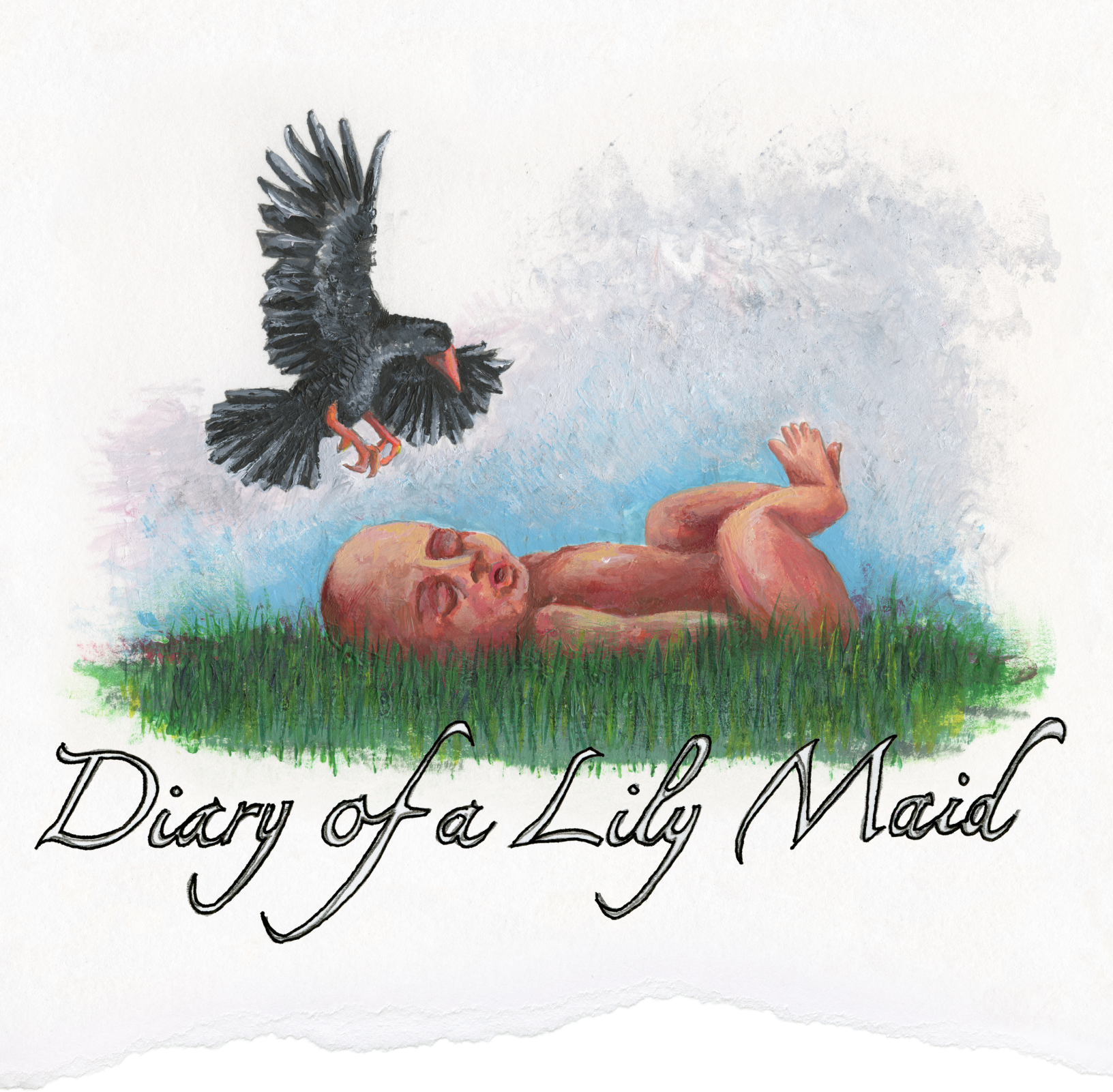

Diary of a Lily Maid

The earth here was once a rolling upland of fields and pastures, dotted with cottages. In the afternoons, I used to play in their yards, one after another, until the grasses of every pen had accompanied my feet.

