

# COUNTING CROWS



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# Counting Crows

By

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*One for joy  
Two for pain,  
Three for sun  
Four for rain,  
Five to grant a secret wish,  
Six for first love's tender kiss  
Seven for sickness  
Eight for dying,  
Nine for laughter,  
Ten for crying.*



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## The Way of Things

Devan was an odd fellow, that was true enough. “Uncanny” was the word some people used. Most said he wanted to be alone, and that’s the way people liked it. Megan, of course, never gave much thought to hear-say, so when she came upon him while strolling through the forest near her family’s farm, she had to stop for a second look.

He stood in a clearing with his back to her, staring into the treetops and murmuring softly. Golden rays flitted through the branches, and patches of gleaming leaves danced and swayed with the late summer breeze. His woolen tunic, soiled and muddy, sagged over one lanky shoulder. He wore no belt. His breeches were far too short, like he’d recently outgrown them the way boys do when turning into men. For shoes he wore only a pair of sandals.

He was staring into the tree above him, murmuring quietly to himself and pointing with a short stick. Above him a flock of crows played in the branches, calling to each other in their shrill voices.

Megan followed his gaze, frowning with curiosity. "Whatever *are* you doing?"

Devan jolted as if he'd heard a thunderclap and wheeled to face her. His eyes darted about, but seeing only a girl he swallowed and sighed from relief. "I didn't hear you. What do you want?"

She stared a moment, not knowing quite what to say. "You're the son of Ethne. The wise woman." Wild reddish brown hair sprouted from his head, and light freckles spotted his face. Megan did not see Devan often. He and his mother traveled from village to village, but never to the farm where she lived.

Megan's family no longer followed the old traditions.

Devan nodded once, still wary. "You're Beoden's daughter." He let his gaze roam freely over her light blue dress and her long brown hair, stopping as their eyes met.

Megan frowned. "You're a right mess," she said. "What have you been doing?"

"You're one to talk. There's dirt all over your face."

"There is not."

"You've been crying." Devan stared more intently, though his eyes were not unkind. "You're not lost, are you?"

"Hardly." Megan pulled out a cloth and dabbed at her cheeks. In truth she had been crying. She often came to these woods to think and be alone, but that was none of his affair. "I was on my way back, and I heard you."

Devan made no response, but merely stared.

"You were chanting something," Megan pressed.

"What of it?"

"What were you saying?"

"Just a rhyme. It's nonsense, really." He gave a smile—ever so quickly, Megan thought.

She stared at the trees where he had been looking. A large crow cocked its head, then spread its wings and flew away. "You're throwing things at the birds."

"I wasn't." Devan looked down at the stick in his hand, then tossed it into the bushes. "You wouldn't understand such things."

Megan smirked. "Go on! You think that just because I'm a girl, I—"

"I said nothing of the sort." He stared at her then, in a way Megan wasn't sure she liked. She was ready to turn and leave when he spoke again.

*One for joy*

*Two for pain,*

*Three for sun*

*Four for rain,*

*Five to grant a secret wish,*

*Six for first love's tender kiss . . .*

Devan shrugged. "Anyway, that's how it goes."

Megan wrinkled her brow.

"Have you never heard that before?"

"No."

Devan turned and gazed into the branches. "They say if you see a flock of crows you can tell the future by counting their number."

"That's foolish."

"Is it?" He gave her a glance, then stared into the branches above them.

*Seven for sickness*

*Eight for dying,*

*Nine for laughter,*

*Ten for crying . . .*

"It goes on like that for quite a bit."

"And how many did you count?" Megan asked.

Devan gave her an arch look and grinned. "I shan't say."

Megan smirked and rolled her eyes. "Such clever nonsense! The things you learn, being the son of a witch."

"Indeed."

"Father tells me not to believe in any of it."

Devan folded his arms. "And do you believe everything your father tells you?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"He can't know everything." Devan gave her a sideways look.

Megan scowled. She wasn't sure she liked his tone; yet her curiosity continued to prevail and she did not leave. "Perhaps. Can you show me real power?"

"If I chose."

"Well you'll have to do better than counting crows."

Devan thought for a moment, then glanced toward a flowering currant bush and pointed. "Do you see that butterfly?"

Megan followed his look, then nodded.

Devan raised his finger and became still. After a moment of silence his lips parted and he spoke, barely a whisper. "*Luatha, hemm!*"

The creature fluttered on command, bobbing as it circled to gain height against the breeze, then flew straight as an arrow's shaft until it lighted on the tip of his finger.

Megan raised a brow and gave him a narrow look. Not quite sure what to say, she could only stare. A breeze sighed in the trees.

Devan grinned to himself and chuckled; yet as he caught her look his smile quickly melted. He shook his hand and looked down. "It's nothing." He stepped back. "More of a trick, really."

Megan's eyes followed the butterfly as it flitted away. She stared after it for a moment, then turned to him with a mystified smile. "Do it again."

"There you are, worthless boy!" A shrill voice called.

They turned as a woman approached. Short, with hair flaming red and piercing eyes, she stalked into the clearing carrying a large basket filled with tubers and herbs. A brace of hares hung from her belt.

Ethne.

Like her son, the witch was soiled from head to foot. Her unkempt hair was tied back in a bushy pony tail. She frowned as she looked from Devan, then to Megan, then back at Devan. "Have you got any, or have you forgotten what I sent you to do?"

"I found a whole bunch, right there." Devan turned and pointed at a nearby log. Thick moss spread across its bark, and tiny brown mushrooms sprouted in small clusters.

"Right. Well done, then. Where's your basket?"

Devan's mouth fell open, and he shifted nervously. "I think I left it by the brook. I'll have to go fetch it."

Ethne's eyebrows contracted until she looked like a hawk. "Off mucking about, again. You'd forget your head if it wasn't stuck to your shoulders."

Devan jumped as if burned, and began plucking handfuls of mushrooms while his mother glowered. "Gather as many as you can carry," she said. "That lot'll do."

Megan sidled away, but stopped as the woman turned toward her and smiled. She was missing several teeth, and her left eye had an inward cast. Freckles spangled her nose and cheeks. "How fares your grandmother?"

Megan wasn't sure what to say. Oma Reagan was old and dying. "Mother says she hasn't got long."

"Hmph! Beoden is stubborn as a goat. I could lend a hand but he won't hear of it. My mother gave him his name when he was a babe. Did you know that?"

Megan blinked, but said nothing.

"No, I'll wager you didn't. I'll come look after your grandmother if he sends word. Dumb as an ox, that priest of his."

"Yes ma'am."

Ethne stared for a moment, then shooed the girl away. "Off you go, then. Devan has work to do. No time for pretty faces."



Cries of alarm filled the evening air as thick smoke billowed from the door of the wooden longhouse. The menfolk ran with buckets in hand between the fire and the river as they strove to keep the blaze under control.

Megan arrived in time to see her family douse the last of the flames. She was hot and out of breath, and her lungs burned after having run all the way from the woods. She held back a pace, keeping out of the way and panting as she scanned the scene.

Her entire family stood outside in a circle around an elderly woman, who sat on a chair heaving and coughing. Lynet, Megan's mother, fanned the woman with a cloth. Megan's father bent close, speaking in a loud voice so the old woman could hear.

"How did this happen?" Beoden said.

The old woman would not meet Beoden's eyes. She shook her head, confused. "I had to put some water on. We're having coney stew. Jem brought them in all cleaned and ready to go in the pot." She frowned and winced. "I hurt my hand. I think it's burned."

Lynet took her mother's hand and clucked as she examined it.

Uncle Argus emerged from the house, his face and arms black with soot. "You should see the pile of wood she tried to use. She's got enough to cook an ox."

Oma blinked and stared at Argus. "The water wouldn't boil. I had to get more."

"Why didn't you get Megan to help?" Lynet asked.

The old woman waved her off. "I could manage. Besides, I nearly had it put out."

Megan wished she could melt into the ground and vanish. She stepped back, fearing her parents' wrath.

"You nearly burnt our house to the ground, you did. Damn that girl! If you don't keep an eye on her she's off playing heaven knows where." Beoden straightened and scanned the crowd for his daughter's face, then spotted her standing at the gate. He nailed her with a black stare. "Where have you been?"

Megan cringed as all eyes turned toward her. "I . . . Oma was sleeping. I was going to be right back, I swear."

Beoden drew near. Barrel-chested, with arms like the thick branches of a tree, he towered over the girl with his hands on his hips. "Everyone has a responsibility on this

farm. It's the way of things. Oma Reagan is your responsibility. You're not to leave her side, you know that. We could have lost everything."

Megan's face fell. She bit her lip so she wouldn't cry, and nodded.

"Dearest, you know your grandmother isn't herself anymore," Lynet said. "Someone has to keep watch."

Megan sniffed, and a tear escaped her eye. "I was going to be right back. She was napping, and I had to . . ."

"Had to what?" Beoden glowered as his daughter's shirking form, but Megan found no reply. "There's a right awful mess in there, and you're going to clean it up, do you understand?"

Megan stared at her feet and bobbed her head.

"Now see that Oma's cleaned up, and look to that burn on her hand before it festers."

Oma Reagan was dying, Megan knew that. It was only a matter of time. The hardest part for Megan was seeing Oma so helpless. Oma raised Megan, looking after her when her mother was not present. Oma had always been there, helping and guiding, always dabbing at her with a cloth to wipe away some spot, fixing all of Megan's problems, braiding her hair, telling her stories, and holding her at night when she was afraid.

