

Excerpt from

Flamme und Harfe

by

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- Book One: Two Women
- Prologue

swem nie von liebe leit geschach,
dem geschach ouch liep von liebe nie.

(Those who have never felt pain from love,
have never felt joy from love either.)

Gottfried von Straßburg, Tristan

Once upon a time beyond history, in an age almost beyond imagination, there was a girl as fair as the moon, sitting on a horse and watching a fire. The bonfire is a part of history, but the princess is a part of legend.

Tristan and Isot, Tristram and Isolde, Essyllt and Drust, Yseult and Drystan: the spellings have changed, but they have always been lovers -- the greatest lovers the world has ever known. Most accounts of their story have begun with the man.

This one begins with the woman.

#

Young Yseult reined in her mount and turned to look back at the Rock of Cashel, her home for the first seven years of her life. The fire Palladius had lit for the baptism of her father King Aengus illuminated the mount of kings with a glow to rival that of the rising sun.

Behind her, she heard her mother and the old druid Boinda rein in their mounts as well, but she didn't turn. She couldn't let her mother see the tears on her lashes -- they were unworthy of the daughter of Yseult the Wise, Queen of the Tuatha De Danann, kingmaker of the island of Eriu. Yseult knew that, yet there were the tears anyway.

Her mother shed no tears.

She blinked rapidly and squared her shoulders. Strands of her long, fair hair were coming loose from her braid in the early dawn breeze. She raised a hand to tuck them behind her ear and wipe her cheeks before anyone noticed. Surely she would see her half-brothers and father again.

"Come, Yseult," her mother said gently. "It is several hours to Sidhe ol Femuin. And after that, there is a long journey north ahead of us."

Yseult continued to gaze at the fire. "Why did Father let Palladius drive the staff through his foot if it meant we had to leave?"

It was not her mother the queen who answered, but the old druid Boinda. Yseult turned in her saddle to look at him. His beard was whiter than her hair, but his hands on the reins were strong and his voice was clear. "Palladius promised him that none of his sons would die a violent death, and no one would be king of Cashel but his own descendants."

It wasn't fair. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. "But it is the queens of the Tuatha De Danann who determine who is king," Yseult insisted.

"Your father is trying to change that," Boinda said.

Her mother shook her head. "Even now it is changed. The marriage to the land is a symbol, no more. The assembly chooses the successor to the king."

"And Aengus wants to usurp the power of the assembly as well," the druid

murmured.

Yseult wondered how her mother could remain so calm. Perhaps that was why people called her Yseult the Wise, while she was only Yseult the Fair. She wanted to be Yseult the Wise someday too. If only it were possible to be wise without being calm. She swallowed and looked back at the fire. "So that means father likes being king better than he likes us."

"I don't think he understood that he was making a choice," the queen said softly.

"If he didn't, he should have." Boinda's voice held more bitterness than her mother's. "The queen of the Tuatha De Danann could hardly remain with the Christian king of Eriu."

"Which is why we must continue on our way. Come now, Yseult."

The sun had just appeared beyond the rim of the world behind them, and the Rock of Cashel hung above the horizon, illuminated by the first rays while the earth below was still muffled in night.

"It looks like a magical island," Yseult said.

Boinda nodded. "Tír na nÓg. The land of youth."

"My youth." Yseult whirled her mount around, towards the east and the rising sun, leaving the fire of Palladius behind.

- Chapter 1

From across the sea he will come,
His head shaven,
His head full of madness,
His head in a hole in his cloak,
The head of his staff bent.

He will chant impiety,
From a table in the front of his house;
all his people will answer,
"Amen, Amen."

From Muirchu's Life of St. Patrick

Queen Yseult of the Tuatha De Danann, consort of High King Loegaire, led the party of riders up the Hill of Slane, away from the road that would take them to Tara. It was a rich procession of bright cloaks and colorful jewelry, bronze and gold glinting at wrist, waist, and neck and on the bridles of the horses, but the expression on the faces of the riders was somber, the group quiet. Even the youngest, fourteen-year-old princess Yseult, was uncharacteristically serious.