When the sun strayed beyond the horizon, I would look out at those cottages from the grasses of my own yard, watching their windows flicker with the soft light of a hearth fire.

And when morning came, it offered their chimneys no rest; welters of smoke and steam from the cook fires billowed out the misty clocks on which I timed all of my breakfasts.

In those days, even when the summer flowers had passed, sprigs of rowan lined the walkways, fields of cloves still grew along the folds of every meadow, and clouds of thistledown took to the air with every breath of wind. Each puff carried a wish of its own, wisped away to some far-off granting realm until the wind breathed no more. Then we'd wish on something else.

When winter came, the last of the autumn leaves would rattle down from their branches, collecting like bonnets on the grass below, which was stiffened to its full height with a thin layer of frost. And the greens of holly and ivy, blazing red against the pale landscape, glinted a blush so bright that no chill could ever quell.

It was an age when nature still held sway, when every season would arrive and depart on its own. Needing no invocation from us, spring would return to the air in perfect time, gilding the figs and lilacs, covering the cottage roofs in houseleeks, and dusting the walkways with the pollens of every shade of bloom.

In what felt like the interstice between two glances out of my window, this world was taken from me. When I look out on that same stretch of land now, hoping for a familiar sight, I find nothing to sate that hope.

Whatever vegetation that managed to survive the chill of the first winter now grows like relics of a time when the sun still appointed morning. The wind that used to carry away our wishes now breathes a chill, no longer remembering the field where it began. And the countryside, having long been laced with footpaths and winding, cobbled streets, has become little more than funeral barrows, like rolling hills beneath a thickening skin of ice.

Every new day here opens and closes without pity for its tenants. In this world, the sleeping calendar turns slowly, having turned over twice since the first snowfall, when the green rushes along the riverbank quickly gave way to its shades, with every other floor of the earth to follow.

Each morning, I still stand in the yards where I used to play. The landscape I remember is gone, but if I close my eyes, I know the location of every vine, every leaf, every flower. I stand where they once grew, waiting beneath the low winter roof, hopeful that the darkness above me might lean back so I can catch the familiar sun and hold it still in the afternoon sky.

Once in a while I'm tempted by almosts, which is why I keep returning, like the spurned fisherman whose great fish graces the line before returning to the deep.

Today, the faint light above me is dimly glinting upon the mantle of frost below, and it is slowing thawing the memories of my son. Many timepieces have passed since his birth with no record of his life. I am not aware if he survived – whether he was swallowed by Thorn or by the cold – but I bear the only breathing memory of his entry into this world.

It happened on a strong morning, on the eve of the first of the three winters, before the cold was just as deeply wed to shadow in the day as in the night. But even here, a hope still flowers in the dark. Rumors can still be heard whispering of his survival.

Among all the ornaments of the night's sky, the loosely fastened moon had long rested just above Firth, its beams painting the thatched roofs of the market.

One of these roofs was covered in blooming houseleeks that no season stifled and no hand ever dared to pluck. Beneath that roof, in a home warmed only by the breath of those it housed, lived a lily maid, my mother, who taught me the art, the craft, and the secrets of that life. We spent our nights alone but for the guests we served, who spent that time feasting on porridges, ciders, breads, and sometimes a dole of meat, should luck be so charitable.

Every evening, as we set the table, my mother would take a single piece of the meal's bread, tear it in two, and stuff its halves into the pockets of her gown. After supper, as night began to settle itself into the sky, she would remove the crumbling halves from her pockets and place them into the heels of her slippers as an offering to the darkness, asking that its feet take their trample abroad, letting sunlight shine again in the coming morrow.

