



THE MARK OF THE BANDIT

BY KELLY BARNHILL

PART I

Áine had never seen so many fish. They wriggled and flopped in the bow of the boat—a great, seething, silver mass of them. They stared at her with their bright, livid eyes as they gasped for water. Even in their last moments of life, each one was shockingly lovely. Áine slipped her fingers into the nets and ran them along the shining scales, as the wooden hull of her mother’s fishing vessel moaned under her feet.

The name of their craft was *The Inkeeper’s Daughter*, chosen by Áine’s father before she was born. Áine had been sailing with her mother since the day she could walk. And as far as she was concerned, there was no better place.

Áine’s mother stood at the helm, gripping the sheets of the straining sails in each hand and operating the tiller with the sole of one boot. Even as the their craft lurched and sped, even as the sails swelled so hard Áine thought they might rip in half and the white-capped sea churned around them, her mother appeared perfectly still, balanced delicately on one foot like a rare bird, as her hair and skirts fluttered prettily in the wind.

“Mind the lines, my girl,” her mother called over the roar of the sea. “And watch the boom. We’re coming about in a moment.”

Áine did as she was told. As the seventh person in a six-sailor vessel, her primary task was to stay out of the way. That, and to attend to the practicalities of a busy fishing expedition: make sure the provisions were stowed properly in their air-tight casks, fetch snacks for hungry sailors, snatch the stray fish who takes it in its head to flop over its netted walls, scan for rocks, scan for blowspouts, scan for the tell-tale ribboning on the water where a new school was passing through the currents, and mind the rigging. The other sailors leaned over the side, their broad hands gripping the gunwales, their heavily muscled arms stretching their nets over the waves.

The crew rarely spoke during their jaunts into open water. It wasn’t that it was forbidden, it was just that no one could ever think of anything to say, aside from orders and

the grunts in reply to orders. The other sailors—a pair of sisters who lived near the docks, and an old man, his son and his grandson, each with nearly identical rosy bodies (the only way to tell them apart was to look directly at their faces, and even then it wasn't easy—were a serious bunch. Sober. Focused. Stern. As different as could be from Áine's mother.

“Brace yourselves, friends,” her smiling mother called out as the boom swung to the other side. “There's a prize in the lee of that reef, and I've a mind to snatch it. This wind's a monster, but it has wings.” And to the dark patch on the sea she called out, “I see you, my lovelies! Pray, stay a moment longer!”

And they flew across the waves.

It was, by day's end, a record catch.

Once *The Innkeeper's Daughter* reached the far lip of the broad harbor, the sails had to be hauled in, and the sailors each took an oar and rowed the rest of the way, snaking through the sharp rocks that hid just below the surface of the water. Áine would sometimes take a turn when any of them grew weary, though that rarely happened. The other boats hailed them as they rowed in. The sailors set their teeth against the growing cold, their woolens soaked through. They shivered as the daylight ebbed away.

Áine crouched in the stern of the boat, watching the colors from the setting sun leak across the sky. On shore the ice vendors and the salt vendors and the green merchants were all prettying up their stalls for the Night Market, and mothers in town were hastily corralling their children into their beds, in hopes that they might be first in line at the ornate iron gates at the entrance.

Only the best were allowed to sell at the Night Market. Áine looked at their haul of fish—each one fat and shining and perfect. Their catch would be gone before it was even dark. Savvy shoppers knew to ask for *The Innkeeper's Daughter's* fish first. Her mother wasn't just the best at what she did. She was better than best. Áine looked at her mother at the oars, her calloused hands gripping the handle, her heavily muscled legs braced against the bench. She smiled as she steered the craft and smiled as she rowed and smiled when she pulled and hauled and scrubbed and baled. Áine's mother was *always* smiling. She caught Áine's eye and winked, her dark lips unfurled into a broad, knowing grin.

The other sailors didn't smile at all. Once they were docked and battened, they collected their pay and shouldered their oilsacks and slid into the harbor crowd without even a word.

This wasn't so with the other boats. Most fishing boats were operated by chattering extended families with their matching voices and shared jokes and similar faces. They communicated through smile and gesture and touch. They loved each other.

Áine's mother once worked a boat like that—all family, back when she lived in a

fishing village called Kaarna, which was very far away. Áine had never met her mother's family. She wasn't allowed. She never knew why.

