

Chapter 1: A Drop of Rain

A raindrop breaks the silence of her world. Until that tiny bead of water *pocks* upon the girl's hooded head, she has been heedless of the hush enshrouding her. By the time she stops to stand by the lake's edge, the rain is a steady thrumming on her garments.

The clouds hang brooding and dark, rolled out over the landscape like a parchment buffed with charcoal. The rainfall rustles the stalks of bulrushes in the lake's muddy margin, and twitches the slender leaves of willows huddled in clusters by the water's fringe. On a clear stretch of shore, the girl huddles alone within the folds of her white woollen brat.

Mute, she gazes out at the miniature splashes of water upon the silver and black sheen of the lake surface. To her they form a frenzied faerie dance. She sees wild wee folk, whirling and twirling, leaping with hands aloft, lightly touching each other's finger tips before swirling off again. She tilts her face to the rain and closes her eyes. A faint smile curls her lips.

Yet her smile quickly fades as a pang of longing shivers her, an unrequited hunger to see some mystery assume real form, though for her such stirrings remain unnameable shadows. But The Faithful teach against such hungers. They are idleness and temptation to sin, they say, along with so many things that seem so real within her that must be choked off for her sanctification. With a pinched expression she opens her eyes, and for a moment watches the rain-spatter flatten into the impenetrable reflection on the lake.

She adjusts the bundle of herbs upon her back, and turns from her revel. Her gathering has taken her quite some time. The herbs are not as plentiful as they once were. Now the day is ebbing, sped on by the shadow of the clouds. She steals along her way.

The rain abates and the clouds disperse, yet the shadows grow long, reaching out across the girl's path. For a moment, the receding light casts a rich, hazy sheen across the moist

air. Colors fleetingly deepen: rust of dying bracken; white crust of lichen; silver-green of drying moor grass. Then the veil of twilight begins to drape across the land.

She descends thru the glen. Old stone walls in disrepair rise and fall across the fields. The walls of abandoned homes, intimate and venerable in the afternoon sun, assume an eerie aspect in the shifting light. From afar, a faint bark cuts the air. A chorus of bays and yelps follows on, tumbling out of the twilight, closer and closer.

A hare bursts from the hedgerow, startling the girl. The barking draws near. She hears a pattering of paws and the swishing of canine torsos thrusting through the rushes and sedges. She sees them. In the spectral light their white hides shimmer. Her body twitches as if to turn and flee, but something inside her defies the urge. She stands stock still. All is hushed for a long moment. Her skin begins to tingle. Her insides rush and roar, and then the baying erupts anew as the hounds explode into the breen and dash headlong after the hare. She is transfixed. In the growing dark their red-tipped ears appear as if dipped in blood.

She believes they can't be real, but feels that she must pursue them. Down through the hollow, they bay and bellow. Away from her familiar ground. She is not supposed to stray in the woods and hills by herself – only do her collecting and come home. But the hounds are so strange – wondrous – that her parent's proscriptions can't restrain her. She tracks the hounds through gorse and heather, across the tiny streams, between miniature stands of hazel and birch. She jogs at a steady pace, paying close attention to her footing. All about her, shadows assume more substance, and the air of potential menace.

The hounds lead her uphill now. How are they still so close when they run so fast, she wonders. Over a shoulder of exposed rock, pushing up out of the now threadbare turf, she tracks them. Never in her fourteen summers has she come up here, always sticking to the well-worn path she has been taught. This unfamiliarity strikes her as peculiar now. But the chase carries her thoughts away.

She clears the shoulder and skirts a wild patch of scrub forest, tucked out of the wind. As she passes into the glen beyond, she sees a tiny glow far below that seems to float in the air. A dark shape takes form about and below it in the darkness. It is a tower. But who dwells here? She has never heard of this place. A hermit, maybe? But how could the tower go unseen until now? She draws closer.

Expecting another rough glen, she is surprised to find the way clear and the footing sure in what seems to be a well-tended area. She treads easily across the short-cropped grass. There are sheep. She spots a few, their whiteness stark against the darkening turf. She takes pause. The baying of the hounds has ceased. Did they come here? Are they from here? There is no sign of them.

