

*“The Isle of Enchantment” from The Tins and the Pale Lady**

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Chapter Eight: The Isle of Enchantment

When they opened their eyes they found themselves in a glass house, and were seated at a long table laden with food and juice. A man and a woman sat at the ends of the table, and introduced themselves as Niamh and Aengus. They were dressed in golden robes, and had blue paint in a circle around their eyes. Niamh’s golden hair hung in tresses, and at the end of each plait hung an emerald bead.

‘You must be hungry,’ Niamh said.

‘Starving,’ Danny said, his mouth watering.

‘Yes, thank you,’ Kate said, poking Danny in the ribs.

‘Oh, sorry,’ Danny said.

‘Eat up,’ Aengus said.

The food was so delicious and the Tins were so hungry that they ate far too much and too quickly and burped several times. It was embarrassing, but their two hosts laughed, delighted.

But then, Niamh and Aengus disappeared and slowly the table and remaining food disappeared, and when their seats disappeared, the Tins fell on their bums.

The glass house transformed itself into a glass bridge over the sea. They got to their feet but before they quite realised what was happening, the bridge disappeared too, and they were floating above the sea. They telepieed each other furiously, trying to understand what was happening.

* **Note by the writer:**

The Tins and the Pale Lady is what might nowadays be called a mashup of characters and plot from the author’s imagination and from the legends of Tír na nÓg, or Hy Brasil. Kate and Danny are twins, who live on the Western shore with their father, Cormac, a fisherman, and their mother Estrella. When they were small children, they pronounced ‘Twins’ as ‘Tins,’ so they became known as The Tins and are so close that they communicate by telepathy, or what they call ‘telpy’ – hence the invented verb, ‘tel pied’. Their mother ‘walked into the sea,’ leaving them sad and puzzled, but slowly they suspect that she is really Niamh, a 5,000 year old Sióg or fairy who was once the lover of the ancient hero Oisín. The great whale Miolmór guides them to the Land Beneath the Sea, where the raven Fiach conducts them on numerous quests to discover their true identity.

Something dark was appearing from the direction of the sun. At first they thought it was a cloud, then as it drew closer, they were certain it was a flock of birds, but then as it was almost upon them they shook their heads in disbelief.

It was a large shoal of salmon, swimming high above them through the air. A very beautiful woman floated up to greet the shoal. When she kissed the leading salmon, she disintegrated into thousands of pieces of dazzling colour which sparkled over the sky.

The colours formed into the woman again, and she floated towards the Tins.

‘Hello, Tins,’ she said. ‘I am Nuala.’

The Tins stared at her, their mouths open.

‘Did you...?’ Danny began.

‘Did you kiss a salmon?’ Kate asked.

‘And explode?’

‘Into thousands of pieces?’

‘In all those colours?’

Nuala smiled.

‘I kissed the Salmon of Knowledge,’ she said. ‘One day you too will recognise and kiss this power.’

The Tins looked up. The salmon were gone.

‘And will we explode like you?’ Kate asked, her eyes wide.

‘Yes,’ Nuala said. ‘Yes, you will.’

‘No way!’ Danny said. ‘I’m staying in one piece.’

Kate held the same opinion, but decided to be polite, especially as Danny had said it already.

Nuala smiled, and reached out to embrace them. They were bathed in the colours they had seen when Nuala had disintegrated, and it was a beautiful, warm feeling. They closed their eyes, hoping it would never end, but when they opened them again, Nuala was gone.

‘Where’d she go?’ Danny demanded. He thought for a moment. ‘It doesn’t matter, does it? That was cool.’

‘Yes,’ Kate agreed, smiling happily. ‘Cool.’

They were floating aimlessly above the sea, with not an island in sight.

‘I can’t believe it that I don’t mind being here, just like this, not knowing what’s going to happen next,’ Danny said, baffled but happy.

‘Me neither,’ Kate laughed. ‘We could be floating here for eternity. And I certainly never thought that I wouldn’t mind being alone with you for eternity!’

Danny frowned.

‘That’s very surprising.’