As the nets were emptied into carts and the prices haggled and negotiated, she noticed how much each crew greeted the members of the other boats as well. Hollers and hellos and waves. No one greeted Áine's mother's crew. No one greeted her mother at all. Despite the impressive haul. Despite the fact that Áine had heard with her own ears the respect and awe that other sailors had for her mother. Her genius at the helm. Her innate understanding of the water. Her great love for fish.

Still, no one would even offer a wave.

This was also unexplained. Áine's questions—and there were many of them—were never answered.

"When everyone around you is looking east, look west. When everyone is looking up, look down," her father always told her. And she tried to follow that advice. She tried to look up, down, sideways and inside out. She tried to be like her father—noticing the things that no one else would. But still, she couldn't find an answer. People respected Áine's mother, but they mistrusted her too. And Áine didn't know why.

Once the ship was buttoned up and securely moored, and once the purse of coins on Áine's mother's belt was heavy and full, both mother and daughter slid into the tangled streets of the town, moving against the flow of shoppers, swimming upstream like two bright fish.

"Are you hungry, my girl?" her mother murmured into Áine's black hair.

"Only some," Áine replied, even though she was starving.

"Then let's eat, shall we?"

The bake shop was closed, but a woman and her husband stood at their cart next to the road, selling meat-filled pastries wrapped in leaves and cooked straight on the coals. Her mother bought one for herself and one for Áine. The man and wife were chatty enough, most likely because they didn't know who Áine's mother was.

"Have you heard the news, Madam?" the pastry man said.

"Hardly," Áine's mother said. "Nothing travels over the water, save for wind."

The pastry woman's eyes grew wide, the need to share so great it looked as though she might burst.

"There's been a theft. Right here in town. *A real theft.*"

"That can't be shocking news," Áine's mother said mildly. "Merchants in the night market have complained of thieving for years."

The man shook his head. "Nothing like that. Not a lifted purse or a stolen loaf, neither. This is the mayor's own vault that's been emptied."

Áine's mother's brown face turned quite pale. "Vault?" she said. Her voice was little more than a whisper. "The *mayor's* vault?" She lifted her chin and set her gaze down the length of the road, as though the thief himself was just at the edge of her sight. "Not *emptied*. It's not possible." Áine had seen her mother grow worried before, but this was a different *kind* of worry. This worry had teeth.

"The very one," the woman said. "And what's more, it happened in broad daylight. When there were people about. People in the room where the vault was. No noise, so sound, no rattle in the walls. Nothing broken or scratched. The door was locked one moment and opened with the contents removed the next, *as if by magic*."

"*THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MAGIC*," Áine's mother pronounced. Was there a note of panic within her booming voice? She checked herself and cleared her throat, her cheeks coloring deeply. "I mean, everyone knows that," she stammered. "It's only in silly stories that the ignorant tell their children."

Áine stared at her mother. Nothing ever rattled her. *Nothing*.

"Mother," she began, but her only answer was a tight grip at her shoulder.

"*No questions*," her mother hissed.

If the man and the woman noticed the exchange, or thought it odd at all, they didn't mention it. Whether this was due to their embarrassment or their pressing need to gossip, it was difficult to tell.

"So much gold," the husband said.

"And vanished without a trace," trilled the wife.

Áine and her mother waited for their pastries to finish heating through. Her mother had begun to fidget. She *never* fidgeted.

"There's not even a suspect!" the husband said. "It's a mystery, is what. A real mystery."

Áine watched as her mother's face grew progressively darker, like the shadowed sea bracing itself under a wild, storming sky.





PART 2

When Áine and her mother returned home, the house was dark. The bakeshop had closed hours ago, and her father should have been home with the hearth blazing and with soup in the pot. But even at a distance they could see that the house was dark and quiet and cold, and her father wasn't home.

Áine's father worked odd jobs—whatever struck his fancy at the time. He was a big man, her father, tall and broad and incredibly strong. Additionally, he was bright, curious and clever. Too clever by half, her mother always said. He had worked in the flour mill and the tanneries and the carpenter's shop and the shipwright's and the book binderies and the breadmaker's and the silver smith's and the scrivener's. He liked to dabble, learn, and move on. A restless worker. Lately he worked at the bakeshop, and his skillful creations of bread and seeds and fruits were a marvel to all. The bakers pretended not to, but they loved him like a son. It was temporary, of course. Her father would leave, and they would tell their friends that they always knew he was shiftless, and everything would be as it was.

"Boredom is the curse of the clever man," Áine's father told her more than once. "And none are as clever as I," he'd add with a grin.