She should go home, she thinks. Darkness is settling in. Her family will be worried. She could come back and look in the daytime. She could bring someone with her.

The strangeness of the place and the darkness unsettle her. Yet, she holds herself in silence. She waits. The darkness grows on her. She is hidden in it as well as any other thing. She wonders, would she too look frightening?

She edges closer to the black of the tower, its dim light. An amber glow spills out near its base. She is careful to be quiet.

The moon is rising early, its own blue-silver glow now looming over the hillside.

The ferocious tingling resurges in her as she delicately stalks toward the tower. Is there danger here? Or just some harmless holy men? It looks like a place of The Faith. She hears no one.

The flickering torchlight in the doorway falls upon her as she treads noiselessly toward its source, mystery-bound. She ascends a rough-hewn ladder and stands in the simple square

doorway, framed strangely high off the ground. There is a thick, oaken door, iron-strapped. It stands ajar.

“Hello?” she speaks in a tremulous voice, to the darkness beyond the door. There is no answer. She slowly eases back the heavy door. Then torchlight illuminates the interior. She starts to enter and hesitates. She hops softly to the base of the ladder and removes her bundle of herbs, tucking it into the blackness beneath a young yew tree standing sentinel near the tower’s foundations. Then she climbs the ladder again and steps through the portal. The hall is spare – simple benches, a cloak on a hook mounted on the wall near the door, another ladder laid up into a hatchway in the thick-raftered ceiling above.

She proceeds to the bottom of the ladder and peers above. She pads upward, cautiously. As she reaches the next level she says again, “Hello?” Her voice is more assured. She listens both downward and above. There is no answer. No sound.

As her eyes adjust in the dim glow from below she scans the room. She is in a dining hall and sleeping space. It is spare as below. A table with two stools; a sideboard with cups; a spoon, a knife and a plate; a pitcher. An unlit lamp. A bed. A fire place, with smoldering ashes. A cauldron sits by the fireplace. The fire has been left untended. Strange, the room appears – bigger, somehow, than she would have imagined from without.

Another ladder continues upward. She moves swiftly, but her ears are alert. The next level is in deeper darkness. In the shadows, she can barely perceive shelves stocked with what appear to be diverse jars. The air is dry and close.

A faint light spills down through a hatchway from above, barely luminous enough to allow her to see the footing. Slowly she creeps from step to step until she can peek over the oaken planks of the upper floor. No one is here.

In stark contrast to the lower levels, this room is brimming. A table with a lamp; quills and brushes and inks in jars; the walls lined with cabinets and shelves and the shelves

lined with books and parchments. Upon the far wall, flame flickers in an encased lamp. There is a thin dark recess further around the wall – the window whence she could see the light as she entered the glen.

The girl enters the room on all fours and slowly stands erect. She gazes about and strides toward the table. Parchments lay unbound. A large book of bound sheaves lies open. It is a work in progress.

Strange birds and beasts glare at her. Human faces, wide-eyed, looking astonished. She stares with her own wide eyes wondering at the pages, the figures. She traces them with her long fingers. All about the images the pages of parchment are filled with black characters, small, tight shapes packed in row upon row. This is writing. She stares about and frowns.

She does not know how to read.

She feels she should leave, but she is excited, not knowing what she may happen upon here. She tells herself she will leave in just a moment. She tells herself this several times, as she leafs through more images of wonder. There is no sound but the delicate rasp of fingers on parchment. Her own eyes are wide, her lips parted in a faint smile. She is enchanted.

Boom. The door slams shut below. She is shaken and panics momentarily. Hide! she thinks, but she can't hide in here. To blow out the light will reveal her presence. The room below is unlit. She scurries down the ladder and feels her way from the hatch, into the dark, behind the shelves. Carefully, she crouches down, drawing her tall form into a ball behind a row of large jars, wrapping the flanks of her hooded brat about her.

If they bring light in here she will be exposed, but whoever it is must still look behind the shelves. The air is musty. She listens to movements below. The clattering and grinding of the ladder as someone ascends from the entrance way. Shuffling footsteps. The stoking of

the fire. The leg of a stool scraping the floor. A drink being poured? The pitcher set down. The position of the stool being adjusted. A soft glow fills the hatchway. A lamp has been lit.

