efforts, but it was getting more difficult.

CHAPTER 14

Mute jumped up onto Bennet's chest, waking her with her purr and the kneading of her paws. She hadn't done that in a long time, not since Gannet had become a part of their lives; kitten and child had become inseparable. In the past, Bennet had looked upon this greeting by Mute as a sign that all was well; now, she had a horrible feeling that something was wrong. She was up in an instant, and headed for Gannet's room. It was empty.

Where was Gannet?! Bennet searched the house from top to bottom, in every room, every closet. She searched the barn, the loft. She looked to be sure Gannet wasn't with Lady May, but the mare stood head down in sleep, alone. Bennet ran back to the house, intent on waking the others to help her but no matter how loudly she shouted or how much she shook them, Kit and their friends slept on. Only Mute could hear her. The kitten

kept up with her in her mad dash around house and barn. Finally she reared up on her hind legs, kneading Bennet's leg. When she had her attention, she headed for the porch. 'Of course!' thought Bennet. Gannet loved the porch swing. But when she looked down at the swing, hoping to see the little form fast asleep there, she was disappointed. Gannet was nowhere in sight, only the painting Bennet had bought from Ty. Bennet didn't stop to wonder why the painting was out here and not over the mantelpiece in the livingroom. She was too intent on her search. The painting was propped on Ty's easel, and Bennet glanced at it in passing, always glad to see it. Then she concentrated once again on her search and tore her eyes away from the landscape to search the shadows and the yard.

Again Mute got her attention, this time leading her directly to the painting. Mute clambered up onto the swing so that she was on the same level, then she extended a paw as if pointing. Bennet's eyes followed where Mute's paw pointed. She looked closer. There was something different about the picture, but what? Then, in the left hand corner, she noted movement. The figure of a tall man dressed in black was leading a child by the hand. It was Gannet!

Bennet shouted her name. Gannet turned at the sound, looking back and up at Bennet. She tried to yank her hand free but her captor only tightened his grip and practically dragged her along the path. Bennet kept calling, calling until the two figures reached the small cave entrance below the tree. Without a backward glance, they entered the cave and were lost to sight. Bennet could hear Gannet's sobs for a long time afterwards.

“No! You can't have her! Bring her back!” she shouted.

* * *

Kit shook Bennet, trying to wake her. She was in the throes of a nightmare, so violent that she tossed to and fro and wept, calling out repeatedly 'give her back'. It was several minutes before he succeeded. She threw herself into his arms, weeping so hard she shook. He felt his heart would break at her distress. Suddenly she rushed from the bed to Gannet's room. Gannet was there, sleeping soundly, Mute beside her. Mute's head lifted at Bennet's appearance but when she did nothing else, the kitten laid her head back down and closed her eyes.

It had been a dream, a horrible dream. But somehow, Bennet was sure it meant something more. Had that been Tigne Sh'dah himself? Had she gotten a glimpse of their nemesis? The figure had been too far away.

It was some time before Kit could coax her to lie down again. He held her close until their shared warmth made her relax. When she finally nodded off, Kit lay there for some time before he, too, could go back to sleep. This situation was becoming unbearably stressful. Something had to give and soon.

* * *

In the morning, everyone felt lethargic. The night's events had really had an impact on them, especially as they all realized that this was probably

just a precursor. They ate a simple breakfast of fruit and cereal – no one felt up to cooking.

“This is no good. We need a break,” insisted Kit. “Why don't we drive out to the caves? We won't go in, just walk the paths and look at the turning leaves. Maybe we could take a picnic lunch. We did promise Jenny one, remember?” he coaxed.

Faces looked up with some semblance of enthusiasm. A break sounded like a good idea. It was unlikely anyone would be hunting them there and a picnic would be fun. The more they thought about it, the more enthusiastic they became. In no time, they were making sandwiches and finding goodies to stuff into a basket. Bridie made a tall pitcher of lemonade. Bennet pulled out the remnants of the chicken and made a salad with it. They found some cookies and peaches to top it off. Jenny grabbed a couple of old blankets in case all the picnic benches were occupied. The house was securely locked up, the weather was fine if a bit cool, and there was plenty of gas in the car. Everybody brought a jacket. They were ready. They all piled into Kit's van, even Mute, and soon were on their way.

This was Gannet's first venture in a car, any car was the way she put it, and her first time off Bennet's property. She was very excited and insisted on bringing her penguin with her. She bounced in her seat and gazed out the windows in rapt amazement. Everything shot by so fast and there was so much to see!

When they got to the caves, it was cool in

among the trees so Bennet helped Gannet put on her bright red jacket and buttoned it up. Gannet waited patiently but it was evident that she was aching to run, to dance in the pretty leaves and play hide-and-seek with Mute. She had a wonderful time! They walked the paths for quite a while, enjoying the beauty and the fresh air and sunshine. Jenny said it was everything they had led her to expect. Eventually they found two adjacent picnic tables and settled down to share their lunch. Gannet finished hers first and rather than having to wait until everyone else finished, she was allowed to run about the area, playing with Mute. They were in one of their interminable games of hide-and-seek when Bennet noticed all at once that she hadn't heard Gannet's giggling calls for a minute or so. She looked around but could not spot her red jacket anywhere. She became concerned.

“Gannet? Gannet, where are you?” she called.

The others started to call and look, too. Bennet ran a ways along the path. No sign. It was as though the little girl had disappeared in a puff of smoke. But then Mute came racing towards them. Once she had their attention, she raced back the way she had come. She ran so fast it was difficult to keep her in sight. But then they realized she was headed directly towards the cave entrance.

Bennet gasped, “My dream. He dragged her into the cave in my dream. We have to hurry!”

Now that they knew where they were going, they pushed the pace, confident of their destination and how to get there. Luckily the entrance wasn't

that far away. As they approached, they caught a glimpse of a tall dark shape next to a small one in a bright red jacket.

“Gannet!!” called out Bennet. The little figure stopped and tried to turn but the taller darker figure pulled on her hand, forcing her into the cave. They could hear Gannet's cries of dismay.

“Oh God, we have to hurry! It's Nemesis. He's got her!” cried Bennet.

“We know these caves. We'll catch them. Follow me.” said Kit.

He thrust into the cave and, although they were in a tremendous hurry, made one and all pause to let their eyes adjust. He took out his penlight – he always had a light of some kind with him, like most cavers. When he switched it on, it was incredibly bright in the gloom. They followed close on his heels, joined by hands clasped, careful even as they pushed the pace. They were gaining. Gannet's wails grew louder, closer. They'd been inside approximately half an hour when they heard a low cursing just ahead. Gannet's abductor had tripped, dropping his flashlight. He couldn't search for it and hold on to Gannet's hand simultaneously; he let go.

Kit crept up behind where he'd glimpsed Gannet standing before the flashlight had died. He stretched out his hand and brushed hers in the dark. He let his penlight flash on his face for an instant. She had seen. She grasped his hand and let him draw her slowly, quietly back and away from the still groping figure. Soon Bennet drew Gannet into

her embrace. One quick hug and then they reversed their direction, Kit again in the lead. They moved quietly, quickly. Behind them they could hear cursing which became actual shouting when the kidnapper realized he'd lost his prey. He'd found his flashlight but he spent considerable time searching the nooks and crannies where he'd lost the child before backtracking. Their lead lengthened.

When they reached the entrance, the bright light outside brought tears to their eyes for a second or two. They increased their pace, almost running back to the van, abandoning the remnants of their picnic in favor of a speedy getaway. Mute, who'd waited at the cave entrance, bounded along beside them. Within minutes they had bundled into the van and left the parking lot. It had been a very close call but they had Gannet safe and sound again. They were determined not to lose her again.

The drive back to the farm was fraught with tension. Kit kept looking in the rear view mirror to see if they were being followed. No cars appeared.

Gannet shivered in her seat. She was oblivious to everything around her. Bennet sat next to her, arm wrapped around her, as close as seat belts would allow. Gannet was pale and hadn't said a word since they'd been reunited in the cave. No one else felt up to breaking the silence.

They pulled into the driveway. Bennet unfastened their belts and gathered Gannet close. She carried her up to the porch, sat in the swing and started a slow swing back and forth, just the two of them and Mute. The others hovered uncertainly until Bennet shook her head, then they made

themselves scarce. Soft sounds of muffled activity provided background noise, soon joined by Mute's purring. Slowly, the tension leaked out of Gannet's body.

An hour later, she relaxed enough to fall into a healing sleep. Bennet continued to swing, content for the moment just to hold her close. She closed her eyes, willing herself to relax, too, but flashes kept bringing Gannet's near loss to her mind. She was terrified by the close call! Eventually the warmth and monotonous movement of the swing worked their magic and she rested, too, but she could not sleep; she was totally aware of movement and voices around them. She chose not to acknowledge them. A blanket was tucked around Gannet and herself, somehow managing to include Mute as well.

It was another hour before Gannet stirred. Bennet opened her eyes and smiled down at the little girl looking up so trustingly. Gannet smiled, too. Their love for one another shone in their eyes.

Bennet broke the silence. "Getting hungry, sweetheart?"

Gannet smiled. "I could eat three peanut butter and jelly sandwiches!"

Bennet chuckled. "Three, hunh. Well, we better hurry then before Ty and Bridie finish off the peanut butter."

Gannet pushed the blanket off, slipped off the swing and tugged Bennet to her feet. "Hurry!" she cried in mock terror. "They eat lots!"

Gannet raced into the kitchen, startling the others gathered there. She climbed up on the step stool to rummage in the cupboard. She triumphantly pulled out a half-full jar of peanut butter and crowed her pleasure. Bennet grabbed a bag of bread and a jar of jelly and the two concentrated on making the first of several sandwiches. Ty and Bridie joined the happy twosome. The impromptu picnic spread. Within minutes everyone was scarfing sandwiches and teasing one another. The hilarity had a manic cast to it at first, reflecting the release of tension held too long. But that passed, leaving an easy camaraderie and a light atmosphere.

Eventually they couldn't eat any more. The atmosphere changed. Hilarity died. Gannet matter-of-factly addressed the thoughts uppermost in all their minds. She said, "It was that big man who talked to Kit over the fence. I was looking for Mute. He grabbed her. I saw him. When I started to call out, he grabbed me and Mute ran away. I tried to get loose but he was too strong. Then he pulled me into the cave to hide till you left. I was scared!" Her eyes grew big with memory. "When he dropped the flashlight, I thought about running but it was too dark. I couldn't see. And then Kit showed me his face."

Kit asked, "Did he say anything, Gannet?"

Gannet nodded and answered, "The master waits."

Jenny noted, "We didn't see your blue glow, Gannet."

Gannet explained, “No, Tigne Sh'dah wouldn't let me. He's strong. He was inside that man. When he grabbed me, I wasn't strong any more, but he got stronger.”

“So he can steal your strength by touching you?” asked Jenny.

Gannet nodded 'yes'.

