

**THE SECRET
OF THE
DOUBLE RAINBOW**

A novel

By Gary R. Leigh

The Secret of the Double Rainbow

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Preface

A curious little man was seated in the middle of a circle that was made from flowers. While they were bright and glowing, everything else around him was faded. He looked up to a sky that should have been softly shimmering with colours and energy. Instead it was grey, as if though the life had been slowly sucked out of it. He sighed.

He had just finished a ritual. It had been complicated, and in this energy depleted place, he now felt drained. Something he was not used to.

He stood up and saw a cat looking at him. He had seen this cat before but had no idea where it had come from. Cats were not common here. He knew very little about them, but he did know the name of this one.

"Well, Tiger Fawn," said the man. "It is done. I have called to her. I wonder if she heard me?"

The cat just purred softly and stretched in the grass. The little man bowed to the cat and faded away.

1. A locked door

The door was locked. Not that surprising for a door but for Lennon, it was an annoyance that was starting to border on obsession.

His Uncle Chris had explained, painstakingly to him, that the lock was broken. It had been that way since they bought the house, but they had it on good authority that behind the door was a small storage closet.

When Lennon asked why they had never bothered to have it fixed, Aunt Mary retorted: Because we haven't. Chris hastily added that they didn't need the space and the cost for replacing the door was not worth it. His aunt then snapped that he needed to get on with the gardening and do his homework. That was the end of that conversation.

It had been two weeks since he had come to stay with them and he was yet to feel at home. Mostly due to him feeling like he had to walk on eggshells around his aunt. She had no children of her own and was also a hard task master. If she caught him doing nothing, she would invariably find a task for him to do. Lennon thought her domineering and opinionated and wondered how Chris ended up with her as he was more relaxed about things.

He had taken to standing in front of the door and staring at it anytime he passed by and that meant he did it a lot as it was at the end of the hallway that connected the stairs, bathroom and his bedroom.

What he expected to happen by doing this, he did not know. Once Chris had caught him and said: You're not Superman, you know. I doubt you'll develop x-ray vision.

"But don't you want to know if there is anything in there? What if there's some valuable antique that could be worth a fortune!" he blurted out in return.

"And what if there isn't? Tell you what, though, you come up with the money to pay for a new door then you can replace it and if there's anything in there, then you can keep it. Deal?"

"I don't have any money to spare," Lennon protested. "Mom didn't have much to give me and what I have probably won't pay for a new door."

Chris shrugged. "Get a part time job. You're sixteen, I'm sure you can find something."

"Between my studying and chores, I doubt I'll have time," he grumbled.

"Well, maybe you can sweet talk Mary into paying you for your chores." He grinned sardonically.

And that was the end of that conversation.

He was more careful in future not to be seen at the door. Chris tended to move softly so he was harder to detect. His aunt, on the other hand, stomped around, announcing her presence wherever she went.

No, he did not feel at home there. He wasn't comfortable with Mary and the house felt creepy. He always had the feeling that something was hiding in the shadows watching him.

The painting in his bedroom did not help. There was something about it that felt off to him. His Aunt has said it had come with the house. She liked it and so had kept it.

It hung opposite the window that looked out over the back yard. They had put his bed underneath the window so when he lay down, he ended up looking directly at the painting.

He did like the frame. It was golden and seemed to catch light in a strange and mesmerizing way.

The painting itself was of two very pretty, young girls. Lennon would have guessed they were around his age. They were standing in a garden that looked like it had been painted to look... Well, Lennon couldn't quite decide what it looked like. Lifeless was one word that came to mind, but it looked out of place.

Maybe the artist had created it in such a manner to give contrast to the girls, but it just felt wrong. It looked wrong.

He wondered how he could both like it and hate it at the same time. Something wasn't right. He wished he could cover it or have it removed. Like the door, it would draw his attention against his will.

Another thing that he found annoying was that every time he looked at it, he would hear the word '*portal*' in his mind, as though, some hidden being was whispering to him.

He knew that a portal could be a gateway to another place. At least, he knew that was one of its meanings. He wasn't sure how he knew, except he did.

Lennon would often get such cryptic messages in his mind, but he was able to dismiss them as they seemed to have no context or relevance.

But every so often, just in case the painting really was a portal, he would gingerly poke his finger at it. Not surprisingly, his hand did not disappear. Nothing happened and as far as he knew, nothing was going to.

At the other side of the room, a wooden desk and chair had been set up, so he could study. He preferred to sit there as it put his back to the painting.

Lennon had no idea how long he was going to be staying with Mary and Chris but felt he would see the school year out. After all, that was the reason he did not follow his mother when she had made the sudden decision to move.

For now, he would just have to stay at 'creepy house', as he had come to call it.

2. Cat

It was now four weeks since he arrived, and the school term was fast approaching its end. Lennon had quickly discovered there was very little to do but his homework and duties. He had no friends locally, and even when he was at home, he found he preferred to spend his time alone rather than mix with others.

He was bored, and he blamed that as the reason he was drawn to the locked door whenever he was headed towards the stairs. He had lost count of the amount of times he had stood in front of it and tried its handle, as though some magic was going to make it suddenly work.

He was obsessed, and he knew it. He seriously considered getting a part time job to save the money, so he could take Chris up on his offer. That way, he could finally put this all to rest.

Spring was fast approaching, and his aunt had told him that it would be a great time to start working on tending their garden.

He immediately protested this, saying that he had no clue how to do that, but she had dismissed him by saying that she was sure he would work it out as he went along. Lennon knew that any further conversation on the matter would be pointless. Mary was stubborn, and he had yet to see her relent on something once she had got it stuck in her mind.

Fortunately for him it had rained a lot. In fact, every time he meant to work in the garden, the rain would suddenly pour down. Even Mary accepted that as a reason for not doing gardening.

If there was one thing Lennon loved, it was the sound of rain against the window and right then, it was raining hard. He had just finished homework and was ready to call it a night.

He lay down, turned off the lamp on his nightstand and listened to the rain pelting down outside. It soon lulled him to sleep.

He awoke what felt like hours later, but to his surprise, he saw not even an hour had passed, as was shown by the small clock next to his bed. It was only twelve thirty. He found he was wide awake and the rain had stopped. He shifted his body to look at the

window. Even though there were blinds, Lennon liked having them raised. The sky had completely cleared, the moon was nearly full. The moonlight was particularly bright. It lit up the room enough to show the furniture and the painting.

The young ladies almost seemed to glow making the painting seem more portal like than normal. He felt a sudden compulsion to get up and touch it. Maybe with the moonlight, something might be activated.

He got up and moved in the dark towards it. It was definitely glowing. He touched the canvas but found it was cold and rough to his fingers. Not that he was surprised, but part of him had really believed something was going to happen. He touched again, just to make sure, and got the same result.

He climbed back into bed and wondered if the girls had ever existed and who they might have been. Did they live in this house? His imagination kicked in. In his mind's eye he saw the girls, playful, innocent and full of joy. They were playing in a garden. Images of highly coloured flowers and deep green, lush grass started to fill his mind. He imagined himself with them. Each of them took one of his hands.

He suddenly jerked back to reality. He had started to doze, just briefly, and he swore that he had felt their touch. His hands, tingled, slightly and he gently rubbed them.

He tried to drift back to the pleasant dream, but now he was too restless. He tossed and turned. There was no getting comfortable. He had too much energy to just lie there. It was unusual for him to be so awake at this time. Normally, if he ever woke up after midnight, he'd roll over and go back to sleep.

Now he lay awake, eyes wide open, staring at the painting and as always, the word *portal* repeated in his mind.

"It's not a portal," he said to himself, angrily. "Enough with that word." It was driving him to the point of frustration. Part of him could not let go of the idea that something was supposed to happen but the realistic part of him knew that paintings did not turn into gateways to other places. At least, not in real life.

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft noise. He realized that he had been listening to it for a few seconds, or maybe even a few minutes, before it had registered. It sounded like an engine running, or was it more like a cat purring?

It couldn't be a cat, as there were no pets here. He shifted a bit, his head lifting slightly from his pillow. The noise sounded close by. It was definitely the sound of purring.

Maybe a stray cat had gotten in through an open window. He reached to turn on the lamp but stopped himself. Turning on the light might startle the intruder. Perhaps he could use the small flashlight he kept on the nightstand instead. That way he could direct the light. He groped for it, found it and turned it on. It produced a small, somewhat weak light just strong enough to reveal the immediate area. He slowly swept the beam back and forth, scanning the room for the cat, but found nothing. Maybe the torch was probably not such a good idea after all.

He listened carefully; the purring had stopped. Maybe he should look under the bed. He crouched on the cold wooden floor and swept the light under the bed but found nothing. He stood back up and did another quick search, but the room was empty. Maybe it was a car after all.

He decided to try and get back to sleep. Perhaps his sleeplessness was caused by too much light from outside. He pulled down the blinds and turned off the torch. Now at least things were dark.

He let out a small yelp. At the foot of his bed were two small luminous dots. Two green eyes stared plainly at him. His heart thumped as he fumbled with sweaty hands and turned the torch back on. He shone the light on the eyes. Or rather, where the eyes had just been. A small, dark shape jumped off the bed, just a split second before he lit the area and moved towards the door, out of his sight.

"It's only a cat!" he reminded himself. "It's nothing to freak out over." He wondered how it had got into his room. In his mind came the word *Lyran*. He ignored it. It was a word he had never heard before.

So where had this cat come from? It had to be a stray. A chill ran

through him as he noticed that the door was still closed. How had it got into his room?

Abandoning the torch, he turned on the main light. He would find it much quicker if he could see what he was doing. Perhaps it was in his wardrobe. He softly crept up, so he wouldn't alert the cat, and jerked it open but only found his belongings there.

He looked at the door. Should he open it or go back to his cooling but still warm bed. He knew that he wouldn't get any sleep until he looked outside the bedroom. He did not know why, but he felt a sense of expectation, as though something was about to happen.

Very quietly, so he didn't alert anyone, he pressed down slowly on the handle and pulled the door towards him. The hinges must have been well greased for it made no sound. A suddenly freezing chill hit him and then was gone. He shivered. His room was much warmer than the hallway. He peered around the frame, half expecting to see nothing. He caught his breath as he saw a small shape run down toward the end of the hallway where the locked door was.

He shivered again. Suddenly, the idea of chasing it down a cold, uncarpeted hallway in the middle of the night did not seem appealing, but for no apparent reason, the thought of having his own pet entered his mind. Maybe it would keep him company. He could give it water and feed it food and perhaps it would stick around.

Shining the torch down the passage, he nervously walked towards the end of the hallway. He felt apprehensive, a feeling that increased with each step he took.

Before he had reached the bathroom, which was in the middle of the hallway, he had to admit that something wasn't right. The passage was clearly empty. Of course, the cat could have run down the stairs or somehow doubled back to the other hall where his aunt and uncle's bedroom were. But now the cat was forgotten. Instead, there was the door. That enigma that he could not walk past without spending time there.

He had never visited it this late and the allure of doing so was

strong. It was strong enough that even the feelings of something watching him wasn't enough to stop him.

He reached his destination and shone his flashlight on the door. The handle glimmered in the beam of light. It almost appeared to be glowing. The light reflected upon a smooth, shiny surface. It looked brand new. He reached out and touched it with just one finger, as though he was testing it for heat. It felt smooth, warm and tingly.

His hand glided over it as though it was touching something both solid but not there at the same time. He pushed down and felt it easily move. Was the door unlocked? Was that possible? He pushed gently and felt it open inwardly.

How? He knew the door was still broken before he went to bed. Something mysterious and amazing was at play here.

His thoughts were interrupted by a creak of a door opening from Chris and Mary's bedroom. Someone was coming. While he did not think he would get into trouble for being out of bed, he was not ready to be seen and explain what he was doing. He wanted time to work out what was going on first.

He dashed towards the stairs and climbed down them, so he was out of sight. Moments later, he heard someone approach.

It was Chris, who was making a midnight journey to the bathroom. His bladder had woken him up and not for the first time, he cursed it for the inconvenience. He was a light sleeper as he suffered from a sleeping disorder, though he was unaware of that.

Lennon waited for what felt like forever until he heard Chris going back to bed. Only a few minutes had passed, though. He climbed back up and made a beeline to the door. He grabbed the handle but now it was cold to the touch. The door refused to open. All kinds of swear words came from his mouth, he felt so frustrated and angry.

Every few seconds, he would try the door again, but the result was the same. He did not know how long he stood there, but eventually a thought in his mind said: *You know, the definition of*

insanity is trying the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

The thought came unbidden but made him realize that he probably should get back to bed. Besides, he was now cold, stiff, tired and grumpy. Reluctantly, he returned to his room and climbed into the now cold covers.

After a few minutes, he considered checking the door again, but he was now warm and sleepy, and he now had a lot to think about. He drifted off to sleep. The next thing he knew was his Aunt shaking him awake telling him to get up or he'd be late for the bus. He gave a hearty sneeze and sat up bleary eyed. It seemed that wandering around in the cold night air had not been good for him. All thoughts of the previous night were temporarily forgotten in his haste to get ready, have breakfast and rush off for the final day of term.