Nothing was as it had been before. Oma's mind came and went. At times she was herself, but other times she was like a young child. Megan had to see that Oma was dressed, her hair combed each morning and properly braided. Megan couldn't sleep with her any more because Oma urinated in her pallet. Each morning she had to be bathed so she wouldn't smell, and the straw in her bed had to be changed and her blankets all washed and hung by the fire to dry.

At times when Megan came near, Oma looked at her like she was a stranger, and demanded to know what Megan wanted. She would get agitated, and Megan couldn't get her to calm herself until mother came and held Oma's hand, and looked into Oma's eyes and told her everything would be all right.

It was like losing a best friend. In Oma's place there was this poor wretch who looked like Oma, but reeked and sat about all day asking the same questions over and over again, and required constant care like an infant.

And now Oma stank of singed hair.

Megan sighed as she looked her grandmother over. Except for the burn on her hand and a few patches of soot, Oma was hardly any worse for wear. Megan could find no blisters; yet Oma winced and cried from the pain.

Megan dabbed away the soot with a damp linen cloth, then wrapped it around Oma's hand. "Keep cold on it. That should make it feel better."

"Such a good child," Oma said, smiling. She took Megan's hand and kissed it, then stared at the ring on Megan's finger. "Your grandfather wore that ring on his little finger, did you know?"

Megan nodded and smiled. "You've told me."

"He used to come and see me when I was a maid. I was promised to another, so he came in secret." Oma smiled, her eyes wide with the memory. "One day he took it off and gave it to me. He said he would marry me someday, and this was his promise."

Megan smiled again, then threw an arm around Oma's shoulders and gave her a squeeze and kissed her forehead.

The mess inside the longhouse was unimaginably worse than she'd expected. Everything was wet and covered in soot, and it took her the rest of the evening to clean.



The farm of Beodan Strongarm and his brother Argus lay not far from the town of Raedford, on twenty hides of choice land between the river and the wood. Their two longhouses stood at right angles to each-other, with the stables and animal pens along the third side of an inner yard. A low stone wall with a gate closed off the area. The gate opened onto the main road, which ran along the river Arn.

Many people lived on the farm, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters. There were servants and thralls, too, some thirty souls in all; for both Beodan and Argus were wealthy thanes.

Busy as a hive, everyone had work to do. Mother and Aunt Willa, twin chieftains in battle, directed a relentless assault on the daily chores: carding, spinning, and weaving the wool, weeding the garden, milking the goats and the cows, or toiling away at the cook fire. Megan worked from the moment the sun came up until long after it set. At night she burrowed into her blankets and instantly fell asleep, only to wake the following morning and do it all over again.

Now that they had met face to face, Megan took notice whenever she saw Devan. One day he came down the road beside their farm, driving a small herd of goats. Busy with a cow she was milking, Megan barely looked at him before returning to the task at hand.

A few days later she spotted him fishing along the riverbank. She had gone after a goat that had gotten out of its pen, and chased it quite a way downstream before catching it.

A week later she saw him again on the road. He was leading an ass laden with two large bundles of firewood. She stopped her work, remembering that afternoon in the woods, and wondered how he managed that little trick he showed her. Devan turned just then and caught her eye. He grinned and waved. She returned his smile,

but at that moment her mother called her away and she thought no more of the boy who, it seemed, could summon creatures at will.



“He’s a right bloody *napper*, he is.” Jem’s nostrils always flared like a horse’s when he was angry. “If he comes ‘round here again, I’ll thrash him. That’s what I’ll do!”

Megan sat spinning from her basket of wool. It was a splendid day for working outside. Her favorite spot was under a tree beside her father’s longhouse, where she could gaze over the fields and watch the distant forest. She turned to stare at her brother. “What ever are you going on about?”

“That oaf of a witch’s son, that’s who.”

“What’s *he* done?”

“He came here, asking for you.” Jem glowered at his sister, his right hand clenched in a fist.

Megan secured her finished thread at the end of her spindle with a half hitch, then gave the whorl a smart twirl, playing out the woolen fibers from the skein. “Well what did he want?”

“Said he had something.”

“What, for me?”

“No, for Oma—of course, for you. Don’t be a fool.”

“What was it?”

“He’d caught a butterfly.”

Megan’s fingers paused. Her mind flashed again to the afternoon in the grove. She looked away and frowned. “Whatever for?”

Jem's mouth dropped open. "He fancies you. Can't you see that?"

Megan shook her head and returned his glare. "Oh, now, really! Now you're the one who's being foolish."

"Ha! He's smitten for you—the village idiot." Jem thrust his chin at her and grinned. "This is lovely! Megan and Devan—what a pair. Do you think you'd marry him?"

Megan's look became scorching. "Why don't you—you know, I just might. Wouldn't you like that, then you'd have *him* for a brother-in-law."

"You'd take a napper to bed with you?"

"I would, and I'd bear him twenty children." Her eyes flashed. "They'd all look just like him and call you Uncle Jem. Everyone would say, here comes Jem. He's related to that witless fool, the witch's son, don't you know—"

A flicker of movement across the field caught Megan's eye, and she paused to look. A thin figure, a boy in his teens, broke from a distant copse of trees and ran, arms and legs pumping, his loose grey tunic flapping in the wind. She was sure it was Devan.

She stared after him, her face flushing from the heat of her words. He couldn't have heard, and yet she wondered. She and Jem had made no attempt to hide their voices. Impossible. It was so very far—more than a bowshot.

Jem turned and peered across the field with squinted eyes. His vision wasn't sharp, but he guessed rightly enough at who it was. He took off in a dead run, but Devan's lead was hopeless and he had to give up. Breathless, Jem shook his fist in the air. "Don't you dare show yourself around here again! Do you hear me, Devan? Bloody napper!"

## Bluebells

“Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit.” Friar Joseph bent over Oma Regan, and dipping his finger in a brown bottle, dabbed a drop of oil on her forehead.

Lynet scowled as the priest administered his prayers, yet she held her tongue and glared at her husband. Beoden looked on with reverence as the priest made the sign of the cross over Oma’s head.

*“In nomine Patris, et filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.”*

“Amen,” repeated the others in the room.

The hearth fire snapped, sending a plume of sparks swirling among the smoky rafters. Everyone kept silence as the old woman lay.

The friar looked up. "I can do nothing more," he said, and then caught Lynet's stony look. "I admonish patience, my daughter. You must have faith in these matters. It is God's will that we all die."

Megan knew well the black look her mother wore, the dangerous kind when Megan and Jem's excuses were only digging them in deeper.

The priest withered under her stare. "I see," he said, his voice quavering lightly. "If she has other children, you should call them to her side. There is still time."

Lynet gave a tight smile.

Sensing he had done his part, Friar Joseph gathered his things and quietly left. Beoden walked him to the gate and stood there until the priest had vanished down the road. When Beoden turned toward the house, Lynet stood before him, blocking the way.

"Now that he's done his part, it couldn't hurt," she said.

Beoden did his best to meet his wife's stare, but his will was rapidly eroding. He narrowed his eyes. "You know how I feel about such things. We've discussed this before."

"Yes. We have." Lynet turned away, then catching sight of Jem, she paused and thought a moment.

Liking his mother's mood less and less, Jem began to sidle away, but she called him back. "You're going to Cantley town," Lynet said. "I want you to fetch your aunt Hilda."

Jem looked scandalized. He turned to his father for support, but Beoden said nothing.

"Right," Lynet said. "You'll need a bit of food and something warm. I suggest you leave as soon as you can be ready."

Jem stared, his jaw hanging open.

"Off you go, now. Hurry!"

Jem made a disgusted noise, but held his tongue as he stalked into the longhouse and began rummaging about for supplies. "At least can I take a horse?" He called through the door.

"The last one you brought back half lame," Beoden said. "I think not."

Jem appeared in the doorway, red-faced. "But that's three days' walk, there and back again!"

"Then you'd better go quickly," Beoden said. "Oma hasn't got much time."

Jem's shoulders slumped. He rolled his eyes toward the clouds then turned again inside. A few minutes later he emerged with a satchel and a water bag slung over his shoulder. He had his cloak pinned about his shoulder, and a stout staff in hand. His expression was absolutely wretched. He cast his father one last pleading look.

Lynet gave her son a quick hug and kissed his cheek farewell, and soon he was gone down the western road. She gave Beoden one final glance then stalked into the house. "Megan!"

Megan looked up from the fire she was tending.

"Come," her mother said. "Help me prepare a basket of food."

Megan went to the corner and got down a large basket hanging from the rafters. "What is it for?"

"You will take it to the wise woman. You know where she lives."

Megan made no response, and stared at her father, who had just appeared in the door.

Lynet ignored her husband. "You will ask Ethne to come." She took a cloth and covered the bottom of the basket, then added a wedge of cheese, two loaves of bread, and some apples.

"I can't. I have to watch Oma." Megan toyed with the hem of her skirt. "Why couldn't you have sent Jem?"

"You'll do what I say, and I won't have you arguing with me, understood?" Lynet added a cluster of eggs, then folded the cloth over the food and handed the basket to her daughter.

Megan took it and stared at her father. Beoden traded looks with his wife for a moment, then turned and left with a sigh.