They had their work cut out for them. Once Nemesis literally got his hands on Gannet, or by proxy through his hunters, Gannet couldn't defend herself. It was up to 'her birds' to protect her strength – as foretold in the ballad. While they and she sang, they would have to protect her body from his touch. The task was becoming more convoluted.

“Gannet, when we sing, will Tigne Sh'dah be here physically, too?” asked Bennet.

Gannet nodded. Then she said, “We can only defeat him if he's here, like me. He'll be coming any time now. He has to come before the moon gets bigger to catch me.” And she chanted, “When dark and light fight for might..”. Then she added, “In seven days.”

“Seven days,” murmured Bennet.

“And when we win and light defeats dark, then what happens?” asked Bridie.

“Tigne Sh'dah fades away for another age,” replied Gannet.

“And you,” asked Bennet softly.

“My fight will be done,” said Gannet simply.

“Will you fade away, too?” asked Bennet in an almost whisper.

“I don't know,” Gannet replied, looking confused and then a little scared. “Will I?”

Mute distracted her just then, batting at a piece of crust that had dropped to the floor. The kitten was so funny that Gannet crowed with laughter. Then she dropped to the floor to play with her. The conversation was done.

* * *

They left Gannet to her play and gathered in the livingroom.

“To recap,” said Kit, “we have one week. In that time we can expect Tigne Sh'dah to try and get his hands on Gannet. He knows, after today, that she's with us. My fault,” he grimaced. “We have to protect her until we can smuggle her and the lights into the cave and pray we get it all set up before 'he' shows up.”

Bennet placed a sympathetic loving hand on his arm, “It was bound to happen sometime, and now we know more of what we're up against.”

Kit said resolutely, “I'll be here round the clock this next week.”

“Me, too.” asserted Ty, with the girls chiming in their own resolve a moment later. “This is too important to leave to chance. And we can do a lot of the prep work here at the farm.”

Bennet nodded her acceptance. She knew Gannet was important to them, too.

“I think we're going to have to call a halt to the horseback rides with Gannet. She's going to be disappointed, but there's too much chance that someone might try to snatch her,” said Kit.

“Yes, we'll be better able to protect her here at the house,” agreed Ty.

Bennet nodded her head. They'd just have to entertain Gannet in some other way. The little girl would understand, although she'd miss Lady May.

It was getting dusky out. Bridie flipped the switches to turn on the spotlights. At least that would keep the shadow dogs at bay. Their world had just gotten a lot smaller. For the next week, it would be comprised of the boundaries that encircled the house, barn and the yard between the two.

CHAPTER 15

Bennet was afraid, afraid that somehow Tigne Sh'dah would breach their haven and take Gannet. She couldn't bear to let Gannet out of her sight for even a moment. So she decided: henceforth, Gannet would be sleeping in her room. Bennet needed to be able to stretch out her hand and touch Gannet, reassure her when she was afraid; the next room was too far away. She had to tell Kit. She knew he might not like it, knew he might think she was just being overly paranoid, but she also knew she wouldn't – no, couldn't – change her mind. To her intense relief, Kit understood. He didn't try to talk her out of it, didn't question her in any way. He just nodded, kissed her cheek, and that was that. So she asked Gannet if she'd like to sleep in their room, just until all this was sorted. Gannet was happy with the idea; she, too, felt more secure with Bennet on one side of her and Kit on the other. Ty moved up into Gannet's room and Jenny joined

him. Now all six slept on the same level; Gannet was surrounded by her 'birds'.

Jenny had first watch. She was nervous. They had no idea of how or where the next attack would take place, only that Gannet's nemesis was obdurate about getting his hands on her. Jenny was glad of the spotlights below her perch on the roof. After Highens' rear flank approach, they had begun turning on the back light, as well. Now the house was totally surrounded by lights. But up on the roof, Jenny was still cloaked in shadow. Within days, however, the growing moon would take that advantage away.

Jenny had her flute with her. It had proved to be as effective a weapon, if not more so, than the flashlights or bow and arrows. At the first sign of trouble she could begin playing. They didn't know if it was effective against more than the shadow hounds, but it couldn't hurt.

For the three hours that she was up there, she counted two lonely cars drive by, and heard the far off drone of an airplane. Hermit swept by a couple of times, just to let her know she was on guards, too, but otherwise all was quiet. When it came time to wake Bridie, she climbed down the trellis in relief. Two minutes later, Bridie had taken her place. The clock chimed 1 a.m.

Bridie was alert, shifting her viewpoint every few minutes, her ears concentrated to hear any untoward sound. There were a few rustlings in the bushes, but she paid them no more than a cursory glance as nothing further happened. Nor had Hermit shown any undue interest in them. It

was some time later that all hell broke loose.

Her first warning that something was wrong was a high pitched squeal from Lady May. Bridie couldn't see the mare from her position but she could hear her stamping as well as her protests. She badly wanted to go to the mare, to help her, but knew this might just be a diversion and that it was important to stay at her post. She saw Hermit sail by, enroute to the pasture. Kit, Jenny and Ty burst out of the door below her within seconds. It wasn't necessary for Bridie to direct them; there was no mistaking the disturbance. The three ran towards the mare. Ty had his bow and arrows with him, Jenny her flute, and Kit held both a baseball bat and a flashlight. They were as prepared as they knew how to be.

Quickly they reached the barn fence. The barn's spotlight did not illuminate the field; rather it focused on the side of the barn facing the house. From the fence, they could just make out the mare rearing and whirling in a circle. She was obviously fighting more than one attacker. They climbed over the fence into the pasture and approached with caution. Kit directed his flashlight towards Lady May, and when they got a little closer, they could see a pack of five shadow dogs silently encircling the mare, acting in concert to take her down. First one would lunge toward her. When she responded by rearing and stamping in that one's direction, the others would close in on her from behind. She'd held her own so far but was visibly tiring. Up close they could see several slashes marked her flanks and her nose where the hounds had gotten through her guard; but they could also see that she had taken some revenge; two of the hounds limped.

Kit's beam caught the hounds and as one they cringed away from the light. The momentary respite allowed Lady May to break through the circle and run to stand, blowing, behind Ty and Kit. The pack whirled to face them. Their lips curled back in silent snarls. They padded towards the group and Kit quickly motioned for the others to spread out. Jenny lifted her flute to her lips and started to play. The pack advanced more slowly. With each successive repetition of her music, the hounds faltered. They tried to go around the humans for a last try at the mare, but as they moved, so did Kit's light. He had held it in a shining arc to cover all of them up to that point. Now he changed his tactics, concentrating the beam on the foremost hound. Within seconds, it had faded away. Pleased with his success, Kit repeated his trial with each of the remaining four until all were gone.

Then Ty, who had been standing closest to Lady May, led the skittish mare to the barn where he examined and cleaned her wounds. He gave her some grain and checked the water trough. He rubbed her poll and patted her neck, murmuring softly until she settled down. Then he headed back to the house. Kit had gone ahead to tell Bridie that Lady May was okay and to relieve her of watch duty. Jenny, after making sure Ty was okay, gave him a kiss and went to tell Bennet what had happened. Everything was under control once more.

* * *

Kit's three hour period was almost up when he saw three police cars, sirens blaring and lights flashing, barrel around the bend in the road. Two

raced directly up Bennet's driveway while the third parked across the way at Mrs. Sackle's. Kit hurriedly descended the trellis and reached the gate by the time the cars had stopped and the officers had emerged and started towards the house.

“What's the problem, officers,” he asked.

“We were notified of another break-in at this address,” answered the lead cop. While he and Kit spoke, two other officers headed towards the barn and garage, respectively. The fourth remained by the gate, but at his partner's words, opened the gate, intent on coming into the yard to search the premises.

“There's been a mistake,” insisted Kit. “I've been awake for the last two hours and it's been as quiet as a grave.”

“The lead cop stopped. “You didn't call in another break-in?” he queried.

“No. I couldn't sleep and have been just sitting in the livingroom reading. There's been no disturbance and no phone calls. I'm afraid someone has played a prank on you,” asserted Kit with a degree of sympathy.

“Well, it does seem quiet enough,” admitted the officer. “Sorry to have bothered you, but we take these calls seriously, especially when it's a second or third strike on the same place.” He called to his partner who had made his way around to the back of the house by then.

“False alarm.”

By then the other two officers had returned with negative reports from the barn and garage. The four men made their way back to the two patrol cars and, without further ado, with sirens off and cars modestly lighted, drove away.

Kit went inside the house to relay what had been said. None of them was quite willing to chalk it up to a silly prank but couldn't see the point of Tigne Sh'dah sending the police to the farm. For the time being, they had no choice but to accept it as a bizarre coincidence. Everyone went back to bed, but Ty took over Kit's place on the roof.

In the morning, everyone was on edge and out of sorts; their rest the night before had been repeatedly broken and none of them felt truly rested. They discussed the curious incident of the false alarm, but could still not come up with any dire reason for it.

Bennet, Bridie and Gannet trooped to the barn to check up on Lady May. Aside from the slash marks, she seemed fine. Gannet patted the mare, whispering to her and feeding her apple bits while Bennet cleaned and redressed the wounds. She released the mare back into her pasture but decided, henceforth, to call the mare into the barn and into her stall at night until her wounds were thoroughly healed. It would also be easier to keep an eye, and an ear, on her there in the event of another foray by the hounds.

Bridie and Jenny tried to concentrate on their studies, and Ty tried to work on his painting, but none of their efforts were very successful. After lunch, they followed Gannet's example and took a

nap, everyone except Bennet. She was too restless to sleep so she used the time to bake a couple of pies. Cooking was her way to deal with stress. She would get so caught up in the mechanics that she could blot out other worries for a spell.

Kit was the first to come down. He entered the kitchen and put his arms around Bennet, nuzzling her neck. “Umm, smells good,” he commented. Bennet smiled up at him, “I made rhubarb pies.”

“Those smell good, too,” he grinned amiably. She smiled and leaned back into his embrace. Their chances for privacy had become very limited of late and moments like this were appreciated all the more. It grounded the two of them, filling them with a sense of peace and contentment.

Kit turned Bennet in his arms. “I’ve been thinking.”

At her questioning glance, he continued, “We should make this permanent. I love you, Bennet. I’ve loved you since I first met you.”

Bennet looked into his eyes, her love for him shining in her own. “I love you, too, Kit. And...I feel the same. We belong together. It just took a while for me to see it.” She reached up for his kiss; it was a promise for the future, a future they would build together, a future they hoped would include little Gannet.

When the others made their way downstairs, it was to the savory aroma of steamed salmon

steaks, brown rice and a salad full of tomatoes, fresh spinach and bits of feta cheese. If anyone noticed a new measure of serenity and happiness in Bennet and Kit, noone spoke of it, but the atmosphere served to enhance the close friendships that had built up between them all. Gannet was her exuberant self. They all felt renewed by the rest, the food and the chatter that batted back and forth between them all so naturally.