The queen kept her eyes on the top of the hill and the smoke rising from the summit. Another fire. Seven years later and far to the north, another fire burned, more important than the one she had fled all those years ago. And nothing she'd done since had been able to stop it; not her marriage to Loegaire and her support of him as High King, not her work among the greatest filid of the land, not her attempts to keep her people, the Feadh Ree, from turning their backs on the public life of the Gaels in answer to the growing disrespect for the old ways.

She clenched the reins of her mount tighter, and the mare threw her head back, snorting. The queen let out a sigh and loosened the reins again.

The party of Feadh Ree riders reached the summit and approached the circle of Christian believers, drawn by the ribbon of smoke snaking into the sky, dark gray against pure blue. They drew up at the edge of the gathering, the queen and her brother Murchad at their head. A few of the white-clad figures glanced behind them, but most kept their attention fixed on the fire and their master Patraic.

"It's sacrilege," Murchad muttered angrily, but he was as unwilling as she to attack the peaceful group of worshipers on the crest of the hill.

No, she couldn't let her fear show, couldn't allow those with the power of knowing to feel it. She was Yseult the Wise, and she had to fulfill that role.

"But very effective," she said. The smoke must be clearly visible at Tara, and come night, the residents of the seat of kings would be able to see the glow of the flames themselves.

The mounted warriors accompanying them shifted in their saddles, knowing a bonfire lit the week before Beltaine could only bring bad luck.

"Can't we stop him?" Murchad's wife Nemain asked.

Yes, that was the question. She had seen fire too often in her dreams, the dreams of the end of the old ways. "I don't know," the queen said, answering more than Nemain was asking.

Patraic had ignored their approach, but now he turned, gazing directly at her. "Let no one forget. The lesson learned here is the lesson of Christ's dominion."

The wind shifted, as if obeying the will of Patraic's god, and the smoke from the bonfire wafted toward the party of riders, stinging their eyes. The horses began to snort

and stamp, nervous at the smell of the fire, but they were well-trained warhorses, and they didn't break away.

The man behind this fire was much more dangerous than Palladius, the last Christian wise man sent by Rome. A dogmatic moralist, narrow-minded and intolerant, Palladius had appealed to little more than the small, scattered communities of the Britain and Romans and the ambition of leaders like Aengus, whose conversion held more calculation than conviction. But Patraic was different: his former master had been a druid, and he knew the ways of Eriu, knew the power of symbol and illusion. It was a deliberate provocation, this fire, deliberate and clever. And what a sense of drama. Lighting a huge bonfire in the week before Beltaine was an outrageous stroke of brilliance.

Queen Yseult rode forward.

"What is the meaning of this?" she called out from the edges of the gathering. The question had the ring of command, but Patraic stood his ground, looking almost regal himself in his long white robes.

"It is the lighting of the Easter fire, lady."

Seven years ago she had fled before the fire of Palladius; she would not flee this time. Smoke filled her nostrils and burned her eyes, but she urged her reluctant mount through the circle of worshipers, and they parted to let her pass. Patraic might be their prophet, but she was the queen of the Tuatha De Danann, the kingmaker herself.

She drew up in front of Patraic without dismounting. If he wanted to play a game of symbols and stories, she would be happy to oblige him. She had the height and presence of those with the pure blood of the old race, and sitting her mare, she towered above him. The sight would be an impressive one, she knew. Her long braid

was the same shade of gold as the torc around her neck and the bracelets on her upper arms; her mare was as white as her tunic, and her cape a deep royal purple. The Christian wise man in the white robes of a druid was small and plain in comparison.

The wind shifted again and the air between them cleared. "I am certain you know that according to our ways, it is sacrilege to light a bonfire in the week before Beltaine," she said.

Patraic shook his head. "It is Beltaine which is a sacrilege to the true belief of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins on this day."

The queen looked down at him, using her power of knowing to probe his mind. There was respect there -- respect and stubbornness. "We allow you to practice your religion among the people of Eriu, and you name one of our greatest festivals a sacrilege?"

"Your festivals are full of sin in the eyes of our Lord," the Christian wise man replied quietly. "I would bring the people of Eriu the one true religion."

Suddenly Queen Yseult knew: If they did not put out this fire, it would burn in the memory of mankind for centuries.

"Murchad, Aidenn, Gamall!" She called out the names of Fianna and Feadh Ree warriors. "See to it that this fire is extinguished!"

