

Human Blood, Frozen Heart

June 6, 2005

1 Prologue

I shivered miserably in the cold forest, having been sheltered all my life. The fox-like boy who brought me here noticed and he removed his owl-feather cloak and put it around me. "Hope this helps," he said.

"Thank you," I said. The cloak was incredibly warm and I instantly felt better, allowing me to enjoy the chill night air a lot more.

Suddenly, he bowed before me and took my hand. As soon as he took my hand, I suddenly felt very light and quickly noticed that my feet were no longer touching the ground. He too, was floating above the ground. "Think of happy thoughts to stay up," he said as he began to hover in front of me.

I thought about flying around and being a heroine who had the power of both music and the sword. I continued to float upwards unassisted and I felt slightly giddy. Then I thought about college and becoming a professor of abstract math at a prestigious institution like MIT or Harvard, which caused me to sink a bit. Realizing that I was thinking about something solemn and grown-up, my mind quickly shifted to all the adventures I'd have if I remained here...

For the rest of the night, he and I flew over the forest canopy and admired the beauty of it all in the moonlight. In this forest, there was a slight silver or blue tint to many of the leaves and the moonlight added an iridescence that is hard to describe in plain words. As I inhaled the fresh scent of the pines and the night-blooming flowers that reminded me of a huge botanical garden, I thought to myself, "I could live the rest of my life here." The breeze also continued to blow, as if to speed us on our flight over the forested landscape which was only interrupted by the occasional clearing with a pool or a fallen tree in it.

"Do you like it here?" he asked when we alighted on a large stone outcropping to admire the view of both the forest and the sea.

"I love it here. I want to return here," I replied, still awe-struck at the deep-blue sea with the high-crested waves illuminated by the bright moonlight.

"Remember these words," he said. Then he whispered to me:

*From the sacred ring of trees
Ride ye upon the dancing breeze
Over the vast blue seas
Set your path upon that distant star*

To enter the land of the Sidhe-Alfar!

I repeated the words, then I huddled a bit further into the cloak he gave me when the wind picked up. It was cold and I really wished that I had at least changed into something warmer before following him out of the window!

"But remember, grown-ups aren't able to come here unless you're one of the many spirit-folk who are native to this land. Here's something that'll help you remember if you run into trouble," he added.

*Let me forget thoughts of grown-up toil
And cast aside this mortal coil
Take me home where the faeries are
Let me return to the Sidhe-Alfar!*

"I promise..." I said eagerly before leaping up into the air once more...

2 California State University, Hayward

I had just finished presenting my talk on refining the stomatal conductance calculations on the SiB10 algorithm for modelling evapotranspiration and it was a nerve-wracking talk because I had never presented before such a prestigious audience. It was at the global change modelling symposium at the American Geophysical Union and many of the top scientists in the field were there. Even the question and answering session wasn't as tough as I had expected, but then again, I had been working on this material for the last two years and had by now gotten to know it fairly intimately.

That night, after I had a long dinner with my collaborators and family, I went back to my dorm room to take a break from all the socializing. Much to my disappointment, there was little discussion over the actual research and it was mostly social niceties. I certainly got more than a few earfuls about how I was pushing myself too hard by spending all my time studying and doing research, but then again, that's how all my collaborators got to where they were! I ended up excusing myself from the table, citing fatigue and indigestion, as well as concern over safe driving.

It certainly felt great to be back with my books so I could start working ahead for my ordinary differential equations classes. As a junior in college, I knew it was critical for me to not only do research, but also to keep my grades up and do well on the GRE to get into a strong graduate program. I was also at a significant disadvantage, being somewhat older because I had attended a junior college at the demands of my overprotective parents, so I had to work even harder to get in somewhere. Thus I spent the rest of the evening until about midnight – studying and trying to master the material ahead of time so I would be able to refine my knowledge when it came time for class.

