

I stayed with the Good People, one of the names we call the fairy folk, for six months. I was sworn not to reveal their secrets, but I learned to disguise my appearance and use my other new powers. They told me how to get to the road that would take me to Rochfortbridge where Elizabeth and her family lived.

I left with Martha, confident that my human kin would not turn me away. I exited Sheehough forest not where I had entered it, but instead at the wide dirt road that led to my cousin's town, leaving my birthplace of Inchantatane far behind me. The road passed between lush hills and slowly descended to where Rochfortbridge lay nestled in a valley. A strong and fast-moving stream divided the town into east and west.

Along both sides of the road, buttery clusters of flowering gorse bushes gave a sweet coconut smell. I drifted into memory.

I was four years old and mama was weeding her garden. I spotted gorse bushes not far away and went to pick some of the pretty flowers for my mother. Then I felt tears rolling down my adult cheeks as I remember mama gently putting balm on my bleeding and thorn punctured fingers while tears rolled down the cheeks of child-me in the memory. I wiped my cheeks dry and rode on.

Entering Rochfortbridge, I nodded a polite greeting at several people I passed, but I didn't speak to anyone until I got to the Inn and relinquished Martha to the stable boy. I looked at my surroundings, noting that most of the homes had been built in the new square style, instead of rounded as the homes in my village had been. They were also made of wood--not stone--as some of the oldest buildings in my town had been. I went through the front door of the Inn to enquire about Elizabeth's address.

I stood at the right side of the open door and surveyed the room. There was a row of sturdy poles in the center that held up the ceiling and several long tables in rows, with benches currently crowded with travelers.

My eyes found the Innkeeper, a stout red-haired woman neatly dressed and wearing a white apron, who moved rapidly among the tables, bringing food and drink. I slowly moved to an open spot on a bench toward the back of the room. When I entered, the room had been filled with boisterous laughter and conversation, but each table I passed grew quiet, and I felt eyes on my back watching my progress.

My skirt swished over the clean reeds and straw on the floor, stirring a smell that reminded me of mama's kitchen.

When I sat down on the last bench, the young men already there exchanged wide-eyed glances. They smiled at me, but then they slid as far away as the bench would allow. One on the end slid a bit too far and fell on his arse. One of his companions hurriedly picked him up, "A bit too much ale, eh, Henry?" They laughed, but it sounded forced.

The Innkeeper bustled over, red-faced from the exertion of the running among tables she was doing. She opened her mouth to speak, but when her gaze met mine, her eyes grew round as saucers and she gaped like a dying fish for a few seconds before apparently regaining her voice.

"Good morning, m'lady. What may I get for ye?"

"Do you have tea?"

"Yes, m'lady."

"Tea, and toast with jam, please."

She actually curtsied before she left, to my shock.

My sharp ears picked up a whispered snatch of conversation from my companions at the other end.

"Could she be? I thought they were mere legends?"

"Well, why don't you jist ask, foolish! Shut yer mouth before she hears ye!"

I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat as I looked around at the rapidly emptying room, many people leaving half-finished plates behind, not very Irish of them.

*Do they suspect? Is my disguise not good enough?*

The innkeeper returned with my toast and tea. She started to turn away, but I laid my hand on her wrist and she jumped at the contact. "Do you know where I can find the home of Elizabeth MacSweeney?" My mother's sister, Elizabeth's mother, had also married a man named MacSweeney, though not related to my father, so my cousin and I carried the same last name.

Every bit of red fled the Innkeepers face, leaving her so pale her freckles stood out like measles. Tears wet her eyes. "Please," she whispered. "No' her. She is to be married," She pleaded, lower lip trembling.

I smiled in delight at this news, but she backed up and pressed her fist to her chest. “My cousin is getting married! What good fortune!” My smile faded as I noticed the Innkeeper’s expression. Her eyes had gone wide again and her mouth hung open.

“Cousin?” She squeaked. “Oh my--I apologize--I thought you were a...” She stopped. “Nevermind. Yer cousin lives out of town a-ways,” She said and pointed west.

I enjoyed my breakfast; the thick slices of bread piled generously with blackberry jam complemented the honeyed tea.