3. Attunement

On the bus, Lennon thought about everything that had happened the night before. Though it had a surreal quality to it now, he was certain it had not been a dream. All day long, Lennon could not think of anything else but what lay behind the door. On top of things, his nose kept on running. A cold was the last thing he wanted.

He was fortunate that, with the last day of term, there was very little work to do and little need to pay attention to what was going on as much of the time was spent on revision for things he now knew well. His weeks of study were really paying off. At times he reflected that if he had known it would have made that much difference, he'd have done it years ago, instead of the last evening cram that was his usual method.

Now his head also felt like it was burning slightly, and he felt shivery, as if a flu had taken hold. The day dragged on for what appeared to be forever, and for the first time, he was anxious to get back to the house.

Before going home, he decided to stop by a chemist and get cough drops for the sore throat that had developed.

Lennon normally did chores after he got home but Mary said: "Are you alright, Lennon? You're looking flushed and you're sniffing."

"Oh, yeah," said Lennon. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"If you've got a cold, go rest. I don't want to catch it."

"I'm just a little achy."

She sighed. "Signs of the flu I'd wager. Wonderful. Means I'll have to look after you."

"I'm sure I'll be fine,"

She touched his forehead and nodded knowingly. "Yes, hot. I'll make you some chicken soup. I'm told that's supposed to be good for flu. Lots of rest before it takes hold and I'm sure you'll be fine before we know it."

Without any further protest, Lennon dragged himself upstairs and put himself to bed. Of course, this was the last thing he wanted to do. He wanted to try the door again, but he felt so weak that he just wanted to sleep. Plus, there was no way his aunt would allow him to stand at the end of the hallway while he was sick.

"Damn this flu," he muttered to himself. "Could the timing be any worse?"

Attunement. The word came to his mind. He had no clue what it meant. But he did have a horrible feeling dawning that maybe he had dreamt the door opening the previous night. If he was sick, then that would explain everything. The whole business was probably nothing more than his imagination working overtime while he was feverish. Still, it felt so real.

Mary looked after him and soon she appeared with the chicken soup. He ate that and felt slightly better. A small heater was put into his room and he was given extra blankets. She also plied him full of flu tablets and put drinks on the nightstand to keep him hydrated.

By the time she left, he felt like his body was floating and his head was hurting.

He looked at the painting. The light was starting to fade, giving it an unreal quality. He blinked his eyes for it almost looked like the painting was capturing the light around it, making it look clearer and brighter than it should be. More so than the night before. Even from his bed, he could still see it clearly. For the first time, he took a closer look at the details. Before, all he had really noticed were the two young ladies. This time, however, something else caught his attention. A shiver went up his spine. There, in the background, staring back at him with two luminous eyes was a picture of a cat.

"*That wasn't there before,*" he thought to himself.

"*Lyrn,*" said his inner voice, but he had no clue what that even meant.

Lennon blinked. He had heard stories that the onset of a migraine might make people hallucinate and see glowing and swirling

patterns. And while he wasn't quite sure he had one, his head really did hurt.

He tried to look carefully at the cat. Was it the same one as the night before? But even if it was, how the heck would he know? All he had seen was some eyes and a dark shape and all cat eyes looked the same to him.

This will have to wait, he decided. Whatever was going on, he was in no condition to deal with it and he fell into a feverish sleep.

4. Moonlight

It was a few hours later when he awoke. His throat felt like it was made of gravel and he had trouble swallowing. He looked at the time and saw that, like the previous night, it was almost twelve thirty. He felt like a truck had hit him.

He reached next to the bed and felt for the cough drops that he had bought at the chemist. He prayed that their claim of helping a sore throat was true. The blinds were drawn up. He assumed that Mary had done so for some reason, though he could have sworn they were not like that when he went to sleep. The moon was a little brighter than the previous night. The painting glowed, and he was easily able to make out the two ladies. The artist had used luminous paints. That was the only logical explanation.

His eyes were drawn to the painting, the two figures taking on a ghostly quality as they continued to shine with their own light. The cat's eyes were also glowing. Well, that made sense. If you were going to use luminous paints, you'd put them on the eyes.

His head was swimming a little and they looked as though they were closer than they should be. It took him a few moments before he realized that they were in fact, not part of the painting. The cat was back and perched on the end of his bed.

He shrieked involuntarily, took a sharp breath inward, and almost choked on the lozenge. "You're dreaming," he said to himself. He had to admit that he couldn't be sure if he was awake. His head was heavy, and his mind felt like it was full of cotton wool. Still the eyes stared unblinkingly at him. Maybe he was awake.

He pinched himself, as he had heard that you could tell if you were dreaming by doing that. It hurt a little, but not as much as he would have expected. He decided it was enough for him to prove he was awake.

"Okay," he said to it, trying to be reasonable, "so you're clearly a stray who's found his way inside. I'm too sick to worry about it right now! You can stay there for all I care."

In answer, the cat remained in its place and began a loud purr.

Despite what he had said, Lennon propped himself up on his pillow and leaned forward to try and stroke it. As he did, it jumped and headed towards the door, a dark silhouette, clearly moving in the faint moonlight and like the previous night, it vanished as though it had never been there. Lennon looked back towards the painting. The cat eyes had gone, though the girls were still clearly shining.

"*That's... bizarre,*" he thought. He did not want to get up and follow. In fact, it was the last thing he wanted to do, but what if the door was open again? Surely, he could just take a quick peek and then head back for more rest.

Groaning, he stood up, feet touching the cold, floor and almost jumped back into bed.

He probed around with a foot for his sheepskin slippers and slipped them on. He fumbled for his dressing gown, which was hanging on the back of the door and put it over himself.

He stood there feeling woozy and swayed.

For long moments, he stood, undecided what he should do. He felt so unsteady on his feet and the bed had been so warm and inviting. He sighed. One thing he was certain of was that he would not be able to go back to sleep if he didn't investigate. Was it worth chasing a cat once again down the hallway? Was he risking making himself even sicker? Sighing inwardly, he picked up his flashlight and turned it on.

He opened the door and shone his torch down the hallway. It was empty. *Good,* he thought. *No point going any further then.* He shone the light once more, just to make sure and it dimly lit up the door the far end.

For a moment, he was sure he saw the eyes of the cat.

Quietly and quickly, he moved down the hallway towards the door. He was badly shivering. He wished the house was centrally heated. No wonder he was sick, he thought.

He reached the door and inspected the handle. It was warm and vibrating to the touch. His mind felt like it was doing somersaults. Nervously, he put his hand on the lever and pulled down. It

moved easily. He pushed, and the door opened. All was quiet. Suddenly, he began to shake. Everything seemed to take on a surreal like quality. Maybe I am dreaming, he thought to himself. He did so much want to go through the door but was petrified of what might lay in wait. It was pitch black and now that he finally could enter the room, he was having second thoughts.

He was scared, but he could not turn back now. Finally, he decided that he couldn't stand there all night, and he was feeling decidedly groggy. Either he acted now or went back to bed. He knew that he would never forgive himself if he didn't pass through. What if the opportunity never came again? With this last thought in his mind, he tentatively pushed the door open wide enough for him to enter, and with his young heart beating wildly, he stepped through.

5. The garden

Lennon entered. He shone his torch around the room and saw it was deeper than expected. The only thing he saw was a large painting propped up against the wall. He scanned for spiders in the corners but found them curiously clean. The closet had no boxes, old furniture or shelving. He was able to walk in fully. He noticed a fresh scent hung in the air like that of a summer breeze. He had been expecting a musty smell. The fact he could smell anything was lost on him right at that moment.

He shone his light at the floor and checked for any loose boards. Maybe there was something hidden but if there was anything, it was extremely well hidden.

He shone the light on the painting. It was around a foot or so taller than him. He estimated 7 feet high and five feet wide.

He noticed two things. The portrait was of two girls; the same that were also in Lennon's room and the other was that it was shimmering with an eerie silvery light. He turned off the light and after a few moments, he saw it was indeed glowing.

He gingerly stretched out a hand to touch it then pulled it back, as if stung, for he had felt nothing there. There was no resistance. His hand had appeared to pass through it. He suddenly wondered if he was dreaming or having a feverish hallucination. Surely this was not possible. He then realized that he no longer felt cold or feverish, and his throat had stopped hurting.

Suddenly, he felt something rubbing against his legs. He yelped and stumbled backwards. Hastily, he shone his light at the floor and saw those two eyes. It was the cat. It then jumped right into the painting and vanished.

"What the hell?" he said to himself. "That's not possible."

A strange thrill of fear went through him. There was only one possible explanation. The cat was a ghost and if that was the case, so was the painting. But as far as he knew, objects didn't have ghosts... or did they?

A panicked thought occurred to him and he spun towards the

door half expecting it to be locked once more. To his relief, he found that it wasn't. He pushed it fully open and it showed no tendency to swing closed.

He wondered if he should get Chris and Mary, but something stopped him. As much as he wanted witnesses, the thought of doing so made him feel incredibly anxious. He was not sure why. Also, he had a sneaking suspicion that the door would become locked again. He decided against alerting anyone and immediately felt better about the decision.

He turned back towards the painting and noticed that it wasn't glimmering as brightly.

Now! His inner voice said. It sounded urgent and he had the feeling that time was running out for whatever was happening.

His heart beat quickly. Somehow, he knew that 'now' meant he should follow the cat. Was that even possible? He reached out to touch the painting again and this time, felt an odd tingling, as though he were passing his hand through static. It was quite a pleasant sensation and before he could stop himself, he found himself moving right through to the other side.

He found himself elsewhere. It wasn't within the house, or even in another room. It should have been dark and cold, but instead it was warm and bright. The air felt vibrant and alive, as though it was charged with energy. He was in an enormous field. He couldn't decide if it was a park or an extremely large garden, but it couldn't be one because it seemed to stretch on for miles.

First thing he did was look for the painting. It was still there, but it looked shimmery and faint. Almost portal like.

What if I'm stuck here? he thought in a panic. He quickly stepped back through and found himself back in the closet. To his great relief, all was as before. It appeared that he wouldn't be trapped there. He paused for a few moments, letting himself recover. He carefully considered if he should go back through again. It had seemed safe enough and the unexpected warmth and light had made him feel very strange; almost joyous.

If this was some type of ghost, did a haunting behave in such an

odd manner? Was he even really here? He had once heard of a special type of dream called Lucid Dreaming. As far as he understood, it meant you could be in control of your dreams.

He wasn't sure he was not dreaming as his body felt strange. It tingled and did not feel quite real. Lucid dreaming seemed to be the best explanation right now as the ghost one didn't quite make sense.

He decided if this was a dream, then the worst that could happen was that he would awaken in his bed. That meant he had nothing to lose by exploring. "Well then, here goes!" he said, to himself. He boldly stepped back into the portrait and found himself back in the garden.

He looked around again, this time more carefully. Everything took on a dreamlike quality. The plants and trees seemed to shimmer and take on an ethereal look. Something seemed wrong, though and he couldn't put his finger on it.

He looked up and tried to see where the light was coming from but could not see any sun. Indeed, the sky had a very dreamlike quality, as though it had been painted using sparkling, shining paints made from light. He also noticed that there was a greyness to it. They were sparkles in the grey.

"How can there not be a sun?" he said to himself. *"The light must come from somewhere."*

If this was a lucid dream, it would certainly fit. Also, he knew he should be sick, but he was feeling fine. There was no sign of flu and certainly no hint of any aches or pains. He jumped. His body lifted high and landed lightly as though he had very little weight.

"I'm awake in a dream! That's incredible." It was an amazing feeling and he mused that if this is what having the flu did to you, then he wouldn't mind getting sick more often.

He walked around a little, admiring the details of such a lifelike dream. He vaguely wondered where he was, if he was anywhere that actually existed. It reminded him vaguely of a botanical garden. It was certainly a magical place. Feelings of wonder and excitement ran through him, like water flowing into dried out

riverbeds.

Dare he go a little further? He couldn't see the harm in it and it was just a dream, after all. At least he was pretty sure it was. But on the slim chance that it wasn't, he had better be cautious. He didn't wish to get lost, so he kept the portal as his focal point. He hoped that if the worst came to the worst, he would just wake up in his bed.

He looked down at himself and saw his pyjamas and dressing gown. At least he wasn't naked, like some dreams he had had

He wondered if this was something he could do again, after all, this was the second night in a row that the door was open. But it was a dream so...

But if it was a dream, how did the cat factor in? He was sure that wasn't part of it. It also reminded him that he had followed the cat here, but where was it now?

He scanned the area to see if he could find it. Something nearby glinted in the grass catching his eye. He went over and knelt down so he could examine it. It was a dove, made from gold. It looked intricate and expensive. It also had a little hole where the eye should be, as though it was meant to be part of a charm bracelet. The dove itself was skilfully made. The gold felt smooth and warm and seemed to tingle just ever so slightly.

Should he take it? Did dream objects count as belonging to someone else and would it be stealing? Was it stealing if it was clearly lost? He shrugged and put it into his dressing gown pockets, which were full of tissues.

