

**GANNET SOMME:
THE IRISH ARTIFACT**

by

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Dedication

***This is dedicated to my newborn grandson, Bjartur. He is a precious addition to my and my family's lives.**

Children are our legacy and our hope for the future. It is fascinating to watch them grow, to see how they face life's challenges and pursue their own interests. A strong loving base of family and friends empowers us all; it makes it possible to face what life throws at us with aplomb. Knowing that, no matter what mistakes are made, we will still be loved, gives us the courage to do what must be done, even when the consequences may be dire.

May all our children be loved. They deserve it, unreservedly.

***I also want to thank Mary and Bruce, their neighbors, Annie and Bjarni for making our visit to Wales a happy and memorable one! Our time there made a deep impression in my heart.**

Acknowledgements

I fell in love with the Snowdonia area of north Wales on my visit there! Much of the descriptions in this novel are taken from my own observations. For others, I turned to the plethora of pamphlets I gathered while there as well as consulting sites online. The following are a few sites for those who would like to virtually explore the country. But I would not hesitate to recommend north Wales as a prime destination for an actual vacation! I hope to go back myself one day.

I must apologize to Amlwch for changing the dates of the Viking Festival to suit my own purposes. However, the general description of the festival itself is given as presented at:

<http://www.amlwchvikingfestival.co.uk/>

The quotes used to describe the castles in Wales were taken from the pamphlets provided by the Welsh Assembly Government. Information was obtained at:

www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

and from specific sites:

<http://www.harlech.com>

<http://www.caernarfon.com>

<http://www.castlewales.com/dolw.html>

<http://www.castlewales.com/criccth.html>

<http://www.conwy.com/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beaumaris>

Printed information about Snowdonia was obtained from a pamphlet produced by Attractions of Snowdonia, 41B High Street, Llanberis, Gwynedd.

www.star-attractions.co.uk

General information about the archaeological wing of the National Museum of Ireland was provided by the pamphlet/floor plan provided on-site.

Information on the town Beddgelert can be obtained at:

www.beddgelerttourism.com

Information on the slate caverns in Llechwedd, Wales can be obtained at:

www.llechwedd-slate-caverns.co.uk

Further information about Portmerion Village, Wales, can be obtained at:

www.portmerion-village.com

or info@portmerion-village.com

Further information about Holyhead and the isle of Anglesey can be obtained at:

www.angleseyattractions.wales.com

and www.holyhead.com

CHAPTER 1

“Mo-oom, Mom!,” yelled Gannet, running up the sidewalk and hurtling through the kitchen door. “You’ll never guess what happened in school today!” Shucking her backpack as she moved, Gannet made her way from one room to the next until finally she raced up the stairs to find Bennet in her office, in the act of replacing the phone receiver.

Bennet’s face brightened as she caught sight of her daughter, then assumed an expression of puzzled anticipation as Gannet gave her a warm hug and took up her conversation where she’d left off.

“Mom, you’ll never guess in a hunnert years!” Gannet’s face glowed with excitement. She waved a piece of paper that was creased and a little damp from being so tightly clutched in her hand.

Not giving Bennet any chance to ask the obvious, Gannet thrust the paper into Bennet's hand and before Bennet could read a single word, Gannet uttered "Ireland! We're going to Ireland!"

Finally Bennet was able to focus on the paper and it's highlighted headline: Proposed Cultural Trip to Dublin, Ireland. She quickly scanned the missive while Gannet danced around the room in her enthusiasm. Gannet was quick to note when Bennet had finished reading and leaped back to her side to grasp her hand and look at her hopefully, pleadingly.

"We can go, can't we, Mom?," she asked, her face expressing her every emotion.

Bennet looked at Gannet's face, so alive, and thought to herself that she could deny her daughter nothing. However, mindful of her role as parent, she smiled and said, "Let's wait for your dad to come home and see what his schedule looks like." Then, seeing Gannet's face fall, devastated, she added, "But if he can get a substitute, then I think we'll be able to go."

Like a light switched on, Gannet's face brightened from doldrums to a bright beam of pure happiness. Gannet hugged Bennet hard then, unable to contain herself, dashed back down the stairs and out to share the news with Lady May, her mare and best friend. Bennet watched her go and saw Lady May waiting for her by the fence. Soon, mare and child were racing across the pasture at full tilt. Bennet didn't worry about the pace nor the fact that Gannet rode bareback and without a bridle. She knew that the mare would be extra careful with

her passenger. The two were inseparable; the mare treated Gannet as her foal and was always on the lookout for her.

A little later, Kit walked into the kitchen, and headed straight for Bennet to hug her close and nuzzle at her neck. Before Bennet had a chance to say more than 'welcome home, darling', Gannet burst into the room to encompass both of them in a hug while saying, "Can we go, Dad? It's IRELAND!" Then she let them go to dance an impromptu jig around Bennet and Kit while she waited for Kit's reply.

Kit shot a puzzled but indulgent questioning glance at Bennet who gave a quiet laugh and handed him the missive that Gannet had brought home. Gannet was in a fever of excitement waiting for him to finish reading the note, but when he finally did and looked up, she stood before him, still as a stone, only her eyes giving away her tense anticipation.

Kit pulled her onto his lap and shared a quick warm smile with Bennet before saying, "Hmmm, I think I might be able to find a sub for these two weeks. How about your mom?"

But Gannet, having heard the first all important sentence, had leaped up and become a whirling dervish, whooping 'Ireland! We're going to Ireland! Whoo-hoo!"

Bennet sat down next to Kit and they shared a rueful smile.

"I guess we're going to Ireland," Kit

murmured to Bennet. "I guess we are," she replied, and smiled.

Later, at the dinner table, Bennet looked at Kit thoughtfully. "You know, this is not a bad idea at all. Bridie is studying in Dublin and this would be a wonderful opportunity to see her. It's been months since we saw her last. I miss her."

Mouth full, Gannet nodded her head emphatically to express her agreement. She was very fond of her cousin and looked forward to seeing her again.

Kit nodded, too. "You're right. You should call her and let her know what's in the works, and find out if she'll be able to spend some time with us. She may even have some ideas to pass on to the organizers about the best places to go and what to see for a group of 10 year olds."

Here Gannet broke in and said, "Yes, Mrs. Reilly wanted us to ask our parents for ideas. I'll tell her about Bridie."

"I'll call her this evening," agreed Bennet.

Once Gannet had been settled for the night and the kitchen put to rights, Bennet dug out her phone directory and punched in the number that Bridie had given them months ago. The overseas call had a distinct ring, unlike anything she'd heard before. The line rang five times and Bennet was

about to give up when a breathless voice answered, “Hello?”

“Bridie! It's so good to hear your voice! This is Bennet.”

“Bennet! I'm glad to hear you, too. Hold on just a sec. I just came in the door and want to shed a few things so we can talk in comfort.”

Bennet waited patiently, smiling at Bridie's usual antics. Bridie was an adult version of Gannet: always on the go, breathless and cheery. Even those few first words brought her niece's face and character back to life, vividly.

“There! That's better. So, how are you?” queried Bridie enthusiastically. “How're Kit and Gannet? Have you heard anything from my dad and mom? How's Lady May?”

Bennet laughed. “If you give me a chance, I'll fill you in.”

Bridie laughed, too. “Sorry. It's just that it's been so long and I miss you all, and, well...okay, I'll shut up now and you can talk.”

Bennet was quick to relay the latest about the family and Lady May, and then reached the crux of her call. “I have big news! Gannet's class is planning a cultural trip to Dublin! We are definitely in favor of the idea, and are just hoping that you'll be able to spend some time with us. What do you say?”

Bridie answered, “Wonderful! I can't think

of anything I'd like better! Give me the dates and I'll set them aside! How exciting!”

“Oh,” continued Bennet, “and Gannet's teacher has asked for ideas about places to see and things to do for a class of ten year olds while there, so if you have any ideas, we'll pass them along.”

“I'll make a list and send it to you by email,” promised Bridie. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun! I can hardly wait!”

Bennet laughed. “I think that Gannet is about to dance out of her skin, she is so excited!”

They chatted a little longer, and when Bennet hung up, she was beaming almost as broadly as Gannet had earlier. It promised to be a very happy reunion! She hung up the phone and joined Kit in their room where they talked long into the night about the proposed trip and seeing Bridie again. They had lots of plans to make in the meantime. This would be their first trip abroad as a family. And with their Irish roots, it would, in a way, be a homecoming as well.

CHAPTER 2

The next few weeks went by in a whirl. Bennet made arrangements at the university library to take two weeks' leave. Kit broached one of his research assistants to take over his classes and gave him the prepared notes and visual aids. Bennet and Gannet applied for passports; Kit had only to renew his.

Bridie, true to her word, sent a very informative email to Bennet about sites of interest and fun for the class. Bennet made a copy and then forwarded the email to Gannet's teacher, Mrs. Reilly, who was enthusiastically grateful and made haste to share it with the others on the planning committee. A schedule of events was printed and sent home with each student. Then it was the parents' turn to go through the list and sign

permission slips.

At last, all the preparations were made. The kids had been studying Ireland in class for the last few weeks and had some idea of the history, the geography, and the cultural background of the island. The trip would be the culmination of their studies. Flights and accommodations had been booked, passports had been received. All that remained was to pack. Susan, Bennet's best friend at the university, had agreed to take care of Mute, their cat; a neighbor would take Lady May for the duration and keep a general eye on the farm for them in their absence.

Like Gannet's family, several parents had decided to accompany their children on the trip, so there was a fair percentage of children for each adult. This made things easier for the teacher, as well as for the parents left behind: they knew that the kids would be well looked after on the two week jaunt.

The trip would take place during the last two weeks of the school term, timed that way on purpose. This way, they hoped to benefit from good weather while abroad, and when the children returned home, they could relax and readjust themselves to a different time zone without having to worry about school.

The first leg of the journey was a bus ride to the airport. Everyone gathered early at the school. A special bus had been commandeered to accommodate people as well as luggage. The teacher checked off names from a list and made sure everyone had his or her passport handy before

leaving the school grounds. Then the adventure began. The bus pulled away to shouted goodbyes and a flurry of hand waves from family members left behind.

The bus made good time and they arrived at the airport a good three hours before their flight was scheduled to take off. This was necessary for with twenty-five children and 12 adults, it would take time to check everyone in as well as going through the security check point. The children were in high spirits. Gannet was no exception. She alternated between whispering and giggling with her two best friends, Lacey and Callie, and asking endless questions of Bennet and Kit. But, although the kids were full of energy, most burned it off hopping and twirling in line, staying with the group.

This was a first flight for most of them and no one had the temerity to go further than a couple of feet for fear of getting lost, with one notable exception. One boy, Terry, had flown once before and was not shy in sharing his superior knowledge with his classmates. However, even he stuck pretty close to the group. There were massive crowds in the terminal. Whenever someone pushed past, blocking his view of the rest for a moment, he was quick to reestablish eye contact immediately.

The line inched forward. Eventually it was their turn. Mrs. Reilly stood ready to count her charges off as they were checked in, every two or three with an adult who then took charge of their boarding passes and made sure they didn't get lost. This was helped by the fact that most of the kids tended to stick with their particular friends, and those traveling with parents stuck with them. After

check-in, they divvied up into smaller groups and explored the concourse. But an hour before their plane was scheduled to depart, they all gathered once more and queued for the security check. The kids thought it was interesting, rather than a chore, having to remove their jackets, shoes, and backpacks to go through the checkpoints. To them it was just another part of the adventure.

When everyone was through, they made their way to the waiting lounge. Not everyone got seats, but the kids didn't mind. They preferred moving about anyway, one moment staring out the window, the next snaking their way through the crowds to get a snack. Here, the adults didn't have to watch the kids so sharply – there was nowhere else for them to go. But, some twenty minutes before they were to board, the teacher called them all together and had groups use the facilities turn and turn about. By the time the last group came back, the first rows were boarding.

The passenger cabin was full. Most of the kids shared a row of three seats with one friend and an adult. There was some disappointment in the seating arrangements but no one made a real fuss. The kids settled in their seats, retrieving items from their backpacks to occupy them during the flight, and chatted with their friends.

This was only the first flight of two. First they would fly to New York. And then they would switch to a direct flight to Dublin. The luggage had been checked all the way through, so the adults had only to keep an eye on their charges. Once in New York, the next flight left from the same airport, JFK, so they did not have to worry about ferrying so

many charges across the city. After landing, they would have two hours to find the correct terminal, get their boarding passes, and stretch their legs before boarding.

Things went smoothly for the most part. Only one child suffered from air sickness and soon recovered. The kids took turns with the window seat so that each could get a view of the clouds and view while in the sky. It was very different from being on the ground; they plastered their faces to the windows, enchanted by the bird's eye view, and awed by how small everything looked from so high up.

Gannet sat with Lacey and Kit. She would sit with Callie on the second flight. Bennet was on the other side of the aisle with Callie and Bernadette. At first, the girls were constantly calling to one another from one side of the aisle to the other, but as time flew by, even they tired of craning their necks and trying to hear what the others were saying or doing; finally, they settled into their seats and murmured quietly with their immediate seatmates. The adults were in the aisle seats so Kit and Bennet were able to talk quietly with one another now and then, but mostly kept track of their charges and their needs.

Everyone was glad to deplane in New York and stretch their legs. Friends gravitated to those they usually congregated with, and shared experiences and observations from the first flight. Mrs. Reilly again sent group after group to the bathrooms, and then they marched off to find the next terminal and check in. This was a much simpler affair than it had been in Ohio, for they

didn't have to worry about the luggage. And with this out of the way, the kids, with their designated adult, were free to explore the many shops along the concourse. Regretfully, it was not as easy for the adults, pulled first one way and then another by their charges, but they had known what to expect in advance, so they accepted it as part and parcel of the whole.

Again, an hour before the planned departure, everyone met up in front of the security checkpoint. The kids, now old hands at the procedures, filed along and confidently made their way through. Once through, there were more shops to explore as they made their way to the waiting area. But finally they tired of even that and settled in groups here and there, sitting on the floor and chatting quietly among themselves. Mrs. Reilly organized a last run to the bathrooms, and then everyone just waited. It turned out to be a longer wait than first anticipated.

Everyone had gotten up very early that morning to meet the chartered bus, and now energy levels were running low. Mrs. Reilly knew that such a delay might occur and had planned ways to distract the children. She gathered them in a rough circle and started a story game. One began a story, then stopped at a particular point and the next in the circle took up the thread. It was a quiet game but it lifted their spirits and soon they waited with baited breath to see what the next person would say. They were deep in the game, and laughing at some of the silly quips when the announcement to board broke over the speakers. Mrs. Reilly looked on with contentment.

Once again, the kids were divided up with

one classmate and one adult. Mrs. Reilly made sure that everyone rotated so that no one was left out. She was a wise teacher. Bennet and Kit and the other parent helpers were well pleased with her efforts and respected the seeming ease with which she took charge and kept her children in line, interested and cooperative. They knew how very difficult that could be.

This flight would be much much longer. The kids were delighted to find there was a movie to watch during the flight. But they also had certain materials that Mrs. Reilly had provided them with that required both time and attention to complete before they reached Dublin, Ireland. Being strapped into their seats with one classmate and an attentive adult was not that much different from being in the classroom, so quiet reigned for the most part.

The children concentrated on their tasks which were varied so that they wouldn't grow bored. Between those, dinner, and the movie, all were ready for a nap during the last hour and a half of the flight. This refreshed them enough that when they landed, they had the energy needed to go through the passport check, collect their luggage and follow Mrs. Reilly to the waiting bus that had been chartered to take them to their hotel and, once assigned, to find their rooms.

Each room had two queen beds, and all the beds were used. Some rooms had one adult and 3 children, some 2 and 2, depending on families and preferences. Bennet, Kit and Gannet had a room to themselves. It was with relief that they reached their room and collapsed onto the beds. After a

quick wash, they all were ready for a quiet night, even though it wasn't all that late local time. And when Bennet opened the window a crack, it was apparent that the night life in Dublin was going strong; they heard foot traffic, buses and taxis shooting by. As tired as they were, it did not keep them awake. Soon they were fast asleep.

The next morning, everyone woke very early, not yet acclimated to the time change. Everyone leisurely showered, unpacked, and got organized for the day, using the time until the breakfast room opened. Gannet kept going from one window to the next, gazing out at what there was to see, intrigued by what she could hear, even this early.

But eventually, seven o'clock rolled around and they exited their room to join the rest of their party for their first day in Dublin. It was an experience. Everyone had problems understanding what the locals were saying; they were unused to the accent, the different sound and ways words were pronounced over here. Some were daunted to the point of going dumb, others laughed in delight and resorted to pointing at the menus to indicate their choices. But this first barrier was surpassed and everyone was soon eating a hearty breakfast.

Mrs. Reilly called for quiet when everyone had finished eating and outlined the day's activities: first a walk through the middle of town and then a visit to the National Museum of Ireland. Bridie had recommended the Archaeological Section and had provided maps so that they could maneuver through

the city with relative ease. There was a cafe at the museum so that after viewing some of the exhibits, they could relax while eating lunch. It sounded like a good plan.

Everyone went back to their rooms, used the facilities and then packed their marked backpacks with a water bottle, a snack, a pad of paper and pencils, the address of the hotel, their names and Mrs. Reilly as the contact; the name of their school group was prominently displayed. Each child also had a bright yellow baseball cap that also sported the name of the school. Mrs. Reilly was taking no chances on losing one of her charges!

Within minutes, everyone had reassembled in the hotel foyer. Mrs. Reilly marked names off her list before they made their way outside. Their hotel was on the main street of downtown Dublin, but some distance away from the center. As they walked, they passed a striking cathedral. Just past it was a charming park called The Park of Remembrance, dedicated to those who had died in the fight for Irish freedom. They entered to explore it.

Trees-lined steps descended to a cross-shaped cement-lined pool. Beneath the water, they could see that the floor of the pool was tiled to represent blue and yellow waves, with spears, round shields and swords picked out in contrasting tiles along its length. Small tables, flowers, bushes and trees lined a walkway that surrounded the pool. At the other end of the pool and up another set of steps was a giant sculpture that captured the essence of the story of the Seven Swans.

The sculpture depicted the sister and her seven brothers (princes transformed into swans by a witch). Four swans were in the act of taking flight while 3 of the brothers, yet unchanged, crouched below them. It was an awesome statue and the children enthusiastically examined and climbed around it. Most of them knew the story and, in a loud clash of voices, took it upon themselves to relate it to the few who did not. Pictures were taken to commemorate their find. It was a happy start to their day of exploration.

They continued to the center of Dublin. There was lots to see! A huge slender spire rose in the center of the city, signifying a new beginning. Further along they encountered a huge black carved pillar topped with a statue of O'Donnell above carved angels and a panel all around of other carved figures; this represented Dublin's past. It was so big that the kids standing next to it were dwarfed by the carved figure above the massive base.

The architecture of the buildings in downtown Dublin was different to that at home. The buildings were tall, made of red brick or gray blocks. And the streets were cobbled. It was much harder to walk on than the sidewalks at home. As they walked along, Mrs. Reilly and the other adults had to continually admonish their charges to pay attention to the traffic. Vehicles drove on the left side of the road here, the complete opposite to back home! So crossing a street was a challenge. They didn't know which way to look so, to be safe, they looked both ways! But it was still very disconcerting when the traffic closest to them suddenly turned left right into their path!

Mrs. Reilly pointed out the street names. They were written in both Gaelic and English. Awesome! And the buses were double decker! The sides of the buses had ads in Gaelic and the destination window above the front of the bus was also written in Gaelic. Fascinating! It was not the children alone whose eyes grew big at these sights; for most of the adults, Dublin was proving a revelation, as well. As the group walked along, foot traffic increased until they were pushing through a thick crowd. And all around them they could hear many different languages. In every direction, they could see people walking, talking and taking pictures.

Eventually they came to the O'Connell Bridge over the river Liffey. They paused on the bridge to look down into the water and watch its flow. When they'd looked for a time, Mrs. Reilly called their attention to the carved figures of the bridgemounts, that of giant seahorses. Looking along the river to either side, they could see bridge after bridge after bridge. And each bridge sported these same seahorse bridgemounts. Many of the kids had their pictures taken next to one of these seahorses; it was somewhat difficult to get both child and mount in the picture, for the children were not all that tall and the base of the seahorses started above the tops of the children's heads.

After walking along the river for a distance and admiring the buildings, Mrs. Reilly consulted her map and led them straight down one street to the entrance of the Archaeological Section of the National Museum of Ireland. They had reached the day's main objective.

Before entering, Mrs. Reilly reminded all the children of her expectations of their behavior. She smiled and told them to stick to their groups, find at least 10 things to list and be able to talk about, and to meet back in the foyer in two hours' time and, most important: HAVE FUN. The kids smiled and took out their pads and pencils. They joined into their usual groups and moved inside. The adults paid their way in, made sure they knew where the bathrooms were located, and handed each child a floor plan of the museum. Then the kids were allowed free reign to go where they chose.

The museum was divided up into several sections: Prehistoric Ireland, Ireland's Gold, The Treasury, Kingship and Sacrifice, Viking Ireland, and Medieval Ireland among others, on two different floors. Some groups began their tour in Ireland's Gold section which filled the center of the floor on the first level; others walked the perimeter of the first floor following the history of Ireland from prehistoric Ireland up through Medieval Ireland. Others climbed steep stairs to begin in the section devoted to Viking Ireland. Not so surprisingly, most of the groups composed of boys headed there first.

Before Bennet's group headed up the stairs, she noticed that Gannet's group was walking the perimeter downstairs, starting on the left (prehistoric) and walking slowly around to the medieval exhibits. Gannet walked slowly, taking in everything she saw. Bennet realized that to her, some of the Medieval exhibits might not look so ancient after all. It was at times and places like this, that she was vividly reminded of Gannet's past and her entry into Bennet's life and heart. Then she

moved further up the stairs and could no longer see, but it was much longer still before she could force her thoughts back to the present.

The Viking exhibit was mesmerizing. There were two bog bodies, dressed in the clothing in which they'd been found, preserved and enclosed in glass boxes. Kids and adults, alike, were curious, drawn to the figures but repelled by their skeletal nature. The figures were incredibly long. Around the walls were tools, pottery, woven cloth, metal buttons, and various weaponry from the past. The kids were busy drawing and writing on their pads, fascinated by what they saw and read.

Bennet thought it would be a long while before she could pull them away. But then another group came in, loudly exclaiming over the viking ship they'd been looking at. It acted like a magnet. Her groups' heads came up, and they made a beeline out the nearest exit to head for the ship. It was magnificent!

On their way downstairs, they passed classmates who were talking about fancy crosses and golden coins, long carved wooden slats and clothes unlike anything they'd seen before. These hints of what was in store only hastened her charges to continue their tour downstairs. They were obviously finding this very intriguing. And Bennet was happy to follow in their wake. It truly was interesting! She was learning a bit about her ancient forebears in the process.

At the base of the stairs, she looked around to see if she could spot Kit or Gannet. Of Kit there was no sign. But not too far away, in the Medieval

section, she saw Gannet staring intently into one of the glass cases. She seemed to sway for a moment. Bennet made to move in her direction, but remembered her charges. Torn, she glanced from her group and back to Gannet and saw that Gannet was now striding along with her own group, laughing and heading towards the stairs. She seemed fine; it must have been her imagination. Bennet moved off after her charges and put the moment's concern out of her mind.

It was unbelievable the amount one could see in two hours' time was Bennet's conclusion. But her head was starting to spin from trying to take it all in, so it was with relief that she herded her children to the foyer to meet up with the rest of the class. Gannet and Kit were already there and both looked happy but also ready for a break. Once everyone was gathered, Mrs. Reilly did a quick head count and then led off to the museum's cafe.

Everyone felt better after having eaten something and visited the lavatories, or WC as they were known here. Mrs. Reilly decided that that was enough indoor activity for one day and led them outside to tour more of Dublin. There was lots yet to see, including several churches and cathedrals, and a castle.

The children and adults formed a loose-knit circle. By chance, Bennet and her charges ended up right next to Gannet's group. Bennet and Gannet exchanged loving smiles but no words. Reminding them all to watch the traffic when crossing the street, Mrs. Reilly headed across. Bennet's and Gannet's groups were the last to cross. They dutifully looked both ways. Somehow, Bennet and

Gannet ended up last in line. And just as they reached the middle of the street, out of nowhere raced a black featureless car and clipped them both so that they fell to the cobblestones, breathless and bruised.

Kit had seen the incident but it happened so quickly, he wasn't able to reach them in time. He had called out a warning, but it was too late. The car raced off and around a corner and was gone. Bennet shakily tried to rise from the cobbles, but only managed to sit up halfway. Although dizzy, she immediately turned to check out Gannet's condition.

Gannet was unconscious. She had a bruise on the side of her face, already starting to purple. And her ankle was twisted at an odd angle. Mere moments later, Kit was there. He didn't move Gannet, but expertly checked out her injuries; his expertise in caving had led him to learn how to deal with many types of injuries and how to care for them.

After a minute, Gannet's eyes opened. She focused on Kit's face and tried to rise but slumped back with a moan. "My ankle, Daddy. It hurts," she moaned.

People were milling about on both sides of the narrow cobbled street, but someone with more forethought had gone back into the museum and called for help. As Kit evaluated Bennet's and Gannet's injuries, they could hear the familiar sound of an ambulance approaching. Guards had blocked the street to either side, ready to stop any through traffic. But none came until the ambulance itself

showed up.

Paramedics emerged from the back of the ambulance and Kit made way for them to assess the situation. Bennet had suffered only bruises and abrasions. She was helped to her feet and escorted to the back of the van for first aid. Gannet, however, was carefully lifted to a wheeled cot and into the van, Kit by her side. A hurried consultation between him and Mrs. Reilly resulted in a redistribution of the charges Kit and Bennet had been shepherding, and the name of the hospital was relayed. They would be in touch when they knew more. It was a somber group that watched while the ambulance pulled away and drove off.

CHAPTER 3

Their stay at the hospital took several hours. It was a clinical situation. Once they had been registered and wheeled through the emergency doors, they had to wait for almost forty minutes before a doctor was free to see them. While Bennet's abrasions were quickly treated, they had to x-ray Gannet's ankle and head. Each step of the process took time. Gannet was in pain, but she bore up under it well, only grasping Kit's hand tight in hers, and keeping a close eye on Bennet.

Bennet limped a bit. She had landed roughly on the cobbles and sprained her ankle. But Gannet's ankle had fractured. She would need a cast. At long last, the cast was on. Luckily, Gannet's head suffered from no more than a bruise. She had been administered a pain killer. A taxi had

been sent for to take them back to their hotel. It had been a harrowing ordeal. Now all they wanted to do was go back to their room and rest.

Once there, Bennet and Gannet did retire directly to their room, but Kit was delayed by two important conversations: one with Mrs. Reilly, who naturally was concerned and wanted to know how they were, and the other with the police who wanted a statement and to know if this could have been anything other than a horrible accident. All this took over an hour. By then, Kit was more than ready for a rest himself. This was not the first time his wife and child had been in danger, but the last few years had been serene and danger-free. Today's incident had taken its toll.

Much later, around dinner time, Kit and Bennet woke, both somewhat refreshed. Gannet slept on and they let her. They retreated to the bathroom for a whispered consultation.

“With that ankle, she's not going to be able to continue with the school tour,” Bennet said, stating the obvious.

“No. But there's no reason why we three can't go off on our own. We're already here. The plane tickets are paid for. Why don't we just make the best of it and spend the time with Bridie?” suggested Kit. “I think Gannet would enjoy that, and so would we.”

Bennet's face lit up at the thought. “Yes, that's a good idea, Kit. I know Gannet will be

disappointed at not being able to stay with the tour, but she'll love spending time with Bridie.”

Kit said, “That's settled then. I'll go downstairs and have a chat with Mrs. Reilly. I know she's wondering how to resolve this issue. Poor woman. She's been so good with these kids. She's a great teacher. This has rattled her a bit but she'll go on and make a success out of the venture, despite this setback.”

Bennet smiled. “I agree. Gannet's lucky to have her. Be sure and tell her how much we appreciate all her efforts. And tell her to go on and have a wonderful holiday with the rest of the class. Next Fall, Gannet can share her own slightly different two weeks with the class, and everyone will have something special to remember.”

“Good idea, my dear. I'll tell her. Now you go back and rest and when I'm done we'll order up some room service. Gannet will probably be hungry when she wakes up,” responded Kit. He leaned over and kissed her, gave her a careful hug, mindful of her many bruises, and then helped her limp back to the bed before quietly exiting the room.

Bennet drifted off into a light sleep again but woke when she felt Gannet shifting restlessly next to her.

“Gannet? Are you awake, honey?” Bennet asked in a soft voice.

Gannet awkwardly turned over so that she was facing Bennet. “I'm awake, Mommy. How are

you feeling?"

Bennet's eyes filled with tears that the first thing out of her daughter's mouth was a query about her mother's well being.

She smiled and said, "I'm fine, sweetheart. Just a few bruises here and there. That was a nasty accident."

Gannet looked back somberly. "It wasn't an accident, Mommy. I felt it, just before. It was more of *His* men. They're looking for us, for me." She grimaced with a twinge of pain, then said, "I felt his presence in the museum." She hesitated. "Well, not close by, but somehow I felt *Him* and I know *He* felt me. *He* hit me with his power and almost made me fall, but then I was able to move away and then I couldn't feel *Him* anymore."

Bennet might have put this all down to imagination had she not witnessed and gone through all the horrible nightmare five years before, and too, she had seen when Gannet had almost fainted. It had happened. She knew that Gannet did not lie. If she had felt her nemesis's presence, then the hit-and-run had not been an accident after all.

"Gannet, we'll talk more about this when your dad comes back up. But in the meantime, shall I help you to the bathroom? Or would you like a glass of water? Do you need another pain pill?" she asked.

Gannet seemed glad to shelve the discussion for the moment. "Yes!" she gurgled. "And I'm starting to get hungry, too!" she admitted.

Bennet hopped carefully upright, and then helped Gannet maneuver the cast off the bed and balance upright before they headed slowly to the bathroom. Inside, Gannet was able to move around by herself, hanging onto the sink, the side of the tub, the doorjamb, so Bennet left her to her privacy, waiting quietly on the other side of the door until needed to help her back to bed. Several minutes later, all watery sounds ceased and Gannet slowly opened the door a crack.

“Okay, Mom, I'm done for the moment. And I'd really like to lie down again. This cast is heavy!!” she laughed a little.

With an empathetic smile, Bennet slipped a supportive arm around her daughter and they limped back to the bed.

“That's better!” Gannet rolled her eyes exaggeratedly. She was obviously doing her best to keep her and her mom's spirits up.

Bennet went along with her. “Yeah! Just lugging you back to bed has about taken every last bit of energy I had! Whew!”

Gannet wasn't sure at first that her mom was joking and looked a little concerned, but then she saw Bennet's secret smile, chuckled in appreciation and threw a pillow at her. “Mom, you're so full of it!” Then both of them collapsed in laughter.

When they recovered from their fit of hilarity, Gannet saying, “Oooh, I can't quit laughing! I don't know which hurts more, my ribs from laughing or my ankle.”

Bennet drew herself up and hobbled to the bathroom where she fetched a glass of water and shook out one of the pain pills for Gannet. “Well, let's make sure that the 'next pain' is from too much laughter and nothing else!” she said. “Take this and when it's taken effect, we'll look over the room service menu and see what all we can order.”

Gannet was all for that! She smiled, downed the tablet and then asked for her backpack. “I want to write down some of the neat things I saw at the museum before I forget. Mrs. Reilly will be expecting me to turn in my assignment.” She concentrated on her task for several long minutes.

Bennet didn't have the heart to tell Gannet that her participation on the trip was over. Not yet. She'd wait till Kit came back. They had many things to talk over. Many things. Until then, she would sit here and watch, and marvel at the resilience her daughter had shown from first to last. She admired her daughter immensely, and sometimes stood in awe of her.

At that moment, the hotel phone rang. Gannet was closest and answered on the second ring. “Hello? Bridie! Oh, Bridie, when will we see you? We're at the hotel you recommended. Mom! What's our room number? Bridie is downstairs!! It's room 309, Bridie. Come up!”

“Mom! Bridie's here!” Gannet was practically bouncing on the bed in her excitement.

“Wonderful, Gannet! It will be so good to see her again. You'll have to tell her all about Lady May and school!” Bennet enthused. They both

loved Bridie very much and had missed her over the last few months.

Two minutes later, the door opened and Kit slowly inched his way in. He looked around and smiled when he saw both Bennet and Gannet awake and alert. "Hello, ladies. I'm glad to see you both up and awake. Because.. You have a special visitor!" He opened the door wider and Bridie edged around him and ran to hug first Bennet and then Gannet. Bennet hugged her back but noticed that Bridie was careful not to squeeze very hard, and showed no surprise at the cast on Gannet's foot. Obviously Kit had filled her in.

Hugging Gannet, Bridie looked at her in mock sternness. "What have you been up to, young lady? I can't leave you alone for a minute and you break your ankle!"

Gannet hugged her back and proceeded to tell Bridie all about her day. She waxed about all she had seen downtown and at the museum, but faltered when she came to the hit-and-run. Bridie didn't allow her to dwell on the latter. Instead she changed the subject.

"This is all really interesting. But, hey. I don't know about you all, but I'm starving! How about ordering up something from the menu? A girl needs her strength!" she suggested.

"Yeah! I'm hungry, too," admitted Gannet. "Mom and I were just starting to look over the menu when you and Dad came in."

"Well, let's see what's to be had!" continued

Bridie and she settled in carefully to sit next to Gannet on the bed. “I think I'm hungry enough to eat an elephant! I wonder if they do an elephant steak?” and she rolled her eyes, much to Gannet's amusement.

While Bridie and Gannet laughed and teased one another over hamburgers and fries, Kit told Bennet about his conversations with Mrs. Reilly and the police. Kit hadn't taken the policemen's query as to whether the car accident might have been premeditated seriously. But a look in Bennet's eye made him falter for a moment. Bennet gave a tiny shake of her head to indicate they would discuss it later, so he subsided and went on to tell her about his conversation with Mrs. Reilly.

The teacher had agreed with their decision to leave the tour. With so many other adults along, it would be easy to assign the kids from Bennet's and Kit's groups to others. She wanted a chance to speak with Gannet before they left, just to see for herself that the little girl was alright. Kit had told her that he'd bring Gannet down the next day to see the group and say goodbye.

At the end of the makeshift meal, Gannet was looking a lot more comfortable. The pain pill had obviously taken effect. And Bridie's bright presence added to her ease. But it was Gannet herself who brought up the question of the tour.

“Mom, Dad, I don't think I can keep up with the others on the tour. I've been talking with Bridie.” Here she flashed her cousin a smile. “Would it be okay if we spent the time with her instead? It's been so long since we did that last.”

And she looked up at her parents hopefully.

Bennet and Kit smiled at their daughter.

“What a wonderful idea!” responded Bennet. “I was wondering how we would be able to fit in a good visit with Bridie what with all the 101 different activities that had been scheduled for the tour! I'm sorry you'll miss out on all that, Gannet, but spending time with Bridie will be just as much fun.” And she, too, flashed a loving smile to Bridie.

“Here, here!” said Kit. “I second the motion!” And then everyone was laughing.

A bit later though, again Gannet broke the easy camaraderie to address the issue of the car. “Dad, the accident wasn't an accident. I felt *HIM*. I'm sure that it was some of His men who were in the car. And I also felt Him in the museum. I was looking at some of the things in the medieval section - some of those things were so familiar! I could just see them being used! But then all of a sudden I could feel *Him* and I knew He could feel me, too, 'cause He reached out and tried to grab me. I almost fell down. But then I moved a little further away and then I couldn't feel Him anymore.”

Bennet spoke up. “I saw that happen. I was about to go over to her when I saw her move away. She seemed better then and happy with her friends so I stayed with my group. This was all just before we exited the museum. It was only minutes later that the car tried to run us down.”

Bridie leaned forward. “Gannet, do you remember what you were looking at when you felt

Him?"

Gannet nodded. "I was drawing one of them. Mrs. Reilly wanted us each to find ten things to learn about and talk about later. It was a tiny bronze ring; maybe big enough for my little finger." She opened her backpack and reached in to pull out her notepad. She turned a few pages and then showed them a drawing of a ring with scalloped edges. On the top of the ring, two letters, T and S, had been etched into the metal, etched very carefully. The etching was elaborate and of master workmanship compared to the ring itself.

"Tigne Sh'dah," they all murmured. Gannet's nemesis had found another way to make his presence felt. And now he was after Gannet again.

"Gannet, did you write down what the placard said about the ring?" asked Bennet.

"Yes." Gannet flipped to the back of the same page and read:

Bronze Ring, ca late 1400s, marked with initials T and S; unidentified.

"That's all it said."

"We already know a lot, but we need to know more. Do you have access to their archives, Bridie? Perhaps there's a note of where it was found, and if it was found with anything else. There might be a clue to its relevance that we would recognize where others would not," said Kit.

Bridie said, “Yes, I do have access. I'll look into it as soon as I get back to my computer. I was also thinking that you three should come stay with me. My apartment is huge and my roommate is gone for the summer so I have all that space to myself. The bedrooms are large, they're all on one floor, and it would be a lot nicer than staying here in this hotel.”

Gannet piped up, “I vote yes!”

Bennet and Kit exchanged a significant glance and nodded their agreement. “With pleasure.”

Kit said, “Gannet, your classmates and teacher want to see you and say goodbye in the morning. We could go to Bridie's right after that.”

Gannet said, “Good. I wanted to say goodbye to my friends anyway, and to Mrs. Reilly. I also wanted to show her that I completed the assignment for the museum.”

Bennet smiled. “Then it's settled. But now, young lady, I think it's time you got ready for bed. You've been yawning for the last 10 minutes!”

Gannet sheepishly grinned. “Yeah. I'm ready to go to sleep. I just need to brush my teeth.”

Bridie lightly rose from the bed and said, “Allow me.” She helped Gannet to the bathroom and when she was finished changing into her nightgown, helped her back to bed and tucked her in.

“I'll see you in the morning. It's time I went home. I have to get ready for my house guests!” Bridie smiled, gave them each a kiss, and bustled out the hotel room door. 'Good night. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite...' was the last thing they heard as the door closed behind her.

Gannet smiled and drifted off to sleep. It wasn't many minutes later that Bennet and Kit settled to sleep as well. Time enough on the morrow to figure out their next move. The night was left to healing sleep.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, they woke around 7. After ablutions, Bennet helped Gannet dress and they ate the breakfast that had been sent up to their room. Just before 8, Kit carried Gannet downstairs where they found Mrs. Reilly and Gannet's classmates eagerly awaiting their appearance.

At first the other kids kept their distance, afraid they might somehow hurt Gannet if they came too close. But Gannet called Callie and Lacey over and soon they were laughing and using bright pens to write on Gannet's cast. Mrs. Reilly let two and two at a time speak with Gannet, and soon her cast was a montage of colors and names and drawings. And the kids were all smiling. Even with a cast, lively and happy Gannet was still the classmate they all knew.

By 8:30, everyone had had a chance to speak with her. Mrs. Reilly took the opportunity to wish Gannet and her parents a wonderful visit with Bennet's niece, asked that they thank her for all her help in organizing the tour, briskly told Gannet they'd see her at the end of summer vacation, and then herded her class out for the day's activities. Everyone called out 'goodbye, see you later' and then Kit carried Gannet back upstairs.

Before Gannet had a chance to dwell on her exclusion from the class trip, a knock at the door preceded Bridie popping her head in and wishing them all a good morning. Then Gannet was all smiles again.

It didn't take long to pack up their things and carry them down to the car Bridie had rented. Once everything was in, Kit went to pay their room bill only to discover that Mrs. Reilly had already taken care of it. He left a note thanking her and wishing her and the class a wonderful holiday. Then he joined the others in the car and Bridie took off.

It was very strange to be driving on the left side of the road and have oncoming traffic to their right. But the adults felt it more than Gannet. Luckily, Bridie had lived there long enough that she had grown accustomed and drove with confidence.

It wasn't far to her apartment, although it was in a different part of town. Her building looked newer, brighter somehow than some they had seen while walking and Bridie told them she lived in a newer neighborhood. Dublin was renovating, building and upgrading in some areas while some of the older buildings were empty, abandoned and

vandalized. Dublin was in upheaval, but determined to change and move with the times.

Bridie's apartment building was made of the same red brick to be seen all over town. Her apartment was on the entry floor, off to the right. There were three steps up to the outside entrance, and stairs off to the side led down to apartments in the basement, with a separate entrance.

Tall windows faced the street. They were long and wide and bright, with a slash window at the top that opened for ventilation. The building, counting the basement apartments, was 3 stories tall like all those around it. In older sections of town, the buildings were often 5 stories tall, but in this newer section, the buildings were lower. In front of the building was a small patch of grass, sporting bright beds of flowers tucked under shady trees. And a black metal fence marched along the sidewalk, separating the yard from pedestrian traffic, black metal gates opening into each entryway. It looked clean and bright and tidy.