Her brother and the others dismounted and pulled blankets from their saddlebags. She urged her mare through the crowd again, rejoining her daughter, niece, and sister-in-law, while the soldiers approached the bonfire. Before they could reach it, Patraic stepped in front of them. Staring at them deliberately, he raised his hands high above his head, the sleeves of his tunic pooling around his shoulders. His voice carried as well as the queen's, booming above the noise of the flames and the

nervous horses:

"Christ beside me,
"Christ in front of me,
"Christ behind me.
"Today I take on a terrible power;
"I invoke the Trinity,
"I acknowledge the power of the Three
"In the belief of the One,
"In view of the Maker."

A gust of wind came up, driving a wall of smoke into the group of people gathered at the top of the hill and temporarily darkening the sky. The three warriors stopped in their tracks at the magic invocation, spoken by one with the power of speech of a druid. Even giant Murchad faltered.

The flickering light of the flames reflected off their gold and silver jewelry and cast dancing shadows on the white-robed disciples. Murchad was the champion of the High King of Eriu, but a warrior had no defenses against a druid curse.

Patraic was winning the battle of symbols and stories. The fire would not be put out.

Queen Yseult didn't know what to do. In the tales spoken around the fire on long winter nights, she was Yseult the Wise, the fair flame of the Tuatha De, whose knowledge of healing and wisdom in the ways of Gael and Feadh Ree alike was famed throughout the five fifths of Eriu -- but she had no wisdom for this. She could not force her men to go against Patraic and risk being cursed, and she could not put out the bonfire by herself.

Bitterness twisted in her stomach like a draught given to someone who had eaten spoiled meat.

Patraic lowered his arms and gazed at her, the blue of his eyes as intense as

the sky beyond the veil of smoke. He knew as well as she that the warriors of Eriu feared the power of the word more than the sharpest blade. And he knew how to use that knowledge.

She spurred her horse forward through the small group. Pulling up next to the Christian wise man, she leaned over to him. "When the Ard Ri hears of this, you will no longer be welcome at Tara."

"What is the seat of earthly kings compared to the seat of the king of heaven?" His voice was once again gentle, but there was triumph there as well.

"It is not over, Roman," she said shortly.

Suddenly he grinned. "No, both of us are much too stubborn for that."

The humor disarmed her completely -- a man willing to share a joke with his enemy. She couldn't help but wish they were on the same side.

She straightened up in her saddle and found herself staring at the fire of Patraic; Patraic, who was more clever than dogmatic, who had grown up with the people of this land and knew their ways, who understood the importance of ritual and knew how to manipulate signs. This was power and magic. And this made Yseult the Wise very afraid.

The Gael admired courage above all else, and here was a white-robed wise man, facing down the champion of Loegaire and the queen of the Tuatha De Danann. Next to courage, they loved generosity, and Patraic was nothing if not generous. Finally, they had a great respect for the power of words.

"Christ will accept you too," Patraic said quietly. "He died for all our sins to give us eternal life."

Yseult the Wise did not care to be saved by the god of the Romans, a god who

had no room beside him for Danu or Brigid or Lug, a god without tolerance who reserved all magic in life for himself. She wheeled her mare around. "Come," she called out to her party. "We must return to Tara and inform the king." She motioned the warriors to remount and led them away, south, to Loegaire and Rath na Riogh, away from the Hill of Slane and the fire that burned at her back.

#

The queen paced in front of the fire pit in the great hall of Tara. The high pillars of wood holding up the thickly thatched roof were decorated in intricate patterns of curling leaves entwined with human and animal figures, the best craftsmanship Midhe or Brega had to offer. An assortment of domestic utensils, woven hangings, and weapons -- reminders of a less peaceful time -- hung on the walls, long shields and round shields of bronze and wood alongside swords and axes. Before the days of Loegaire's father, Niall of the Nine Hostages, those weapons had been used against the other tribes of Eriu, especially the greatest enemies of the Ulaid, the Laigin. Now the enemies they protected against were the tribes of the Britain across the waters; raids between the tuatha of Eriu had become rare.

"Sit, Yseult," Loegaire said. "You are making us all nervous."