After dinner and cleaning up, they practiced their song. Gannet joined them, her young bell-like soprano effortlessly soaring above their voices, and blending in an intricate pattern with the basic melody that held all of them in thrall. Her voice held power; they could feel it. Outside, the ravens whirled and danced above the house, cawing their replies and approval. Even the sun seemed brighter as Gannet sang. And when she stopped, there was a hush as though the world paused before it sighed into motion once again.

* * *

They were all ready for the night's challenges. The rest had renewed them physically; the past hours had renewed their spirits. Jenny's and Bridie's watches proved uneventful. Nothing bothered the mare; noone and nothing disturbed the night. But they were not fooled. They knew this was a false calm. Time was growing short for Tigne Sh'dah as well as for them. They knew he would try again, and soon. He did not disappoint them.

There was plenty of fanfare. That night in the wee hours before dawn, a terrible storm battered

at the doors and windows, so strong that roof tiles threatened to break off and go flying. The news the next day talked of a freak storm and an unexpected front; it came out of nowhere. There was flooding in homes at the base of the hill and throughout the valley. Across the road, from the temporary watch in the sewing room, Kit and then Ty both saw a lurid red glow suffusing the empty Sackle house. Gannet's blue glow got brighter and brighter as the storm progressed. Her sleep was restless; she tossed and turned, crying out 'he's coming'. Bennet tried to comfort the child, first stroking her back and when that did not help, she held her close in her arms, rocking and speaking in low tones.

Eventually, Gannet woke from her dreams, at the same moment as the storm stopped, as abruptly as it had started. All was deathly still. Gannet pulled a little away from Bennet, seeming wide awake, and said, "He's here. Tigne Sh'dah is here." She looked resolute but scared. "Light fights night for night," she chanted. Then she seemed to come out of a trance. She looked uncertainly about her. Her blue glow was gone. She looked frightened and very vulnerable. She clung to Bennet for a moment, then jumped up to run across the hallway to the sewing room window. Bennet followed, stopping in the doorway. Gannet stared across at the Sackle house for a long time. The red glow no longer showed. Then Gannet walked slowly back to Bennet's room and bed, climbed up, looked at Bennet, who had followed, and said, "Five days more. Five. Either we defeat him or...all will be night. Forever." She buried her head against Bennet for long moments. Then sleep claimed her once more.

Monday morning they assessed the damage from the storm. They had come through it surprisingly well. The chicken coop was the only casualty. The wind and rain had proved too much for the dilapidated structure. Where it didn't sag, it had collapsed into the surrounding shrubbery which, in turn, had kept the old timber from flying further into the fields beyond. A few barn tiles had come loose; Kit and Ty nailed them back into place. Some of the lower house windows leaked, but that was the sum total of the damage. The Sackle house appeared to be completely untouched. They could not see any movement from within, but they were certain their foe was there, plotting his next move.

Bennet and the others did not go beyond the gate or barn, nor did Lady May show any interest in leaving her stall. The ravens confined their flights to the area over and behind the house, shunning the fields fronting the road. It was as if they, too, knew of the danger that lay just over the road, and wanted to stay out of its range.

A watch was kept throughout the day. Everyone was on pins and needles. Conversation was kept to a minimum. Even Gannet preferred sitting quietly and petting Mute, to any game involving running or jumping. They were all waiting to see what would be Tigne Sh'dah's next move.

Mid afternoon brought an end. They saw Heights' car park in the Sackle driveway. He went inside. Moments later a tall, dark figure, flanked by Heights, emerged from the house and walked across the road and up Bennet's drive. Everyone gathered by the gate. When only the gate lay between, group

faced group. Gannet stood next to Bennet, the two surrounded by their friends.

Tigne Sh'dah glanced once, piercingly at Gannet. Then he addressed them politely, his voice surprisingly bland, everyday. "You know who I am and why I'm here. Give me the child and I will leave you in peace," was his reasonable address.

"We'll never give her to you," declared Bennet calmly.

"Then the battle is joined," replied Tigne Sh'dah simply. He turned around and walked back down the lane and across the road.

No more than ten minutes later, a high pitched squeal sounded from every direction, converging on the house. At first noone could locate where the sound originated, but in moments, a rustling in the bushes and shrubs that lined the fence told them where to look. They retreated to the porch. Ty and Kit disappeared momentarily into the house, emerging a few seconds later with weapons in hand, just in time. Rats, everyday field and barn rats leaped out of the bushes from every direction and ran towards the porch. The rats came in droves, but jerkily as though forced out of hiding and into this action against their will. They squealed in protest and anger but did stop their forward advance.

Gannet began to sing and Jenny to play, both of which had an immediate affect, but although the rats slowed, they did not stop. Kit rushed everyone inside and bolted the door. They could hear the rats pushing and scratching at the wood. They could

hear them biting and squealing. It was a nightmare!

Then they heard cawing and screeching from above the house. They looked out the windows and up. The ravens and Hermit, too, were out there attacking the rats. These natural enemies frightened the rats so much they milled about on the porch and in the yard. But they did not leave. Reluctantly, they evaded the birds but held their posts. Meanwhile, Gannet continued her singing and Jenny her fluting. It looked like a stalemate.

Suddenly there was a great rushing sound in the air followed by dozens of birds converging upon the rats. This was too much. The rats ran for cover, dispersing in every direction, squealing as they ran. For some minutes after the last rat had disappeared from the yard, the flocks of birds whirled in the sky, harrying their prey into the fields and further until the birds themselves could no longer be seen. Only then did Bennet's own two ravens, Wing and Caw, resume their usual crisscross pattern over house and barn; Hermit retreated to her daytime roost in the eaves of the barn; quiet reigned.

Bennet, Kit and the others slowly emerged onto the porch. It had suffered some damage, primarily chew and bite marks around the door, the swing and Ty's easel.

Bridie rubbed her arms up and down, over and over; she was phobic about rats. This had been her worst nightmare come true. It would take awhile before she would be able to move about the farm with her customary ease. The milling rats, their horrible squeals and long, ugly hairless tails had almost had her gibbering. It was the music,

both flute and song, that had kept her from losing her mind. For her, the birds had not come a moment too soon. She would forever look gratefully, benignly on ravens and owls. They had preserved her sanity and taught her that it was possible to fight back. But she still rubbed her arms. This had been the worse attack yet.

It was almost dusk.

Gannet said, “He will regroup his energy now before he tries again. We are safe for a little while.”

They all welcomed the breather gratefully.

CHAPTER 16

Bennet looked worried and puzzled.

“Kit, have you heard from your office today? I haven't and that's rather unusual. By this time I should have gotten two or three different calls, asking for directions or assistance or permission, etc. And I haven't heard from Susan either. Which is doubly weird. She and I are always exchanging calls! But the last time I heard anything was two or three days ago. Do you suppose something has happened on campus?”

Kit replied, “Now that you mention it, it has been pretty quiet the last few days. One of my graduate students said he planned to call me after the weekend and so far – nothing.” He turned to the others. Have any of you taken a call?”

Everybody just shrugged.

“Maybe we should call and check,” suggested Ty.

“Yes, I should have heard something from Grey by now,” chimed in Jenny. “He's in charge of setting up the practices and booking our gigs. I should give him a call.”

“Go ahead, Jenny. We'll make our calls later,” said Bennet.

Jenny picked up the phone and started to punch in the numbers, then stopped, pressed the disconnect button a couple of times and listened. “That's strange,” she said. “There's no dial tone.”

Kit took the phone and tried. “Maybe the storm knocked out the power,” he theorized. “Does anyone have a cell phone?” Noone did. “I guess we're incommunicado until the line's fixed then,” he concluded.

They looked at one another while it sunk in. This was not good. Now they were even more isolated than before. Which meant they were more at the mercy of their nemesis with no hope of backup. It wasn't as if any of them would know who to call for help anyway. This wasn't exactly the type of problem they could go to the police with. But now, even that remote possibility had been snatched away. It made them all even more uneasy.

Bennet said, “Perhaps we could make a quick run to buy some more provisions. We're running low on a few things. And then we could call from the store to alert the phone company to the

problem. Gannet, you said 'he' needed to recoup his energy. Do you have any idea how long that might take?"

Gannet looked unsure. "No, not exactly, but while it's still light, it will take him longer. Once it gets dark...I wouldn't want to trust him to take very long."

Kit said, "So we have a little time." he squinted at the sun. "We may have an hour before dusk hits. That should be enough."

Bridie said, "I'll go. You can spare me the most."

Bennet didn't like the idea much but knew it was the practical solution. She pulled out her wallet, as did Kit. They pooled their ready cash and handed it to Bridie. Then Bennet wrote a quick list of essentials and handed it over along with her car keys.

"Be quick, my dear, but drive safely," cautioned Bennet.

"I will. Don't worry," assured Bridie. Then she walked out to the car and unlocked the door. But something was wrong. She looked at one side, then crossed in front of the car and looked at the other. Then she turned and raced back up the walk. "The tires are all flat," she cried. "It must have been the rats."

Ty and Kit raced to the car, then to the van. All the tires on the car were flat, chewed strips hanging from all of them. On the van, two tires had

obviously been attacked but two still held air.

“Do you have any spares?” asked Ty.

“One,” said Kit and grimaced. “It looks like we’re going to be here awhile. Help me remove these two flats. Let’s see if either is repairable.” Within a few minutes, they had both flats off and the spare in place of one. Then they brought the two flat tires up to the porch along with Kit’s repair kit. It was apparent that one tire was not salvageable. When Kit examined the other, he found several holes and torn strips, but it wasn’t in as bad a shape as the other. He took several plugs out of the repair kit and wedged them in place. Now they just had to test if the tire would hold air. He pumped the tire with a foot pump, then poured water around the plugs. No bubbles showed.

“I think it’ll hold, at least for awhile. The tread is thin in places where it’s been chewed and stripped, so you’ll have to watch your speed, Bridie. But if you’re careful, it’ll see you to the store and back,” concluded Kit.

“Maybe I should go with her,” suggested Ty, as he helped Kit wheel the tire back to the van and bolt it into place. “We’ve lost time doing the repairs and if we want to get back before dark, we’ll have to hurry. And if Heights follows, she may need backup.”

Kit thought about it as he tightened the bolts. “Okay, but you two have to get back before dark. If that means you have to abandon part or all of the supplies, do it. Just get back here in one piece.”

Ty and Bridie climbed into the van as soon as the last bolt was tightened. Bridie drove. Ty sat in the passenger seat, alert to any sign of pursuit. Kit noted that above, a single raven followed them down the driveway. As expected, when the van turned onto the roadway, Heights hurried out of the house and was on their tail in seconds. Soon both vehicles cornered the bend and were lost to sight.

Bennet, who'd been watching from the gate, and Kit could only pray that Ty and Bridie would be safe out on the road and would come back none the worse. It was out of their hands now.