He wondered if he should try heading back or wait to see if he woke up. Still, dream or not, he was starting to feel uneasy. As amazing as this place was, he was beginning to feel that he didn't belong there or was it more that he didn't have permission to be there. If someone was to turn up he wasn't sure what he would do.

He looked around carefully to see if anyone or anything was in sight but there was no sign of life. He listened and fancied he could hear some indistinct music in the air. It made him feel

drowsy and next thing he knew, he was sitting down and then laying back in the grass.

He felt more comfortable laying there than in any bed he had ever slept in. He sighed. This was a paradise. As he enjoyed the feeling, he closed his eyes and began to feel dreamy and the music seemed to grow stronger. It was a soft, lilting, beautiful melody. It sounded almost like a choir of angelic voices, reminding him of a song he had never heard before.

The music became louder in his mind until a clear voice seemed to separate itself and sing something. At first, he couldn't quite make out what the words were, but soon they became very clear.

*Find a double rainbow
Let all your dreams come true
May all the love I have inside
Find its way to you*

*Find a double rainbow
Though things have fallen apart
The help we've sought has now arrived
It's time to mend our heart.*

He abruptly opened his eyes to try and locate the source of the song. That was a mistake, as the music vanished as though it had never been there.

He suddenly felt a prickling sensation on the back of his neck and he had the uncomfortable feelings of someone watching him.

He looked around and though he could not see anything, he felt a sense of negativity. It reminded him of times in his life when, as a child, he would lie in the dark and feel that something unpleasant lay just out of reach. It also reminded him of how he would often feel in the house.

He looked towards the general direction he thought it was coming from. There was a flash of light and the sensation quickly cleared. The flash left an after print in his mind. He closed his eyes and saw a jet-black image. It looked like a hooded being.

He had the intense feeling that he had overstayed his welcome. It was time for him to leave and he hurried back to the shimmer of

the portal.

The closer he got, the more urgent the feeling he had to get through it.

He ran as fast as he could towards it and launched himself directly into it and found himself running right into the closet's wall. He hit it with a thud.

He wasn't hurt, but the shock had left him reeling for a long moment. As he recovered, he found he was freezing. His heart was beating rapidly, and he broke into an ice cold sweat. He reached into his gown pocket and pulled out some tissues to soak up the moisture on his forehead.

Where had he been? What was that black thing? Was it all a dream?

The door was still open, and he walked out of the closet. The instant he did, hot flushes and dizziness returned, and he almost collapsed. He held onto the door to stabilize himself. Lennon was painfully aware that he was cold, very sick and in need of a warm bed. He staggered down the hallway and collapsed on the bed, still in his dressing gown.

That was how his aunt found him a few hours later when she came to check on him at the first light of day. She automatically assumed that he had gone to the bathroom sometime during the night. She felt his forehead and noted he was burning up.

She covered him with a blanket and kept a close eye on him to make sure he didn't get worse.

6. Holly.

Lennon recovered quickly. He started to feel better by the evening. He was thankful for that and assumed that he was more resilient than he gave himself credit for. Once again, the word *attunement* entered his mind.

He thought a lot about the garden. He couldn't get it out of his thoughts. There were only two possibilities for its existence. Ghost or lucid dream, but neither fully felt right, but what did he really know?

When Chris came into the room to see how he was doing, he took that opportunity to ask his thoughts.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"As long as it's not about that closet door again," said Chris.

"Tell me," he continued, ignoring the jibe, "Have you ever had a dream so real it felt like it was really happening?"

"No."

"Is it possible to have such a dream?"

"Maybe if you're doing drugs," he said, "but as I've never done that, I couldn't say for sure. Are you saying that's what happening to you? The dreams, not the drug part."

"I honestly am not sure. Last night, I could have sworn I was in another place."

"Last night you were feverish. Told Mary that if you got worse, we'd call an ambulance. So yeah, probably a fever dream."

"That's so... strange."

Chris shrugged. "It's all I got."

A short while later, Mary came up with a dinner tray and gave him his evening meal. He told her that he was feeling much better and could get up, but she ignored him, stating that she had seen others say that before and they had then relapsed. Like it or not, he was going to stay in bed till the morning.

He really was feeling better. The headache was almost gone and his nose had stopped running. The chills had subsided and he was no longer sweating or even tired. *That's odd*, he thought. *I've recovered extremely fast.*

Having slept all day, he found himself wide awake. He lay there bored. He looked at the clock and saw it was only 10:30 pm. Maybe he could read. He turned on the light, got up and looked for something that would occupy him.

Stacked haphazardly next to the study desk was a stack of books. Most of them were for school but he had picked up a few along the way that were not. He scanned the title and found a thin book called: *How to Meditate*. He pulled it out from the pile and looked at it. The strange thing was that he could not recall ever buying it. It was clearly second hand and a sticker on the back of it indicated it had been resold at a very low price.

Maybe he had bought it and forgotten about it. As nothing else drew his attention, he got back into bed with it and began reading. The pages promised that meditation would clear his mind, give him insight into the secrets of the universe and bring him a great calm.

It suggested he started by focusing on his breathing. He did the first exercise and soon grew bored.

At around eleven thirty his aunt looked in on him. "Try and get some sleep," she said. "If you're feeling better tomorrow, you can get up." She then retired for the night.

He lay there for a long while, feeling restless and frustrated. His thoughts kept on going back to the garden. He decided that writing them down might help him understand what was going on there.

He got up and sat at his desk. A pen and an unused exercise book was handy, so he opened it and began to write.

He wrote quickly. It took him a while to write down all that he remembered. When he came to the song, he stopped and thought hard. How did it go? What was it about? His mind tried to catch the melody, but, frustratingly, he couldn't remember how it

went. Was it something about rainbows?

He looked up at his clock and saw that he had been writing for nearly an hour. He remembered that it was close to the time that the previous two incidences had happened. This time he was wide awake. Surely it wouldn't hurt to quickly check to see if the door was open.

He had no sooner finished that thought, when there was a noise outside the door. For a moment, he thought that Mary was checking in on him, but the noise sounded like someone scratching. He broke out in a cold sweat. It had to be the cat, but the sound was creepy.

The sound stopped and he listened carefully. Perhaps this cat lived somewhere in the house and only came out at night when everyone went to bed. A stray that looked for food. But then, it was clearly connected with the door and the garden. The scratching began again, this time more urgently.

"I really hate this," he said to himself. He steeled himself and got up.

He opened the door, but nothing was there. The sound had stopped the instance he turned the knob. Okay, each time the cat had appeared, the door was open and that meant that tonight would be no different.

He quickly got dressed, turned off the light and used his flashlight to light the way. He stole quietly down the hallway towards the door. This time he knew he was fully awake and he felt fine. This time it wasn't a dream.

He shone the light on the handle and touched it. As before, it was warm and vibrated slightly. His fingers felt strange. He took a look and it appeared to be glowing, but it was hard to be sure in the torchlight.

Lennon turned off the torch. It was suddenly pitch black and his eyes took a few moments to adjust to the darkness. As they got used to it, the handle was clearly glowing faintly. It was a ghostly aura. Lennon felt this was proof that it was haunted. It was the only explanation left.

He touched the handle once more and watched as his fingers began to glow. He stood mesmerized for a minute, just looking at the light. Then he realized that he should do something, so he pulled down on the handle. It moved smoothly, and the door swung open.

The closet was faintly illuminated by the glow from the painting. What was it about this house that had happened to cause such a thing to occur? Whatever was behind it all, he intended to find out.

He entered, taking care to keep the door open behind him. He wasn't too worried about what would happen if Mary or Chris found him. After all, even they would have to admit this was strange. He wasn't sure what they would do, but whatever that might be didn't seem to bother him all that much.

He stood in front of the painting. It shimmered like ripples of a pool in the moonlight. It reminded him of television shows he once seen about gateways that led into other worlds. He was certain he had found one.

Suddenly, the feeling of something malevolent watching him returned. Except this time, it was coming from the hallway. He looked and saw something large and dark. It looked like wisps of tendrils that covered some kind of creature. It was not moving but he somehow knew it was watching him.

Lennon was not easy to scare but right at that moment, he felt frozen in fear. He looked at the painting, felt it would be somehow safer on the other side, and passed through.

He immediately felt better as he emerged once again into the garden. But now what? Would it be safe to return with goodness knows what waiting for him?

He took a look around him and all looked as it did the previous night. He recognized some of the landmarks. In the distance, there was a distinct group of trees and there were groups of flowers that grew in odd, but distinct patterns, as though they lay in some invisible beds.

The area around the portal was quite distinct. A group of red

flowers were blooming, and shimmering. Not far from them was a large tree. If he explored more, he felt he should easily be able to find his way back, providing he didn't stray too far. He wasn't sure how long he should stay, but he felt an hour or so wouldn't hurt.

He looked at his watch and noted the time; 12:35 a.m. To make sure he could find the place again, he decided he would need a marker of some kind. Maybe the torch would do the trick. He stood it on its end and backed away. Yes, he was sure he would be able to find his way back now if he was careful.

He made his way towards the trees he recognized from the previous night. He mused about how it was daytime where it should have been night. Perhaps he was in another country. It was always daytime somewhere in the world and perhaps he had been transported to another place. That would make sense, but it raised even more questions. He needed to search for something distinct and unmistakable like a landmark he would be familiar with.

It wasn't long before he caught sight of something else. It was clearly human. This shocked him as he had assumed that he was the only thing in this place. There was no sign of any other living being. No birds, insects, ambient noises or something to indicate otherwise.

He froze in shock. He was unable to decide whether he should be seen, or even if he really had the right to be there. As the figure came closer, he saw it was a young girl. She looked familiar. Could he possibly have seen her before?

As he was out in the open, he had no place to hide, so he just stood motionless and waited to see what would happen. She did not yet appear to have seen him and he began to wonder if he was invisible to others here. It was just as possible as a garden that didn't exist in a closet that held a portal locked by a door handle that only opened at night. The idea of wandering around without being seen was appealing. The fantasy was suddenly broken as she finally noticed Lennon. She immediately turned and moved towards him.

As she came closer, he saw that she was lovely. She was five foot five inches tall, had long, rich brown hair that covered an oval

face. Wide green eyes, that were full of love, looked at him. The girl had a quaint little nose and the most brilliant smile that Lennon had ever seen. She just about took his breath away. She reached him and said in a musical voice: "Hi there. Do I know you?" Her words seemed to echo more in his mind.

"I don't think so, but not sure," he responded. He felt stupid.

He couldn't stop staring at her. To him, her beauty was amazing. His chest felt as though a fire had started in it. Unfamiliar sensations went through him and a general feeling of good will and love towards all things filled him.

"I'm Holly. What's your name?"

"I'm Lennon," he said, his voice croaking. It sounded weird and thin.

"I don't know *Lennon*, but then, my memory seems to be failing me," she said to herself. "Hi, Lennon. You sound strange. I'm Holly," she repeated.

A thrill ran up his spine. He was completely lost for words. She didn't seem to mind or notice. She stood there, looking gaily at him. He took several deep breaths, trying to get past a giddy feeling and finally, he was able to gather enough wit to form the question he was dying to ask. "Where am I?"

A confused look crossed Holly's face for a moment. "Why, it's the nature-scape," she replied.

Lennon had never heard that term before.

"But where?"

"I don't know if I understand what you are asking," she replied, slowly. "Perhaps I knew the answer once, but my memory has not been very good of late."

Her look of doubt made him feel bad. He wasn't sure what he should do. He wanted to hold her so that he might comfort her. He imagined what she might feel like to hold and kiss her pretty face.

Suddenly, a little white cat appeared seemingly out of nowhere

and jumped right onto Holly's shoulders, bringing Lennon out of his daydream. "Oh, Tiger Fawn," Holly exclaimed. "Where have you been my little one?" The cat playfully chewed at her earlobe. He had the strongest feeling that this must be the cat that had been plaguing him for the past few nights. It ignored him though, as if it had never seen him.

"Tiger Fawn?" he said, "Do you know this cat?"

"Oh, Tiger Fawn is our friend. Aren't you, little one?"

Lennon nodded, thoughtfully. "Is he... a spirit?"

"Oh, yes, of course he is. We're all spirits.

So, he was right, somehow this place was a ghost, though he still couldn't work out how that was possible.

"Are there others here?"

"Sometimes... I think," she said, her eyes growing sad for a moment, as if she was reminded of something disturbing. "Like you. Like Tiger Fawn, you're another spirit."

Lennon had no idea by what she meant by him being a spirit. The cat clearly was a ghost, yes, but he, himself, was most certainly not. Holly was also one, but for some reason, he was feeling a growing attachment to her. He didn't believe in love at first sight, but he was sure he was experiencing it. He knew something wasn't right and it made him anxious.

His feelings must have shown for Holly said: "You look troubled." She touched his hand, as if to support him. "What's ailing you?" Her touch was warm and pleasurable, but she suddenly pulled away as if shocked. "You... you don't feel right," she stammered. "What are you?" She took a step back, a confused look on her face.

"I don't know what you mean. What do you mean?"