"Be quick about it, dearest." Lynet kissed her daughter on the top of the head, then pushed her outside. "And don't dally in the woods. Be on your way, now!"



Everyone knew the house where the wise woman lived. Little more than a hut nestled in a corner of the woods, it lay not too close to the town of Raedford and not too far from it either, set back a stone's cast from the road. It was round, with a thatched roof tall and pointed, and sat in a wide clearing beside a stream.

She saw Devan right away, chopping wood in the yard. He glanced up, but when he recognized her he turned away and fished another log from his pile.

Megan wasn't sure how this moment could be more awkward.

Devan reached for his axe and raised it high, then brought it down with as much force as he could muster. He missed, and the blade stuck into the old stump so deep he had to climb up and wrench the axe free with both hands.

She drew near, avoiding his eyes. Several tiny hens strutted in the yard, clucking and scratching. A pair of goats sat in a pen on the other side of the house, chewing their cud and regarding the new visitor with their strange eyes. Smoke curled from a round brick oven.

Devan swung at the piece of wood several more times, making no attempt to aim his blows until it lay quite smashed. He grimaced and then turned to face her. "What do you want?" He stared at her shoulder, not willing to meet her eyes.

Megan pulled a curl of hair from her face. "Is your mother here?"

Devan blinked, his brow furrowed. "No."

She bit her lip. By the Virgin, now what? "I've been sent to fetch her. I've brought a basket."

Devan tossed the axe aside and came closer. He lifted a corner of cloth and peered inside. Megan expected him to smell sweaty and unwashed like Jem, but he didn't. He was very tall and slim. His eyes were dark brown, and his hair reddish brown. *Mind your task, girl.* "Can you take this?" She asked, holding out the basket.

Devan shrugged and lifted it from her hands, then stared at it for a bit.

"I . . ." Megan trailed off, not knowing what to say. She turned to leave, then paused and faced him again. "When will she return?"

"Nightfall."

Megan sighed. "It's urgent. My grandmother's sick, and she needs care."

"I thought your father didn't like our *kind*." His voice held a bitter edge.

"Mother sent me."

Devan peered into the basket once more. He relaxed a bit, and his face showed mild concern. "What's wrong with her?"

Megan didn't know what to do with her hands, so she clasped them behind her back. She shrugged. "She's old. She's dying."

Devan met her eyes. "Does she have a cough or a fever?"

"She's got a fever," Megan said with a nod. "And a cough."

"Does she have boils or ulcers of the skin?"

Megan shook her head.

“Right.” Devan looked at the basket in his hands, then turned toward the house. At the door he paused and raised a hand. “Don’t leave yet, I’ll get something.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “You?”

“Don’t leave, please.” Devan disappeared inside the house.

Megan cleared her throat and frowned. She let her eyes wander around the clearing. She saw nothing new, and after a moment stood watching the hens.

Devan emerged once more carrying a small bundle of herbs. They were wrapped in the napkin from the basket. He drew close. “This is lungwort, for any illness of the chest. You must make an infusion and give it to her thrice daily.” He lifted a cluster of dried leaves, heart-shaped, with spots.

Megan wrinkled her brow. “What’s an infusion?”

“Steep it in water. Do not boil, but let it set overnight. Each morning you can have her drink some of it.”

Megan nodded.

Next, Devan held up an herb that looked like a cluster of green downy feathers. “This is yarrow. You can boil one or two of these in a small pot. Add honey to make it sweet. Have her drink three times a day.”

Megan bobbed her head once more.

Finally, he held up a stem of pendulous trumpet-shaped flowers, slender and vivid blue. He handed them to her.

She took them and stared for a moment. “And these?”

“They’re pretty,” he said with a shrug. A smile hesitated on his lips, as he paused. “They made me think of you.”

Her breath stood still as she held the stem in her hands. A smile grew on her lips, and suddenly she felt quite hot. “I . . .” She looked into his face and then looked away. “I must be getting back.”

"Of course." Devan handed her the napkin with the herbs, then stepped back, smiling. "I will bring my mother in the morning."

She didn't know why, but Megan felt like giggling all the way home. More than once she lifted the flowers to her nose and caught their sweet perfume, but not before she was out of sight from the wise woman's house.

Bluebells.



Ethne frowned and muttered as she went about her work. She hadn't heard that Oma Reagan was so close to dying. "The priest spoke rightly enough. There is nothing to be done."

Mother's mouth trembled only a bit. She pressed her knuckles to her lips and nodded quickly.

"I can ease her suffering," Ethne said. "Let me see what the boy has given you."

Megan felt frustrated and sad at the same time. Her last hope had been that the priest was wrong. She couldn't bear it any longer and went outside.

Devan sat on the stone wall beside the road. His eyes darted at every noise, and he shifted as if his breeches were crawling with ants. "Where is your brother?" he asked.

"Jem? Mother sent him to fetch my Aunt Hilda," Megan said. "He'll be back in two days."

Devan took a breath and let it out. "Your father does not like us."

Megan made a half-smile and shook her head.

"How are you getting on?"

"We're doing well enough, I suppose."

"I meant you."

Megan caught his glance, then looked at her hands and shrugged. She did not feel well enough. She wanted to be anywhere but here, and yearned for some distraction. "How did you do that trick with the butterfly?"

"Would you like to see it again?"

Her smile came quickly. "I would."

Devan beckoned and hopped over the wall. Megan ran around through the gate and caught up with him. They turned off the road, then skirted the animal pens and waded into the field.

"If you see one, point it out," Devan said.

They walked in silence for a bit. Autumn was coming fast. The wheat was above Megan's knees, and bent in great golden waves as the wind swept across the field. Her father always told how it reminded him of the waves rolling on the sea.

"Friar Joseph says that when we die, we go to a place called heaven," Megan suddenly said.

"Do you believe him?"

"I don't know what I believe." She thought for a bit. "His god couldn't keep Oma from dying. Could yours?"

"What god can?"

She frowned at this, then pointed to her right. "There!"

Devan put a finger to his lips, then stretched his hand and whispered. A pair of blue wings fluttered from the wheat and flew straight to him. It landed on the tip of his finger.

Megan caught her breath. "How do you do that?"

Devan's grin turned smug. He gave her a sly glance, studied the butterfly.

"Tell me!"

"I could teach the words, but it wouldn't work for you."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. If you're not born with it, it simply won't work." He let the butterfly walk across his fingers for a moment, then passed it to her.

The delicate legs tickled Megan's knuckles. "What do you mean? Born with what?"

Devan shook his head. "Not sure, really. The gift . . . knowing power, being born to power, as some say."

Megan stroked the velvety wings and looked closely at the intricate veins. "Are you trying to sound mysterious?"

Devan went on. "Even if you have the gift, it takes practice. It's not as easy as it looks."

"Can you summon other creatures?" she asked.

"I know the names of many birds. I can call stray cattle or sheep."

"I can call a dog." Megan said, grinning.

Devan laughed. "That is no mastery."

"Don't be too sure. The only other person it will come for is father."

Devan grinned some more, then pointed at a second butterfly and called to it. It was yellow, with white speckles. He passed it to Megan and her eyes sparkled.

"Will they never go away?" she asked.

"The spell does not last long unless I will it."

A sudden notion occurred to her, and she knit her brow. "Can you only summon living things?"

"Now there's an odd question!" Devan's eyebrows narrowed together. "What do you mean?"

Megan became still. She stared at her hands as she thought. "I want to know what happens when we die."

Devan sighed and stared at the distant trees. "In truth? Only the gods know. Even the wise, whose sight is great, cannot say."

"I heard tell of a woman who could summon the spirits of the dead," Megan said, with an arch look. "She used a small round stone of crystal."

"Necromancy," Devan made a nod. "People who can scry the dead."

"Haven't you ever wondered? Haven't you ever been curious to try?"

Devan's face became doubtful. "I have never thought about it. I suppose it would be dangerous."

"It's not forbidden, is it?"

He looked at her, then shook his head. "Only by such as your Friar Joseph, and those who believe him."

Megan bit the corner of her lip and cast a glance at the longhouse. Her sister and her cousin were busy grinding meal. A pair of servants worked at cleaning out a stall. Her father was nowhere about. Megan turned and regarded Devan once more. "Could you do it?"

"Me?" Devan ran a hand through his thick curly hair, then shrugged. "I don't know."

"Would you? For me?"

He glanced into her eyes for a moment, and his look softened. "Who would you call?" His voice was almost a whisper.

She shook her head and thought for a moment, then spoke. "My grandfather, I suppose."

Devan made a heavy sigh. "I don't know if I can."

"What is needed?"

"I . . . Well, something that was his, I suppose. It can be anything."

Megan remembered the ring she wore, and turned her hand so he could see.

"This was once his. Would that do?"

He bent to look closer. "How long ago did he have it?"

"I can't say. Many years. He gave it to my grandmother as a promise that he would marry her. She has worn it since. When she got sick she gave it to me."

Devan frowned, his eyes narrow. "That could work. It would be better to have something that was his until the day he died."

Megan thought for a moment, then shook her head. "There is also his sword, but my brother, Ryce took that when he was fostered to Lord Athen."

"Well I suppose the ring would have to do. Do you know your grandfather's name?"

"He was Glyn, son of Mardoc."

"Not that name." Devan shook his head. "It would have been a special name, one that he kept secret and never told anyone until just before he died."