When Bridie unlocked the door, it led directly into the living room/dining room. Light from the windows reflected warmly off the wood floors and creamy yellow walls. Along one wall was the kitchen, separated from the living room by a bar counter. A generously sized table resided under one window, while the other shone onto the comfortable chairs, sofa and fireplace in the living room. Plants lent a homey air to the apartment. Around a corner were two good sized bedrooms, a small study, and a huge bathroom with both a shower and a tub. There was no window in the bathroom, but the walls were lined with peach and

flower tiles, mirrors, and bright lights, so one did not notice the lack of natural sunlight.

The bedrooms faced in the opposite direction and again were graced with large wide windows. Overall, the apartment was bright and cheerful. Bridie had made a lucky find.

A cot had been placed in the study so that Gannet would have a room to herself. The study had a window as well, but it was much smaller and narrower than those in the bedrooms. However, bright sunlight still managed to impart a cheerful ambiance over the oak desk, burnt orange walls, and bookshelves that lined two of the walls. The cot was along the fourth wall and by the window so that Gannet could look outside and watch the passersby while resting. A boom box was prominently displayed on the desk.

A further surprise was in store for Gannet. A birdcage rested on the desk. Inside were two parakeets, one white, and one blue with yellow markings. Gannet was instantly entranced. Within moments, the birds were resting on her fingers, singing loudly and eloquently. Gannet held her head to one side as though considering what they sang about. She looked happy and serene.

Bennet and Kit had been given Bridie's roommate's room for the duration of their visit. The closet had been emptied, but little knick knacks, plants, and a few pictures made it homey. Bridie had, indeed, been busy getting ready for her house guests! The bed was full size, and sported two nightstands. Two comfortable chairs and a small bookcase completed the room. The floor, like the

rest of the apartment, was made of oak parquet. The walls were painted a soft lilac. It was very restful and cozy.

Bridie's room was approximately the same size, but a mirror image. She had chosen a sleep sofa for her room. During the day, the bed was out of sight and she had a comfortable couch to relax on. A low double decker coffee table, as long as the sofa, held books and tablets, writing paraphernalia, and a drinking mug, signs of Bridie's passion and studies. There were wheels with tiny brakes on the legs of the table. At night she could just wheel the table to the side and out of the way when she wanted to convert the sofa into a bed.

Under the window was a substantial desk for all her computers, a scanner and a printer, along with deep drawers under one side of the desk. A padded adjustable desk chair was pushed up to and under the desk. A plush armchair that just begged to be sat in to read, a small round side table big enough to hold a book, a mug, and a plate of munchies, and a set of bookshelves that held a choice selection of books and cds, a compact digital sound system and small but powerful speakers lined the third wall. It all looked very lived-in and comfortable.

After viewing the layout of the apartment, Gannet was settled on the couch in the living room, with a view out the window, accompanied by her parakeet friends, while Bridie prepared to access the museum's files. Bennet retrieved the drawing of the ring and the text that Gannet had recorded for comparison purposes. Gannet had, unfortunately, not thought to write down the number assigned to

that particular exhibit, so it would take a while to find it.

Meanwhile, Kit grabbed the newspaper that lay on the kitchen counter and proceeded to find out what kind of news was of import here in Dublin. Many of the articles were in both Gaelic and English. Kit idly wondered if the Gaelic were read aloud if Gannet would understand it. She'd been too young and poor to learn to read in her own time. But she still remembered the language, both to speak it and to understand it, although it had been established that her learned version was different from modern-day Gaelic.

The only sounds disturbing the comfortable quiet in the apartment was the cooing of the birds and the click of the keys as Bridie typed in requests and commands. But suddenly, Kit let out an explosive breath.

“Bennet, Bridie. Could you come in here, please?” he asked with a controlled voice.

Curious, aunt and niece joined him at the kitchen table.

“What is it, Kit?” queried Bennet.

He pointed out a small article on the back page of the newspaper. The headline read: 'Museum Ransacked'.

Quickly, Bennet and Bridie read the text. It stated that the night before, the Archaeological Section of Ireland's National Museum had been broken into. Several glass cases on the main floor

had been smashed open and artifacts scattered. Upon checking the artifacts against the list of exhibits, it had been discovered that a single artifact had been taken: a Medieval bronze ring, exhibit #AM80, from ca late 1400s, distinguished by the etched letters T and S, but otherwise of unknown origin.

Museum authorities were baffled by the heist of such an insignificant artifact, displayed more for its period quality than for any distinct craftsmanship or intrinsic value. However, security had been increased. The Medieval Section would be roped off and inaccessible for a day to allow the glass cases to be replaced and the exhibits to be properly arranged once more.

The museum offered its apologies for the brief closure, but reminded the public that the other sections would still be open for public viewing.

After reading the article, they looked at one another. This lent even more credence to the reappearance of Gannet's nemesis, Tigne Sh'dah. Now, more than ever, they needed to find out the significance of the ring. At the very least, but most important to them, Gannet's life was in the balance. What more lay in store, they did not know. And ignorance, when dealing with *Him*, was NOT bliss.

Without a word, Birdie headed back to her computer. At least now she would not have to scour the many exhibits in order to find the one of special interest. The article had given them the reference number they needed: #AM80. She quickly typed in the number and within seconds was rewarded with a much more detailed summary of

the artifact and everything known about it.

When she pulled up the record, Bennet leaned over the back of Bridie's chair, meaning to read along with her. And then pulled up short. The entry was written in Gaelic. She would have to wait for Bridie to translate it for her.

Stifling her impatience, Bennet went into the kitchen and proceeded to do that which she usually did to forestall an attack of nerves: she cooked. She located the ingredients she needed. Soon, the apartment was redolent with the wonderful smell of fresh baked waffles, jam and cream that she whipped up while the waffles were baking. Then she set the table for four and soon had a high pile of waffles waiting to be eaten.

Gannet didn't wait. She asked Kit to bring some waffles to her on the couch and then, between bites, shared minuscule bits with the parakeets.

“Bridie said they hadn't been named yet. I asked them and they said they liked the names Pearl and Topaz, so that's their names. Pearl is the white one, and Topaz is the blue one. Pearl is a girl. Topaz is a boy,” Gannet solemnly informed her parents.

Bennet smiled. She never ceased to be amazed at the affinity her daughter had with birds. Gannet truly understood them and they her. What's more, birds had played a prominent role more than once in Gannet's past in protecting her. Bennet had a profound respect for birds since Gannet had come into her life.

Gannet had started on her second waffle and Kit on his third before Bridie emerged from her room with a printout in hand. Her eyes brightened when she noticed the waffles and she was quick to snag her share. While she ate, she placed the printout on the table for Bennet and Kit to peruse.

At the top were a few lines dedicated solely to the museum's own particular system for identifying and cataloging their thousands of exhibits, so they swept past that to the meat of the entry.

This exhibit, #AM80 (Archaeological-Medieval) is a bronze ring ca 1.5 cm in diameter, with a scalloped edge and a roughly rectangular flat top into which have been elegantly etched the letters T and S. The ring was among several other artefacts bundled in a tattered muslin bag (see #AM23) retrieved from a blanket peat bog along the southwest coast of Ireland. All the artifacts date from the late 1400s. Curiously, the ring was found encircling a sheepskin parchment upon which a child's ditty had been scratched. (The ditty has since been sent to the Musical Archives for study and research.) Ownership of the ring has not been determined. Other artifacts found with the ring include a possible mouth reed from a Medieval Shawm (a pipe like instrument not so different in shape from today's recorder, but using a reed like a clarinet), and an expertly carved figure of what looks like a type of seagull. No explanation has been forthcoming for the curious mix of artifacts, but as they were tightly wrapped in the bag, they were obviously connected.

The carving and reed are both being studied.

When Bennet and Kit had finished reading the intriguing entry, they looked inquiringly at Bridie who, without looking up from her waffle, produced another printout and laid it on the table. Bennet and Kit leaned over to read it.

This exhibit, #AM81, is a sheepskin parchment, dated around 1450. In ancient Gaelic, what seems to be a child's ditty (chanting song) has been printed onto the parchment.

The ink has been tested and is in agreement with the 1450 date of the parchment. The ditty, comprised of 7 verses, has been copied and handed over to the music department for further study. The parchment is in surprisingly good condition. No difficulty was encountered in reading and copying the text.

This brief entry finished, Bennet and Kit looked at Bridie expectantly, but this time she looked up from her now empty plate and shrugged.

“The ditty has not been downloaded into the archives so I couldn't get a copy of it. I'll have to contact the music department directly.” explained Bridie.

“Well, this still explains a lot,” observed Kit. Keeping his voice low and unemotional so as not to peak Gannet's curiosity, he continued, “The carved figure obviously refers to Gannet, the initials to you-know-who. We have to get our hands on the ditty though. I have a feeling it's important.”

“Yes,” agreed Bennet. “But we can't ignore the third artifact, the reed. I have a feeling that the musical instrument is just as important. We need to

talk with someone who knows about these instruments, if they are still in use, and where we can get one. As for finding someone to play it..." Bennet looked doubtful.

"I have an idea about that," said Bridie. "Did you know that Jenny and Ty are in Wales? Jenny is giving a concert there in a couple of days." And she looked significantly at the others.

Gannet heard the names Jenny and Ty and perked up her ears. "Jenny? Ty? Are they here, too?" she asked hopefully.

"Not exactly here, but close by," answered Bridie. "How would you all like to take a ferry ride?" And she smiled.

"Oooh, that sounds like fun!" responded Gannet with a wide grin. "What's a ferry?"

"I have their number. Why don't we give them a call? Maybe they can save us some seats." grinned Bridie.

By now, both Bennet and Kit were grinning, too. It would be great to see the two again. They had grown close during all the happenings of three years before. Jenny was a superb musician and Ty painted the most amazing landscapes. There was one prominently on display back home in Bennet's and Kit's living room.

While Bridie called, Kit explained to Gannet what a ferry was. Gannet's eyes grew big with wonder. She had never experienced a ferry ride before. But then, over the past few years, she

had experienced a multitude of wonders. This would be just one more.

“Good news!” relayed Bridie. They're going to be playing in a village not far from where the ferry docks. They're going to reserve us a couple of rooms at their hotel and promised to save us some seats. I told them we would be arriving tomorrow evening. Which means...I've got to hustle! I'm going to go over to the Music Archives Department right away, but I was thinking. It's going to be a beautiful day today. How would you all like to spend the day at the zoo? I think I can get hold of a wheelchair for Gannet.”

Gannet was so excited, she was fluttering her arms here and there, making it difficult for the parakeets to maintain their perches, so that they flew into the air and around Gannet's head, chirping in protest. Gannet chirped back once in apology and stopped waving her arms around, but her excitement was no less abated. “I'd love to go to the zoo! Can we, Mom, Dad?”

Bennet and Kit laughed helplessly, lovingly in the face of her enthusiasm. “That's a wonderful idea, Bridie. I'm sure we'd all enjoy it.”

“Great! Then that's settled,” Bridie grinned. “One of my colleagues at the University has been trundling his sister around the grounds in a wheelchair for the past six weeks. I'm sure he can tell me how to find a chair for Gannet. I'll give him a call right now.”

Minutes later, she got off the phone and said, “Nothing simpler. She got her cast off two

days ago and doesn't need the chair anymore. He said we could use it for as long as we like, but he's about to go out so we need to fetch it right now," she reported.

They grabbed their backpacks, water bottles, and camera and were soon settled in Bridie's car. Luckily the car had a roomy trunk. When they pulled up in front of her friend's place a few minutes later, he demonstrated how to fold the chair flat and helped tuck it into the trunk. They waved their thanks and goodbyes and Bridie drove them to the zoo entrance. Dublin Zoo was attached to beautiful Phoenix Park. Bridie didn't stay. She dropped them off and then shot into traffic, intent on her own errand. She would meet them back here later.

Kit went ahead to get in line for the tickets while Bennet pushed Gannet up the walkway to the zoo entrance. It was a warm sunny day and there were lots of people out and about. People were converging on the zoo from several different directions, some through the park, some from the same direction as Bennet and Gannet now strolled along, and some drove up to park just opposite to the entrance. Everyone seemed to be in a good mood.

Tickets in hand, they entered the zoo and consulted the paper maps they'd been given. Dublin Zoo was extensive. In outline, it looked sort of like the head and neck of a hand puppet of a dog. The entrance lay at the end by the World of Primates. The tour started off to the left. There was an option of taking a 'safari' ride through the exhibits, but since they had the wheelchair, it was nice just to

stroll along at their own speed and inclination. The paper directory listed forty different exhibits.

First up were the primates, ranging in size from macaques and chimpanzees up to gibbons and orangutans and gorillas. They stood for the longest time watching the primates walking along logs, swinging from ropes, scratching and mock fighting, eating and staring. Across the way were the big cats: tigers and leopards. It took a while to spot them for the cats hid themselves well. But finally Gannet saw a tiger. She was amazed at how big it was.

They moved along to look at the wolves. They reminded Gannet too much of shadow dogs so they didn't spend long there. When she spotted the sea lions, Gannet's smile shone through again. They were big, but their flippers made her laugh. And when she spotted the hippos, she couldn't stop laughing. The hippos dove and stayed submerged for a few minutes then popped up with a whoosh and opened their mouths wide. The insides of their mouths were so pink in contrast to the gray of their skin that Gannet found them funny critters. She watched them for several minutes before reluctantly moving on.

Next they looped around the African plains and there was lots to see. They saw ostriches, such funny shaped birds that didn't fly. To the astonishment of many other zoo patrons, the ostriches came close enough to the little girl in the wheelchair that she was almost beak to nose with them through the mesh fence enclosure. They eyed one another for a few moments before moving off to run in a group to the far end of the enclosure.

Gannet wore a secret smile for several minutes after that but she didn't say anything. During the encounter, though, several people had gotten snapshots, Kit among them. Gannet would enjoy seeing her new friends later when the pictures were downloaded onto their computer.

They made their way around the plains, watching the zebras and the rhinos, but it was the giraffes who next peaked Gannet's enthusiasm. Their necks were incredibly long. She loved seeing the baby giraffe next to its mother. And enjoyed watching them stretch to reach the leaves on the trees high above. They watched while the giraffes used their thick lips and long tongues to wrap around the leaves and pull them off of the branches.

It was time for a break. The heat had grown more intense as time passed. Bennet helped Gannet to the lavatories, and after they were all refreshed, Kit bought them ice cream bars at one of the little kiosks that dotted the paths. They were lucky. They were not the only ones to want something cold in the heat. The tellers had a hard time keeping up with demand, and a few minutes after they had gotten theirs and settled at a picnic table, the kiosk rolled down the cover and locked its doors; the inventory had been temporarily sold out and the kiosk would be closed until the stock could be replenished.

After they had finished their ice cream, they continued on their way. Now they were seeing more birds. And tortoises. Gannet had seen turtles before, but her eyes grew round in amazement when she spotted the tortoises. They were so big! And they were active, moving quite quickly in their

enclosure, looking for the most succulent vegetation to feast upon. Gannet, in her chair, didn't have to bend to watch them through the wire mesh. One came close in its pursuit of food, but shied off moments later. Gannet was thrilled to get such a closeup look at one of them. She thought the designs on their shell backs were very interesting, and mourned the fact that she had forgotten her pad and pencil back at Bridie's apartment.

When they got to the Snowy Owl's cage, Gannet was eager to commune with one of her friends. But the owl was sleeping and didn't stir while they were there. Finally Gannet gave up, but she kept looking back, hoping the owl would awaken. She knew though, that this was the time of day when the owl slept, so didn't try to awaken it.

The penguins were a draw. One of the first things Bennet had ever given to Gannet was a stuffed penguin; she still slept with it every night. The penguins, like the ostrich, came up to make her acquaintance and then entertained her with their antics in the pool as well as a long conversation of honks and snorts. Soon Gannet was laughing uncontrollably. But finally, the penguins scooted up on the bank to bask in the sun and Gannet said goodbye.

The elephants were intriguing but Gannet had no rapport with them. They were huge and wrinkled, and their trunks were very mobile, but Gannet thought it had been more fun watching the hippos. Then they approached the flamingos. The flock was originally on the far side of the lake, but something drew them close when Gannet approached. They came close enough to dip their

heads, almost like a courteous bow, in her direction before moving off again. Gannet was charmed by their beautiful pink color and their stately behavior.

At the very end of the path were several cages full of many kinds of birds and tiny meerkats. Here they stayed for many minutes. The birds inside the cages flew hither and thither, trying to get closer to the little girl, but were hindered by the wire mesh. They trilled and shrieked and soon the cacophony had the meerkats climbing higher into the branches above, huddling and hiding. Gannet emitted a couple of chirps and the birds seemed to calm down. Finally they settled on branches and started preening their feathers, but their chirps and calls were still numerous and loud. It wasn't until Gannet uttered a final chirp and moved away that the birds settled down and became silent again.

A few patrons had noticed and looked curiously after the wheelchair when they left. They stared at the birds in wonder, but couldn't figure out what had caused the unusual behavior.

Before they left, Gannet asked to go into the gift shop. There, she spied several cards with pictures of some of the zoo's denizens on them. She chose several, one of the hippos, one of the tortoises, one of the snowy owl, one of the penguins, one of the giraffes, and a final one of the flamingos. She wanted to remember her friends here, as well as the more fantastic of the critters she'd seen. She paid for them herself with some of the money each child had been given for their Irish trip. When Kit rolled her chair outside, Bennet approached with her hand behind her back. Then, with a smile, she presented Gannet with a stuffed

hippo. It's impossibly pink mouth was wide open and it seemed to be grinning at her. Gannet loved it! Even though it wasn't a bird, she loved it. She hugged Bennet. "Thanks, Mom!"

While they'd been inside the gift shop, Kit had called Bridie. When they emerged from the zoo, she was already there waiting for them. Gannet showed Bridie her trophies, talking non-stop for a good ten minutes, Bridie laughing in appreciation. She had parked by the entrance but they decided to walk through the park for awhile before leaving.

The paths were lined with shady trees which overlooked bright flower beds, ponds, and long stretches of grass. Many were holding impromptu picnics on the grass. Some were playing with frizzbies, others were stretched out enjoying the sunshine. Bikes, strollers and baby buggies dotted the park. It was obviously a popular place, for both Dubliners and visitors. Many visitors were snapping pictures every few feet. There was a luncheonette sited prominently along the walk. While the girls relaxed on the grass, Kit went inside and emerged a little later with drinks for each of them and a couple of bags of munchies for them to share. It was too soon for a real meal, but a snack and a drink went down well.

While they relaxed, Bridie told them that she had been lucky. The research department head was friends with her advisor and readily allowed her a copy of the ditty she'd come looking for. All she asked was that if Bridie came up with any clues about the relevance of the ditty, that she share it with the music department.

Bridie loved the challenge of deciphering texts and had, in fact, come to Ireland to increase her knowledge and expertise in Gaelic so that she could help in the task of deciphering ancient texts and cuneiform. The ditty was, therefore, just the kind of challenge that she excelled at and looked for.

She took out the copy of the ditty and started reading it. It lent itself to a particular rhythm and rhyme. At first, her small audience just listened to the cadence in appreciation. It was very melodic, both the words and the language. But then Gannet got a faraway look in her eye. And then she started to chant along with Bridie. Bridie faltered for a moment and then just listened, following along in the text as Gannet chanted. The words were not identical, but so close as to make no never mind.

Gannet finished and looked up. Her voice had an odd inflection when she said, “Me and me mates used to chant that when we were circle dancing. We’d hold hands and dance around a fire. At the end, we’d throw the flower ring into the flames and watch the smoke drift up into the sky.”

“Gannet, do you understand what the song says?” asked Bridie.

“Well, I can tell you the words we used to sing,” replied Gannet. And she chanted the seven verses that she knew. It was in ancient Gaelic so Bennet and Kit understood nothing. But they kept mum. This was important. Gannet was patient and spoke a few words at a time so that Bridie could write it down. Bridie had to ask a question a few times, in Gaelic, and listen sharply when Gannet

replied. Bridie seemed a little doubtful, but dutifully wrote it all down as Gannet told her. Finally it was done.

“Gannet, did you children just sing, or did someone play music while you sang?” asked Bridie.

“On Festival days, then the bard would play his shawm while we danced and sang. And on that day, we were given a special ring carved out of wood to throw on the fire. But otherwise, we just sang ourselves and used flower rings,” replied Gannet.

“Did you notice anything else special about the ring during Festival?” asked Bridie.

“Yes, the ring always had something scratched on the top where it was flat,” answered Gannet. “I couldn't read it though. I didn't know how.” Then her face brightened. “But I remember how to draw it!”

She bent over the paper that Bridie had been writing on and drew several flourishes on the paper. All three, Bennet, Kit and Bridie, looked down at the drawing. Gannet had carefully drawn:



It was no surprise that Gannet hadn't known what the shapes stood for. They were a far cry from the letters taught in school. To a four and five year old Gannet, they had just looked like a picture, one that intrigued her enough to sketch and remember, all this time later.

The letters were very significant! Bridie knew her alphabets. These letters, very stylized T and S, were typical for 14th and 15th century Medieval alphabets.

Bridie had downloaded a picture of the ring that had been stolen from the museum. She flipped back to the front of her tablet and drew forth the printed image. They all looked at it. The letters etched onto the ring were practically identical to that which Gannet had drawn.

“Did you practice this song often, Gannet?” asked Bennet.

“Oh yes! Ma and Da said it was very important and we had to know it by heart for Festival.” asserted Gannet. “Cause of my voice, they wanted me to lead the song at Festival. My friend, Mary, was jealous. She wanted to lead but her voice was like a duck quacking so she wasn't allowed to,” said Gannet very matter-of-factly. The adults around her were hard put not to laugh.

Then Gannet added, “My ma used to sing it when she was wee. She told me how proud she was that I got to lead the singing. I just remembered that!”

So. The ditty had been well known and

sung often in the late 1490s and at least 20 years earlier. Who knew for how long before that it had been a special practice during Festival?

“Did you ma and da ever say why the song was sung at Festival,” asked Bridie.

“Noooo...but once I overheard Ma and her friends talking about it. They were saying that if it was sung really well then we'd be safe for a whole nuther year. I don't know what they meant by it though. But then they both looked up at the sun and smiled,” responded Gannet slowly.

Gannet continued. “This has something to do with my nemesis, doesn't it?” She sounded scared. Bennet's first impulse was to hold her close and deny there was anything to worry about. But she knew how strong Gannet was. It would not be right to keep this secret. Like three years before, Gannet might end up being their salvation.

“Yes, Gannet. We think the ring belongs to *Him* and that the picture you sketched represents his name. And I think the ditty you remembered is a safeguard against his ring allowing him power here. All that you've remembered is important and may help stop him again, like you did before,” answered Bennet.

Gannet paled when she remembered the incidents of three years before, but then she rallied. “Well, as long as I have my birds around me, I'll be fine,” she said. And she looked at Bennet, Kit and Bridie and smiled a brave smile. “Oh! And soon all five of my birds will be with me, 'cause we're going to meet Jenny and Ty! I know I'll be alright

now! We'll stop him, just like last time,"she asserted with authority.

The adults were a little less sanguine but kept their doubts to themselves. It would do no good to anyone and might actually work to Tighe Sh'dah's advantage to undermine Gannet's resolution and assuredness.

They had all had enough of the park for the day so they got rid of the trash, settled Gannet in the wheelchair again and set off to the car. It didn't take very long to get settled and arrive back at Bridie's apartment, although it was all the way across town. Traffic flowed smoothly and they were able to stick to major streets.

Back at the flat, with Gannet once more ensconced on the couch with the parakeets, Bennet sent Kit off to buy groceries and started preparing dinner. Meanwhile, Bridie sat down to compare the two versions of the ditty: that provided on the sheepskin and Gannet's own version. Both were in Gaelic. Bridie first compared them in that language and then translated them both to English. She wanted to be sure that she had the exact meaning before deciding on which version to use. She also wanted to tape Gannet singing her own version so that they would have the tune down pat to share with Jenny and Ty. As before, precision might play a very important part against their enemy.

So while, Kit helped Bennet in the kitchen, Bridie had Gannet sing the whole ditty a couple of times. Then she transferred the rendition onto a couple of cds.

After dinner, they settled down to a quiet game of Scrabble. When Gannet had gone to sleep, the grownups sat a bit longer in the living room, listening to a jazz cd and chatting.

“There was a significant point that Gannet made. In both practice and when singing at the Festival, the token ring was burned on the fire after the ditty was sung. The actual ring, if we accept that the stolen ring was that, is most likely now in the possession of Nemesis' minions. To stop him, we're going to have to get the ring back,” stated Kit frankly.

“And, they've already made an attempt on Gannet's life. We have to assume that they will do so again,” added Bennet.

“So to find them, we basically have to expose Gannet, so that we can get the ring back,” said Bridie with a grimace. “I'm not terribly thrilled about that!”

“No, it's definitely not ideal. However, if what was true in the past, these minions are not terribly smart, nor does Nemesis allow them much free will or thought, so we should be able to deal with them,” asserted Kit. “We're just going to have to be extremely careful and keep a close watch.”

“I thought this was all behind us. I thought that Gannet was finally free,” bemoaned Bennet. She's just a girl. And she thought last time that once we shut him out, he was gone for an age.”

Bridie said, “According to this translation, he is basically shut out. This ring acts like a gate.

If his minions follow instructions, then they could open this gate and let him through. It will be our task to keep that from happening. I've made a couple of translations. The two versions of the ditty are not exactly the same. But I think that might be due to regional differences. The basic meaning seems to be the same. Here's the translation from Gannet's version:

Translation of Gannet's Version of the Ditty

Sickle Moon
Lost in gloom
Found: the ring
A gate he'll bring.

The ring is found
The ring is bound
To Dark will heed
To mind his need.

Two – four – six – eight
Pass the ring to open gate
Dark will come
Light He'll shun.

Circle thrice
Birds, salt, rice
Sing the ditty
O Light we bid thee
Close the gate
Seal his fate.

Circle Moon
Banish gloom
Burn the ring
While Light does sing.

Fear the night
Fear His might
Watch the Light
Protect Her sight.

Circle thrice
Birds, salt, rice
Sing O Light
With all your might
Seal the gate
Bind his fate
Save us all
Ere it's too late.

“Well. At least this one seems easier to follow than the last song!” joked Bennet. “Do you think we will be allowed to sing the English version this time?”

“I think we need to consult with Jenny on that one,” said Bridie. “But for now, I think we'd better get some sleep. We have to get up pretty early to get to the ferry on time. Once we're in Wales, we still have a little driving to do before we reach the town where Jenny will be singing.”

“You're right. Good night, then. See you bright and early in the morning,” replied Bennet.

Kit added his good night, and they retired to their respective rooms. Bennet and Kit glanced in on Gannet before closing their door for the night. She was sleeping soundly and deeply. The birdcage door was open and the cover off, but the birds perched inside slept soundly as well. It took a while longer before Bennet was able to doze off, spooned against Kit's warm back. But finally she did, tired

out from the day, her still healing bruises and her thoughts.

CHAPTER 5

The next morning they woke bright and early, packed their bags, ate a piece of fruit and piled into the car, all before 7:30. They would be leaving from the Dun Laoghaire (sounds like Dun Leary) ferry station promptly at 8 and taking the car with them. After Bridie handed the parakeets in their cage over to a neighbor for the duration of their stay in Wales, they made it through the early morning traffic and waited in the car while Bridie ran in and bought their tickets. Then she hurried back out and joined the line to the parking level. Once the car was parked in the bowels of the ferry, the wheelchair retrieved and Gannet comfortably seated, they leisurely made their way to the elevator to reach the passenger level.

They still had five minutes before the

scheduled departure when they claimed one of the tables that lined the windows on the perimeter of the enclosed deck. Gannet wanted to explore, but Bridie convinced her to wait until the ferry actually left the dock. So many people were still bustling about, getting settled. Once the ferry embarked, it would be much easier to move around. So Gannet used the time to stare out the window and study the other passengers.

Bridie said, “The ferry takes just under two hours to make the crossing. It will dock at Holyhead on the Ilse of Anglesey in Wales.”

Before she could say any more, there was a slight bump and then an announcement over the shipboard intercom asking people to remain seated as they got under way. They were informed that there were two observation points, one for smokers and one for non-smokers, on the side of the ferry they had entered. They were admonished to be careful moving about as the motion of the ferry on the water might make it difficult to maintain one's balance; they were encouraged to use the hand rails that lined the walkways.

A few steps up was another enclosed deck. This one offered several different types of food stations as well as drinks. People were already looking over the menus and queuing. As they had only eaten a piece of fruit when they'd left Bridie's flat, Gannet, for one, was starting to get hungry. Bennet and Kit went upstairs to check out what was on offer and, while Kit kept their place in line, Bennet went back down to relay the choices to Gannet and Bridie. Decisions made, she rejoined Kit and a few minutes later the two carried several

danish, containers of orange juice, and two plates of sausages and eggs back to the table. They had decided to share the bounty between them. Gannet tucked in with a hearty appetite, but was soon finished and was again itching to explore.

This time Bridie was amenable to taking her about. She pushed her along the gangway, avoiding those who staggered uncontrollably with a good-natured grin. Actually, holding onto the handles of the wheelchair gave her better leverage than those who tried to walk without using the handrails.

The two girls located the bathrooms, passed those and discovered a room filled with brochures and cards and maps and pictures. They spent several minutes there, and when they left, Gannet held a thick bundle of what was on offer. Bridie took a few, as well, with future expeditions in mind. When they exited, ahead of them they saw an open platform enclosed by a wire mesh. A loud watery roar was to be heard and Gannet was curious to see what was making it. So Bridie pushed her out onto the platform. Below them they could see the powerfully ejected water from two water jets. The wake from these and the ferry itself extended far into the distance behind the ferry, its white water easily distinguishable from the surrounding ocean.

It was much cooler out here on the platform and neither Bridie nor Gannet wanted to stay there for long. So Bridie turned the wheelchair around and they reentered the enclosed hall. Next to greet their eyes was the gift shop. Gannet was eager to see what was on display. Inside was a mishmash of trinkets, toys, books, clothing, candy, jewelry, papers and magazines, beverages and sport

paraphernalia. The shop was already filled with people. It took patience and perseverance to push the wheelchair through the crowds, especially as people still had to deal with uncertain footing, although it was felt less in here than closer to the ferry's perimeter. However, Bridie managed to push Gannet close to what interested her and they emerged triumphantly a little later with a necklace sporting a green harp, and a box of chocolates for Bennet and Kit.

When they continued around to the other side of the ferry, they found a room filled with arcade games. A few teenagers were already seated in front of some of them. Gannet eyed the games for a moment, but the space didn't really accommodate someone in a wheelchair so they continued on their walk. This side of the ferry was a mirror image of the other. There were steps leading up to the food court, and tables lining the windows. At the bow, the space opened up to more tables. And then they had rounded the turn and were heading back towards their own table.

Kit and Bennet looked up at them with smiles, Bennet's somewhat shaky, but it went unnoticed by the younger girl in all the excitement. (Bridie noticed, however, and was determined to find out later what had caused it. For now she held her peace.) Gannet gave the chocolates with hugs. Then she proceeded to tell them all that she and Bridie had seen and spilled the many brochures and maps onto the table so that they could all look at what she'd found.

Several brochures pictured and talked about castles that were to be found throughout Wales.

Bridie spread out a map of Anglesey Island and pointed to where they would dock (Holyhead) and then to a Sea Zoo at the southeast tip of the island. Gannet thought that was a funny way to refer to an aquarium, but her eyes lighted up when Bridie suggested that they visit the watery zoo before entering Wales proper.

Then Bridie opened up another map. This one was of Snowdonia, a national park that encompassed a huge area in the northwest part of Wales. It was this area that they would enter upon leaving Anglesey. She had explored a little of Snowdonia once before and knew a few of the attractions on offer. She pointed out several on the map and on several of the brochures that Gannet had chosen. If they stayed in Wales for a few days, they would be able to visit many of them.

Kit had been keeping one eye on the view out the window and drew the others' attention to a fleet of boats which passed them. They heard others around them talking about a race. They watched the sailboats until their paths led them inexorably out of sight.

Time passed quickly. Soon it was announced that the ferry would be docking in about ten minutes. There was a mass exodus towards the elevators by those traveling with vehicles. While they waited their turn, Bridie helped Gannet to the bathroom. Their small group was one of the last to descend to the car deck. Not many fit into the elevator alongside the wheelchair. But they weren't in any big hurry. The day was just starting and the ferry wouldn't leave again until they had exited and others cars were admitted.

They emerged and followed signs that led across a bridge and onto Anglesey Island proper. Kit was in charge of directions. He had Bridie access the A55 which led directly across the island to the southeast. At Port Britannia, they turned right and followed the bus route until it was time to turn off onto a much narrower lane that had a sign arrowing towards the Sea Zoo. The lane was enclosed by thick foliage on either side and looked only wide enough for one car. However, they did encounter a couple of vehicles going in the opposite direction and managed to scrape by without accident. Bennet was very happy to let Bridie drive in these conditions. It would take a while to get used to such narrow roads as well as driving on what was, to her, the wrong side of the road!

Eventually they reached the coast and another sign directed them to the right. But they did not actually spot the zoo until they had driven into and along what looked like someone's driveway. Then they encountered two possible branches and chose one. They chose correctly. Ultimately, the driveway opened up into a long narrow car park next to an unobtrusive building. They had reached the zoo.

It was nice to get out and stretch. Although the drive hadn't taken more than maybe 25 or 30 minutes, the narrow road and not knowing when or exactly where it would end had made the trip seem longer. There were few cars in the car park this early – it was just after 9 a.m. But the zoo was open so they situated Gannet in her chair and wheeled up the walk to the entrance. Luckily, the wheelchair was not too wide – it would be possible to maneuver between the exhibits. Bridie breathed in

silent gratitude; she had forgotten to make sure the zoo had wheelchair access before suggesting the stop.

Kit took it upon himself to wheel Gannet past the exhibits. Their cheerful voices led the way as Bennet and Bridie walked leisurely along the ramps behind them.

Bridie looked at her aunt. “I have a feeling something happened while Gannet and I were exploring the ferry.”

Bennet paused. “Yes, but it's nothing to be concerned about. It was just a small incident.”

Bridie eyed her again and flatly asked, “What small incident?”

Bennet's hands had unconsciously started to knead one another. “Well, Kit and I decided we wanted some coffee. He offered to get it but I wanted to move about a little so I said I'd go. I got the coffee and started down the steps when the ferry lurched. You know how it does. Anyway, before I could catch my balance, someone behind me must have lost their balance, too, and shoved hard into me. I tried to catch the rails but with a cup of coffee in each hand, that didn't work. I fell on the steps, losing both cups in the fall. When I turned around to see who had stumbled into me...there was noone there.”

“No one saw anything. Everyone was busy with their own pursuits. The first anyone knew anything about the accident was when the coffee cups went flying. That was a lot to clean up. A

woman passing by helped me to my feet and then one of the ferry's employees spotted the spill and ran to mop it up. I wasn't hurt, just shaken a bit, so I went back to the table. I told Kit I'd fallen when the ferry lurched and lost the coffees, so he went back and got two more.”

Bridie thought about it. “Do you think it was an accident, Aunt Bennet? Or do you think someone deliberately pushed you?”

Bennet paled a little. “I don't know. I've run the series of events over in my mind, again and again, but there's no way to be sure. I just thought it was strange that whoever it was disappeared.”

“Yes, that point hadn't escaped my notice, either,” replied Bridie. “You're sure you're alright?”

“Yes. As I said, I was just shaken up by it. No bruises, no breaks. I'm fine,” answered Bennet.

Bridie accepted that, but privately decided to keep a closer eye on her aunt. Something just didn't add up. And she was determined to find out what it was.

They spent an hour in the sea zoo. Gannet had a wonderful time looking at all the critters. They watched the sharks for a long time, but Gannet seemed to like the seahorses best. She plastered her face against the glass for ten minutes just watching the tiny animals floating about in the water.

They exited directly into the gift shop. Gannet wheeled about and finally selected a post card that featured seahorses as a memento.

Alongside the gift shop was a cafe. They decided to see what was on offer and ended up getting a handful of Welsh cakes and some hot chocolate. The Welsh cakes were similar to scones in taste, thought Bennet, but were the size of cookies and contained raisins. They were good.

They went outside. There was a small play area off to one side for children, but it looked abandoned at the moment. Gannet was the only child currently present and she couldn't move around like she normally could. The day was warming up. They didn't need their light jackets any more. The trees and grass against the blue sky were beautiful and serene. It was perfectly quiet. The sounds inside the zoo were totally muffled. There was no traffic, no one walking around talking. And yet, Gannet shivered.

She said, "I think we should go. I don't think we are safe here."

This startled her companions. As they made their way to the car, they peered in every direction, trying to find whatever or whoever had triggered Gannet's radar. Gannet had, in the past, actually glowed when danger threatened. They could not see the glow now; they were in bright sunlight. But they knew to take her warnings seriously.

The closer they got to the car, the more agitated Gannet became.

"Wait! The danger is here, somewhere in the car park!" she exclaimed.

When they had pulled into the car park,

there had been maybe a total of five cars. Now, they still saw only five but then, as they warily reached to open the car's trunk, a dark van raced towards them from the far end of the park. It aimed not for Gannet, rather for Bennet who was separated from the others by a couple of yards. Bridie was closest to her and, seeing the van's direction, leaped towards her aunt and shoved her to the side and down. The van came within millimeters of the two. If Bridie hadn't tackled her aunt, Bennet would have been hit dead center. It was doubtful she would have survived.

The van raced away. To the sound of its motor receding into the distance, Kit raced to Bennet and Bridie. Both lay stunned on the hard dirt. Then Bridie made an effort and rolled away from Bennet who had been trapped beneath her. Bridie groaned and then slowly rose to a sitting position, worried about her aunt.

Bennet had been knocked out by the impact with the ground. But she regained consciousness to find Kit leaning over her and gently palpating and manipulating her limbs to assess her injuries.

“This is getting old,” she murmured. “I’m going to have bruises on my bruises.”

Kit, anxious, asked “Are you alright?”

He helped her sit up when she indicated her intention. “I’m okay. Just got the wind knocked out of me.” Then she looked at Bridie. “Bridie, are you okay?” she asked anxiously.

“I’m fine, Aunt Bennet. But I think this puts

paid to your idea that the incident on the ferry was an accident,” replied Bridie.

“What incident?” asked Kit, suddenly on alert.

“Yes, what incident?” repeated Gannet who had maneuvered the wheelchair closer with some difficulty.

Bennet told them what had happened and they all meditated quietly for a moment. Then Kit helped the girls to their feet, brushed them off and helped them to the car. This time, he put Bridie in the passenger seat. It was time to practice driving himself. Once all three females were seated, they just sat there for awhile, to catch their breath and decide what to do next.

“I think we have to reevaluate everything that has happened,” Kit finally said. “Including what happened outside the museum. I think that the hit and run was meant for you, Bennet, not Gannet. For some reason, your nemesis wants Bennet out of the way. And I can only think that it is because she is closest to you. I think they are trying to gain control of you again, Gannet. By removing Bennet, I think they are trying to weaken you, weaken all of us. I don't think they want you dead, Gannet, I think they want to kidnap you for some purpose.”

No one said anything for a minute. They just added up the facts they had and came to the same conclusion. Both Gannet and Bennet were in danger, but in totally different ways. They would have to be even more on guard than before.

Bridie piped up. “I think I may know why. It would explain some of the differences in the two versions of the ditty. At first I thought the differences were just regional. But now I think the ditty that was found with the ring was Nemesis' own version. And I think we need to take a much closer look at it. I think it will give us a clue as to what his henchmen have in mind.”

Gannet looked pale. She said, “I think we need to gather my birds as soon as possible. We're all safer together than apart.”

Kit said, “I agree. No more diversions. We head straight for Jenny and Ty. We need to hold a powwow and see where we stand. Bridie, can you direct me?”

Bridie opened the map without another word. “We have to backtrack to hit the A55 again. But be on the watch for that van.”

It was a tense ride, not just because of the unfamiliar road and driving tactics, but because each of them anticipated a dark van attacking them. Finally they reached the juncture to the A55 and joined the steady stream of cars. It was easier to see and drive now. The van was nowhere in sight. The thick trees that had lined the back road had receded somewhat on this main thoroughfare. Their nerves had a chance to relax.

It was a short hour and a half later that Kit drove into the small village of Betws-y-Coed. It took a while to find a parking place but they finally managed. There was no sidewalk, so to speak, at the entrance to their bed and breakfast. The edge of

the property lay directly on the road. So that care had to be taken coming and going. Special care for them as they expected a van to try and run them down at any moment! But they reached the entrance without harm and Kit carried Gannet up the stairs to check in. The rooms were up another flight of stairs. It was decided that Bridie would share with Gannet. Their rooms were on opposite sides of the short hallway.