"You're just... wrong." There was a long uncomfortable pause, but then Tiger Fawn jumped from her shoulder, purred around her legs and ran playfully towards a flower bed of orange flowers. The moment was broken and with a squeal of delight, he was

seemingly forgotten as she chased after the cat.

Lennon watched as she ran out of sight. He stood for a long time; staring at the spot where she had disappeared, trying to piece together his feelings and mind. That was so odd. His feelings for her, the reaction she had when she touched him, none of it made any sense.

"Am I in love?" he asked himself. *"But how could that be?"* Yes, she had beauty, but he barely knew anything about her. And yet, he could not stop this feeling of longing and desire for her.

He wasn't sure if he should wait or leave. He looked at his watch and noticed that the time was still 12:35 a.m. It seemed that no time was passing while he was here. He did not believe his watch was broken. It had to be something about this place.

But surely it was time to go back. He needed to think. He shook his head, as if to shift himself from a daydream and headed back to the portal. In the back of his mind, he had not forgotten about the shadowy being that was on the other side. If no time had passed, then it meant it would still be there.

As he approached the opening, he once again felt a disturbing sense of darkness. Even though he was on the other side, he could clearly feel something was watching him. He tried to pinpoint exactly where this presence came from, but the moment he did so, it faded. He wondered if it was trying to avoid detection. He had felt it for long enough to recognize it as the same thing that was in the hallway. Maybe it had followed him here. That wasn't a happy thought, but it also would mean that the hallway would be clear now.

He picked up his torch and stepped warily back through the portal. He was prepared to move back through it in case that thing was still waiting. To his great relief, it was gone.

He walked through the door and looked at it. He wondered what would happen should he try leaving it open. The idea appealed to him and he put his torch between the door and frame to keep it from swinging shut.

Quietly, he walked back to his room.

He was suddenly very sleepy. He quickly crawled under the covers and slept heavily until morning.

7. Jess.

When Lennon awoke, he felt fully recovered. Did people get over flu that fast? Was it even that or something else. It didn't matter. He was just happy to feel back to normal.

Then the memory of the night's events returned to him. He still felt strong feelings for Holly. Ghost or not, he wanted to spend more time with her and maybe he could, especially if no time seemed to pass by.

He then remembered he had stopped the door from closing. The sun was just starting to rise so he might be able to get a better look at what was going on.

He quickly put on his dressing gown and looked out his bedroom door. It was still dark, but now light enough for him to see down to the end of the hall. The door looked as though it was closed but he couldn't be sure.

As he approached the door, he saw it was clearly closed again and his torch was nowhere to be seen. A brief search failed to find it, so he could only assume that it was in the closet itself. He wasn't sure how he felt about that but as he couldn't get into check, there was nothing left for him to do but wait till the next opening.

He returned to his room and got dressed. As he did that, the painting caught his attention. In the growing morning light, it seemed to fade, rather than become clearer. He felt that was odd and once again mused that maybe luminous paints had been used, however they weren't acting in the manner he would expect.

He suddenly realized where he had seen Holly before. She was one of the girls in the painting. It looked just like her, right down to her love filled eyes.

"How?" he muttered. "*And she looked around my age, but this painting is years old, surely.*" He knew the painting had been done before his aunt and uncle had moved into the house, and they had lived there for a dozen or so years. At the very least, she would have had to be an adult in her twenties by now.

He felt like something had walked over his grave. Holly had to be someone who once lived here. She had died young and now her ghost haunted this house. He felt sad.

He focused on the other girl. Had she died, too? She looked around the same age; fifteen or sixteen. She had long, bracken brown, twisty, wavy hair, that almost seemed to take on the appearance of hanging branches. She also had soft blue eyes, a smiling wide mouth which showed flashy white teeth, a button nose and a very shapely figure.

He looked back at Holly. Nothing seemed as pretty as her. He sighed. After staring a few more minutes, he shifted his focus to the garden in the background. It didn't look like the one he had been in, but then again, for all he knew, this might be a part that he hadn't visited yet.

He then studied the cat. It was white, just like Tiger Fawn, but then he had seen many white cats who looked just like him. Logically, it had to be the same one.

There was a signature on the bottom right hand corner. It was flowing and hard to read, but he thought he could make out certain letters. After a long study, he thought the name was 'Taiyter', though he certainly couldn't be sure. Maybe he could find out more about that later. He had automatically assumed that the artist was dead, but it only then occurred to him that maybe that wasn't the case.

His study of the picture was interrupted by Mary, poking her head around the door.

"My goodness! You're up!" she said, sounding surprised. "You should be resting in bed."

"I'm feeling better," he said. "In fact, I feel the best I've felt in a long while."

She came and felt his forehead and looked into his eyes. "That's a remarkable recovery, if it's true," she remarked. "You were not doing well yesterday morning and I fully expected you to be in bed the entire day."

Lennon nodded. "I know," he said. "but I'm feeling fully

recovered. I've been taking those lozenges that promise a quick recovery, so maybe that's it."

"Maybe," she said, doubtfully. She thought for a moment and then seemed decided. "Well, you're the best judge, Lennon. Still, you are to take it easy, I don't want you relapsing on us."

"Maybe some fresh air would do me good."

"Nothing wrong with fresh air," she agreed. "Well, how about you take it easy today. I'm sure the chores can wait for a day. Go out and do something. I'll give you some money."

She went downstairs to make some food.

Later, as they ate their breakfast, Lennon tried his luck at finding out if they knew something of the history of the house. As a cover story, he said it was for a school project and wanted to know about the house and its previous owners.

"That's an interesting project you've chosen," said Mary, "I understand why you've chosen it. I, too, loved the house when I first saw it." She went on to explain how the former occupants had sold the house to them back in 1983. It had been somewhat run down and that had made the price affordable. It also came fully furnished. She spoke about how cheap the house had been compared to the property values in the area and how it was much nicer than her neighbours. Lennon wondered if it was so cheap because it was so creepy.

"Where are the previous owners of the house now?" asked Lennon, changing the subject.

"Stacy and Mick Taiyler," said Chris. "I remember that because he spelt his last name in an odd way."

Mary nodded. "Well, yes. In fact, that painting in your room was done by their son. He seemed to have some talent there. I wonder how much that would be worth," she mused.

"Did they have any other children, like daughters?"

"We only bought the house. We didn't need to do a background check on them," said Chris. "I'd assume so, though. I mean, this is

a big house. Big enough for a small family."

Lennon figured that maybe he could try and do some research at the local library. As it was the same one he already had a membership with, it could prove convenient. It was also in the same area as the council buildings. He wasn't sure what he expected to find but it was a start.

Soon he was on his way. It was a good-sized library and felt it would be good for research. As he started his search, he realized that he didn't have any real idea of what subject he should be looking for. The supernatural section was the obvious choice and while there was a wide selection of books, most of them novels, he soon found that none of them seemed relevant. He leafed through several books on haunted houses, but found they were mainly case studies and they didn't offer any real answers.

As he put back his fourth book, he noticed that a young man, around nineteen years of age, was also browsing the same section. He was rather tall and lanky, wore a chequered shirt and a pair of overalls. His hair was brown, long and straggly. He reminded Lennon of a builder's labourer. He looked at his face and saw it was warm and friendly. Lennon instantly liked it. It made him feel comfortable. The man was smiling and quietly talking to himself. After a moment, as if he sensed Lennon looking at him, he turned towards him and said, "Not much of a library, is it?" His voice almost had a note of apology in it.

Lennon nodded, though he had not really spent enough time to form an opinion on the matter. The young man continued. "And hardly a feast of books in this section if you're after answers to the unexplained."

"I'm not really sure what I'm after," Lennon said, somewhat taken aback. Did he look like he was searching for answers?

"Seek and ye shall find," he said, with a merry laugh. "They just never told you what you should seek."

"True," he agreed.

"You know, there aren't really that many useful books around."

Not yet, anyway. Oh, there's the odd few. They give you some insight, but let's face it, most of the information isn't all that useful to you. There are more coming, but that doesn't help us right now."

"You seem to know a lot about it. I'm not sure, though, how you could possibly know what I'm after."

"Things aren't always what they seem," he said, laughing. "I'm Jess, by the way."

"I'm Lennon."

"Local to the area?"

"For the moment. My father died recently and I'm staying with my aunt and uncle to finish the school year before I join my mother up north." He blushed. He did not know why he was telling his story to a perfect stranger.

Jess smiled. "Well, Lennon, pleased to meet you. I'm sure we'll bump into each other again." He grinned and waved bye to him and continued his browsing.

Lennon was at a loss as to what to do next. Looking for books wasn't going too well, and he doubted he would find any useful information on the house, but he had to try.

He asked the librarian for some assistance, but after a brief search came up empty-handed. She suggested that he might try the council on the other side as they would have records.

Jess happened to be standing right behind him. "I couldn't help overhearing your question," he said. "I doubt you can just walk right in and ask for that type of information without good reason. "Then again, what do I know about bureaucracy?" He appeared thoughtful for a moment. "Mind you, I can probably open a door for you, though."

"A door?"

"A door of opportunity. I know someone who works there who might let you get the information you're after if I put in a good word for you."

"You would do that for me?"

"Certainly."

"Why?" His tone sounded suspicious, though he did not intend it to come out that way, still Lennon couldn't understand why a stranger would bother to help him.

"Why not?" he countered. "Now the intellectuals are out of the way, shall we go and give that said door an almighty boot open?"

He followed Jess to the council offices. As they entered, he left Lennon and walked up to a middle-aged woman who was sitting at a counter. He watched Jess chat to her for a couple of minutes until Jess beckoned at him. He walked over.

"I've done my smooth talking and sold my soul to this beautiful lady," he said, winking at her. "This is Becky. She'll do what she can to help you. It's over to you now, buddy. I've got other ladies to romance, so catch you later and good luck."

He left Lennon alone with the clerk. Feeling his face flush, he began to hesitantly explain what he wanted. Unfortunately, he soon discovered that there was a cost involved to getting information on the house, and it was more than he could afford, even with Jess having put in a good word for him.

This was going to use up almost all the money he had, including what Mary had just given him.

He stood there for a few minutes trying to decide if it wanted to spend cash on something that might not provide answers until Becky suggested that maybe he didn't need everything. What exactly did he want?

"I guess I want to know how old the house is, who built it, lived in it, you know?" He smiled, somewhat sheepishly.

Becky looked thoughtful. Finally, she said that as a favour to Jess, she could organize it for a small search fee. She also seemed to respond well to Lennon's courteous and friendly manner. She asked him to ring in a day or so. Lennon ended up paying fifteen dollars; a small fee for the council, but still, a fair amount out of his own savings. He prayed he would find the information useful.

He sighed. The morning was almost over, and he felt he hadn't gotten very far.

He left the offices and pondered what he should try next. He was almost hoping he'd see Jess again, but he was nowhere in sight. No doubt he had gone off to whatever he had to do.

He had a sinking feeling that even if he did get the history of the house, it would not provide him with the family details.

He also wondered if there was a way to get evidence of the garden. He might have enough money to buy a cheap, disposable camera.

He also remembered that his torch had vanished. Maybe that was a good enough excuse to buy a better one. The old one was cheap and was never intended for lighting up an entire area. They didn't cost too much, and the thought of a better lighted passageway appealed to him after the feelings he had experienced the previous night. It would also be useful for examining the closet in more detail.

He caught a bus to the city and wandered into several shops looking for the best deal. Things were never as cheap as he hoped they were, and he ended up spending more than he wanted for a decent torch and camera. Still, the cost was quickly forgotten as he felt excited about the prospects of using his new tools.

He stopped to get some lunch and felt he had done enough, or in any case, he had run out of ideas. It was time to head back home. However, as he was headed down to the bus stop, he noticed a mystical book shop. It was the new age type books in the window that caught his attention. A speciality shop on the subject he was researching would be just what he needed.

Feeling oddly embarrassed, he opened a glass door and went inside. There was a sign saying the bookshop was on the second floor. The lift looked old and slow, so he decided to climb the two flights of stairs.

He entered the book store itself and noticed that he felt prickly and uncomfortable, as though the very atmosphere was charged with electricity. The shop itself was filled with many book cases.

There was a large counter at the front of the store. There were at least two dozen bookshelves and he initially felt overwhelmed. If there was information here, he was going to have a difficult time finding it. He looked carefully at the books. There was more literature on dozens of subjects than he had ever dreamed of, and all at very high prices. The books seemed to be around ten dollars more than they would cost at a normal book shop. Even if he knew where to look, he most certainly wouldn't be able to afford it.

The problem was he had no idea where to start. He needed something about the nature of ghosts.

He looked towards the front counter and saw there was only one lady behind it. He approached her and said: Hi.

"What can I do for you, luv?"

"Do you have anything about ghosts?"

"There's a section on ghosts, back wall." She pointed in that direction. "Ghost stories, ghost cases, hauntings... yeah, that's all we got luv."

"I'm trying to find something on ghost worlds... I think."

"Worlds...? What exactly are you after?"