I knew, from the day I turned fifteen, that I was going to become a research scientist and to do that, I had to do well in college, get into a good research team, and ultimately, make my research known. In doing so, I also knew that there were many sacrifices I had to make along the way and that many of the joys that others would enjoy would be ones

that I, like many of my fellow collaborators, would be forever banned from. That day, when I had turned fifteen, I made this vow. "From this day forth, I will not rest or allow myself to idle in love or sloth, nor will I open my heart to anyone or anything, save the pursuit of knowledge." The moment I took that vow, it felt as if something suddenly froze inside of me and I thought I heard soft weeping in the distance. Nothing, not even the demands of family could stop me...

3 Bane of the Sidhe-Alfar

"Unlike us, the Sidhe-Alfar, when mortals die, their soul either rises up into the skies to join the multitude of stars or descend into the fiery depths of the earth, but in either case, they will give guidance and hope to their descendants, who are ever the more foolish and cause them nonstop grief," said the old crone, whose face was a maze of wrinkles of wisdom and had a vaguely owl-like expression to them. "We, on the other hand, live for thousands of years and we will never feel the bite of disease or age. But when our time comes, we fade away from existence, and we can never experience many things mortals suffer from, this thing that they call love..."

The youth, a boy of apparently fourteen or fifteen human years with a fox-like expression, reddish-brown hair, and a cloak of owl feathers, stirred restlessly. "Grandmother, what is this thing they call love? I've heard of it in my travels but I have no clue what it is."

The grandmother sighed. "My child, it is something that we must never know, it is a deadly poison to the Sidhe and the curse of the mortals. It is a special attachment they make with each other that blinds them to all else and ties them to their emotions and robs them of the powers their ancestors once had. But to gain their immortal souls, they must suffer this curse that binds them to their world. Were a Sidhe to know it, then his or her powers would fade away and they too, would become mortal and taste the bitterness of sorrow."

"Grandmother?"

"Yes, my child?"

"How do I know if I've experienced love?" asked the youth, concerned.

"I do not know, but I have been told by our ancestors that it is a feeling of giddiness that takes over their being and it also is always with an irresistible attraction towards a mortal. They also speak of a desire to spend the rest of their lives with this object of attraction and a weakness that goes through the body as the power of the Sidhe flows out of them. You will recognize the curse of mortality upon you when the mark on your arm fades." Then turning to the curious youth, she said, "But, do not burden yourself with such things! Enjoy the thousands of years that we have been given, you have only known a small fraction of that!"

With that, the youth wandered off and began to play on his panpipes in the trees before wanderlust overtook him. Transforming into an owl, he flew up past the canopy and into the night sky towards the east.

4 Adventures in Control Dynamics Systems

All of my hard work had finally paid off when I finally started receiving acceptance letters at several graduate programs in control dynamics with a focus on climatological applications. Among my choices were Caltech, UC Berkeley, Stanford, and MIT, and I had to admit, it was hard to decide on a program. Having spent my undergraduate years at Cal State Hayward, however, I eliminated UC Berkeley and Stanford so I could explore the wider world and be free from my nagging relatives who constantly wanted to see grandchildren, since I was the only child. In the end, I chose Caltech since I decided that it was in an environment more conducive to intense study and the smaller population was also appealing to me.

My first year was fairly uneventful aside from the heavy course load, much of which I had with precocious undergraduates who were at least five years younger than I was. I did feel a bit self-conscious at first at having spent an extra two years at Contra Costa College and an extra year at Cal State Hayward, so I did enter the program somewhat older than the average student. In time, I joined a biogeochemistry lab but still maintained my close ties with the control dynamics department. Then one day, my adviser in biogeochemistry told me of an opportunity in the southeast, where I would essentially be there for three years and collaborate with a team from University of Georgia to develop a streamlined version of SiB10 with a focus on humid climates since SiB10 was now fairly well refined for arid climates. I felt a bit hesitant about travelling to the southeast, but given the research opportunities for refining the SiB10 algorithm and validating the model, I accepted the offer.

That night, after I had told my advisers in both biogeochemistry and control dynamics systems of my decision, I went to my dorm room, where my roommates were throwing yet another weekend party full of beer and tasteless jokes. Time and time again, I merely hid from their frivolous partying and refused to partake in anything they did. I was still proud to live a fully ascetic life, uncluttered by such silly things, and the only things I did indulge myself in were jogging, swimming, and hiking. Ignoring them, I began to go over the paperwork required to join the SiB10-WP team. If I could just develop a more universal SiB10 algorithm, I would feel infinitely better! I knew what I wanted to do – continue refining and developing algorithms for modelling water exchange as well as net primary productivity. There was nothing else besides my studies.