The rooms were cozy. A single queen-sized bed dominated each room with a cupboard to hang a few clothes, 2 night stands, a nook with a small desk, tiny tv, and a coffee pot. And each room had its own private bath with a tub and shower, toilet and sink. There wasn't a lot of walking space but they didn't plan to spend much time in their rooms anyway. Each room had a huge window. The rooms' walls were brightly papered. Thick curtains over sheers covered the windows but it was possible to open them and let the sun shine in. It was also possible to open the windows. All in all, the rooms were cozy and bright and comfortable. Jenny and Ty had found a nice place.

Once they were settled, Kit went downstairs to ask about Jenny and Ty. They were currently out. Their room was on the upper floor. Kit explored a bit. Downstairs there was a small tv room, and through a set of doors to the left at the base of the stairs, one entered a dining area. The hotel was managed and run by a single family. Across the road was a park, sporting a river. The sun looked very beautiful as it burned off the last of the fog over the trees. Kit was told that there was a pub and restaurant just a short five minute walk down the road next to a church.

Back upstairs, Kit relayed the news to the girls. He felt like exploring and asked if they'd like to come along. Bridie and Gannet were enthusiastic, but Bennet was still feeling somewhat shaken; she opted to rest on the bed for awhile.

When Bennet woke, she felt surprisingly refreshed. Then she caught the soft murmur of voices from across the hall. She opened her room door to see that Jenny and Ty had been found; all five were crowded into Bridie and Gannet's room. They looked up when they heard her door open. Within seconds, Bennet was enveloped in warm hugs from her young friends.

Ty used to work with Bennet at the university library. They had both met Jenny there and it wasn't long before Ty and Jenny became a couple. But more than that, they were good friends and an integral part of Gannet's 'birds', protectors of the young girl who was, herself, so much more than a simple young girl!

There was not enough space for so many in such a small room. Ty clattered downstairs and discovered the tv room was empty so he commandeered it for their party. Soon, Gannet was enthroned on the sofa and the others perched on chairs and the sofa table around her. It was time to catch up on news. Ty circumspectly closed the door. Of course, while Bennet slept, the others had more or less already shared their news, but now they updated Bennet as well.

Jenny and her band (two other players) were at the end of a tour that had them giving concerts throughout Europe. They had been at it since

January. Tonight's concert was the last and then they had thought to head back home for a much needed break. Home was Kit's old house that he had turned over to Ty when he and Bennet had gotten married. Ty and Jenny had gotten married soon after and they had all remained something of an extended family every since. It had only been this last year when Jenny and her band had decided to spread their wings that they had lost touch for a few months.

Jenny had grown up in Dublin, raised by her Gran. The idea had been to finish this last concert, go visit with Gran for a week or so and then fly home. It was pure chance that they were all in this part of the world at the same time. It was a happy reunion.

But then the talk turned more serious. It took a while to tell Jenny and Ty all the things that had happened in the past week. Bizarre to think that it had all happened in only 4 days! Even more bizarre to be facing Nemesis again! This was the general reaction of all of them. It was hard to come to grips with the fact that *He* was back and that once again danger threatened their lives. But they had faced *him* once before. They were ready, if not eager, to do so again. Gannet was precious to all of them, as was Bennet. They would do whatever had to be done to keep them safe.

CHAPTER 6

Since Jenny was giving a concert that evening and would need to practice, they decided to have an early dinner. There was a nice restaurant about five minutes walk away. Jenny called and asked her band mates if they'd like to join them, but they had already made plans. So it ended up being a reunion dinner. Some of the tables in the restaurant had padded benches. When Gannet was wheeled into the restaurant, the party was immediately seated at one of the roomiest tables. Gannet was able to rest her leg along the bench, and the others sat in the chairs on the opposite side. It was a big table so there was plenty of space for each of them.

The menu was varied, the service speedy and the food both plentiful and delicious. They

spent the hour listening to Jenny and Ty relate their adventures of the last few months and then Gannet talked about Lady May and school.

“Ty, have you been painting while traveling?” asked Bennet.

“Yes, I started a series that I call 'Rural Europe'. Almost each place we've visited has had some spectacular views, totally unique from the next, but all of them far from the hustle and bustle of urban life.” he answered.

“We tried to hold concerts in smaller towns whenever we could,” added Jenny. None of us in the band is really into the city scene - too hectic! We had to travel a little further to bypass the cities, but it was worth it. We always managed to find a nice B and B in the town hosting the concert and the crowds were just the right size. We usually held them in a pub, like we're doing tonight.”

“The B and Bs were pretty accommodating, too. They'd make me a sack lunch and point out the best views or angles and how to get to them. I usually painted something small to give to them by way of thanks and they always seemed to like it.” smiled Ty.

Bennet was not surprised. Ty's paintings were magical, and magnificent. Those b and b owners had no idea how valuable the paintings Ty had given them actually were. But Ty was not into painting entirely for the money. He always made sure that the paintings were truly appreciated before selling – or giving – them away.

“You must have quite a collection by now,” commented Kit.

“Yes,” agreed Ty. “I've been shipping them home as I finish them. Once we get back home, I'll hold a showing. We'll see how people respond to a different sort of landscape.”

“Well, if your past paintings are anything to judge by, they'll go like hotcakes!!” predicted Bennet.

Ty smiled. He knew that Bennet was one of his biggest fans as well as being one of his best friends.

“Hey, you guys, I have to get moving,” said Jenny, rising from her chair. “We have to warm up a bit before the concert. But I had seats reserved for all of you.”

“We'll see you there, Jenny,” chorused the group. Ty gave her a kiss and waved her off.

After paying for their dinners, they went outside and walked a little further down the road to look at the church, St. Mary's. It was impressive, old and quite beautiful, but not overbearing. It was obviously a working part of the daily life in this little town.

It wasn't dark yet, and another hour before Jenny's concert would start so they crossed the road and began walking along the path that paralleled the river in the park. Several others were out walking, one with a baby buggy, and a group of teens were playing some sort of ball game on one of the greens.

It was not a ball game that Bennet or Kit knew; it must be a game particular to either this neighborhood, Wales in general, or simply European.

In the river a few ducks swam around, and when they spotted Gannet, they approached as close as the water would allow and honked at her, jostling to be the one closest. Gannet communed with them for a few minutes and then sent them on their way with a bemused smile.

“They told me that they'd seen a dark van driving up and down this road this morning. They haven't seen it since but promised to be on the lookout. I told them to be careful. The men driving the van are *not* nice,” related Gannet.

Bennet, Kit and Bridie all took this in stride. It wasn't the first time birds had gone out of their way to help protect Gannet. Both ravens and an owl had raised beak and claw in their defense in the past, acting well out of the bounds of natural bird behavior.

They strolled along for a while, just enjoying the fresh air, the rural atmosphere and the beauty around them. When the sun began to sink in the sky, Kit pushed Gannet's chair in the direction of the pub. To avoid the crowds, they had determined to go a little early and get settled in their seats. However, they had not taken into account the word-of-mouth popularity of Jenny and her band. People here had heard their music sometime somewhere else and had spread the word. When Jenny's friends entered the pub, there was already standing room only. If they hadn't had seats

reserved, they would not have gotten in.

This was excellent news for Jenny. She and her bandmates would be so pleased! Bennet, Bridie and Ty were smiling broadly at the turnout, even though it made it difficult to weave a path through the crowds to get to their seats. Once there, a small stool with a plump pillow had been reserved as well for Gannet to rest her leg on. And no one around them complained in the least. The crowds were energetic and happy, but not rowdy at all. This was the kind of audience that Jenny and her band preferred.

Most people had a drink in hand while they waited. Kit volunteered to fetch them all something, and once he had their orders, maneuvered through the throngs with practiced ease. He knew well how to squeeze through narrow spots, thanks to his caving expertise. It was a few minutes before he returned. There was a substantial line at the counter, but he managed to get back without spilling a drop before Jenny and her two compadres came on stage.

Jenny shouted out a hello – 'Croeso' – in Welsh before starting the first number. A deafening 'croeso' was the reply, but as the first notes played, a hush fell over the crowd. They were here to listen and Jenny and her band were well worth it.

The night sped by with reels, ballads, sad songs and jigs. One never knew what they would perform next. Some of the songs were from countries they'd passed through enroute to Wales. Some of the songs were pure Celtic. But they ended the night with a Welsh lullaby, one well

known in this little town, and on the second round, the audience joined in. When the last note died, the people clapped and whooped and whistled, eager to show their profound appreciation of the concert. Jenny and her two mates bowed and smiled and waved, but finally put their instruments away.

Jenny made her way to Ty and leaned into him for a hug. It had been a wonderful night, a successful end to a many months' tour, but now it was done and all she wanted to do was relax with her loved ones. The crowd left her alone. Now that she wasn't up on the stage, she was treated to the privacy she seemed to want. They treated her as one of them, a familiar figure who just happened to be in the pub for a drink and a little relaxation. She did share a beer with Ty, but then she, as well as Gannet, looked ready to call it a night. They moved towards the door, en masse, and a few good nights were called out, but no one followed.

Outside, the air was fresh and cool. The moon, a little less than a sickle moon now, shone down on them as did the stars. That was the only light to brighten their path on their way to the bed and breakfast. It reminded Bennet and Kit of the sky on their farm. There, too, it was possible to see the night sky, unlike in the city where the street lights bled away the view. It was beautiful!

Perhaps because of the serenity of the night after enjoying themselves so thoroughly at the concert, their minds were not focussed on the road. Others were out walking, a few cars were pulling away from the pub, and they naturally stayed close to the roadside to let them pass.

Suddenly, a multitude of ducks flew overhead, honking loudly and circling in front of them. Gannet pulsed a bright blue, and out of the darkness came a roar. Bright lights blinded them as they rushed in their direction. Had it not been for the ducks' warning, it would have ended in tragedy. Kit grabbed Bennet and shielded her with his body tucked up against the wall of the store they were passing; simultaneously Ty reached down and bodily picked Gannet up from her chair, holding her close and following Kit's example. Bridie leaped away from the chair she'd been pushing and hugged the wall like a lover; Jenny tucked in beside her.

Horn blaring, the lights swiped over and past them and off down the road. It had been close, too close. It had come up onto the narrow slate stone path, trying to swipe Bennet off it, but endangering everyone in the group in the process. It was pure luck that Kit and the others had acted as swiftly as they did. A second later would have been too late - for Bennet, for all of them.

This time, they had all been targeted. Had Tigne Sh'dah upped the stakes? Had he reached the conclusion that if *He* couldn't secure Gannet for his own use, he would make sure she was no longer around to oppose him at all?

The morning's events only increased their puzzlement. At the breakfast table, perusing the daily paper, they discovered an article about a fatal car accident late the previous evening, just on the outskirts of their village.. A black van with a Dublin, Ireland registration had been found

overturned and burned in a nearby field. Inside were the remains of three unknown persons. No identification was found. The van had been reported stolen a few days prior to the wreck.

“This just doesn't make sense!” said Bridie. “Why would *He* kill his own men? Isn't that just defeating *his* own purposes?”

“Well, in our last encounter with *him*, *he* never harmed his own men. If they got harmed while trying to carry out his instructions, he just found more of them. But I don't remember him hurting them himself,” mused Bennet.

Just then, Bridie was called to the phone. While she was gone, the others continued their breakfast, but shelved any further discussion until later. When Bridie returned, she seemed about to burst. “I have news. That was the head of the music department at the museum in Dublin. There have been developments concerning the ditty. She remembered my interest in it and thought I might want to know that it was stolen last night!”

“Stolen? Well then, we're lucky you managed to get a copy beforehand! Did she say any more?” asked Kit.

“Well,” answered Bridie, “it happened two nights ago. The thieves also made a try for the reed. Remember? The one in the bag? But the alarm went off and they left with only the sheepskin. And of course left behind a horrible mess. Security has been increased, but they have no idea who the perpetrators were.”

“The plot thickens,” commented Ty.

“I'd like to see your copy of the ditty,” said Jenny. “Was there a musical score attached?”

“Not exactly,” smiled Bennet. “But the next best thing. Gannet, here, used to sing it with her friends.”

Jenny looked at Gannet with raised eyebrows, surprised and intrigued, and awed..

“Well, then, perhaps you could sing it for me, Gannet,” Jenny said lightly, with a smile.

“You have to remember that Gannet's version is slightly different from that found on the sheepskin,” interjected Bridie. “I'm beginning to think we need to take a closer look at the other version,” she continued slowly. “If the thieves wanted the ditty badly enough to break into the museum, then perhaps it has more significance than we realize.”

Breakfast done, Bridie hurried up to her room to retrieve her copies of both versions. There were several significant differences from Gannet's version. And Jenny was shaking her head at some of Bridie's conjectures. She read through the original Gaelic, and again looked at Bridie's translation. Gently she said, “You missed a few key words here and there. It's easy to do. The Gaelic is very old and meanings have changed over time. If you don't mind, I'll write down a closer translation.”

Bridie nodded her assent, a little pink, but this was too important to let ego get in the way.

Jenny's translation of the sheepskin
version of the ditty:

Sickle Moon
Lost in gloom
Found: the ring
A gate she'll bring.

The ring is found
The ring is bound
To dark will heed
And follow his lead.

Two – four – six – eight
She wears the ring to call the gate
Then Dark will come
And Light is done.

Circle thrice
The ring and Light
While she does sing
The Dark she brings.
Opens the gate
And seals her fate.

Circle Moon
Welcome gloom
She wears the ring
For Dark she sings.

Circle thrice
The ring and Light
Sing, O Light
With all your might
Open the gate
Bind your fate

Your task is done
His time has come.

They all perused Jenny's version. Bennet paled as she read it.

“This is the opposite of Gannet's version! The complete opposite! No wonder they stole the ring and the sheepskin. And no wonder that *He* is trying so hard to get his hands on Gannet. *She* is the only one who can open the gate for him!”

“Yes, and I have a feeling that last night's accident was punishment for putting her in danger. Tigne Sh'dah doesn't like to be crossed and his men seem to have taken things into their own hands.” said Kit.

“But that still doesn't tell us why they have been trying to hurt Bennet.” added Bridie.

“Maybe she simply got in the way.” said Jenny. “Twice she was standing right by Gannet. Perhaps those men planned to snatch Gannet and couldn't because of Bennet. Maybe they just got frustrated and decided to get rid of the obstacle.”

“You may be right.” said Kit, “but we're not going to take that for granted. We must continue to keep a close watch on both Gannet and Bennet.” To this they all heartily agreed.

Gannet had been very quiet during all this. Bennet saw that Gannet had curled in upon herself, one knee drawn up and arms wrapped around it. She suspicioned that if the cast hadn't been there,

both knees would have been drawn up and Gannet would have curled into a defensive ball. Her heart went out to the frightened little girl.

“Sweetheart, we'll keep you safe! When have your birds ever failed you?” she said, trying to rally Gannet's spirits.

“I know, Mom.” answered Gannet. “But I'm still afraid. I'm so happy here with you and Dad and Bridie, Jenny and Ty, and Lady May. I thought *HE* was gone now and I could be happy with my new family. But *He's* still trying to capture me, use me. And if *He* succeeds, all this will just vanish. All of you, this life, the sun, and I'll be trapped for evermore, in the dark, and made to do whatever *He* wants.”

Bennet paled at her daughter's fears, at the thought of losing her, of losing everything. She hugged Gannet closer.

“We have to find the ring!” said Ty. “The ring is as crucial to this battle as Gannet. Both sides need it.”

“Perhaps my other friends can help us,” Gannet looked up, suddenly hopeful. “Can one of you wheel me out to the park? I need to call.”

Kit picked Gannet up to carry her down the steps and across the road, looking long and carefully in both directions before crossing. The others were hard on his heels, Ty carrying the folded up chair. Once across, he opened the chair and Kit placed Gannet in it. Then they wheeled to the edge of the river and stood back to watch.

Gannet raised her arms and began to sing, a beautiful air without words. And it wasn't long before the birds in the trees and the birds on the water began to answer her, each in their own way. Soon the air was filled with an incredible but melodic cacophony. No one else was about to witness this phenomenon, only the group of six, Gannet and 'her birds'.

Although they had heard Gannet sing before, they had never seen her talk to the birds like this. It was eerie. The hairs on the back of their arms raised. The birds in the trees did not approach but as the collective sound became ever louder, it was obvious that they were amassing there. The water birds did swim close to where Gannet sat, but they remained on the water. The song went on for a long time and then, just as suddenly, stopped. Gannet caught her breath for a few minutes. Then she looked at her loved ones and contentedly said:

“They are going to help. They are going to look for the ring. And they are going to pass the word on to other friends. They will find it. My birds are keen-eyed. It will be hard to hide anything from them.”

“Amazing. Simply amazing.” Bridie shook her head and smiled ruefully. “Well, my little cousin, in the meantime, there are a few things *we* can do. We need you to teach us the ditty – *your* version, if you please and the tune.” Then she winked at Gannet.

“That will be easy,” replied Gannet. But we also have to look for a Shawm.”

Jenny's ears perked up at that. "A Shawm? I've only ever seen one once and that was in a museum in Budapest. I've never heard it played though. Why do you need to find one?"

"We need it to accompany my song," answered Gannet simply.

"That may not be easy," said Jenny. She sounded kind of daunted. "Even if we find one, none of us knows how to play one."

Gannet's face dropped a little at that. But then she said, "Jenny, you are good with the flute. I'm sure you could learn how to play a simple tune," she coaxed. "It's not so different from an oboe and I know you've experimented with that."

"That's true, but the Shawm uses two reeds. If we can somehow find someone who knows how to play one and can show me... Well, we can only try," said Jenny, giving in with a grin.

"Great!" said Gannet, taking the qualified answer as a yes.

"What's the name of that museum in Hungary, Jenny? Perhaps I can make some connections through the Trinity College," suggested Bridie.

"Or I, through Fletcher Chapel College, back home," mentioned Bennet.

"I knew my birds could help me." Gannet almost purred her pleasure.

They went back to the bed and breakfast where a flurry of phone calls and email messaging took place. While they waited for replies, Gannet began to teach them the lyrics and the posturing of the dance that went with the ditty. It wasn't complicated, but everything had to be done precisely in the correct order.

Ty, of course, had the most trouble. But when Gannet said he could chant rather than actually sing, it became a much simpler task for him. Chanting he knew! His voice sounded like a bull frog when he had to sing and, thus, it was something he did very seldom and not by choice! But his deep base would add a profound element to their performance.

Jenny, who lived to sing, often teased him about his voice, but he took it in good stead. He was comfortable with his skills and that singing didn't number among them, didn't bother him in the least. Plus, he knew how much Jenny admired his skill with a brush, and that she loved him, warts and all.

A couple of hours later, they had made good progress. Jenny and Bridie and Gannet had closely compared the Gaelic and English versions of the ditty, and with the changes Jenny had made to Bridie's original translation, Gannet thought it a close enough approximation that they would be able to use the English version this time. Ty was not the only one to breathe a sigh of relief when Gannet announced that! But his dramatic 'phew!!' made Gannet giggle, which was half of his intent in the first place. His answering cheeky grin only made Gannet giggle harder. It was a nice break in the

tension for all of them.

They were partially in luck. The Hungarian museum had several Shawms but, at first did not want to lend one to Jenny, even with her links to the the Irish National Museum and Trinity College. But then Bennet got on the phone. It turned out she had corresponded quite often with the director of the museum and she had been able to help him on a number of occasions. When she added her plea to the request, it turned the table. Jenny would be allowed to borrow the instrument, but she would have to personally fetch it. And, they did not have anyone on staff who knew how to play it. But the party did not give up hope; they had solved stickier problems before.

The next step was for Jenny to go to Budapest. It was decided that Bridie would accompany her. Ty would remain to help guard Bennet and Gannet. The trip would take three days; with the flight connections, it wasn't possible to do it any quicker. Betws-Y-Coed was a quiet little town with no airport. The girls would have to reach London and fly from there. A bus left within the hour, but it was a three and a half hour drive, minimum. The girls booked an evening flight, but it remained to be seen if they made it. If they didn't, they'd have to try again the following morning.

Meanwhile, Bennet took up the task to find someone who knew how to play the instrument. This was a task to which she was particularly suited. She had spent more than the last two decades helping people find things; that was her job as head librarian at Fletcher Chapel. Not only had she grown adept at using the internet, but had made

innumerable contacts around the world. Just off the top of her head, she could think of at least three who might be able to help.

First she tried the internet, but soon realized that she needed a more personal touch with the search. She called a cohort in London as she was relatively close by, but Shannon couldn't think of any contacts who could help. After a few minutes of private catching up, Bennet hung up and turned to her email. She could not remember Berndt's phone number and had to access her files to find it. Berndt worked at the University of Graz in Austria. She knew for a fact that it was an important school for musicians. She thought he would surely be able to help her; either he might know someone himself, or could direct her to someone else who could.

She dialed his number and after a short delay while his secretary fetched him, they were soon deep in conversation. She outlined her need to find someone who knew how to play a Shawm. Berndt recognized the instrument immediately for they had several among their own exhibits. However, he couldn't immediately remember anyone who was proficient in playing one. He asked if he could call her back the next day. She readily agreed and hung up, and caught the others up on her efforts.

Gannet was starting to feel housebound so Kit and Ty decided to take her out for a sightseeing tour. Reflecting that she could do no more until she heard back the next day, Bennet decided to join them. First they ate lunch in the nearby pub, then, armed with a map upon which the concierge had marked several sites of interest, they appropriated

Bridie's car and set out.

CHAPTER 7

Ty had never driven on the wrong side of the road so, being the most experienced of the three adults, Kit took the wheel. Luckily there wasn't much traffic. Or perhaps that was the general state in these parts. The view of Mt Snowdon was breathtaking! The mountain reared up against a blue backdrop. Between lay a valley through which ran rivers and endless snakelike stone fences, made of the area's natural stones, piled horizontally one atop another with, in many instances, the top layer being made of upright stones. Bennet found these quite charming.

The first real stop they made was in the town of Beddgellert. After parking, they walked through the town and followed a crowd who made straight for the information building. Here, they picked up a

pamphlet about the town along with several postcards. The next stop, just a couple of paces further on, was an ice cream parlor. That sounded good after the drive. The day was perfect: warm, sunny, with just the slightest of breezes. Licking their cones, they meandered along the singular street which ran between a rushing river on one side, and the stone-built cottages on the other.

Bennet was reading the brochure and stopped them all to read how the town seemed to have taken its name from a tale about a dog. She read:

...a prince had gone out hunting, leaving his best-loved hunting dog behind to watch over his infant son. When he returned, it was to find the son dead and the dog all bloody. Immediately, he concluded that the dog had killed his son, so he slew the dog. Then he went into another room to find a dead wolf. It was only then that he realized it was actually the wolf that had killed his son, and the dog was bloody from fighting the wolf in defense of the babe. The prince was inconsolable. He had lost both child and his favorite dog. He buried the dog and raised a plaque in his name, and supposedly never smiled again.

“Supposedly, the grave of the dog, Gellert, is here,” she continued, “and is visited regularly.”

“Oooh, we should do that, too,” cried Gannet, entranced by the story of the brave dog.

They walked through a gate and along the tree-shaded river into a meadow. At the center of the meadow was Gellert's grave. Touchingly, some

child had written a note to the dog and left it next to the grave marker, held down by a stone. A bit further along, they found a rough metal statue of the dog. Gannet insisted on having her picture taken, seated as close to the statue as the wheelchair would allow, and with her arm around its neck.

On the walk back, they passed by a long low stone building which turned out to be a shop filled with arts, crafts, and more postcards. Bennet and Gannet went inside to take a look, but came back out again, empty-handed. There were many beautiful things inside, but nothing that drew either of them. Neither was inclined to buying knick-knacks just for the sake of it. Outside the entry was a huge statue of the Welsh dragon. Now that drew Gannet's attention!! She sat before it for a very long time before she was willing to come away.

From there, they drove to Portmeirion, an artificial enclosed village designed and developed by Clough Williams-Ellis in order to demonstrate how a site could be developed without spoiling the surrounding natural habitat. He started it in 1926 and didn't complete it until 1976, when he was over 90 years old; he died two years later. Portmerion is a Conservation Area, and it cost to get in to see it. The site was both beautiful and exotic. Buildings were topped by spinares, with odd little balconies here and there, the buildings themselves were all painted varied pastel shades. Below was a garden with paths winding through it and an enclosed pool.

Walking down a path on the other side of the garden, they approached a protected estuary. When Gannet learned that it was a preserve for water fowl, she was eager to reach the banks. Mud flats

extended far out so that it was impossible to enter the estuary when the tide was out. Off to the left they could see a thin strip of a pebble beach and beyond what looked like the entrance to a cave. High above, surrounded by trees, jutted a house. Kit reckoned that the black hole was actually the entrance to steps leading up to the house. It was all out of bounds.

Seagulls flew over the mud flats and, unsurprisingly, came closer to land on the barrier walls close to Gannet when they spotted her. They stayed there for a few moments, then with a shriek lifted off into the air. Gannet wore a smug grin for a moment, but didn't say anything. However, the others were pretty sure she had asked them to help their counterparts in finding the ring.

They pushed Gannet back up the walkway and decided to buy some juice before continuing on their way. Portmeirion was an interesting place, but it was too.. artificial, for them to want to stay there long. They all preferred nature without the odd bits and buildings that had been collected here. Still, it had been interesting.

The bed and breakfast manager had marked off a rough circle on the map they'd been given. There was one last stop marked off which was actually not far from their hotel. This last stop was the Slate Mine and Caverns in Llechwedd. Two different tours were available, one on the surface and one that went deep into the mine. They chose the former simply because of time constraints and Gannet's impediments. Had they had more time and had Gannet not been wearing a cast, they would have opted for the deep mine tour, for they all

enjoyed spelunking.. It was fascinating!

Each put on a hard hat and boarded the tiny very narrow train (2 very chummy seatmates fit in each row); the doors to each 'car' were bolted shut by the conductor after everyone was seated. They entered the mine and passed from bright light to night. There were tiny lanterns situated strategically along the track, as well as in a few of the 'rooms' passed along the way. Then the train stopped and the passengers were asked to collect in a cavern and be seated on the stone benches at the entrance.

There they were treated to a short lecture - very clearly and well rendered (despite the accent) by a guide. He covered a little history, showed the tools used by the miners, and turned off the lights so they could see the true conditions under which the miners worked. Fascinating! Then they backtracked in the train to another cavern where a tape and posed costumed mannequins went over some of the same material and a bit more. 'Those poor miners' was the concerted opinion of all. Such bleak, dangerous, back breaking conditions!

When they returned to the starting point, they hoped to witness a slate cutting demonstration, but it never materialized, so finally they visited the gift shop, where Gannet found a postcard sporting the Welsh dragon. Then they wended their way back to the car and drove on to the bed and breakfast.

By then, everyone was feeling peckish. Gannet was feeling weary as well as hungry, so Kit and Ty offered to go to the restaurant, pick up some

food and bring it back to their rooms. Gannet decided to write down as much as she could about their experiences to share later with Mrs. Reilly and her classmates. While she was thus occupied, Bennet checked her email. Berndt had written to say that he was on the trail of a 'hot prospect' and would get back to her as promised on the morrow. Bennet had to snicker a little at the thought of Berndt saying 'hot prospect' in his strongly accented English. He was a dear colleague!

Kit and Ty raced up the stairs, laughing and talking, and accompanied by mouthwatering aromas.. Bennet's and Gannet's doors had been propped open and both girls waited with smiles of anticipation. Soon they all settled down to share a platter of beef, roasted vegetables and potatoes. It looked like the guys had bought enough for an army, thought Bennet privately, but when they had finished, there was very little left on the platter.

It was decided that since both Bridie and Jenny were gone, Bennet would share Gannet's room. None of them, including Gannet, wanted her to be by herself. So after eating, Bennet gathered her night things and moved them into Gannet's room. The rest of the evening was spent quietly, writing and reading, interspersed with the occasional comment.

A cat came by and peeked into their room before they closed the curtains for the night. It mewed at Gannet through the cracked window, but did not try to enter. However, it's presence did

draw their attention to the open window and the terrace beyond. Prudently, they closed and latched the window for the night.

It was good that they did so. Around 3 a.m., Bennet heard someone moving about on the terrace. Whoever it was attempted to open their window but finding it locked, went away, perhaps looking for someplace easier to access. Gannet slept through it, but Bennet lay there for many long minutes afterwards, heart pounding. But there was no repeat attempt so finally she relaxed and fell into a light doze.

The next morning, Bennet mentioned the incident to the man who took their orders for breakfast. The man promised to look into it, although he seemed very surprised. He said that it was a rare occurrence in their small community; everyone knew everybody else. He didn't say it, but she could tell that he was skeptical, probably thought she had just had a bad dream. However, a little later, he came back and admitted to finding muddy footprints on the terrace and outside Gannet's window. He commended her for latching her window, and said he would keep a watch tonight in case the thieves made a reappearance.

When Kit and Ty heard what had happened, they didn't say anything until their waiter had left, but then they had Bennet repeat the tale. Kit and Bennet's room overhung the tv room's windows. Kit resolved that Bennet and Gannet would sleep in that room tonight. The windows would provide no foothold to would-be intruders. He would take

Gannet's room and both he and Ty, whose room was just above Gannet's, would be on guard. No more was said on the subject.

Ty's phone rang. It was Jenny calling. She and Bridie had reached London, but a little later than anticipated so had not been able to fly until this morning. They had spent the night in an airport hotel, and were now at the airport, waiting for the flight to Budapest to board. They expected to arrive in Budapest in a few hours and would hopefully get to the museum before it closed.

Before Ty hung up, Bennet asked to speak to Jenny. She told Jenny about the search Berndt was conducting for them, and said she'd call as soon as she knew anything more. It was possible the girls might have to make a detour to Austria before heading back to Wales. She passed on greetings to Bridie before handing the phone back to Ty. She did not, however, tell Jenny about the prowler. The girls had enough to think about already.

The attempted break-in let them know that Tigne Sh'dah had not forgotten them nor given up his efforts. It also told them that he had already managed to find more men. They would have to stay alert. There was no telling when or where further attempts would be made.

After breakfast, rather than hang about the bed and breakfast, Kit, Ty and Gannet decided to explore the area a bit more. Bennet decided to stay

and wait for Berndt's call.

Even though Gannet's cast made it difficult to take advantage of some of the hiking trails, there was nothing stopping them from driving. They headed farther north to look at some of the castles that dotted the area. There was a plethora on offer! And each was very different from the last.

First up was Conwy Castle, begun in 1283 and completed in four year's time, dominating the mountainside and surrounding area. The castle was a part of King Edward I's plans to surround Wales in "an iron ring of castles" to subdue the rebellious native Welsh population who were opposed to English invasion. Its eight towers were connected by a high curtain wall. The castle's main entrance was via an ancient suspension bridge which connected the castle with the peninsula. Gannet read from the guidebook:

"Anyone looking at Conwy Castle for the first time will be impressed first and foremost by the unity and compactness of so great a mass of building, with its eight almost identical towers, four on the north and four on the south, pinning it to the rock on which it stands. Especially striking is the long northern front, where the tower's equidistant spacing divides the wall surface into three exactly similar sections, each pierced by a similar pair of arrowloops, and each rising to a common battlement line."

They walked through the entry, around the enclosed rectangular area and peered into the exposed rooms from the walkways above. Gannet read more:

"The Inner Ward is the heart of the castle, containing, as it does, the suite of apartments which Master James of St. George contracted to build for King Edward and Queen Eleanor in 1283. In each range of buildings the principal rooms were on the first floor, with heated but somewhat dark basements below them. All the floors are now missing."

Kit and Ty took turns carrying Gannet up stairways to get a bird's eye view of the town below and the surrounding countryside. The day was clear so they could see a long way.

And then it was on to the next: Castle Biwmares further to the northwest. This castle was totally different, square in shape, perfectly symmetrical, and surrounded partially by a water-filled moat. It was unfinished. Inside the walls was a huge grassy green. The walls were not imposing like Conwy Castle, rather seemed more integrated into the surrounding town. A wall surrounded the castle itself providing several obstacles, including the moat, to would-be attackers. Evidently, although another of King Edward's 'iron ring' castles, the king ran out of funds before he could complete it.

Next the three headed south to Caernarfon Castle. Gannet quoted from the guide book:

“Begun in 1283 as the definitive chapter in his conquest of Wales, Caernarfon was constructed not only as a military stronghold but also as a seat of government and royal palace.”

“...Standing at the mouth of the Seiont river, the fortress (with its unique polygonal towers, intimidating battlements and colour-banded masonry) dominates the walled town also founded by Edward.”

“In 1969, the castle gained worldwide fame as the setting for the investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales.”

This castle was huge! The guidebook was quick to point out the many defenses with which the castle was equipped, including seven towers, 20 feet high, and two massive gatehouses. The castle's regal nature was made even more evident with the Eagle tower (with its triple turrets, each bearing a stone eagle, symbolic of the links with imperial power), Queen's Tower, Chamberlain Tower and Black Tower, all accommodation towers several storeys high, mostly with self-contained chapels on each storey (indicative of high status accommodation).

Gannet said, “The booklet says that over a period of 50 years, King Edward spent over £25,000 to make the castle fit to be a royal residence and a seat of government. Wow! That's a

lot of money! It must have been a fortune then! Mrs. Reilly is going to really be impressed!” Kit and Ty smiled a little at the last, but agreed it was all very impressive.

By now, they were all ready for a break, so they stopped in town to have a bite of lunch. Kit took the opportunity to call Bennet and find out if she had heard anything yet. But Berndt hadn't called. Bennet was using the time to look up other possible sources in case Berndt's 'hot prospect' fell through. She asked how their sightseeing was going. Gannet took the phone and began an excited recitation of all the things she had seen and been most impressed by. When she finally ran down, Kit retrieved the phone with a laugh and said they'd call again later. He hung up and they finished their lunch, watching the other pedestrians and visitors from their strategic seats on the restaurant's patio.

Continuing their trip, they headed further south along the northwest coast of Wales, until they reached Castle Cricieth, a little south and west of the town of Beddgelert. This castle sat on a rocky peninsula overlooking Tremadog Bay. They learned that the core of the castle was originally constructed by Llewellyn the Great of Wales but that the castle was then taken over by Edward's forces in 1283 and added to his string of defenses, withstanding attacks until finally overtaken and burnt in 1404 by Welsh leader, Owain Glyndwr. The castle stands on a headland between two beaches. It was easy to see how it could have defended the town below from an assault by sea in centuries past. Gannet and her two escorts saw

many people picnicking outside the grounds, enjoying the view and the fine day. Had they not already eaten, they would have joined them

They were not far from the bed and breakfast now. There were two more castles they intended to see before calling it a day. The first was Harlech Castle, on the other side of Tremadog Bay from Castle Cricieth.

Harlech Castle sits on top of a high cliff, and overlooks both the sea and rural Snowdonia. It took six years to build, and due to its natural site, was impregnable except to the east; that one vulnerable side was guarded by a massive gatehouse. The gate-passageway was protected by a succession of no less than seven obstacles, including three portcullises.

Master James of St. George, King Edward's architect, was responsible for planning and executing the building of the 'iron ring' castles, and adept at using a site's natural advantages to increase protection, Castle Harlech was no exception. However, it was overtaken in 1404 by Welshman Owain Glyndwr, who then took up residence there until the English once again took control in 1408.

The last castle on the list was Castle Dolwyddelan. Unlike the other castles they'd looked at, this castle was not built on the coast. It was built by Snowdonia's ruler, Welshman Llewellyn the Great between 1210 and 1240, high on a ridge deep in the heartland of Snowdonia in

order to control a strategic mountain pass to Conwy. The castle was shaped totally differently from those built for King Edward by Master James: it was high, rectangular, narrow, and had no rounded towers, although a wall was built around it. This castle was a bit more difficult for Gannet to maneuver around simply because of the rocky hillsides so they contented themselves with an exterior view and that from the visitor's center.

They were only about five miles now from Betws-y-Coed. They made themselves comfortable on the grassy knoll by the castle and just relaxed, taking in the view and watching the sheep who grazed amidst the rocks, quite unafraid of the people who clambered here and there to gain a better view of the countryside. Gannet had hoped that some of the sheep would meander in their direction, but had to content herself with a more remote viewing. Kit took the opportunity and called Bennet who said she had finally heard from Berndt.

It was late afternoon. The day had been interesting, informative, fun, but they were all surfeited with castles. Kit and Ty helped Gannet back to the car. In a matter of minutes, they met Bennet at the pub in Betws-y-Coed to exchange more anecdotes of the day, eat dinner and find out what Berndt had had to say.

CHAPTER 8

After Gannet had shown Bennet all the different guidebooks and postcards that she had gathered at each of the castles they'd visited, they sat back to hear her news of Berndt.

“Well, he did track down his 'hot prospect',” grinned Bennet. “And the guy evidently does know how to play the Shawm. However, he is not currently in Graz. Rather he's in Salzburg, involved in a festival there. So if the girls want to meet him, they're going to have to go to Salzburg.”

“Have you already talked with Jenny?” asked Ty.

“No, Berndt only called me about a half hour before you came and it is not easy to terminate

a conversation with him. I had barely hung up when Kit called so I just waited. I thought you might like to talk with Jenny at the same time,” replied Bennet, with a wink.

Ty smiled. “Yes, I would. Thanks. I'll call her now.” He dialed Jenny's number, but was referred to voice mail. “I'll try again in a few minutes. She's probably at the museum and has her phone turned off.”

They finished their dinner and Bennet listened to more of Gannet's enthusiastic reports about her day.

“I'm going to write down what I liked best about each castle. Then I'll have that and my cards and these pamphlets to show Mrs. Reilly and my class. They are going to be soooo jealous,” Gannet observed with a smug grin.

“I'm sure they will be fascinated by all of it,” agreed Bennet.

Ty's phone rang. It was Jenny. As he'd surmised, she had just now finished at the museum. When she turned her phone back on, she had seen that she had just missed his call. The others could only make surmises from Ty's side of the conversation of what had gone on.

“So, how did it go?” he asked. “Any problems? Really! Wow! You were very lucky! Yes. Here, you'd better talk with Bennet about that.” Then he handed the phone over to Bennet.

“Hi Jenny. You got it? Great! Yes, Berndt

called back just a few minutes ago. He gave me the name of the man you need to see. But you and Bridie will have to go to Salzburg to find him. His name is Johan Kepler. He can be located at the Mozart Festival office on the main platz in downtown Salzburg. The office has been told to expect you. They're open all day till around 6 p.m. Yes, I'll tell them. Take care. We'll see you day after tomorrow. Give Bridie my love. Bye.”

Then she handed the disconnected phone to Ty and told them, “She and Bridie are going to try and get a flight tonight, but if that isn't possible, they'll go early tomorrow. They expect to be back here no later than noon the day after tomorrow. Jenny said she'd call later with their arrival time. Oh! And they were able to get hold of the Shawm after finally tracking down the right official. It took them a couple of hours being shunted from one office to the next before they found the right one and someone who understood enough English to help. But once they did, it was smooth sailing.”

Finished with their meal, they headed out the door and across to walk by the river. The sun was just starting to set and the pinks, oranges and reds reflected off the surface of the water. It was serene, a perfect ending to the day. A couple of swans floated on the water, and made their way over to exchange greetings with Gannet. But the birds didn't stay more than a moment before swimming off to a more secluded section. The four walked a bit further along the path before turning and heading back to the bed and breakfast.

When the sun went down, it became almost pitch black outside. And with the sun gone, it got

chilly very quickly. They reached the entrance to the hotel within moments and Kit carried Gannet up the steps and on up to his and Bennet's room. The others followed behind, but Ty continued on up to his own room.

The travelers all felt in need of a wash. Kit took over Gannet's room. Gannet had to make do with a sponge bath due to her cast, but felt refreshed afterwards. Then she donned the nightwear that Bennet had fetched for her and settled into the bed to write up her reports of the day. She couldn't help chuckling at some of the things she remembered and wrote. Her classmates were going to love this!

Kit joined them after his shower, to drink coffee and idly chat with Bennet. Ty joined them for a few minutes. Then the two males went downstairs to the tv room to see if there was a ball game to watch. Bennet pulled out a book of crossword puzzles and solved three of them before seeing Gannet begin to nod over her paper hoard. She helped clear it away and got Gannet settled. In moments, Gannet was sound asleep.

Bennet lay propped on her side for a few minutes, just watching her daughter sleep. Kit knocked on the door softly and Bennet got up and opened the door to whisper a good night to Ty, who continued on up the stairs with a wave of his hand, and to kiss Kit good night. Then Kit crossed the hallway to enter Gannet's room.

Soon, lights in all three rooms were extinguished. But inside two of the rooms, their occupants settled in for a night of watch duty. It had been settled that Ty would take first watch,

from eleven till 3. Then he would knock on Kit's door and Kit would take over. Bennet slept on the side of the bed nearest to the window. The window was closed and latched even though it rose above a flat windowed face.

Bennet planned to take no chances. She slept very lightly. If someone discovered she and Gannet slept here this night and somehow managed to climb the glass face, she would be ready at a moment's notice to bundle Gannet out of the room and across the hall.