"Well, supposing you found another place that only exists at certain times, like a garden, perhaps, and it only exists during the night..." he trailed off. The look she was giving him wasn't encouraging.

"So, like a ghost garden," she muttered. "I think you're looking for a novel, luv."

"No, I'm looking for something like a case study."

"Back wall, luv. If it ain't there, we ain't got it."

He headed over and looked. He spent a while leafing through books only to find there wasn't anything of use to him. Finally, he walked out feeling dispirited. This certainly wasn't going as smoothly as he had planned.

What he really needed was someone to talk to who knew about such things. Maybe a psychic. He had never met one, but he assumed they knew it all, could see it all and their knowledge and wisdom was infallible, or so he believed.

Maybe such a person could help him. If only he knew someone. He knew he could not afford the services of a professional. For now, he was at a loose end, so he headed back home.

He got back in time for dinner and after they had eaten, he went upstairs and wrote in his journal. He mused on Holly. Who was she? Why did he feel such a draw to her? Was this normal? Would he be able to meet her again?

He found he was ready to sleep around nine o'clock. Maybe he could get some rest and get up around midnight. He set his alarm, so he would not oversleep.

He fell asleep very quickly, and no time seemed to have passed when the alarm on his clock awoke him.

Bleary eyed and heavy headed, he leaned over to one side and quickly shut it off, hoping that no one else had heard anything.

It was another cold night. He got up and quickly slipped into some warm clothes. He noticed it was raining once more and it looked even darker than normal, even the painting didn't seem to catch much light. He took his new torch and camera then headed to the locked door. He had taken it for granted that it would be unlocked at this time. He didn't bother to turn on his torch, as he knew the hallway well enough by now, and was quickly able to locate the handle. His heart froze as he put his hand on it. It felt cold instead of warm and tingly. He pushed the door, but it refused to budge. It was clear that he was not able to get inside.

8. Willow.

Lennon felt a moment of panic. What had happened? Fears that he had done the wrong thing with Holly sprang to his mind or worse, maybe he was being punished for trying to discover what was going on and had been prevented from returning. He tried a few more times, but the door refused to open.

As the initial shock subsided, it occurred to him that maybe he was too early. Every other night, it had been at half past midnight. He needed to wait a bit longer. He headed back to his room. It was too cold to wait by the door.

The moments ticked slowly by. In the meantime, the rain had stopped, and a bright full moon was revealed by the uncovering clouds. The room just about lit up, clearly highlighting the painting which had been transformed into a shimmering sea of light. The two girls looked like silver ghosts.

It occurred to him that the painting might be a signal that told him when the door was open. He picked up his equipment and headed back. He turned on his new torch and to his delight, it lit up the entire hallway.

To his surprise and confusion, he saw that the door was already open. In fact, it was exactly how he had left it the previous night, being held ajar by the old torch.

How, though? He would have to think on that one later. In the meantime, he walked back into the closet. He turned off the new torch, so he could see the portrait. As his eyes grew used to the darkness, he could see the bright shimmer.

After a minute of marvelling at it, he turned the torch back on and the powerful beam lit up the entirety of the room. He took a careful look and saw something glinting on the floor. It was the dove. He had completely forgotten about it. It must have somehow fallen out. He just wasn't sure how.

This time, he carefully put it into the change pocket of his jeans. He half played with the idea of going back to his room and putting it safely away, but he had no idea just how long the door would

remain open. He did not want to risk losing his chance for entering this night.

He then shone his light on the painting and studied it. It was almost the same as the one in his room. He could have mistaken it for a print of the original, but he knew the first one so well that he could spot differences.

He immediately noticed that on the left hand of the girl next to Holly, there was a bracelet. Something he had not seen on the other painting. He wasn't certain, but he would check for it later. He wasn't going to risk returning now.

There was no cat in this version. In the background there was a vividly painted rainbow. He moved his beam to the top and saw a title: *Find a double rainbow*. Wasn't that part of the song he heard? But what did it mean?

At the bottom of the painting, there was a poem that read:

*Moon weaxen old,
light shining true,
alight your beam on us,
I am coming through.*

Lennon was never any good at riddles and this certainly looked like one. He would need to research it later. If he took a photo, he could study it at his leisure.

In one hand, he held the torch and in the other, the camera. He took a couple of photos.

He felt enough time had been spent examining the room. He had no way of knowing if there was a time limit on this side of the portal. If things returned to normal, would he suddenly be trapped in the room? Would he vanish like the torch? It was something he did not want to find out. He had a strange feeling that he would be trapped in a place where no one would be able to find or even hear him.

He turned off the torch. The painting was still shimmering, but it appeared to him that it wasn't as brightly as before, but it certainly did look very ghostly. Clearly it was part of this ghost world. Maybe it once had existed, a twin to the other one, and

perhaps had been somehow destroyed and now it haunted the house.

This night he decided to take his time as he was going through. He wanted to see how things shifted as he moved into it.

So slowly he moved through and noticed that his body was tingling and was feeling lighter. It was an odd sensation. Nothing like he had experienced before. His vision was obscured. He could no longer see the closet nor the garden. All he saw was silver flecks swirling and spinning all around him. He stopped and quickly realized that was a mistake as he started to feel very dizzy and confused. He threw himself forwards and entered the garden.

As always, he seemed to arrive during the daytime. He wondered if night ever fell here. He placed his torch on the ground. It was a deep red colour and would make a good marker. Of course, there was that distinct shimmer where the portal was, if that ever disappeared, he at least could be certain of the location and where he should wait.

He looked about, hoping he would see Holly, but, as always, the place looked deserted. He wasn't sure if he was disappointed or relieved.

He took a few photos and noticed that as he looked through the viewfinder, the world took on a surrealistic look. Lennon had never taken drugs, but he suspected that this is what it might be like if he had. He turned around and took a picture of where the painting should be. Through the camera, the shimmer was much more intense. He felt oddly comfortable knowing that he could enhance it. It might come in useful if he lost sight of it. The camera only had enough film for 24 photos and he didn't want to use them all in case something else interesting appeared. He plotted a course, taking note of any landmarks he could see and continued collecting evidence. He was so intent on his task that he had even forgotten about Holly.

He began to feel more confident and adventurous as he moved deeper into the garden. It didn't seem to have any limits to its size. He had to be careful otherwise he might lose his way back. He did not want to find out what would happen then.

Other objects became clearer as he moved closer. Lennon kept on going over the main landmarks in his mind. The big tree to his right was near the purple clump of flowers that formed a vague arrow that pointed him to a clump of bushes. He took his time and moved methodically.

After a little while, something large started to emerge ahead of him. To his amazement, what looked like a house appeared. There was a cluster of trees in the way that obscured the view, but he was certain of what he saw. Maybe he would finally get some answers if he headed that direction. Unexpectedly, he heard a voice behind him. It was as if for a moment that his heart tried to leap out of his throat. He instantly knew it wasn't Holly as the tone was sharper and harsher. Once again, it felt more like it was in his thoughts. Still it was certainly female.

"I've been watching you," she said. He spun around and found himself looking at someone who he felt he should know. It took him a moment, but he realized she was the girl next to Holly. She too, looked young. Another ghost and this one didn't look very friendly.

Her tone of voice and the way she looked at him made him feel guilty. She made him feel that he was doing something forbidden.

"You..., you have?" was all he managed to say.

"Aye, indeed," she said, speaking rapidly. "Where do you hail from? I've seen you popping in and out thrice now."

"You have?" he repeated.

"Aye, an' you seem a strange one. You slinking around, like a thief in the night." Lennon vaguely thought he should mention that there didn't appear to be any night in this place, but he said nothing. She continued: "Acting as though you don't belong. Taking pictures an' all. Pictures! Who are you and where have you come from?" she asked again.

"I'm Lennon and I'm from... the living world," he said, lamely. He didn't know what else to say.

"Living world? By that, what do you mean? Isn't it all living?"

"Is it?" Her tone was accusatory, and he felt he was on trial. He had not asked to come here. It had been the cat that wouldn't leave him alone. "Ask Tiger Fawn, he's the one who brought me here."

He immediately saw mentioning the cat's name was a mistake. The girl's face became as dark as thunder, and a grey aura seemed to palpitate around her body. It quite unnerved him.

"Tiger Fawn!" she said venomously. "I might have known. That accursed Lyran won't mind his own business. None of them do."

That was the same word he had heard in his mind, but he had no idea what it meant. "Wait, what? What's a Lyran?"

She ignored him. "And I saw ya with Holly. One of her friends, I would say."

"No, I only met her once by chance. Who are you?"

Once again, the girl ignored the question and kept on glaring at him. Lennon found his gaze drawn to her eyes and found them entrancing. They were icy and blue. Very cold and penetrating. There was not the slightest hint of warmth in them.

"Who was it that sent you? Just what are you up to?"

"Up to? Why should I be up to anything? And no one sent me." He did not like her tone at all and was rapidly starting to dislike her. Maybe it was her he felt watching him from time to time. "Have you been spying on me?"

"Is one, who observes a stranger in her home, called a spy, now?" she asked, acidly. "Your manner is an outrage."

"So is yours," he said, now becoming more heated. "So, you're saying that all this belongs to you."

"Of course it don't. But I belong here. You don't."

Lennon started to feel hostile, which was out of character for him, but he had never been attacked in this manner before. "Then, really, if you don't own it, I have as much right to be here as you do. And too bad if you don't like that."

Her eyes became even icier and she coldly replied: "You say that as though you do not know what I'm capable of. Did they not warn you? Yours is a true folly."

He looked at her carefully. She was a slip of a girl and would have been prettier if she didn't look so hostile. He didn't know much about ghosts, but he had never heard of any hurting someone in real life, apart from ghost stories told during his childhood that he never believed, even then.

"You don't look that threatening to me," he said, with a touch of laughter in his voice. He was taunting her, and he ignored any feelings that it was not a wise move. "But guess what? I don't care. I don't know what's going on and I'm starting not to care about that either." His words were becoming more heated as he went on. "I didn't ask to be here, but I'm here so deal with it."

She just continued looking at him directly in his eyes as though she was searching for something. "So, who are you, since I obviously don't know who you are?"

"Willow!" she snapped, as though the answer should have been obvious.

"I can't say I've heard of you."

"I've not heard of you either, though your ignorance of me is astounding."

"Not nearly as astounding as your ego, I bet!" he shot back. "You act as though I should know you, but I don't and what's more I wouldn't want to!" He was beginning to feel very resentful.

She turned away for a moment as if taken aback. There was a long pause and then she said: "Beware, stranger. I can easily turn you into a wretched soul. Beware."

"How? By talking me to death?" he said, blithely.

Her eyes flared up. She stretched out her hand, as if to touch him, but Lennon automatically took a step back. Ghost or not, he didn't know enough about what they could do, especially if he was in their world. She took another good look at him, but this time it was as she looked into his soul. He suddenly felt unnerved.

"I can't see him," she muttered to herself. "He is hidden." She seemed to suddenly slump. "If they sent you, it means you're dangerous, but then, so am I. Why would you be here otherwise?"

"I don't know where 'here' is, I don't see how I could know that."

"You must know or how could you have gotten here," she said, flaring up again.

"You tell me. If someone sent me, then they neglected to tell me why."

Willow looked thoughtful. "I've not reason to trust the likes of you, so I don't. If you're not here for me, then you have no reason for being here. There is no energy to be had here. It's mostly gone. Look around you."

Lennon looked around him. Everything seemed alive to him. "It looks fine to me."

"Then you are blind! That you are here is a sure sign of sickness. Curse it all."

"I don't follow."

"The vibrations have fallen so low that you can enter. I would not have thought that possible, though. So, you're either here by accident... some stupid human who found a portal, or you were sent. Either way, you should leave."

"Stupid human...?" He faltered. He wasn't sure if he should be insulted or not. In any case, he felt it wasn't fair and he was fed up now. "Well, at least I'm not dead."

Willow stared incredulously at him. For a moment she was lost for words. Then she loudly laughed. A truly incredulous, mirthless laugh. "Dead?"

"Yes, you're dead but you probably don't know it."

"Well, then, that proves you're just someone who unwittingly came here. We are the reality. You are the reflection. Now go!"

She turned on her heels and stalked off. He watched her go. He wondered if he should try and stop her, but he didn't know why

he should, so he just watched as she quickly vanished behind a willow tree. "That's appropriate," he thought.

Her final words echoed in his mind. *You are the reflection.* What did it mean?

9. Salvia

The feelings of resentment began to fade. He felt he had spent long enough in this place and it was time for him to head back.

Still, he wanted more information. If only he had thought to take a picture of Willow. He suspected that would have not been well received by her.

He looked down at his camera, still in his hand and decided he'd be ready next time someone turned up. He quickly took a photo of the Willow tree and walked away.

He looked around and remembered that Willow said there was no energy here. To him, it looked as if there was, but perhaps that might be due to his ignorance of how it really should look. What did that even mean? What would this energy be used for? Was that how ghosts remained ghosts? Did they all fade away once it was all used up?

He thought carefully about what he wanted to do next. He looked back over at the Willow tree in case Willow was still there, watching him. There was nothing to be seen, but an odd feeling, almost like a bitterness, felt like it was coming from it.