She stopped her pacing and turned to face the king. She had supported Loegaire's kingship willingly after his first wife died, had become his consort and shared his bed. Now, however, he was growing old quickly, and the strength in his arm was not what that of a High King should be. She had left his bed three seasons ago, but she continued to uphold his kingship because she knew he would never completely abandon the old ways.

But now -- now he had no interest in confronting Patraic.

"Can't you see how dangerous he is, Loegaire?" she asked.

The king let out a bark of disbelieving laughter. "Dangerous? I like the sacrilege of this fire as little as you, but I hardly see what threat a Christian wise man poses."

"His bonfire can be seen a day's ride away in every direction," the old druid Boinda said quietly. "If he keeps it burning, it will rival that of the Beltaine fire."

She could feel Loegaire's impatience like a shout in her mind. Queen Yseult possessed all three of the powers of the old race, changing, calling, and knowing, but knowing was strongest in her -- at times almost like a curse, when she was distracted and the thoughts of others threatened to crowd out her own.

Loegaire turned to Boinda. "Then we must bring this Patraic here for Beltaine, not banish him. The land of Eriu has welcomed new gods before this."

"His religion is not so open-minded," the druid Lochru said.

"What am I to do?" Loegaire asked, shrugging. "If I banish him, the subject kings who believe in Patraic's god may try to withdraw their support of the High Kingship of the Ulaid."

Loegaire's older brother Coirpre leaned forward. "And if you do not, the kings who continue to follow the old ways may refuse to follow you."

Queen Yseult gazed at Coirpre. He held the rath at the holy site of Tailtu, but he would never forget that the council had passed him by, choosing his younger brother as Ard Ri. She didn't care for Coirpre, but he was a staunch follower of the old ways and thus her ally.

She had a consort she couldn't love, an ally she couldn't like, and an enemy she couldn't help but respect. Suddenly the queen felt very tired.

#

On Beltaine, the High King and his druids lit the true fire, as it should be. The cattle were driven between the bonfires and the summer pastures opened, also as it should be. But this year, the fire of the Christ burned to the north, and nothing would be as it should be.

The druids withdrew to the sacred grove with the ban file Brigid. The young priestess was little older than the queen's niece Brangwyn, and already she was the greatest female druid in the land, the representative of the goddess in Eriu. Although she was of mixed blood, her powers were greater even than those of Queen Yseult.

It was the power of knowing needed for the ritual of the tarbfeis, the bull dream. The druids had chosen the bull to be sacrificed in the place of the king, blessed it and given it the king's identity, while Loegaire received the holy herbs and was brought away. The druid Lochru killed the bull and Brigid ate of its flesh to induce the dream. The chief bard Erc stood by to commit the ceremony to memory and produce a poem to be told around the fire on winter nights. Everything was as it should, except for the fire to the north, still burning on the Hill of Slane.

Brigid fell into a trance, and the incantations were recited over her. But when she emerged from the grove, bathed in the blood of the bull, she did not pronounce the rituals necessary for Loegaire to rightfully claim the throne of the Ard Ri for another year. What she pronounced were the circumstances of the High King's death.

Queen Yseult watched Brigid speak, no longer the bright and beautiful young presence she knew. Instead, she was Morrighu, agent of death, with blood on her hands and her lips; Danu herself, with the knowledge of all things shining from her eyes.

Brigid's voice was distant, but it carried through the crowd. "I speak of the death of Loegaire. It is the death of a king no longer a king. Death will find him between Alba

and Eriu after he has given up his word and his kingship."

A collective gasp escaped the onlookers at the ban file's words, while the pale figure at the center of attention collapsed between the druids flanking her.

#

The next day, High King Loegaire called together the druids and nobles in the largest round-house of Rath na Riogh, which the queen had once shared with him. Now he shared it with the female slave from across the sea who was roasting a sow in the central fire pit. The peat fire was slow and even, spitting and crackling occasionally as fat dripped onto it. The smell of the meat and the fire surrounded them, but the house was finely built and well-ventilated, and most of the smoke escaped through the vents at the top of the outer walls.

"It was not the tarbfeis," Loegaire insisted. "No mention of the kingship for the coming year was made. The ceremony must be repeated."

Queen Yseult glanced at Brigid, but the keeper of the flame remained silent. She seemed to think that if the High King wanted to deny the truth of a prophecy, that was his decision.