Then we would lay our bodies into the center of our beds, gaze up at the moon, and she would hum me to sleep, lifting her melodies from lullabies once sung by the Abbot of Firth, who had long since passed. In the age of the Abbot, Firth was home to more than one of the great music cobblers. But in the age of Laberyn, history is where Firth's songs reside. For many generations, our town has been a quiet and peaceful one, peopled by stablehands and fisherfolk. Few of them ever bore witness to the customs of the lily maids, and fewer could have identified their origins. But like many of Firth's oldest traditions, their wrapping conceals ancient secrets. And the reward for this custom, so my mother learned as a child from her mother before her, was the bloom of the new day.

Every morning when we awoke, the bread in my mother's shoes had vanished and been replaced by the first beams of sunlight. The beams that would thereafter light the village would always arrive first at our cottage, as if to clock in for work before beginning their day's itinerary. On no morning did she question her cashier or the payment she offered.

After my mother's passing, I continued to serve Firth, carrying out every tradition on my own, even humming the Abbot's melodies as I readied for slumber under the moon. One of the stablehands whom I had known as a boy, growing and learning beside me, helped bury my mother near the River Glass where the lilies bloom brightest. They cover the mounds where her mother was buried, and her mother before her, and they will soon cover their newest descendant and all those who follow.

The stablehand, so gentle and generous, had never known his father as I had never known mine, and he soon took to my side as I was taken to his. By the first color of spring, he was helping me collect food and attend to my guests. By full blush, he had joined me in humming the Abbot's bedtime melodies. And every morning, before daylight's first beams had shined upon my slippers, he had risen from bed to milk the ewes and began his journey to the fields to collect supper's grains and berries. Here, fruit and clover bloomed in the same season, and by the time he arrived each day, they were shining in the slanting light of springtime's nurturing sun. He would fill his basket beneath the flutter of Firth's birds, their endless songs like tinkling harps, rinsing off any grief from his day. And he always left some seeds and cherries behind for those birds as payment for their melodies.

When he returned with the day's food, we would walk to the River Glass together. That's where we spent our noons, at the water's edge, listening to the sound of the shore lapped by its warm waves, the caroling of the crickets, and the oars rapping against their oarlocks. There was nothing to do but listen and watch the shoaling waterfoul, the sun dancing on the river's surface, the current laboring around its stones. And then, at the same time every day, the east wind came rustling through the river reeds, shushing all of their crickets. That was our sign to return to the cottage so that supper could be ready for the diners by nightfall.

These days filled our calendars, the sights and sounds changing with the seasons, but the warmth of companionship remaining the same. Then, in the limbo dividing one winter's close and the full opening of its spring, I had become with child.

As I myself passed from child to maiden, and then toward mother, the diners, my suitor, and the child within me were not my only guests. Fate also aged beside me as a silent companion. But soon that companion would gain a voice, stitching its threads into a web of despair that would snag nearly every soul who walked the grasses of Firth.

With autumn not yet passed, and winter only beginning to signal its advent, a man from Lir arrived. The scent of a cook fire drew him to our cottage. Although he came for supper, by the time he arrived, all I had left was the bread in my pockets and a pot of white cider.

Every year at this time, when the bloom of all other fruits grew scarce, the lamb's apple would still grow full, their ivory skins shining as brightly as the coming winter sun. In the mornings, I collected them; in the afternoons, I pressed them; and in the evenings, I boiled them for nighttime's cider.

I did not offer my bread to the man from Lir, but I poured him the cider. And he was so enchanted by its flavor, and by the scents of the flavors he was too late to try, that he returned the next night. And the night after that. And he continued to return until he no longer left.

As timepieces tumbled onward in their intractable march, the coming winter donned its first coat upon the larches, gilding the pitched flanks of the pastures beneath the moonlight. And I entered into a sudden labor. My child seemed to be writhing toward his birth as if racing the changing of the seasons.