Áine's mother unlatched the door and pushed it open with a rusty, lonely sigh. "My love?" she called into the dark, cold room. As though just calling out would force him to appear. She smoothed back her hair and adjusted her skirt and pinned her face into a smile. "It looks as though it's just the two of us, my girl," she said with an unnatural brightness.

And even though Áine's mother was obviously nearly cracked to bits with worry, she insisted on trying to hide it from her daughter. It was the hiding, Áine decided, that made it worse.

Her mother set to work. She raked the coals in the hearth and built a warm fire. She heated a mug of milk and re-braided her daughter's hair and sent the girl to bed.

"Mama," Áine began.

"I said no questions," her mother said, not meeting Áine's eye.

The girl had no choice but to drink her warm, sweet milk in silence and to crawl into bed. She waited to hear the sound of her mother's footsteps walking into her own room and climbing into bed herself—or, better yet, sliding under the covers next to Áine,

and cuddling close. But she didn't. Instead, she heard her mother slide a chair next to the door and sit heavily upon it. Áine fell asleep to the sound of her mother humming as she stared out the window, into the night.

The next morning, Áine woke to see the chair still sitting next to the door, but it had no mother sitting in it. Nor was her mother on the other chair next to the fire, nor the bench by the table, nor her own bed on the other side of the main room.

"Mama?" Áine called. "Papa?" No one was there. Áine, being a practical girl and a clear-headed girl, knew that an empty house wasn't the end of the world. She splashed cold water on her face and looked in the mirror and told herself to stop being such a silly. She grabbed an apple from the barrel and a piece of cheese from the larder because it would be much easier to come up with a plan with food in her belly. She put a stout log on the coals and set a full kettle of water on the hook in the hearth because surely her parents would likely want for a nice warm drink when they came home.

And because she knew that they would more likely be seen at a distance from the road, she put on her cloak and tied the woolen hood tightly over her black hair to keep out the wind and the drizzle, and went out to the cobblestones, and waited.

It was still early, and an unnatural quiet had settled on the damp town. No donkeys brayed, no carts rattled, no bread vendors called out their fine loaves for sale. The green grocer at the crossroads had not yet filled his trays, and no housekeepers pestered the dairy cart driver, haggling over the price of milk. The whole town seemed to be holding its breath. Finally, a boy crept toward Áine, and tapped her on her shoulder.

"Boo," he said, and Áine rolled her eyes. He gave her a wide smile. "Did I scare you?" he asked.

"No," Áine said dryly.

The boy's name was Fien and he was four seasons younger than Áine. The house where he lived with his mother and his auntie and his grandmother shared a wall with Áine's, and while the women in Fien's family never spoke to Áine's parents, that never stopped Fien. He could hardly stay away from Áine or her family. Sometimes it seemed to Áine that he only came to play with her so that he could endlessly pester her father about his travels in the Wide World.

"Have you seen the Cursed Stones?" he'd ask again and again. "Is it true you've been to the Lost Lands? Is it true that you have found a way through the Deadly Forest? Is it true that the forest is magic?"

If her mother was not nearby, Áine's father would say, "I cannot think where you've heard such outrageous tales," with a twinkle in his eye and his fingers curling his red moustache, and neither Áine nor Fien knew what he meant by that. It was both infuriating

and thrilling. But if both her father and mother were present, her father would say nothing, as her mother's fist hit the table with a colossal smack. "Enough!" she'd say. "No more silly questions. And there's no such thing as magic." And then no one said a word.

Now, Fein stood in silence next to Áine as the drizzle dampened his black hair.

"Did you hear about the Mayor?" he asked finally.

"I don't care two stones for the Mayor," Áine said. "Have you seen my father?"

He gave her a curious look. "Yesterday," he said. "Haven't you seen him since then?" He looked up and down the street as though her father was about to leap from the bushes with a booming laugh.

Áine shook her head. She didn't cry. It wasn't practical. She narrowed her gaze and tightened her lips and scanned the street once more as though just by doing so, she would force her father to appear, and her mother would follow quickly in his wake.

"What was he doing when you saw him?"

Fien shrugged. "Not sure," he said. "After the news about the mayor, everything went all topsy-turvy and everyone started running every which way. Your papa was here, though. When we heard, I mean. He gave me a bag of bread to sneak into the house because grandmama would send it back if she knew it was from him, which I do not understand but sometimes people do strange things when they are old. She doesn't like me playing with you either but she won't tell me why, and I don't even think she knows anymore, and it is just a rule because, and maybe that is also from being old." Whenever Fien spoke, his words flowed out like a stream of water from the pump—a breathless, tumbling gush, slowing to a trickle at the end. He gasped for breath.