The druid Lucet shook his head. "The time was right and the bull consecrated. If the kingship was not mentioned, so be it. We can only hope the gods will give us a clearer message next year."

"If no one else was named king, only you have the authority to be Ard Ri for another year," Lochru added.

Loegaire's expression cleared. "True." His gaze slid over Queen Yseult and away again, and she could feel his desire bloom briefly before he repressed it. He still wanted her, wanted her as more than just a symbol of his marriage to the land. His

Bretain slave was pretty enough, pretty and docile, but it was not docility he wanted, it was the queen of the Tuatha De Danann.

He pushed back his chair and stood.

"I intend to seek peace with the Britain," the High King said, beginning to pace.

"We must make contact with the kings of Rheged, Venedotia and Dumnonia."

Commotion broke out among the other kings present. Loegaire's motive was clear to all: he wanted to ensure that he could not be caught in battle between Alba and Eriu, wanted to be more powerful than prophecy. But the raids on the Britain coast were very lucrative for the kings of the east.

Dunlaing, a king of the Laigin to the south, finally made himself heard above the din. "And what of the Oenach, Loegaire? Don't you intend to speak with the other kings first?"

"Nothing has been decided yet," the High King replied, not answering Dunlaing's question. "The first step is to send emissaries."

"And what if we have no interest in peace with the Britain?" the Laigin king insisted.

There might now be no raids between Dunlaing and Loegaire, but there was no love lost between the two. The High King turned, staring at his hereditary enemy. "If I make peace with any of the Britain tribes, those subject to the High King of Tara would do well to abide by the peace."

"That is not the way decisions are made among the kings of Eriu," Coirpre said, his powerful voice echoing among the wooden beams of the great hall. His comment was calculated to remind the other kings of the insult to their dignity, and it worked.

"Yes, the Oenach should be consulted!"

"You cannot make peace with the Bretain without consent of the council!"

"Why should we give up the raids across the sea?"

"Peace!" Loegaire roared, and the shouting finally subsided. "As you all know, the Bretain grow stronger by the year, and our losses greater with each raid. It is not easy to call together the kings of all the tuatha outside of an official Oenach. I thought to save some time by discovering first what the terms of peace might be and will consult with the leaders of the five provinces of Eriu at Lugnasad."

Queen Yseult saw some heads nod in agreement, but many kings and queens still sat stony-faced. The stray thoughts and feelings she picked up were equally mixed, but chief among them was the conviction that Loegaire was not doing this for the good of Eriu.

He was doing this for the good of Loegaire.

#

On the last day of the Beltaine festivities, hundreds gathered on the slopes of a hill below the main rath of Tara. The gentle grade provided an excellent natural stage for the poetry competition of the filid. Even a number of foreign merchants had come to watch, those who spoke the tongues of Armorica, Alba or the Pictish tribes, languages close enough to that of Eriu for them to appreciate the poetry of the Erainn bards. Besides, the merchants knew there would be few visitors interested in examining their wares while the filid were singing, and there was nothing they liked more than a good song if their bellies were full and their backs warm. A whole day of song was that much better.

The great hill-fort of Tara, seat of kings, was situated on a ridge overlooking the valley of the River Boyne, and beyond it, all five provinces of Eriu: Laigin to the south,

Mumu to the southwest, Connachta to the west and Ulaid to the north, while Tara itself stood in the province of Midhe. Clustered below the ridge stood the wooden and thatch round-houses of artisans and farmers who catered to the needs of the rath or wanted to be near its defenses in times of war. Only a small portion of the Beltaine visitors lived in or near Tara -- people came from several days' ride away for the seasonal festivities.

From the earthwork ramparts on the slope of the rath, the poets could be seen by all while they sang their spontaneous compositions. Next to the competitors stood the judges, among them several druids, Queen Yseult, and the ban file Brigid of Druim Dara.

The dew was still on the grass when the first competitors received their challenge. They sang well but with little true inspiration, modest songs suited to the season, of spring grass and sowed fields, of rivers and blood running high. But the words were true and the music fine and the audience happy.