Two months later, I arrived at the site, which was in a remote region in southern Georgia. It was a pristine forest and I had never seen so much greenery anywhere, except for perhaps the Pacific Northwestern temperate rainforests! Running through the forest was a river that the locals told me was so pure and clean that I could drink from it if I had to. It was quite clear and cool, especially in comparison to the thick, sticky humid air that surrounded me. At first, I thought I was going to be smothered to death by the wet heat that threatened to squish me. Gradually, though, I adjusted to the humid climate and I enjoyed living in the small trailer they had given me. Basically, there was always at least one other person with me, but it was usually a senior researcher who kept to him or herself, allowing me to do my own research in peace.

He let out a heavy sigh, knowing that if he failed, his life was forfeit and he would

fade away from all existence. When he went to search for the girl he had sorrowfully parted from many years ago, she was no longer in the old room she was in. It was vacant, and he had to consult the trees, the rivers, and the animals to find out where the girl had gone. From the redwood forests, he flitted over to the smog-laden basin known as Los Angeles. Again, she had left, and a regal live oak that had witnessed her daily walk from her room to the lab told him that she had gone to a place known as Georgia. Determined to find her, the youth began his long flight to the southeast, where she was now sequestered.

"Why have you left me?" he thought. "Or what has sent you away?"

The flight grew more and more difficult for him, and eventually, it took all of his concentration to merely stay aloft. The tattoo that marked him as one of the faeries was looking washed out and he could feel his link to his world fading. He already was no longer able to transform into the silver-feathered owl, and then he remembered what his mother once told him. "Strong as we are, we can still be felled by mortal attachments and greatly weakened by the felling of the sacred groves." It was still clear in his memories when he had seen his grove was cut down by those large metal machines. He felt the inspiration and the strength from the grove cease to flow into him, but at the same time, he did not feel the life flowing out of him. He was still blessed with the agelessness of the Sidhe, but he knew that too would fade away regardless of failure or success.

"I will find you again. And I will find a way so you can be among the Sidhe. Or if that can't be, then I will be mortal like you and sharing our lives together."

5 A Strange Young Man

It was another of those gatherings where I did my best to hide until someone was ready return to the field station. I much preferred to be working on my computer, but nobody, adviser and other professors included, would hear of it. Already, I had spent a significant portion of the night fending off eager lads who were hoping to get my number. I was the only female in the lab who was unattached and had developed a reputation as the "Ice Geek", which I was quite proud of. In the two years on this project, I had published three papers and was revising two and I was well on my way to formulating the Geo-SiB11 algorithm with my collaborators both here and at Caltech. It was worth it, even if I did have the occasional moment where I felt a twinge of loneliness and longing. There was no room for that kind of nonsense for me.

Two guys from my own lab were now trying to get my attention even while I was formulating ideas on how to escape from this situation so I could finish revising that paper for publication in *Oecologia*. "Come on, just one dance!" begged one of them.

"No thanks," I said coldly before I disappeared into a crowd of professors. I coughed, realizing that the thick smoke wasn't helping my temper.

Still intent on escaping from the party, I weaved this way and that so I could avoid any further attention. Then just as I stepped outside from the clouds of smoke and loud music, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Whirling around and quite startled, I saw a tall, muscular young man with a roguish, almost fox-like expression. For some reason, he

looked vaguely familiar, but then again, after a while, everyone did blend in. He had reddish-brown hair, high cheekbones and he wore fairly nondescript clothing, at least as far as field ecologists went, but what really caught my attention was that he had this mischievous twinkle in his eyes and that he seemed to have an aura of mystery surrounding him. Also, on his left arm was a somewhat faded tattoo of a fox on it.

I tried to continue walking away, but he kept on following me. "Sir, why are you following me?" I demanded as I mentally prepared myself for either calling for help or running.