So instead of wondering what was going to happen next, they breathed in deeply, closed their eyes and thought about all the wonderful colours Nuala had shown them.

‘I could look at these forever,’ Kate said quietly.

They forgot about time but when Danny opened his eyes again he thought he saw a green island floating in the turquoise ocean.

‘Look, Kate,’ he said, pulling at her sleeve. ‘Do you see what I see?’

‘Yes, that’s it,’ Kate said.

‘What do you mean, that’s it?’

‘I saw it with my eyes closed.’

‘Kate, are we moving towards the island or is it moving towards us?’

‘It’s moving towards us, I think.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

They watched as it grew larger and larger to them.

‘How can an island move?’ Danny wondered to himself.

The shore of the island moved beneath them and they floated down to the beach which stretched as far as the eye could see, and they were dazzled by its golden sand. Apart from sand, the only thing on the beach was a rock, some distance away, so they walked towards it and were only a little surprised to see Fiach on it, grooming as usual.

‘The thing to remember,’ he said without bothering to look at them, ‘I say, the thing to remember is that the Isle of Enchantment, which is where you are now, in case you hadn’t noticed – I say, the Isle of Enchantment is more than one isle. Hmm. Let me see. For you it is perhaps several isles, but in reality it is a number beyond your understanding. However, several will do nicely for now, thank you.’

‘What are they called?’ Kate asked.

‘Oh, I forget. You did well out there, floating in the middle of the ocean with nowhere to go. I didn’t think you’d be able to just be, and not be afraid of what was going to happen next.’

‘No?’ Danny asked, frowning. He was more than a little tired of Fiach speaking to them like that.

‘No. I find it rather difficult myself, to tell you the truth. No, I didn’t think you had it in you, and that’s a fact. And neither did you.’

They had to admit he was right.

‘So, you don’t know what these isles are called?’ Kate asked now that she could see that Fiach was pleased he had made a point.

‘The isles? Oh yes. Let me see. I’m not saying you’ll come in contact with all of these, these particular ones, mind. As I said, there are isles without number and the ones you see depends on how you approach them. If you are afraid, then they’ll be a bit scary; if you are happy, then they will be bliss. Which ones do I like? Hmm, let me see,’ he said to himself, and they could have sworn he was smiling, although how you could tell with a raven was hard to say.

‘There’s the Isle of the Shouting Birds. Yes, I like that one. Great fun. The Isle of the Hermit – you go there when you want some peace and quiet. The Isle of the Miraculous Fountain – you’d like that. And so on and so on and so on. But there’s really no point in me telling you – you have to discover them for yourselves.’

‘We’ll never get through them all,’ Kate said.

‘No, but you’re not supposed to. Only the Higher Síoga know them all. But to get back to the point. The point is, they will get through you. Hmm. You will have your

favourites – but only for a while, because then you will go to the Isle of Forgetfulness, and that’s a barrel of laughs. So, goodbye, for now, and good luck.’

Fiach was wishing them good luck? They recovered in time to thank him before he flew away.

‘What do we do now?’ Kate asked.

‘I think we stay very still and think of nothing.’

‘That’s right, brother of mine. You’re improving, I must say.’

‘What? A compliment?’

‘Shh,’ she teleplied. ‘You’ve to think of nothing, remember.’

Nothing happened for a long time, and they were about to give up when they noticed they were in a different place altogether.

‘How’d that happen?’ Danny whispered.

‘By not thinking, I suppose,’ Kate whispered back.

It was a large isle, with woods of oak and yew on one side, and on the other a plain with a small lake which had some rocks around it.

They walked to the lake, and there was an Ogham stick among the reeds.

‘Can you make it out?’ Danny asked.

‘The... Isle ... of ... the ... Eagle.’

They looked up into the dazzling blue sky. In the distance they saw what appeared to be an aeroplane but as it came closer they saw that it was a giant eagle carrying something in its beak. This was no ordinary eagle though. It had no feathers. The Tins scurried for cover in the woods and the eagle landed at the edge of the lake. The Tins were scared of it at first, then they realised that it was very old, like the eagle they had seen on the Isle of Many Fears.