Without thinking, he started to head back towards that area. He knew this was not a wise move, but curiosity drove him. When he reached the tree itself, he touched it tentatively with the tip of his index finger.

Without warning he was overwhelmed with feelings of bitterness and resentment. Willow, Holly, the cat, the garden was none of his business. It wasn't his fault he had been led here. If Willow had a complaint, then it was her problem. This was just so unfair.

He jerked his finger away and the feeling faded.

"Well, that was weird," he thought. "Does nothing in this crazy place make any sense?"

He felt that staying any longer was a bad idea and now he was feeling down and depressed. It really was time to leave. He walked back quickly. He now recognized the landmarks and had

no difficulty finding the portal home. His torch soon came into view, but he saw it wasn't alone. Someone or something small was right beside it and blocking the portal entrance. This might mean more trouble. He stopped about 10 feet away from what looked like a little wrinkled old man.

Though he looked harmless enough, he wondered if it would be safe to come closer. He suspected that he might be waiting a long time for the person to leave. Whatever else he thought of the place, he was convinced that it wasn't real in a physical sense and therefore it couldn't hurt him. With that thought in mind, he approached with a bravado he did not feel.

The small man looked almost like a gnome. He had a wrinkled face, big hazel brown eyes, long white hair and he was wearing a strange brown costume that seemed to have golden buttons or knobs sewn all over his jacket and trousers. He didn't look terribly threatening. He also didn't look terribly happy. He was clearly looking at Lennon as he approached.

"Hello?" said Lennon, cautiously, as he got within throwing distance. He waited for a response. He wasn't disappointed. The odd man spoke in a voice that reminded Lennon, for some undefinable reason, of crackling leather.

"My boy, what are you doing to us? To yourself?"

This was not a greeting he had expected. His mouth gaped open for a moment and then he finally said: "I'm not doing anything." But he suddenly felt terribly guilty, like he was a trespasser caught stealing apples from an orchard.

"You're not doing what you might and you're doing what you shouldn't."

"And what am I meant to be doing, then?"

"What you have been called upon to do."

"Well, if everyone stopped talking in riddles, perhaps I might have a mind to do so, though no one has asked me to do anything."

"Of course, they have. You were called. How else could you be here?"

"You tell me."

"We called you."

"You?"

"It has to be you. Unless... but that..." he faltered. The old man looked gravely at him. "I..." He paused as though hearing something. "I'm afraid I can't tell you. You're not ready and They would not be happy if you knew."

"Who's they? Do you mean Holly and Willow? And why wouldn't they want me to know?"

"No, not them." His face wrinkled up.

"Who then?"

"You would not believe me. But they would not think kindly on me for spoon feeding you information."

"Well, maybe I don't care who 'they' are.

The little man just shook his head. "If I had known all this, I would not have called upon you. All I can offer is my apologies. This is not what we expected."

"Fine, then," he snapped. "Just move aside and I'll get the hell out of here. It's not as though I like it here, anyway"

The little being stepped aside. "You can go. I am not one who would stop you. However, I must ask you, before you leave, if you hate it here so, why do you keep on coming back?"

Lennon did a double take. All he could do was think about this place when he wasn't there, and he eagerly awaited each night, so he could return, still, he wasn't about to admit that right then. "It's because I'm bothered by that cat until I come here," he said, unreasonably.

"No. You could not claim such a thing for tonight."

He flushed. "And what do you know about it all?" There was suspicion in his voice. This man clearly had to be responsible and now that he thought about it, he had just admitted it by saying

that he had called him.

"And you then touched the Willow tree. Do you even understand why that was not wise?"

"Can't say I do."

"Because it made you resentful and angry. When you leave here, then you will feel normal. But now it's not good and we should not have this talk now. Come back tomorrow. Again, I am sorry."

"I guess I am, too," said Lennon. "I don't understand any of this and I wish I did, but you won't tell me. Can you at least tell me your name?"

"To some I'm known as Salvia. Call me that if you will. But I do not wish to delay you. Go back now before Willow takes hold." He got up and walked away. The conversation was obviously at an end. He waited for a long moment and then shrugged his shoulders and entered the portal.

Immediately he felt less resentful and suddenly embarrassed about how he had acted. But if Salvia was right, he couldn't be all to blame. He needed sleep and time to reflect on what was going on but more importantly, he had to write down everything before he could do that. He did not want to risk forgetting.

It took him an hour before he was done. Try as he might, he could not remember the poem on the painting. He should have written it down, but he could do that next time. He then slipped into bed. But now, his mind was racing, and he remained wide awake. Things had not gone as he expected. Not only had he failed to see Holly again, but he had met a hostile ghost, a cryptic spirit and had even less idea about what was going on than before.

How could he help if he didn't know what he was meant to do?
And who were 'They'?

Were 'They' ghosts as well?

He tried to remember all the stories he'd read and movies he'd seen about ghosts. They always seemed to involve the breaking of some curse or completion of a quest to set the spirits to rest. Maybe they all used to live in the house and he had to find their

bones and bury them. This house was definitely haunted, and he appeared to be the guest of honour.

Maybe he didn't know what to do, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try and help and he finally drifted off.

10. Heather.

Morning came, and he awoke. He looked out the window. It looked as though it was going to be a fine, though cold day. That would probably mean he'd have to work in the garden and he knew nothing about gardening.

It was his plan to get his chores out the way as soon as he could, and then he'd be free to take his photos down to the chemist to be developed. He also hoped that the council would have an answer waiting for him.

The morning passed quickly enough, and indeed, Mary, after looking out of the window at the clear sky, fixed her sharp eyes on him and suggested that he might do some gardening. "It will be fine today. No rain for a change, according to the forecast," she said.

He nodded. "I will do my best. It's the least I can do for you taking care of me."

She smiled. "I'm sure you'll do fine. Just put in a couple of hours and you go do your own thing."

He looked up at Mary. "Aunty, I'm going to the library again once I've finished my chores," he said.

Mary nodded. As far as she was concerned, libraries were healthy places for a young boy to be. There wasn't much trouble you could get into while reading books.

He went outside and with a small garden fork, he began weeding the flower bed.

Amazingly, grey clouds began to appear, and rain looked certain. The weather was really being kind to him, he mused. However, it had not begun to rain yet, so he kept on working. As he worked, he went over and over what had occurred the night before.

Eventually he developed a cramp in his leg, so he stood up to stretch them. He looked up and saw an old lady looking and smiling at him from over the short picket fence, next door. Her face was quite old and wrinkled, but her eyes, hidden by rather

thick glasses, still had a sparkle in them.

"Hi," he said. "Just doing some gardening."

"You're doing a good job," she replied, enthusiastically. "It's good to see someone finally doing something about that garden. You know, it's been so ignored. Barely a thing done except for the mowing, and only that when the grass gets unmanageable. "Pity about the weather. Raining so much more than usual of late."

Lennon nodded. She seemed friendly enough. "I'm Lennon," he introduced himself. "I'm staying with the Yorks. I'm their nephew."

"I dinna know they had one," she replied. She in turn introduced herself. "Heather. I'm your neighbour. Been a neighbour for a good many years now." She certainly looked old enough for it, Lennon thought.

"Wish I knew more about gardening. We didn't have a garden in the flats I lived in and so I've never had much to do with them."

"Then take it from me when I tell you that there is no better place of spending time than in a well-kept, growing garden. It's nature you know. It's got healing in it."

"I don't really know the first thing about gardening," he responded. "I'm just making it up as I go along."

"There's a lot to it, to be certain, but even the basics are easy to learn. Mulching, watering, up turning the soil, pruning, knowing when to plant and what to plant, they all take a bit o' knowing, but they aren't so hard to know. If you have the mind for it, come across and I'll show you some gardening books."

"Thanks, I'll do that," said Lennon, trying not to appear rude. "Maybe another time. I need to get on with this job while the weather holds."

"Better do so, yes," she said. "From the look of those clouds, they'll be rain here soon enough. So much for the fine weather predicted." She chuckled. "It was good to be talking with you, Lennon. That invite is always open." She gave a half wave and walked away, humming quietly to herself.

He returned to the task of weeding. It was hard work, but the flower bed looked much improved by the time Mary called him in for lunch. By then, the first drops of heavy rain began to fall.

He had worked up a hearty appetite and wolfed down the sandwiches presented to him. He mentioned that he had met the lady next door.

"Who? Mrs. Knight?" she asked.

"She said her name was Heather."

"Heather Knight. She's been widowed and always wanting to talk. Lonely I guess. Wendy told me that her husband died some years back and her children had moved away. She said she has some strange friends. She's not caused me any trouble, though."

Lennon had no clue who Wendy was, but he just nodded.

The rest of the day was his. He pulled out a piece of paper that Becky had given him and noted there was a contact number. Surely a quick phone call would save him a trip. He shortly rang up the council. He was unable to get hold of Becky but a man, who sounded middle aged, told him that unfortunately, the information had not come in yet and advised him to try again the next day. He was disappointed. If only there was some other way of finding out about this house.

At least he could still get the photos developed. He headed back to the chemist and arranged that.

As he was leaving the shop, he heard someone call his name. He turned around, unsure if it was someone else calling a different Lennon and saw the youth from the library who had helped him.

"We meet again," said Jess. "Very synchronous, if that a word, that is."

"Hi, eh, Jess, right?"

"He remembers! I must have made an impression on him," said Jess, with a laugh. "Hey, tell me, did you get what you were after?"

"No, not as yet. They said to try again tomorrow. Thanks again for

your help, though."

"Wait till you see the bill I've sent you." He grinned.

Lennon found he was starting to like him. He certainly seemed pleasant enough. "So, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know pharmacies nowadays. They got everything and its brother here, you know? Sometimes I just come here to browse through things and see what they've got."

"Find anything you're after?" he said, conversationally.

"Oh, this and that. There are some interesting things that people just aren't aware of." He pointed to a small stand with bottles on it. "Now take this for instance. This is one of the most amazing healing systems I've come across, and yet I bet most of the world remain blissfully unaware of its existence. And yet they sell it in a chemist! Now how strange is that?"

"What are they?"

"Flower remedies. Each bottle contains the essence of a flower, or a tree or even water from rocks."

"Sounds good," said Lennon, dismissively. "Though I think such things are mostly placebo."

Jess grinned in response. "Things aren't always what they seem. How few people understand what it means. But let me finish telling you about these flower remedies. They're not actually herbs but..."

"Nah, it's okay," interrupted Lennon. "I couldn't afford them even if I knew how they worked."

Jess nodded and had a knowing smile on his face. "Well, I guess you'll know when you need to."

"Yeah, I'm sure I will, but you know, I really need to get going. Glad to see you again."

"Yes, I'm sure we'll meet again, Lennon. Have fun."

He left the chemist and realized that he had not much else to do.

Maybe he should have stayed and had a chat with Jess after all, but he felt he couldn't turn around now and go back. It would make him look like a liar. He did the only thing he could think of and returned to the house.

As always, the garden was foremost on his mind. It kept on nagging at him. Maybe if he read what he'd written in his diaries, he might be able to make more sense of it all.

As he read over it, his thoughts returned to Holly. Why was he so drawn to her? He really wanted to meet her again, but that would mean returning to the garden and risk running into Willow. But he did say he would return to talk to Salvia, so he had a reason to go.

If only Holly could come back with him. Suddenly, he had a flash of inspiration. It was so obvious now he thought of it. He was meant to somehow bring her back. Maybe that would return her to life.

The thought excited him. How could he have missed this? If he could go through the portal and end up in their world, they could come through it back into his. Then she would be so grateful that he brought her back to life that she would want to be with him.

Yes, tonight he would do it. He stared lovingly at her figure in the painting. The artist had truly done a magnificent job of capturing her essence. Willow was well captured, too, but he wasn't sure if he was meant to save her as well. From the cryptic conversation he had had with her, he suspected that Willow had at some point killed Holly, believed that Lennon was there to punish her, and Salvia was the one who was behind it all. He still had no idea who 'They' were, but that didn't seem important right now.

The rest of the day went slowly. The rain had stopped but it was still overcast. He realised there was little else for him left to do but wait. He lay back on his bed and soon dozed off. He awoke just before dinner and joined Chris and Mary. He hardly heard a word they said as his mind was now completely obsessed with finding Holly. Uncle Chris spoke to him, but he didn't hear at first. He looked up from his food and apologized and asked him to repeat what he had said.

"Mary tells me you've met Heather," he said.

"Yes. She seems harmless enough."

"So do serial killers," he said, grinning. "But you know something, she might be good for your project."

"What project?"

"The one about the house!"

Lennon had forgotten about that. "Oh, right. Yes."

"Well, she's been living next door for half her life, right? She'll know about who was here before."

"Would she?" he said, getting excited. How could he have not thought of that before? Of course she would. What a fool he was. He could have spent the afternoon talking to her instead of wasting time at the house.

It was too late to go next door now, but he resolved that he would do it tomorrow. Maybe he would see her again when he did more gardening.