Megan gave a confused look. "I have never heard of such a thing."

"Your grandfather lived before the prior and his monks came. His parents would have still followed the old traditions. In those days everyone was given two names. One was given by the parents. For the other, each child was taken to the village wise woman, or to a sorcerer or a wizard. This name was kept secret, and known only to the child's parents and closest kin."

Megan narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"To know someone's true name gives you power over them." Devan's face grew serious. "If you're born to power like me, you can lay a curse on them, or command them to do anything you wish."

"Just like that?"

Devan's lips stretched in a line as he thought. "Well not really like that. You must first overcome their will, and that can take some doing, but still . . . knowing someone's true name can give you great advantage over them. If you had been given a name, you would only tell it to those whom you most trusted. Your mother and father would know it. And you would tell your husband someday when you married. You would never call each other by that name, and you would not use it very often. There are many things that walk the world unseen, which can overhear."

Megan nodded, her eyes solemn.

"This is not a light thing you ask," Devan said. "Calling on the dead."

Megan gazed into Devan's face, then looked down as the blue butterfly trembled from a sudden breeze. The wings spread, and the next moment it fluttered away. Megan gasped in surprise and stared after it.

"All things come to an end," Devan said. "Best to accept what must be."

She looked up and found him still looking at her. She glanced at her other hand, then nodded and shook the remaining butterfly free. Her face was now sad. "It was only a thought."

## Five to Grant a Secret Wish

Oma Reagan slept all that day and all of the next, and Megan found her chores much lighter. Mother put her to work carding wool with her younger sister, Brienne. Brienne finished her half first, and gloated at her older sister as Mother let her go out and play. Megan continued on in silence, her feelings a turbulent storm. At last she put down her combs and sighed.

Lynet looked up from kneading a pile of dough, searching her daughter's face. "What's wrong, dearest?"

Megan pursed her lips, hardly knowing where to begin. She could still remember Oma's bright smile like it was yesterday. "I can't imagine what it would be like, Oma not being here."

Lynet laid her dough on the table and began pushing the palms of her hands into it. She paused a while before speaking. "Your grandmother is very old."

"You believe in the new Christian god, don't you?"

Lynet nodded. "I do. Sometimes."

"Well then if he's a true god, why is he letting Oma die?"

"Who's to say, child?" Lynet folded the dough and began pushing into it some more. "Like Friar Joseph said, it's the way of things."

Megan bobbed her head, staring at nothing as she twirled a stray lock of hair.

"Do you ever miss Opa Glyn?"

"Sometimes." Lynet rubbed her cheek with the back of her hand. "Sometimes more than others. You never really get over losing a loved one. Not someone close to you as your father or mother."

"You've had babies that you'd lost. Wasn't it the same thing?"

"Perhaps, but not really. It's different, then."

"Well, either way, you're more used to it." Megan stared at her lap. "People dying, I mean."

Lynet picked up the dough and pounded it onto the table. "You never get used to it." After kneading a bit more, she spoke. "You remember when your brother Hengst caught sick and died? You used to play together all the time."

Megan shook her head. "I had barely five summers. I didn't even know what was happening."

"Yes, but you do remember him?"

"Of course."

"Did you love him?"

Megan pulled tight her lips, and nodded. "I suppose so. I can still remember the way he would sit next to me at supper and say, 'I sit wight Megan!'"

Lynet smiled and nodded. "In that way, he'll always be with you." Lynet turned and regarded Oma for a moment, lying still in her pallet. "As long as you

remember your grandmother, she will never really be gone. She will live on in your heart." Lynet kneaded some more. "When I think about Oma, I will always remember the way she smiled when the two of you played. The time she took you to the river and you fell in, and came back all muddy. You were barely walking, then."

For a while, Megan's eyes brimmed with tears, and she stared at Oma lying in the corner. She sniffed and wiped her cheek. Her voice broke as she spoke again. "Mother, do you ever wish you could talk to Opa Glyn, just one more time?"

"Indeed I do." Lynet stopped kneading and peered at her daughter. "I would like that very much."

"He used to call me his Princess Pea." She laughed, then had a sudden thought. "Did a wise woman ever give Opa Glyn a name?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

Megan opened her mouth, then shrugged. "Ethne told me that her mother named father."

"Really! He never told me that." Lynet began pulling apart the dough. She kneaded a piece into a round bun, which she laid on a long wide board. "I suppose it's true. He was born before the prior came and built the abbey."

"So you were never given a name?"

Lynet shook her head.

Megan drew her bottom lip between her teeth. "Did you ever hear Opa Glyn's name?"

"I did. It was *Ardell*."

Megan repeated the name, feeling the weight of its sound on her tongue. "That's very lovely," she whispered.

Lynet smiled as she rounded another bun in her cupped hands. "I thought so."

"What about Oma? Did you ever hear hers?"

Lynet bobbed her head. She laid the bun in place, then tore off another piece of dough. "She told me last summer. Said she wanted to be remembered."

"Will you tell me?"

"Not until she passes on."

"Why not?"

"When someone gives you their name, you can't tell it or say it too often, lest it lose its power."

Megan gave her mother a narrow look. "I thought you no longer believed in such things."

"Some things, no, but some things yes." Lynet laid the new bun beside the other two, then wiped her hands on her apron. "You can never be too careful. Some say the old powers are still very much alive."

"So you still believe in them. The things that Ethne, the wise woman, can do."

Lynet turned to her daughter, her hand on her hip. "Now I wouldn't say that I believe all the things that old hag says. A good deal more than half of it is rubbish—and what's worse, she herself couldn't say which half was which." She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, but a streak of meal still clung to her face.

"Devan told me a way that you can tell the future." Megan blurted it out before she knew what she was saying. She felt her face grow hot.

Lynet did not scold her daughter. "Did he?" She picked up another piece of dough and patted it round.

"If you see a flock of crows, you can count them. There's a rhyme, but I can't remember all of it."

Lynet smiled, but said nothing.

"It's rubbish, isn't it?" Megan asked with a frown.

"Crows are the messengers to the gods."

The answer surprised Megan. She looked at her mother, full of sudden curiosity. "To Woden, you mean?"

Lynet nodded.

Megan lowered her voice, just above a whisper. "This morning, I spied a flock beside the river. I counted five."

"Five to grant a secret wish," Lynet answered. "Five is a lucky number."

Megan's eyes became round. "Can you tell me the whole rhyme?"

Lynet shook her head. "I haven't heard that since I was a little girl—younger than you, in fact. Oma taught it to me." She set down the last bun, then picked up a knife and began cutting crosses into each one.

Megan's thoughts turned back to her grandmother. "Mother? If you won't tell me Oma's secret name, then why would you tell me Opa Glyn's?"

"The dead are forever beyond our ability to help or to harm."

"So do you believe that it impossible to summon someone who has died?" Megan caught herself, then hastily added. "I heard tell of a traveling woman who could do such things."

The knife paused and Lynet's eyes hardened. "What have you and that boy Devan been talking about?"

"Nothing!" Megan said, her mouth dropping open. "I only . . ." She swallowed and looked away, then picked up a tuft of wool, pulling at it absently.

Lynet set down the knife, then lifted the board and put the buns aside so they could rise. She picked up her dirty bowl, and began scraping it over the hearth fire.

After a pause, Megan spoke again. "Do you believe what Friar Joseph says? That those who are good go to a place called heaven?"

Mother's hand became still and her shoulders slumped. She stared at her daughter, not sure of what to say.

“Do you think she is going to be all right?” Megan said. “Where Oma Reagan is going?”

Mother set the bowl on the table, then came and sat by her daughter. She put her arm around Megan’s shoulder and squeezed her tight. “We can always hope.” She kissed Megan on the top of the head.

Megan sighed and buried her face in her mother’s warm shoulder.

One can always hope.



Oma opened her eyes the next morning, though she did not appear to see anyone. Megan tried to get her to eat, but Oma wouldn’t swallow. When Megan spoke to her, Oma acted confused.

Later that morning Lynet came with a bowl of broth, begging Oma to have some, and managed to get her to sip a bit of it. Afterward she sat and held Oma’s hand.

When Lynet heard Jem’s voice calling across the field, she rose and went to the door. She stood there a moment, framed against the light, her hand cupped to her mouth, then ran outside.

Megan went and stood in the door. Jem was there, with Aunt Hilda and her son Ferghus. Mother and Aunt Hilda held each other in a tight embrace. After they parted, Lynet had tears on her cheeks.

“We came as soon as I got word,” Aunt Hilda said. She looked much like Lynet, but was quite a bit older, with wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. Lines of grey streaked her hair.



Megan always looked forward to visits from Aunt Hilda, but with all the worry and fuss over Oma Reagan, Megan hardly got any notice. Megan wished her cousin Aithne had come. Ferghus was more Jem's friend, and he was a pretentious twit, besides. After a while Megan began to feel useless and decided to slip away—her first chance at freedom in many days.

She didn't know where to go at first and wandered across the field, her thoughts suddenly turning to butterflies and the boy who could summon them. She came to a brook and followed it, hoping to catch sight of a frog or maybe a fish. At last she reached the edge of the woods and stared up at the treetops. For a moment she hesitated, debating whether to go further or turn back. Her parents' longhouse lay in the distance, set against the far-off hills, a curl of smoke rising from the smoke hole in the thatch and wafting in the early afternoon breeze.