"Sorry if I scared you, but I just wanted to make sure you got back safely," he said, concerned. "I saw those guys and I didn't want them to chase you while you were alone."

Cautiously, I looked over him again. A brief flash-back passed through my mind for some odd reason, a memory that was just barely in the back of my mind.

6 Whispers From the Past

I somehow got separated from everyone else and had managed to wander away from the trail. I fell down a really steep and slippery slope in the park, and since it was one of those quasi-wild parks, it was pretty secluded. When I fell down, I saw a strange-looking boy with a fox-like expression sitting at the bottom. I guess what made him look odd was the vivid tattoo of a fox on his left arm and the fact that he was wearing a brown and grey feather cloak and a tunic made of green leaves. He looked very hungry, so despite my own hunger, I offered him my lunch, which he thanked me for and eagerly took. Then after he ate his fill, the rest of my memories blurred but the next thing I knew, I was back in the parking lot with my family...

"Are you ok?" he asked, touching my shoulder gently.

I leaped up, not used to being touched. "Sorry, I was remembering something and yes, you did startle me. You just looked a lot like someone I've seen somewhere before."

Nonchalantly, he smiled and said, "So, where were you headed? We can talk along the way."

"The field station," I said. For some reason, there was just something about him that looked familiar. While we walked through the humid forest, I noticed that he looked a bit nervous and I suspected that he sensed my own nervousness as well. "So, are you part of any of the field teams?"

"No, I just moved back here after years of travelling and living in the city," he replied. "I'm not quite cut out for school like you. At least I don't have the same drive that you have if you're willing to go away from what looks like rest and recreation. You do look familiar as well." His eyes continued to focus on me.

Where had I seen this guy? It was now bothering me that he seemed so familiar and that he seemed to also have seen me before. While we were walking down the fairly well-trodden path to the field station, I found myself wanting to ask more and more about him. I just had to figure out why this guy seemed to be familiar! "Where else have you travelled to?" I asked, hoping that maybe I could gain some further insight.

"Not too many places. All over California, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Montana, pretty much most of the west and the southeast. There was a grove near UC Berkeley I was especially fond of before they turned it into that new math building there. It was a beautiful oak grove. It's such a shame they destroyed it," he said sadly. I noticed a small tear in his eye when he spoke of the grove near UC Berkeley.

"This grove is special to my people. It is where our kin, the faeries, have taken up residence and thus as long as this grove stands, any animal who comes here will have refuge," spoke the voice.

I nodded and asked, "If I lived here, will I be able to not grow up?"

"I'm afraid not. The enchantment is not that strong, but it will give you a bit more time before you do have to grow up if you visit often enough. Please, come away with me, before it's too late and you grow up! Speak the words!"

I stood there, contemplating what to do. I must've been there for at least half an hour trying to remember the words. Just as I was about to speak the words that would allow me to return to the land of the Sidhe, my parents found me and hauled me away with a sound scolding for wandering off again. Once I was out of reach of the grove, I remembered the words at last, but it was too late.

*Forget thoughts of grown-up toil
And cast aside this mortal coil
Take me home where the faeries are
Let me return to the Sidhe-Alfar!*

That was the last time I saw that grove of trees. When I saw the new math building being constructed over where the grove once stood, my eyes filled with tears, but I dared not show my feelings to anyone. I had to be strong and not show any signs of weakness. It was also the last time I saw that odd youth or that place he took me to and I came to doubt that it was real, that it was all just a bunch of dreams I had from too many fairy tales...

"I think I remember that grove. It was a bit before I turned fifteen. I was so sad when I found out about it," I admitted, then I bit my lip, realizing that I had inadvertently revealed another side of myself to someone.

"You're hiding something aren't you?" he asked with a tiny hint of accusation in his voice.

At that point, I just made it a point to not say anything. For the rest of the trip back to the field station, we walked in awkward silence. Throughout the silence, I could see from the corner of my eye that he wanted to talk to me, yet he seemed to sense my desire to not talk. Once I was back at the field station, I thanked him politely, figuring the least I could do was a simple "Thank you."

He bowed before me and said stiffly, "You're welcome." As he walked into the night, I continued to ponder who he was and then after a moment, I resumed working on the computer. I just had to get that algorithm running!