* * *

Bridie had never driven the van before but it seemed to her to be acting a bit sluggish. However, the tires were holding up fine and she had control. She drove cautiously along the winding road until they reached the entrance to the freeway. There she picked up speed but not too much, afraid the patched tire might burst if she pushed the pace. Heights maintained a steady speed and distance behind them, keeping them in easy sight. At the store, Bridie quickly found the groceries they needed, while Kit stayed by the van; he didn't want to give Heights any chance to sabotage their only means of transportation. Heights remained in his car, keeping the van in sight but not approaching.

Done shopping, Bridie came rushing out, bags in hands and practically threw them into the van. "Do we have time to call about the phone line?" she asked.

Ty glanced at the sun. "I don't think we

should risk it. We have maybe fifteen minutes before the sun sets. We've got to hustle.”

This time Ty drove. The trip back along the freeway was uneventful. Heights maintained his distance. But when they got back onto the lonely country road, he speeded up. There was no other traffic in sight.

With a burst of speed, Heights rammed his car into the back of the van. Ty and Bridie were jolted, their heads whiplashing back against the head cushions. Ty was able to keep them on the road, although it wasn't easy. They both tightened their seatbelt. Heights hit them again. Ty and Bridie could hear and feel the crumpling reverberation as they clung tightly to wheel and dash. The van was becoming more erratic, harder to control.

When Heights began to speed up a third time, he got a surprise. A mass of outspread feathers blocked his view. The raven who had sailed above them all this time intervened. It flew close to Heights' windshield, causing Heights to swerve automatically. Heights was driving so fast that he couldn't stop quickly enough and drove off the road and into a deep ditch that paralleled the old road. His car stalled. He was stuck. Bridie, who had been watching through the rear window, kept up a running commentary. When Heights went off the road and just sat there, she exclaimed, “Yes! He's gone.”

It was a relief to have Heights off their tail but they weren't out of the woods yet. The van had taken a lot of punishment, both now and previously

from the rats. It was starting to act strangely. The speedometer kept dropping no matter how hard Ty pressed on the gas pedal. And when a possum ran across the road in front of them, Ty hit the brake but nothing happened. He pumped it and the brake pedal went all the way to the floor without any significant reduction in speed. Luckily the possum made it across before the car could hit it, but it was a close call.

Ty said, "Something's wrong. The brakes are gone and the gas pedal's not responding either."

"Can we make it around the bend," queried Bridie.

"I think so, but I don't know how much further," replied Ty. Their momentum saw them around the bend and into Bennet's driveway before their impetus faded. The slight incline was too much for the van. It stopped a few yards into the lane and died with a rattle and a wheeze.

"At least we don't have to worry about the brakes anymore," said Bridie philosophically.

They leaped out of the van. It would take the usual five minutes to make their way up to the house. They grabbed the bags of groceries, locked the van, and with frequent wary glances behind them, hustled up the drive. Kit and Jenny met them at the gate.

"I think the rats must have chewed some of the lines under the van. Brakes and gas weren't responding," reported Ty. "How about here? Anything new?"

“All quiet, but the red glow is visible again,” replied Kit. “I think Tigne Sh'dah has recouped his energy. Let's get this stuff inside.”

Gannet stood just inside the porch door. She held Mute in her arms and now and then stroked the kitten's soft fur. Mute was passive but very alert. From where Gannet stood, she could easily see across the road. Her own blue glow was a dull halo surrounding her and the cat. That it was there meant that danger was nigh but not imminent; it was a warning to be ready. When danger did flare up, they would know of it almost instantly.

Everybody but Gannet trooped into the kitchen. Ty and Bridie told the others what had happened.

“So. We don't have a car nor do we have a phone connection,” observed Bennet. “What about the supplies? Where you able to get everything on the list,” she asked.

“Yes,” said Bridie and handed back a few bills. “There just wasn't time to call the phone company.” She sounded apologetic. “I'm afraid we're going to continue to be on our own.”

Bennet just waved it away. She was glad the two had gotten back safely; that was her primary interest.

“Will the supplies see us through Friday, Bennet?” asked Kit.

“Yes, I'll raid the freezer. We'll manage. Some of the meals might be a little strange though,”

she commented with a wry smile.

“What we have to worry about is how we're going to get to the caves on Friday,” worried Kit.

“Would the van's tires fit on the Honda?” asked Bridie.

“Yes, but we don't know if the car has been damaged underneath like the van. We'll have to take a look and make our plans accordingly,” responded Kit.

Gannet came to the kitchen door. “That man – the hunter – he just walked around the bend in the road.”

“So he didn't get his car out of the ditch,” said Ty with satisfaction. “At least that puts them back on an even footing with us.. for the time being.”

It was dusk out. Bennet had already flipped the switches to turn on all the exterior lights. The lights blazed in the gathering gloom. It was quiet so they took the opportunity to make a quick meal. Gannet enjoyed the spaghetti but she was too distracted to give it her undivided attention. She ate just enough to appease her appetite, then went back to her watch by the door. Her little figure evoked sympathetic glances from those in the dining room, but noone stopped her from leaving. Cleanup was quick. Bennet sat on the coach, close to where Gannet stood; the others scattered about the room. It was a game of waiting.

Bennet broke the silence. “Gannet, how

strong are his powers over here, now that he's here in the flesh?" she asked.

"He can influence people and animals, like before. He can do things to the weather. He can stop me from using my powers if he touches me," she replied.

"Can he influence us?" asked Jenny.

"Maybe. He might make you afraid. But he can't hurt you. You're my birds," explained Gannet.

"Can we hurt him?" asked Ty.

"Only with song and light. He's warned by his glow, as I am by mine, when anyone comes near. But he takes strength from the dark and also from his hunters. If he touches someone, he can drain them, like he wants to do with me," said Gannet.

"So we have to keep him from touching any of us, too," said Bridie. "Sounds like a parasite or a vampire from one of those science fiction thrillers."

"Except that this is real," agreed Ty.

"We have to be alert. He may try to separate us to make it easier to get at Gannet. If anyone spots anything suspicious, call out, don't try and investigate on your own," advised Kit.

Outside, the wind was starting to blow. The sky had turned an ugly purple and black, reminiscent of a bruise. It looked like another storm was on its way. And the temperature was dropping.

Ty and Jenny made a dash to the barn to make it secure and feed and water Lady May. They hadn't quite made it all the way back to the house when the storm hit. Within seconds they were sopping. Rain fell in sheets. The wind blew horizontally, slashing at everything in its path, stripping leaves from the trees and shrubs, tossing whatever wasn't securely fastened down.

Ty's painting paraphernalia had been brought inside and placed in the unused back room. The grill had been stored in the enclosed part of the porch. Windows were latched and towels placed to catch the leaks. Lightning flashed, lighting the sky and striking the earth. The time between strikes grew less. The strikes came closer, louder. Finally a particularly big one hit the oak tree. The tree erupted but the wild rain and wind doused the flames so that only a smoky haze could be seen afterwards. A flash struck the power lines. A crackle and sparks illuminated the lines for an instant, then all went black, including all the lights around and inside the house. That last strike seemed to drain the storm. The wind and rain prevailed a little longer, but the lightning strikes ceased. All was quiet and dark.

Gannet's blue glow spread, providing a soft eerie light throughout the downstairs where they all were gathered. She said, "He used lots of power for the storm. He'll try to come now. But his hunters will be his strength. If we can hold them off, we'll fear no more from him tonight."

The wind had abated. The rain, a mere sprinkle, stopped. The sky cleared of clouds and the new moon appeared. The stars were vivid in the

sky, especially as all the lights had been doused in a wide radius around the hill.

“The power company will be working to get the electricity up and running again. In the meantime, check your flashlights and have spare batteries to hand,” said Kit.

Everyone went to a different window to keep watch. The wind had stripped the surrounding shrubbery; their view was unimpeded. It was as though Autumn had come and gone in a flash. The trees were totally bereft of their leaves and raised denuded branches to the sky as if in protest. The oak tree steamed.

Something thumped against the kitchen door. Again. Jenny, who had chosen that as her vantage point, jumped back, startled. Heart thumping, she leaned forward enough to see out. It was just barely possible to see the frightening, snarling visage of a shadow hound lunging against the door in the gloom. The hound made no sound, just kept hurling its body at the door. It looked like it was ready to continue its efforts until either the door crumpled or it died from exhaustion. Jenny turned on her flashlight and shined it on the hound when next it hit; the thumping stopped abruptly.

In its absence, she could hear a muffled crashing at the porch door, where Gannet had been watching. Jenny left her post just long enough to peek into the livingroom. Bennet held Gannet encircled in one arm; the other, holding a flashlight, flared forth with a bright light aimed at the door. The battering stopped. Then she caught the chittering of tiny squeaks and the sound of

scratching low down at all the doors. The rats were back. When she shone her flashlight down, she could see dozens of rats milling around the kitchen door's base, but there was room for only a few at a time to scratch and chew. Still, if something wasn't done, the rats would eventually chew their way inside.

She called out, "The rats are back!"

Upstairs, they could hear Kit making his way down. "Do you have any water hoses, Bennet?" he asked.

"Yes, but they're in the wash house and one has to go out to get to its door," she replied.

"Wait!" called Ty. The owls are here!" And then they could all hear. Soft hoots were interspersed by dismayed squeals from the rats. All chewing and scratching stopped. Within minutes, the rats were gone. A continuous hooting let them know that the owls were roosting all along the rim of the house, on every side. It sparked the imagination: all those owls, invisible to them in the dark, watching over the yard like so many furry sentinels.

By then it was so late that Gannet couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. She collapsed on the couch and Bennet covered her with blankets. Then she took her place at the porch door. Gannet's blue glow maintained its strength despite her sleep, but it did not impede Bennet's view outside; it was focused inside the house, making it easy to maneuver and to avoid running into things - sort of like soft blue candlelight that lit up the rooms from

corner to corner. Upstairs, Ty, Kit and Bridie made do with regular candles and their flashlights.

Bridie, who was stationed in the office, called out, "Something's approaching through the field. I can see a very bright light." A few seconds later, she added, "It's a fire torch! I think they're going to try and set fire to the shrubs around the house!"

Kit, who was in the master bedroom, watched from the window facing the barn. He called out, "I see another approaching the barn!" His call was echoed seconds later by Ty who was in the front-facing sewing room. "Someone's coming up the drive with a fire brand, too."

Everyone raced downstairs. The rats and hounds were gone. The owls were on watch. Jenny and Kit retrieved the water hoses from the washroom and quickly attached them to the outdoor faucets. Ty collected his bow and arrows. Bridie took up a defensive stance by the kitchen door.

Ty headed towards the barn. He had an arrow nocked and ready. As soon as whoever carrying the flame came within arrow distance, he'd let fly. The flame provided a perfect target. From where he stood, he could also see the gravel circle where Bennet's Honda was parked. Faint light glinted off the chrome, outlining the car. Whoever approached up the drive would block those glints, alerting Ty to his presence. The flame which the intruder held would then mark his position, and Ty would have his target. Ty could release one arrow at either target and be ready to let fly at the other within a couple of seconds.