11. The dove.

It was just before half past twelve when Lennon got up. He noticed that it was much darker than normal. He looked out the window and saw it was raining again. Heavy clouds covered the sky and blocked the moonlight.

He quickly pulled on his clothes and made his way to the door. It opened without any issues, but when he walked into the closet, he noticed something wasn't right. The painting was not shimmering.

He turned on the torch and shone the light on it. It looked lifeless. Fearing the worst, he tentatively touched it. It was solid. He felt the various bumps and texture of the paint. This wasn't right. Desperately, he felt the entire painting. Was there something he was missing? He shone the light all over the room. Nothing seemed any different, apart from the fact there was no shimmering from the artwork.

Maybe, he thought, he was once again too early. Maybe if he waited it would reanimate, but after twenty minutes, still nothing happened. He had grown cold and tired and he decided he would return to his room and try every five minutes or so until he got in. For the next forty minutes, he crept back and forth up the hallway, with no success. As the time moved on to one thirty, he began to despair. It didn't look like he was going to get in and on the last trip, the door changed back to its locked state. A storm had evolved outside and the rain hit the window hard.

He fought hard to prevent the tears of frustration he felt coming, unbidden. He now knew that he had less than an hour to enter the room. But why couldn't he pass through the portal anymore? Was it something he had done, or perhaps hadn't done?

Could Willow have somehow blocked him? Did Salvia change his mind? He was sure he told Lennon to come back the next night but maybe he misunderstood.

The thoughts went around and around his mind until he fell asleep from exhaustion. He slept fitfully, with half-real dreams punctuating his sleep. He would see himself getting up, going

through the door and managing to pass through the portal. It seemed so real, and then he'd jerk awake and realize he'd been dreaming. He found it frustrating.

He drifted back off to sleep and once again he dreamt that he managed to get past the locked door. This time, however, he paused before passing through the portal. He turned around and saw that there was no wall. Just an inky blackness of a night sky with a full moon brightly shining behind him. He turned back and saw the moon was illuminating the words he had once seen. He could read them clearly.

*Moon weaxen old,
Light shining true,
Alight your beam on us,
I am coming through.*

He jerked awake once more. The words were repeating themselves in his mind. He hastily grabbed a pen and wrote them down before they faded. He had dismissed them as having no meaning. Had he been wrong to disregard them? He now knew that he had.

He wondered what they meant. Turning on the light, he went and pulled out his school dictionary and looked up the word 'weaxen'. It defined it as an old English word for wax, which meant growing. Didn't the moon wax and wane? Did the words mean that the moon was growing old? Somehow, this didn't seem quite right. When the moon was waxing, it was becoming full. So logically, that would mean that 'Moon weaxen old' had to mean the moon was almost full. And it certainly had been that way for the last few nights. It had lit up the painting in his room quite well.

Except for this night. The rest of the words suddenly made sense. 'Us' had to be Holly and Willow and the moon had to be shining on the picture for the portal to open so he could pass through.

The storm had prevented him from returning. He felt very frustrated. If he was at the whim of nature, then he might never get back to the garden. What was even more clear to him was that there was no hope of a portal during a new moon.

He turned off the light and drifted off once more.

That morning, Lennon had spent a lot of time turning things over in his mind. He had been working in the garden all morning in the hope of seeing Heather again. He knew that she had said he was welcome at any time, but he lacked the confidence to visit someone he barely knew. He had impressed Mary, though, who walked out from time to time and looked at him with a bemused smile. He even heard her mutter once: Keep up the good work, Lennon.

He was in luck that morning for Heather passed by to check her mailbox. She good naturedly greeted him and asked how the gardening was getting along. He made some small talk, and then, hesitantly, mentioned that he'd love to see some of her books on gardening. Her face lit up. She seemed pleased and told him he was welcome anytime and suggested afternoon tea.

He readily agreed. That would give him enough time to make the trip to the chemist, get those photos and contact the council. He told her that he looked forward to it.

The lady at the chemist handed the envelope containing the photos to Lennon. He eagerly opened them, hardly daring to hope that they would show what he wanted. He had expected something, but photo after photo was completely black. Nothing showed up at all. He felt despair. This was simply terrible!

The lady smiled sympathetically at him and suggested he get himself a proper camera instead of the throwaway kind. He grumbled something about they shouldn't sell them if they weren't going to work.

He left the pharmacy and headed towards the council. He saw a phone booth and figured he would save himself some time if he rang ahead. After waiting on the phone for 3 minutes, he was told that nothing had come back yet and it was suggested that he try again the next day. He slammed the phone down in sheer frustration.

He headed home and told Mary that he'd be going over to Mrs.

Knights' to get some tips on gardening. She heartily approved and commented that his work was starting to make a difference and said she was pleased by how enthusiastic he had become.

So, it was with nervous anticipation that he knocked on the door of Heather's home. She welcomed him inside and had him sit on a comfortable couch. The living room was quite cosy. There were scenes of trees and meadows on the walls, and the room was done up in a tasteful way. The walls were painted a sky blue with white trim and green accents. On a coffee table in front of him were several books on gardening that lay next to a statue of a bird that was standing in flames.

Heather entered the room with a tray laden with biscuits and a teapot and set it down next to him. She chatted away about herself for a few minutes.

"Anyway, dear, enough o' that. Let's look in here." She opened one of the books on gardening techniques and highlighted some of the methods. Lennon did listen with interest, because he knew that it was going to help him, and one thing he didn't want to happen was to have all his work go to waste.

Presently she stopped and poured another cup of tea for them both. Lennon then brought up the subject of the house and asked if she might tell him anything about it.

"It's an old one alright," she thoughtfully replied. "Don't rightly know when it was built, but the people before your aunt and uncle would have known."

"You knew them?" he asked, hardly daring to hope.

"I was their neighbour, and friends with them for a good many years before Mick got sick and passed on. I kept in touch with Stacy after she moved away, but she's passed on, too. Several years ago now. She didn't want to live without her Mick. I say that's what killed her."

"So, they're dead?" It was more a statement than a question.

"Sadly, yes." She smiled ruefully.

"Do you mind if I ask..." he hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Did they ever mentioned anything odd about the house they lived in?"

She looked thoughtful for a long moment then shook her head.

"No, dear, as far as I know, it's just a perfectly ordinary house. No mention was ever made of it not being that. Do you think it's not?"

"It... doesn't really matter," he said.

He thought about the council and how he had paid for the documents. Now it was likely to be just useless information and he had wasted good money. Maybe he could get a refund as they had not yet completed the search. He decided that he would ring them and ask if it wasn't too late to cancel it and get his money back. He asked Heather politely if he might use her phone. She agreed, and he quickly rang them up. It turned out, the search hadn't even been started, and they told him that all he need do was present his receipt to gain a refund.

As he hung up, he dug into his change pocket to pay for the use of the phone. Heather saw him and guessed what he was doing.

"You don't have to pay, Lennon. I'm not that badly off."

But he had already pulled out a few coins. A flash caught his eye and he caught his breath. How could he have forgotten this? In his hand, amongst the coins, was the golden dove.

12. Hope.

"What's the matter, dear? said Heather. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I think I might have," he replied, unsteadily. He kept on staring at the dove. The fact that he had it was absolute proof to him that everything that had occurred had really, truly happened. Not that he had doubted it, but he finally had proof. Heather came closer and spied the piece of jewellery.

"Did it belong to someone you knew?" she asked, gently.

Lennon's head was almost spinning. He was barely aware of what he was saying. "No. I don't think so."

"Do you want to talk about it? I'm a good listener."

He looked at Heather. He was bursting to talk to someone and he felt she might be a person who could listen. "Well, it's not an easy thing to talk about," he confessed. "You'd think I was crazy."

She got him to sit back down and waited for him to speak. He slowly weighed up in his mind if he should tell her. Perhaps it was time he told someone.

"I think the house is haunted," he began.

"Chris's house?" she clarified. He nodded. "Why do you think that, dear?"

Haltingly, he began to tell him of all that had happened from the first time he saw Tiger Fawn. It had only been less than a week ago, yet it felt as if months had passed. The more he spoke, the more he was able to talk about it. Heather remained silent, except for the odd encouraging grunt or nod. Finally, he finished his tale and looked at her to see if she thought he was crazy.

"Those paintings you talk of," she said, thoughtfully, "Them were painted by Sam Taiyler. He was Mick and Stacy's only son.

"You know the ones I'm talking about?" he asked, surprised.

"Oh yes, I've seen them for myself. He called them 'The Faces of

Nature'. He was what you might call an enlightened man, Sam was. He was awakened, a seer if you will. If you knew him, he'd always let you know that."

"What's a seer?"

"One who can see things that are normally hidden from us normal folks."

"Like a ghost?"

"Yep, like a ghost, but there is more o'course."

Heather sat back and started to reminisce on what she knew about the Taiyler family.

Initially, they had lived in the house that the York's owned. Then they bought another one when Sam was a child, one that had a big garden with a swimming pool and rented out the old one. They were quite wealthy, and they retired early and lived in the house next door until they sold it and moved.

Sam was given the other house and was apparently still living there, last time she had heard.

Heather said that Sam, himself, was an unusual, though quiet man. "As a seer, he seemed to live almost in a world of his own. Most thought he was odd which tended to frighten a lot of people.

He was a gardener by trade and he ran a very successful gardening business. It suited him, I always thought, but then one day he just up and sold the business and retired. The odd thing was that his own garden was always so sickly looking."

"He can't have been a very good gardener, then," commented Lennon.

She shrugged. "He had next door looking like a show piece. That's why it's such a tragedy that it's been left to seed. Never rightly understood why his own garden looked like it had the kiss of death upon it."

She spoke a lot more, but she strayed into other areas that were irrelevant to him, such as her two boys and her late husband, who

she had loved dearly. He politely listened as he certainly didn't want to offend her.

"Robin, my husband really loved Sam's art work and they got along quite well.

She took stock of herself. "Oh my, we have strayed, haven't we?" she said. "I do tend to prattle." She smiled sheepishly.

It was getting late, and Lennon knew that dinner would be soon. He told Heather and got up. "Thanks for your hospitality," he said. Heather appeared thoughtful.

"I think, Lennon, that you might want to talk to Sam," she said, slowly. "He might be able to explain about the paintings."

"He's still alive?" he said. He was genuinely surprised as Heather had been talking about him in a past tense, and so he assumed he was dead too."

"Certainly was the last time I heard from him. He's middle aged now, but still active enough."

Lennon suddenly felt hope. Maybe he could explain what was going on. Or at least, he might be able to tell him about the paintings themselves. In fact, it occurred to him that if he was a seer, then maybe he might even be familiar with the ghosts of the garden.

"I'd love to," he said, eagerly. "but I really don't know how I'd manage that. Even if I knew his number, I don't think I could just ring him up and ask, you know?"

"Oh, posh. I'll ring him up this evening, if he's still there, that is, and arrange it all."

"Do you really think he'll be able to explain it? Would he know about the portal and how I can get back into the garden?"

"He might, though it sounds like you already know why it dinna work. I guess he could confirm that for ya."

He nodded and was quiet.

13. Faded.

The time was nearing twelve thirty. Lennon lay awake hoping that he might be allowed through this night. He had prayed for clear skies and so far, the moon was showing. It was in a different position, but he hoped that enough light would hit the painting.

Earlier, Heather had rung him with the news that she had successfully contacted Sam and, with his aunt's permission, could visit him the next day. She asked if he could be there early afternoon as Sam, himself, was going to pick them up. This was exciting news. Maybe he might get some answers at last.

He thanked her.

He looked glumly out of the window. It wouldn't be too many nights before the moon waned to beyond a quarter. He wasn't sure if that's how it worked, but he felt that he would not be able to enter the portal once that happened. The full moon had peaked three days ago, and he figured he'd have two more days, maximum, before time ran out.

At twelve thirty, he tried the portal. To his great relief and delight, it was shimmering. Maybe it was enough for the clouds not to be blocking the moon.

His heart beating fast, he pushed through the large canvas and found himself back in the garden.

Joy quickly turned to caution as he remembered Willow. He looked around to see if she was there, but there was no sign of anyone.

He needed to find Holly before Willow appeared.

As he walked, he remembered what Willow had said about the energy and looked for signs of it.

He came across what he failed to recognize as an umbrella tree. Tentatively, he reached out to touch the leaves, but remembered what had happened when he had touched the willow tree.

Instead of the usual numerous oval leaflets that radiated from the centre like the ribs of an umbrella, they were faded, sparse and

had a brown aura. He shuddered and suddenly felt a great sympathy with it. What was wrong with it? The more he looked, the more he noticed how faded everything appeared.

He knelt and said: "What's wrong with you?" to the plant, softly. "What can I do to help?"

A voice from behind him made him jump to his feet. "It's dying!" it said. It was Willow, but this time she didn't look hostile.

"Please don't do that!" he said, almost angrily.

"You do amaze me about how jumpy you are," she retorted. "Do you have something to hide?"

"You just startled me," he said, defensively. The last thing he wanted was to start arguing again. "Is this normal? Is this a seasonal thing or does it have to do with the energy you mentioned?"

"It's not normal. My whole home is dying."