Over the course of the next several weeks, I was assigned some particularly heavy field work and the station was understaffed due to budget cuts. At this point, I was by

myself, and with all of the heavy equipment that included soil respiration chambers and leaf clip spectrometers, just to name two of the less awkward pieces of equipment, it was very difficult for me to be efficient since I am not particularly strong or agile. That strange young man, though, would arrive in the morning and give me a hand with the equipment, cutting my in-field time in half so I could also get that model to run.

I had to admit also, that I enjoyed his company very much and for the first time in my life, there were something going on in my mind that just did not quite register. It was a curious feeling that I just realized one late evening alone in the field station. We had just finished installing the metal tape measure that would allow us to set fixed points on the transect and we had also finished taking some soil respiration measurements. I managed to trip on our way back and as I was trying to get up, he helped me up and for a moment, our eyes met and we smiled at each other before I went back to my usual straight-to-business self. I was scared – was I losing my touch and my will-power? What was the matter with me, after all these years of being aloof?

7 Whispers Revealed

”Why do you come here to help me so often? And how do you find the time?” I asked during lunch one day after a tough day in the field that involved trench digging and pounding stakes into the soil to mark the transects that we had to measure.

”I only work three days a week, but they are long days, admittedly,” he said. ”So the rest of the time, I can give you a hand. I feel bad that you’re all by yourself here without any help, even if you are a lone wolf and would be perfectly happy being left alone.”

Still keeping an eye on him since I was still a bit nervous with him around, I replied, ”I do have to admit, I prefer to be alone since it’s hard to work with others around. But I really appreciate your help.”

”But don’t you do anything else besides work? In all the time I’ve seen you, all I’ve seen you do is either work or study,” he noted.

”That’s all there is for me,” I said, honestly believing every word. ”I’ve got to work hard to get to the really good professor and research positions. I’ve got to make something of myself and I can’t let anything get in the way.”

”Surely, you’ve wanted to do something else before,” he insisted. ”No hobbies, no enjoying the world beyond, no sharing your life with another?”

”Not really,” I replied, trying to maintain at least a cool exterior. He was really probing me this time for some reason and I was starting to feel awkward talking to him. Part of me wanted to try to banish him because he was being a distraction, but at the same time, I had to admit, he was a great help in the field and he was pleasant companion who asked for very little. ”Academics was the only thing I really felt any real passion for and it’s all I’ve ever known...”

He looked at me intently with those intense fox-like eyes that seemed to glitter oddly, as if he were trying to probe further into me. ”Honestly, there’s got to be something else,” he said. ”No human could just focus on a single thing without at least wanting something else as well.”

I paused a moment, gauging him. There was something really strange about my assistant, yet for some reason, despite my nervousness, I also felt a reassuring aura about him. Logically, I should've just thrown him out, but my curiosity about him outweighed my cautiousness this time. "How do you know?" I asked testily to buy myself more time.

"It's just part of the human condition to want many things but only be able to get some of them," he replied. "I know, even a workaholic like you, must have some hidden desire that you've hidden away."

Coldly, I replied, "Nothing real, unless you count the urges of laziness." I began to count to ten in my mind to keep myself from blowing my top and being un-professional.

Calmly, he said, "So you say. Why do you hide behind your studies so much?"

In frustration, I said, "Like I said before, it's the only way to get ahead. I have to give up everything else for it."

"Are you sure you weren't hurt and now afraid of being hurt?" he asked, still pinning me with that intense gaze. "Or perhaps in your determination to gain knowledge, you've forgotten everything else and need time and opportunity to remember yourself."

Irritated at his persistence, I stood up, ready to step out to get away from him. "Please, stop this!" I blurted out. I then walked out of the trailer that served as part of the field station.

He merely sat there, nodding his head sadly. Then very faintly, I heard him whispering.

From the sacred ring of trees
Ride ye upon the dancing breeze
Over the vast blue seas
Set your path upon that distant star

Something struck me and for whatever reason, it sounded very familiar. *From the sacred ring of trees... Ride ye upon the dancing breeze... Over the vast blue seas... Set your path upon that distant star...* Unconsciously, I murmured something I heard before, probably from some fairy tale I heard when I was a tiny girl. "To enter the land of the Sidhe-Alfar!"