Áine rolled her eyes. "I don't care about your grandmama. I want to know about my father."

The gush continued. "He brings us the most delicious things, you know. Since he started working at the bakeshop, and since Auntie got hurt, he's been bringing bread and sweet things to the house for us, but I'm not supposed to tell anyone that so don't tell. Auntie thinks I've been doing odd jobs for the baker but I haven't been because the baker doesn't like me. Which is unfair. But since she got hurt she doesn't ask too many questions, which is good because I am not very good at lying. Anyway, your father was here, and then there were other people here too—errand boys and delivery girls and the milk sellers and the apple man, and all sorts of people who usually pass by, but they all crowded together in a clump and your father was the center of it all. I think maybe because he is tall. People clump on him. He is like a net in the sea."

Áine lifted her face toward the drizzling sky. She liked Fien well enough, and was willing to give a punch or two to anyone who was mean to him (and there were plenty of those), but he could be as dim as an earthenware pot.

“Fien,” she said at last. “My father. What did he do after? We came home and he was not home and he hasn’t been home since.”

“Do?” Fien shrugged. “He left with the Constable.”

“What? You mean he was arrested?”

Fein wrinkled his face. “I don’t think so,” he said. “The Head Constable said, I’m thinking you should take a walk with me, stranger. And your father said, I had a feeling you’d say as much, and then they left.”

“I see,” Áine said, a dark cloud passing over her face. She set her teeth and began to walk down the road.

“Where are you going?” Fien called after her.

“The West Gates. I believe my father has been arrested.”





PART 3

Long ago the nation suffered from a generations-long infestation of bandits. The Bandit Horde, while small in number, was an ever-present annoyance to the Realm. They were wily and tricky and wild. Sometimes violent. Always impossible to catch.

Most cities, like Áine's own, built high walls around its borders, with large iron gates to the north, south, east and west, each with squat towers on either side where the Constabulary minded the gates and waited at their desks for rumors of wrongdoing. The jails stood separate, inside the boundaries of the wall, like free-standing cages in the open air for all to see lest people lose their reason and join the Bandit Horde, and then lose their heads as well. Everyone knew it was just a ruse. No one could catch the members of the Horde. The only residents of the jails were low-level thieves at best, or at worse, simple victims of happenstance. They crouched in cages, their mournful faces turned to the sky. They would be kept that way for a full season, until the shame of their incarceration had fully erased any inclination toward banditry. Or they died in their cages—of shame, the official statement said, more proof of an individual who couldn't be saved.

But that was a long time ago. No one had seen the Horde in ten years. It seemed that, without warning, the Horde disbanded, dissipated, shattered into bits—vanishing without a trace. No one had heard from them since. Still, the walls and gates stood firm. Because you never know.

Áine could see from far down the road that her father had not been jailed. Indeed, the jails were utterly empty. Which Áine found curious. Usually there was someone in those cages, if only just to remind the citizenry to keep itself on its toes. Áine pressed forward, determined to ask the constables a question or two.

She was about to knock on the old oak door of the constable's tower when next door the stable gates flew open, and there was one of the lower constables astride his horse, and behind him was—good heavens! It was Áine's mother. They thundered down the cobbled road and curved into the press of buildings and vanished from sight.

"Mother!" Áine called, but she didn't answer, and probably didn't hear Áine over the pounding of hooves against stones. Open-mouthed, Áine watched the space where her mother had just been, as if her worry and her shock would be enough make her mother reappear and come running, and hold Áine's hand and tell her that everything was wonderful. Which was silly. Áine knew it was silly. She pressed her lips together and shook

her head and tried to think practically. She had questions. There was someone inside. She knocked.

The heavy wood door opened with a slow creak and a man blinked from the shadowy gloom.

“Can I help you, my girl?” he said.

Áine gasped and took two quick steps backward. She was not a girl easily frightened, but this man was terrifying. His head had been shaved and so had his face, aside from a very thin mustache curving over his upper lip. His teeth had been sharpened to points and his skin, almost all of it, bore a tangle of tattoos—a chain around his neck, an eye on his forehead, a herd of horses running up one arm, and a nine-pointed star, the mark of the bandit, on the back of one hand. But that wasn’t what terrified her.