For the first time since I myself was a child, and the duty belonged to my mother, I did not collect the daily bread for my slippers. I just breathed, and breathed some more, until, moments before winter had finished displacing autumn, my child was born.

The next morning, as I lay in bed with my child and my suitor, the man from Lir, still occupying one of our rooms, rose early to gather the food, cook the meals, and serve the other guests so that I may rest with my newly expanded family.

As he walked outside, he stepped upon the first coat of winter's frost and saw the shades of autumn's flowers beginning to pass. But my cottage was still templed by the blush and rich perfume of its blooming houseleeks.

The man from Lir reached up, plucked a single flower from the leeks, and returned inside, placing the flower on the dining table.

That's when I awoke to a young farm boy crying out from the square, alerting all in range that the ewes and cows were issuing bloody milk.

When I left the warmth of my son and suitor, and saw the flower dying slowly and beautifully on the table, I knew where it had grown. I did not look to my slippers. I just smiled, both forged and sincere, at the man from Lir.

He was putting his own shoes on so that he may go to the square, speak with the farm boy, and understand the commotion. I asked that he stay. Better to rest now so that he may assist in serving the coming guests.

He sat down at the table, I followed, and we both began to eat. And he began to ask about my life. And I began to tell him. How my ancestors were the original settlers in Firth. How they had come from the Nameless Isle when all the lands were still nameless. How I had never seen any land of another name.

I was still telling my story when afternoon began to settle itself into the sky. An early dusk was already hanging low over the village. And I must have appeared troubled by this as the man from Lir questioned my welfare asking if there was anything he could do to ease my burden, perhaps watch my baby so I may rest.

I asked instead that he travel to the fields and collect enough red ribbon straw to be used as swaddling bands. He attempted and failed to disguise a puzzled expression with a promise to deliver bands enough to swaddle a giant.

When he left, I informed my beloved stablehand, still lying in bed, holding our child, that we, too, would be leaving shortly. But we would be headed to the river's shore where we spent so many noons.

The shadows in the sky had deepened by the time the man from Lir returned. He had not just collected, but assembled the bands, and his face was now stamped with an artist's pride.

As he handed it to me, he offered to assist in the swaddling. Although kind in the persistence of his gesturing, my child had not yet been seen by anyone other than my suitor and me. And I preferred it remain that way, although I did not say that. I asked that he stay behind and see to it that any guests needing shelter would be fed and held safely. And that he would lock the doors when the cottage was filled.

His face returned to its earlier confusion. I did not unscramble that confusion with an explanation of where I was headed. I just left.

I carried our baby in one hand. My stablehand carried my other hand in his hand. As we walked toward the River Glass together, the curfew bells sounded across the fields, echoing against the dark slopes at the village rim. We kept pace. Until I couldn't anymore. It had not been a full day since I had given birth and I grew tired. So we took a moment to rest. As I caught my breath, I looked up, and in the center of the night's sky, Thorn's dark star shone faintly, but strongly. Even as the clouds passed in front, it never left its post in the heavens.

Sensing distress, my stablehand scooped me up and began to carry me as I carried our child, who was too tiny and swaddled too tightly to carry anything of his own. Eventually, we covered the distance. We reached the shore, sat together, and watched the sky fall asleep. We watched its darkness swallow the moon and set Firth's lights trembling against the black drapes behind it.

Nighttime extended its residence in the sky and Firth's lights slowly lost their breath. Soon, the glow of its windows and fires became dimmer than Thorn's star, the only other observable light in the darkness.

With no bread for our shoes and no moon to receive our songs, we lay in silence. And we resolved to take turns sleeping. I was too restless to sleep, so I volunteered the first watch.

The world remained still until my betrothed and I traded places, and traded again.

Just before the thrust of tomorrow's dawn into the air, I heard unusual scratching at the earth. I awoke my stablehand and we sat motionless, our bodies statued in their posture, our ears straining to capture what our eyes could not.