‘Isn’t that...?’ Danny pointed.

‘The Naked Eagle?’

‘But this one’s huge.’

‘I know. But I think it’s the same one.’

When the eagle had finished eating, two young eagles came out of the sun, and landed beside the Naked Eagle, a sapling laden with berries in each of their beaks. The eagles began their feast of berries, holding the sapling in one talon, and the juice from the berries dropped into the lake and turned it red.

The young ones picked at the insects which tormented the Naked Eagle, and when they had finished, the old bird bathed in the red water of the lake. Then the three of them ate more berries. After a while they hopped into the lake and the old bird was washed again.

This happened three times until at the end, the Naked Eagle’s feathers had grown back and they were shiny and full and he looked as young and as strong as the other two. Then they took off, and flying three times around the isle, they flew into the sun and disappeared.

‘The Naked Eagle got his clothes back,’ Danny said.

‘And he looked as young as the other two. How did they do that, I wonder?’

‘Will we have a swim?’ Danny asked lightly.

‘Where those birds have just cleaned themselves? No thanks.’

But some force made them run and jump head first into the red water. They couldn’t help but dive to the bottom, though it got darker and colder the deeper they went, and without noticing how, they were on another isle.

This one was small and round, but it had very tall, steep cliffs, over which hung the branches of apple trees in blossom.

‘I’d love an apple,’ Kate said, as she leaned down to pick up a fallen blossom.

‘I wouldn’t mind one, either,’ Danny said as he leaned down to pick up another.

They smelled the blossoms, and it was such a lovely scent that they closed their eyes to enjoy it. When they looked again, a large red apple had grown out of the blossom.

‘Go on, eat it,’ Fiach said from the branch of a tree. ‘They’re delicious.’

‘Hello, Fiach,’ they said.

‘Eh... Hello. Now look,’ he said, training his eyes on a tree opposite him. An Ogham sign was etched into it. ‘What does it say?’

‘The Isle of Apples,’ Danny said.

‘Oh,’ Fiach said, surprised. ‘Very good.’

They crunched their teeth into the apples and the juice splattered all over their faces and into their eyes, but they were so refreshing and delicious that they didn’t mind.

They had hardly swallowed their last bite when they found themselves floating above the sea again, and what seemed like a tall tower of chalk was drifting towards them. As they landed on it, they realised that they were among the clouds, and in the courtyard of a fort, the walls of which surrounded the island, and on the walls were large houses painted a dazzling white.

‘Well, if they are there and we are here, I suppose we ought to have a look,’ Kate said, meaning the houses.

‘Let’s start with the biggest one,’ Danny said.

The whiteness of the largest house was so strong in the sunshine that they had to shield their eyes as they approached.

‘Anyone at home?’ Danny called in the large hall, his voice echoing around the walls.

There was no reply, and the Tins looked at one another and tried another room, and then another, and then still another, and there was no reply. When they had tried twenty rooms, they were convinced no one lived here and were about to leave when Danny walked into a room in the middle of the house.

‘Kate, come quickly,’ he teleped.

‘What’s that smell?’ she asked as she caught up with him.

The room was enormous, like you would expect in a palace, with three stone pillars in the centre, but they didn’t support the roof and only went half way to the ceiling.

‘Look,’ Kate whispered, clutching Danny’s arm.

A small white cat was playing on the pillars, jumping from one to the other and back again. It looked at the Tins for a moment before continuing its game, which puzzled the Tins.

‘This room has only three walls,’ Danny whispered.

One wall was decorated with brooches of gold and silver, decorated with crouching cats and flying eagles.

The second was decorated with three necklaces of gold and silver, decorated with horses dancing in opposite directions.

On the third hung three magnificent swords.

‘Do you think they’re for us?’ Danny asked.

‘Something tells me they’re not,’ Kate said.

They stared at them until they were distracted by a delicious smell. At the long end of the room was a table laden with meat and bacon, six strange vegetables and a delicious red drink.