"I knew it!" he cried out excitedly as he ran out towards me.

"What?" I squeaked, surprised.

"You do remember something of yourself besides your studies," he commented, smiling at me. "And perhaps you might remember yourself better if you stepped away from your work once in a while. Think back to a time when you hadn't committed yourself to your studies so hard... and think of the Sidhe-Alfar..."

"They're just fairy-tales!" I blurted out. "Wait... I remember dreaming about them all the time and going to their lands... there was a boy who wanted me to stay there with him... and then I'd never grow up... but it sounds far too much like J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan..." Then I stopped and scolded myself internally for my lack of tact around anyone, even if it was someone I trusted.

He suddenly took my hands and before I registered what had happened, he said, "I was that boy. You saved me when I was lost. I remember the fruits and nuts you gave

me even though you were very hungry and lost... and you told me that you didn't want to grow up and become like the adults that never let you do anything on your own... You even saved me when you convinced those bullies to leave that silver-feathered owl alone..."

"It can't be!" I cried out, shocked that someone knew anything about that misadventure of mine or the time I stopped some boys in middle school from throwing rocks at that little owl. "He said that he would never grow up and I always thought it was a dream when I flew across the sea... or hallucinations from reading too Peter Pan far too many times."

"Only as long as I remain careless and returned to my home at least every fortnight," he added. "When you didn't return, I got worried and when I saw the grove get cut down and you getting taken away by your parents, I vowed to find you again and save you from growing up and from becoming what you're rapidly becoming... although I'm afraid things didn't quite work out as I was hoping to." He looked a bit self-conscious as he showed me his large hands and pointed at the stubble on his face as well as the fact that he was over a foot taller than me.

At this point, I was completely confused. "But why...? Don't tell me you want to still take me away to your world..."

His face suddenly darkened and his expression became downcast. "I cannot return. At first, I thought I would be able to take you away... unfortunately I didn't take into account what would happen after the grove was removed... or what would happen if I made that promise to find you..."

"Then what?" I demanded. "And why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was scared to tell you right away because I knew you wouldn't believe me... and I wanted to earn your trust..." he started.

Blushing a bit, I said, "I have to admit, I'm a bit shell-shocked now that someone who I thought was only a dream is now real..." I stopped, realizing that I was about to leak something else out.

8 The Meeting

The phone suddenly rang and I picked it up. "Hello?"

The computer technician's extremely nasal voice rang out, "We're going to have another meeting shortly. I will be over to pick you up soon." The phone then hung up.

"Damn. I need to be going to a meeting soon. Want to hang out here until I come back in a couple hours? Or want to join us at the meeting?" I offered, even though I knew he would hide from the academic gathering.

"Thanks, but I do have something I need to take care of in the meanwhile. I'll see you later though," he said, walking out of the door and disappearing into the trees.

All too soon, the computer technician arrived with one of the soil scientists on the team. I followed them into the beaten-up station wagon and while they continued to talk about the various algorithms I should try, I found it hard to focus.

"You know that boy in engineering really likes you," said one of random people who shared office space with me at Cal State Hayward, which now felt like a lifetime ago. "Why don't you give him a chance and try to get to know him?"

"No way in hell I'm dating anyone," I thought but didn't dare to utter that thought. Tactfully, I replied, "I noticed. But school is first and I can't let anything interfere."

"That's what you always say. You're too cold," she complained to me. "Who raised you to be so mean like a badger?"

"I was raised to never be loser or a quitter," I countered. "And I also learned to always go for my ambitions no matter what." I hoped that would get her to leave me alone for at least another hour or two.

The plant physiologist paused for a moment. "You do have a good point, but at least try to be a bit less mean! You'll scare off your future husband at that rate..."

I snorted. No way any of this... love stuff happening to me! "Probably for the better," I mumbled under my breath.