The scratching continued, like sticks grinding themselves into dust trying to claw their way back into the trunks from which they were born. And it was growing louder. Whatever was making it was close.

I had hoped, by leaving Firth, we could escape what was coming for us. I lost that hope.

Braking the pace of our breath into silence, we fixed our gaze across the landscape separating us from Firth, where the paths and fields were lit only by the pale glow of Thorn's star.

Before long, we saw it: one of Thorn's crows, bandy-legged, hobbling along the rim of the slope, passing us, headed toward the village. As it moved away from our camp and into the distance, its claws scraped against the dry ground with a gait so awkward it appeared as though its bones were splintering with every step. But however feeble it looked, it was somehow even more forbidding.

Several timepieces later, before the crow had reached its destination, and before the darkness had let go of its captive moon, the haunter of Thorn itself showed up.

This was a creature outside of the common realm, a nameless heap of shadow uprooted from the black woods, as tall as the trees whence it came. And it came like a fury loosed from the bowels of some netherworld. At the moment Firth's bells would have tolled dawn, what we heard instead was its villagers crying out.

We looked down upon Firth's valley, still paralyzed in our bearing, still taking our air from shallow breaths. Under the light of Thorn's star, now glowing even more brightly, like some black night's sun casting down its purple beams, the farmers and fisherfolk could be seen scattering from their cottages.

Those who fled were permitted to flee. Those who fought were met with a different fate. I watched the Thorn King reach its arms up as if to snatch its lamp from the vault of the heavens, and then drive them down, mowing through Firth's men like a harvester upon his field. From our distance, we could hear the cries of the dying carried along the wind, their piercing chorus twisting around the trunks of the trees, carried across the pastures and plains.

The courageous among Firth's men offered no challenge, but they did not surrender, and the grass and dirt were reddened with their courage.

Every body was soon dressed in the colors of its own mortality, and no one would dare avenge any of them. Only the wind, when the killing was done, would mourn their loss with a lull.

At dark's end, the newly dead lay in a terrifying stillness.

The haunter of Thorn, having purged the town of all its life, walked among the harvest of its victims inspectingly, as if salting rows of slaughtered animals. Their open wounds, growing cold, would soon be a feast for Thorn's crows.

And through this, my child lay still.

When it was over, we continued to stare across the quiet land and empty air to Firth in near-disbelief and complete despair, watching it slowly fade from sight as the star overhead dimmed to its former glow. The only thought that diluted our despair was a shared faith that the three of us might yet survive. We wore that faith lighter than a patch of summer shade, but it was all we had.

After what felt like several timepieces, but must have been quite suddenly, a familiar scratching sound broke the silence.

During the violence, muted beneath its cries, one of Thorn's crows had apparently begun to stagger back to its woods. And had reached our camp. And had seen us as we saw it. Before we had a moment to react, it emitted a grating shriek that pierced the air, rising into the sky like an invocation.

The Thorn King, still lurking in the valley below, and giving no impression that it was fulfilled with its slaughter, spun to face the sound and lurched into pace, its galloping stride beating to an unnatural measure.

Whatever fragile faith I had previously held was replaced entirely with dread, assuring me that my son would soon be taken from swaddling bands to winding sheet.

But in this darkness, my panic was offered a hope.

The waterfowl, which I had not seen or heard all night, began slinking down the river's shore, south, toward the bend where the ferryman could always be found at this hour. I could hear the small bodies skipping through the water, but I couldn't see them, as the beams of Thorn's star seemed to withdraw their earthbound light, now only illuminating the sky. And dawn's sun still waited to shine. So shadows of a darkness deeper than night laid claim to the land between Firth and the river, blinding any who might approach.

Concealed by those shadows, using the waterfowl as my guide, I realized I might be able to reach the ferryman's raft in time, but there was no time to tarry.