‘It’s time to eat,’ Danny said, sitting at the table.

‘I’m starving,’ Kate said.

They ate and drank until they were drowsy.

‘Look,’ Kate said, pointing to the floor.

The shining quilts and pillows were too much to resist, and soon the Tins were cuddled up and fast asleep.

The sun was rising when they woke.

Kate stretched, but Danny stopped her in mid-yawn.

‘There’s someone here,’ he teleped.

Kate strained to see behind the table, and sure enough, a large black cat standing on his hind legs and dressed in knee boots, a hat with a feather in it, a booty bag around his waist, and a sword in his right paw, was in the room, looking around him, his eyes glowing with greed. He went to one wall, his left paw outstretched, but at the last moment he was distracted by the gold and silver objects on another wall.

The Tins huddled into their quilts so that only their eyes weren’t covered and even then they hardly dared to watch.

In the end the black cat decided on the horse necklaces, but no sooner had he lifted the first one off the wall, than the Little White Cat leapt from one of the pillars and struck the black cat in a ball of flame. The black cat didn’t even feel what happened to him, but fell to the ground in a heap of smoking ashes.

When the Tins recovered from the shock, they looked up to see the cat playing happily on the pillars again, as if nothing had happened. They tried to sneak out of the house, Kate leading the way, but Fiach was waiting for them, perched on a beam over the great hall, grooming as usual.

‘Not so fast,’ he said.

‘Fiach!’ Kate shouted in surprise. ‘You gave me a fright.’

‘It’s you,’ Danny said for want of something better to say.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ Fiach snapped. ‘Now look’ He nodded towards an Ogham stick.
‘What does it say?’

‘The Isle of... something...’ Kate said.

‘The Little White Cat,’ Danny finished.

‘Right. You are on the Isle of the Little White Cat, who has shown you every hospitality, and what do you do? You sneak away like ungrateful beggars.’

‘We should have thanked her,’ Kate said.

‘Well, The Little White Cat wouldn’t understand your thank yous, thanks all the same. But she would appreciate you showing your gratitude.’

‘How?’ Danny asked.

‘There’s a big heap of ashes in there, and an empty jar on the table. Scoop up the ashes into the jar, and throw the jar into the sea. That will please her very much.’

The Tins didn’t like the idea of cleaning up the black cat’s ashes, but they had done so many things they would never have dreamt of doing that they just gave each other a weary glance and went back into the triangular room.

The Little White Cat was still happily jumping from one pillar to another, but they kept a close eye on her as Kate held the jar and Danny swept the ashes into it with a broom he had found. As they were leaving they turned to watch the Little White Cat one last time.

That she looked so innocent and yet was so dangerous if you broke her rules was a big lesson for them.

‘That’s what it’s supposed to be,’ Fiach said from the beam above the hall. ‘I didn’t think you could resist taking the necklace, especially.’

‘You mean...’ Kate asked, eyes wide, ‘you mean you thought we’d...’

‘And if we had we’d... You expected us to go up in a ball of flame!’ Danny shouted.

‘Well, yes... Now throw that jar as far as you can out to sea.’

‘You do it,’ Kate said, handing Danny the jar.

He liked throwing things and he was good at it.

He threw it in a big arc but the sea was so far down that he couldn’t see the splash.

‘I suppose it sank,’ Danny said, turning back to Kate. ‘Here, what’s that necklace doing on you? Oh Kate, don’t tell me you stole it!’

‘What?’ Kate was astonished to find a necklace around her neck. She hastily took it off and stared at it. ‘I never touched it, I swear,’ she said, very scared.

‘Are you sure?’ Danny demanded.

‘Yes!’

‘I’m not shovelling your ashes into a jar,’ Danny said.

Kate’s hands shook, but the necklace was so beautiful that she couldn’t take her eyes off it. It was the three-layered necklace of dancing horses who seemed to be dancing in rows one above the other.

‘But-’ Kate said as she looked up at Danny. Her mouth fell open as she stared at his neck. ‘Danny...’

‘What?’

She pointed at his neck.

‘What?!?’