Their precautions panned out. Whoever had prowled the terrace the night before must have thought their presence had gone unnoticed, but in their reconnaissance had determined which room was Gannet's. They returned in the wee hours just before 3. Ty, who was still vigilantly watching the dimly lit terrace for any sign of activity, heard a muffled scuffle and a hastily broken-off exclamation. Someone was definitely below and obviously didn't want anyone to know about it.

Ty's window was open. He leaned forward so that he could look down and saw two man-shaped shadows carrying bags. He watched long enough to see that they were settling by Gannet's window and opening their bags before he silently left his perch by the window, and hastened down the stairs to make the sound of a cat outside Gannet's door. This was the sign Ty and Kit had agreed upon to alert one another.

Moments later, Bennet peeked out her door

to see Ty disappearing into Gannet's room. Bennet closed her door but kept watch by it, ready to move at the first indication of danger.

Inside Gannet's room, Kit had shaped pillows on the bed to resemble that of a sleeping child; then he and Ty took up positions in the room, one near the light switch, the other on the far side of the dresser, ready to pounce. They watched quietly while the intruders scored a circular piece of glass, removed it and unlatched the window. Then they raised it quietly. One was inside and the other straddling the window when Kit flicked the light switch, illuminating the scene. One intruder leaned over the 'figure' on the bed, about to plunge a needle into it at shoulder level. Ty tackled the intruder at the window; they both fell out the window onto the rough cobbles, Ty on top. While they struggled, Kit leaped at the intruder by the bed.

The intruders had been caught totally by surprise. Kit managed to knock the syringe from the intruder's hand, but then had a fight on his hands. The assailant had a balaclava on his head so Kit could not see his face, however he was tall and built strongly. The assailant managed to shove Kit hard enough to knock him off balance and took the opportunity to dive through the window.

Ty had just managed to subdue his opponent when the flying leap through the window crashed Kit's antagonist right on top of him. Ty flew off the man he'd downed and crashed into one of the patio tables. Before he could collect his wits, the man who'd crashed into him had dragged his cohort to his feet and the two made a run for it. Kit came through the window to help Ty to his feet. They did

not pursue the pair. They doubted they would be back, now that they knew they were being watched.

Kit and Ty climbed back through the window, closed and latched it, although until the hole had been repaired, that meant little. Then they turned the light on and opened the room door to call out to Bennet. Bennet opened in an instant, poised for flight. But seeing the lights on and Kit and Ty by themselves, she relaxed a little, pulled the door to so as to minimize the noise of their conversation as they held a whispered consultation.

Soon Bennet had heard it all. They would all remain on alert the rest of the night but doubted they'd see any more action now. Each retired to his or her room. Bennet closed and locked the door, and peered out a crack in the curtain. The front of the bed and breakfast was more illuminated than the back. Still, she could see nothing other than a pair of lights winking and then turning off in the distance. The night was quiet and undisturbed. She went back to lie down next to Gannet. She mused on the happenings for a few minutes, then allowed the quiet and Gannet's steady breathing lull her back to a light sleep.

In the morning, Kit looked out onto the terrace. In the heat of the moment, last night's 'guests' had forgotten to retrieve their bags. He pulled them into the room and looked through them. Inside was a small bottle of liquid, a soft cloth, some rope, a longish black cloth and some duct tape. In the other was a blanket, a long black suitbag, and a blackjack. He opened the bottle and took a wary sniff. He thought it could be chloroform. He retrieved the fallen syringe and

added it to the collection.

When Ty tapped on his door, he let him in and showed him the bags and their contents. Neither was surprised but they were grim at the thought that it all added up to attempted kidnapping. When Bennet tapped on the door a little later, she was shown the contents, as well; Gannet was not. Bennet stayed just long enough to grab some clothes for Gannet and slipped across the hallway again.

Then Kit called the hotel's manager and asked him to come up to Gannet's room. He showed him the window, explained what had happened during the night, and finally showed him the bags and their contents. The man was aghast. He immediately called the town's single police representative who came at once. A quiet but thorough interview was held in Gannet's room. The constable was hoping for some identification, but at mention of the balaclavas, seemed resigned to disappointment. When asked if any particular reason was known for the attempted kidnapping, Kit expressed only puzzlement.

The officer left, in possession of the bags and the bits of information afforded him, before Bennet came across to announce that it was time to go down for breakfast. The manager, sworn to secrecy around Gannet, hurried down the stairs to take up his role as waiter. Breakfast was a quiet affair; they all tried to act as naturally as possible.

Then they held a consultation about what to do with this, their last day (they thought) in Snowdonia. Bennet had spent some time the day

before in reading up on the area, and had a couple of ideas. Many ideas were impractical due to Gannet's leg being in a cast. However, she had found mention of a city with an improbable name, and had also read a bit about Anglesey, the island connected with Holyhead. Gannet was intrigued. So after breakfast, they collected a few things and went back to the car.

When they got there, it was to discover that vandals had been at work. The headlights had been smashed and the tires flattened. They headed back to the bed and breakfast, and a little later had their second meeting of the day with the local constabulary. Kit and Ty took him to see the car; Bennet and Gannet waited in the park.

“It was his men, wasn't it, Mom?” asked Gannet quietly.

“I think so.” answered Bennet just as quietly.

Then they just looked across the water, watching the day progress while they waited for Kit and Ty to come back.

It took another hour, but finally they returned. A statement and report had been made. The car agency had been informed and another car provided. It was a subdued party that loaded into the new car, but their moods brightened the farther away they drove. The day was brightening, the traffic was light, and the sight of a goose chasing a dog in one of the small towns they passed through soon had them chuckling. After that, they were able to brush the darkness away and enjoy the day.

First they made their way to the city which boasted the longest name in the whole world: **Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch** It meant: The church of St. Mary in the hollow of white hazel trees near the rapid whirlpool by St. Tysilio's of the red cave. Gannet longed to hear a local say it. A train stop with the name printed out on a long placard was visited by a steady stream of cars and pedestrians. More than a few took pictures. But no locals seemed to be in the vicinity, so Gannet reluctantly was persuaded back to the car.

Then they had a drive of maybe an hour's duration, back the way they'd come several days before, to Anglesey. Bennet had a real treat in mind. She'd read on the internet about a special festival being held on Anglesey called the Amlwch Viking Festival where 200 authentically equipped warriors and villagers recreated the early 10th Century political rivalry on the Island, leading to internecine treachery and the eventual Battle of Ros Meilion to expel the Vikings.

It featured a working 10th Century encampment, a Viking wedding, and Vikings at work creating their original crafts. One could listen to their banter, and soak up the atmosphere. There were traditional craft stalls and one could taste a cut from the roasted hog while watching the spectacular display and battles, plus an open-air gig featuring Valleum and the Baloo's Band. Finally one could join the throngs of people on Upper Quay Street in Amlwch Port to witness the Ceremonial Boat Burning

Bennet hadn't forgotten what Gannet had told

them about going to festival with her parents. This might bring back some of those happy memories, even though the Viking festival was supposed to represent life four centuries prior to Gannet's first memories. At any rate, it sounded like it would be a lot of fun and the perfect last day in Wales.

When they had parked and settled Gannet in her wheelchair, they followed the crowds. The closer they got, the louder it got. Gannet's eyes grew round when she finally saw where they were headed. Her eyes got bigger and bigger with each fresh surprise. She was mesmerized by all of it, way too busy feasting her eyes to write anything down. But Ty was busily snapping pictures that he would later develop and give to Gannet. She would not go home empty-handed.

Gannet was thrilled! She enjoyed the spectacles, the music, the costumes, everything! And when Kit brought her a piece of fresh meat straight off the spit and stuck on a stick, she couldn't help thinking back to her first festival with her parents. It brought tears to her eyes, but they were happy tears.

They went from one stall to another, and when she looked longingly at a necklace of a carved bird, Bennet bought it for her and placed it round her neck. Gannet sighed in pure pleasure. Finally, they had to take a break. They sat down at a rough bench next to one of the Viking tents. They could hear murmurs from inside. There was a small fire just in front and a small pannikin of water was suspended on a simple wooden tripod above it.

“This reminds me of long ago,” said Gannet.

“The open fires, the roasting meat, the crowds and the happy laughter, even the music a little bit. Thanks, Mom. This has been wonderful!”

Bennet smiled. “I’m glad you enjoyed it, sweetheart. On to practical matters! Do you need to use the facilities? ‘Cause I’m about to burst!” and she opened her eyes in pretend desperation.

“Yes. I think they’re over there behind the stalls.” replied Gannet, with a giggle.

The two made quick work of the interlude, then headed back in search of Kit and Ty. They found them holding paper plates heaped with food and containers of water for each of them. They plopped down on a grassy verge and enjoyed the picnic lunch while watching the entertainers set up for another presentation, this time a wedding. It was simple, but charming and again, reminded Gannet of her past, not in specifics, but just in the natural flow of events.

But then finally, just as the sun sank into the horizon, they watched the ceremony of the Viking burial at sea: the boat burning. It was a solemn moment, and they treated it with the respect it deserved.

Then it was time to leave. They made their way back to the car, piled in and decided to eat at one of the restaurants they had passed enroute. It would make a nice change from those in Betws-y-Coed. The dinner was fine, but then they faced the daunting prospect of driving the rural roads of Wales in the dark. There were few lights along the route, nor any reflectors lining the sides of the road.

They had to rely on their headlights. Consequently, Kit drove very conservatively.

All went well until they passed by the intersecting road to Castle Dolwyddelan. Suddenly, there was a high powered roar coming up fast behind them; the headlights of a vehicle bigger and higher than their own light sedan sent blinding reflections into their mirrors. And then the vehicle behind bumped them, not lightly, rather hard enough to cause all of them to whip back and forth in their seats. Luckily they all wore seatbelts. Kit managed to keep control of the wheel, but their ordeal was not over. The engine's roar growled again and rammed them a second time. This time, Kit was forced off the road. Eventually the car stopped when it hit a protruding rock. Kit had killed the motor which also killed the lights. All that could be seen was what the moon and stars illuminated.

The vehicle that rammed them was either gone or had stopped and killed its own engine. They did not know if they were alone or not. Bennet's neck was stiff and sore from the whiplash effect, but she finally managed to unlatch her seatbelt and turn to check on Gannet. Gannet didn't answer when addressed. Bennet reached in the dark and finally found her shoulder. Running her fingers up lightly, she discovered a wet gash on the right side of Gannet's forehead. She had hit her head during the incident and was unconscious.

“Kit? Ty?” she whispered. “Are you okay?” Neither replied. She heard a groan, then another. “Kit? Ty? Wake up!”

She reached down to the well behind the driver's seat and located her backpack. Inside, she had a tiny flashlight on a keychain. She pulled it out and shone it first on Kit, then on Ty. Kit was laying crumpled against the driving wheel, groggy but attempting to wake up. Ty lay much like Gannet. He must have hit his head as well. Next Bennet shone her light on Gannet. Yes. She had hit her head. But the blood wasn't running any more. She felt for a pulse on all three and all three had strong pulses. So they were injured but not worse.

Then she heard a sound. It came from outside the car, the side closest to the road. Oh, God! They weren't alone! Quietly, as quietly as she could, she unrolled the window on Gannet's side of the car, leaned over as far as she could and shone the light down. The light reflected back at her. There was water on that side of the car. No knowing how deep it was. It could be very deep. Which meant getting out on that side was not such a good idea.

Bennet heard the sound again. Something or someone was approaching. But then she was confused. She heard sounds from two different directions. From one direction, the scuffling was accompanied by a light. She gently grabbed Kit's shoulder, squeezed lightly, and whispered:

“Kit. Wake up. I need you.”

Kit managed to lean back in his seat. Being more upright seemed to help. “Wha...what happened,” he murmured.

“Car accident. Kit! Someone's coming!”

Please, wake up!” Bennet whispered forcefully. It seemed to work.

“I.. I'm awake. Unh.. my head... I – can't see.” Kit wiped at his eyes and came away with a hand wet with something sticky. But he had cleared his vision. “Bennet. Bennet, are you alright?”

“I'm fine, Kit,” she whispered, “but someone's coming. Actually two groups seem to be converging from two different directions. I don't know who's friend or foe. Can you turn on the headlights?”

Kit looked a little disoriented at first, but he finally turned the key in the ignition, enough to turn on the lights. Immediately in front of them was the rock they'd hit. They could see reflections off the pool of water off to their right. From their left they could barely make out ..something - big. They didn't know what it was. But from behind them, they could hear wary footsteps approaching.

When the lights suddenly came on, the footsteps abruptly stopped. The animal, or whatever it was, veered away from the lights, in the process moving toward whoever was approaching them from behind. Whoever that was took to their heels and ran at sight of this new challenge. Soon, all was quiet around them save for the crickets who had gone mum during the accident but now burst into song once again.

Ty regained consciousness next, with a groan, and a hand pressed to his head. Gannet slept on. Bennet tried not to worry about that. The girl's pulse was strong. Staying asleep a while longer was

perhaps not a bad thing.

“Kit, can you start the car?” she asked.

He turned the ignition. At first it just whined in protest. But with the next try, the engine turned over. Kit shook his head a little as if trying to clear his senses. Then he put the car in reverse and inched slowly back away from the rock and the water until they were on solid ground, just off the edge of the road. Normal night sounds prevailed save for the ticking over of the car's engine.

Kit slowly eased back onto the road. Their goal lay just around the bend: Betwys-y-Coed. The car basically limped into the village and parked in front of the pub. They just sat there for several minutes, regaining their breath.

Then Bennet roused herself. “I'll go. Just wait here while I get help.” She opened her door, pulled herself to a standstill, and holding her neck, walked into the pub. She'd only gone a couple of steps when the barmaid saw her and hurried over. Bennet explained as the maid eased her over to a chair and called for help.

Within minutes, patrons inside had assisted those still in the car into the pub. Gannet was laid on a bench seat and a jacket put over her for warmth while they waited. Soon, an ambulance pulled up. The paramedics gave them an initial exam, declaring they all needed an x-ray to determine if they suffered from concussion. They were all piled into the ambulance – it was a tight fit, and taken to the nearest clinic.

Two hours later, Gannet had finally come to, all of them had been x-rayed, and their visible wounds had been tended. Gannet, Ty and Kit had all suffered concussions. The doctor wanted to keep them overnight for observation. Bennet they allowed to return to the bed and breakfast. The constable, who had been called in, gave her a ride and took a statement at the same time.

Bennet hated to be separated from the others, but she thought they'd be safely monitored by the nursing staff in the hospital, so she'd docilely returned to the b and b, too exhausted to put up any resistance.

Back in her room, Bennet called Jenny. Jenny answered right away, cheerful and eager to share her news. Bennet let her. Jenny said, "I found Mr. Kepler. He's a wonderful musician! He showed me how to play the Shawm, at least well enough for our purposes. Bridie and I will be back in London tomorrow morning bright and early, in plenty of time to catch a bus. We should be back by 2 at the latest."

With a slight smile in her voice, Bennet said, "I will be glad to see you. I'll be waiting." Then she hung up before Jenny or Bridie had a chance to ask about her curious wording. Bennet took a couple of the pain pills she'd been allotted, and collapsed on the bed. She fell asleep immediately.

CHAPTER 9

Bennet slept through the night, dreamlessly, courtesy of the pain pills. In fact, she didn't open her eyes until mid morning, long after the breakfast hour. However, the hotel owners, aware of what she'd gone through the night before, had reserved coffee, a fruit salad and some toast for her. As soon as they heard her coming down the stairs, they gently herded her into the breakfast room and brought her the simple meal. Bennet was touched by their thoughtfulness, and thanked them warmly.

When asked about the others in her party, she had to admit she hadn't had a chance to call yet. The manager put in the call for her while she ate. While she sipped at her coffee, he came back to announce that all were doing well and they were even now being escorted home by the constable.

When Bennet heard that, she brightened and made haste to finish her meal. She thanked the manager again for everything, then hurried upstairs to put all to rights before her family arrived. Her neck was still stiff and sore, but she had taken a single pain pill upon awakening and it sufficed to take the edge off.

Just as she was finishing, she heard voices downstairs at the entryway. She made her way down. The constable had carried Gannet up the steps and patiently waited to be directed to the girl's room. Ty and Kit followed behind, looking much the worse for wear, but bandaged and clear eyed. All smiled at sight of Bennet, and Gannet started talking a mile a minute about all the people she'd met at the hospital and all the things she'd experienced there. It was just one more adventure for her and, as always, she was prone to look on the positive side.

Gannet proudly pointed out the new bandage on her brow. It was decorated with bears and stars, much to her liking. Bennet dutifully admired the bandage but was more interested in making sure that they were all alright.

Kit reassured her, "We're fine. They took good care of us. How about you?"

Bennet smiled, "I'm much better, now that we're back together again."

Ty went on up to his room to change clothes but promised to come right back down afterwards.

Kit said, "I'm afraid the wheelchair is still in

the trunk of the rental. Gannet will have to stay put for a little while more. Are you up for a short walk, Bennet?"

"Yes, I could use some fresh air," she replied. "But let's wait until Ty comes back down. I want to tell you all about a phone call."

While they waited for Ty, Kit changed clothes and Bennet helped Gannet freshen up and arranged her more comfortably on the bed. When Ty came back down, she told the three that Jenny and Bridie expected to return around 2. At that, Ty's face brightened and Gannet looked up from the drawing she was making to smile her approval.

Then Bennet and Kit left Ty with Gannet while they went to look at the rental and, at the very least, retrieve the wheelchair. The rental had a dent and the right front light had been broken. The car started though. Kit went inside the pub to phone the rental company and explain what had happened. The rental company was a little leery of sending out yet another rental car for their use, but finally agreed to do so as long as Kit filled out a complete report about the accident. They promised to have a new one delivered at around noon. They retrieved the wheelchair and walked back to the hotel.

They had just over an hour to wait. Kit borrowed pen and paper and wrote out a statement to which both Ty and Bennet added their own; then all three signed. So, by the time the new vehicle was delivered, the exchange went quickly and smoothly.

Now they just needed to await the return of

Jenny and Bridie. The bus was expected back at 2. No one felt inclined to go out and about before their return. So when lunchtime rolled around, Bennet called the pub and asked if simple burgers and fries could be delivered to them. Not much later, they were chowing down in their rooms. Afterwards, they all concentrated on packing up their things and settling their bill. The b and b owners very nicely allowed them to stay in their rooms until the bus arrived.

The bus pulled up in front of the church. Jenny and Bridie were the first ones off, Jenny carrying an instrumental case in one hand, both anxiously looking for their family and friends. Bennet and Ty met them; Kit remained behind at the hotel with Gannet. When they saw Ty's bandages and how stiffly Bennet held herself, they knew something had happened, but restrained themselves until they reached the b and b. Jenny let it suffice to simply touch the bandage lightly and give Ty a gentle kiss. Bridie kissed Bennet on the cheek but did not say anything, just gave her a speaking look..

Once up in their rooms though, the girls gave free reign to their concern and peppered the others with questions. Both girls paled upon the recitation and again gave the others a once-over, making sure they were really alright.

Then it was time to vacate the hotel. The owners had been more than generous but they knew that to stay longer would inconvenience the family-run business. Thank you's and smiles and handshakes were shared as they finally turned in their room keys and exited the building. They

assured the owners of their gratitude and appreciation of the premises and care before they left. The owners looked pleased.

The new rental car was actually a van. With two extra passengers and even more luggage, a regular sedan was simply not big enough. Even had the accident not occurred, they would have had to exchange for something larger. The van was just right for their needs. Everyone sat next to a window and each seat was roomy. There was a small rise just behind the driver's seat that was perfect for propping up Gannet's cast, so she was much more comfortable than before.

Bridie took the wheel. It made sense with so many of the others injured plus the fact that she had the most experience driving on the left side of the road as well as in this country. Bennet took the front passenger seat, ready to read the map if necessary. But the route was very straightforward, straight back to Holyhead, onto the ferry and then back to Bridie's apartment.

The ride was not marred by any accidents or unpleasantness. The road was light of traffic, the sky was blue, and the sun was shining. Everybody enjoyed the view out their windows and relaxed. Meanwhile, the girls took turns giving a recitation of their own adventures over the last few days.

Bridie said, "When we left on the bus, it made a roundabout trip through the countryside until it finally reached Liverpool. We stopped there for about twenty minutes while the bus was refueled and passengers got on or off. We got off briefly to use the facilities and get a snack. And then it was

another long drive to London.” Bridie wrinkled her nose. “The traffic was heavy and we kept landing in these long lines every time we passed an on-ramp. So we ended up arriving later than we’d hoped for.”

Jenny took up the tale. “We called the airlines but there was no way they could hold the flight for us, so they just rescheduled us for the next morning. Then we got a taxi to an airport hotel. We ate dinner in the connecting lounge and then just crashed. We were both pretty tired.”

“The next morning, we had time for a fast cup of tea and some fruit before the shuttle arrived to take us to our terminal” she continued. “I hope I don’t have to go through Heathrow Airport again! It was a madhouse, even that early!”

Bridie agreed, “Yeah! It was so crowded! And noisy! But eventually we got our luggage checked in and got our boarding passes. There wasn’t much time left after that so we went directly through the security check and to the waiting area.”

Here, Jenny interjected, “And once we got there, we sat and sat and sat. The plane landed late and once it did land, our flight was delayed three times!”

“Luckily,” said Bridie, “there weren’t too many passengers. Once we boarded,” she smiled, “we had our pick of seats.”

“And when we were about an hour into the flight, a group behind us began singing,” interrupted Jenny. “It was beautiful,” she said, dreamily. “I

went back and asked them to teach me the tune and the song. They didn't understand much English, but everyone understands music," she grinned.

"So when we got to Budapest, these guys gave us a ride directly to the museum," continued Bridie with a smile in her voice.

"Once we got inside the museum, we had a harder time though," said Jenny. "No one seemed to understand English, at all. I just kept showing each person we were led to this paper with the name of our contact and the word Shawm. They'd look at it for a minute, say 'aaaah' a couple of times, and lead us on to yet another person."

Bridie took up the tale. "Finally, they couldn't pass us off to anyone else and led us to the director of the museum who did speak English, although his accent was so strong that it was really hard sometimes to understand him."

"But he was a dear!" asserted Jenny. "Once he knew who we were and that we were looking for a Shawm, he remembered the phone call and the rest was smooth sailing. He took us directly to the room where the instruments were displayed and showed us all of them before taking down one and putting it into a specially designed case to protect it."

"He asked about you, Bennet," said Bridie. "He is obviously very impressed with you. He said you had helped him on several occasions and hoped that next time he would get to meet you in person."

Bennet smiled. "Yes, he is always very

polite and enthusiastic on the phone, and very grateful when I have been able to help him. He sounded like a kind man.”

“He was,” chorused Jenny and Bridie.

“He helped us find a hotel for the night, too, when it became too late,” said Jenny.

“And, he even drove us there!” added Bridie.

“Well, I shall certainly thank him when next I speak with him,” declared Bennet.

“We were all prepared to fly back to London the next day and had made tentative reservations before we left the airport. But then you called, Ty.” continued Jenny. “And when you, Bennet, told us that we would need to fly to Salzburg first, the concierge helped us change the flights. They were really very helpful people once they understood what we needed.”

“We had time to walk through a little of the older part of town,” said Bridie. “It was beautiful! But then it got too dark to really see, so we went back to the hotel and had a late dinner. The food was ... different. I still can't decide if I liked it or not,” she laughed.

Jenny laughed. “Yes, we let the waiter choose a few dishes for us. She was very enthusiastic about our trying some of the native dishes, but had a hard time telling us what was in each dish – her English was minimal. But she tried

really hard to please us.”

“The beds were rather soft but the rooms were warm and cozy. I think I'd like to go there again and really spend some time there,” enthused Bridie.

“Yes, it's a shame we were there so briefly. Ty and I really liked our visit there,” said Jenny. “If we had had more time, I could have shown you some of the sights. Budapest is really two towns, Buda and Pest, joined into one. Really interesting! And very beautiful.”

“So anyway, the next morning, the concierge called a taxi to take us to the airport and luckily told the driver exactly where to go because he didn't know a word of English!” said Bridie. “He pulled up to the kerb right by our terminal and helped us with the luggage. Then he pointed to the meter with a smile. After we paid him, he bowed, smiled, and drove away in a big hurry.”

“The queue for the flight to Salzburg wasn't too long. We had a brief lay-over in Vienna but didn't need to switch planes. And the flights were smooth.” resumed Jenny. “We saw a little of Vienna just flying over it, but the flight on to Salzburg wasn't more than an hour and a half. So when we got there, we still had much of the day ahead of us.”

“We took a bus to the downtown area and then walked,” said Bridie. “It was beautiful! It was warm and sunny, and there were lots of people sitting at tables outside of the cafes in this big square. I loved the architecture of the old

buildings! Everywhere we turned they were promoting Mozart. They even had Mozart candy balls: chocolate covered marzipan. I tried one and it was pretty good.”

“We also saw people going for rides in horse-drawn carriages,” enthused Jenny. “And, Ty, we saw the most beautiful mozaic decorations. You would have really liked them, honey!”

“More people understood English there so we got directions to the festival office. It was chockful of people, but eventually it was our turn and as soon as we mentioned the name 'Johan Kepler', they were very helpful and led us directly to him,” said Bridie.

Jenny went on: “When we found him, he was playing an oboe with a group of musicians. They were all dressed in costumes and playing pieces by Mozart. Did we say it was a Mozart festival?” She smiled. There was a large group of people gathered around to watch and listen, and passersby, like us, couldn't resist the music and stopped to listen. The music was bright and addictive.”

“But eventually the piece finished and then our guide led us over and introduced us to Mr. Kepler” said Bridie. “He was a lot younger than I had expected. But he had an old world formality to him. When we were introduced, he half bowed over our hands. I actually was charmed by him,” said Bridie, somewhat self-consciously.

Jenny took up the tale. “When we told him that your friend had sent us to him, Bennet, he was

intrigued. And when I told him that we were hoping he could teach me how to play the Shawm, he actually beamed! I pulled the instrument case around and opened it, and he just glowed! He asked permission to lift it out, and when I said, 'of course', he lifted it as delicately as you would a newborn. First he examined the Shawm itself for several minutes, and then located the reeds, inserted them and played a scale. I was surprised at how similar in sound it was to the oboe.”

She continued. “He talked a little bit about the Shawm, and pointed out the differences between it and his oboe. He demonstrated how to play it and then had me try. It took me a few tries to get the hang of it, but I think that with practice, I'll manage.”

Bridie observed, “He seemed very sad when he finally placed it back in its case. But he actually thanked us for the opportunity to play one again. And he said to be sure and get in touch with him if he could help in any way. He seemed like a really nice guy.”

Jenny agreed. “Then we hustled back to the airport and caught our flight back to London, and then to the bus and here we are. What's our next move? And would you all be interested in meeting my Gran in the meantime?”

Bennet spoke up, “That's a wonderful idea, Jenny! We'd love to meet her and see something outside Dublin's city limits as well. But don't you think we are a rather large bunch? Won't she feel inundated by all of us?”

Ty laughed. “Not her Gran! She loves people. The more the merrier!”

Jenny laughed, too. “He's right. She'll be delighted. But I will call to let her know we're coming. She'll want to have something ready to offer. In fact, I think I'll do that now, before we reach the ferry.”

As she dug through her bag for her cell phone, Jenny remembered that only a few years earlier, it had been impossible to just pick up a phone and call her Gran. It had only been recently that she had persuaded her Gran to get her own phone; before, she'd had to call a neighbor or rely on 'snail' mail to reach her. Now, she made a point of calling often, and her Gran seemed to like the new connection, enough to start considering the idea of getting a computer, too. But Jenny had a feeling that it would be a bit longer before she actually agreed to it. She was sometimes shy of modern day equipment.

Quickly connected, the others could only hear Jenny's side of the conversation but her laughter and easy tit for tat soon let them know that Jenny's Gran was not the least bit overwhelmed by the thought of six guests abruptly showing up on her doorstep. When Jenny rung off, she said, “She's very excited. And she said to tell you all that you will be more than welcome. I told her to expect us late afternoon.”

Bridie was approaching the ferry entrance and within minutes, the van was parked on the lower level. They retrieved the wheelchair and, experienced now, they lost no time in taking the

elevator to the deck above and found a large table that would accommodate all of them and the wheelchair, as well. The ferry left the dock without more ado. They sat back to enjoy the ride and watch the other passengers.

This time, Gannet did not suggest exploring. Rather she wanted to stick close to the others. All of them were rather subdued, but then Jenny and Ty began to speak about Jenny's Gran, giving them some idea of what to expect.

Jenny's Gran had raised Jenny. She was around 60 years old but, according to Jenny and Ty, you wouldn't know it to look at her or listen to her. She was energetic, opinionated, always on the go, worked hard and was extremely active with her neighbors and community activities. She loved to hold quilting bees with the other ladies of the village. And when not busy with that, she would be knitting. She was well-known in her village and in Dublin for the intricate patterns she knitted into sweaters, socks, scarves, hats and mittens, and had orders that would keep her busy for years to fulfill them. She also was prone to take off at the drop of a hat and walk the hills above the village. Consequently, she was in excellent physical condition. Those who met her for the first time thought she was closer to her 40s than to 60.

“Oh, and there's two more things about Gran you should know,” said Jenny. “She has a habit of 'adopting' people. If she likes you, she will automatically henceforth consider you one of *her's*. And then she will do anything and everything she can for you till the day she dies. It may sound rather corny, but she is passionate about her circle

of family and friends. And the second thing is that she.. just knows things.” Jenny stopped after dropping this bombshell, and refused to say anything more on the subject.

The others were intrigued, to say the least, and looked forward to meeting Jenny's Gran even more. In a way, the fact that Gran was a seer would make it all the easier for her to accept the mystery that surrounded Gannet.

They spent the rest of the cruise chatting idly, drinking hot cocoa and coffee and snacking on chips. Jenny and Ty warned them that Gran would put on a big spread, so they did not want to ruin their appetites.

When the call came to man their vehicles, they made their way to the elevator and were ready to pull out as soon as the ferry had docked. Before making their way to Jenny's Gran's, they would make a stop at Bridie's apartment, collect the parakeets from Bridie's neighbor, and settle their luggage in the rooms. This was accomplished quickly and while the adults were arranging things, Gannet took the opportunity to update her little birds friends on the hunt for the ring. This was conducted with a series of clicks, whistles and melodious tweeting. When it was time to leave, Gannet was once again looking smug.

Jenny's Gran lived in Enniskerry, a small village southeast of Dublin. For this trip, Jenny didn't need any help with the map. She took the wheel and headed straight down the N11. She

informed them that it would take about 45 minutes to get there. As she drove, she gave them a mini guided tour of the area.

Enniskerry, *Ath na Scairbhe*, which means Rugged Ford, is in county Wicklow, the 'garden county of Ireland'. It's about 15 miles south of Dublin. The village is situated along the Glencullen River. Sugar Loaf Mountain and Djouce Mountains rear above the valley. A few miles further south along the river Dargle is Powerscourt Estate which is famous for its gardens and grounds and also for its waterfall which falls 121 meters, ranking it 687th in the world; it's the largest waterfall in all Ireland.”

She turned off on the third Bray exit which listed Bray South, Greystone and Enniskerry, and then continued.. “The population of Enniskerry is about 2600 people. It has two churches, a parish church, St. Mary's, the first church built in Enniskerry, and which Gran still attends every Sunday, and St. Patrick's which Viscount Powerscourt built in 1861. It is only one of two churches in Ireland with a copper spire. It's been worked on a lot throughout the years and was finally restored in 1996.” Jenny's voice turned a little teasing, “Before there was any church in the village, it's been said that mass was held in Dixon's barn.”

From the turnoff, it was only two miles to downtown Enniskerry. Everyone had been listening to Jenny's recounting, but also feasting their eyes on the scenery. The buildings downtown shared walls so that a shared facade ran down the street, distinguished by separate roofs and brightly colored doors. A clock tower, surrounded by fenced in

flowers and ringed by a roundabout, graced the center of the village.

Jenny's excitement built the closer she got to her childhood home. The village was the epitomy of what the others had expected to find in Ireland: a plethora of green valleys, trees, and mountains surrounding quaint cottages. It was beautiful. Jenny slowed so that they could get a good view of the centre of town, then continued up the hill until they reached Peat Terrace.

She turned off onto the narrow road and passed two isolated cottages before turning left into the driveway of #7. A plaque graced the front of the building: Dove Cottage. The name was appropriate. The cottage was painted a soft grey with a darker slate grey roof. It wasn't a large house. But it had a nice yard both in front and behind, with rhododendrons in glorious color against the green of grass and trees and the mountain rearing behind. It was charming.

Jenny parked the car and was out and racing to the cottage's front door before the others could even get their belts off. She met her Gran coming out the door and hugged her close. Gran hugged her and then looked over her granddaughter's shoulder to smile at her guests. Jenny tugged her forward and introductions made the rounds.

“Please. All of you can call me Gran. Everyone around here does.” and she laughed.

But it was when Gran spotted Gannet, who was still waiting for the wheelchair, that she smiled her widest. She leaned down to take the young

girls' hands in hers and greeted her in Gaelic.

It was no surprise when Gannet responded in kind. The two held a short conversation, Gran patted Gannet's hand, and then she rose to make way for the wheelchair.

“Welcome, all of you, to my home. Please! Come in!” she said, and then led the way back to the front door and held it open in invitation.

A couple of stone blocks comprised the walkway from driveway to the door. The door was almost flush with them. So it was not difficult to push Gannet in her wheelchair over to the door and with a little lift, over the threshold. The door led directly into the livingroom which was graced by comfortable stuffed chairs and a couch. Gannet was transferred from the wheelchair to one of the chairs and a bolster pushed close to support the cast. Little tables were scattered about the room as were books, magazines, and knitting wool. Bright yellow curtains against pale green walls and a couple of landscape paintings, as well as a cross, made the room very comfortable and inviting.

Within moments of their arrival, a regal tabby made a dignified entrance and headed straight for Gannet, jumping lightly up to curl contentedly in her lap. Gannet, delighted, lost no time in stroking and rubbing the ears of the cat. The cat reminded her of Mute back home. Soon a rumble of purrs made background noise for lively conversation.

In no time at all, Gran and Jenny had the others feeling perfectly at home. Soon, all the

women were helping Gran in the kitchen with last minute preparations for the gigantic meal she had made for them. The dining area was straight across from the livingroom, on the opposite side of the entry door. The kitchen was one door down on the same side as the dining room.

Laughter emanated from the kitchen as the women bustled about. Kit and Ty were pressed into service setting the table. Then Kit carried Gannet to a padded chair at one end of the table. Another bolster had been arranged for her leg. When everyone was seated, Gran said a simple grace, and then plates were passed around. Gran had outdone herself. She had made a roast with potatoes and vegetables piled high all around and a tasty gravy to pour over. There was a fresh salad of vegetables taken directly from her tiny garden, and fresh baked bread with honey butter and homemade jam. To drink were pitchers of creamy milk, ice cold water, and two carafes of wine.

When everyone thought they couldn't take another bite, Gran brought out a fresh baked peach cobbler with clotted cream. It was too delicious to pass up. And soon everyone was groaning and leaning back in their chairs to digest the feast. Siobhan, the tabby, was not left out; she got her share of both the meat, the milk, and a dollop of cream and seemed well satisfied, busily grooming herself afterwards.

The remnants of the meal were quickly packed away, and the dishes washed and put in the cupboards. Then Gran brewed coffee and heated water for tea. The day was still fine outside, the sun just starting to drop behind Sugar Loaf Mountain.

They prepared their drinks and followed Gran and Jenny to the backyard to sit in the swing and deck chairs that dotted the porch. As they watched the evening rays streak the sky, they relaxed and just enjoyed the view and the peace and quiet. It was a powerful reminder of their own homes in Ohio and how they so often spent their evenings there.

Gran sat in a rocker, knitting and occasionally reminiscing about the past. Seeing her knitting without so much as looking down at her busy fingers, Jenny remarked that she seldom saw her Gran without something in her hands and laughed. Gran just smiled and kept on knitting, but recalled how one day Jenny had come home after wandering the hills with her friends Clare and Mary. “They were so dirty I dumped them all in the bath together! When they got out, I gave each of them some dry socks and a jumper (her word for sweater) to wear, and then I heard Clare, I think it was, whisper 'Wow! She sure knits fast!' And then you, Jenny, remarked, 'Yes, her hands are always busy!'” Everyone laughed, including Gran. Earlier, she had shown them some of the things she was currently working on; they were all impressed by her skills and the beautiful designs.

Gran broke the silence. She looked around easily and caught their eyes. “Yon girl's special,” indicating Gannet. “And she's in great danger for all that she's young and as innocent as a newborn. Ye'll want to be on watch. But you'll get help from an unexpected direction.” Her eyes grew a little faraway. “I see a distant isle, fire and ice, and a quiet grove of birch trees. Trust the birds. Remember. Keep her safe, her and her mam.” Then she stopped speaking and seemed to refocus.

She raised her mug of tea and looked out over the hill.

Bennet and Kit looked at Jenny questioningly. Jenny just shrugged.

Reluctantly, they arose to take their leave. It was getting late. Jenny and Ty would be staying a few days at Dove Cottage. The rest of them needed to drive back to Bridie's apartment and it would be easier to make the journey before full dark settled in. They all thanked Gran profusely for the meal and her gracious welcome. Hugs were exchanged, a special one between Gran and Gannet. Then Gran handed Gannet a packet and whispered something in Gannet's ear before she let go and stepped back. Gannet nodded solemnly, stroked Siobhan a last time, and then everyone settled in the car and fastened their seatbelts.

Waving goodbye but promising to see them in a few days, Bridie, once again at the wheel, backed out of the driveway and they retraced their route back through downtown Enniskerry and to the main road to Dublin. As they traveled, they pondered what Gran had said.

"I wonder what this other isle could be.." mused Kit.

"Yes, and the fire and ice," said Bridie.

"What did Gran give you, Gannet?" asked Bridie.

At the reminder, Gannet opened the parcel Gran had handed to her and pulled out a beautiful knitted sweater that had birds picked out in cream

against a red and blue background. It was a perfect fit. Gannet was very pleased and stroked the soft wool. But then her face lost its animation. It was clear that she was thinking about something less than pleasant.

“What did Gran whisper to you, Gannet?” asked Bennet.

“She said to trust my instincts and my birds. And she said to be very very careful. She said we would be alright if we stayed strong and trusted one another.” answered Gannet.

“She's right.” remarked Bennet. “We must be careful and strong. And trust one another. She's a wise woman.”

“Yes. But I'm still afraid,” replied Gannet. “She said to especially keep you close, Mom. She said you were in as much danger as me.”

“Then we'll just have to be extra vigilant,” said Kit. “We will all keep you both safe.”

Bridie nodded emphatic agreement. But the mood inside the car had turned very somber. The quiet held until they were back at Bridie's apartment. Then, after settling Gannet in the study once again, as well as the parakeets in their open cage, they retired to their respective rooms and tried to sleep. But it was much later before they could let the worries go long enough to slumber.

They had used up half of the two weeks

allotted to their trip. Over the next couple of days, Bridie took them to see the campus of Trinity College, and to an outdoor concert on the grounds. They were treated to a view of the Book of Kells, a must-see for Bennet. Gannet liked the giant metallic globe with its innards cracked and exposed. It was intriguing.

Another day they took the train to Howth, a seaside town north and east of Dublin's center. It didn't take long – perhaps 20 minutes – to get there. The last stretch was along the peninsula. There were no trees. In the bay was another, smaller island, which turned out to be a bird sanctuary. Once they exited the train, they walked through the station and turned left to walk downtown. There were several attractive paths leading up into the hills, but they didn't think it would be such easy going with the wheelchair so instead they went out on the piers.

Gannet was in transports when they did, for they encountered several seals sporting about in the water. Upon seeing the tiny group walking along the pier, the seals drew close, perhaps hoping for bits of bread, but seeing none, slapped the water with their fins, dove and re-emerged, barking and peering at the humans with their great dark eyes. Gannet was charmed by their antics and laughed at their play.

Beyond the village they could see a grassy mound upon which rested Bailey lighthouse. The village itself was charming with its pastel-painted facades and stonework. Several pubs and cafes lined the walks. The weather was fresh and sunny, and flowers hung here and there to brighten their

path. They discovered a transport museum and wandered among the exhibits until they came upon an open-topped tram once used in the village. Gannet marveled at how small it was compared to the trams and buses in use today.

They ate in one of the pubs, for people of all ages were welcomed there, including children. The pubs were for families, not just for drinking, but rather for watching ball games and horse races, for the gathering and gossiping of town residents and visitors alike. There were fireplaces, small tables both inside and out, a bustling bar, and people coming and going constantly. People went outside to smoke, then reentered to continue whatever activity they'd been involved in before. It was mesmerizing just to sit there, listen, and watch.

But eventually, they'd had their full and left to reboard the train, BART, and head back to Dublin. That evening they watched a movie on Bridie's tiny tv, eating popcorn and drinking hot cocoa.

After Gannet went to bed, the three adults played scrabble until time to go to sleep. It was a relaxing interlude. No one threatened. They'd just enjoyed spending time together, catching up on news both home and abroad. It gave them all a breather and reinforced their sense of family.