I looked at my stablehand and he needed no further explanation. "Go" was his only parting word, its tone both hurried and tender. And I did. As I turned to follow the waterfowl, my betrothed set off in the opposite direction: toward the Thorn King. He would meet it out in the open, hanging on the impossible hope that he might thwart destiny and slow the baleful creature enough to prevent it from reaching me and our son.

As I raced southward, I looked over my shoulder once and couldn't find him in the darkness. But in my mind, I still see him standing tall in the meadow, brave, waiting to confront the Thorn King. In his final word to me, I saw a single bead of sweat on his forehead. Today, I picture him having erected himself like a statue but for that lonely bead soldiering its way down his brow. In my mind, he's still alive.

Through the darkness, I tread the grasses and sands of the shore until I made it to the ferryman's bend. Standing ankle deep in the river, my invisible guides returned to their usual silence, and I began wading through the unknown, my baby in one arm, the other reaching out in front of me, helping its hand to find the boat.

I knew by heart nearly every crook in the river's wind, but not this one. I had only been here once.

As a child, when I imagined up my wishes and assigned them to the thistledown, I made sure every puff that took to any gust carried one, and I'd watch it ride off to meet its granter. On occasion, I would chase them. It was my attempt to ensure their delivery. And on occasion, I would catch up to them, finding they had crashed into some foliage, having given up the journey. But once, I chased a puff from my yard in Firth clear to the ferryman on a single exhale of the long west wind. And I would have continued my pursuit until that wind lost its breath had its course not found an early end at the snatch of the ferryman's hand. He set down his staff, reached out, and plucked it from the air. Tucking it into the pocket of his robe, he said he would take it beyond the waves.

I didn't respond. I spun around and ran home faster than my feet had carried me on the trail of my wish. I never returned to that part of the river and I never again wished for a child.

I didn't anticipate then that my first reunion with the ferryman would be in the blackest night, as a mother, with speeding death aimed in my direction.

Still piloting my course by sound, I made my way through the shallows, back and forth, arm extended, hoping his boat would be stationed wherever I reached next.

I reached and reached, and my hands closed on nothing. There was no ferryman.

My pulse began to flutter itself into a sickening panic. I wanted to call out to him. Maybe he's just down the river. Maybe he's still within reach. But I knew that would only let Thorn gain my position again. So I closed my eyes against the darkness and I quieted my breathing and my thoughts. If I could mimic the stillness of the waterfowl, I could hear the faintest lapping of waves against the hull of the ferryman's boat.

I listened and listened. There was no ferryman.

All I could hear was the approaching of Thorn's crows. And I knew my son must be set adrift before dawn was born and its glow would give him away.

So I laid him down on the shore and set out to build a raft, using the sticks and brambles along the water's edge. Finding nothing of use, my pulse began to consider its earlier panic.

That's when I heard the familiar sound of the waterfowl.

I returned to the water, reached out, and touched what felt like reeds weaving themselves. I could feel the forest's pitch seeping from the strands. They were bound in knots, floating on the river's surface.

Before relief had gained its seat in my spirit, I ran for my son and brought him to the nature-woven raft. I placed him atop it and, for a moment, it bobbed at my feet as if unwilling to leave. But then, with a frightening swiftness, the river claimed it. And the darkness quickly hid it from sight.

I stood still. Silence gripped the landscape. I could feel the undertide gently pulling at my feet. And all I could do was hope.

Then came the pulse from Thorn's star. It was almost blinding. The beams were thick and agitated; the erratic blaze at its heart was nauseating. And then it faded. And vanished. Completely.

Then, as the night's sky began its ebb, its darkness receding with first light, the river ripples glinted of the faintest silver. I could see the full breadth and stretch of the waters. And I could see that their current had already carried my son beyond the distance of my eyes. In my mind, to that far-off granting realm where my only remaining wish could come true.

I turned my gaze from the water. Over my shoulder. Toward Firth. Toward death. But the haunter of Thorn was gone, its departure as eerie as its advent.