What terrified her most was the brand on his cheek. A large star surrounded by a circle, burnt into his skin. Áine knew what it meant. The tattoos and the teeth were marks that he was a member of the Bandit Horde. Or had been when there was still a Bandit Horde. But the brand meant that he belonged to the King—that he had turned on his brethren and confessed their secrets to the law. It also meant that he was a man not to be trusted. Not by bandits, because he was a traitor. And not by regular people, because he had once been a bandit.

“Oh,” he said quietly, a strange gleam in his eye. “I know who you are. You’re his child. I knew your grandparents, my girl. I knew them well.”

Áine knew that bad people sometimes told lies, and that she should take any of his words as seriously as she would a fishmonger selling before noon. She drew herself up and stated her name and the names of her parents. “My mother was just here. I saw her ride away. I learned from my neighbors that my father left with the Head Constable. I thought he would be here, but he is not. Where is my father, and where did my mother go?”

The man smiled and Áine took a step backward. The man smelled bad. And she didn’t like how he was looking at her—all slitted eyes and a smug grin. Like she had the answer to a question that she never would think to ask.

“Why do you think the Head Constable wanted your father, my girl?” the man asked.

“How would I know?” Áine said. “What the Constables want is their own concern. I have concerns of my own. Have you seen my father?”

He smiled again, and his face became soft. “Your eyes,” he said. “You have your grandmother’s eyes. How we loved her. How we would move Heaven and Earth to win her favor. How we would travel through the fires of Hell to snatch the circlet off the head of the Devil if she but asked for it. We’d steal the whole world and lay it at her feet.”

Áine backed away. She had no idea what the man was talking about, but he was clearly deranged.

“Thank you anyway,” she said, and she turned on her heel, walking as quickly as she could without appearing to run.

“Neither your father nor the Head Constable have come back here. I told your mother to go to the scene of the crime. And I’ll tell you something too, girl.” His voice echoed against the stone walls and rang through the quiet street. Áine couldn’t get away from it. “Why would the Law need the help of a baker—or a papermaker or a silversmith or whatever it is he’s decided to call himself these days—to assist in an investigation? Don’t you find that odd?”

Áine clenched her teeth until they nearly shattered in her mouth. Worry wasn’t practical. She wouldn’t worry. She wouldn’t. Áine hooked around the corner and broke into a run and didn’t stop until she arrived at the Mayor’s residence.

The Mayor lived in the largest, nicest house in the whole town—curved walls, polished white stone, balconies and verandas blossoming up the sides. Unlike most Mayors, he had come from humble beginnings—an orphan of unknown parentage, who became rich . . . somehow. Something in business. No one knew what, exactly. His wealth was enough to erase concerns over his obscure background and to win the heart of a lady of high birth—a second cousin to the King himself. They made a handsome couple, both impeccably well-dressed and beautiful of face. The Mayor was famous for his exquisite gloves made of supple leather, hand-painted and hand-stitched with cunning designs adorning each finger and each palm. The Mayor’s Lady was famous for her whimsical hats, affixed sometimes with tiny birds emerging from tufts of white feathers arranged like clouds, or bright diamonds spangled across a black velvet dome and twinkling like stars. The entire city lived in a state of constant anticipation for the latest offering of her Ladyship’s most marvelous hats. Unfortunately, like the King, the Mayor’s Lady was spoiled, ill-tempered and dim-witted. Not only that, she had a tendency toward public temper tantrums, providing endless amusement to the local gossips—lovely hats or no.

And indeed, when Áine arrived at the Mayor’s house, the Mayor’s Lady was on the Lower West Veranda, the spot where she usually addressed the City (typically to elicit cheers and adulation for her most recent frock) screaming crazily to anyone who would listen. Her hair—usually coiffed and pinned in magnificent swirls or loops or tall towers of golden braids—had been torn and tousled, and looked to Áine like a clump of kelp, washed up on the shore. Her dress too had been torn, and her heavily painted face was a blur of streaks and smears, with a cloudy swirl of orange and blue and dark gray around her eyes, like storm clouds at sunset.

“Treachery!” she shrieked, beating her breast with her fists. “Treachery and perfidy! How DARE you accuse me! How DARE you!”

A crowd had gathered. They pressed close together, clucking and squawking and murmuring. Áine kept herself apart, trying to keep a long view. She could see her mother

standing below the veranda with two men in constable's uniforms. They bowed their heads close to one another, speaking quickly, with short, fast gesticulations. But Áine could see, even at this great distance, the relief on her mother's face.