Of all places, it was the last one where Megan wanted to be.

In fact, now that she could think clearly she absolutely dreaded the idea. The woods beckoned, and she turned and pushed her way through the branches.

Before long she came upon her favorite trail, which ran by the clearing where she and Devan first met. She stepped into the open space and gazed heavenward. After a while a pair of crows flew overhead, followed by a third. "One for joy, two for rain . . . or was it pain?" She bit her lip. "Pain, I suppose." That made more sense, but what was three?

She stared for a moment longer to see if there were more. A breeze picked up, and the birds flew away. "Silly game." She turned and continued along the trail until it emptied out onto the old road. She had gone completely around the village, and now found herself just a little past Ethne's house. Funny, that. "I suppose I shall have to pass by and have a peek," she said to no one in particular.



A large raven swooped over the clearing, lighting on the roof of the tall round house. *“Roak!”* it proclaimed. The bird ruffled its feathers and cocked an eye at Devan, who was working in the yard below. *“A-roak!”*

Devan looked up from the stump where he was chopping wood, then turned and stared down the path where Megan hid. *“Who’s there?”* he called, his voice gruff.

Megan sidled from behind the large bush, feeling a warm flush rise up her cheeks. She had only paused there a moment while still out of sight, trying to work up her nerve and think of what to say.

Devan lowered his axe as he caught her face. *“I’m sorry. Didn’t know it was you.”*

Megan smiled. *“Hello.”* She came closer, her steps timid.

*“How fares your grandmother?”*

*“Well enough. My aunt has come, and she looks after her.”*

Devan bobbed his head, then cast an eye at the door of his house. *“My mother’s not here.”* He blinked and rolled his eyes. *“Again.”*

A sheepish grin spread across Megan’s face. She folded her arms, then put them down at her side.

*“You’re welcome to stay if you’d like to wait.”* He turned back toward the stump and his pile of wood, which had grown quite large. Devan pointed to a three-legged stool at the foot of a large tree. *“Have a seat?”*

Megan cast her eyes around the yard as she lowered herself onto the stool. She peered up at the raven.

The raven cocked its head sideways and glowered at her with one beady eye.

*"A-roak!"*

Megan knit her brow, staring more intently. "He sounds as if he's speaking."

Devan glanced at the rooftop, then at her. "He says we have a visitor."

"He keeps watch?"

"Sometimes. When he's not off robbing nests or pestering the squirrels."

Megan slowly nodded, impressed. "Is he enchanted, then?"

"Not in the way you would imagine. He comes and goes as he pleases."

"But you can understand him?"

Devan opened his mouth, but faltered. "Mother can. I can only hear a few things."

Megan blinked, amazed. "I never imagined birds can talk."

"Well . . ." He waved a hand. "Not all birds, I suppose, and not like people. And you have to know them, become familiar with them." Devan picked up a log and set it on the stump. "He's older than me. Been here all my life." He swung his axe and split the wood neatly down the middle.

"I see," Megan said, then fell silent. She felt happy, sitting in this place, with no chores and no one shouting for her. Just watching him.

Devan split a couple more pieces of log, then paused for rest. Their eyes met, and she looked down. "I can do what you ask," he said.

She searched his face. "Sorry?"

"Your grandfather."

Her thoughts suddenly returned to the present. "Oh." She fell quiet, not knowing what to say.

Devan sat down on the stump and tightened the straps on his shoe. When he finished, he looked at her again. "You mentioned a woman who used a scrying crystal?"

She nodded.

"Well I think I can do better than that."

Megan sat mute, not sure of what to say. Had Devan come to her yesterday she would have been brimming with excitement and interest.

"You seemed rather earnest about it, the other day. Do you still want to?"

She bit her lower lip. "Well, I am rather curious, actually. When I think about dying, what it must be like . . . I can't imagine. It's frightening."

"Did you ever find out his true name?"

"I did."

Devan pursed his lips and nodded. "Right, then." He sat motionless for a moment, his head bowed in thought and his hands between his knees, then rose and walked toward the house.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll have to get something," he said.

"What for?"

"Well if the spell is going to work . . . I'll be right back."

"You mean to do this right now?"

"Naturally. There's nothing to it, really." Devan was only gone a moment. When he came back outside he held a small clay jar in one hand. It had a cork to keep it sealed. In the crook of his other arm he carried a large sack. "Shall we go?"

Megan goggled, feeling helpless. "Don't you require a full moon, or something?"

He shook his head. "I know a place, in the woods. It's all we need."

"Where in the woods?"

"Not far. It's safe." He smiled. "Nothing unnatural, I assure you."

She rose, her heart racing. "Right." She forced a smile. "Let's have a go."

## The Forest at the Edge of the World

Devan led Megan to a hidden dell not far from the road. A spring of pure sparkling water cascaded down a face of rock, spilling into a clear pool. A great oak spread its branches over the water shading it from above, and the tree's roots burrowed into the earth like long gnarled fingers. It felt cool and serene, wholesome.

"Where are we?" Megan asked.

"It's a place of sanctuary. My mother uses it for namings. The Old Powers are strong here."

"Like when babies are born? People still do that?"

"Oh, yes," Devan said with a nod. "More so than you might think. Do you have the ring?"

Megan held up her hand. "What are you going to do?"

"A curtain separates this world and the next. It is very thin here, and spirits can come quite close to our side. Help me clear the ground." Devan began kicking aside branches and last year's fallen leaves. "We'll need a spot wide enough for both of us to sit."

Megan's heart began to race. The leaves rustled as she brushed the ground clean with her toes. Devan found a large rock. He worked his fingers around the edge and pried it up, then flattened the spot with his heel.

"Take off your ring, and place it in the water." Devan pointed to a place where it was shallow. "Close to the shore, so you don't have to go swimming after it when we're through."

Megan slid the ring from her finger, then feeling a wave of giddy excitement dropped it into the water.

"Now sit." Devan motioned to the cleared patch of ground.

Megan carefully sat. Devan fumbled open the draw-strings to the bag, then reached inside. It was salt. Using his hand, he carefully poured it in a wide circle around Megan. When he was done he set the bag down at the foot of the oak, then picked up the clay jar and stepped inside the circle.

"Drink this," Devan said. He sat, and held up the jar. "Try to stay awake."

Megan's eyes widened with alarm. "What is it?"

"Absolutely awful!" Devan said, making a face.

Megan gave him a sideways glance.

Devan laughed. "It's not bad, really. It will make you sensitive to things around you."

"Will you have some, too?"

He shook his head. "I was born with the ability, remember?"

Megan took the jar and worked the cork out. The potion had strange scent, sharp but not unpleasant. "How much do I take?"

"Just swallow a sip," Devan said. "That should do. It will make you want to lie down and go to sleep, but don't. Try to stay awake."

Megan's excitement was waning fast. "Perhaps we shouldn't."

Devan laid a hand on her elbow. "I'll be right here. Nothing bad will happen to you, I promise."

Megan found his eyes. They were soft, and his expression was poised and sure. A light smile played on his lips. "Will you trust me?" he asked.

Megan pursed her lips and swallowed, then quietly nodded. She looked down into the jar. She could see the glint of dark liquid. She paused but a moment, then lifted it to her lips and drank a sip.

Her mouth went instantly numb, and her throat tingled as if she had swallowed ice. She coughed once, and the jar slid from her fingers.

Devan caught it, and gripped her shoulder. "Don't fall asleep."

Megan's chest heaved. The feeling of numbness spread quickly down her throat and filled her lungs. She gasped air, and felt as if she'd inhaled a thick vapor. A tingling began at the back of her head, and a rushing sound filled her ears. Her arms grew heavy. Cold prickles spread down her body, running all the way to her fingers and toes. A strong tide of drowsiness flooded over her, and her eyelids drooped.

"Stay awake!" Devan said. "Don't close your eyes."

Megan slowly nodded. Shadows swam at the edge of her vision. The world began to darken as if she were inside a deep cave and looking out. Her body felt strange—detached as if it were no longer part of her. She watched Devan sitting close. He faced her, his hands in her lap and gripping her fingers tightly, though she could not feel him touching her.

Words began pouring from Devan's lips. He chanted in a language that Megan did not know, and his voice sounded far away as if coming from the end of a long tunnel. Megan's world rapidly faded. Thickening shadows swam before her eyes, darkening her vision until it was entirely blotted out. The sound of Devan's chanting continued, growing fainter until it became a whisper, and then trailed off into utter silence.

Megan's mind floated disembodied amid an endless void, bereft of all sight and sound or feeling; there was only awareness, her thoughts running swift and lucid. Panic bloomed. She was trapped. She tried to scream but there were no lungs to fill with air. She tried to run, or to flail her arms and thrash but she couldn't feel her body.

How long she remained trapped in that emptiness she couldn't say. *Is this death? There is truly nothing. Has everything I ever knew been a lie?*

Memories of her life began to play before her in rapid succession, like watching actors in a play. She was standing with Devan on the day they met in the grove, and heard herself demand, "Whatever *are* you doing?" Then it was morning several days before and she was caring for Oma, who'd wet her pallet. The smell of stale urine drenched her senses. Then she was younger, it was the year before at the feast of Saint Stephen. She was following her mother and holding Oma's hand as they walked in the procession. Friar Joseph led them to the chapel in the village. He carried a large wooden cross. Year after year visions continued backward through her life. She was watching her mother holding her younger brother Hengst in her arms. He was dying, and her mother's tears fell on his tiny face. Now Megan was a small child again, falling into the river and Oma was wading in up to her knees to pluck her out. Then Megan was a baby, younger still, and seated on her mother's lap. She had tasted honey for the first time, and it was thrilling. Then the visions ran more swiftly, blurring from night to

day until at last she knew only warmth and darkness, and the muted sound of a woman's voice, rich and beautiful.