Kit climbed up the trellis, one water hose in hand, totally ignored by the owls. He could see a brand approaching along the side field and a faint shadow of whoever carried it. He directed Jenny where to stand to squirt out any flames the moment they were lit. She had a semi-obscured view; the branches, although without leaves, were pretty dense. She could catch the flicker of the firelight, but couldn't make out the figure holding the flame.

When the figure came closer, an owl, perhaps Hermit, started harrying him. But it was difficult as the bird had to avoid the flame to do so. The owl's efforts slowed the arsonist's approach but could not stop it. Kit waited till Hermit's latest pass was concluded, then turned on the hose and let fly with a strong gush of water that left the torch guttering and the person holding it sputtering. Kit kept his hose trained on the spot. He couldn't see the person anymore but he could hear him. After a few seconds, Kit and Bridie heard the sound of a retreat in progress; Kit shut off the water. They could hear the owl harassing the man as he stumbled away. One down.

Meanwhile the figure coming up the drive must have heard what had happened to his colleague. His shadow hesitated before continuing towards the gate. As he passed the Honda, Ty noticed the shadow blocking his view, as well as heard the rolling of pebbles underfoot. When the torch came into view, highlighting the shadow, Ty let fly. He saw the flame quiver but it didn't go out. He nocked another arrow, but now his attention was split two ways; the flame approaching the barn was getting close.

Luckily, once the first flame wielder had been doused, Kit turned his attention towards the front of the house. He instructed Jenny to stand by the gate. When Ty's arrow moved the flame, Jenny turned on her hose and doused the flame with her water arrow. The flame was extinguished and the gush of water beat at the bearer. Once the flame was gone, another owl took flight and harried the would-be arsonist on his way.

Ty was able to concentrate on the threat to the barn. As soon as the flame got close enough that Ty could see the outline of the attacker, he sighted; the arrow flew true. A shout of pain presaged the dropping of the torch which immediately extinguished the flame in all the wet grass. The figure staggered off and away, back where he'd come from, helped along by still a third owl. Ty watched to be sure noone came back but the owls had taken over and didn't let up until all three intruders were off the property.

Ty joined Kit and Bridie and all three went back into the house. Gannet's glow had subsided. They took this to mean they were safe for the time being. Kit decided to go back onto the roof to keep watch alongside the owls; they seemed to tolerate his presence fairly well. He admired the few glimpses he got of them but concentrated his attention outwards. He knew they would give warning of any approaching danger.

When dawn showed its first rosy hues in the east, the owls lifted wings and departed en masse, all but one who hooted once and headed for the barn. Kit climbed down. They'd made it through another night.

Bennet, who'd been napping alongside Gannet, took over watch from the porch while everyone else took the opportunity to catch a few hours' sleep. It had been a long night.

* * *

Around noon, Bennet and Gannet welcomed a sleepy bunch in the kitchen for a meal. Gannet had kept watch while Bennet prepared it. It had been quiet all morning. Likely, their foe and his henchmen were resting and licking their wounds. After the meal, Kit and Ty examined the Honda. The ravens were already patrolling from above. While Ty kept watch, bow and arrow at the ready, Kit crawled under the car to check out the various hoses underneath. When he crawled out some minutes later, he said, "We're in luck. There are signs of some chewing but I didn't find any leaks so the rats must have been scared off before they could chew all the way through. Let's go get us some tires."

Bridie joined them. They made their way down the lane. Again Ty kept guard. Kit put the van into neutral and they pushed it over onto the lawn. Then Kit got to work. As Kit removed each tire, Bridie wheeled it up the lane to where the Honda sat. When they had all four, they retreated to the Honda and Kit started switching the tires. The one patched tire was held in reserve. Kit used the car's regular spare tire and put the patched tire in the trunk.

"Now at least we have wheels again," he commented. "From last night's activities, it's obvious Tigne Sh'dah has reinforcements which

means he'll probably have access to one or more cars, too. We're back on an even footing.”

“Yes, unless or until they get hold of more guns,” worried Bridie.

“If they had had guns, they would have used them last night,” reasoned Kit. “No use worrying about what could be till it happens.”

* * *

Electricity was restored abruptly around six thirty that evening. Conveniently. It was just as dusk started to settle. Unless Tigne Sh'dah called up another storm, they'd have lights as a defense during the night. Across the road there were still no lights. Evidently their foes were acting like squatters on Mrs. Sackle's property and didn't want anyone to know they were there. There were no lights, and doubtless no water or phone connection, either. Unless one of them had a cell phone, they were as cut off as was Gannet's group.

No car had pulled into the Sackle driveway since Heights had driven away and gotten stuck. They had no way of knowing how Tigne Sh'dah's new recruits had arrived, but they didn't seem to have their own transportation, or at least didn't park within sight of the Sackle home. So far, Gannet's side seemed to have the upper hand. But there was no way of knowing how long that would last.

Not long after a simple dinner of soup and sandwiches, most everyone took a nap. They wanted to be fresh for whatever the night might bring. Bridie took first watch to allow Ty and

Jenny a little private time. She decided to watch from the roof. Hermit wasn't on guard yet. The owl usually showed up between eleven and midnight. The air was cool, fresh scrubbed after all the rain. It was so quiet that the crickets' chirping sounded as loud as a symphony. It was a homey sound, one that spelled 'country' to her.

Bridie could hardly believe all the things that had happened since she'd started college here. Her studies were interesting and often challenging. Her aunt's life had changed to include not only herself, but also Kit and then little Gannet. She had found two new terrific friends in Ty and Jenny, a little sister in Gannet, and renewed her acquaintance with Lady May. If all this weird stuff hadn't happened, she'd feel on top of the world. Instead, she was on top of a house waiting to be attacked. How bizarre was that?!

Every minute or so, she shifted her position. The moon's sliver, bigger than yesterday, shone bright in the sky, but it was so thin that it obscured very little of the stars around it. That was one advantage to being out in the country. One could see the stars and the moon so much more easily. There were too many lights in town and on campus. There, one had to climb all the way up into the chapel's bell tower in order to see above the lights. It was a beautiful view! Oh! There went Hermit, out on patrol. It must be later than she'd thought. She glanced at her watch. Luckily, the minute and hour hands were coated to shine in the dark. It was eleven thirty. She'd wake Jenny in another half hour.

Bridie now faced directly toward the

roadway down the lane. She saw something glint for just a second. Possibly, someone had opened or closed Mrs. Sackle's front door. Bridie peered but couldn't see any more. A few minutes later, she heard Hermit hooting for all she was worth. The fast flutter of her wings indicated she had someone in her sights and was worrying them. A moment later, she caught sight of someone just crossing the path of the barn's spotlight, not all that far away from the garage and the Honda.

The car! Someone was going after the car! She rapped on the roof and Kit and Ty emerged within seconds. "The car!" shouted Bridie. Immediately the men leaped down the walk to the gate, flashlights beaming. Whoever was out there, warned by Bridie's shout, had about-faced and was hurrying back the way he'd come. Kit's beam caught him for just a second, and flashed off something metal, something long and thin.

"We'd better check it," he said grimly.

One tire had been slashed. They'd have to use the patched tire after all. "We're going to move the car," said Kit. "If we take down that piece of fence by the garage, we can park it by the barn."

"Too bad the garage is full of stuff," commented Ty.

"I wouldn't trust them not to try and burn it down. No, it'll be safer by the barn," said Kit. "Till tomorrow, we're going to have to keep watch over the car, too."

Bridie climbed down. Ty followed her

inside. He and Jenny shared a hug in passing. Then Jenny emerged and climbed up the trellis. Kit climbed to the top of the fence and scrambled up onto the top of the garage. When Ty took Jenny's place, Bridie came out again and relieved Kit. But there were no more attempts that night.

* * *

Simultaneous with the sunrise, Kit was back outside. Bridie went in for a couple hours of sleep. Kit made a start on making a break in the fence, big enough for the Honda. Ty climbed down from the roof and helped. When the hole was big enough, they pushed the car directly into the line of sight of the spotlight. Then the two ate a quick breakfast and lay down to sleep a little more. They were all getting used to sleeping in spits and spurts. It wasn't as restful as sleeping straight through, but it kept them going.

While they slept, Bennet, Jenny and Gannet kept watch. But all remained undisturbed.

Gannet said, "I think he's readying himself for Friday. He'll need all his power then. I think his hunters may try something on their own, but 'he' (meaning Tigne Sh'dah) will reserve his strength for the coming battle."

"Without his directing them, they don't seem very clever," observed Jenny. "Maybe we should finalize our plans for Friday."

"Yes," agreed Gannet. "The song is ready. The music is ready. But I am not." She turned to Bennet. "I have to prepare. I have to sit here like

this.” She sat on the couch with her little legs crossed and her hands pressed together in her lap. “I will be aware of what's going on around me, but I won't be able to talk or wake up until it is time – when the moon is risen on Friday. You'll have to get me into the cave room, and seat me like this there. You'll all have to stand around me. Only you, Bennet, can touch me. Anyone else will get a shock,” she continued. “And you all, my birds, must make sure none of Tigne Sh'dah's men touch me nor 'he' himself, for if they do, they will drain me and I will not be able to sing with you or vanquish Dark.”

She then ate a huge meal, several peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and endless glasses of cold milk. Then she hugged Bennet hard, kissed Jenny's cheek, sat down and was instantly in a trance. The blue glow was there. When Bennet asked her if she could hear her, Gannet smiled but didn't move a muscle or respond in any other way. When the others came down, it was mid afternoon. Bennet and Jenny cautioned them from touching Gannet and told them her instructions.

“This will make it a bit tricky getting her into the cave, but we'll figure out something,” said Kit. “Her theory that Nemesis' men are acting of their own volition is a relief. Without their boss's will, they don't have much imagination. If we keep up our watch, we'll be fine. We'd better plan to get to the cave early on Friday so we have a chance to set up the lights, too. But we also have to be prepared to go earlier if those goons over there show signs of leaving early.”

Everyone was rested. Bridie and Ty made a

quick visit to check on Lady May. The mare was fine but glad to see them. She still showed no inclination to leave her stall. Her wounds were healing nicely. A couple more days and she'd be as good as new. They petted her for a few minutes before making their way back to the house.

Kit took a look at the slashed tire. It had one deep gouge. He put a plug in it, but only time would tell if it would be enough. The spare tire seemed to be holding its air, but was very bald in spots. They'd have to allow extra travel time so they wouldn't have to push the pace and suffer a possible blowout. Mostly though, they had to protect the car from any more vandalism. If the goons slashed another tire, they'd be in deep trouble.

It seemed that Gannet's theory was right. Without Tigne Sh'dah to guide them, his henchmen lacked the imagination to attack. Bennet and company were not bothered all the rest of that day nor the next. They'd all gotten so used to living with one eye perpetually open for trouble that it took a concerted effort to relax. But Gannet's trance-like state was a very real reminder that the threat was not over.