But the interlude ended. The next day they were to pick up Jenny and Ty. They still had the van. Just as well, for Bridie's car was tiny, only just big enough to fit four, and only then if people didn't mind being squeezed together. Bridie referred to it as her *peapod*. But she said it fondly; she loved her

little car.

They left early. They wanted to have some time to explore a little of the countryside away from Dublin. But their plans were cut short. When they got to Enniskerry, they found the village in an uproar. Several police cars as well as an ambulance were climbing the hill in the same direction as Gran's house.

Kit, Bennet, Bridie and Gannet were apprehensive about what they would find. And rightly so. When they turned off onto Gran's road, they saw that the ambulance had pulled up into Gran's driveway. The back doors of the ambulance were already open and the attendants lifting down a wheeled bench by the time they had parked their car and made their way to the door.

Ty saw them coming and crossed to greet them. He said, "I guess we aren't safe even here. They must have followed us off the ferry, but not seen it when you four left. They broke in last night." (He didn't have to explain who 'they' were.)

"What happened? Who got hurt?" asked Bennet, anxiously.

"None of us, luckily. Gran's a light sleeper. She heard someone trying to enter through the back door, snuck into the kitchen and grabbed an iron skillet. When the backdoor opened and someone tried to sneak in, she let him have it. That's why the ambulance is here. She knocked him out cold and the others ran. Then she called the police and the ambulance. Gran's making a statement now. I guess she hit him hard enough for a concussion.

He's still out of it.”

They watched silently while the paramedics wheeled the would-be burglar to the ambulance. They saw his face as he passed by, but none of them had seen him before. Nor, it turned out, had Gran. He was a complete stranger. None of them were surprised.

The police left, too. They'd gotten a statement. They all knew Gran. She was a long-time fixture in the village. No one felt particularly merciful towards anyone who tried to hurt her. They would be keeping a watch to make sure the others who'd run away didn't come back to finish what they'd started.

Gran was more angry than upset. Being who she was, she realized that the attempt had not been against her, rather against young Gannet. And that made her furious. She said, “They didn't succeed this time, but I don't think they're done. As long as you all are here, in Ireland, they'll keep on trying. Maybe you should consider cutting your vacation short.”

The others looked at one another. Perhaps Gran was right. But they needed to find the ring before they left. It was vital.

Gran had ideas on that, too. In her non-sense voice, she said, “The ring will surface where you least expect it. And, it will follow Gannet. She is the wearer of the ring. It will never be far away from her; it knows her. You can safely leave here. The ring will be right behind you until it's ready to be found.”

They were all speechless. Ty and Jenny collected their things and stuffed their bags into the van. Then they shared a much simpler but no less filling lunch together before Jenny hugged her Gran goodbye. Gran had recovered much of her usual good nature by then and hugged her back fondly. Then she did the same with the rest of them. It was obvious that she considered them part of her extended family now. "Don't be strangers!" she admonished. "Now that I have a phone, there's no reason I shouldn't hear from you now and then to see how you're doing." She smiled at Gannet and gave her a final hug. "Take care, Gannet. And remember what I told you. And I'll expect you back for a visit when all this is done."

They piled into the van and waved goodbye. Gannet turned in her chair and waved until they turned the corner and could no longer see Gran's cottage. Gannet had come to look at Gran as her own gran, as well. It was nice to have a gran, as well as a mom, a dad, a cousin, and all her wonderful 'birds'. She felt very lucky!

"Perhaps we should consider going home early," ventured Kit.

"I'm coming with you," asserted Bridie. "I've got some free time now. I think that we should stick together until this is resolved."

Ty and Jenny added their agreement. They, too, were determined to see this through.

So once they arrived back at Bridie's

apartment, Bridie called the airlines. Unfortunately, they were not able to get a total refund on the original tickets, but they did get back some of it. Then she made reservations for all six of them on the soonest flight she could find. When she hung up, she told them, "Our flight leaves at 7 a.m. tomorrow morning. We'll have to get up around 5 to drive to the airport. We can leave the van there. We should arrive in London before 9 and the next flight leaves about 5 hours later. It was the best I could find."

"Thank you, Bridie. Sounds good," said Kit. "Do you have any sleeping bags? Ty and I could bunk out here on the floor tonight, and you ladies can have the beds." And so it was decided. Bridie made arrangements for her neighbor to watch the two parakeets, yet again. But the birds were no trouble, so it was not much of an imposition. The neighbors actually enjoyed the birds.

They spent the day walking around and then, as a final treat, had an early dinner at Knight's Bridge pub. They had to make reservations just to get in. It was exceedingly popular and very busy. When Gannet's cast was seen, they were led to the end of a long table right in front of a stage. A spare chair was set up with a cushion to prop the cast. Then their dinner orders were taken and beverages brought.

Bridie hadn't told them why they were eating here, but soon their questions were answered. As they ate their meals, a succession of singers and dancers appeared on the stage; they were treated to traditional Irish ballads and dancing. It was great fun and soon had them all smiling and clapping

their hands and stomping their feet along with the rest of the crowds. It was a superb ending to their visit to Ireland.

They went home to Bridie's, still talking and laughing about it until they tumbled into sleep.

Bridie's alarm woke them at 4:30, giving them just enough time to dress, gather their things and pile into the van. Bridie drove them straight to the airport. Luckily, at this hour of the morning, the traffic was light and in no time at all, they were parking, and wheeling their luggage up to the check-in counter of Ryan Air. Ryan Air was efficient and quick to check them and their baggage in, then sent them to the lounge to await their boarding call. This was a bare-bones airline. No meals nor other luxuries were provided. So they used the waiting time to snag some orange juice and muffins for breakfast. It would hold them until they landed in London and could eat a more substantial meal.

They boarded, choosing seats as they entered. They could see the luggage being loaded. Once the plane was fueled and they were cleared for take-off, they were on their way. They all stared down at the lovely green terrain until the plane flew up and through the cloud cover. The plane landed in London on time, and they retrieved their luggage without hassle.

The next leg of their journey would be with British Airways. This meant that they had to taxi to a different airport. This took quite a while because of the traffic, but at least the taxi let them out right in front of the check-in desk. There was a long line

of people waiting to check-in. This was par for the course in Heathrow Airport.

Bridie's friend had readily agreed to letting her continue to borrow the wheelchair for Gannet. And waiting in line, the party of six were very glad. It took almost an hour before it was their turn to check-in. Once it was accomplished, their first order of business was to find somewhere to eat. They were all famished!

CHAPTER 10

There were many kiosks. Once they found one that appealed to their appetites, they settled in a booth with their choices and dug in. They had gone longer than anticipated since those muffins. There was little or no conversation as they each concentrated on appeasing the angry growl of their stomachs. But once accomplished, they perked up and started to show interest in their surroundings and the people who were a constant stream in both directions.

“We have over two and a half hours before boarding. Shall we explore a bit, Gannet?” asked Birdie, back to her usual cheerful self.

But, uncharacteristically, Gannet declined. “I think I’d like to just sit here, Bridie.” And then

she snuck a look at Bennet before glancing hurriedly away.

The glance had not gone unnoticed.

Gently, Bennet smiled at her daughter. “Gannet, I saw a very appealing book kiosk a little ways back. You know me. I can't pass by a book store without going in! Would you like to keep me company?”

Gannet perked up. “Yes, maybe I can find a book to read on the plane. I've finished my other one.”

Bridie, Jenny and Ty decided to explore some of the duty free stores along the concourse; Kit went with Bennet and Gannet. They planned to meet back in front of the food kiosk in an hour's time. Then the two groups moved off in different directions.

Bennet's group spent almost the entire hour in the bookstore. Kit helped Gannet to reach those books she thought looked interesting. And Bennet, true to form, soon became lost in the worlds opened up by the many and varied books on offer. At first she glanced up every minute to make sure that the others were in sight, but after several minutes of this and being confronted by the happy faces of her husband and daughter, her vigil became more relaxed. After all, what could happen in a tiny book kiosk? Soon she had moved down the row of books and around the corner into a tiny nook that had books stacked from floor to ceiling. She pulled volumes down at random, the familiar weight and smell and tactile sensation filling her with

contentment and a sense of peace.

Occasionally, someone else entered the nook and chose a volume or two, but soon departed. And soon Bennet's wariness gave way. Those others were just innocent shoppers like herself. There was nothing to worry about.

A middle aged woman entered the nook. She was somewhat short in stature which made it difficult for her to reach the top shelves. After a couple of minutes of perusing the bottom and middle shelves, she spotted a book higher up but couldn't reach. Bennet was only half conscious of the woman, engrossed as she was in the book she herself was looking at. But then a sigh of frustration cut through her haze of concentration.

Bennet looked up from her book. When she saw the predicament that the older woman was in, she naturally offered to help. The woman gratefully told her which book she was interested in and Bennet stretched to reach the volume. It was rather tightly wedged so that she had to put down her own book choice and turn her body to face the shelves so that she would have more leverage.

As she worked to remove the book, the other woman made encouraging sounds and watched Bennet's efforts. As she worked, Bennet soon had totally turned around so that the other woman was completely behind her. Just as Bennet succeeded in removing the stubborn volume, she felt a pinprick on the back of her neck. She thought nothing of it, just rubbed it and thought bleakly of flies.

She started to turn to hand the book to the

other woman. But then her feet seemed to become tangled, her vision blurred, and she fell in a heap. The other woman grabbed her under the arms and pulled her towards an unobtrusive door further back. She had almost reached it with Bennet in tow when a cry arose towards the front of the kiosk.

A blue glow seemed to emanate from that direction. And then Kit and Gannet came flying down the narrow aisle. They had seen. Bennet's kidnapper struggle to open the door and pull Bennet through but Bennet's body became wedged, not unlike the book she'd retrieved.

The kidnapper, seeing that she could not succeed before Kit reached her, abandoned Bennet where she lay awkwardly half in and half out of the door, and ran. When Kit and Gannet reached Bennet, the other woman was long gone. And Gannet's blue glow had faded.

Kit cradled Bennet in his arms. The kiosk manager called security and a medic and soon the three were situated in a tiny office. While Bennet was being seen to by the medic, Kit and Gannet gave the officer a statement. However, neither of them had seen the kidnapper clearly, nor had they witnessed the attack, only the attempt to pull Bennet through the doorway.

Reluctantly, the officer let them go. There was nothing he could hold them for. This would be labeled a random assault, not too surprising with this many people in an enclosed area.

Bennet came to, bewildered at her surroundings, the last few minutes a complete

blank. Kit and Gannet told her what they had seen. Slowly she remembered those last seconds: the pinprick, the dizziness. She was able to give the officer a better description of the woman, but was utterly confounded as to the reason behind it all (at least publicly).

They left the tiny office. They were overdue to meet the others. But the food kiosk wasn't that far away and within five minutes, the six were reunited. They sat down in one of the booths and Bennet had a cup of tea. The incident was relayed. There would be no more splitting up. It was all too clear that Tigne Sh'dah was aware of them and still working to obtain either mother or daughter. They were all on their toes.

When Bennet had finished her tea and felt a bit steadier, they arose en masse and moved to the security check-in. It would be safer, if more boring, to be in a smaller area where they could more easily monitor their fellow passengers. Once through to the waiting lounge, they seated themselves by the windows, the wall and glass to their back. No one would be able to sneak up on them.

Gannet was still pale. She had taken Gran's warnings to heart and never let Bennet out of her sight. That Bennet had been attacked only a few feet from her had really rattled her. But Bennet talked with her and held her close and soon the young girl had the sparkle back in her eye and a slight smile on her lips. But she still stuck close and showed no inclination to move around. She did, however, look closely at anyone who walked in their direction.

The others were also on edge. Their eyes roamed the room constantly, studying each of the passengers, wondering who was in their enemy's employ, of whom they need be most wary. But this was an impossible task. The people around them were completely unassuming. They would not act until their master deemed it the time to do so. And they had a suspicion that his minions were completely unaware of him or his behests until the moment came when he took them over and directed their actions. It was a spooky thought. For the minions were as innocent as anyone else, helpless to resist, helpless to do other than what he commanded, but otherwise just innocent passengers like themselves.

The wait was long and tedious. Towards the end, the girls escorted Gannet and Bennet to the women's room, standing watch turn and turn about. Only two stalls were available so they did not have to worry about other occupants. Then they moved back to their seats and awaited the call to board.

After what seemed an interminable wait, they discovered that the flight had been delayed. The plane had required some small repair. Thus, an additional hour was tacked on. Everyone in the lounge was becoming restless, agitated, and the air was stale, even with fans blowing constantly. Tempers grew short, people sweated profusely, kids ran from one end of the room to the other, becoming more and more shrill as the waiting time extended. Parents, who originally tried to keep a rein on their children, now let them run; they had become listless and helpless in the face of the tense atmosphere.

Bennet looked around. Some of the reactions were quite normal, but others were greatly exaggerated for such a short period of time. She and her family, felt that Tigne Sh'dah was responsible for the heated atmosphere, for it all felt forced, unnatural, and he was adept at taking advantage of such situations.

Everyone heaved a grateful sigh of relief when finally it was announced that the plane was repaired and they could commence boarding. Parents resumed the effort to manage their children, others quieted and gathered their belongings, reverting to their former innocuous manners, waiting patiently for their rows to be called and then moving forward to show their boarding passes and move along the connecting ramp to the plane. It seemed that people were oblivious to how much they had changed in the past two hours. It was uncanny and disturbing. Only Bennet, Kit and their friends seemed aware of what had gone on.

This time, they had assigned seats. Due to Gannet's cast, they had been given the first rows both left and right in the public cabin behind first class; the seats had a little more leg room than those behind them. The extra room made the cramped seats more bearable. The flight would be a long one, so every little bit helped.

Unfortunately, there was no way to prop Gannet's leg, at least during take off and landing. But once they were in the air, they raised the armrests between the seats and took turns resting Gannet's cast on a pillow situated on one of their laps. The adults rotated, giving each a rest, and giving Gannet someone new to talk to throughout

the flight. Gannet was no trouble and the flight attendants seemed to be very grateful. Other children on the flight were much more obstreperous and demanding.

Once the attendants had given the safety precautions, and settled the passengers with drinks, the passengers grew quieter. Dinner would be served in a while, followed by a film. The atmosphere grew more relaxed.

One of the attendants came by to smile at Gannet and give her some paper and crayons to help pass the time. Gannet looked up and noticed her name tag. It read: Loa.

Gannet said, "What a pretty name! What does it mean?"

Loa responded, "Loa is a kind of bird in Iceland. It has a very distinct warble that everyone learns to recognize from the time they are just tiny children."

"Are you from Iceland, then?" asked Bennet, with interest.

Loa smiled. "Yes. I am actually on my way home for a vacation. I switched with another flight attendant just so that I could make this flight. I miss my family and want to spend my vacation with them."

Gannet's eyes had gleamed with pleasure when she learned that Loa was a bird name. She liked the attendant.

“Do you have any children?” asked Gannet.

“Yes.” smiled Loa. “I have a son about your age and a younger daughter.”

“What are their names?” asked Gannet.

“My son's name is Orri, and my daughter's name is Dufa.”

“Are those bird names, too?” persisted Gannet.

“Yes” admitted Loa with a laugh. “We like bird names in my family. Yours is a bird name, as well, is it not?”

“Yes,” said Gannet with satisfaction. “And I like bird names, too. My mom and dad also have bird names, as do my aunt and our friends,” indicating Bridie and Jenny and Ty.

“I have to get back to work now, but I'll come by a little later. We can talk some more and I'll show you some pictures of my family and Iceland,” offered Loa, much to Gannet's and the others' delight. They all smiled and told her how interested they were and that they looked forward to it. Then Loa went on about her duties.

Once everyone had been served dinner, the detritus cleaned away, and most passengers absorbed in the movie, Loa came back. She was as intrigued with Gannet and her fellow travelers as they were with her. She brought several pictures, and soon had Gannet laughing at the stories about Loa's children; all of them found her and what she

told them about Iceland fascinating. It wasn't long before a real rapport had developed between them all. Telephone numbers and addresses were exchanged along with the hope of future visits. Gannet was especially interested in Loa's children.

But Bennet was struck by how closely Loa's depiction of Iceland matched what Gran had told them. Iceland was, indeed, a land of fire and ice; full of volcanoes and glaciers and innumerable waterfalls. And, it was an island. It all sounded very significant. But she didn't realize how significant until some time later.

Loa had gone back to her duties. The movie was winding down, and Loa and her cohorts were handing out pillows and blankets. There were still many hours to go before they landed in New York. Many would use the intervening hours to sleep. And there were always passengers who needed help or a drink or the answer to a question before they could settle down; the attendants were kept quite busy.

Quite suddenly, there was a bump. No one paid it much mind, just assuming they were going through a rough patch of clouds, for that is all that could be seen out the windows. The fasten-seatbelt sign flashed on, and the attendants were quick to make sure the passengers complied. And also to reassure them that it was just some rough air they were passing through, but it was best to remain seated and strapped in until they were through it. So, although some passengers grumbled, everyone was soon in their seat, finding some other way to pass the time, and enduring the occasional bump and lurch to their stomachs. It was uncomfortable

but not too bad.

But then the weather worsened. Outside the windows, the clouds had grown dark. Ice lined the windows and every once in a while they could see flashes of lightning. Their flight grew bumpier, and then to the point where it felt like they were on a roller coaster. Several unfortunate passengers lost their supper, and soon groaning and moaning could be heard throughout the cabin.

Those in the front of the cabin grew alert when one of the attendants answered the phone that must be linked to the pilot. She spoke briefly on the phone, then whispered to her fellow workers. Then she came on the intercom to make an announcement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has just announced that we must make a brief landing in Iceland. There is nothing to worry about. The weather has gotten worse and he thinks it would be better to delay the flight until the worst is past. Please stay in your seats, keep your seat belts fastened, and your seats in an upright position. We will be landing shortly. Thank you.”

Although the attendant had spoken calmly and what she had said wasn't all that alarming, Bennet and Kit exchanged glances. The attendant, once off the intercom, whispered for some time with her cohorts, and plainly looked concerned.

A few minutes later, the attendants attempted to go up and down the aisles to check that the passengers were ready for landing. It was difficult for them to keep their feet as the plane

bucked and tilted. They were constantly bumping into the sides of chairs along the aisle, holding tightly to the seatbacks as they passed along. They tried to smile reassuringly but did not stop to chat.

When Loa reached the front of the cabin and the seats where Gannet sat, she paused briefly to whisper, "It's a freak storm. Came out of nowhere, but it's impossible to fly further in it. Luckily, we are within sight of the international airport in Iceland! I'll talk with you more when we've landed. Don't worry."

Then she took her seat next to the other attendants and they all braced themselves as the plane made its way down through the clouds and into a grey and black world, lighted only by savage streaks of lightning.

The pilot maneuvered them expertly through the rough weather, but even he breathed a sigh of relief when they touched down. It had been a very rough ride! They taxied up to and connected to a connecting ramp at the terminal building. Then the pilot said over the intercom, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to Iceland. This is an unexpected stop but the Icelandic authorities assure me that they will take care of us until it is possible to resume our flight. I don't know when that will be, but we have been offered rooms at hotels here in the vicinity of the airport as well as in the capital city of Reykjavik. I'm sure you will all be made comfortable until the weather calms down. Thank for your patience."

When the plane had taxied to a stop, the attendants leaped to their feet and organized a

controlled departure. Passengers were told to take their belongings with them, along with their passports and boarding passes. They would be supplied with essentials to tide them over during their stay. Buses had been organized to take them to the hotels.

Due to Gannet's need for the wheelchair, they waited till everyone else had left the plane before they exited. Loa asked them to wait for her once through the security check. She had something to ask them. They readily agreed, settled Gannet in her chair, and then made their way up the ramp, into an elevator, along a corridor and into the line of people snaking through the security check. It went quickly as no one had more than the hand luggage they'd boarded with.

Once through the check, they found that Loa was already there. She smiled and moved forward to join them.

“Hi. Welcome to Iceland!” she said with a smile. “It so happens that my brother and his family are on vacation in Denmark. His house is just around the corner from my apartment. I was wondering if you would be interested in staying there instead of in a hotel.”

“That would be wonderful!” exclaimed Bennet. “What a generous offer! And this way we will get to see something of your country, too. Thank you!”

Loa smiled. “I, too, wanted to take advantage of this unexpected visit. I think my children would like to meet Gannet. And it would

give us all a chance to get better acquainted. I have a Mitsubishi van in the long term parking. And it is more than big enough for all of us! Just let me fetch it and I'll come around to pick you all up; no need for all of us to get wet!" And she laughed.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to come with you," said Ty. I fancy a little fresh air, and the rain doesn't scare me."

"Of course," Loa answered with a grin.

They all moved down the long wide corridor to the steps and escalator that led down to the duty free store and baggage pickup area. From there, they passed by security guards who smiled and spoke briefly with Loa before waving the whole party through. Then they found themselves in a narrow corridor. A kiosk selling drinks, magazines and snacks fronted them. Off to the right was another stand where one could buy bus tickets. Farther down the hall was a place for renting cars. Windows lined the wall by the food kiosk, and sliding doors led directly to waiting buses. Beyond they could see taxis and other cars parked. Loa told them that this was where people were picked up from incoming flights.

Outside, the wind blew fiercely. The sky was dark and grey and rain seemed to fall from every direction, both horizontally and vertically. Ty fell in love with it immediately. His eyes glowed. He relished the violence, the natural wildness. He linked arms with Loa and the two pushed through the sliding doors and bent into the wind and rain until their figures were lost in the gloom. The others were glad to wait inside for their return.

Bennet and Kit got everyone a drink: coffee, tea, juice, hot cocoa. It was refreshing, just what they needed looking out onto the forbidding landscape. It looked daunting, but also somehow it drew them.

Minutes later, a dark van that at first glance looked black but on closer inspection was a dark green in color, pulled up and Ty opened the passenger door and jumped down. After opening the passenger sliding door, he raced over. While Kit collapsed the wheelchair, Ty lifted Gannet into his arms and carried her quickly to the van's side door. He lifted her onto the middle seat and she scooped over to sit by the window, directly behind the driver's seat.

There was a padded ledge conveniently behind the driver's seat. Bennet climbed in to sit next to Gannet and helped her prop her cast on the ledge. They strapped their seat belts on. Behind them were Kit, Bridie and Jenny. Ty resumed his seat in the front next to Loa. Once everyone was seated and belted, Loa took off.

Their seats were high up and the windows were huge. They had no trouble seeing the rugged terrain as they left the airport and joined the traffic into and bypassing the town of Keflavik. One bus turned off to take grounded passengers to a hotel there. Others continued on the same road as Loa followed.

She pointed off to the right and told them that the buildings there had been occupied for a very long time by American forces, but that they had left abruptly in 2006 and now the buildings

house University students and their families.

What struck all of them was the almost complete lack of trees. They could see mountain chains on one side, and the ocean on the other, with small communities dotted here and there along the bays. But only by the houses did they see any trees. The land, humped tussocks, lined the road and spread all the way up to the mountains beyond. In this weather, it looked even wilder.

It was obvious that Ty was itching to paint what his eyes drank in. This was about as close to untouched nature as one could get, and it spoke to his soul. At the same time, it was so utterly foreign to anything any of them had seen before that it was hard to relate to it.

And then it got stranger. For the farther they traveled, the lighter the sky became. The sun came out. The rain stopped. The grey and black skies turned blue. Everything glistened from the rain. Impossible greens, incredibly blue skies and ocean contrasted against black volcanic mounds and the distant mountains. It was beautiful! It was eerie! It was powerful!

They couldn't believe the abrupt change in the weather. Loa just shrugged her shoulders. "The weather in Iceland can change a dozen times in as many minutes," she said. "And it makes a difference also on which part of the island you are. It can be sunny and beautiful in the north, and be snowing or raining in the west. One place will be calm, another fighting strong winds. One must be prepared for abrupt changes. We here in Iceland pay strict and constant attention to the weather we

are heading into, for to be unprepared is to risk injury or worse.”

Looking around them at the land, and having just experienced one of those abrupt changes, they were all inclined to believe her.

“Does this mean we'll have to turn around and go right back to the airport?” asked Bridie.

“No, the weather will be monitored. I was told that the storm is moving west. But it is moving slowly. You will be here for at least another day before going on. But we won't know how long for sure until they monitor the patterns and see how fast and which way the storm will go. Sometimes they change directions abruptly,” replied Loa. “And sometimes, even when the weather is alright here, the airports along the east coast of the United States will be closed to air traffic. We shall just have to wait and see. British Airways may even decide to fly back to London rather than go on to the States. Every day, every hour that they are grounded here, they are losing money. If they cannot go on, they may want to go back or fly elsewhere.”

“In the meantime, I want to show you a little of my country,” smiled Loa. “And maybe sometime, I can come visit you in Ohio.”

“Both sound like a lot of fun,” asserted Bennet.

Loa passed the time telling them different tidbits about Iceland. When they got closer, she pointed out the town of Hafnarfjordur; the aluminum smelter on its outskirts was the first sign

of civilization they had seen for several kilometres. Suddenly there were rows upon rows of houses. They passed a cemetery, not a very large one. The lack of trees was still very noticeable, and the fact that most of the buildings were made of cement, topped by colorful tin roofs. Small trees hugged the buildings, but one still could see for some distance. The wildness wasn't far removed from the crouching homes, most of which were no more than three stories tall.

The signs and street names were very strange, just as strange as those in Ireland but in a different way. Loa turned on the radio and they could hear the language. It was novel to all. It was also totally incomprehensible to any of them. But then music was played. They were surprised that much more music in English was played than in other languages; Iceland seemed well tuned into the current popular music from the States.

“Yes, Iceland is very well connected. We keep abreast of the news, music, movies, fashion, politics, disasters, everything in other countries. Iceland is a small island with a population of about 300,000. That doesn't include visitors. But it is very cosmopolitan. People from around the world come here to visit, to work, to marry. Icelanders go abroad to study and work, but most return. Often they will bring others back with them. Like me.” and Loa smiled. “My husband is actually Scottish. So our children have dual citizenship and are bilingual. We are constantly visiting back and forth, and my job makes it easy to travel for I and my family get discounts on airfares. And there are numerous flights between the two countries.”

“What does your husband do for a living?” asked Kit.

“He is a freelance graphic designer. He works for a company that has offices both here and in Edinburgh, but most of his work is done on the computer so it doesn't matter where he actually lives; he just sends the work to them over the net.” responded Loa.

“What is his name?” asked Bennet.

“Calum, which means dove.” Loa laughed. “Our daughter, Dufa, is named for him. Dufa is Icelandic for dove. But you said, Gannet, that you all have bird names, too. What are they?”

“Robin Bennet, Christopher (Kit) Peregrine, Bridget (Bridie) Lark, Jenny Wren, Ty Fleet Eagle,” they recited, going in a circle.

Loa laughed. “Wow! This is too much to be a coincidence. What is your American saying: Birds of a feather flock together? It would seem this is more than a saying!”

Everyone laughed with her, but secretly believed it was true; too many things had happened in their lives to be mere coincidence.

By now they were in Reykjavik proper. Loa turned left onto a side street. This area is called the 'Hlida' neighborhood. It is one of the most popular areas. I grew up in this neighborhood, and now both my brother and I have homes of our own here. My brother's house is just around this first corner.”

Everyone peered. She kept on driving. “On the left is the high school 'Hamrahlid'.” Loa drove further along this street and slowed just before a roundabout. “That is the grade school, Hlidaskoli, and my apartment is in that building with the bay windows. I am on the third floor.” Then she drove around the corner and down two streets where she turned left onto Drapuhlid. They came to a building on the left with a white angle-cut pillar out front. “That is the neighborhood medical clinic. My parent's home is on the first floor in the building just opposite to it.”

After everyone had gotten a chance to see the house, a cement block, four stories tall like all the others in this area, and with a yard that was lined with trees, Loa drove to the end of the street, turned left and drove to where she once again hit the roundabout by the grade school. She got onto the roundabout, taking the second exit which once again put her on the same street she had originally driven down, and drove back up past the grade school and past the high school until she reached the last possible left before the light. On the right was a block of stores, a bakery on the end, a grocery store on their right after they turned. Loa drove past the store block and pulled over to park in front of a white painted cement building. It had two balconies, huge windows, and lots of trees around.

Loa turned off the car and turned in her seat to face them. “This is my brother Krummi's house. I called him once we landed in Keflavik and he said it was fine for you all to stay here. I thought of his place because the entrance is directly off the path and the house is huge. Krummi and his wife, Stina, have five children, so there is plenty of room and

plenty of beds.”

She led the way up the walk and pulled out a bunch of keys. “We each have keys to one another's house, so if someone loses their key, we have spares.” She opened the front door and Ty wheeled Gannet's chair straight into the foyer. Everyone followed Loa's example and removed their shoes. Then they followed her down the wooden floor hallway.

Off to the right was a huge formal dining area which led into another huge living room through an arched entryway. Walking through the living room led them to a kitchen, long, lined by shelves, with a window over the sink that looked out across a fenced-in backyard and a substantial built-up complex (Loa said it was one of two major malls) across the major highway they'd traveled on from the airport.

The kitchen, in turn, led into a dining nook. Emerging from the dining nook, with its table and benches, they were back in the hallway, facing the front door. Past the dining nook was a stair leading up to the second floor ('the bedroom area' said Loa). Past that were three more doors. One led into a study which contained a futon, tv and dvd player, the second was a bedroom (with a convertible couch) that faced the front of the house, and between them was a tiny bathroom with sink and toilet.

Loa led the way up the stairs. Kit carried Gannet. The stairs were wide and lined with a banister the entire length. Upstairs were four bedrooms, one slightly bigger than the others,

obviously the master bedroom, which had its own tiny bathroom and shower attached, and another, more substantial, bathroom (completely tiled) with tub, shower, sink, and mirrors, and one narrow window, just at the head of the stairs.

It was all spotless, but the smaller bedrooms were obviously meant for children. Bookcases full of books and games and toys of every description took up substantial space in each room. The floors were made of cork, and the beds, single sized, sported *saengs*, which Loa said were feather ticks that were used in place of blankets in Iceland. One room had bunk beds in it. Some of the rooms were designed for girls, some for boys.

All in all, the house was perfect for their needs. It was bright, clean, and comfortable. Bennet and Kit admired how it was situated, so close to shops, stores, schools, and the clinic. Loa said that most of the neighborhoods were set up like this, to make it convenient for all the residents. But she admitted she liked this area better than many others. “Perhaps I am biased, having grown up in this one, but I still like it best.”

By now it was getting late, although not dark. In fact, everyone was surprised that despite how late it was, it was still so bright. Loa said, “We are in the bright season now. The sun approaches dusk around midnight but then brightens again. It makes up for it by being mostly dark in January and February, but then it starts brightening again. Icelanders are accustomed to it, but visitors sometimes have a problem sleeping. Just close both the blinds and the curtains. Then it should be dark enough that you can sleep.”

The dinner on the plane had been many hours before, so everyone was starting to get hungry again. Loa gave them a key to the house and then led them all back out to the van. “My parents are expecting us all. They are going to feed us an Icelandic dinner.” She smiled at the surprise and everyone smiled back, feeling very spoiled and grateful.

“Do your parents speak English, Loa?” asked Bridie.

“Yes. But not so well as I or my children. They are of the older generation and it is harder for them to learn new languages. But they did make an effort once I brought Calum home. And Calum learned to speak Icelandic after a fashion, so they manage to communicate. Calum and the kids are going to meet us there. It will be a big party,” she smiled. “But that is what we like. Any excuse and we hold dinner parties.” And she laughed.

They piled into the car for the short ride. Loa parked at an angle on the street right in front of her parent's garden. Then she led the gang up the cement path and up the few steps. The door had already been flung open and the sounds of laughter and conversation, although in a foreign tongue, could be heard emanating from the interior. Just as they reached the door, a fair haired youngish man with a ginger beard and mustache pulled Loa close for a kiss and hug. Then they were surrounded by children all speaking at once, in both English and what must be Icelandic, trying to hug Loa and welcome her home.

Loa hugged each in turn and spoke a few

words before turning and gesturing to her guests. “Please, come in and meet my family.” Her kids stood wide-eyed, but backed up to let Bennet and the others come through. It was when they saw Gannet with her cast that they threw off their quiet and addressed her first in Icelandic and then in English when the former drew no answers. Ty was quick to open the wheelchair and place Gannet in it and then the boy took over the task of pushing her around while they talked non-stop. They were all obviously having a good time.

Meantime, Loa introduced her parents and Calum to Bennet and her family. Smiles, names and handshakes were exchanged, then everyone was shoed into the formal dining area. The table had already been set, along with a smaller one for the children. It was all done so matter-of-factly that Bennet concluded that Loa's comment about holding dinner parties at the drop of a hat was nothing short of the truth.

Everyone was given a drink. There were grapes in a bowl on the table and they were invited to help themselves. Then they spent the next thirty minutes just chatting and getting to know one another. Loa's parents, Mar and Ugla, again bird names, made them feel at home at once. They tried to engage their guests in conversation, and when a word lacked, would turn to Loa or Calum to help them fill in the blanks, laughing all the while. It was fun.

When they learned that Jenny was a musician and a singer, they insisted that after dinner she sing for them.

The dinner was mouthwatering. Ugla had steamed salmon with lots of leeks and butter and topped it with fresh shrimp and feta cheese that had been soaked in herbed oil. Perfect red-skinned potatoes dipped in butter complemented the fish; they were so sweet that Bennet called them candy. There was a fresh tossed salad and fresh baked rolls. The kids were offered milk, and the adults had a choice of lemonade or white wine. Just when they thought they couldn't eat another bite, Ugla brought out some Icelandic chocolates. Bridie, who could never resist chocolate, took a bite and couldn't hide her delight. It was very good! They relaxed over coffee, tea and chocolates, talking some more. And then they asked Jenny to sing.

There was a piano in the corner. Mar took a seat and looked at Jenny expectantly. She consulted with him for a moment or two and then began. She sang a lovely Irish ballad. Mar picked up the tune quickly and accompanied her. Then she sang a couple of rollicking tunes which had everyone tapping their foot; Loa's son and daughter tried to dance to them but mostly just pranced about. It was all good fun. And not in the least what any of them had expected when the plane was forced down by the severe weather!

Soon, though, it was time to call it a night. The girls helped to clear the table, and wash the dishes. The men continued to chat. Mar was an engineer, but his hobby was to trek the mountains all around Iceland. Every year he would choose an area of Iceland and for one week, he and friends or family would brave the weather and traverse the wild countryside. Just talking about it was enough to brighten his eyes. Both Ty and Kit were

enthusiastic about the idea and, given the chance, would have joined him in a moment!

In turn, Kit talked about his caving adventures and Ty related some of the incredible panoramas he had witnessed while traveling about with Jenny and her band. All three looked very content when the ladies joined them. The ladies had held their own conversations in the kitchen. Loa and her mother had spoken of places they had visited or would like to, and Jenny and Bridie talked about their travels and life in Ireland. Bennet held forth on the beauties of Ohio and Jenny and Bridie backed her up. Then the chatter turned to the children.

Loa was obviously proud of her children. She hugged them easily, and they her. And the grandparents were favorites with the kids. Loa said that the kids spent a lot of time with their *amma* (grandmother) and *afi* (grandfather), almost as much time as with their own parents. And they also spent time with their cousins, although their cousins were a little older. They all got on well together. One of their favorite activities was playing football – soccer.

Bennet knew that if Gannet had not been wearing a cast, the kids would all have been running here and there inside and out, and probably playing soccer. She was glad that they took her cast in stride, and found ways to play together despite its limitations. Of course, the cast had to be signed, and took their time drawing signs on it. Dufa was a little shy, however Gannet's persistence paid off and before they left that evening, Dufa was hanging on the arm of the wheelchair, listening and watching

Gannet, and laughing with glee at her stories and faces.

Gannet told her new friends about things she'd seen in Ireland and Wales, about Lady May back on the farm, and about Mute, her cat. That was the one thing lacking for the two young siblings. They had no pets. They traveled too much and Calum had allergies so they had never had pets. So they listened to Gannet's descriptions with awe and some amount of envy.

Time was taken to listen to the weather forecast. It was delivered in Icelandic, but accompanied by weather maps. So, although they couldn't understand what was said, they could get a pretty good idea of the weather just by looking at the maps. The weather did not look promising. Heavy storms, of almost cyclonic strength, especially west and southwest of Iceland, seemed to just be sitting there, sending heavy winds and rain to the entire east coast of North America. Several days ahead had the same forecast. However, the weather in Europe was better. Sunshine and light clouds seemed to rule. It would seem that if they wanted to proceed on to the States, they had a few days' wait at the very least ahead of them.

Loa's guess that British Airways would not want to stick around in the face of such a forecast proved correct. Loa had let her bosses know that she had taken Bennet and her group in hand. So when they wanted to contact them, they simply called Loa. A long conversation was held. Loa told them that the airlines had made arrangements for their flight to be continued on Icelandair, when the weather cleared. In the meantime, they could stay

on in Iceland, at British Airway's expense, or else fly back to London. The choice was theirs.

After a rapid consultation, everyone agreed they'd rather stay in Iceland than go back to London. The message was relayed. Flight plans would be made when the weather allowed.

All of which meant that they could explore Iceland for at least the next three days. Immediately, they sat down to make plans. For Loa and Mar and Uglá were determined to be a part of them.

No mention had been made of the attacks and problems relating to Tigne Sh'Dah. Everyone was hoping that they had, at least temporarily, managed to hide from their nemesis. It's true the storm came very abruptly, but they couldn't conceive that he was behind it. It was just weather! Plus, Loa had taken them away from the passengers, so even if they had been followed, no one would know where they were. This was their hope.

They made tentative plans to meet the following morning. Then goodbyes and thanks were extended to their gracious hosts and Loa drove them back to Krummi's house.

“What does Krummi mean?” asked Gannet.

“There are two names for ravens in Icelandic: hrafn, and krummi. Krummi is sort of a nickname.” explained Loa.

“The shops are still open if you would like to buy a few groceries,” said Loa. “I'll go with

you.”

Kit and Ty had both exchanged a few bills for Icelandic currency while at the airport. Bennet and Jenny decided to go with Loa; it was just across a driveway. They came back a little later with two bags full of yogurt, *skyr* (a thick milk product eaten much like yogurt and highly recommended by Loa), milk, juice, tea, bread and things to eat with them. It was enough to see them through the next couple of mornings.

The groceries were put away, the beds made, showers taken, and the decision of who slept where decided. Ty and Jenny would take the bedroom downstairs; Gannet would get the futon in the study; Bridie took one of the smaller bedrooms upstairs and Bennet and Kit took the master bedroom. They took Loa's advice and flipped the blinds up and closed the drapes, but they also opened the windows for fresh air. The beds were comfortable, the feather duvets warm and light. The swish of cars on the highway, beyond the backyard and the intervening sidewalk, provided a soothing sussuration that quickly put them all asleep. It was extraordinary how at home they felt in this very foreign land!

CHAPTER 11

The next morning they groggily awoke to find half the morning already gone. When they cracked the blinds, blindingly bright light streamed in. Traffic was in full force and pedestrians and bicyclers were to be seen on the wide sidewalk beyond the backyard. But for all that, it was a quiet neighborhood.

Jenny knocked on Gannet's door and opened it to find her staring raptly out the window.

“What are you staring at?” she asked.

“There is a raven sitting on the roof of the garage next door. We've been having a conversation all morning,” replied Gannet simply. She waved at the raven who lifted wing, cawing,

and disappeared. “He's on the lookout for us now.”

Jenny helped Gannet up and they joined the others in the kitchen. They tried out the *skyr* with milk and a little granola. Gannet loved it. When everyone had finished their breakfast, they got dressed and downstairs again before Loa and her family showed up.

“Nothing new on the weather to report,” announced Loa. Everyone crowded into the living room area. The kids were already busily plotting and planning and laughing. The grownups looked at a map that Mar had brought with him.

“We thought we'd take you all on the 'Golden Circle' today. The weather is perfect for it. I hope you all have jackets?” Mar asked, looking around. They all nodded. “Good.”

Ugla spoke up. “I've packed a lunch for us all. We'll take Loa's van and our jeep, so there will be plenty of seats for everyone.”

Bridie piped up. “I've got my camera, too.” Ty, especially, perked up when he heard that. He could hardly wait to get his hands on some canvas and paints, but photographs would be a help.

“I'll be bringing a sketch pad, as well,” he said. “The panoramas I've seen so far are amazing! I don't want to forget them.”

“You'll see even better ones, today,” promised Loa. Her parents just nodded in complete agreement. “Are you all ready?” When everyone said yes or *já* (the Icelandic word for yes), they all

headed out the door. Bennet was careful to lock the front door and pocket the key before proceeding to the car.

All three children, Loa, Bridie, Ugla, Jenny and Bennet went in the van. Ty and Kit joined Mar, and Calum in the jeep. Then they were off. This was exciting!