A light appeared in the center of Megan's vision, smaller than a grain of sand but very bright. She felt a rush of great speed as she was swept forward. Shards of radiant brilliance shot past her, every color of the rainbow. The light became stronger and larger until at last she was engulfed by its brilliance. Shapes began to materialize as if she were looking through a fog that was slowly clearing.

She found herself inside a deep forest. Massive trees soared into the sky, their trunks covered with white bark, and their branches arching overhead like the beams of an enormous hall.

She could stand without effort, the effects of the potion having all but vanished. A warm breeze gently wafted, carrying with it the humid scent of damp earth, mingled with the sweet fragrance of flowers. Fresh grass, lush and vivid green spread across the forest floor. Tiny blossoms bloomed in patches, brilliant in the sun. It was absolute perfection.

Devan sat a short way off amid a patch of dappled light, staring with a bemused look into the heavens. She called to him, and he turned to her and stood.

He smiled in that sly, self-assured way of his. "I can't believe it worked!"

"Where are we?" Megan asked.

Devan spread his arms heavenward. "Look!"

Megan followed his gaze, her jaw dropping in disbelief. The air just above the trees shimmered like quicksilver, rippling as the waves on a pond. Beyond that, the sky stretched overhead, a vault of the purest blue.

"Why's the sky like that? What is that strange light?"

Devan shook his head. "The Curtain, perhaps?"

"The Curtain?"

"The barrier that separates our world from the next."

Megan's heart began racing. She suddenly felt nervous, though she didn't know why.

"Are you all right?" Devan asked.

"What have you done?" Megan said.

"We stand between both worlds."

Megan's stomach did a slow roll as Devan's words sunk in. "Are we dead?"

Devan came closer and took her hand. "We're safe here. We can stay as long as we need."

Megan looked around. "I think we should go back."

"Isn't this what you wanted?"

Megan didn't answer. She looked up and stared into Curtain rippling across the sky. Her hand felt warm in Devan's. After a moment her nerves began to calm. She looked into his eyes, then nodded.

Devan smiled. "Let's try calling your grandfather. What was his name?"

"It was Ardell."

Devan wet his lips and raised his arms to the sky. "*Ardell, luatha nas!*"

Nothing happened.

He paused for a moment and then repeated the summoning. After several more tries he lowered his hands, his eyebrows furrowed together. "Perhaps you should try it. I don't think the ring you used is a strong enough focus."

"How do I say the words you used?"

"I don't think it matters. Just call to him however you like. He should be able to hear you. Time and space don't exist here."

Megan looked up and spoke in a loud voice. "Opa Glyn, where are you? Ardell? It's Megan. Do you remember?"

Silence.

“Opa? Opa Ardell?”

Devan hung his head and paced in a circle. “This isn’t working. Why isn’t this working?”

“Opa, please!” Megan shouted as loud as she could muster. “Ardell, come to me!”

A shadow passed over the light, and the air cooled. The back of Megan’s neck began to prickle. She looked at Devan, whose face had gone white. “Do you feel that?” she asked.

“Something is wrong,” he said.

A twig snapped in the distance, and they spun toward the sound. Megan craned her neck trying to see, and took a step toward the nearest tree. She saw nothing. “I don’t like this place any more,” she said. “How do we go back?”

Devan held up a hand. “I hear voices. Can you hear?”

Megan felt a thread of fear like frost grip her heart. She swallowed, straining her eyes as she stared around her. A shadow flitted between two trunks, and she gave a short scream. “There!” She pointed.

Devan moved off, and she kept close. After a moment, he shook his head. “I could have sworn I heard . . .”

The air chilled, and a light fog began to gather. Swirling tendrils of mist advanced across the grass, filling the space between the trees, and rising steadily. When it touched the hem of Megan’s dress, her feet went cold. She looked up and could see the branches shaking, as if something was moving about but trying to stay hidden.

“There!” Devan said, pointing.

Megan turned, and saw a lone figure, tall and slender sidle from behind a tree. Hooded and robed in black, it grew as it came forward as if rising from a hole in the earth. Panic froze her heart, and she could not move her legs. "That's not him." She shook her head. "That's not Opa Glyn."

"Take my hand," Devan said.

His fingers trembled, and his hand was cold. Megan swallowed, but her eyes held fast on the black spirit drifting toward them.

"Go back, I abjure you!" Devan's voice rang among the trees. "*Hemla non farithas!*"

The spirit laughed, a hissing sound that reminded Megan of a snake. "Will is of the body." It spoke with a voice that sounded in their minds. Waves of loathing, and baleful hatred emanated from its being. "You have no power here."

"We must go," Devan said to Megan, then looked at the spirit and shouted, "Stay back! We have no quarrel with you."

The spirit laughed again, low and malevolent, then spoke aloud. "Thou fool."

Devan backed away, and Megan clung to his arm. Shadows fell, like blankets of un-light. Dark shapes descended from the trees, more spirits like the one before, coming down head first as if they were enormous spiders. Others spread their arms, bat-like, and floated among the branches. Cold sweat poured over Megan's face, and her mouth went dry.

"Run!" Devan shouted, pulling her by the hand.

They found it quite easy to move, and did not have to use their legs. Megan found herself flying just above the ground, surging over the grass and weaving through the trees as fast as her thoughts could take her. All around them, black specters closed in, cutting them off until they had nowhere to go. They drew to a stop, clinging to each

other as the enemy tightened the circle. A shrill cry rose from Megan's throat. "No!" She shook her head, shrinking to the ground. "No, no!"

Cold fingers, pale and bony gripped her body. She screamed, and Devan flailed his fists to fight them off. The two were quickly overwhelmed and torn from each other's grasp. Megan shrieked, her mind given over to complete despair. She was dimly aware of Devan being dragged away, and his cries gradually faded.

Three spirits held her fast, and dragged her along the ground. Others danced around her, coming close and mocking.

"Where is he, your sweet Opa?"

"Has he forgotten his Princess Pea?"

Several spirits drew near and hissed in her face, then flitted away laughing as she screamed.

"So alone! Where is the boy who tried to protect you?"

"He got away while he could, and left you behind."

"Get off me!" Megan cried. "Beasts!"

The spirits laughed with wicked glee. "Had to save himself, such a coward!"

"So sad."

"Left you all alone."

Megan began to sob. "Stop it! You lie!"

"Couldn't save you—oh, he tried, but no." The spirit laughed. "He could only save himself. You belong to us, now."

One of the spirits came near, and drew himself up until he was very tall. He pulled back his hood, revealing a pallid grey face. His hair, ragged and unkempt, was pure white. His eyes, solid black like two onyx stones, bored deep into Megan's soul.

After a moment he turned and raised an arm. A chasm opened at his feet, a gash in the earth like a giant maw. The fog poured into it, vanishing in its depths. The spirit faced her again, his voice sounding in her mind, "Come!"

Megan thrashed and kicked with every ounce of will she could find, screaming and sobbing as they dragged her to the brink. Eyes wide with horror, she stared into the abyss. "No! Oh, God, no!" She kicked one of the spirits hard in the chest, and he recoiled with a loud hiss. Megan screamed and kicked with more force. "Oh God, oh God! Dear God, save me!"

No sooner had she said these words than a pillar of intense light engulfed her form. The spirits recoiled as if burned, screaming with rage and absolute fury. The light grew stronger until only the leader of the dark spirits remained, staring heavenward, his arm shielding his eyes from the brilliance. His lip curled in a hateful grimace, and his eyes bulged with malice. Falling suddenly to his knees, he gnashed his teeth and wailed high and piercing, tearing at his robes; then turned and dove headlong into the pit. The darkness closed up behind him, and the mist fled like on a summer's day. Megan lifted herself from the ground and stared into the sky. The golden light burst full upon her.

*Fear not.*

The voice spoke inside her mind; all panic melted away. In its place came a love, warm and encompassing, that permeated every part of her being. The light grew in intensity until it blotted out all else, and she was floating again amid a sea of absolute brilliance.

A man appeared in the distance, walking toward her. He wore a loose robe, radiant and white, and open at the chest. His arms and feet were bare. He appeared fuzzy at first, as if he were approaching through a haze; but his face became clear at last, and he stood smiling before her.

Opa Glyn.

## The Death of Oma Regan

Megan couldn't remember feeling so happy—ever. She fell into her grandfather's arms and held tight, and did not let go for a very long time. At last she loosened her embrace.

"Now let me look at you," his voice sounded in her mind. He smiled, warm and well pleased. "I have been watching over you. How you have grown!"

"I miss you," Megan said.

"You will be with me in your own time." Opa's face became stern. "What you have done was very foolish."

"But I wanted to see you." Megan responded, feeling somewhat deflated.

"The dead cannot be compelled in this manner."

"But you came." Megan smiled. "You saved me."

"No. I was called by another, and I came of my own free will."

Megan's heart fell. "I just thought . . ."