While I was coding in Fortran, I saw a pair of ghostly images running past. One was of a boy and the other was a girl, both with a mixture of Asian, Caucasian, and Native American features. They were chasing each other in a playful game of tag and there was a tall, muscular man with dark skin and reddish-brown hair. The children ran up to the man, who was able to grab both of them in a bear-hug. Then the three of them ran to me as well. The vision vanished when one of the new graduate students walked right into where I was sitting...

"Hey, you ok?" asked the technician.

I hastily opened the window and stuck my head out. "Just... carsick..." I lied, trying to conceal the fact that I wasn't really paying any attention and that I was distracted. The technician and the soil scientist continued to babble on and my mind drifted once more. My head hurt and all I could do was close my eyes and hope that sleep would overtake me.

The young man walked alone in the forest towards his rural home. It was approaching dusk and he apparently still had a way to go. "Why are you so cold and distant? What hurt have you been through? Or what have they done to you at the college?" he asked nobody in particular.

I wanted to call out to him, but I couldn't move for some reason. In the fading sunlight, he almost looked like a fugitive on the run or a lost exile.

He suddenly knelt before a small pool and whispered something incoherent. At first I couldn't hear anything but soon I was able to make out some of the words. "I am almost a mortal man now, the mark of the Sidhe is just barely there. My fate is in her hands..." He held out his arm into the moonlight to show a very faint tattoo of a fox on it.

A hauntingly beautiful female voice that seemed to come from the pool said, "Dear brother, why have you chosen to suffer so? Please, come home, you can still return while the life of the Sidhe flows through you. Abandon your quest and forsake that ungrateful mortal! I have seen her and even the Sidhe possess more capability of warmth than she."

"Dear sister, I cannot do it," he said flatly. A few tears formed and rolled down his cheek. The tattoo on his arm faded even more until it was just barely visible. "I will not

abandon her. I have already chosen my path and it is the path of mortality.”

The female voice, now accompanied by a haunting male voice that also held an unearthly beauty to it, cried out in disbelief. “Dear brother! It cannot be!”

“You would give up your life and give us grief... for her?” demanded the female voice. “Reconsider your path before you become truly mortal and fade from existence!”

The male voice hissed, “Our brother is already a mortal man. He is capable of shedding tears, which we can never do.”

I gasped when I heard this conversation, then I pinched myself to decide if it was real or not. I let out a little yelp...

“You ok?” asked the soil specialist, noting my lack of attentiveness. The car also hit a particularly bad pothole in the road.

His voice and the car jarred my mind back to reality and I jumped up. “Oh, yeah. Just not feeling all that well,” I replied.

“Sorry to hear that. Hope you feel better. If you need, I think we have dramamine and tylenol,” said the technician, motioning to the soil scientist to look around.

The soil scientist laughed and said, “Or my buddy here can drive a bit better.”

I just nodded, stuck my head out the window and let the refreshing breeze clear my mind as much as possible. What was going on in my mind? Why was I seeing those visions? “Oh, I’ll be all right. I just need to get a bit of rest before the meeting I think.” I closed my eyes again and tried to relax. Then after an hour of listening to endless talking, we finally reached the makeshift office at the edge of the wilderness. In the office were the rest of the research team, both from University of Georgia and from California Institute of Technology.

Usually I was attentive and talkative during meetings because I knew my input was critical and it was a way for me to show that I was indeed interested. However, today, I was feeling unusually weary and not quite focused. Something was definitely wrong! At one point, while everyone else was debating over whether to incorporate ACORN or FLAASH atmospheric correction and whether to use TRIANA or ASTER thermal data, I actually dozed off, so tired I felt...

9 The Confession

I was trying to get that presentation together for the annual MODIS-Vegetation meeting at University of Montana. I already had preliminary results from Geo-SiB11 and I wanted to show how promising they were. As I was putting together all the graphs I had produced using R, I suddenly felt strangely restless. “Nervousness, that’s all,” I thought even though I felt a small sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Will you save the one you love?” whispered that unearthly female voice in my mind.

I tried to ignore it so I could focus on my work. It was getting extremely hard to concentrate. I hadn’t seen my companion for a few days and I realized that I was a bit worried about him because normally he’d somehow contact me if he were to be gone for

a while. Then the voice came back to my head, "Do you not return his love? Will you let him fade away in vain?"