They drove to the end of the street and turned left to get to the light. Then they drove to the next light and u-turned to go to the next intersection where they merged onto the cross traffic to the right. This put them on a second major street, Miklabraut. The traffic moved incredibly fast, slowing only for lights. There were three lanes of traffic, not counting the turn lanes. First they went uphill, then down. Past the light the traffic became even faster. They sped under walk bridges and a vehicular bridge and then sped up a long hill.

The sides of the thoroughfare were graced with groves of young trees, flower patches that had yet to bloom and swaths of green grass. They stayed on the road going around several roundabouts in the process. They passed industrial complexes and housing communities, long stretches of open fields until they reached another substantial (at least by Icelandic standards) community. Just past it, there was a turn off to the right which led into *Thingvellir*. This was their first destination. After the turnoff it would take them twenty to thirty minutes to reach the center.

“*Thingvellir* is where our Icelandic parliament first met, starting in the year 930. Every year people from all over Iceland would walk or

come by horseback to hear the laws and bring complaints or have disputes settled. Criminals were punished, sometimes exiled, and female law breakers were drowned. Today it is a national garden, open to everyone. There is a special house where our prime minister can meet with other heads of state. And people can camp there or pick berries or hike or drive through. There are summer cabins there and one of our greatest writers, Halldor Laxness, lived there. Now there is a museum there to honor him. We are going to a lookout point where you can walk down the same path that the parliament followed, and then we can walk around and let the kids explore,” said Loa. “The paths are flat so it will not be a problem to push the wheelchair.”

True to her words, Loa's passengers could see a few houses alongside the road they now followed, but not many. What intrigued them was the landscape: the dark greens, the mountains, the sparsity of trees, the unusual colors on the hillsides, the vistas in general. Then they also started to see rivers and ponds. Icelandic horses grazed behind fenced fields, but sheep grazed freely along the roadside and a couple of times they had to slow as slower lambs followed their dams across culverts and the road to reach the other side, baaing madly all the way.

At one point, high above the valley spread out below them, Loa turned off to give them a scenic view, Mar right behind. They got out and just looked for a few minutes. Then they piled back into the vehicles and followed the road down and into the car park. Once Gannet was ensconced in her chair, they walked around the planked viewing

platform that encircled the visitor's center. Their Icelandic hosts were quick to point out significant features in the landscape. Ty was completely oblivious. He stood there and just drank it all in. Bridie took several photographs, both with and without people.

After a while, Loa led them around past the parking lot and to the head of *Almannagja*, the path that led down through high rock walls to the plains below where the parliament used to meet. There was no problem pushing the wheelchair. The dirt path was wide and mostly free of pebbles. Orri ran ahead and then back, pointing out things to Gannet and climbing on the rock faces. Bennet could tell that Gannet ached to be doing the same, but she kept a cheery face on and vicariously enjoyed the outing and her new friend's enthusiasm.

The plains opened up past the rock-lined path. Wide plank walkways snaked through the valley to the other side. They followed one. It was a little slower going here as the planks were set up as widely spaced steps. So every few feet, they would have to carefully lower the wheelchair onto the next step. However, eventually they made their way across to where rifts were filled with the clearest water they could imagine. Below the water they could see small fish swimming along the sides of the rock faces, hiding in the shadows. The rough rock below the water reflected the sun's rays off the thousands of coins that had been tossed into the water. It was magical.

Gannet stared down into the water for the longest time, entranced to see the underwater world so clearly. Calum told her that divers sometimes

explored some of these channels. Then they walked on past the Prime Minister's summer residence. Across the valley, tucked under the hill, was a hotel. It was intriguing, built in the old style with steep roofs, three in a row. They followed a narrow path until they finally reached the entrance to the hotel. They went in and tried *kleinur* (Icelandic donuts, pointed on both ends and tied in the middle), and *tebollar* (round cakes that rose to a point in the middle, studded with raisins or chocolate bits. Both were well liked by everyone. Ugla said that she could give Bennet the recipes for both. This idea was well received.

The easiest way up to the parking lot was back the way they'd come, due to Gannet's cast and the need for the wheelchair. However, Ty, Bridie and Jenny followed Mar along a narrow path up along the face of the cliff. It was exhilarating and not at all difficult, but obviously not possible for Gannet. Loa's son looked longingly up the cliff path but in the end joined Gannet and on the way back showed her the vines and berry patches along the sides of the plank steps. They told her that later in the summer, there would be *kraikiber* (little black berries) and blueberries growing there. They collected them every summer and ate them with *skyr* or else made jam. But they weren't ripe until August.

When everyone had reached the parking lot again and visited the facilities, they piled back into the vehicles and followed a path across the river *Oxara* and further into the park. This eventually led them to their next stop, a magnificent waterfall, Gullfoss (Golden Waterfall). There were many cars already in the parking lot high above the falls. Loa

said this was a very popular site for both natives and visitors to visit.

A steep path, muddy in spots from the spray from the falls, led down to the edge of a cliff overlooking the falls. There were no barriers to hold people back from the edge, rather people were expected to use common sense and caution. They could see people who had made their way around to other vantage points, several taking pictures. The falls were magnificent! The noise was a roar. The water flowed in a flat sheet to where it crashed down 11 meters to flow to the next falls, turning at an abrupt angle to the left, then roaring into a wide crevasse some 32 meters deep. There was so much spray from the falls that they could see rainbows. It was awesome and no surprise that it had been given the name of Golden Waterfall..

Their group strung out along the cliff for everyone wanted a good view. Bridie was occupied with her camera. Mar and Uglá were busy explaining something to Kit, with Calum's help. Loa had her hands full keeping a close eye on her children, so Jenny was helping out. Ty was drinking in the view between Bridie and the cluster around Mar. Bennet and Gannet took up a position on the other end.

Gannet was leaning over as best she could to see as far down as possible to where the falls ended. But even had she stood upright, it would not have been possible. The cliff was too sheer to get close to the edge. Bennet had one hand on one of the parked wheelchair's handles, her attention divided between Gannet, the falls, and the scenery around them. So no one noticed when the cliff edge,

already crowded by their party, surreptitiously gained another watcher.

A youngish male in black leathers threaded his way through the crowd, seemingly wanting a closer look. He came up behind Bennet and just stood there for a moment, staring out at the falls. Then he half turned, and as he did so, he bumped against Bennet. He apologized, in Icelandic? - she wasn't sure, and moved off.

Bennet thought nothing of it. She gave a polite half smile in acknowledgment of his apology, not even looking into his face, just going back to her perusal. Then she shook her head. Suddenly she felt a little dizzy. She put her free hand up to her head as though to brush away the haze that suddenly filled her gaze. Then she collapsed and in so doing, she came perilously close to the edge of the cliff.

Gannet screamed. She reached down from her seat, but her arms were too short and she couldn't reach her. Loa and Jenny were actually closest to them. Loa called her children to her sharply to keep them out of the way. Jenny inched her way to where Bennet lay, calling out Bennet's name. But there was no reply; Bennet was unconscious.

Luckily, the brake on the wheelchair had been set as soon as they had taken up position on the cliff. One of Bennet's arms had become wrapped around one of the wheels. This had prevented her from catapulting over the cliffside.

“Be very still, Gannet,” said Jenny. “I'm

going to grab Bennet's leg and pull her towards me. Together we can get her to safety. Right now, one of her arms is wrapped around one of your wheels. So if you are very still, it will keep her from sliding any further. But you have to be very still. Okay?"

Gannet nodded, terrified, but able to listen and cooperate. She gazed down at her mom and then at the drop. But she didn't say anything, just watched as Jenny inched forward until she could grasp Bennet's foot. Behind her, Kit and Ty had grasped Jenny in turn, to give her leverage and to prevent both Jenny and Bennet from going over. Bridie had a firm grasp on the wheelchair.

In tandem, they pulled, at first gently, and then when their handholds were more firmly entrenched, they pulled harder. Once Bennet's body was entirely on the ledge, Kit went around Jenny and pulled Bennet to safety while Ty did the same with Jenny. It had been a harrowing incident, but everyone was safe. Bridie took the brake off the wheelchair and immediately moved Gannet far back and away from the edge. Only when everyone was several yards inland did they stop, lay Bennet on a grassy verge and assess her condition.

As Kit looked her over, Bennet moaned a little. Her eyes fluttered and then opened. She looked very confused and pale. "Wha..."

Kit caressed her cheek. "You had a fall, sweetheart. But you're safe now. How do you feel?"

"I..." She moved to sit up and then grasped her head, still woozy and dizzy. "I'm...okay. What

happened?”

“That's what we'd all like to know,” replied Kit, supporting her and hugging her to him. “Do you remember anything?”

After a moment's reflection, Bennet said, “We were looking out at the falls. It is so beautiful. Then he bumped into me when he turned to leave...”

“Who bumped into you, Bennet?” asked Bridie.

“The boy in leathers.” she whispered.

They all looked around. Aside from their own party, there was no one else there.

“He was here, looking at the falls,” insisted Bennet.

At that moment, they all heard the unmistakable whine of a motorcycle, above in the car park. The whine grew loud and then diminished rapidly. Whoever it had been, he was gone now.

It was impossible to discuss it further with Loa and her family here. It would have to wait. But everyone in the know was sure that Tigne Sh'Dah had struck again. It was a sobering thought. He had found them. Their grace period was over. Now they need be on perpetual watch once again.

Loa and her parents were in shock. They had heard of other accidents at the falls but never witnessed one themselves. They were worried about Bennet, but she insisted she was alright, just a

little shook up.

They asked her if she wanted to go back to the house, but Bennet was a trooper. She wanted to continue the tour. She just needed to sit down in the car and rest for a moment. They made their way back up to the car park, and Uгла gave Bennet a mug of hot sweet tea from the thermos she had filled. Bennet sipped gratefully at the tea. It did help. After a couple of minutes, she felt fully revived and asked what was the next stop on the tour.

Their hosts, once sure Bennet was okay, turned enthusiastic. Next they would be visiting the geysirs. Everyone perked up at that. When asked how far away it was, they were told no more than a ten minute drive. Kit gave Bennet a hug and a questioning look, but she smiled back and nodded a yes. So everyone took their seats and buckled up again.

Ten minutes later they parked by a restaurant that was situated just across from the entrance to the geysers. Bennet's party surreptitiously looked around but no one spotted a motorcycle or man in leathers, so they breathed a little easier, and walked and wheeled their way over and up the path.

It looked much like an empty field with rolling mounds of earth surrounding an area with a big puddle in the middle. White short pillars lined the path, and Orri was quick to try and scramble up to sit on one and Dufa attempted to imitate his actions; the pillars were a little too high to play leap frog. Their antics soon had Gannet laughing again,

but she still kept close to Bennet.

Loa said, “Actually, there are two geysers here: *Geysir*, the oldest known geyser in the world and the one that gave all the others their name, and *Strokkur*, who we call 'little brother'. *Geysir* doesn't spout anymore except on special occasions when filled with soap. But *Strokkur* spouts every few minutes.”

They followed a crowd up the path and formed a loose circle around *Strokkur*. Nothing much was happening, but Mar warned them that once they started to see a bubble form, it would be safer to move back a distance, for the water was very hot, and would shoot up very high and very fast. Those too close could get spattered.

People milled around, got their cameras ready and looked at the crusty edges of the pool. A few climbed the mounds to see *Geysir* but soon returned to wait for the eruption. And then the excitement began: first a small bubble in the middle of the pool. Then the water seemed to be sucked into the middle. A much larger bubble formed. It spit just a little. Again. But this time the geyser shot a few feet up before subsiding again. Then, just when they were wondering if that was it and several people, looking disappointed, came closer, a giant gush of water erupted high into the sky and splashed those lined the pool. Gannet, Orri and Dufa had all been held back by Loa and her parents. They stood and sat a safe distance away and thus had a really good view of the height of the geyser. “Wow!” said one and all, young and old.

Bridie snapped pictures and then they waited

around to witness it again a few minutes later. Better prepared, they stood back and got a much clearer view of the spout. Only Kit had seen a geyser spout before – Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, some 30 to 55 metres. He was just as impressed by *Strokkur*. Mar told them that *Strokkur's* eruption reached approximately 20 metres (70 feet) in height but that *Geysir* used to reach 60 metres, three times as high.

When they'd seen it erupt twice, they made their way back to the restaurant's parking area and went inside. There the kids had ice cream cones. Then they left. Mar took the lead this time and took them along rural roads, not all of them paved, to Selfoss, a small community maybe an hour's drive from the capitol, Reykjavik. There they stopped and found a pleasant picnic area near the river to have their picnic.

Ugla had brought some traditional Icelandic food for them to try: flatbread with smoked lamb or homemade lamb liver pate, french bread with smoked salmon, pickled herring and rye bread, a homemade slaw salad made of cabbage and turnip, apples, raisins, and cucumber. It was delicious and definitely balanced the bread and meat toppings. She had also brought dried fish which was dipped straight into the butter and then chewed .. and chewed.. and chewed. It was salty and tasty. Mar told them that it was a favorite of all Icelanders, pure protein, and a natural addition on every outing.

Ugla had brought flasks of water and bottles of malt for people to drink. Gannet wasn't too sure she liked the malt, a heavy brown non-alcoholic ale. But everyone loved the water. The water in Iceland

was incredibly clean and refreshing. There was no chlorine in it and it didn't need to be filtered before one could drink. It was the best they'd tasted, comparable to the well water back on their farm in Ohio, and much much better than regular tap water.

Above them, the sun shone warmly. The grass was only beginning to turn green. Summer in Iceland didn't really burst into foliage and flowers until well into June. But this was a pleasant spring day, warm while wearing a light jacket. The river was in spate, full with the melting glacial water. Loa warned them that it was a hazard; several cars and young children had fallen into the water over the years. They kept a sharp watch on Loa and Calum's children. But the kids stuck close, wanting to spend time with Gannet. So that worked out well.

After lunch, they drove on through the rural area, full of rivers and mountains, horses and sheep and lots and lots of churches. Uгла laughed. “Yes, there are many churches in Iceland. Communities are small, and most are out in the country. There is much snow in the winter and so it becomes hard to get around. So many churches were built so that each community would be able to worship, no matter the weather. Some of the churches are so small that only twenty people or less can fit in them. Some of them are very old and are no longer in use, and then they are turned into museums.”

They reached Hveragerdi, a village at the base of a tall mountain. Lots of smoke spirals filled the sky there. Loa told them that Hveragerdi used the natural hot water to grow vegetables and flowers in rows upon rows of greenhouses. The produce

was sent all over the island. And there was a horticultural school based there. From Hveragerdi, it was only a half hour's drive to Reykjavik.

Mar said, "Often in winter, this road over the mountain is closed. The pass is very steep."

They inched their way up. Traffic was slow, although there was a pass lane for cars to go around slower buses and trucks. As Mar had warned them, the sides were very steep. The dropoff was a far one. It made Bennet a little nervous; she wanted to clutch the back of her seat but because of the kids, she just folded her hands in her lap and kept her attention strictly forward. That helped. But it was a great relief when they reached the point where solid ground extended to either side of the road again. Then she could breathe easily again. Although the mere thought of braving such a mountain pass in rain or snow made her quail inside..

The drive after that was fairly routine. The traffic upped the pace and it was a straight run to the outskirts of Reykjavik. By then, it was the middle of the afternoon. But Loa and her family were not done. They drove to an outdoor museum where lots of older buildings had been moved and preserved. Inside the buildings, people in traditional costumes were busy demonstrating the old skills: spinning, weaving and knitting and the use of old tools. Some of the buildings had the original fittings in them. They could see how the animals were cared for and kept. They saw how food had been stored in mounds, with roofs covered with grass turf. After the tour, they were treated to waffles with cream and jam, another traditional favorite.

So it was late afternoon before they set foot in the house again. It had been an interesting and eventful day; and now it was nice to just relax for the rest of the evening. Loa and Mar dropped them off, and said they'd be in touch later. Everyone thanked them for the day and then went inside to just let it all sink in.

Nobody addressed Bennet's fall at first. Bridie heated water for tea and hot cocoa. Once everyone had a drink in hand, they just sat in the living room for a while. Every once in a while, one of them would make a desultory comment on something he or she had particularly liked during the day. Then they would muse some more. But finally Kit brought it up.

He asked, "Bennet, did you get a look at the motorcyclist's face?"

"No, not really," she replied. "But I think we all know who he was working for."

Bridie glumly said, "*He's* still on our trail."

"So we'll just have to be extra cautious," interpolated Bennet resolutely. She looked around, and everyone returned her gaze. Point made – no need for further discussion.

They did make use of the evening however. Jenny had the Shawm with her and practiced playing it. The others, under Gannet's instructions, practiced the ditty. In the middle of their practice, the door's bell rang. Jenny went to see who was there and came back with a smile on her face and Orri and Dufa in her train. They had heard a little

of the ditty and wanted to hear more. Before long, they, too were singing along. They thought it was great fun, especially when Gannet taught them a circle dance to go with the song.

Around 6:30, Calum came to fetch the kids and invited them all back to dinner at their place. As they had been planning to just eat things on bread with yougurt, they readily agreed. Everyone crowded into the van. Using the jump seat, there were enough seats and belts for everyone. Loa had been busy. She had baked a leg of lamb with fresh potatoes, peas, pickled cabbage, homemade rhubarb jam, and fresh bread on the side. She told them that this was often served on holidays or as Sunday dinner, but was always a favorite.

Everyone dug in and found the meal as good as it smelled. No one left the table hungry. After dinner, they watched the weather – no change there strangely – so made plans for the following day. Mar and Ugla would not be able to join them, but they offered the use of their jeep. Calum and Loa had wanted to take them swimming, (a year round past time in Iceland) but because of Gannet's cast, they had decided instead to take them to *Heidmork*, a nearby wooded area full of hiking trails for a grill party. That sounded entertaining!

After cleanup, Calum drove them home to rest. It had been a long day. He waved goodbye and said they'd be by to pick them up around noon the next day. They were all bushed. They got ready for bed and went straight to sleep. All that fresh air and exercise had worked their natural wonders on them. They had no problems sleeping in Iceland, no matter how bright it was.

The next morning, around 10:30, the phone rang. Everyone was awake but had been slow to get up as they weren't expecting company until later. Kit answered the phone; it was Loa calling.

“There's been a slight change in plans,” she said. “The weather is best here in town, but is supposed to improve tomorrow. So I was thinking perhaps you all would enjoy seeing downtown Reykjavik today, and grilling tomorrow.”

“That sounds fine, Loa. I'll tell the others. When shall we be ready?” he asked.

“Would an hour be too soon?” she queried.

“Not at all. We'll be ready.” he promised.

Loa hung up and Kit told the others about the change. They were all excited to see the capitol.

“Mar warned us that plans in Iceland change according to the weather. I guess now we have a prime example,” said Ty with a grin

They had breakfasted already, so it was merely a matter of getting dressed and straightening the beds. When Loa and Calum drove up, they were out the door and piling into the vehicles within moments. Today Dufa was in playschool, and Orri in school. Gannet was a little disappointed but she hid it well; she was also looking forward to the day's activities.

First they drove to *Perlan*, The Pearl, a restaurant, museum, and lookout point that sat high on six hot water tanks, overlooking Reykjavik and the surrounding valley. The day was partly cloudy, but not very windy. “Lucky”, commented Calum. “When the wind blows, one feels it most up here.” They could see far in every direction and in every direction there were signposts pointing out the significant features to be seen.

Across, in the direction of the downtown, was a high church steeple. Loa said that was of Hallgrimskirkja, where it was also possible to climb to the top to get a view. She said that it was not easy to get lost in Reykjavik. One had only to look up to become oriented, either on the church or *Perlan* and then one knew in which direction to go to find one's destination.

Next they drove to the coast road and approached the downtown area that way. There was a slight chop to the waters in the bay. Loa said that one often felt the wind downtown, as well. Once parked, they first viewed the harbor and the docks. Then they threaded their way through the buildings to *Austurvellur*, a square of green crisscrossed by walks and edged by flower beds and trees. In the middle was a statue of Jon Sigurdsson, the man responsible for Iceland ultimately becoming independent from Denmark.

The statue faced a dark grey building which Loa told them was the Thinghusid, the Parliament. She led them around this building and they faced the *Tjorn*, a three part pond in the middle of the city. Closest to them was the largest section of the pond which hosted aquatic birds. Loa said it was

kept heated in the winter so that the birds could be there year round. There was a small mound where the birds could climb up out of the water to sun themselves. A walk, lined by benches and young trees surrounded the pond. Off to the right was a walk-bridge that led to a new glass-sided building, the *Radhus*, where parliament met.

The walkway led to a door at the lowest level of the *Radhus*. When they entered, they found a huge geological plaster cast of all of Iceland. Loa and Callum led them around it, pointing out the glaciers, the active volcanoes, the many rivers and fjords and bays, and the villages and towns that hugged the coastline. No one lived in the interior.

This was fascinating! It made them all want to see much more of the island, and pointed out how very rugged the terrain was. One road encircled the island. Loa told them that it was mostly paved now. But the smaller roads crisscrossing the interior were primarily gravel or dirt, suitable only for 4 wheel drive vehicles, and often closed even to those in the wintertime. “However,” broke in Calum, “during the winter, lots of 4 x 4 vehicles trek up to and over the glaciers.” Both Kit and Ty expressed interest in that sport.

When they emerged, they were on the far side of the pond and walked along it, through the trees until they reached the bridge, for both vehicular and pedestrian traffic, that separated the two bigger portions of the pond. A spout of water sprayed in the smallest section. Across the road and higher up was the University of Iceland.

They continued their walk around the pond

and Loa or Callum pointed out various buildings to them. Once they were back downtown, they led them across the street and up *Laugavegi*, the main shopping street in downtown Reykjavik. A little ways up on the right was an information centre for visitors to the island, along with a gift shop alongside. Loa led them there and set them free.

First they perused the maps and brochures on offer and took many of them with them. Then they went next door to the gift shop. It was crowded but people were good-natured and made way for Gannet's wheelchair.

Bennet immediately headed for the book section. She found several books depicting the beauty of the island. One was named 'Fire and Ice'. And then it struck her. That was exactly what Jenny's Gran had said. She bought the book, along with several others. She also bought some volcanic pottery. Gannet found a stuffed puffin that she fell in love with, and both she and Bridie found t-shirts they wanted. Kit found a book on ice caves in Iceland. Jenny found several cds full of Icelandic ballads. Bridie found a book on runes. And Ty found a book featuring beautiful prints of watercolor landscape paintings by Icelandic artist, Thorarin B. Thorlaksson.

When they emerged with their bounty, Loa and Calum had to laugh. They hadn't gotten very far from the car, so Calum and Ty took all the bags and stowed them in the trunk. When they returned, they headed up *Laugavegi* once more. But then Loa led them off on a tangent.

She had them stop and look straight ahead

and up. There before them reared the church, *Hallgrimskirkja*, and the statue of *Leif Eriksson* before it. Loa told them that the church stood 74.5 metres high (about 244 feet). It had taken 38 years to construct, and wasn't completed until 1986.

They passed several art stores along the street as they made their way towards the church. When they finally reached the church, they paid to ride the elevator up to the observation tower. The view from there was just as good as from *Perlan*, but it had a closer view over the harbor and to Mount Esja on the other side.

When they came back down, everyone was hungry. Loa walked them down towards the bay until they hit Laugavegi again and then along Laugavegi until she found a tiny food kiosk. Then she ordered pylsur for everyone. *Pylsur*, Icelandic hotdogs, are made from lamb meat, and are topped with a mayonnaise-type topping, mustard, ketchup, fried and fresh onions. Everyone liked them so well that they each had two. Then they washed it down with cups of pepsi or *sinalco*, an Icelandic lemon-lime soda pop.

They took the next side street and walked all the way down to the bay, walking along the coast until they reached the harbor once more. Loa took them back downtown by a twisty path until they reached a small shop that specialized in woolen goods. She had remembered how much Gannet and the girls had admired the sweaters that her children and Calum had been wearing on their outing the day before. Everyone's eyes lit up at the plethora of sweaters and designs, mitts, hats and socks in all different shades and sizes. A half hour later, they

emerged with bags stuffed with the famous *lopi* (Icelandic wool) sweaters and accoutrements.

The trunk was beginning to fill up, Loa teased. But the others just smiled. They were well content.

Next stop on their route was *Laugardalur*, a park that featured sports arenas, an ice skating rink, botanical gardens, a zoo and a children's play park. There was also an outdoor swimming pool right next to it, the same one Loa and Calum had thought of introducing them to. But that would have to wait for another visit, another time.

They walked along the tree lined path past the ice rink and as far as the stadium. Loa said that sometimes concerts were held there, as well. Then they took a side path, ending up on the edge of the botanical gardens. They passed a pool that sported placards in both Icelandic and English. The pool had been used in times long past for washing clothes. It was a natural hot spring. After reading the posters, they continued their walk and came upon duck ponds in a grove of trees. It was charming.

Loa then walked them over to the entrance to the zoo and play park. It cost a pittance to enter. It was not a big zoo, but it featured animals native to Iceland and Gannet enjoyed it. The minks stuck their noses out briefly before hiding in their burrows. The horses came up to the gate to be petted. Did they get a whiff of Lady May off Gannet's clothes? And the seals were very playful, darting here and there through the water, then rising to sunbathe before slipping back into the water and

laying on the bottom. It was amazing how long they could lay down there before coming up for air! Gannet especially liked the young pup. She got to hold a rabbit in her lap, and petted it for some time. They saw the bulls, geese, and a falcon that had hurt its wing and was being held in a lofty spacious cage while it recuperated. Of course Gannet had a 'few words' with him and came away smiling.

They didn't bother with the play park as Gannet could not take advantage of it. Rather they exited and walked through the botanical garden. Not many of the plants were blooming as yet, but the walks were serene, dotted here and there by statuary. Then they found a grassy spot and just soaked up the sun for awhile.

As they rose to resume their walk, two things happened simultaneously: above them a raven's loud croaks battled the whine of an engine. A motorcycle raced towards them. The rider leaned over to grab Gannet from her wheelchair, but she grabbed the sides and he was unable to dislodge her grasp as he wheeled past. The raven dived, slashing its wings into the face of the rider. The motorcycle wobbled and the rider lost his balance. The motorcycle landed on its side and stalled; the rider was thrown to the ground a couple of feet away.

Ty and Kit raced towards him, but the rider leaped up and raced off before they could reach him, the raven harrying him as he ran.. Gannet had had a fright but she was okay; she knew that her family would protect her and they had. They all were standing on guard, surrounding Gannet and watching in every direction but the rider did not return. Loa and Calum were in shock. They just

could not understand what had almost happened. They just kept saying: 'This just doesn't happen here!' The others could readily believe it, but they did not offer any explanations.

The raven came back, croaked, circled, and landed on the grass near where the motorcyclist had been thrown. The bird croaked over and over, then picked something up in its beak. It took flight only to realight on the side of Gannet's chair where it then dropped its burden into her lap. It rubbed its head once against her arm, then hopped off and took flight. Before Loa or Calum could express their startlement at the bird's unusual behavior, Gannet held up what the bird had given her. It was a bronze ring marked with intertwined initials: T-S. They had regained the stolen artifact!

CHAPTER 12

A surprise awaited them the next morning. The first they knew of it was when Gannet started shouting “Mom! Dad! Look out the window!”

Bennet and Kit jumped out of bed and rushed to the window. Outside the world had turned white overnight. Snow covered everything, glistening in the sunlight and changing the entire face of the land. The way it lined the tree branches and how tulips seemed to arise from mounds of snow made it surreal. Snow was the last thing they had expected at the beginning of June! Now they were even happier that they had found the sweaters, hats, mitts and socks the day before.

Everyone got up, dressed hurriedly, ate a hasty breakfast and went outside to enjoy the treat:

winter snow in June! Quickly a snowball fight was in the offing and the air was filled with the sound of laughter. When Loa drove up, she stepped out of the car, a laugh on her lips as she saw her new friends enjoying themselves.

The game picked up with this new target. Loa was quick to retaliate, more than ready to join in the game. It went on until everyone's face was red from cold snow and their high spirits had toned down a bit. They brushed themselves down and went inside where Bennet made a giant pot of hot cocoa. Everyone crowded around the kitchen table, sipping cocoa and nibbling on sweetmeal crackers. When they were warmed inside and out, conversation turned to their future plans.

Loa said, "The weather has cleared to the west. I think your flight will take off tomorrow, sometime around 5. That's the usual departure time to New York. Which means we have today. Originally we were going to take you to Heidmork, but I am not sure that is a good idea now, what with the snow covering the paths. It might be difficult to push the wheelchair through the snow."

She continued, "Would you be interested in seeing some of the museums here in Reykjavik? Or perhaps seeing more of Iceland? We could take a drive to one of the most beautiful areas of Iceland: Thorsmork. It's a national park where you can drive right up to a glacier, or camp, or go for hikes. One has to cross over three rivers to get there, but that would not be a problem with our jeep."

Everyone liked the idea of seeing more of Iceland's unique landscape so they opted for the

drive. Decision made, Loa was quick to outfit them all with sturdy hiking boots or wading boots. An enormous amount of food was packed to take with them. This time, Calum and Loa's parents would come along as well as Orri and Dufa. So it was a large party and two vehicles that took off not more than an hour later.

Gannet was glad to see her new young friends again. The three kids were quick to commandeer the seats in the back of the van so that they could chat and play together as the grownups attended to the driving. Gannet had remembered to bring her notebook and markers with her, and the kids entertained themselves with many paper games along the way.

The drive went smoothly. It took about 2 and $\frac{1}{2}$ hours to get to the turnoff that would eventually lead them into the park. At the turnoff they pulled off to view a beautiful waterfall. Some watched while others braved the tall sheet of water to climb behind it and come back out on the other side, somewhat damp but enthusiastic. Gannet wished she could have climbed the horseshoe staircase behind the falls, but resigned herself to watching and cheering on her friends.

They took a lunch break while there, too. Loa had brought the fixings for sandwiches, along with lots of fresh vegetables cut into wedges and sticks. No one went hungry. Here, the light snow had long melted in the face of the warm sunshine. But Loa assured them that they would see much more in Thorsmork.

After they had eaten their fill and stretched

their legs, everyone piled back into the vehicles and they drove back onto the dirt road that led into the park. Mar had been telling them tales about some of the incidents that had happened to unprepared travelers who had tried to cross streams and gotten stuck. He said it was always wise for at least two vehicles to travel together. He and Uglá, and Loa and Calum had come here many times and were well versed in what to bring and how to dress. So their guests needn't worry.

The entrance was so unobtrusive that one would never know one had entered a park. But suddenly mountains and trees lay before them in an exotic collage. The colors were incredible. The path circled around a field of strange mounds. And then further on they encountered the first stream of many that they must cross.

Mar looked it over. It wasn't too full. He entered the stream at a slant, slowly and steadily pushing on until he emerged onto the path on the other side. Loa followed his tracks as closely as possible. The van did not have the same clearance that the jeep had, but she knew that her dad was there to pull them out if they got stuck. He always had on hand tow ropes, shovel, wading boots, and a phone to call for help. He was also an amateur radio operator and had a special radio for contacting other radiometers if the phone conked out.

Everyone was impressed by all the precautions their Icelandic friends took when broaching the wilder sides of the island. It reminded them all of how careful they must be when at the mercy of the elements. And they had seen how quickly the weather could change. So

such precautions only made sense. But Mar and Calum told them that many visitors persisted in trying to visit these sites without proper equipment and, sadly, many had died as a result.

Suddenly the road raised and then dipped. At the bottom of the dip was a stream. When they crossed it, they found themselves at the foot of a glacier. Everyone got out of the vehicles and followed a narrow path around the edge. To proceed further it was necessary to cross a pebbled sandy wash. Kit decided to carry Gannet across.

This was a rare opportunity and he did not want her to miss it. They crossed the wash carefully. The temperature plummeted. And then it wasn't possible to go further. Before them reared up the glacier, white at the upper levels, but dark with embedded silt at the levels they were facing. Mar told them that this was just a small tip; the glacier extended far away up and over the mountain range and down the other side.

They made their way back to their vehicles and just in time. They could see other vehicles at the top of the rise, waiting their turn to cross the stream. Mar led them to what seemed at first glance to be a wide pebble wash. On the other side they could see buildings and more hillside. The sun was temporarily hidden behind a gray sky. As they followed the barely discernible path across the wash, they could see that it was transected by three rushing rivers. The water was the same color as the pebbles which is why they hadn't seen the rivers at first.

“This is where it gets tricky,” said Mar. “If

we were planning to camp, we'd cross here. But since we're just here for the day, I'm going to turn around and go up another canyon. There are buildings there and it is possible to walk up one of the little canyons there. When they had driven another twenty minutes, they pulled over. Once again it would be necessary to carry Gannet. But that was okay. She was light and the men decided to take turns.

Now they could see why their foot wear was so important. The canyon featured pebbles and rocks alongside a rushing stream. At first it was not so bad. But the further they proceeded, the wider the stream became. Mar told them that if they followed it all the way to the end, they would find a narrow gap between two rock faces and between them they could find the mouth of the stream where it originated from a waterfall. However to do that, it would be necessary to cross over the stream and it was too full to safely do so at that moment, even if Gannet had been able to move about on her own.

The view though was wild. To either side were rock faces, some covered with moss and dirt and vegetation higher up. The stream rushed along over giant rocks and boulders placed seemingly at random in its path. But those rocks must have fallen or been pushed their by glacial withdrawal. They were too big to have been deposited by the stream itself.

The air was cold and moist. And then it started to snow. Just a few flakes at first, melting in the water and on the rocks. Then it became a regular shower. Mar kept them bunched together, away from the edges of the stream. When the

shower let up, he looked at the sky and led them back to the mouth of the canyon. It was time to go. He said he expected more snow before it stopped.

The snow was accumulating. It transformed the landscape. But Mar knew his way and led them steadily back until they reached the main path that led back to the park's entrance. They did not pass any other cars along the way. The sky looked heavy, the color of lead. They made steady progress, but everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they passed over the grate that marked the entrance. And the sky seemed to breathe along with them, for the further away from the park they got, the lighter and brighter the sky became. By the time they had reached the waterfall where they had stopped for lunch, the sun was shining with nary a cloud to be seen.

It was uncanny how quickly the weather had changed! A matter of minutes was all that it had taken. It made them aware of the fact that Iceland was actually a land still in the making, raw and very much at the mercy of the elements. The people here had grown accustomed to its vagaries but they had also learned not to take it for granted. Wherever they went, they went prepared. And in the process, they appreciated the land and its demands even more, reflecting that strength and wildness in their very nature, even in their appearance.

Sharp features, and deep set eyes under broad heavy brows marked the men's features. They looked incredibly fresh, energetic and sturdy. Their cheeks were high and bright red. The women's features were also sharp but somewhat softened, and their beauty was a natural one; it

shone forth without the need for enhancement. Ugla told them that in Iceland, people lived longer than elsewhere. Life on the island might be demanding, but it had made them healthier and stronger as a result.

They stopped at the waterfall to make use of the facilities and stretch their legs. Calum took pictures of all of them in front of the waterfall. Bridie had been snapping pictures the whole time. And Ty had brought along a sketch pad. He was drawing manically fast, flipping one page after another with a look that said he wasn't sure he'd gotten it all and was desperate to do so. He had filled several of these sketch pads over the course of the last three days. These landscapes would haunt him until he could set paint on canvas. And he was in a fever to start.

On the drive back to town, the kids became quieter and quieter. And soon all three were lolling in their seats. The fresh air, exercise and events of the day had taken their toll. They rested for a good portion of the drive home and the adults talked in subdued tones so as not to disturb them.

Everyone was awake and alert though when they reached the final stretch leading back to Reykjavik. The day's sunlight had given way to cloud cover. It suited their subdued moods. Much had occurred during this interlude, mostly good, but now they had to return their attention to the problem that faced them.

Loa and Mar dropped them off at the house and drove on to their own homes. Ugla had invited them to a final dinner later that evening. In the

interim, Jenny practiced playing the Shawm, and the others concentrated on learning the ditty by heart. Throughout, Gannet fingered the ring which now hung from a silver chain around her neck. She did not try to put it on. In fact, it made her nervous just to be wearing it, but it made her even more nervous when it was out of her hands, hence the necklace.

Several times, Bennet noticed that she seemed about to say something, but she always subsided and just smiled and went back to clasping and unclasping the ring. Bennet decided not to disturb her daughter's reflections, but it set her to pondering herself.

Just before 7 that evening, Calum drove over and picked them up in the van. They drove to Mar and Ugla's home and walked up the path. It was becoming quite familiar to them. Inside, Loa and the kids were already there. Loa was busy helping her mother. The kids raced forward when they saw Gannet carried through the door. Once she was settled into her wheelchair, they quickly rolled her away to the toy corner.

Mar and Calum corralled Kit and Ty and the four were soon engrossed in a computer site that showed pictures of Thorsmork and other interesting areas around the island. Each picture seemed to evoke a story, some humorous, some more serious. Bennet, Jenny and Bridie watched for a while but then moved into the kitchen to help Ugla and Loa.

For this last dinner, Ugla had sliced up a smoked salmon and served it on fresh baked French baguettes for starters. Then she made a

thick seafood stew, featuring all the different seafoods that were caught in Icelandic waters, and baked it in a crusty round. It was delicious. For dessert, she offered them fresh baked crepes filled with homemade blueberry jam and whipped cream. Bennet was very impressed by the quality of the food and how much effort had gone into making it, not to mention how good it all tasted. Fresh fish was not common in Ohio so she had not become accustomed to eating it. But given such quality and availability, it would easily become a favorite.

The evening ended in its usual manner, helping with the cleanup, conversation in the livingroom, and watching the children at play. But the mood was a somber one; it was their final night. They had become good friends and it is always hard to say goodbye.

It was late – time to go back to the house, finish preparations and get some rest before the long flight. Addresses, phone numbers, hugs and thanks were exchanged. Then Calum took the wheel in the van and drove them a final time back to the house. A few last words were exchanged, then Calum drove off with a wave.

Bridie led the way up the path to the front door in silence; the others trailed behind. The lighthearted mood of this interval was replaced by melancholy at leaving their new friends and this amazing country, and by nervous dread of what lay before them.

Once inside, Bennet helped Gannet into her pajamas and settled her into her bed, then sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes..

“Mom,” began Gannet tentatively, “Remember back in Ireland when we visited with Jenny's grandma?”

“Yes,” answered Bennet, somewhat puzzled as to where this conversation was going.

“Well,” continued Gannet, “she said to trust the birds, and she also said to trust my instincts. I'm not sure we should be leaving tomorrow. I'm beginning to think that we need to stay here. Orri and Dufa have gotten really good at singing with me. It's almost like before.” Gannet looked up nervously at Bennet, hoping for understanding.

Bennet was in a quandary. She didn't know what to say or what to do. Up to now, they had been guided by circumstances. The idea of staying longer in Iceland had never occurred to her. And yet, in the past, they had relied heavily on Gannet's instincts and certainty. But now, Gannet seemed as nervous and in search of guidance as any of them.

“Sweetie,” she began. Then stopped and tried to collect her thoughts. “Let's sleep on it. Maybe in the morning things will be clearer. In the meantime, we all need to rest.” She smiled and Gannet smiled back, at first hesitantly, and then with her whole heart. She reached up and hugged Bennet, then lay back with a sigh.

“Okay,” she said. Then she snuggled into the duvet and let sleep claim her. Bennet was glad to see her drop off to sleep so quickly, but noticed before leaving that Gannet, even in sleep, kept a tight grasp on the ring. Bennet left the room troubled. Once in bed snuggled up against Kit's

warm back, she lay there for a long time, trying to think her way through to what was best.

One minute Bennet was awake, thrashing restlessly in bed while her thoughts whirled in an endless circle. The next, her memories claimed her. First she was walking through the museum in Dublin, looking at the artifacts displayed under glass covers. She glanced around and spotted Gannet in the act of bending over a collection of rings, then swaying back and almost falling. She saw her step back a pace or two and regain her balance before moving away, seemingly fine. Her recollection shifted to their emergence from the museum, to those dark moments just before the car impacted.

She flinched, but then memory moved on. Now she was on the ferry carrying drinks back to their table, just about to descend the angled stairs when she felt the thrust at her back and dropped the drinks to grab onto the rail, saving herself from a nasty fall. Before she could become enmeshed in shakiness, memory resolutely shifted to the water zoo, the near miss there and on to the break-in at the hotel in Wales.

Relentlessly, she was made to remember each horrific incident but drifted to the next before the horror was allowed to settle upon her. There must be a reason that her mind was forced through these paces, with no lingering. That is, not until she remembered their visit to Gran. Then, her mind paused. She thought again about what Gran had said in her vision.

And then she realized. Only part of Gran's prophecy had been fulfilled. When she added to that what Gran had said to Gannet, Bennet realized that her subconsciousness had taken this route to answer the uneasiness that Gannet had expressed before going to sleep. Gannet was right; they were not meant to leave just yet. It must be here, in Iceland, that the confrontation was meant to take place.

Only then, with this realization, was Bennet's mind allowed to relax enough to slide effortlessly into sleep. She slept deeply and well. When she awoke in the morning, she was clear-eyed and ready to share her thoughts and conclusions with the others. The sense of drifting, of helplessly reacting was over; now it was time to take the initiative.