Opa Glyn frowned. "No one whose heart is pure would ever answer such a summons. Do not try this again. There are many who deceive."

Megan nodded, greatly sobered. "I swear. I will never do this again."

"That will do." Her grandfather lifted her chin, and smiled once more. "I am never far from you. Tell your mother to not be sad." He stepped away, and the light gathered rapidly around him.

Megan felt an inexorable pull drawing her away. A rushing like a great wind blew past her as if she were drawing away at tremendous speed. The light faded, then quickly receded to a point. Presently she was once more engulfed in blackness. She felt pressure all around her, as if she were being wrung like a woolen rag, then stretched and finally squeezed into a tiny, confining space.



When Megan opened her eyes, she was lying on her side. It was completely dark. Shadowy branches sighed in the wind, bending and waving overhead. Her strength returned by degrees, and after a few moments she began to grope about to see where she was.

Her fingers splashed in cold water.

In a flash the memories came rushing back. She and Devan had been kneeling beside a pool. She was back in the little hollow beneath the great oak tree.

She scabbled up the bank, and found the foot of the tree. There she rested for a moment, willing her fears aside, her thoughts running at full gallop.

Where was Devan?

Megan wanted to search for him, but it was impossibly dark. She called until her voice grew hoarse. Her only reply was the wind in the trees and the faint trickle of the spring. Her mind flashed back to the dark spirits, and she shuddered. They'd told her that Devan had run away, that he'd abandoned her to save himself. Did they lie? Megan couldn't believe such a thing, yet why wasn't he here?

Night creatures called, and branches creaked in the wind. Megan forced herself to rise. Fear crawled inside her, but she could not stay in this place. She stumbled blindly, feeling her way. Bushes clawed at her dress, and scraped her arms and face. She tripped many times, but at last she came to the main road. Starlight shone on the path, revealing a ribbon of grey that threaded its way among the shadows.

She walked slowly, and after a good while she made her way in to Raedford, where she shuffled into the square and sat down beside the well. Lights from inside the houses lit the ground. People moved past her as they hurried home.

"Good heavens, child!" said a woman.

Megan looked up, but could not see the woman's face.

"Megan?" the woman said.

Megan nodded at the sound of her own name. The woman drew near for a closer look. She was Mildred, a friend of Megan's mother.

"They've been looking all over for you. Let me take you home." Mildred took Megan's hand and held tightly. "Gracious, child! You must be freezing!" She called for help. A man came with a torch, and together the two of them walked Megan home.



Megan's disappearance caused an enormous stir. Lynet embraced her daughter, not knowing whether to be overjoyed or completely furious. "Where have you been, child?"

Megan hardly knew what to say. "I went for a walk in the woods and got lost."

"Well no more of that for you. From now on, you're staying close to home." Lynet let her hug go slack, then held her daughter at arm's length. "Enough of these childish fancies of yours. It's time for you to grow up."

Megan's mouth dropped open, scandalized. "Mother, I'm hardly a child!"

"If that's so, you might try acting less so. Just look at your shoes!"

Megan glanced at her muddy feet, then went stomping into the longhouse and retreated into the farthest corner.

Tensions on the farm cooled down after Megan's mother got over her anger. Lynet fell back to worrying over Oma Reagan. Throughout the whole affair Megan's Aunt Hilda hardly said a word.

For supper Megan had a cup of hot broth with leeks; it was all she had the stomach for. She sipped it quietly while images both disturbing and overwhelmingly peaceful warred inside her. The world felt different somehow, and Megan knew she would never see it again in quite the same way. She wasn't sure what she had experienced, but she knew beyond all doubt that it was real—too real, in fact. Somehow it felt even more real than life in the world of the living.

After finishing her broth, Megan wanted to sleep for a week. She burrowed into her blankets, and dozed right away.

She woke again in near total darkness. The hearth burned low, casting a dim orange glow on the pillars and rafters. All lay still, except for Beoden's snoring from the other end of the hall. She was ready to roll over and go back to sleep when a movement caught her eye. She turned and sat up.

Blue light, faint and wispy hovered over the fire. She thought it was smoke at first; but then she saw an image, faint and wavering. She stared, transfixed, as it sharpened and took form; then her mouth dropped open in shock and disbelief.

Devan.

The image gazed back in earnest, his lips moving as if calling her name. Megan rose from her pallet and stood before him. She could see only his head and upper body, as if a distant light were shining on him.

“Devan?”

His shoulders slumped, and he smiled, relieved. He tried to speak several times. His lips moved, and his hands waved with frantic desperation, but no sound came.

Megan shook her head. “Why can’t I hear you?” she whispered.

Devan mouthed a single word.

“Sorry?”

He mouthed the word again.

“I—I can’t hear you. I can’t make out what you’re saying.”

“What in bloody—” Jem’s voice shattered the quiet. “By God, almighty!”

Megan spun toward the sound to see her brother rising from his bed. Her heart lurched. Sidestepping, she placed herself in front the apparition.

Jem lunged around her. “What in bloody hell was that?”

She turned back toward Devan’s image, but it had vanished.

“I saw him, I did. That’s necromancy, isn’t it?”

Megan’s eyes went wide, and she raised a hand to his lips.

Jem swatted her arm away. “It was that napper, wasn’t it? I told you if I ever—”

“Jem, be quiet, please!”

“What’s all this” Beoden’s voice growled from a dark corner.

"I saw a spirit, I did." Jem's face looked drawn and stricken in the dim light. He pointed. "It was right there, hovering over the fire. Megan was talking to it!"

Lynet came forward and stood by the hearth. The orange light reflected dimly on her face. "Honestly, the two of you, I never heard such nonsense."

Jem stared at his mother helplessly, then turned a cold eye on his sister.

"He's being ridiculous, he is," Megan said.

"Now hang on, I know what I saw." Jem jabbed with a finger as he spoke. "You can't possibly deny this!"

Lynet drew closer to see her daughter's face. "What were you doing up?"

"I'm parched. I went to fetch a drink of water."

"You lie!" Jem snarled.

Lynet glowered at Jem. "All right, I've had about enough of this. We'll discuss it in the morning, now off to sleep, the both of you!"



Megan woke to the sound of wailing. Oma Reagan had passed away in the night. Lynet and Hilda sat crying over her pallet. Megan came and held her grandmother's hand, and tried to comfort her mother and aunt as best she could.

Preparations for the funeral were brief. Beoden had a plot dug in the churchyard, which lay east of Raedford just outside of town. Everyone left Lynet and Hilda to their grief as the two women prepared the body for burial. Servants worked around them, and Megan gave herself willingly to her morning chores.

At last all was ready, and Megan came to let mother and Aunt Hilda know it was time. Mother would not stop crying. Megan remembered her vision of Opa Glyn amid

the brilliant light, and wanted to tell her, but the time did not feel right. Instead, she put her hand on her mother's arm. "She is happy, mother."

Lynet sniffed.

"She is with Opa Glyn, now. There is no pain, and no sorrow. Only peace."

Tears streamed down their faces, as Megan looked from her mother to her aunt.

"Mother, they're both in heaven, just like Friar Joseph says. Can you believe that?"

Lynet sobbed and swallowed.

"Mother, do you hear me? I'm not afraid of dying. Not any more." Megan squeezed her mother's arm. "There is nothing to fear."

Lynet turned to her daughter, her eyes narrowed as if seeing her for the first time.

"Gracious, child," Aunt Hilda said. "How sweet. In heaven she is, with papa." She bobbed her head.

"Would that I could know your words were true," Lynet said, squeezing Oma's hand.

"Oh, but it is! Mother, you must believe. You cannot see Oma, but she is never far from you. Opa, too. You will be with her again, someday."

Lynet took her daughter by the hand and squeezed. "You saw her last night, didn't you? Is that why Jem woke us all up?"

Megan remembered Devan's face in the darkness. She bit her lip, not knowing what to say.

"That's who it was you saw," Lynet insisted.

Megan looked down and smiled, unwilling to tell her the truth, and unwilling to shatter this small comfort. She nodded.

Beoden, Uncle Argus, Jem, and cousin Furgus came and bore the body away. All the household followed behind.

The afternoon sun rode high, and a light wind blew. Friar Joseph was there, too, but Megan remembered little else of that day. She wept bittersweet tears. For mother and Aunt Hilda she had tears of sorrow for their loss, but for Oma Reagan she cried tears of joy and felt sadness only for their parting.

Yet during all this, her thoughts grew more troubled. Why had Devan appeared to her, and what message was he trying to give her? Was he safe at home? Or was he still caught on the other side? The thought chilled her and made her fretting all the worse.



A tinker passed by late that afternoon. He led a mule weighed down with pots, knives, and a heavy whetstone. Uncle Argus greeted him at the gate, and the two spoke in quiet tones. Megan stood nearby, scattering grain for the chickens and only half listening.

"Right strange it is," the tinker said with a shake of his head. "Reckon he'll be back soon enough, though. Off in some wild adventure, something unnatural like as not—if you know what I mean."

"Have they sent people out to look for him?"

Megan tossed the remainder of the feed and drew near, suddenly curious.

"Spect they have. No one's found any sign of him."

"Who are you talking about?" Megan said.

Argus looked down at her with a disinterested air. "That witch's son. He's gone missing. It's just a rumor, though."

Megan whitened, her mind racing. Memories of Devan's screams echoed through her mind as she turned away. What had truly happened? They were separated. She cried after him, until his sounds were drowned out by her own.