"I'm just hallucinating. I can't love him or anyone except for my work. I just like him," I thought as I compiled another graph in R. Then something in me felt weird. I had no idea what it was, but I somehow knew something was odd. Maybe I was deceiving myself and I had broken my vow, the one I had made so long ago... The oath was now on my mind. "From this day forth, I will not rest or allow myself to idle in love or sloth, nor will I open my heart to anyone or anything, save the pursuit of knowledge." Abandoning my presentation, I ran as fast as I could back to the field station.

I reached the field station and my lungs and heart felt as if they were going to burst any second. There was my companion lying on a cot and he was just barely awake. His normally tanned face was ghostly pale and his breathing was labored. "You're back... At least... I get to see you... one... last... time... but... soon... I will... fade away..." he wheezed faintly.

"Before you die... I have a confession to make to you... I love you," I tried to say but no words came out. Tears were pouring down my cheeks as I gently caressed his face, which was now cold and clammy...

The technician stood next to me and shook me gently. "Is everything ok?"

I screamed in surprise at being woken up. "Sorry. I'm just not feeling very well today," I said, deciding that the strange vision was not something to mention in front of all these scientists. "Did I miss anything important?" I asked, slowly recovering.

"Not really, you pretty much missed departmental and campus politics," said the technician. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah. I really should get a bit of rest where it's quiet and then get back to work."

The trip back was fairly event-less, aside from feeling genuinely car-sick from the technician's driving. Yet for some reason, I could feel my heart pounding, not from the driving, but from something else. Did it have something to do with that vision? Once I got back to the field station, I quickly ran in after quickly thanking the technician for driving me back so rapidly, even if his driving made me feel a bit nauseous.

When I got back in, I saw my companion standing at the make-shift dining table. He was looking as strong and hale as ever, and he smiled to me. "What's going on?" I asked, confused again. Then, for no logical reason, I ran up to him and hugged him. For the first time since I was a teenager, I actually voluntarily hugged someone. He, too, held me in a close embrace and after a while, he lifted me up in his strong, muscular arms. Without even answering, he kissed me, not on the cheek like my annoying relatives do, but on the lips. I could feel the blood rushing to my face and never in my whole life did I think that I would ever allow anyone to kiss me or that I would kiss anyone willingly. At the same time, it felt as if something suddenly broke inside of me... or as if winter had finally given away to spring.

After what felt like too short of a time, he sat down on the couch, still holding me. Gingerly, he placed me on his lap and then took my hands gently. "You've saved me..." he whispered. "As soon as you came to terms with yourself... and faced your own feelings towards me..."

It was then I noticed that there was no mark at all on his left arm. "I'm sorry that

I was so cold towards you... I'm just glad that you're well now..." I barely was able to speak from the excitement.

"No worries," he said, laughing. "We have each other now and we're both whole now." At some point, he had let go of my hands and was cradling me while he was stroking my hair. Then I realized that I was gently caressing his muscular frame and that I actually enjoyed both touching and being touched. "Let's go somewhere a bit safer," he whispered suggestively, lifting me up.

"Definitely not in this building," I said, looking intently at him. "Unless, of course, you want to announce to the researchers here."

With a crooked smile, he set me down gently on my feet. "I've always fancied a nice long walk with you... without you worrying about your research..."

10 Epilogue

From that evening forth, I abandoned the vow I took as a teenager and despite the challenges I have faced in my new life, he has always been supportive of me. It's ironic that I would learn how to be human from one of the Sidhe-Alfar, a fey creature supposedly incapable of love or most other human emotions. It has been ten years since I made that confession to him and we have chosen to share the rest of our lives together. I am still a researcher who is now working on validation studies for the GeoSiB-CASA but I also have other things to live for besides my work. I also have my beloved and our son and daughter to live for and nurture.

Both my beloved and I are truly human now, and despite the fact that he gave up his immortality to give me my humanity, he has never been more alive than now. Every morning is a cause for us to rejoice, for who knows what would have happened if he chose to remain among the Sidhe-Alfar and left me to remain buried in my research...