I finished my breakfast, paid with a few coins from the pouch on my belt, and went to collect Martha from the stable.

Cousin Elizabeth’s home was grand, much larger than the hut I had been born and raised in, but I felt no envy.

Instead of the common thatch, the sloping roof was constructed of overlapping wooden boards, painted red and gleaming in the sun.

A stone-strewn path led up to the front door, and a pretty lawn surrounded the place. I spotted a stable at back, but I wanted to greet my cousins first, so I tied off Martha at a post in the yard.

The house had many windows, on all sides, and a skylight. *Charming*, I thought.

I knocked on the door with the *bas-trann* a small piece of wood laid in a niche by the door. A woman in a black dress with a white apron and white bonnet which covered her hair answered the door. Like the Innkeeper, she paled and her gray eyes widened when she saw me, but she didn’t gape like a fish, to her credit. She cleared her throat. “Good morning, Milady. May I help you?” Her accent wasn’t Irish, but I was far from well-traveled so I didn’t recognize it.

“Yes, good morning. My name is Agatha MacSweeney, I’ve come to visit my cousin Elizabeth.”

“Oh, Miss Elizabeth,” the maid curtsied. “This way please, milady. I’ll announce you.”

She led me to a parlor with finely-crafted oak furniture and colorful cushions. There was paper on the walls, decorated with tiny blue and white flowers I didn’t recognize.

“Agatha! What a pleasant surprise! I have missed you so, dear cousin!” Elizabeth blew into the room and enfolded me in a hug.

Elizabeth had grown into a lovely young woman; she had none of the baby fat of her childhood. Her eyes were dark blue and her fair cheeks contained a rosy hue.

I admired her raven hair; she had it parted in the middle, and it was plaited into 3 intricate braids on each side, then at the back, they were woven together into one lovely thick braid that still left a good amount of hair to flow freely down her back.

*I'll have to ask her if she will do my hair like that!*

Elizabeth laid her hands on my shoulders and drew back to arm's length, smiling broadly. Immediately her smile faded and frown lines appeared between her eyes.

"Agatha?" She said in a tense voice. "What has happened to you?"

"Can we sit? I will tell you all."

I didn't though. I told her of the plague, and of my parents' deaths. Elizabeth wept during my tale, her blue eyes reddened and she dabbed her eyes with a white silk handkerchief. "I am so sorry my aunt and uncle are gone, Mother will be devastated too." Elizabeth patted my hand, as she said this.

"How is it that you are alive when everyone else in the village died?"

"Perhaps fortune smiled on me, I don't know why."

*I'll not tell her of my pact with the Banshee, though judging by everyone's reactions, people suspect. Lord knows how my relatives might react if they find out all of the truth of this matter.*

"I'm so sorry, Agatha. The plague was terrible, a few people died here, but not nearly as many as in Inchantatane. What will you do?"

"That is one of the reasons I'm here, dear Elizabeth. Do you need a maid? I hear you are to be married soon. Congratulations!"

*I am happy for her. I would have invited her to my wedding to my dear Thomas, had he lived.*

I pushed down the emotions that threatened to well up with memories of Thomas and I focused on what Elizabeth was saying.

“...But she is old and cranky. I would much rather have you as my maid, to help me get ready for the wedding. And of course, you will go with me to my new home. If you are willing...Oh!” Elizabeth clapped her hands. “Will you stay on, to be governess, to the children?”

I smiled. “Of course.”

“Splendid. I can’t wait for you to meet my Jonathan, He is a wonderful man-- and a banker.”

Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled as she went on to tell me all about her plans, and how much she adored her beau.

Later, I was troubled by fact that people seemed to be aware of something different about me, even though no one had said so. I decided to slip out and ask the Innkeeper about it.

The Inn was nearly empty when I arrived and walked up to the Innkeeper.

“You knew I was a Banshee, didn’t you? How did you know?”

“Well, your skin glows faintly, and your eyes look red when they catch the light. In the stories, the fey have shimmery skin, and among them, only the Banshees have red eyes. Also, we here in Ireland have lived alongside the fey for centuries, so in our hearts, we are able to tell the difference, unlike other places where they don’t live so close to the fairy-folk.

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