Then the pit opened.

Megan shuddered and rose. Where *was* Devan? He came to her last night, obviously in need of help. If he was in trouble—she hurried inside and got her shawl.

Lynet looked up from the cook fire. "Dearest, if you would . . ." she began, but Megan was gone before her mother could finish.

Outside, the tinker was leading his pony away and Uncle Argus waved farewell. He turned just as Megan ran past, darting through the gate. "Oi! Where are you off to, girl?"

Megan never turned around, but kept running as fast as she could go.

## One for Joy

Megan had no trouble finding the stream and following it to the pool. Devan lay sprawled beside the water, his body still and cold. She rushed forward and caught him up, calling his name over and over. "Can you hear me? Devan? Please wake up!" He was not stiff, but his face had lost all color. *He can't be dead! Please, he can't be dead!*

Ethne. The thought came to Megan in a flash. That was what Devan had been trying to say the night before. He had been calling out his mother's name. She tried to pull Devan to his feet, and when that didn't work she thought to drag him, but he was too heavy.

Thinking fast, she lifted the shawl from her shoulders and threw it over his form, then turned and ran towards the wise woman's house.



Ethne scowled from the doorway and waved Megan away. "Be gone! No herbs. No potions, not today." She turned and closed the door.

Breathless, Megan came to a halt before the house. "Please! Ethne, it's important!"

The wise woman's muted voice came through the door. "I can do nothing more. Your grandmother is beyond my help, and I have troubles of my own."

Megan pounded on the door with the palm of her hand. "It's Devan, you have to come quickly!"

The door opened, and Ethne stood before Megan, her hand on her mouth. "Where?"

"It's not far. I tried to bring him but he's too heavy. You have a donkey?"

A short while later they returned to the hollow with the donkey in tow. When she saw her son, Ethne cried out, ran forward, and threw herself on him, sobbing. "What have they done to you? Oh, they can be so cruel!" After a moment she sat and pulled him into her lap, keening and stroking his hair.

"Will he be all right?"

"He lives, but his spirit hangs onto this world by a thread." Ethne's eyes were closed as she rocked. She looked up at Megan for a moment, then gazed around the hollow. "How did you find him?"

Megan pursed her lips, unsure of what to say. She wrung her hands.

Ethne's eyes fell on the clay jar, and she picked it up and smelled it. "No!" Her voice quavered. "No, no, my boy, what have you done? Oh, stupid fool."

"He didn't drink that."

Ethne turned to Megan, her eyes narrowed. "How do you know?"

"He had me drink it. I wanted to see my grandfather, and he said he knew a place." Megan didn't feel it could serve any purpose to hold back, and told the woman everything she could remember, leaving out the part about her grandfather. That was for Megan, alone.

Ethne moaned, casting her eyes around. Then she saw the circle. "Oh, foolish child!"

A glint of silver at the edge of the pool caught Megan's eye. It was Opa Glyn's ring. She stooped to fish it out of the water, then remembered Devan's apparition the night before. "I think he will be all right," Megan said. "He came to me last night."

Ethne looked at her once more.

"He was trying to say something, but I couldn't hear."

"He appeared to you?"

"Yes."

The wise woman looked away, lost in thought.

"This was all my idea," Megan said. "I feel terrible. I do hope he will be all right."

Ethne rose, and had Megan help hoist Devan's body over the donkey's back. Then slowly they picked their way down the trail until they came to the house.

It took both their efforts to drag Devan through the door and onto a pallet beside the hearth where he could be warm. Ethne had Megan fetch wood to stoke the fire. Then she threw a handful of herbs into the flames, filling the room with pungent sickening sweetness. Megan began to feel light-headed, but did not complain. Afterward, Ethne sprinkled a cup of powder onto the fire, which made it turn blue and throw yellow sparks. Then she sat on the other side of the hearth, and taking a round drum began chanting softly and beating a light cadence. Megan watched and kept the flames going.

The day waxed old, and the sun hid behind the low western hills. Ethne sighed and put down her drum.

"You're not giving up?" Megan asked.

Ethne rose, nearly toppling from stiffness as she got to her feet. "He will come, but I must have water." She gestured toward the fire. "Keep sounding the drum. Call to him."

Megan reached for the drum, and tapped on it, not sure of what to do.

Presently Ethne came back with a morsel of bread in her hand. She chewed as if she hadn't eaten in days.

"I was told that the spirits of good people cannot be summoned," Megan said. "Are you sure this will work?"

Ethne gazed at Megan with a narrow look. "Who told you this?"

Megan didn't know how to reply. "It's true," she stated.

Ethne shook her head. "Not summoned, child. Guided." She took a long drink then set down her mug.

Megan's hand faltered. "I don't understand."

"His spirit is lost between the two worlds. This will help him find his way."

"Why is it taking so long?"

"The dead live in a beautiful place. Not like here. He may not want to come back." Ethne trailed off for a moment as she tried to swallow back her tears. "Say his name as you sound the drum. His name is Bendil."

Ethne taught her a chant, and had Megan take it up while she went about preparing a small meal. After a while she had Megan stop and handed her a plate of stew and a rind of bread.

Megan softened the bread in the broth and tried to eat, but found she had no appetite. She put down the bowl and took Devan's hand. It felt warm. She did her best to hold back the tears, but to no avail.

Ethne came around the fire to sit beside her. "Oh, no, dearest. Musn't lose hope, no we musn't."

Megan sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Why won't he come?"

"Let's not think about that. Let's talk of other things." Ethne held Megan, rocking and crooning softly. "Why don't you tell me how the two of you met?"

Megan shrugged. "There's nothing to say, really."

"I sent him to gather mushrooms, and I came to find him with you."

"I . . . it wasn't what you think." Megan paused. "I go into the woods to be alone. I was on my way home, and I heard someone. I think I startled him."

"What was he doing?"

"Counting crows."

Ethne nodded, smiling. "A child's game."

"Do you know it?" Megan asked. "One for joy, two for rain . . ."

Ethne chanted the rhyme,

*One for joy*

*Two for pain,*

*Three for sun*

*Four for rain,*

*Five to grant a secret wish,*

*Six for first love's tender kiss*

*Seven for sickness*

*Eight for dying,*

*Nine for laughter,*

*Ten for crying*

Megan smiled.

Ethne's voice trailed off. "You like him, you do."

Megan looked into the wise woman's face.

"Perhaps you don't know it, yet, but I can see it in you. I can hear it in your voice when you call his name."

Megan blushed and tightened her lips. She brushed her hair back over her shoulder, then gave Ethne a nervous smile.

"Lucky boy he is," Ethne said. "You would make a good wife to him."

Megan shook her head. "My father would never allow it, and my brother . . . He couldn't bear having grandchildren who are cursed by magic."

"A curse, is it?"

Megan opened her mouth, but floundered for words.

"A curse it is not—yet it is no matter. Sight and Will come from the mother and not the father. Unless Devan marries another like himself, his children will know nothing of power."

Megan sighed again, perhaps she felt relieved at hearing this. She slowly bobbed her head, then smiled. "I do like him."

Ethne got up and moved around to the opposite side of the hearth. "Call to him once more. Tell him how you feel." She sat down.

Megan bit her lower lip, uncertain how to express what she felt. She took his hand once more. "Devan."

"Use his other name, child."

Megan cleared her throat. "Bendil." Her voice caught. "Bendil, can you hear me? Come back. I need you to live." Silence. "Bendil, I want you to live." The words faltered on her lips for a moment, then broke forth like the opening of a gate. "I love you . . . Did you hear me? Bendil, I love you. You have to come back. Come back and teach me the rhyme." Megan sighed. "You never said how many."

Devan stirred, then took a deep breath.

"My son!" Ethne got up and rushed to his side. "Oh, my son! My baby!" She threw herself upon his shoulders and sobbed with joy. After a very long moment, she straightened and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Devan looked at Megan, smiling with his eyes.

Megan bent forward and gave him a hug, uncertain how he might receive it. When she let him go, he smiled again. "Well, say something."

Devan gave her a helpless look. "I lost count."

"Of what?"

"The crows. You wanted to know how many there were, but I lost count."

"But you said you knew."

Devan gave her an arch look, then laughed.

"You're hopeless!" Megan punched him lightly on the arm.

"If you must know," he said with grin, "I'm sure there were eight, but you interrupted me at six."

"Six for . . ." Megan took a deep breath. Her face was very close to his. She looked into his eyes, and he did not look away; and then she was kissing him, and for that single thrilling moment all the world stood still.



## ∞ About the Author ∞

T. W. Abbott grew up the child of an Air Force master sergeant, and has lived in Spain, Texas (twice), Colorado, Guam, and Japan. He learned to love medieval fantasy during his teenage years while living in Okinawa, Japan, where he also learned to scuba dive and drive on the wrong side of the road. After graduating high school, he spent two years doing volunteer work in the Canary Islands. Upon his return to the US, he attended Ricks College, then Brigham Young University where he eventually earned a Master's degree in computer science.

He currently lives near Salt Lake City, Utah, with his wife and children. He is a senior software developer at a local telecommunications company. In his spare time he enjoys reading, movies, programming, video games, and occasionally dabbles in writing.

You can find out more about his upcoming projects by visiting [TWAbbott.com](http://TWAbbott.com). If you liked this story, drop him a line and let him know what you think.

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