"I am innocent I tell you!" the Mayor's Lady screamed again. There were soldiers on the veranda now. Three of them. All wearing the insignia of the King. "Go away! I am the King's cousin. His favorite cousin! AND I WILL NOT BE MANHANDLED. DO NOT TOUCH ME, SIR!"

The soldiers, it seemed, did not care about the lady's status or her lineage or her fine—or once fine—dress. They clapped her in irons and pulled her back into the house. The assembled crowd gasped. Her mother shook the hands of the men in uniform, a broad smile on her pretty face.

Áine, standing just separate from the fast-talking crowd, felt a wave of relief. The Mayor's wife. Not my father. Everything is fine. And she was shocked to discover her own well of worry. And really, why would she? Why would she think her father was . . . Well. It seemed silly to even consider it. Her father was her father, and that was good.

And just thinking of her father—his face, his height, his mountainous self—made her remember what he always told her. When everyone around you is looking east, look west. Everyone in the crowd stared at the veranda. Áine broadened her gaze, scanning the whole square and the surrounding buildings, and the other balconies and verandas and windows and . . . no!

There on the fifth floor. On the far left. Áine ran closer. She climbed a tree and stared. The Mayor stood at the window, staring at the chaos on the ground. His face bore no emotion at all—it was just a blank. He turned and beckoned with a jerk of his head. And there, towering next to him, was Áine's father.

"Get away from there, Father!" her heart shouted. Her father hesitated, flinched. The Mayor clapped his left hand on the big man's shoulder. He nodded. He offered his right hand to shake.

And even from down on the ground, Áine could see it. The Mayor's hand was ungloved. And tattooed on the back of the hand, a nine-pointed star.

Áine ran home as though she was being pursued by a pack of dogs. Or a phalanx of soldiers. Or a horde of bandits. She skidded to her front door, and closed it behind her with a tremendous slam, breathing heavily all the while. The house was warm and cozy. The stout log that she had put on the fire earlier that day had burned slowly and evenly, as she knew it would. The kettle leaked steam from its nose. She poured the hot water into the stew pot, and put in a salt pork bone and sliced in potatoes and carrots and onions and lentils, forcing her rattling breath to calm. Telling herself over and over that she had nothing to worry about. That everything was fine. She added a handful of bay leaves and garlic cloves and set the whole thing back on the coals to boil. She heated up milk in mugs, and

went to the cellar to draw some ale for her father. She swept the entry way and laid out a cloth and worked and worked to keep her mind from thinking.

Don't think, she told herself sternly. It's not practical. Just work.

And so she did.

Her parents came home arm in arm. Her father threw open the door, caught his wife in his arms, and carried her over the threshold. Her mother, who was not one to truck in foolishness, indulged her husband with a laugh.

"If a man's home is his castle," her father boomed, "then I shall set this castle against the finest in all the land. There is not a better home anywhere, and there is not a better wife or a better child. I am the richest man in the world." And his eyes gleamed and his grin broadened, and he was himself.

The nine pointed star on the Mayor's hand.

The hand that shook my father's hand bore the mark of the bandit.

Don't think! It's not practical.

"And what have you been doing all day, my girl?" her father said.

Áine cleared her throat. "Making soup, Father. And playing with Fien." She hated lying. She grabbed his left hand and kissed it, front and back. She grabbed his right hand and did the same thing. There was no mark. No mark at all. She felt a wave of relief as big as the ocean.

"I've warmed milk, and the soup should be ready soon. But there are dice there. And cards. We can play a game." She narrowed her eyes. "But you mustn't cheat, Papa," Áine warned.

Her mother stood behind her father as he sat down, her hands flat on his shoulders, dark circles under her eyes. Áine thought that perhaps she hadn't slept the night before. Her mother leaned over and kissed the top of her father's head, laying her cheek for a moment on that red, red hair.

Her father laughed. "Oh, my dear sweet child," he said with a sly grin. "I always cheat. Never trust a clever man. And no one is as clever as I." And he winked.

Áine felt a sudden chill as her father began to deal out the cards. She told herself she was being silly. Her mother stood up and pulled her hands away, smoothing her hair away from her face, then fidgeting with her skirts.

"This is true my love," she said slowly. "You are the king of cleverness." Her eyes were dark and flat and blank, her face pale, motionless and glassy, like the face of the calmest sea, just before a storm.