It felt good. It felt right. Her shoulders straightened; her mein reflected assuredness and calm. She went downstairs before anyone else awoke, called the airline and canceled their flight, then began stirring up a batch of pancakes. The savory smell wafted throughout the house; one by one, the others were drawn to the kitchen and to the commencement of the final chapter in this battle.

CHAPTER 13

“Good morning,” Bennet greeted everyone merrily, and slipped a plate in front of each of them as they seated themselves at the table. Her cheeriness baffled the others somewhat, but they were too sleepy to think about reasons. They mumbled a reply and concentrated on the pancakes. But soon, conversation picked up and they started wondering about getting to the airport. Gannet began to nervously finger the ring at that.

And then Bennet interrupted. She said, “We won't be leaving today. I canceled the reservations.”

Everyone gaped at her for a moment and then started to talk all at once. Bennet turned off the stove and turned around to face them.

“I thought a lot about things last night, especially after a conversation with Gannet.” She looked at Gannet and smiled reassuringly. “I don't know if you've noticed, but up until now, we have basically been reacting to whatever has happened around us. It's like we've been led around by the nose. And when there was nothing to respond to, we circled in a dazed fashion, waiting for something new to happen.” She looked each person in the eye. “In other words, we haven't been in charge of our own lives.” She paused to let that sink in. Then she said, “That time is over.”

Kit made as if to say something, but Bennet held up a hand, and he subsided. She continued. “Last night, I was led.,” and here she smiled a little, “down memory lane of all the things that have happened since we arrived in Dublin. That is until we visited Gran. And then I remembered something, something in her divination.”

Everybody looked puzzled.

Bridie spoke up. “She spoke of a land of fire and ice, and to trust the birds.”

Bennet asked, “Is that all you remember? Does anyone else remember anything else?”

No one admitted to remembering more.

“I think our nemesis has been playing tricks with our minds. Remember, he has done that before. But this time he was more subtle. He simply made us forget part of what Gran said.”

Everyone leaned a little forward.

Bennet continued. “Gran also mentioned a 'quiet grove of birch trees'.” She looked around. At first everyone looked surprised and doubtful, but after a few seconds, one by one, their gazes seemed to focus and they remembered. And with the memory and the realization of how Nemesis had been controlling them, they also turned a bit grim, in Bridie's case, downright insulted.

“I don't think we are done here. And Gannet feels the same. I think it is why she has been so nervous and anxious whenever we talked of leaving. Then she would subconsciously grasp and finger the ring over and over. It had to mean something.” Gannet nodded.

“So,” she continued, “we need to take control. I think it is here that we will be closing the gate. Gannet has taught Orri and Dufa the ditty and the gestures. She was to get the cast removed once we arrived back home; we can just as easily have it removed here. We've been practicing the song and Jenny has been practicing playing the Shawm. I think we're ready. All we need to do is find the 'quiet grove of birch trees'.

Nemesis' delaying tactics almost made us leave when we need to be here. But now we are wise to his tricks. No more delays. Now is the time.” Bennet looked at each person in turn and each nodded. They were in accord.

“Right,” said Kit. “I'll contact Calum and Mar, tell them of our change in plans, ask if we can stay here a bit longer, and start the search for a likely grove.”

“And I'll ask Loa where to go to get the cast removed,” added Bridie, still grumbling under her breath about the nerve of some people.

Gannet was all smiles at the thought of finally getting the cast off. Simultaneously, she looked apprehensive at how easily Nemesis had tricked them. “Mom, I'm scared he'll do it again, trick us I mean. And maybe next time we – you – won't notice.”

Bennet crouched next to Gannet and took her hand. “Gannet, he's tried many times before to win but we've always managed to beat him in the end. We just have to have faith in each other.” She smiled encouragingly.

Gannet looked into Bennet's eyes and smiled back. “You're right. My birds have never yet let me down.” For a moment, a faraway look of wisdom and memory glazed the little girl's eyes, then they cleared and Gannet was once again Bennet's little girl, in need of reassurance and love.

It freaked Bennet out every time this happened, but it had not happened in a very long time, and only when they had been challenged by Tigne Sh'Dah. She could only hope that this would be their final encounter with the wizard, but had no great faith that the wish would be granted. All they could do was meet each challenge as it was offered and hope their combined efforts foiled his designs on Gannet.

Events moved quickly. In no time at all, they had gotten permission to stay on at the house and Loa had promised to come by a little later in the

day to take them to the emergency room to get Gannet's cast removed. She also told them that Orri and Dufa were both very happy and excited that they weren't leaving just yet and wanting to see Gannet after school. Gannet smiled when Bridie relayed that message.

Everyone got ready for the day, cleaned up the kitchen, and unpacked again. While waiting for Loa to arrive, Jenny practiced on the Shawm and the others sang the ditty, being mindful of Gannet's directions. Each time it became easier, even for Ty, who was totally tone deaf. He belted out the words in a deep monotone, each word falling like the beat of a drum. His deep tones offset the Shawm's higher notes so well that it was hard to imagine any other possible combination. The beat-like tones reverberated in their bones and anchored them to the ground while the Shawm's flutes soared and swooped above like a bird in flight. Birds. It always came back to birds around Gannet!

They heard Loa pull up outside in the van. Calum and Mar jumped down. Ty pushed Gannet's wheelchair down the walk and lifted her into the van, then folded and stored the wheelchair. Gannet couldn't help it. She was so excited to be almost rid of the chair. She wanted to be able to hop and run about with her friends. She had been good and patient beyond her years, but enough was enough.

Only Bennet and Kit accompanied Loa and Gannet to the emergency room. The others stayed behind with Mar and Calum and began the search for a likely grove. Loa had warned them over the phone that the process could take up to 3 hours at the hospital.

Gannet's leg was x-rayed again to be sure that the hairline fracture had healed before the cast was removed. Each step of the process took time: signing in, waiting for their turn, once inside waiting for an intern to see them, finding the x-ray room, once again waiting to be called then, once the x-ray had been taken, waiting for it to be processed, and going back to wait for the intern's decision.

Then, and only then, was Gannet taken to a room where the cast was finally removed. The intern carefully manipulated and prodded where the fracture had occurred, but Gannet felt no pain, not even a small twinge. Satisfied, the intern finally let her go, admonishing her to be careful and then gave her a lollipop with a big smile. Gannet smiled back and said 'takk' – *thank you* in Icelandic, a word she had been practicing with Orri and Dufa. The intern smiled again and complimented her Icelandic, saying in very accented English, “You speak like a native.” Gannet was well pleased.

Gannet was a little unsteady on her leg. It had been a while since she had last walked. So it was a relief when Kit picked her up and carried her back to the waiting room. Bennet had called Loa when Gannet had finally gone in to get the cast removed, and Loa had driven over to pick them up, pulling up just as they exited the emergency room doors. Loa drove them home and Gannet slowly, but by herself, walked up the walkway to the front door and flung it open. “I'm home,” she cried.

Everyone gathered around with huge smiles and watched her make her way to the kitchen where maps were spread out over the table. Congratulations abounded before their attention was

directed once again to the maps.

“Have you found any likely spots?”, asked Bennet.

“Yes. Several. We have to take into account our need for privacy. Who knows how long this will take. We don't want someone interrupting at a crucial moment,” replied Bridie.

“Mar and Calum have found at least four sites in this area that might do. It helps that school is in session,” said Jenny. “That means we will have fewer people out and about if we do it during the day.”

They all bent over the maps again, and quickly pointed out the four likely spots. Two were downtown, one actually in the center of the town square, another near the ponds. But these two were finally discounted for it was felt there would be too many tourists walking around. Another site was a large park not far from where they were currently staying. And the fourth was a much smaller area farther to the east in one of the settled residential areas, remembered by Mar as being close to the house where Uglá's parents had lived.

It was decided that, after lunch, they would first walk over to the park that was close by, and then drive to the smaller one.

As Loa had warned them, they had ended up spending over three hours at the emergency room. All the waits surrounding the x-ray had increased the time generally spent there, so by the time they finally got back to the house, everyone was more

than ready for lunch. Ty and Bridie made a quick trip to the bakery in the complex next door and came back with fresh rolls. Bennet heated some soup and Loa opened a bag she had brought from home which contained all sorts of toppings for the breadrolls: smoked lamb slices, cheese, shrimp salad, butter, two kinds of jam, and some peanut butter, with a smile in Gannet's direction.

It didn't take long before the last crumb was eaten and the last spoonful of soup was swallowed. A quick cleanup followed, and with so many willing helpers, it took no time at all before the kitchen was back to its pristine condition.

The park was an easy ten minute walk away – no need to go by car. But they went slowly, as Gannet was still getting used to walking again. When she tired, the men took turns giving her piggyback rides with a lot of giggling and horsing around in the process. They crossed a major street and walked between dormant flowerbeds to the huge green, *Klambratun*. Trees encircled the green and tall hedges divvied up the perimeter into smaller squares. It would be possible to conduct their business in privacy in one of those but the place didn't feel quite right. It did not actually contain a grove of trees. They decided to take a look at the smaller green that Mar had mentioned.

They trooped back to the house, enjoying the fine weather and the warm sunshine. It was hard in such bright surroundings to dwell on or even give credence to the darker circumstances that were behind all this. But they had to. And, they knew that soon they would have to confide in their new friends what was going on, why they had really

prolonged their stay, and why they were so insistent on finding a grove of birch trees. So far, they had managed to put forward the idea of a picnic, but after passing up so many good sites, the excuse was beginning to wear thin. And, they needed the help of young Orri and Dufa. It didn't feel right to involve the youngsters without the knowledge and permission of their parents.

Such were their joint states of mind when Mar drove them good-naturedly to look at the small green. It had much to recommend it. It was quiet, it was small, and the trees surrounding it were definitely birch trees. Walkways lined each side, somewhat shadowed by the dappling leaves overhead.

There was a small playground on one corner, but when they arrived, it was completely deserted. A couple of benches lay in the sunshine by the playground, but the rest of the green lay in shadow. It was quiet and serene. Gannet moved onto the grass and just sat there for a few minutes, eyes closed, breathing in the atmosphere. And then the quiet was shattered. To one side of the park, workers began using jack hammers to break the cement walk, while others piled narrow plastic tubes to the side. It was obvious they would be here for many days.

Gannet sighed. So close! They would have to look elsewhere.

They filed back to the van quietly and Mar drove them home. Bennet looked at the others, and at an imperceptible nod from each, she asked Mar, Loa and Calum to come inside. It was time to come

clean.

They settled in the living room, their Icelandic friends looking at them expectantly.

Bennet said, “You all have been exceedingly helpful and kind, and not even asked any questions about what must seem very strange requests from us. And we appreciate that very much. But we, and here she waved her hand to include all of them, think that you should know what is going on. It might not make sense to you; you might even think that we are crazy. But let me assure you, we're not. Everything you're about to hear is the truth.”

Without further ado, they each in their own turn told the tale, not just of the current happenings, but including those when Gannet first came into their lives. Throughout, their listeners sat quietly, only the clenching and whitening of knuckles betraying their feelings during the hairier parts of the tale. The closer they got to the present, the more nervous Bennet became.

Finally, it was Gannet who said, “And now we need your help.” At this, Mar, Loa and Calum sat up straighter.

Mar said, “We've witnessed some very odd things over the past few days,” looking specifically at Gannet who squirmed a little under his intense gaze, “but in light of what you have told us, they make more sense. There *is* something special about your girl and the uncanny way she has with birds – there's no denying it. We've gotten to know you all and found you to be good, honest folk, so if you tell us that there is someone out to harm you,

well, if there's anything we can do to help, then we'll be glad to offer it.”

Bennet looked gratefully at the older man and his nodding daughter and son-in-law. “We sincerely appreciate it. But it goes further than just the help of you three and Uglá. We need the help of Orri and Dufa, as well.”

This made Loa and Calum pay keener attention. “How?” asked Loa. “What kind of help?”

Gannet spoke up. “I need them to sing with me.”

At their puzzled expressions, Gannet continued. “Over the past few days, I've been teaching them a little song. It doesn't sound like much of anything, it's just a child's song. But when I sing it, and we dance to it, then we can close a gate that has allowed my nemesis access to our world. I didn't know that we would actually be here in Iceland when we closed the gate, so teaching Orri and Dufa the song and dance was just for fun, something to pass the time. But now... now I need them. Will you allow them to sing and dance with me?” And she looked each in the eye, seriously, earnestly, hopefully.

This pronouncement had them still confused. They didn't understand how merely singing a song and doing a child's dance could have such a profound effect. But then they recalled all the close calls that Bennet, in particular, had suffered the last few days. And they recalled what their friends said they had suffered through in the

past. This was serious. This was more than just singing and dancing.

Calum said, "This is why you are searching for a grove of trees? You need some place quiet and private to sing and dance?"

"Yes." answered Bennet simply.

"There is danger involved?" queried Loa.

"Yes." answered Bennet again.

"Then we adults will have to be exceedingly watchful, won't we?" responded Calum. "Yes, we'll help. And yes, with a glance at his wife, we'll let Orri and Dufa sing."

"Thank you." said Gannet. And then a beautiful smile crossed her face. "I knew I was right to trust in my birds." Her gaze flashed a moment of pure otherness. Everyone there saw it. The Icelanders saw it, and they caught their breaths in collective wonder. Then Gannet was just herself again, a little girl. But it had been enough. They had seen. If they had agreed in blind trust in their new friends before, now they agreed through the knowledge that Gannet was indeed, more than just a little girl. And once they made the leap of faith in believing that, they believed everything else, as well.

CHAPTER 14

Mar spoke up. “I believe that what you are really looking for is to be found in *Heidmork*. Remember we were going to take you there for a picnic but then the weather changed? Well, perhaps we weren't meant to take you there until now.” He shared a knowing glance with Loa and Calum.

Calum said, “There are enumerable groves there, and during the day, there won't be many out and about except on the weekends. It is quiet and extensive. I'm sure you, nodding at Gannet, can find what you're looking for there. Tourists don't go there much. Few outside the native populace know about it or how to get there. So you should have the privacy you need.”

“That sounds good,” said Ty with an

approving grin. “Didn't you say it was only a 20 minute drive away?”

“Yes,” confirmed Calum. “And if we take the fixings for a picnic dinner, no one else who might be there will be suspicious, not that they would be anyway. People go there to walk and enjoy nature, both in summer and winter. And each group generally leaves other gatherings alone.”

“Is there any reason that Orri and Dufa need to know about all this?” asked Loa.

“No. Let them continue to think it is a game we are playing,” said Gannet. “They will be more relaxed that way. Nothing dramatic will happen until we are done with the song and dance. Except you will all have to be on the lookout for Nemesis' minions. They will try to stop me from throwing the ring on the fire. Once the ring has been thrown, *His* hold on them will be done and they will no longer pose a threat.”

“But,” she added in all seriousness, “they will try to steal me and the ring. They will try very very hard. And they don't care about hurting others in the process. There is danger involved. We have to be ready to face it and deal with it. Once I begin to sing, I will not be conscious of anything or anyone else around me, and I will not be able to stop until it is done. Only Nemesis can stop me by stealing the ring. If his minions succeed in that, we are doomed. You all will have to protect me and Orri and Dufa from any interruption of any kind. It would be fatal – and here she paused to emphasize the word - if you do not succeed. If *He* wins, this world will not survive.”

The Icelanders' faces grew pale at this, but it did not deter them. If anything, it cemented their resolve. Much more was riding on this than they could ever have imagined. They had already agreed to help and would stand by their word. But now they were doubly determined to take every precaution to keep the three children safe and allow Gannet to do what must be done.

“You should also realize,” Gannet continued, “Tigne Sh'Dah will probably use his powers to invoke other help against us.” At their puzzled expressions, she said, “My affinity is with birds, although I can also speak with some other animals, just not as well. But he can take over the minds of other animals, and of men. He will use whatever/whoever he can find to stop us. And he may try to influence you all as well. He has done this before, several times.” Here, Bridie and Jenna especially nodded their heads in grim agreement.

“To shake off his influence is not easy,” Gannet went on after letting them digest that bombshell, “but it can be done if you are strong willed enough. Believe in yourselves and each other and *He* will not be able to break through. Once we begin singing, my sphere of safety will surround Orri and Dufa and myself. I will be able to protect us from all but direct physical contact with his minions. That is why you all **MUST** keep them away from me. One touch and we are undone.”

The others nodded their understanding.

“And one last thing. Tigne Sh'Dah can control the weather. It is his greatest power. We

must find a grove which will not only protect us, but also keep him out,” concluded Gannet.

With every word that Gannet spoke, the seriousness of the issue became more and more apparent. This was turning out to be much more than three children just singing a ditty! This was epic! This was war!

“I will be able to call the birds to our defense,” resumed Gannet. “And if Nemesis does resort to calling on the weather, his minions will be just as much at its mercy as are we. So I don't think he will except as a last try. However, the more we know about the area where we will be, the better.”

At this, Mar and Loa looked at each other. This would require research. Meanwhile, Ty and Kit and Calum had their heads together discussing possible defense mechanisms. The ritual would be held in broad daylight. This would make it more difficult for someone to sneak up on them, but it also made them more vulnerable.

Soon, the three younger men drove off to a hardware store and strangely, to a nursery. Mar and Loa left to go to Loa's house and access her computer. Jenny went off to practice yet again with the Shawm. This left Bridie to help entertain Gannet and watch over her aunt and her little cousin. She was mindful of how many attacks had already been attempted on Bennet and was not about to lower her guard at this point in time.

Gannet was itching to be outdoors. It had been so long now that she had been cooped up in the house, unable to leave it without the aid and

accompaniment of one of the group. She wanted to go outside, run barefoot in the grass, skip rope and simply play. Bennet and Bridie decided to walk with Gannet to the nearest school yard and allow Gannet to play to her heart's content.

It was a straight walk down the street, taking about seven minutes to reach the school. The yard was enclosed with a fence although there were gaps here and there. Several other children were there playing as well, and soon Gannet was playing with them on the climbing bars, playing tag, and when someone brought a ball, she was introduced to the joys of soccer. She couldn't run far yet without tiring, so she played the goalie and seemed perfectly happy to do so. After an hour, all the kids started to drift away. It was time to go home and get ready for dinner.

No one tried to sideswipe them or intercept them on the walk home, although Bridie and Bennet both kept a sharp lookout. Gannet said the ravens and smaller birds were keeping a lookout as well, and would alert them if anyone approached them with menace.

Gannet was very happy but tired after her exertions, so the walk home was a slow one. She prattled on about the soccer game and how soon she would be able to run up and down after the ball like the other kids. Meanwhile, she had learned how difficult it was to block the ball; she had often landed on her backside, but bounced back up immediately to fend off the next attempt. She'd had a marvelous time!

Back at the house, Bridie engaged Gannet in

a game of battleship while Bennet gave some thought to dinner. As Mar and Ugla, and Loa and Calum and the kids would be joining them, they decided to order pizzas. There were several takeout places in the area, including in the mall across the street. It would be easy to either have them delivered or pick them up themselves.

When Calum returned with Kit and Ty, holding several mysterious bags, he suggested a specific pizza parlor and that they pick up the pizzas themselves as it would be cheaper and they'd get more for their money, i.e. two pizzas for the price of one. It was interesting to realize how frugal Icelanders could be with their money.

Several pizzas were ordered with a variety of toppings, along with breadsticks and sauce. Bennet whipped up a salad and when Ugla and Mar and Loa arrived with the kids, they brought along beer and pop and fruit juices. Orri and Dufa made a beeline for Gannet, surprised and gratified to see her without her cast. When Gannet told them about her soccer game that day, the three were eager to go outside and start up another.

With a laugh, Bennet and Loa called them to eat first. And then made sure the kids played in the enclosed backyard when they did go out. Soon the happy sounds of kids at play provided a cheery backdrop to the more serious conversations taking place indoors.

Mar had found a detailed map of *Heidmork*, which showed not only the many paths that bisected *Heidmork*, but also open areas in contrast to tree groupings. Soon, they were able to choose the best

sites for their purposes. The next day they planned to drive there and explore the options, and decide upon possible defensible attributes. Later, when a time had been picked, they would go back in the late evening, making sure they were not followed, to set up their defenses when the light was at its duskiest.

At the store, the guys had gotten rolls of string, metal clanging balls, and a mysterious tangle of some kind of plant as well as several bundles of rose branches, a large sack of gravel, and some netting material that was so fine, it was hard to see it was there when unrolled. There were other things as well. It was obvious that they had given thought to general defenses and ones that would not be immediately obvious to prying eyes but would alert them to the presence of others and hopefully slow them down.

They talked late into the evening until everyone was too tired to do more than just sit and and enjoy the night air. Then Loa and Calum bestirred themselves, called in the children, and drove everybody home. They would meet again the next day after breakfast and after Orri and Dufa had been escorted to school. Kitchen cleaned, showers taken, doors and windows latched, everyone settled in their beds and were asleep within minutes, all but Bennet.

She got up to take one last look at Gannet, smoothing back the shiny hair from her face and whispering that she loved her and everything would be alright. Gannet sighed, gave a small smile and snuggled deeper into her pillow. Bennet snuck away quietly and crawled back into bed with Kit.

He unconsciously drew her close to his side, one arm protectively wound around her waist. Soon she joined him in sleep.

The next morning, everyone awoke refreshed and alert. This always seemed to happen when they were going into battle mode. Their actions were sharper, more economical, more efficient. Each knew his or her role and concentrated on doing it right.

The day was bright with a slight breeze. They each brought a sweater and jacket with them, just in case. They wore sturdy shoes and jeans, ready for trekking through the conservation area, *Heidmork*. Calum and Loa arrived with a packed lunch for them all. They had no idea how long it would take to find the right grove.

They greeted one another with brief smiles, too intent on their mission to pass the time in small talk. They clambered into the van, Calum at the wheel, and started on their way. Each kept a wary eye on the traffic, trying to spot drivers who seemed too interested in their vehicle and/or destination. But it was an impossible task. Tigne Sh'Dah was too smart for that. All he need do was follow the vibrations from the ring to know where they were headed. He did not have to have his minions stick close to them.

Heidmork, a conservation area since the 1950s, lay southeast of Reykjavik. Its total area comprised 2,800 acres, 26 species of trees, the most prominent being Spruce, and 60 species of birds. It

was possible to access the area from different directions, but the closest was a mere 10 minute drive away. Loa had brought the map that Mar had found and directed Calum along the gravel road to the closest possible site. It would still require a hike to get to it. They locked up the car and, map in hand, approached the head of the trail. There were no other cars parked within sight. That was a good sign, but did not necessarily mean that Nemesis did not have followers hot on their trail.

They set off at a good pace, enjoying the smell of the spruce trees, the shady paths and the pretty wildflowers. To Gannet's delight, several birds chirped and chattered when they spotted her and once in a while, one would swoop down to alight briefly on her shoulder for a quick conference and then flit off into the canopy of leaves overhead.

After walking about 25 minutes, sometimes uphill, sometimes down, sometimes on a narrow path, sometimes across an open area surrounded by a mix of deciduous and evergreen trees and beds of flowers and berry vines, they neared the first possible site. The landscape was beautiful, especially against the sharp blue sky. It wasn't very warm yet, but as the sun rose in the sky, the wind decreased and it wasn't long before they were shedding their jackets; a sweater was more than sufficient.

Ahead of them around a bend, was a semi-secluded open area, bounded on two sides by spruce trees. On the third side, the ground rose to a knoll that overlooked a deeply overgrown patch of young birch trees rising up from a bed of variegated foliage. The fourth side was the path on which they

stood. No, this first site was not suitable – too open. After a quick perusal of the map, Loa led off in a different direction.

It was impossible to tell on the map what kind of trees grew where. The many species, some planted, some growing on their own from seeds distributed by wind and birds, intermingled with one another. Of course it was easiest to see the tops of the evergreens. But finding a grove of birch trees in the midst of it all was not going to be easy. It was likely that they would, at some point, need to leave the paths and meander under the trees themselves to find what they needed. It was frowned upon to leave the paths, but in the instance, they were not going to worry about the rules. Too much was riding on the results.

After another 40 minutes of walking up, down and around, they reached the next possible site. This one featured an enclosed grill and picnic area. The path followed a tree line along one side of the area and intersected another path just beyond. The trees were mainly birch but the area was too accessible. They would have to continue searching.

But first they took a break. The climb had been somewhat taxing to Gannet's leg, so she was glad to plump down on the ground and rest a little before going on. Loa passed around water bottles and boxes of raisins. That raised everybody's spirits.

While people rested, the map was consulted once again. This time, they would head in yet a third direction. They would cross one of the roads that crisscrossed the land, and head further north

and east into more rugged terrain that wasn't visited as often. "People tend to stick to the paths closest to the entrance, usually to grill, or pick berries, or in winter go cross-country skiing. "Where we'll be heading now, is much farther away," explained Loa.

When everyone was ready, they shouldered their backpacks; Gannet was given a walking stick to help spare her leg, and off they went, Loa leading the way. It was after they'd been walking for a good twenty minutes when they heard someone crashing through the brush not far off.

This was not a sound to go unnoticed as, by sticking to the walk paths, not much sound was generated by those trekking. This, however, was obviously someone or some people who were bypassing the paths to more quickly reach their destination. Ty had them slow and be quiet, waiting to see if whoever it was passed them by. Instead, the sound changed direction and seemed to be zeroing in on them.

A little ways back there had been a mound with a dip behind it full of flowers and berry vines, not readily visible from the path. Ty had them retrace their steps as quietly as possible and then had Bennet and Gannet enter the dip and crouch well below sight. While Ty pulled out his ever present sketch pad and proceeded to sketch the view, the rest of them reclined or stood, seemingly at ease, in a relaxed perimeter around the mound, talking desultorily.

Abruptly, three young men burst through the trees onto the path directly in front of them. Their eyes were glazed. They looked around but not

seeing whatever or whoever it was they sought, one of them barked a question in Icelandic. Loa answered briefly, seemingly uncaring. Her nonchalance, Ty's obvious bemused attention to his sketches and the relaxed mien of their companions easily convinced the three that their objective lay elsewhere. The three stomped off in a temper, clearly unhappy, hot and sweaty.

The party stayed there for a few more minutes to make sure the three had actually left. When the sounds had diminished and were no longer within their hearing, Ty reluctantly closed his sketch book; they allowed Bennet and Gannet to come up out of the pit and resumed their trek along the path. No one said anything. They had known that their nemesis would have them followed. They had been lucky, but they would have to continue to be watchful. But now they knew of at least three under Nemesis' spell.

The enforced break had been beneficial in one other respect: it had allowed Gannet to rest her leg for a few minutes. So when they started off again, she was easily able to keep up. They walked for almost another hour before they called a halt. Ty had kept them walking steadily for two reasons: one, to get them as far away from their pursuers as possible and, two, to make as much time as they could to the next site before they were accosted again.

When they did reach the site, it was perfect. On a little hillock, covered, surrounded and completely encapsulated by mostly birch trees, both large and small, with pine trees standing sentry farther out, was a serene patch of green, dappled by

shifting shadows and sparkling sunbeams. It had one entrance through trees whose latticed branches formed a leafy vault into the bower. The open area within was about 20 feet in circumference. The foliage was practically impenetrable, but the sun managed to winkle through the constantly shifting leaves, so the little glade was not gloomy at all, just very private. The path was some distance away and down the hill; the bower was not readily apparent unless one was deliberately looking for it.

Ty and Calum explored the mound around which the path meandered. The hillock showed bare bedrock on one side up to about 12 feet where the trees took over. At its base was a marshy patch. Anyone trying to slog through it to climb the hillock from that direction would be easily heard. And even if someone succeeded in reaching the bedrock, the rockface there was sheer; there was nothing to grasp, no cracks or ridges, to aid in climbing it. It would require serious climbing equipment and talent to broach such a task. This was a natural defense and made the boys smile in satisfaction.

They turned to check out the other sides. One side was covered in tightly entwined trees and bushes. They tried pushing through but it was very tough going and after ten minutes, they gave up. That left the third side. There they found rough rubble out of which stubby little trees were trying to grow.

When Calum attempted to climb up, using the small trees to cling to, he was eventually able to reach the top but not without considerable difficulty. The rubble kept slipping and sliding under his feet; the sharp edges and deep wallows

between rocks were a perfect recipe for stubbed toes and barked shins.

The conclusion was that if someone tried to approach them from that side, the noise alone would be enough to warn them. That left the direct frontal approach to the bower through the vault.

This site was as naturally protected as was possible. One had to walk several feet through intertwined trees to reach the actual bower itself. Once they were all inside, they could set up additional defenses inside the entryway to ensure the safety of those within. Gannet's birds would be a first warning sign. The ring of pines protecting the more fragile birch trees closer in provided a strong front that even winds sent by their nemesis would have a hard time getting through.

Only the hazard of fire remained. They had to trust that Tigne Sh'Dah wanted Gannet and the ring too much to attack them with fire. Even so, they planned to have several fire extinguishers on hand, just in case overzealous minions forgot their objective and reverted to 'if we can't have them, neither can you' states of mind.

Now that they had found their objective, their first inclination was to sit down and rest, but Ty convinced them to withdraw from the hidden bower and walk five minutes back down the path before doing so; he did not want to inadvertently give away the actual site until absolutely necessary. That made sense to the others so they readily complied without challenge.

It turned out to be wise advice. Within

minutes of settling to the ground, they could hear loud crashing headed their way. Bennet and Gannet once more hid, this time behind a convenient hedge half hidden by a pine tree. At the same moment the three young men burst through onto the path, a couple of rabbits hopped frantically across it and into the brush beyond, a wild fox seemingly in hot pursuit right behind them. It was enough to divert their attention and distract them from looking in the opposite (Bennet's and Gannet's) direction..

The three were even dirtier, grumpier and wearier than before. Tigne Sh'Dah had obviously pushed them to their capacity. They glanced at the group before them suspiciously, again noting Ty busily sketching. One came close enough to see what he was drawing and grunted. Loa said later that the guy had liked what he'd seen. Then another asked if they had any water to spare – Loa said 'no, they'd drunk it all'. The three grimaced and lurched onto the path and away. Several minutes passed until Ty gave the all-clear. Then Bennet and Gannet came out of hiding and Loa wasted no time in leading them all back to their car.

As they approached from a different direction and along different paths, it took them fifty minutes, which was not bad considering. But all of them were glad to sit down in the van and rest for a few minutes before heading back home. The hidden glade was indelibly marked on all their memories as was the most direct route to it.

Their next objective was to rest and eat something. Sometime around midnight, Ty and Calum planned to come back and bring along their surprise warning systems. It would not be possible

to set them up until everyone was inside the bower, but it would be quick work. Tonight's visit was just preparation and reconnaissance.

The drive home didn't take long. Once there, Gannet took a much needed nap. When she awoke an hour later, she was ready to eat and looking forward to spending some time with Orri and Dufa. When the latter two arrived, they brought with them a couple of board games. Their mother had warned them that Gannet might be too tired to run around outside. The three were happy enough to spend time with the indoor games, broken only by the call to come eat.

Bennet decided to make hamburgers for everyone, with salad and baked beans and potato salad on the side. There was a grill behind the house. It didn't take long for Kit to get it set up. He was in charge of grilling the burgers and hotdogs; Bennet saw to the rest. This reminded them strongly of grill parties at home, and made them all smile.

Mar, Uglá, Calum and Loa arrived in time for dinner. It was a happy evening. The smell and taste of savory food along with good company went a long way to relaxing them all. It did not make any of them forget what was in store, but for the nonce it made it possible to pretend that nothing so momentous lay on the horizon. It was good to 'just be' for a little while, to get lost in the normal pattern of their lives.

Around ten, the children were taken home and put to bed. They had been told that on the morrow, they would be taking a vacation from

school and going to Heidmork for a picnic party with their new friends. Both Orri and Dufa were very excited at that and it was some time later before they could calm down enough to fall asleep. But eventually they did. Then, while Loa collected proper clothing and supplies for the next day's meals, Calum drove back and picked up Ty. Given the circumstances, Kit had decided to stay behind and guard.

When Calum and Loa had taken the kids home, an unpleasant incident had occurred. A car with three young people, they could only assume it was the three same young men they had encountered twice before, had careened wildly down their street, stopping once to peer into the house, trying to discern who lived there. Luckily, Bridie and Jenny had drawn the blinds on the front side of the house because the sun was so intense that it was impossible to sleep, so nothing could be seen. The car had lurched away, with loud catcalls, whistles and horn blaring in its wake.

An hour later, the same car had passed by again. But this time one of the boys had exited the car and staggered to the porch. He'd knocked on the door, rung the doorbell several times, but when no one answered, he'd finally given up, returned to the car and the car had screeched away.

If they came back a third time, Kit wanted to be there. Mar had also come over. If they came back, Mar would answer the door – someone the three had never seen before – and would pretend to be an irate tenant who couldn't understand what the three hooligans were up to and would threaten to call the cops. The hope was that it would be enough

to scare them off for the night, at least.

Ty and Calum drove off with their supplies, sometime around midnight. Mar settled on the couch and Kit relaxed in a chair. Around 12:30, here came the three young men again. They had been drinking and were both surly and antagonistic. This time two of them exited the car and unsteadily approached the front door. While one tried to peek around the blinds, the other started pounding on the door, alternated with jabbing at the doorbell. This was what they'd been waiting for. With a nod from Kit, Mar turned on the porch light and opened the door.

The light wasn't really needed to see the scruffy young men standing there. Entirely in Icelandic, he harangued them, asking what in the world they thought they were doing, disturbing his sleep in the middle of the night. He told them that the neighbors had informed him of their earlier visits, their obnoxious behavior and that if they didn't get back in their car right now, and drive away and never come back, the cops would be speaking with them. In fact, they were already on their way. And shame on them for behaving like such hooligans! Didn't they have anything better to do with their time than to disturb the peace?

Mar went on for some time, and the boys visibly wilted before him. They'd been running on exhaustion for too long. Nemesis had pushed them too far. Faced with Icelandic customs, language and the threat of the police, the three had had enough. They haltingly apologized, wove their weary way back to the car and drove sedately and quietly away. Thanks to Mar's magnificent

performance, Nemesis had lost this round.

Ty and Callum returned around 2 a.m. They reported that everything had gone smoothly. After exchanging brief 'good nights', Calum and Mar drove home. Kit and Ty locked the door and went to get what sleep they could. They would need it. Tomorrow was *THE DAY*. They were as prepared as they could be. From here on in, Fate would decide.

CHAPTER 15

Bennet's eyes opened. She was abruptly wide awake. No one else was stirring. It was early. The house was quiet save for the muted breathing and soft snores emanating from the others. She quietly rose and went downstairs to check on Gannet. She peeked in. At first glance, Gannet was still deep in dreamland. But as Bennet shifted to leave, Gannet turned over and looked directly at her. She, too, was awake. Her eyes were big with fear and unshed tears.

Bennet entered the room and lay down next to Gannet. She folded her close in a loving hug. She whispered, "Hey, sweetie. Can't you sleep?"

Gannet wrapped her arms around Bennet's neck. "I slept a little. But then I couldn't any more. I kept thinking about *HIM*." Her little body

shivered. Bennet knew it wasn't due to the coolness in the room. "I've been so happy, Mom, with you and Dad, and Bridie and Lady May." Her voice caught on a half sob. "I forgot. I forgot that *He* was still after me. I forgot about fighting and keeping watch. I forgot that *He'd* hurt my family before. But now.. Now all I can think about is losing all of you. I...I think I could bear it if *He* took me as long as I knew you all were okay. But I know you wouldn't be safe at all, so I have to fight. Mom, I'm scared. I'm so scared! I don't know if I am strong enough to beat him. I just want to go home!" And she started to sob, harder and harder, her body shaking, her arms grasping Bennet in a tight panicked embrace.

Bennet's eyes filled and overflowed. Oh, how much she loved this little girl! The thought of losing her was unbearable. Witnessing Gannet's fear, not for herself but for her family, just broke her heart. And the idea of surrendering herself to Tigne Sh'Dah, *to save them*, well that was just too much!

She stroked Gannet's hair and softly rubbed her back in a circular motion. After a while, Gannet's sobs stopped and her breathing became slow and regular. She had fallen asleep, safe in Bennet's arms. Bennet lay there, continuing her stroking, allowing the little girl these moments of heart's ease, wishing with all her heart that she could do more.

But she knew that no matter what she could say, what she or any of them could do to help, the upcoming battle was Gannet's. And there was no absolute, no guarantee that Gannet would win. Her

nemesis was powerful and focussed. It didn't matter that his past attempts had been foiled. He would never stop until he had Gannet and her power or was annihilated. Those were the only two options in his mind.

If Gannet did not succeed in closing this gate, *He* would make sure that everyone rued the day they had crossed him, for he intended no less than to rob the entire world of light, of hope. And with Gannet in his possession, he would control the power needed to do so.

What a horrible burden to put on the shoulders of a young child! And Bennet knew that this burden had been carried for longer than any of them could imagine. It did not matter that Gannet incorporated power beyond imagination. To Bennet, she was a vivacious, lovable, little girl who meant the world to her, to Kit and Bridie, to all their friends. Gannet was her daughter, in every sense of the word but for that of actual birth. Bennet's heart was fierce in her need to protect her, love her, give her a happy home and a bright future. That this, that *Gannet* was threatened in such a manner that she, her mother, could not shield her, left her quivering with rage and frustration.

Bennet had to get control of her emotions. She knew that she would be of no help to Gannet if she let her emotions rule her. She had to bank the fires, let them cool so that she could plan and act when and how circumstances demanded it. Only so could she help her little daughter. But it was one of the hardest tasks she had ever faced!

And so she lay there, next to Gannet, wide

awake, planning and plotting, while her daughter slept. Gannet would need all her strength and resilience in the next few hours. This, imparting a warm cocoon of safety and love so that she could get the rest she so desperately needed, was the best Bennet could do. It was no small thing being a mother. Sometimes, the smallest acts, the most trivial of motions or words could have a profound effect. Letting Gannet voice her fears, just being there for her daughter, was enough to allow Gannet to relax and rest, secure in Bennet's arms.

Reflecting, Bennet came to understand Tigne Sh'Dah's strategy. The bond of mother and child was very very strong. Bennet realized that that is why she had been targeted so often these past few weeks. To break the bond would have weakened Gannet so much that the battle would have been lost before it had even begun. Diabolical but practical. And that is exactly how *HE* had come across when they had met. He had been polite but determined, had given them the option of simply giving the child to him. When they refused he had walked away and commenced the attack without pause – a man of few words, but with a plan, ready to use any means at his disposal. And when his plan had failed, he had not wasted time on temper or recriminations; he had simply fallen back to do battle another day – practical.

Bennet realized that their own emotional investment in this battle was both a strength and a weakness, a weakness as it left them all vulnerable to side attacks – Tigne Sh'Dah could hurt and weaken Gannet by attacking not just the child herself, but all or any of them. But their weakness was also their strength, for their love supported and

strengthened Gannet. She had more to fight for, and grew more determined to do battle the more her loved ones were targeted.

Bennet did not think that Nemesis realized this. It was the flaw in his approach. He expected Gannet to succumb to the attacks and give up. He did not realize that the attacks had just the opposite effect, for he could not imagine it – he did not love. He understood power but not that of the human heart.

She resolutely determined that his weakness would be his downfall. For no child was more loved than Gannet. And she knew it, she blossomed before it. Gannet might not know how strong she was, might fear she was not strong enough, but Bennet knew otherwise. To know Gannet was to love her. And she would be surrounded by love when she went to battle. It would strengthen her, and support her. It was the best help, the greatest defense that any of them could give her. And with that, Bennet finally was able to close her eyes, her heart momentarily at peace, and sleep.

A few hours later, they all awoke. Kit woke, at first surprised to find Bennet's side of the bed cold and abandoned, but when he went barefooted downstairs, he understood when he looked in and found her wrapped protectively around Gannet's small form. He smiled, eyes filled with love, and went into the kitchen to start the coffee machine and to whip up a batch of pancakes. He was as adept in the kitchen as Bennet.

Minutes later, the fragrant smells coming from the kitchen drew everybody, yawning and stretching, to the table. Gannet walked in rubbing sleep from her eyes, and after hugging Kit, sat down to attack a stack of flapjacks, covered in butter and syrup. Soon she sported a milky mustache and was struggling to down the last few bites on her plate. The everyday routine had reestablished Gannet's usual cheerful mien. She couldn't stay serious for long.

After eating, she jumped up to get dressed. Her friends would be arriving soon!

The others finished their meal in subdued chatter. They had kept up an innocent conversation while Gannet was in the room, to defuse tension, and succeeded admirably. But when she left, the topic shifted to preparations, expectations, and apprehensions. It was inevitable. They kept their tones as close to normal as they could so that Gannet would not notice, so that she could live *in the now* just a little bit longer, but at the same time they had much to discuss and plan.

Cleanup was accomplished quickly, as was dressing for the day. Bennet and Jenny packed a lunch for everyone. Bridie had Gannet help her to make beds, keeping her giggling at some nonsensical notion or playful gesture. Kit and Ty collected backpacks, found a couple of blankets to use in the bower, and made sure Jenny's Shawm in its case was not forgotten.