No one expected anything different when the old druid Boinda stepped before Lochru for his challenge, his back straight and his chin high. Although he was ollamh, the highest of the seven ranks a druid could achieve, few remembered that he had been a famed bard in his youth. Among the Tuatha De Danann it was said the king of the Otherworld Aengus Og himself had praised Boinda's voice and his quick wit. Now Boinda more often left the singing to the younger filid, content with his role as adviser to Yseult the Wise and teacher to her daughter, Yseult the Fair.

Lochru smiled as he gave the old bard his challenge. "Truth, house, weapon."

Boinda stood still for a few moments, lifted his harp and began to play a series of somber notes. Then his voice lifted clear and high above the heads of the gathered masses.

"The king dwells in truth, and in truth, honor.

"He dwells in a house of duty, a house that will stand.

"The truth of his word builds strong walls.

"The honor of his word is a roof that will not fall.

"His word to his people is a weapon in his hand;

"If he turns against them, he turns against himself.

"If he rules without the word, he rules without honor.

"A king without honor is a bull-king,

"He strikes and is struck,

"He injures and is injured,

"He tosses and is tossed;

"Against him horns are shaken and battles fought.

"His troops will desert him and his dignity will be gone."

Boinda lowered his harp. A stunned silence had taken hold of the crowd, a silence so complete it was a presence, hanging in the air like a spell cast by the old ones.

The whinny of a horse from the race grounds broke the spell, and the applause that rent the morning air shattered the silence, sending it down around them like magic pieces of a rainbow. Boinda had dared and won, wrapping them in his words, capturing and holding them with the power of an accomplished bard. It was clear to everyone standing on the sloping trenches that the most powerful words they were to hear that day had been spoken.

Queen Yseult wished she could cheer Boinda with them, but it wouldn't do to anger her consort even more. She glanced at Loegaire, wondering how he was taking

the references to the Audacht Moraind, the classic Erainn work on the honor of kings. Obviously, Boinda was using its philosophy of kingship to criticize a king who would give up his integrity to avoid a prophecy; a king who would go behind the backs of the local kings to sue for peace with his enemy.

Loegaire stood stiff, frozen and angry.

Boinda's song was only the beginning. With it, he set the tone; fili after fili sang a political song aimed against some enemy or another, songs almost as dangerous in intent as satire. And many of them were subtly directed against the High King himself. A more unusual poetry competition had not been seen at Tara in generations. Queen Yseult could feel Loegaire's agitation growing, too strong for him to hide it from her.

As the warmth of the day began to pass and the sun neared the horizon, Lucet stepped forward, harp in hand. His talent for spontaneous composition was famed throughout the five fifths of Eriu.

Lochru gave him his challenge. "Barley, blood, man."

Lucet began playing almost immediately.

"I am not a sheaf of barley

"To be blown by the wind or cut by the sickle.

"I am not a white bull

"To be led to the grove to spill my blood.

"I am not a son of Adam

"With sins on my head I have not committed.

"I do not answer for the fall of one man.

"No one man answers for my own fall.

"If I remain true to the law,

"The joys of the Otherworld await me.

"My fame in this world is of my own making.

"My fate in the other mine as well."

It was a day for challenges. But while the majority of the audience would be aware of the challenge in Boinda's song, only a few would know that Lucet was attacking the religion of the Christ with his poem. The man in the white robes of a druid pushing his way through the crowd even now, however, was certainly one of those.

Patraic stepped before the judges, his color high. "I too would participate in the competition."

"Only filid or those trained as filid have a right to sing here," Brigid said.

"I received training from my master, Miliuc."

Even though he was her enemy, Queen Yseult could not deny the truth of what he said. She touched the wise woman's elbow. "He speaks the truth, Brigid. According to the rules, he is allowed to participate."

"Then step forward for your challenge," she said, eyeing Patraic warily.

The Christian wise man turned to Lochru.

"As you wish to answer Lucet directly, I will give you the same challenge," the druid said. "Barley, blood, man."

Patraic had no harp, so he stood with head bowed and hands laced together in front of him for a moment. Then he lifted his head, looked first at Brigid and then directly into Queen Yseult's eyes and began.

"I am not a sheaf of barley

"To be cut down and traded for a bushel of eggs.

"I am not a white bull

"To be sold at a fair for a ring of gold.