She crouches, her body rigid. She slows her breathing. The pounding of her heart almost hurts her chest. She feels that her ears are ringing. But it is not her ears.

There is a strange, faint noise in the air, like a buzzing. Bees? Do they keep bugs in these jars? Monks study things. Maybe they are monks. Monks that study things would be kind, or at least civil. But she remains quiet, listening. She is an intruder.

There is no sound from below. About her the buzzing seems to take shape. It is odd, but it seems like there are words in it. It must be her imagination – she is too tense, listening too hard. That can happen sometimes. You can make yourself see colors and shapes that aren't really there by playing with your eyes. You can make yourself hear things.

It *is* words. Voices. But it must be her imagination. Sounds are repeated. She hears “an slua síthe,” she hears “Danu.” These are words, names. Old names. In her own tongue. Rhythms take shape; almost a chanting. She starts – for a moment she has forgotten where she is. But the low, soft droning continues. She leans her head in close to the jars. The sound almost seems inside them.

What sort of magic is this? Is this some magician's tower, then? Nonsense. There are no magicians. Not any more, if there ever were. Those are just stories. She tries to stay calm, but the voices persist.

The stool moves downstairs. Footsteps. On the ladder now.

She is breathless. Please keep going, she insists in her mind. If the man – she knows it is a man, she can feel it – goes upstairs, she can slip downstairs and fly before he could catch her. She knows it.

He stops on the landing. He moves toward the shelves. He holds no light. She wants to scream. He puts something on a shelf and moves away, ascending the ladder to the next level. She watches the soles of his sandals disappear through the hatchway.

She waits listening as he begins to shuffle about, arranging things. She begins to ease toward the stairs. But as she takes her first excruciating step, she hears it unmistakably. An urgent whispering, whether plaintive or commanding she cannot tell:

“Sinn a scaoileadh.....*Sinn a scaoileadh!*” (*unbind us, release us!*)

Who is bound and where, she wonders frantically. But she must flee. She is fleeing now, fear lighting a fire at her feet. Her lithe form descends the ladders like a wraith. Breathless, she arrives at the door. It is unbolted. There is no bolt. Please, please, let it open and shut quietly. Unconsciously she holds her breath. Slowly, cautiously, she swings the door open. She twirls through it and eases it shut. Its hinges are oiled, it is noiseless. She does not look back for a second. She is down the ladder and gone into the night.

She flees in the darkness. But it is not dark enough. The full moon’s light searches her out. But perhaps it is a blessing – she would be able to see nothing on the ground without it. She hears no one in pursuit. She sticks to the trees and bushes, zigzagging her way to the shoulder. She crawls on all fours over the top, where upright she would stand out like a beacon. There is no torch behind her, no sound; just a light breeze rustling the rushes and sedges. She scrambles down to where she came from, to the familiar path. She roughly wipes the dampness from her brow, and her breathing softens and slows. After a while torches appear headed toward her, bobbing in the darkness, casting a glow across the torchbearers’ faces. It will be her family and neighbors – she knows it. They will have thought her lost or injured or worse.

What will she tell them? They will be mad at her if she tells them of entering the tower. Worse still they may think her mad. No one has ever spoken of such a tower. Her thoughts are scrambled. Say nothing, she thinks. You napped and woke late. You stopped to rest and were daydreaming and nodded off. You are an irresponsible girl. You are sorry.

They can see her dim shape beneath the moon. She hears him now.

“By God, whatever is in your head?! Out here in the dark, dead for all we know!”

Her father’s face in the torchlight is a mix of anger, relief, and residual worry. He hugs her first and then frowns as he releases her. She looks up at him, affecting a mask of sheepishness.

“I’m sorry, father. I rested and fell off to sleep....”

“Sleep, is it? Sure, ‘tis asleep you are even when you’re walking. Dreaming. Girls. Women. You should never be let go yourself in the first place, at all. ‘Tis our own fault, altogether.”

He glowers upon her, and shakes his head until his features resolve with a sigh into familiar paternal forgiveness.

“Let’s go home – your mother is talking to herself.”