When Calum and Loa drove up in their van, Orri and Dufa jumped out and made a beeline for Gannet. Gannet had kept one ear cocked to listen

for their arrival and ran down the stairs and out the door to meet her friends halfway. The three were all smiles, looking forward to spending the day together. Gannet's friends only knew that they were going to Heidmork for a picnic and fun outside.

The sky had a few clouds and it wasn't so warm at this early hour, so everyone had brought sweaters and a light jacket. But the day held promise. And the children especially were determined to make the most of this unexpected freedom from their everyday routine.

The van was soon loaded up while the three youngsters played tag on the front lawn; their happy smiles and shrieks of laughter filled the air. When they were called to the car, they raced to the backseat and were quickly engrossed in one of their games. They were happy, just three kids having fun together. The grownups smiled to see it, but knew that it was, to an extent, an illusion, one they did not want to dispell. So after everyone was seated and strapped in, conversation was kept light. Loa kept up a running patter about things they saw along the way, little anecdotes, and funny stories. It kept the atmosphere light and although it did not totally dispell the tension, it helped them cope with it and, more importantly, hid it from Orri and Dufa.

All too soon, they reached the turnoff into the park. As it was a weekday, other cars were scarce, making it easier for them to monitor would-be watchers. They saw no one. They parked where they had parked before. Now that they knew where they were going, a mere fifty minute walk was a piece of cake, even for the kids who resumed their game of tag as though it had never been interrupted.

Back and forth along the paths the grown-ups led them, they seemed to have endless reserves of energy, tagging one another, then racing away with the others in hot pursuit. The weather brightened and warmed and soon everyone had thrown off their jackets. The kids had long since removed their sweaters as well; running was a hot business.

That the adults were somewhat quiet on the walk did not phase the children. Although they indulged the children, letting them run as they liked as long as they stayed in sight and on the path, nor admonish them to quiet down, they kept an alert vigil of their surroundings and any untoward sounds. But all they heard was the occasional raucous call of a raven in flight. It was as though they had the entire park all to themselves, surely an illusion, but one comforting to embrace.

At last they reached their destination. And then everything changed. One moment Gannet was a child hard at work at her games with her friends. The next, she had paled and become very somber and reflective. Her attitude was not lost on her playmates. They were at a loss to understand it, but did not press her, just subsided to sit on the ground until Gannet was ready to play again.

While the women set up the picnic in one of the innumerable open swards along the path, the men climbed up to and into the bower and began taking things out of the bags that had been stored there. Orri and Dufa, curious, followed the men up and in and couldn't hide their curiosity and fascination with the bower itself and all the strange things the men were drawing out of the bags.

But when Loa called, they dutifully left the bower and returned to regale Gannet, who had inexplicably, at least to them, stayed behind, with a report of what they'd seen. Gannet listened rather apathetically, puzzling her friends. But they seemed to know that it was better to leave her alone than pester her into her former vivacity.

Instead, they fell to and helped the others set up the picnic, pulling out the blankets and settling them on the grass, and keeping the flies off the food containers, once opened. Like everything else, they made a game of it.

When all was ready, the men were called back. Plates were filled with sandwiches and salads, fresh vegetables and chips. Beverages were shared out. Everyone settled on a favored spot around the edges of the blankets or on convenient stone slabs that dotted the ground. Gannet had a plate beside her but, although she played with the carrot sticks and cherry tomatoes, she couldn't eat.

Bridie came to sit next to her and jollied her into taking a bite or two of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a few sips of juice from her glass. But Gannet couldn't manage more, and no one pushed the issue. She was back to fingering the ring that hung from her neck.

Finally, when everyone was done eating and drinking, the rest was packed away. The crumbs were scattered across the grass for the birds and animals to find. Then Gannet stood. She seemed to rally a bit. She smiled at Orri and Dufa and started to race them up the hill and into the bower. The adults followed behind more slowly.

When everyone was inside, Gannet sat down in the center and proceeded to tell Orri and Dufa an elaborate story, in keeping with their surroundings. The two were fully entranced as they were meant to be. They noticed nothing and no one else around them. Gannet had begun to glow a bit, quite visible in the shadowy interior. Loa and Calum were startled but said nothing.

The men had made a good start of setting up their defenses before lunch. Now they picked up where they had left off; this time the women helped them. Strings full of dangling bells had been woven through the pine branches around the outer perimeter. Any approach would set off a jangling alarm. Between the pine trees and the birch trees, popcorn and a blend of seeds had been strewn all over the ground. Closer in than the popcorn was a thick bed of sharp-edged stones and pine cones. This would make any approach both noisy and uncomfortable; walking would not be easy. The tiniest slip could result in lacerations.

Along the inside perimeter of the glade, a mesh had been tied to the trees and branches. From ground level to eye level, into the mesh had been woven thorny rose branches and nettles. The mesh blended perfectly with the branches and leaves; it was all but impossible to see. However, anyone trying to come at them would have a very unpleasant surprise when they tried to enter the bower.

Several fire extinguishers were distributed around the glade, within easy reach. While Jenny played the Shawm and the children danced and sang the ritual, the adults would form a protective circle

around them. Ty, Bridie and Bennet had bows and a cache of arrows by their sides, and the skill to use them. The others had baseball bats and a huge pile of stones, perfect for throwing, next to their assigned places. If Nemesis's minions managed to break through, they would have a real fight on their hands.

Now that everyone was inside the bower, the vaulted entryway was disguised with a plethora of tree branches. Farther in, a blanket of edged stones was laid down. A web of strong plastic string was woven across the entryway and into it were lodged more of the thorny branches. This cut those inside off from their only means of egress, but also blocked the entrance from a quick sortie by their adversaries.

Of course if one or more of them had a knife, they could cut their way through the web; it was only string. But in the process, they would surely be cut again and again by the thorns before them and the sharp stones below; this might discourage their advance.

On the inside perimeter of this web was a final defense: the ground was dug up, creating a depression of about 3 inches, some 3 feet wide and long. Into this, a pre-measured roll of linoleum was laid down. On top of this rested a layer of marbles. Over these, a layer of mesh was thrown to conceal the marbles, then covered by some of the dirt and pine needles that had been dug up.

The spot did not, at first glance, appear any different from the rest of the pine-needle covered dirt floor but if anyone stepped onto the hidden

mesh, they would go flying or at the very least, temporarily lose their balance. Those seconds would give the defenders time to focus their weapons upon the intruders. At the last, a small fire, ringed in stones, was started near the center of the glade.

They were finished. They were ready. Jenny lifted her Shawm. At a nod from Gannet, she raised the instrument to her lips and began to play the opening notes. Hearing the music, Orri and Dufa jumped to their feet and stood one to either side of Gannet. They linked hands and started to sing, to step the round dance. The adults, ranged around them in a circle, facing out and away, took up the song. It started softly, very softly.

Around them, the sky began to darken; the wind began to pick up. Birds settled in the branches of the trees all around them. Although it was not yet the middle of the afternoon, the light had turned to dusk and then darker. It had not been this dark in Iceland for months; the midnight sun never let it get darker than dusk before rising high in the sky once more. But now, it was becoming so dark that the light of the small fire alone pricked the darkness.

On they sang. The birds joined the chorus. And yet, Gannet's pure tones easily pierced and surpassed them all. Her voice was hauntingly beautiful. And as she sang, the sun burst through the dark clouds. Then the clouds, seemingly angry at the sun's interference, bunched together, blocking the rays from reaching the earth. Lightning began to stretch its fingers, alighting on trees not far from their glade but never coming too close. Tigne Sh'Dah wanted to intimidate them, scare them, but

not destroy them – not yet.

Suddenly some of the birds to the west broke from the chorus and set up a raucous cry – the first warning. Intruders approached. Those inside readied themselves. Someone was attempting to climb up over the rubble. They could hear several voices cursing. This went on for several minutes. Then they heard a sharp cry and what sounded like a hail of rocks; someone had fallen in the scree and slid down a miniature rock slide. This seemed to discourage the fellow's cohorts. They could hear the voices receding.

The song and dance went on. The first round had been completed. It was time to start the second. They were well into the verses when again birds sent up the alarm. Tigne Sh'Dah seemed to have given up on the weather; the sky brightened and the wind died down. But then the ground beneath them started to shake. It was difficult to keep their balance. Just when they thought it was over, the ground would start again. If this kept up, the children would not be able to finish their dance.

Gannet, Orri and Dufa may have stopped dancing, but Jenny kept playing, now seated on the unstable ground, and the children kept singing. It was the song that was most important, not the dance. As long as they could sing, the ritual could be completed. Tigne Sh'Dah seemed to realize this and gave up causing the mini earthquakes. The fact that his minions could not approach while the ground shook might have had something to do with it, as well. As Bennet had thought, their nemesis was a practical antagonist; if his actions didn't give the requested results, he would desist and try

something else.

Ravens in the trees on the east side started cawing, loudly. It was obvious that someone was trying to break through the impenetrable mix of bushes and brambles. Let them try. It would do them no good, thought Ty and Calum. And after awhile, their prediction proved true. Voices raised in complaint attempted to come closer but then receded and never returned.

Nemesis' minions finally discovered the main entrance. Those inside could hear four different voices calling to one another from outside when the disguising branches had been pulled away. Heartened by the ease of discovering the bower's entrance, they pushed forward, unaware of what awaited them. But within moments, complaints let those who waited know that the stone bed had been reached.

The voices paused before proceeding. It sounded like they were trying to sweep the stones to one side or another. When enough of the path had been cleared, the voices came closer. And then they encountered the barrier. It seemed none of them were carrying knives. They tried to pull the string web down but only succeeded in tangling it more. And in the process, several encountered the thorns. Roars of pain erupted, closely followed by another. So. At least two had been unwary enough to encounter the thorns.

The voices grew dim. The second round of the ditty was completed. Now that the ground had stopped shaking, the children began dancing along as they sang. A bright blue light encircled them,

proof that something was happening.

Then, from between the trees and bushes, a throng of animals chattered. Their nemesis was no longer relying solely on his minions to break through. As anticipated, he had bewitched the native foxes, minks, rats and mice to do his bidding.

Since Gannet and her loved ones had encountered Tigne Sh'Dah's powers before, they had known what might happen, and after speaking with their Icelandic friends, had known which animals to expect. This is why the mesh had been tied all the way to the ground. This is why sharp stones as well as popcorn and seeds had been strewn between the trees.

The stones would hurt the pads of the animals' paws; they were so thickly spread that it would be difficult for the animals to find a way through without damaging their paws. The popcorn and seeds would be an easy attraction for the animals, which might encourage them to stop and take the bait on offer rather than risking their pads.

The few that did come all the way through would have to risk their fur being torn by the thorns, natural stickers, brambles and thistles. A thick layer of these lined the lowest meter of the mesh. Even if the animals braved all these, they still had to chew their way through the mesh. And along the inside of the mesh lay a last nasty deterrent before the humans were faced: a solid double row of lighted candles had been placed on that side of the glade. The animals would not want to approach the fire; even though the flames were tiny, they were

numerous, and easily redistributed.

Tigne Sh'Dah's power forced the animals on. Many stopped and wanted to graze on the popcorn and seeds, obviously fighting his power. Several turned on other animals in their rage. But a few, complaining loudly, limped their way across the stones, licking their wounds every couple of steps, raging but continuing. When they had finally crossed the bed, several were bleeding heavily from their paws and curled up to tend to their wounds.

These seemed to be cut from Tigne Sh'Dah's hold - again, *his* practicality showing. But other creatures, who had made their way with fewer injuries, were chivvied on. They got as far as the mesh. The thick barrier that confronted them caused several to turn back. When retreat was blocked by other animals, they slashed and bit until the way was cleared, then disappeared into the undergrowth. The line of animals that stayed had diminished considerably, but were still in such numbers as to give concern.

They took turns nibbling at the blockage. When one was too sore to continue, another took its place, then another, and another. Finally, when it looked like a hole was about to allow access, a five-fold row of candles centered in front of the almost-breaches were lighted. The animals took one look at the fire springing up before them, screeched loudly and broke, hightailing it away from all this nastiness, so inimical and unlike the rest of the park. Within minutes, the animals were gone. The birds, who had set up a cacophonous diatribe while the beasts tried to get through, went back to singing the chorus. All was well in that direction.

But no sooner had the animals gone than another assault was placed on the entrance. The men had gone away but now returned. Loa and Callum listened closely. The men seemed to have found several sharp rocks that would make short work of cutting through the string web.

Sounds of triumph echoed into the chamber. But as the voices drew nigh, some of them changed from jubilation to uncertainty. Suddenly it all seemed too easy. The men had finally learned to be cautious.

First one, then two poked their heads out just far enough to see the interior of the bower. What they saw did not raise their spirits. Knocked arrows, stones ready in hands, and baseball bats held in determined hands faced them and stood between them and their prize, Gannet.

The third and final round was being sung. Gannet's voice warbled above all, meshing and winding through the melody along with the birds. Never mind that it was a child's ditty; it was glorious!

But Tigne Sh'Dah was not to be denied his chance. He must have turned up the power another notch, for his men stood up straighter, their eyes glittered with intent. The one in the lead took a first step forward. His foot rested quietly on the ground in front of him. When no one reacted to his move, he and his followers grew braver. Those behind pressed forward. The leader raised his other foot to take another step just as those behind pushed to join him in the entrance. Now there were two on the hidden mat and they delayed no more. But the joke

was on them.

As they pressed forward, the ground seemed to heave under them. They couldn't understand it. The ground beyond was not moving. Why couldn't they find solid ground? Why was it moving? Two jostled and clutched at each other, trying to maintain their balance but succeeded only in unsettling one another even more. In moments, in a parody of a slapstick routine, waving their arms round and wide, the two toppled into a heap. Meanwhile, the song was coming to a close.

The last two of Tigne Sh'Dah's men used the bodies of their downed cohorts as solid ground and walked, no ran, over them. Finally, they stood on solid ground, mere feet from their prey.

As Gannet lifted the necklace off her neck to slip the ring off, three minks raced in from the tunnel and jumped past Tigne Sh'Dah's men and straight at the humans. Minks, though small, are incredibly feisty and agile and had very sharp teeth. Add to this being driven – well, they were not to be taken lightly.

Attention divided, Bennet and Ty kept their eyes and arrows centered on the men. Bridie let a bolt fly and nicked one mink; it fell to the ground, favoring one leg and hissed at her. A second mink jumped towards Kit's face, ready to scratch and claw, but before it made contact, a sharp stone hit it in the stomach and it fell to the ground. Blood colored its fur. The third mink had jaws outstretched to bite at Loa's arm when Calum's baseball bat collided with its head. It went down, not to move again.

The men feinted to the left. Bennet's and Ty's eyes never left them, swinging their bows to follow their movements. Then they split up. Bennet followed one, Ty the other. It seemed they would not be able to get past. But then a fourth mink raced into the chamber and leaped straight at Bennet.

Kit saw it coming and tried to intercept but was not quite quick enough. The mink landed on Bennet's shoulder, claws extended, and turned its mandibles to strike with its teeth. Kit managed to pull it off before it could get purchase, but in the process, the man Bennet had been guarding against, shot past. The man was within inches of Gannet when a raven flew down from above and attacked him with a flurry of wings and beak. The man collapsed to the ground, shielding his head with his arms and hands. Gannet, Orri and Dufa sang on, oblivious to all.

The second man, seeing what had happened to his cohort, raised wary eyes above him, then turned and fled.

And then the song ended on a last high note in Gannet's impossibly clear, bell-like voice, and she threw the ring onto the fire. A discordant note rose higher and louder, then cut off abruptly. It was done. The gate was closed.

Gannet sank to the ground, exhausted. The blue glow extinguished. Orri and Dufa fell in a heap, sound asleep. Jenny lowered the Shawm. Ty closed the distance between them and caught her to him.

Bennet, unmindful of the bloody gashes on one shoulder, hurried over to Gannet, sank down beside her and pulled her into onto her lap. A second later and Kit was beside them, holding them both close. And then Bridie was there, one hand resting on Gannet's knee, the other on Bennet's.

The others lowered their weapons, unsure that it was actually over. Loa and Calum reached for each other then hurried over to their children. Each sat down and pulled a child into his/her arms, hugging and kissing their brows over and over again.

When several minutes had elapsed, they looked up in wonder to see that the bower was alight with the sun once more. The small fire and candles had been extinguished when the ring hit the flames. The bower had been lit by these meager points of light for so long, that it took them all a moment to realize what they were seeing.

Birds were chirping and singing in the branches of the trees around them. The world had returned to normal. It was time to clean up.

Bennet continued to hold Gannet. From past experience, she knew it would take several hours, probably a night before she would regain enough energy to waken. Once Loa and Calum had made sure that their children were alright, simply having a nap, they lowered them into a more comfortable position on a pile of sweaters and the blankets and proceeded to help.

The web, mesh, and fire had to be dismantled. The marbles and linoleum were

gathered up. The sharp rocks were disbursed. The candles were packed away. The thorns and thistles were crushed and buried under bushes and dirt. Everything that they had introduced into this natural habitat was removed as much as possible. Within an hour, all that could be seen were some popcorn remnants and they would not last long; the birds and mice would take care of that.

When everything had been packed away, along with the fire extinguishers, and left in a tidy heap just inside the entrance to the chamber, they dragged the unconscious men outside onto the path to let them wake up on their own. None of them was seriously injured. And past experience told them that when the men did awake, they would have no memory or knowledge of what they had done or even where they were. The last few days would be a complete blank to them. Hopefully they would find their cohorts and whatever vehicle they had arrived in. If not, they could hitch a ride, easily done here in Iceland.

The children were carried to the van, the adults taking turns carrying them. Ty and Calum would come back later to retrieve the gear left in the bower. For now, it was time to go home and rest. For Loa and Calum, it would be a time to think and wonder on all they'd seen and witnessed. For the others, it was a time to recoup their energy and maybe, finally, get back to their lives.

CHAPTER 16

They straggled into the house, with barely enough energy to wave goodbye and thanks to Calum and Loa. Kit laid Gannet on her bed. She was limp with exhaustion, completely unaware of her surroundings. Or so they thought. When Bennet, who had stuck as close to her side as possible on the walk back to the van, inside the van, and finally coming into the house, moved to follow Kit from the room, Gannet moved restlessly and murmured a 'nooooo'. Bennet moved back and Gannet's brow eased, her breathing slowed and she snuggled into her pillow. And so Bennet, who had wanted to stay anyway, did. Kit brought in a comfortable stuffed chair and a footrest. They exchanged a loving, understanding glance and then he left them to the quiet.

After a while, Bennet started to speak quietly. Gannet might be asleep, almost comatose, but she could hear and understand.

“Well, sweetie, it's done. You were wonderful! The gate is closed and we are safe.”

Gannet moved a little – unsure? glad? It was impossible to know one way or the other. Bennet kept on. “I know. There might be other gates out there that we don't know about. But for now, we are safe.” Gannet's tension eased.

“Tomorrow, when you've rested enough, we'll have your friends over for dinner. And you and Orri and Dufa can play soccer in the yard.” This provoked the tiniest of smiles.

“And then, in a couple more days, when we're all rested, we'll go home. You'd like to see Lady May again, wouldn't you? And Mute, too. And maybe, there'll be a surprise, one I think you'll like.” Bennet smiled to herself, and stroked Gannet's hair. “But for now, just rest, sweetheart. You've worked awfully hard. A good nap will make you feel right as rain when you wake up. And I'll be right here beside you.”

True to her word, Bennet was still ensconced in the chair next to Gannet's bed when Gannet awoke. But she was asleep. Gannet opened her eyes and just stared at her mom. She was so happy! She had heard every word that Bennet had said the night before but had been so tired, too tired, to ask questions, too tired to

answer, too tired to do more than twitch. But Mom had understood her, even so. She was so lucky!!

After a little while, Gannet sat up. She felt fine. In fact, she felt great. And she remembered that they were going to invite her friends over and they could play soccer. Just the thought was enough to excite her.

“Mom! Mooooom! Wake up! We have to get ready for the dinner. And I need to buy a soccer ball! Mom? Are you awake?”

Bennet opened one eye, then the other. “Was that a little mouse I heard squeaking a moment ago?” she wondered.

Gannet laughed, and crawled off the bed and into her lap. “No, Mom, it was me!” she laughed. She hugged Bennet and then jumped to the floor. “I’m hungry. Hungry enough to eat three peanut butter pancakes!”

“We’d better hurry then,” said Bennet, “or Bridie and Ty and Jenny will eat it all up and there won’t be any left for you!”

Opening her eyes wide in mock terror, Gannet pulled on Bennet’s hand. “Get up! Hurry, Mom! They are such greedy gusses! I’ll bet they could eat 10!” Then she laughed, and raced out the door and into the kitchen, Bennet right behind.

Everyone was up and in the kitchen. They all looked up when Gannet burst in and smiled widely at her energy and happiness.

“You were almost too late,” teased Kit who was manning the stove again. “Ty has already eaten 8 pancakes and Bridie has had 5. I’m almost out of batter!”

“Do you have enough left for 3 more?” asked Gannet anxiously.

“Wellll, I’m not sure. But I’ll try,” he mock sighed. He dipped into the batter, and dribbled some onto the griddle. “That’s one. Hmm..” Then he did it again. “That’s two.” He scraped the bowl again and again and peered into it doubtfully. Then he dribbled the last of the batter onto the griddle. The last pancake was even bigger than the other two. “I guess I did.” he said, and looked down at his daughter with a smile.

“Yay,” she grinned. But then she faltered. “What about Mom? Oh. You can have them, Mom,” she said. “I’d rather have cereal anyway.”

Bennet smiled. “Sleepyhead. I had mine already. Then I got so tired I fell asleep again. These are all yours,” she assured her.

Gannet’s face brightened. She loved peanut butter pancakes!

The rest of the day went as scheduled. Ty took off for a brief foray with Calum to retrieve the gear from the bower; when they returned, nothing was said. Instead, they carried in ice cream cones for everybody. Calum stayed just long enough to hand over the cones, then hastened out to the van to take the others to his own family. He promised to see them all later that evening for dinner.

Bridie decided to arrange flights for everyone. Jenny needed to return the Shawm. Ty would accompany her and then the two would fly back to Ohio. They had been away from home for months now and longed to get back and relax. Ty wanted to get started on his next series of paintings. He was fairly itching with fervor. He had so many sketches and memories from the past few weeks and months, that he had enough material to keep him busy for years! And Jenny wanted to spend some time writing songs in the peace and quiet of their own home.

Bennet, Kit and Gannet would be going straight home. Gannet couldn't wait to see Lady May again. She had much to tell her friend! And, although she hadn't said anything, she hadn't forgotten what Bennet had said to her about a surprise, a good one. She was very curious, but she could wait. Bennet and Kit had to get back to work, although during summer break, Bennet and Kit took turns working a half day so that one or the other could be home with Gannet. It worked well.

So Bridie had much to do. She would have loved to go home to Ohio. She missed the rolling hills, so different from those in Ireland, and she missed her family. But she was drawn to her work. And this interlude with her aunt and Kit and Gannet had assuaged some of that homesickness. She could bear to be abroad a bit longer before she need go home again. Hopefully, in that time, she would be able to finish her thesis, and then, who knew what the world would offer?

Bennet made lasagne and salad and lemonade for dinner. On the premise that it was a

favorite with everyone back home so she thought their Icelandic friends might like it, too. And they ate it with relish! She needn't have worried. For dessert, they had fruit for dipping in chocolate fondue. The kids especially liked that.

After dinner, the kids immediately went outside and started kicking around Gannet's new soccer ball. It wasn't long before a few neighbor kids had joined in. The adults, sipping their lemonade or beer, enjoyed each others' company and watching the kids at play. There had been so much stress and happenings that it was the height of luxury to just sit and 'be'.

“Is it really over?” mused Loa. “You have brought much to our lives, become dear to us. I never expected that you would gift us with our world, too.”

Bennet looked across at her and smiled. “It is over, at least for now. I can't promise that *HE* won't someday find his way back. Since Gannet came into our lives, we have all seen and experienced marvels, both good and bad. I've learned to appreciate what we have, our family, our friends, the sun coming up each day. Because I've learned not to take them for granted. We are lucky that someone like Gannet can protect us, wants to protect us, and has the power to do so. But I've also learned that love is the strongest weapon of all. And it is *HIS* weakness.”

They all pondered her words.

Then Uгла spoke. “You have gained wisdom, something it takes many of us a lifetime

and more to learn. And we are all enriched by knowing you and, through you, knowing young Gannet. I hope that we will see all of you often in the future.”

Her words were reiterated by Mar, Calum and Loa. And by nods of agreement from everyone else. With a sense of contentment, they all went back to sipping their drinks and watching the children. When it looked like the game was breaking up, Calum stood up with a challenge in his eye. “Anyone else up for a game?” And then he was down the steps and kicking the ball around, too. It wasn't long before Ty, Jenny and Bridie joined him. Bennet and Kit were content for the moment to sit with the older couple and watch the fun.

When their energy started flagging, the players were greeted with glasses of cool, refreshing water which they downed quickly, asking for more. Then it was time to say goodnight and, for some, goodbye. Bridie, Jenny and Ty had flights the next morning. Bennet, Kit and Gannet would leave the following day in the afternoon.

A lot of hugs were exchanged before they went to sleep that night. A taxi would pick them up in the wee hours and take them to the bus that would ferry them to the airport. Mar and Ugly were leaving early to go to their summer home, so this was the last night with them, as well. Orri and Dufa had to go back to school in the morning. Loa had been called to work a flight so they wouldn't be seeing her again either. Life went on, no matter what.

Bridie assured Bennet that she'd back for a

proper visit in Ohio before the end of summer break. A few more hugs and everyone went to their rooms to try and sleep. Gannet was sad to see her friends and aunt go, but was reassured that she'd see them again soon. She hugged Bennet and Kit goodnight and fell fast asleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

Bennet and Kit spooned in their bed. Kit was almost asleep when Bennet whispered a secret in his ear. Unsure if he was dreaming or awake, he hugged her close and drifted off to sleep. Bennet smiled and eased into dreamland herself. Neither stirred when Bridie, Ty and Jenny quit the house. It was several hours later when they awoke to a loud crash.

“Oh, my God! What was that?” Bennet and Kit both started up from a deep sleep.

For a moment, all the old fears and worries surfaced. They jumped out of bed and made their way down the stairs, double quick time. First they ran to Gannet's room but her bed was empty and Gannet was nowhere in sight. Bennet's heart raced. They turned to search the house and drew up short when they saw Gannet standing before them, pancake batter spilled all down the front of her nightgown.

“I wanted to surprise you with pancakes,” she said. “but then, when I was reaching for the milk, I accidentally knocked over the bowl and it all spilled.” Her lower lip trembled.

“It's alright, Gannet,” soothed Bennet. “Let's get you cleaned up and then Kit can help you

mix up a new batch. Okay?" Gannet smiled tremulously and handed the bespattered bowl to Kit. Then Bennet led her upstairs to the bathroom and started the shower. She put the soiled nightie to soak in the sink and fetched clean clothes for Gannet. While Gannet finished her shower, Bennet quickly changed, too. They both emerged at about the same time. Bennet helped Gannet dry and comb out her hair. Then they raced each other down the stairs to the kitchen.

Kit had already changed clothes and cleaned up the kitchen. Everything was ready for Gannet to try again. This time, Kit wrapped a towel around her for a smock, and then monitored her while she measured ingredients and carefully whipped up the batter. Then he turned on the electric griddle, put a pat of butter on and when it sizzled and melted, helped her spoon the batter onto the griddle. He showed her how to use a spatula to flip the pancakes and then watched while she attempted it herself.

The first one landed on the very edge of the griddle but the second was spot on. Father and daughter shared a victorious grin. They sat down to a well-deserved breakfast of fresh fruit, pancakes with peanut butter, jam or syrup, milk, coffee for Kit, and tea for Bennet. It was a satisfying experience and they all looked forward to many more in the future.

They shared the cleanup. While Gannet was outside playing, Bennet and Kit began a thorough cleansing of the house. Sheets and towels were set into the washing machine. The duvets and pillows were hung on the lines to air. The floors were swept. The rooms were dusted. All surfaces were

washed. The bathroom, tub and toilet were scrubbed. When they couldn't think of anything else to clean, they swept the porch and walkway.

When finished, they went with Gannet for a walk, to the nearby park Calum and Loa had shown them. Gannet brought her soccer ball and soon she and Kit were racing back and forth across the grass. When they tired of this, they went inside the tiny museum that was attached to the park. After looking at the exhibits, they stopped off in the coffee shop and had a light lunch. Then they strolled back to the house.

Bennet organized the refrigerator, throwing out what they would not be able to use in the remaining time, and making a list of what they needed to replace. Then Kit walked over to the nearby grocery store and bought them. It didn't take long to set the kitchen to rights. All that was left to do now was to await their flight on the morrow.

Dinner was simple, using up the meat and cheese toppings and the bread rolls bought the day before at the bakery. But simple, after so many intricate meals, was a welcome change. Afterwards they just relaxed, played a few board games and went to bed, refreshed and looking forward to going home the next day.

Bright and early the next morning, they washed the remaining linens and towels, aired the bedding, did a final cleanup in the kitchen after a quick breakfast, and packed their things. Calum had arranged to drive them to the bus depot and retrieve the house key at the same time. At two thirty, he pulled up in the van and helped them load

their few belongings.

Bennet made sure the lights were off, windows latched and the doors locked, then handed over the key over. Bennet had left a note of thanks on the kitchen table. Calum didn't linger; the kids would be home by three. So they exchanged profound but sincere hugs and best wishes and then Calum drove off, waving as he went.

They went inside the low building and, following Calum's instructions, found the teller who sold them tickets for the bus. The teller pointed to where they could wait for it, saying it would leave in about 15 minutes, boarding a little sooner. They followed a crowd of other people, some foreign, some not, who were obviously heading for the airport. They were somewhat sorry to be leaving Iceland, its amazing vistas and their new friends, but home beckoned. It would be good to be home again.

The flight home was a smooth one. They were greeted by overcast skies, a shock after all the sunshine they had encountered abroad. They stayed overnight in New York.

Being back in the country was somehow a relief for both Kit and Bennet. Being abroad had been exciting, fun, interesting.. and very different. There was a sense of comfort, an easing of an unknown jumpiness in never knowing quite what to expect while in another country. For the first time, they were truly able to relax; they knew what to expect, how to behave, knew the language inside

and out, and fit.

While abroad, they had never fit in. The people they had met had been accommodating, willing to look beyond their unconscious daily foibles, but it had been perplexing, sometimes irritating, sometimes embarrassing when these things happened. So being back home was like slipping into an old pair of comfortable jeans after having worn tight dress pants for so long.

But the same could not be said for Gannet. Something was wrong. She had cheerfully boarded the airplane, watched for as long as possible the fantastic greens illuminated on the island until the view disappeared in a curtain of clouds. She slept most of the flight.

From the moment they had deplaned, Gannet had been somber, shooting anxious glances in every direction. She stuck close to Bennet, but even that did not seem to abate whatever was bothering her. Kit and Bennet began to fear a delayed reaction to all the shock and horror Gannet had gone through.

Once home, Bennet and Kit watched as Gannet wandered from one room to the next, touching a chair here, a picture there, a lamp, one of her favorite stuffed birds, the railing along the stairwell. She didn't say anything.

She picked up Mute, cuddled the cat and stroked her fur from the top of her head to the tip of her tail. She went out onto the porch, sat on the glider and rocked for a few minutes. Then she finally let the cat slip out of her arms and followed

the cat's meandering path down the walk, through the gate and over to the fence, looking for Lady May. But Lady May hadn't been brought back yet from the neighbor's; she would come back the next day. She turned around and made her way back up to the house, into the kitchen, and wrapped her arms around her mother's waist, leaning her head against her for a few precious moments.

Gannet felt like she was living in a horrible dream, horrible because it mimicked reality so closely but was only pretend. She was confused. Everything was so like home and yet – not. Everything was a mere shadow of the real thing. She floated from room to room, walked around the familiar rooms, to porch to paddock, stroked the pretend Mute, walked across the grey grass.

She kept expecting her Nemesis, who had placed her in this mock world, to come and gloat over his victory. She wondered about her real family. Had *HE* already destroyed them? She didn't know how to feel safe. She didn't know what to do. But she wouldn't let *HIM* trick her. She knew this was mere shadows of her real home. Else Lady May would be here, and the sun would break through the constant cloud cover.

Gannet missed the real world so much, but especially her Mom. She hugged 'pretend' Mom, wishing she were the real thing, but she knew she wasn't. Real Mom talked with her whereas 'pretend' Mom smiled sadly and hugged her and then went back to her chores, leaving Gannet to wander once more through the dream house.

Finally, Gannet lethargically climbed the

stairs and picked up pretend Penguin. For a little while, she tried to imagine that he was real and whispered how much she loved real Mom and missed her. She wondered how long Nemesis would keep her in this misty world. Maybe she would get used to it in time. But she sorely missed the sun, the bright colors of the real world, the fun and laughter and yummy peanut butter pancakes.

She had lost them when they left Iceland. She'd gone to sleep in the real world and wakened in this mist. It was like being in a dream all the time. Everything here tasted of dust and ashes – not worth the effort to eat. And she was so lonely. The quiet was so profound, there since she'd fallen asleep.

Finally, Gannet grew so weary of the greyness and hopelessness of this pretend world and drifted off to sleep, pretend Penguin held close. She registered it when 'pretend' Mom came in and covered her. A pang in her heart echoed how much she missed real Mom and, with a sob, she wondered if she'd ever see her again. That was her last conscious thought before she fell heavily into an exhausted, enervated sleep.

Bennet and Kit knew that Gannet was going through something. But she wasn't talking. They knew that the events of the past weeks would have been hard enough for an adult to deal with. For a young child to face such... And Gannet had been fighting this battle for centuries! It was inconceivable! No, they would have been more surprised if Gannet had not reacted! But it did not stop them from despairing her agony and distress, and wishing they could do more to help her through

it.

Instinctively, Bennet knew that they must show Gannet all the love and patience they could and let her work through her own feelings. She was glad that Gannet had the time to deal with all this without the distraction of school. It was best to be home where Gannet felt most comfortable. It would be even better when Lady May was brought home. The child treated the mare more like a confident than as a pet. They were inseparable. Gannet looked totally despondent at being home and not finding the mare there, awaiting her with head hung over the rail, as she was wont to do every single day.

They watched as Gannet climbed the stairs and flopped on her bed, hugging her favorite penguin and whispering in its ear. Penguin, as he was known, was the first stuffed animal Bennet had ever given Gannet, long before they had become a family. Penguin had been her first friend, the recipient of her deepest secrets, impressions, uncertainties, fears and hopes.

Gannet had always had a special relationship with birds. It had really touched her that Bennet had given her Penguin even before she knew that; it was one of the things that had lodged Bennet deep in her heart before she had really gotten to know her, first as a care giver and then later as a beloved mother.

Gannet didn't consciously think all this; she just felt it. Bennet made her soul happy. Gannet loved Kit, but Bennet was part of her. If anything ever happened to her, Gannet would not be able to

bear it. She whispered this in Penguin's ear and like every other secret, Penguin absorbed her words and stored them safely where no one else would ever be able to find them.

Gannet fell asleep on her bed, arms wrapped around Penguin, a look of anguished sadness on her face. Bennet came in a few minutes later, took off her favorite flipflops and covered her with her favorite quilt. She kissed her brow, smoothed her hair and turned on the night light so that if Gannet awoke in the night, she would not be startled by her surroundings.

Gannet slept right through to the next morning. When she awoke, she was momentarily disoriented but then she focussed on her room, on her stuffed animals, on her quilt and the flipflops. Pearl grey limned the edge of the sky. It was close to dawn. She got to her feet and walked over to the window. Morning dew beaded the grass; wispy grey mist still covered the fields. Gannet sighed. She had hoped that the grey dream world had been just that: a dream. But everything was still robbed of color. And it was still so quiet. Her heart dropped. She was still trapped.

Then, unbelievably, a sound broke the stillness. Gannet's gaze swiveled when she heard an nicker, a very familiar and beloved sound. It couldn't be! Then she caught the sound of hooves clipclopping, coming up the back path.

She grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed, threw it on, slipped on her flipflops and rushed down the stairs, her heart racing. Then she was out the door and dashing down the front walk. She

wrenched the gate open and drew up short just in front of Lady May. The neighbor who'd cared for Lady May while they'd been abroad slid down from Lady May's back and handed the reins to Gannet. He didn't say a word, just smiled and walked away.

Gannet didn't even hear him leave. She had her arms as far up and around Lady May's neck as she could reach. On her part, the mare had bent her head down as far as she could, snuffling into Gannet's hair. The mare nickered another greeting, and a questioning patience. The two just stood there for a while. Then Gannet led Lady May to the mounting block as she'd done a hundred times before. She climbed up into the saddle and they walked over to the gate that opened into the paddock. She leant over and slipped the latch and the rail opened under its own weight. Then the two walked sedately into the field and ambled along the perimeter, Gannet bent over, whispering into Lady May's ear.

Lady May's ears flicked back and forth as Gannet spoke to her, and occasionally the mare nickered, seemingly in response to some particular memory Gannet shared with her. And with time, with each pass around the perimeter, and as the sun rose and glorious pink and golden sunbeams shattered the grey into a thousand colors, and sounds, normal everyday morning sounds split the quiet, Gannet's heart grew lighter and brighter. Her confusion evaporated along with the mist. Her fears dissipated. At last, she was able to believe that she was actually home again, to put the horrible battle and fears of the last few weeks behind her, and accept wonderful reality. She was HOME. She was really home! She was with her family. They

loved her and she loved them. They had a future, a life, ahead of them. The world was bright and full of hope again.

She gave Lady May a last hug and pat, looped the reins around the pommel, making sure that they didn't fall and tangle Lady May's legs. Then she slipped from the saddle, closed the rail and latched it, and started towards the house, first at a walk and then at a dead run. She ran into the house, up the stairs to her parents' room, and clambered up onto the bed with them. They awoke to find her grinning from ear to ear. Once she saw they were awake, she said, "Can we have peanut butter pancakes for breakfast?"

Bennet was so happy to see Gannet back to normal. She grinned back and said, "Well, I don't know. I think I'll need help. Think you could give me a hand?"

Gannet grinned. "I can help. I know exactly how to make them, don't I, Dad?" looking at Kit for confirmation.

Kit affirmed, "You're the best assistant I could ask for."

Gannet moved as though to hop down, but then turned back. "Mom? What was the surprise? We're home now. What is it?"

Bennet was pleased that Gannet had remembered and at last showed interest in the promised surprise. She said, "I'm really really glad that you can help me make pancakes. 'Cause soon I'm going to need lots of help, with that and maybe

other things, too.”

At Gannet's puzzlement, Bennet continued, “I'm going to need a big girl like you to help me because soon, in a few months, around Christmas time, we're all going to get a very special present. At Christmas, you're going to become a big sister. Our little family will get a little bigger and we'll have one more person to love and to love us. Isn't that a lovely present?”

Gannet's puzzlement cleared. She remembered back to when her first mam had been big with a belly. “Is your belly going to get big and round?”

Bennet said that 'yes, that would happen'.

Gannet thought some more. “I'm bigger now. I won't have to worry about fitting on your lap when you read to me. I can just sit next to you and I'll still be able to see the pictures. Will I be able to hold the baby?”

Bennet again said, 'yes. The baby would belong to all of them and would need a big sister's help, especially at first.'

Gannet said, “Maybe I can read stories for the baby, too. Is it a boy or a girl?”

Bennet said, “We don't know. It will be a surprise for all of us. But I'm sure that he or she will love being read to.”

Gannet thought a little more. “Will the baby like birds like me?”

“If you show the baby how nice birds can be, then I'm sure the baby will love them as much as you. But the baby will never be able to sing like you, glow like you, or take your place. The baby will be special in its own way. We'll love the baby but we will never love you less. You will each have your own special place in our hearts and no one or nothing will ever be able to take that away or replace either of you. And our love for you both will grow each and every minute of each and every day.”

Gannet finally smiled. “I will be a good big sister. I'll teach the baby how to make peanut butter pancakes and how to ride Lady May.” Then, obscurely, she said, “I'm so glad not to be in the shadow world anymore. It was grey and too quiet. And the food didn't taste right.” She frowned for a moment but then smiled and said, “But now I'm home. Can we go make pancakes now?”

Bennet and Kit smiled at each other. Everything was going to be alright.

Gannet bounced off the bed. “Come on! I'm starved!” She continued down the stairs, and Kit and Bennet were close behind. A life full of promise, happiness and adventure lay before them. With Gannet and a new little baby on the way, the possibilities seemed endless.

Gannet's advent into their lives had been a catalyst, one fraught with both danger and promise. They had survived the danger. Now they looked forward to the promise. It was a heady thought, and almost made Bennet giddy with happiness. Her heart was so full. She smiled. It was long overdue.

She rubbed her belly and headed into the kitchen.
Peanut butter pancakes awaited!