Bennet stayed close to the child, covering her at night to keep her from getting a chill, occasionally addressing her to let her know they were all there and things were fine. Gannet would smile and Bennet thought her little body grew less tense at her words, but it might just have been her imagination. She preferred to believe it was true though.

CHAPTER 17

Friday. The day they'd all looked forward to. The day they all dreaded. Everyone was up early. Bennet had spent the night in the recliner in the livingroom. She wanted to be there if Gannet should come out of her trance early. But after awhile, the unchanging serenity in Gannet's face and the unwavering blue halo finally lulled her to sleep. She slept, deeply, soundly. She woke the next morning when the others trooped downstairs. Everyone had slept; the watch was held solely by Hermit. Bennet wondered idly if perhaps Gannet was responsible for their slumbers. Regardless, they had all experienced their first night of uninterrupted rest in over a week. And they all felt refreshed, ready for the challenge, if not enthusiastic about it.

A hearty breakfast of French toast, bacon and juice followed. A casual glance out the window showed an undisturbed landscape. Perhaps too

quiet? Senses raised, Kit and Ty ran for the car; Jenny and Bridie ran past them to the barn. But nothing had happened. They peered hard across to Mrs. Sackle's, but there was no clue as to whether it was still occupied or not. They were on their toes now, alert and on watch once again. The girls grained and watered the mare. Kit and Ty went back to the house and started packing up their supplies into four different backpacks. Bennet would not be carrying one; she would be carrying Gannet.

Kit helped to rig a sling so that Bennet could more easily bear the child and so that Gannet would be more secure and cushioned during the climb. Gannet didn't move throughout. It was uncanny how still she had been for the past thirty six hours. Nor had she eaten or drunk anything. But she seemed fine. Whenever addressed she'd smile, so they knew she was okay.

By eleven, they had everything packed to their satisfaction. It turned out that moving the car next to the barn had a bonus effect: noone could see while they loaded it. All was fine until they tried to fit everyone in. There just wasn't space. They had to be careful with Gannet. Especially as noone but Bennet could safely touch her. Kit had tried the merest brush and gotten shocked for his trouble. After that, noone was inclined to doubt Gannet's warnings.

Bennet settled Gannet in the seat behind the driver. She herself would sit in the middle, acting as barrier and protector. Unfortunately, Gannet's crossed position meant that she took more space than she would have otherwise, pushing Bennet

over the middle and well into the space meant for the passenger by the opposite window. Effectively, this meant they would be able to squeeze only two more people into the car, one of the girls by Bennet, and another in the front passenger seat.

Finally, Bridie had an idea. “Why don't I ride Lady May to the caves? I'll go the direct route. Noone will see me and we'll get there about the same time as you do by car.”

Her suggestion was a practical solution but Bennet hated splitting up their group. There was no getting around the logistics: not all of them and their essential supplies would fit into her little Honda. She had to acquiesce. Bridie lost no time in getting Lady May's tack. The mare was ready, in fact eager, for a ride. She had been cooped up in her stall for too long. Bridie's pack was stowed in the car. The house was locked up tight. They were ready.

Bridie hugged everyone but Gannet, but whispered a brief 'see you soon' to her. The she was up in the saddle and on her way. Her path led through the back fields on almost a direct line that bypassed the freeway and motorized traffic. With all the roundabout roads the car must travel, it would take the mare no more time to cover the distance to the caves than it would take the car to traverse the distance even at speed, barring accidents of course. Bridie was a good rider and Lady May didn't take chances. They would be fine. Still, Bennet was glad to see one of the ravens accompanying the two on their way. She would never be able to repay the birds for all their care.

Bridie gone, the rest piled into the car. Kit drove and Ty sat next to him. That left the spot on Bennet's right for Jenny. Luckily she was slightly built; the seating was snug, but they managed. All the supplies were crammed into the trunk. Once everyone was belted in, Kit started the engine and they proceeded down the driveway. As they approached the roadway, their answer as to whether or not Mrs. Sackle's house was still occupied was given. Heights and another man came running out the door and attempted to block them but Kit revved the engine and gave no quarter. Either the men got out of the way or he'd run them down. Both men chose to dive to the roadsides and let them pass. Their faces reflected their rage as the car passed by and speeded around the bend.

This was good news. They would reach the cave and have plenty of time to set up before Tigne Sh'dah and his cohorts could hinder them. Of course, Tigne Sh'dah knew to go to the underground cavern, but perhaps he would not know to come in the back way like they planned to do, thus shortening the trip. The extra time would be needed; they had not yet figured out how to lower Gannet through the 'back door' from the ledge to the path below, all without anyone getting shocked in the process, or letting Gannet fall.

Thirty minutes later, they drew up in front of the visitor's center. There was no sign of Bridie yet. They started to unpack the trunk and had almost finished when a raven's caw sounded. They looked up and then heard hoof beats approaching; it was Lady May and Bridie. Both horse and rider looked to be in fine shape. Bridie's face was flushed. She was grinning from sheer pleasure; the ride had been

invigorating. She jumped down and walked the mare back and forth until Lady May had cooled down. Then she removed the saddle, rubbed her down and put hobbles on her next to a stream and a nice patch of grass under a bower of trees. The mare would be happy there. The raven settled in the branches above. Bennet was sure the bird would guard the mare until they came back. The saddle and tack were stored in the Honda's now-empty trunk.

Bridie joined the others in their hasty lunch, making short work of the sandwiches and fruit she'd been allotted. Everybody topped off their water bottles and used the facilities. Who knew when they would exit the cave next? All this time Gannet sat, entranced, first in the car and then on a blanket on the grass. Not a word nor a movement could be discerned.

When everybody was ready, they trooped up the hill to the exit. Kit went inside to study the logistics.

“Okay, I have an idea,” he said. We can't touch Gannet. However, we can move her remotely. We can rig up a basket with ropes and blankets and lower her using them.”

Bennet was pleased by the idea and so it seemed was Gannet, for she smiled.

Now that they had a plan, they wanted to implement it immediately. Bennet had brought a thick square cushion for Gannet to sit upon in the cave. They placed a blanket on the ground, the cushion over it, and attached ropes to the corners of

the blanket. They were careful to secure the ropes well; they didn't want any slippage during the maneuver. When Kit was satisfied, Bennet lifted Gannet onto the cushion. She balanced there well. They were lucky that the opening was a wide one. It would be no problem to fit the seated child through it.

The extra gear and lunch remains were packed away in the backpacks. Everybody donned jackets; Bennet put Gannet's on her after which Gannet's arms and hands resumed their former position. Headlamps were checked and switched on. They wanted to keep their hands free. Backpacks were strapped on. They were ready.

“Girls,” Kit addressed Bridie and Jenny, “go on in and light the way. Ty, help them down and then come back. You and I can throw the packs down to the girls. Bennet, you'll go next. Ty, if you will, give her a hand? And then you and I can lower Gannet down for Bennet to catch. Everybody got it?” At their nods, Kit smiled encouragingly.

Ty helped Jenny down. She, in turn, guided Bridie's descent. Soon the two of them were dragging the packs out of the way. Then it was Bennet's turn. With lights showing the hand holds, she had no trouble descending. Both girls stabilized her till she was on level ground. Then, Kit on one side and Ty on the other, they lowered the blanketed bundle gently from the lip of the ledge. It wasn't a big drop but they didn't want to jostle Gannet. Bennet gathered the girl, with a little difficulty, but Gannet was such a little girl that she managed. Once she had her, the guys let the ropes slide through their hands until Bennet could place her on

the floor. Then Kit and Ty climbed down.

It was time to switch Gannet from the improvised basket to the harness that Kit had devised. Gannet would be strapped to Gannet's back with the cushion and blankets to support her crossed legs and rump. It looked sort of like a papoose's cradle with a few modifications. Although small, carrying Gannet for any length of time would be wearying for Bennet. Kit tried to make her as comfortable as possible with thick padded supporting straps across shoulders, chest and waist. Distributing the support would help. The hard part was in getting Gannet into the cradle and onto Bennet's back without touching her. Bennet solved part of the problem by sitting. Once she'd placed Gannet in the cradle, the others helped guide her arms through the straps. Then they helped her get to her feet. They held bits of the blanket to support the cradle until Bennet could adjust the straps for maximum comfort.

When she thought it optimally situated, they eased away. Now Bennet was supporting Gannet totally on her own. She stumbled a little, rebalanced, leant a little forward and nodded; she was ready. The others quickly donned their own backpacks and Kit took the lead. Bennet was next in line, followed by Ty and Jenny. Bridie brought up the rear.

It was a forty-five minute trek from chamber to exit under normal circumstances. With Bennet carrying Gannet, the time lengthened again by half with frequent pauses for her to rest and catch her breath. Kit and Ty tried to support her at each such stop, but the prohibition of touching Gannet made it

hard. When they finally got to the chamber, Bennet's legs were quivering from the strain. Getting Gannet out of the cradle proved tricky. First they had to help Bennet into a sitting position, holding edges of the blanket to ease the strain. Once down, Bennet wasn't sure she'd be able to get up again anytime soon. She loosened the straps while the others kept their holds on the blanket. Noone wanted to catapult Gannet from the cradle; they wanted to ease her onto the floor, and they succeeded, but it took teamwork.

While Bennet rested, Kit, Ty and the girls dropped their packs and dug out some granola for Bennet to munch on, to replenish her energy. Next began the process of finding a good spot for holding the ceremony. Gannet's revelations that a mere touch by Tigne Sh'dah or one of his men could rob her of her strength and ability to fight back made it imperative that they find a defensible spot. They didn't want to make it easy for their foes to sneak up on them. It took a good two hours before their explorations turned up a side chamber whose entrance was well concealed. It was free of any stalactites or stalagmites, big enough for their planned defensive measures, and it would not be easy for anyone to hide or sneak up on them.

They went back to where Bennet and Gannet waited. Bennet was able to help now. While the others brought the backpacks, she carried the child to the chamber and settled her in the center, still on her cushion, still serene of countenance. She placed blankets around her to protect her from the chill. The lanterns were retrieved from the packs. Eleven of them were placed in a circle a goodly distance out so that there was plenty of space for all of them

within its confines. They turned them on to be sure they were working properly and put extra batteries next to each. The twelfth lantern was placed in a niche above the entrance and wedged firmly in place. It would not be easy to dislodge it without entering the chamber first and, thus, exposing their presence. More surprises were in store.

They pulled out several plastic tubs which were full of metal ball bearings. It took awhile, but they placed a yard-wide swathe of them outside the perimeter of the lanterns, leaving a narrow path for their own egress. They hoped this would keep the hunters at bay long enough for them to carry Gannet to someplace behind them before anyone could touch her. But this was only the final defense. They had other delaying tactics in mind, as well.