‘You have a necklace.’

Danny went pale and clutched at his neck. Sure enough, there was a metal necklace around it. He took it off. It was a triple necklace too, but with eagles instead of horses.

He was about to turn and throw it into the sea, but Fiach was sitting on the rampart.

‘Silly girl, silly boy, calm down, calm down!’ Fiach said quickly.

‘But... but ...’ Danny stammered.

‘Your necklaces are rewards for service to The Little White Cat.’

‘Are you sure?’ Danny asked, still nervous. The fate of the black cat had made a big impression.

‘Of course I’m sure!’ At which Fiach flew away.

‘It suits you,’ Kate said, smiling. She was relieved, but she looked as if she had been up all night.

‘How do we get out of here?’ Danny asked. He wanted to be as far away from the Little White Cat as possible, as soon as possible.

‘She’s not so bad,’ Kate teleped before they closed their eyes and thought of nothing.

When they opened their eyes it seemed as if they had gone from the frying pan into the fire. They were on a small island, but it was surrounded by a wall and a ring of flame was making its way around the top of the wall. Fiach was perched on a stick, grooming, of course, but as soon as he saw the Tins, he flew away.

‘Some help he is,’ Danny grumbled, and he was about to pass the stick when he noticed it was an Ogham stick, which read “The Isle of Fiery Walls.” He looked at Kate but she shrugged her shoulders and clutched her necklace.

‘This has happened because we were scared,’ Kate said. ‘Remember what Fiach said?’

It was no surprise that it was very hot here, and there was no shelter so they were sweating badly. There was nothing for it but to keep walking to see if they could find a sign, but very soon they were out of breath and exhausted.

‘Three more steps and that’s all,’ they agreed by telepy. ‘Then we’ll lie down.’

The flame had almost made one circle of the wall and the Tins felt hotter and hotter as it came back.

They were gasping by now, but they spotted an opening in the earth at the centre of the island and set off on the winding path towards it. When they were almost there, the path turned away from the opening towards the wall, and they had no choice but to

follow it. As they reached the wall the flame stopped above them, and they were sweating so much that their eyes stung.

Kate had just about enough energy to look up.

‘Look,’ she teleped, touching Danny’s elbow.

The fire was dying, and very suddenly it was dead. They set off again towards the opening and were welcomed into the earth by very beautiful men and women.

‘Come in,’ they said, ‘join us.’

The Tins couldn’t help but feel happy. They felt wonderful, in fact, and the music was the loveliest they had ever heard. Everyone wore beautiful golden garments, and drank from silver chalices.

‘Come,’ one of the women said. ‘We want you to meet a very special person.’

They were brought to a table laden with delicious breads and vegetables and meat and fish, and the finest wines. At the head of the table was an old man with grey hair and glasses. He was small and feeble, but the light glowed on his skin. He was surrounded by his wife, and two daughters and a son.

‘Ah, the Tins!’ he said, delighted. ‘Come here to me!’

He took their hands and smiled just for them, and they felt that they were filled with light.

‘Will you have some wine?’ he asked them.

‘We’re too young,’ Kate said.

‘Too young? Well, so you are. What will we do about that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Danny said.

‘Wife,’ he said, ‘mix some water with the wine for the Tins. It’s a shame to water such a fine wine,’ he said to the Tins, his eyes twinkling, ‘but what can we do? You must have a drink with me, for something wonderful has happened to me today.’

‘What’s that?’ Danny asked.

‘Oh,’ he said very gently, ‘that is something that will take your whole life for you to know. Now drink up.’

Everyone drank, and even though it was mostly water, the Tins’ drink was delicious, and they were so thirsty they drank it back.

They were still licking their lips when the old man became younger, and younger and younger until he was the same age as the Tins. He stopped, his eyes almost closed with laughter, and he was dressed in short trousers, an open necked shirt, and a jacket with a badge on it. ‘Thank you,’ the boy said. ‘I enjoyed our drink together very much.’

Then he got smaller and smaller until he disappeared, and a beautiful tall being of light smiled at them instead.