"I am a son of Adam,

"A man like any man,

"With blood in my veins and needs of my own.

"I do not answer to any but God.

"No man owns me; I make my own way.

"If I remain true to God's will,

"The joys of heaven await me.

"Truth and honor will stand

"Between me and the powers of darkness."

Lucet strode forward. "That was no answer. Slavery has nothing to do with the doctrine of original sin which your religion proclaims."

Patraic turned away from the judges and faced the angry druid. "You based your argument on the idea of free will, did you not? A slave is robbed of his free will."

"Does your religion forbid slavery? I have read nothing of that in your holy books."

Before Patraic could answer, Loegaire stepped between the druid and the Christian wise man. "Enough, both of you!"

Lucet and Patraic stared at the High King as if he had interrupted a discussion of philosophy in the house of druids. The queen suppressed a desire to laugh.

"I am probably not the only one who has had enough of the arguments about whose truth is true," the High King began. "I want each of you to fetch a book containing your truth. We will bury this now."

Lucet looked mildly confused at the turn events had taken, but he motioned to

the young bard Aneirin standing at the front of the crowd to come and join him. Patraic summoned the first disciple he could locate, Ciaran. After a brief consultation, the two hurried off to fetch the desired books. Queen Yseult wondered what Loegaire was about now; his mind was closed to her.

Aneirin returned with a set of ogham staffs of hazelwood, the letters carved in the sides and the whole bound at the top with a leather thong. The book Ciaran brought was in Latin, written in ink on parchment. The young men presented the books to the High King.

"Now we will see which book retains its truth," Loegaire proclaimed, his voice rising above the curious crowd. "Come with me."

He led the way down the hill, while the audience of the competition followed him, the druid and the Christian wise man at their head. When they arrived at the banks of a stream, he turned to the expectant onlookers.

"We will subject these books to trial by water." At these words, he threw the staffs and the parchment into the stream. Finally the queen understood what he was doing, and she turned to Brigid and smiled.

The current was sluggish where Loegaire had tossed the books, and the ogham staffs bobbed at the surface as they headed slowly downstream. The Bible followed a short way until the pages absorbed too much water, and it began to sink below the surface.

"Fetch the books back," the king said to Aneirin and Ciaran. The young men stripped quickly and waded into the stream. The hazelwood staffs were still clearly visible, and Aneirin had soon retrieved the druid book, but Ciaran had to dive beneath the surface. When he finally located the Bible and returned to the shore, his blond hair

was dark with water and the book he carried covered in mud, the ink running off the pages.

"Which book contains the truth now?" Loegaire asked the two wise men.

Lucet was smiling, knowing himself the victor, but Patraic stood straight, his face expressionless. "Not that one," Patraic said in his musical voice, pointing at the ogham staffs. The markings carved into the sides were still clearly legible.

"More so than that one," Lucet said, pointing in turn to the dripping parchment.

"We can all see that the truth that endures is in the book of the druids," Loegaire declared, and his Gael audience cheered, the few Christians among them hardly noticeable. With one stroke, he had made them forget Boinda's song and reestablished his own popularity. Yseult was glad that his triumph had been at Patraic's expense, but at the same time she knew that while Patraic acted from the courage of conviction, Loegaire's actions were prompted by little more than self-protection and ambition.

Patraic came forward and retrieved his book from the High King. He drew himself to his full height, towering half a head above Loegaire.

"I do not accept your judgment," he said, raising his ruined book above his head. "The words of this book will survive long after every ogham staff is gone. Soon your writing will die out, your books will be forgotten, and even your words will all but vanish."

A hush fell over the crowd, more profound than the one Boinda's poem had brought about earlier.

Loegaire's voice trembled with anger when he spoke. "I have put up with your sacrilege too long. You are no longer welcome in the house of druids, and the gates of Tara will be closed to you."

"I spoke no satire against you, Ard Ri," Patraic said more mildly. "I do but speak a prophecy."

"A prophecy spoken in revenge."

"That makes it no less true."

"Go, now!"

Patraic nodded and turned away, but Yseult the Wise didn't see him leave. Instead, she saw a vision of the fire that had been haunting her for years, saw for the first time what the fire was made of.

It was a bonfire of ogham staffs -- the knowledge of her people going up in flames.