Outside the metal marbles, a yard's distance, Ty carefully poured a thick layer of liquid wax all along the edge. The wax measured a foot wide. He moved out another yard and poured another. Then he did it a third time. These comprised the first, second, and third lines of defense. When the time came, each would be set alight with a pause of a couple of minutes or so between each alighting. There was plenty of fresh air in the chamber, coming from several different points. There was no worry that the fire barriers would rob them of their oxygen. Once the wax barriers were consumed, they expected their foes to rush forward and, in so doing, slipping and sliding and hopefully losing their balance on the metal balls.

From just outside the side chamber's entrance to their circle, they scattered handful upon handful of sticky caramelized popcorn. Walking on

the kernels would announce anyone's arrival and the stickiness would prevent them from just sweeping the kernels aside; once stepped upon, the kernels would stick to their shoes and would continue to squeak with each step.

Their worst fear was that curious innocent spelunkers might explore and find them. But the side chamber was naturally well disguised and the circle itself was some distance from where most people might pause and look around. The lanterns would be off till the last second so the group would not be visible. Even Gannet's blue halo would be difficult to spot. The main chamber was vast. It was impossible to see into the side chamber until one had walked some distance into it and made one's way past a cluster of stalactites and stalagmites. Then one would have to enter the side chamber and turn a little to one's left before the blue haze could be spotted. If anyone did by chance enter their haven, at the very least they would have warning of such an approach. It was the best they could do.

All of these preparations took time. They had arrived in the main chamber around one p.m. Add to that the two hours in finding their current quarters. Then all the preparations with a rest break for eating. It was well after seven p.m. before they were finished. Then they took another deserved rest and time to refresh themselves. Kit had brought plastic rings which when blown up allowed them to sit above the cold ground. Seated in a circle with a couple of lanterns alight, they shared their sandwiches, granola bars and oranges that they'd backpacked in, washing it all down with swigs from their water bottles. Then they set a watch.

One stood at the entrance to the side chamber, another by the cluster of icy growths. At the first alarm, they could all be within their circle and ready to set the first fire barrier alight. The watch was shifted every half hour between Kit, Ty, Jenny and Bridie. Again, Bennet stuck close to Gannet. There were only three hours left until moonrise. They had no idea how soon Tigne Sh'dah and his henchmen would arrive. If they had left soon after Gannet's group, and gone the usual way, they could arrive at any time. However, if they were not experienced cavers, they would take a considerably longer time. This was their hope.

It's what Nemesis and his goons did after their arrival and before moonrise that worried them. It would be a long wait, one which they planned to spend in the dark, although Gannet's halo provided some relief in the gloom. Those on watch would not be so fortunate. However, the longer it took Tigne Sh'dah to find them, the better. They turned on their headlamps periodically to relieve the blackness, but were careful to make sure they were alone first. It was a comfort to know that it would be no easier on their opposition, who would not be using any more lights than necessary for they would not want to give away their own position. Conversation was kept to a minimum and conducted in whispers; sound carried easily down there.

The longer they were in the chamber, the colder it seemed. Over time, the warmth was leached from their bodies. They were all dressed for the coolness, but had to keep moving to keep from stiffening up and just to keep their blood pumping. Bennet worried about Gannet. The child

was so still! Although she, too, had been dressed warmly and wrapped in blankets, her stillness would cause her to lose body heat faster. And she was so small. But there was nothing more that could be done. Bennet stayed close and occasionally chafed Gannet's hands and breathed warm air onto her cheeks. Gannet smiled at the attention, but her eyes remained closed and her body limp.

Time passed slowly. A couple of caving groups passed through the main cavern but did not stop long nor explore further; they continued on their way quickly. The watch had changed five times before sound warned them of another approach.

This time was different. Whoever approached was trying to keep their noise to a minimum. And when they had reached the entrance to the cavern, they doused their flashlights. Very unusual behavior! Ty, who was on outermost watch, doused his light and made his way to where Jenny kept vigil by the side chamber's entry way. He didn't speak, just tapped her hand twice – the signal they'd decided on to alert the others to Tighe Sh'dah's presence.

They eased back inside the chamber and Ty flashed his head beam on and off twice. The others would now know of their foe's arrival, too. Utter silence prevailed. Ty stayed by the entrance. Jenny flashed her light briefly to make her way through the narrow path between the barriers. Once within, she waited with the others. Bridie was ready to light the outermost paraffin layer when given the signal. It was then about an hour and a half before

moonrise.

Their side chamber was angled some distance off to the right of the main cavern. A craggy outshoot disguised the entrance. It would not be found easily. But now that their foe was here, it would be a test of their nerves until the moment that Tigne Sh'dah would exclaim 'ah ha! I've found them!'

Tigne Sh'dah had good control over his goons but they were not happy in the vast cavern, tired and irascible after the long trek through the caves, and dismayed by the idea of conducting a further search as silently as possible, with only flashlights to aid them. It was inevitable that one or another would stumble, fall, knock into something and swear. These sounds carried, letting their listeners follow their progress in their search. It also helped them discern how many had accompanied Tigne Sh'dah: three men.

His searchers were not having much luck. And Tigne Sh'dah was growing impatient. After almost an hour's fruitless exploration, he called his men to him and changed his tactics. He called up three shadow hounds and devised simple leashes for each, one held by each of his hunters. This way the hounds could track and the men could follow. It was impossible to see the hounds here in the cavern; they blended naturally into the dark. The men couldn't shine their lights down or forward for then the hounds cringed and refused to move. So they had to direct their beams to the side which made it difficult to keep their footing. The hounds moved relentlessly; the men were on their own in following the dogs and that was not easy.

Ty saw all this and knew they would be discovered in no time if something wasn't done. He stepped back into the side chamber and flashed his beam three times – the signal for Kit and Jenny to come to him. They reached his side quickly. He whispered what was going on and his plan. The three inched their way out of the chamber and, by memory, made their way across to the cluster of stalactites and stalagmites. Each of the three hid in a different section of the cluster. They waited.

All too soon the hounds made their way around the crag towards them. When they and their handlers got close to the cluster, the three waiting turned on their flashlights and headlamps. The resulting glow was reflected and refracted by the icy pinnacles, creating even more light, blinding Tigne Sh'dah's men for a moment. The hounds faded away instantly. The homemade leashes dropped to the floor startling the goons even more. When the hounds were gone, Kit, Ty, and Jenny immediately turned off their lights, plunging them all back into darkness. Waiting until their opponents' flashes were pointed away from them, they quietly eased their way back to their chamber, the goons none the wiser.

Tigne Sh'dah's men were lost. The hounds had traversed the cavern at some speed. The men didn't know exactly where they were nor how they had gotten there, especially as they hadn't been able to track the trail with their flashlights as they were pulled here and there. When their flashlights began to dim, they raised their voices for help. Eventually their master found them and hushed them sharply. Whispering, they told him what had happened.

There was no way Tigne Sh'dah could know where exactly they were, but he probably guessed they were close by. He distributed new batteries for his men's flashlights and had them continue their search. He did not bother to call up more shadow hounds.

Meanwhile, all was quiet in the hidden chamber. Those within listened to the noises made by the searchers. They were getting closer. Bridie checked her watch. It was well after ten p.m. Just over a half hour till moonrise. If they could keep their nemesis at bay for another forty minutes, he would not be able to stop them from singing.

But their luck was running out. Ty, who was still at his post next to the entrance, saw a reddish glow getting closer. Tigne Sh'dah had lost his patience or else was beginning to panic. He was using some of his hoarded power to find their hiding place. Ty withdrew just far enough within to flash a warning to the others. Gannet's blue glow shone softly and had spread; his warning was superfluous. He knew it was just a matter of moments now. He turned on the lantern by the entrance. The light, after being so long in the dark, could have dazzled him, but he looked away as he turned it on and his eyes adjusted rapidly. He made his way along the slim hidden path to the center, avoiding the sticky caramelized puffs and joined the others at the circle's center. They waited.

The sound of feet crossing over the kernels was their first warning. There was a pause after the first couple of steps. Maybe their pursuers were looking for a way around, but finally they must have given it up as a lost cause and resumed their

tramping until they caught sight of the lantern light just inside the entrance. Again there was a pause. Perhaps they were trying to see a way to enter the chamber without being illuminated. That, too, they had to concede.

Tigne Sh'dah entered the room boldly. His red glow was muted by the lantern's light. Perhaps he felt it was no longer necessary, or else he just wanted to conserve his energy. Either way, he let the glow fade away.

“I know you are here,” he said. “I can see the child's blue glow. It's still possible to resolve this peacefully. Give me the child and we'll leave immediately.”

When noone saw fit to answer, he said, “So be it.” Then he motioned his men in and forward towards the blue glow. They advanced purposefully, but slowly. They had learned to be a little wary in their dealings with this group. Also, they were unsure of their footing. They were unable to avoid all of the popcorn; the sounds they made were loud and clearly irked those making them. The goons growled their frustration, but continued forward as their master had ordered.

CHAPTER 18

A few steps more brought Tigne Sh'dah's men within reach of the outermost fire barrier. Bridie lit the wax and inched her way back to the next one. Flames shot up and around the circle, greedily eating away at the wax. The fire was impenetrable and wide. The goons leaped up and back, away from the flames; they were caught totally by surprise and were unsure what to do next. Two walked along the perimeter of the flames, but some distance away. However, they didn't walk far enough to spot the one tiny breach. They turned back and awaited instructions from their master.

Tigne Sh'dah calmly looked around them. The fire gave them glimpses of the group within. He sniffed the air, trying to discern what was burning. But the fire burned odorlessly. Then he went back towards the chamber's entrance. He continued on through, his reddish glow once again

apparent. Everyone waited to see what he planned to do. They could no longer see him or his haze.

The first firewall was almost burnt out. Bridie lit the next one. It was burning brightly. They could all feel its heat. The chamber was warming up nicely. Then they heard a cacophony of cracking and crashes, and then the sound of splashing. The gurgles and splashes came closer. Tigne Sh'dah had melted the ice clusters! Icy water created a river that roved in all directions, seeking out every crack and crevice in its vicinity. Some of the water made its way into the side chamber. It was much reduced from the original deluge, but was still strong enough to cross to the second firewall. Water and fire met. Steam erupted and the fire went out, but the fire had been so intense that it stopped the advance of the water any further but for a tiny trickle.

Bridie lit the last firewall. Some of the water had surged up enough to splash the wax such that it sputtered a bit before it caught fire. Then it burned merrily. Tigne Sh'dah's men crossed to where the second firewall had been and stood there, waiting until the fire died down and they would have their chance to grab the child. Their gazes were hungry and mean in the firelight. They thought their prey to be almost in their hands.

At last the fire died down. Those within its confines had still not turned on the lanterns. When the fire died, everything grew dark again, with just the faint blue glow of Gannet's halo pushing at the dark. It did not extend beyond her 'birds'.

The goons had not seen what lay on the floor

past the fire line. They crossed the waxy residue, heading eagerly towards their prize, all but ignoring the group that surrounded her. It would only require one touch and she would be theirs. Tigne Sh'dah brought up the rear.

Suddenly his men lurched in every direction. They lost their footing, emitting startled cries and some of pain. When they tried to stand again, it took them some time to find a place free of balls in which to regain their balance. Tigne Sh'dah at first couldn't understand what was happening. He stopped and his red haze blazed up until he could see what lay on the floor. He angrily kicked at the balls until he had a path free and clear. Ignoring his men, he advanced.

This is what Bennet and her friends had been waiting for. Each of them turned on the two lanterns nearest to where they stood. The lights blazed and Tigne Sh'dah brought up a hand in front of his face. He backed up quickly, not quite able to avoid the metal balls in his rush, so that his retreat was an awkward one. He kept going until he was beyond the boundaries of the lanterns' glare. His face was no longer benign or calm. His rage transfigured his mien into a horrible caricature and he growled in his anger. He motioned his men forward. The three men had by now found their footing and followed their master's example, kicking the metal balls aside until they, too, could move forward unimpeded. The light made it easy for them to see now and they advanced more confidently, that is until they caught sight of Ty and what he held.

Ty stood in front of them, bow at the ready

and an arrow nocked, trained on them. Now they knew who had shot at them on the farm. Two flinched visibly; they had already been the recipients of his efforts and knew how painful it was. Those two hesitated. That was all Ty needed. He shot the third in the leg. The man went down with an audible moan, grasping his leg, unable to rise.

Within seconds, Ty had another arrow readied. He aimed at one of the two remaining. The other, seeing where Ty trained his gaze, saw his chance. He rushed forward from a different angle. But he had forgotten to take the others into account. Kit took him out with a single swing of his baseball bat. Meanwhile, Ty aimed and let fly at his second target. But the goon had fallen flat when he first saw Ty turn his way. It saved him. The arrow flew over his head, missing him by a scant inch. But the man wasn't safe for long. Ty nocked a third arrow and this time did not miss. The arrow lodged in the meaty part of the man's right thigh; he grabbed his leg and lost consciousness.

Tigne Sh'dah now stood alone. He could come no closer because of the light. His men were down. His shadow hounds would be useless. There was nothing more he could do...or was there?

Bridie screamed. The others turned startled faces towards her. They looked but could see nothing and noone near her. Bridie gasped and screamed again, her eyes focused in front of her on the ground. There was nothing visible there but she was obviously terrified. She backed up until she came up against the pile of backpacks. She tripped and fell but never took her eyes away from the spot

where her fears focused. Then they all understood. Tigne Sh'dah was *influencing* her, making her see what she feared the most: rats.

Jenny quickly picked up her flute and started playing. She played for some minutes before Bridie stopped screaming and came to her senses. She still shook from the fright, but she got to her feet and glared at Tigne Sh'dah. He'd failed again. Before he could focus on any of the others, Gannet came out of her trance. Her hands fluttered up to stroke Bennet's cheek. She opened her eyes and Bennet helped her to stand.

Everyone clustered around the child. The time had come. Gannet's song began low, first just a few notes hummed in tune to what Jenny played. Then Bennet, Bridie, Kit and Ty started singing the first verse, singing the melody in four part harmony. Bridie sang soprano, Bennet – alto, Kit was baritone, and Ty sang a deep bass. The sound welled up and echoed throughout the chamber. Tigne Sh'dah froze. He could neither move nor speak. His reddish haze, so strong at first, diminished.

Then Gannet joined in, her voice rising high above, intermingling and harmonizing with the others. Her voice was pure and sweet, clear as crystal. It reached out and encircled them, then reached farther and touched Tigne Sh'dah. His body whipped back and forth and around as though a mighty wind lashed at him. His face registered pain. And then he lost consciousness. He was held upright by the force of the music, but his frame hung limp and his head flopped from side to side. He looked like a puppet on a string.

Gannet's voice rose still higher, impossibly high until her 'birds' could no longer hear it, yet the room was so full of sound that they rocked to its reverberations. Tigne Sh'dah faded away and was gone. Gannet sang one last note. The room vibrated to it; the lanterns blew out, one after another. When the music ended, so too did the light. Gannet's halo died away. They were plunged into natural darkness once again.

Kit and Bennet immediately turned on their headlamps. They turned, spotlighting their friends until they, too, could turn on their lights. Moaning filled the room; the three goons were conscious. Bennet reached down to gather Gannet close but she must have moved. Bennet swung her light around but could not see where she'd got to. She shone her light onto the floor thinking Gannet might have collapsed but, no, she wasn't there either.

“Gannet! Gannet? Gannet, where are you?!” she called.

Alerted, the others started calling and looking too, but Gannet was nowhere to be found.

“She's gone,” sobbed Bennet. “I've lost her.”

Kit took her into his arms and held her close. Nothing he could say would take the hurt away. The little girl they had all come to love was gone.

Minutes later, the moans and cries of the goons intruded, becoming too insistent to be ignored. With the demise of their master, they had reverted to their normal selves. They were hurt and

had no idea of where they were, how they'd gotten there, or how they'd gotten hurt. They were scared and in the dark but knew someone else was there and they wanted their help. When they saw the faces below the headlamps, they registered no recognition, with one minor exception. Heights seemed to vaguely recognize Ty, but he wasn't able to pinpoint where or when he'd seen him before.

It took some sorting out. What could be, was unobtrusively collected and put back into the backpacks. The hurt men had to be helped to the exit and that took quite some time; two of them couldn't walk without help, and the third was woozy on his feet due to a concussion. The five friends worked methodically but silently. They were all in shock from the way things had turned out and grieved over the loss of Gannet. They were exhausted, and battered. They worked in a mechanical daze. When they had all exited the cave, it was past midnight. Two lonely cars were parked by the visitor's center. One was Bennet's Honda; the other was claimed by one of the hurt men. Kit took the task of ferrying the three men, actually two teenagers and Heights, to the local emergency room.

Their story was that they'd found the three men while exploring the cavern and had no idea who had hurt them or how. Ty concealed his bow and arrows until Kit had driven away with them, then he retrieved them from the ledge just inside the exit. Bridie drove them back to the farm. Kit would return by taxi after dropping off the wounded.

Bennet sat in the car in a shocked trance.

She heard nothing, saw nothing. Her grief consumed her. Her baby was gone. The others gave her sympathetic glances but made only a couple of half-hearted attempts to talk to her. Then they succumbed to their own grief and weariness and shut up. It was a quiet drive and a quiet group who emerged at the farm and went up to their beds.

* * *

Bennet got ready for bed without realizing what she was doing. She acted out of habit. She climbed into bed and lay there, unable to sleep; her thoughts revolved round one thought only: Gannet was gone. When Kit came in much later, he snuggled up against her but she was barely aware of his presence. Mute wandered in and curled up by her shoulder; Bennet neither moved nor acknowledged the kitten.

Some time after four in the morning, everyone in the house was finally asleep, exhausted both mentally and physically. All but Bennet. She lay there, warmed on one side by Kit, on the other by Mute, but she felt numb, cold.

When the clip clop of hooves sounded outside her bedroom window, she heard it, but it didn't register. When a little girl's voice called her name, a modicum of awareness entered her eyes. That had been exactly how Gannet used to call her, back before she had disappeared. Tears burned her eyes.

The sound came again. She must be going mad. Or else this was some horrendous nightmare, torturing her over her loss. Even her own mind

gave her no peace!

The third time it sounded, Mute awoke. The kitten lifted her head, jumped off the bed and streaked from the room. Only then did Bennet realize the kitten had been sleeping next to her. She vaguely wondered what the kitten was so curious about. Then a yowling arose, the seldom-heard cry of the little cat and it didn't stop. The cat wanted out. Now!

Bennet reluctantly dragged herself out of bed and down the stairs. Mute waited by the kitchen door. As soon as Bennet opened the door, Mute raced down the walk to the gate, still vocalizing for all she was worth. Only one other time had Bennet heard her do this: when she had first found Gannet. This was so strange! As Bennet moved to shut the door, she heard the distinct snort of a horse. That was weird. They had left Lady May up by the caves. What horse could be outside?

She was curious, despite her depressed state. And Mute was so loud! It was best to find out what the kitten was so agitated about. She went outside and traipsed down the walk to the gate. Almost there, she peered through the gloom. Sure enough, the shadowy outline of a horse was perceivable. In fact, it looked familiar.

Closer. It looked like Lady May! But how could she have gotten here? Had she somehow gotten loose from the tree and come all this way by instinct? And what about the hobbles? Who had removed them? Bennet was sorely puzzled. But there was no denying the horse stood there, patiently awaiting Bennet's attentions. Bennet

mentally shook herself. She had to take the mare to the barn and settle her in. Hopefully she hadn't damaged her hooves or anything along the way.

Bennet reached for the mare's head to fondle her cheek. And then she noticed a small bundle on Lady May's back. What was that? She reached up to touch it. It moved!

Gannet sat up and blearily cried, "Mommy, I brought Lady May home. I'm so tired. I want to go to my bed, but I can't get down. Lady May is too big."

Bennet thought she was going to faint. "Gannet, is it really you? Oh, Gannet, sweetheart!" She gathered the tuckered little girl into her arms, cradling her and hugging her, kissing her small face over and over again.

Gannet sighed in relief. "Home," she murmured and promptly fell asleep.

Bennet wept tears of joy and carried her precious bundle into the house and up the stairs. She tucked Gannet in beside her and fell asleep, cradling the babe, eyes still wet. If this was a dream, she didn't want to wake up – ever!

EPILOGUE

Summer break. At last!

They had to hurry or they'd be late! Ty, Jenny and Bridie raced one another to the chapel. When they got there, they paused for a moment to catch their breath. Then Ty opened the doors and shepherded the girls inside. They decorously walked down the aisle to the front pews. Gannet smiled at them, looking very pretty in her new rosebud-sprigged dress with its pink ribbons and lacy bodice. She swung her legs back and forth, totally at ease, perfectly happy. Susan sat next to her.

“Here comes Kit,” whispered Gannet loudly.

Kit came through the side door, dressed simply in a blue suit. He wore a pink rosebud in his buttonhole. He smiled at Gannet and those beside her. He didn't join them. Rather, he stood at the head of the aisle and gazed expectantly at the chapel doors. A moment later, the chaplain walked to his side. Jenny stood up and moved to one side. She pulled out her flute and started to play the bridal march. The chapel doors opened and Bennet walked through. She wore an elegant but simple white dress embroidered with tiny roses along the hem, the empire waist and the slashed sleeves. In her hair she wore baby pink roses, and her bouquet held more of the same. She walked serenely up the aisle to join Kit. Gannet slipped from the pew to stand between them.

The chaplain conducted the ceremony without further ado, witnessed by the couple's close friends. Huge smiles crossed all their faces. When the chaplain pronounced them 'man and wife', Gannet whooped, "Hurray! We're a family!" She smiled approvingly as Bennet and Kit kissed. The three embraced. Hand in hand, they proceeded down the aisle, flanked by their friends. And Gannet whispered to herself, 'My birds, my wonderful birds...' and beaming, skipped into the warm, sunny day. Life was good.