"But why?"

"My accursed sister. This is her fault, all of it."

"You have a sister?" he asked, incredulously.

"Of course I do. We're one big happy family here," she said, sarcastically. She spat out the word 'happy' contemptuously.

Lennon made a connection. "Is Holly your sister?"

"One of them, but you pegged her right as being the culprit."

Lennon's mind was suddenly in turmoil. This did not make any sense. Holly was the sweetest girl he had ever set eyes on. "How could that be possible?" was all he managed to say.

"By doing what she shouldn't have gone and done. You think she's a pretty one, don't you?" Lennon tried to look non-committal. Willow continued: "Well, what she's done to this place is not so pretty, is it?" Her voice had started to rise, and sound somewhat hysterical.

"I..." he began.

"Is it?" she said, shrilly.

"No. No, it isn't," he said, quietly. "But I still don't understand how and why she's done this."

Willow shook her head disdainfully. "No, you wouldn't now, would you?" Once more, her cold blue eyes pierced into him, almost as though she was looking through him. "You wouldn't understand. You want to help, but even if you wanted to, you're just an ordinary man."

"I still want to help," he said, softly. "Tell me what I can do. I don't care if I'm just a human."

"There is nothing to do. It's... too late," she said, brokenly.

Gently, he responded: "What if there was a way?"

"There isn't. Thank you for your concern," she said in a cold voice, and stalked away.

14. The Mirage.

Lennon sighed and wondered if he should follow her, but something told him it wouldn't be a very wise idea.

If only he could find Holly. He was sure she was the key. But even if he could save her, what about the rest of this place?

He had thought a lot on what the nature of this garden really was, and he could not escape the conclusion that this had to be a ghost garden that was obviously populated by very strange ghosts. It made perfect sense.

He also suspected that the garden had existed many years ago. That Holly and Willow had been children who had lived nearby and had played there. Perhaps there had been a terrible tragedy, such as a forest fire, or some horrible death. Something that Holly had accidentally done. And now the garden, and all its inhabitants haunted the York's house, or the house had been built on the land it had happened upon.

Now he needed to make Holly alive once more, so she could find a way to heal this place. He nodded to himself. That much was clear.

If this was the case, and he strongly suspected that he was right, then Willow had to be correct. If everything was dead, there was little that he could really do about it and only Holly might be able to help.

Time passed, but all was quiet. He had walked a fair distance around the garden, looking from flower bed to flower bed, examining the trees, though he still steered clear of the willow tree. The result was pretty much the same everywhere. Everything was dying, not quite dead, but certainly needing a drastic solution. What tragedy had occurred here to make this so. He slowly made his way to where he had seen the house just before he had first met Willow.

It was still there, but as he drew closer, it did not look right. It was a double story building, all painted in a creamy white colour. He felt as though he was approaching it from the back, rather than

the front of the house. Near what must have been a back door, there was a strange kind of shimmering, almost like a reflection of water. He immediately wondered if it was another portal, but it looked very large and more distinct.

Suddenly, Lennon twigged to what was unusual. The entire scene looked like a mirage. Unless his perception was wrong, the house wasn't really there. He walked carefully closer. He could almost see through it. He reached it without incident and approached the wall. He put his hand against it and almost expected to feel that odd tingling, but instead it merely passed through. It was unlikely to be a portal then. This had to be a ghost house, if there was such a thing. Well, this was a ghost garden with ghost people. Why not also a house? Maybe this was where Holly and Willow had lived and played. Perhaps it had burnt to the ground and killed everyone.

It was all adding up now. The vegetation that looked like it was dying. The spirits of the cat and the two sisters and even that funny little man, though he couldn't quite figure out exactly what he would have been when he was alive. They must have all lived in the house a long time ago. Holly must have accidentally set fire in a nearby woods that might have existed at the time and ended up killing everyone. No wonder Willow was so bitter. There were still a few things he didn't quite get yet. Why they had called him, if indeed that was who they had meant to call and what he was supposed to do about it, if indeed he could do anything at all?

"The only thing I can do is take Holly back through the portal and hopefully return her to life," he thought. He wondered if he was meant to do the same for Willow, too. The thought both thrilled and scared him at the same time. There would be a story that no one would believe. At least, not until some proof was provided.

Another thought occurred. Maybe this was a different type of portal. One that only activated with the right conditions, just like how the other one needed the moon. What if he was able to go back in time by going through it? What if he could take Holly back so she could prevent her former self from committing the act that caused the disaster! What if she was the key to activating it? Yes! That was it. It all fell into place. He knew what must be done. Now all that was left to do was find her.

He suddenly had the feeling that he wasn't alone. He turned his head and saw Salvia standing nearby. He was cradling Tiger Fawn, who was purring contently. "Hello, Lennon."

"You know my name?"

"Tiger Fawn told me."

"It's not what you'd expect from a place such as this, would you not agree?"

Naturally, Lennon didn't know what to expect. In fact, if this was the ghost of a house, it was exactly what he would have expected. What was Salvia talking about?

"To be frank, I honestly am not sure what to expect. I've had very little experience with such places," he said. "You'll forgive my ignorance, I hope."

"You would not remember, yes."

"I'm trying to work out how it all happened. Can you tell me?"

"I am unsure if you'd be able to understand yet." Salvia looked sad. "Though Tiger Fawn assures me that you're the one we meant to call, which also means you can't help us as you currently are."

"Ah," said Lennon, "but I'm sure I can. I believe I've put the puzzle together and worked it out finally."

Salvia looked closely at him. Lennon could see doubt etched in every wrinkle in his face. "Then that would be an amazing feat to have remembered such a thing. If this is so, then I have underestimated you and I apologize."

Lennon smiled broadly. "Things aren't always what they seem," he said, echoing Jess.

The little man nodded. He did not seem any more reassured.

"Look, if you can tell me where to find Holly, I'm sure I could fix things up tonight."

"Well, you said you know what you're doing. Here is your

opportunity." He pointed towards the direction Lennon had come from. "There's Holly," he said. Sure enough, Lennon saw her heading towards them.

He suddenly got what could only be described as stage fright. "Oh," was all he managed to say.

Salvia nodded to himself. "We pray that your strategy is sound."

Lennon nodded but he really wasn't listening. He was nervously watching her approach. Within a minute she was close enough to notice them. Lennon looked towards Salvia to ask what he should do, forgetting his plan for a moment, when he saw that he had vanished. He had somehow disappeared without the slightest warning. Lennon waited for Holly to reach him. He looked over his shoulder and saw the shimmering of the large portal. It was time to save everything.

15. Bad Memory.

The moment Holly saw Lennon, she made a beeline to him. Lennon felt his heart thumping rapidly in his chest. He had forgotten just how beautiful she was. For a moment, he stood just staring, lost in her aura.

"Hi," she said, gaily, skipping up to him. "Don't I remember you from last time?"

"Hi!" he said, breathlessly.

"So nice to meet you once more," she said, smiling prettily at him. Lennon felt his heart swoon, which was something he hadn't thought possible before.

"You, too!"

She stood there, looking right into his eyes. He noticed they looked very spacey, as though she wasn't fully present.

"Holly..." he began.

"Oh, you remembered my name!" She clapped her hands.

"Yes, I could not forget it. You are too pretty to forget. If I could, I'd love to be here with you for good," he blurted out like a lovesick teenager.

Suddenly, her face clouded over, as though he had said something that had upset her. "Oh," she said, and her eyes became cloudy for a moment. The change seemed to pass, and she returned back to her normal self.

"Are you okay? I hope I didn't say something that upset you."

She smiled. "Yes, though I don't rightly remember your name."

"Well, I'm Lennon. I'm here to save you." It sounded dramatic and romantic, and he found that he liked it that way.

"Rescue me?" She genuinely sounded confused.

"I'm here to return you back to life, Holly," he said.

"To life?" she said, vaguely. "I do not understand. I am not disincorporated."

Lennon nodded, not having the faintest idea what disincorporated actually meant. "Well, it does all seem very real here. If I didn't know better, I'd say it's as real as my world."

"Your world?"

"Yes," he said. "Would you like to visit it?"

Holly looked doubtful. "Visit..."

"Come with me, Holly," he said. "You'll see." This was it. If Holly followed him, he would save her and the garden. He was sure of it.

"Visit?" she said, once more. "Oh, no, bad things happen when you visit."

Lennon felt this was validation. His guess was right. Holly had done something bad that had destroyed the garden and everything near it.

"It's okay," he said, very gently. He reached out and offered his hand to her. She took it without hesitation. Her touch was vibrant and warm, and feelings of intense love and joy flowed into him. He loved everything. She looked uncomfortable.

"Why does your touch feel so strange?" she asked. Lennon just stood there, lost in the feeling. "Lennon?" He felt his hand drop, and he realized that Holly had called his name. "Lennon? Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry..." he sighed. The feelings of love were still strong within him. Everything was just perfect. Where were we?" Holly shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, that's right. I was going to save you."

She nodded, still looking completely confused. He decided against taking her hand once more. He needed whatever wits he could muster now to complete his task.

"Follow me, Holly." She nodded, and he led the way to the large shimmering portal like object. Within moments, they stood at the

edge. He stopped and pondered on how he was going to do this. Should he go in first? What if Holly didn't follow him? Maybe she should go in before him, but then, what if he lost her? In the end, he decided the best action was to both walk in together, side by side.

He turned to tell her his plan, when he noticed that her face looked as though it was on the verge of tears.

"Holly?" he asked.

"Oh. It's bad. I'm bad. I can't... I can't... I can't... I can't..." She was working herself into hysterics.

"Holly, Holly," he said, trying to calm her down. "It's alright. It will be alright."

"I can't... I mustn't... terrible things... horrible consequences..." She was now babbling. Lennon felt he had to act quickly, before she lost complete control. There was nothing for it but to grab her hand and pull her into the portal.

"Come!" he said. He pulled her into the shimmering and had a strong sensation of being in water.

All had suddenly gone quiet. Holly had stopped her babbles and was now looking at Lennon, as if he had gone mad. He waited for a moment, but nothing happened. Then Holly suddenly broke away from his grip and darted from the shimmering area. Lennon was too stunned to react for a moment, then ran after her.

She didn't run far. Only enough for the house and the shimmering area to be out of sight. She slowed down and he caught up to her. Lennon realized something at that moment. He was still in the garden. Nothing had changed. They had passed right through that portal and they were still there.

"Holly?" he said. Now he was confused.

She was already starting to look vague and her eyes glazed over once more. "Hi, " she said, with a smile. "I'm afraid I don't remember your name." She sounded very apologetic.

"I'm Lennon."

"Oh, yes. That's right."

He nodded. He decided this was seriously weird. Holly was acting as though nothing had happened at all.

"Are you okay now?"

"I am very well, thank you, Lennon. Why would I not be?"

"You weren't doing too well back there."

She looked genuinely puzzled. "Back where?"

"At the portal."

"What portal?"

"The one you just freaked out over."

"I'm really sorry. My memory is bad for some reason." She looked confused.

He did not understand what was going on and only one option was left to him. He would have to take her through the portal that led back to his own world. He thought for a moment, and decided he had nothing to lose by trying.

"Holly," he said. "Would you like to come with me for a walk?"

"Oh, Lennon," she said, softly, "I would love that."

They walked for a good ten minutes until they reached the area where the portal was. He had this sudden fear that he might not find it. That it might be gone, leaving him trapped here, and with no way of rescuing her.

However, to his intense relief, he finally saw the shimmer that marked its position. He watched Holly carefully, making sure that she wasn't starting to freak out once more. She looked quite normal this time.

"Okay, Holly, can you see that light over here?" He pointed to the portal.

She nodded. "Walk into it, and I'll be right behind you."

"Why would we do that?" she asked.

"It's a... surprise."

Once again, she nodded. "Okay, Lennon. I'll do it for you." He sighed with relief. This would have to work. Then they could finally plan their next step.

She walked right up to the portal and appeared on the other side of the light. Lennon shook his head, as if to clear it. He had expected her to vanish.

"Holly?" His voice almost cracked.

"Hi," she said, gaily as she turned to face him.

"But you're still here. Come back towards me."

She did, and still did not enter into Lennon's own world. He wanted to test the portal out for himself, but feared that should he do so, he might not be able to get back again that night.

He was so confused and was starting to feel desperate, too. He had to find out more information. Maybe he was missing something vital. Perhaps he could try and find out when this disaster occurred and do some research on that time period. He had to be tactful, though. Perhaps she didn't know she was a ghost.

"Holly," he said, trying to phrase his question carefully. "How long have you lived here?"

"Forever," she replied dreamily. "Well, a long time. I don't remember anything else but my home."

"Do you remember... well, dying?" There, he had said it. Maybe he was going to regret the question, but he had to ask.

She smiled, as though it was a joke. "I'm not dead," she simply replied.

It confirmed his theory that she just didn't know it. "Well, you seem awfully young for having lived here so long," he said, gently.

"My memory is bad, but I know I am very old. Some days I feel it.

But I shouldn't, should I?" She shook her head, as though she was trying to clear a memory, but she looked troubled. "Why is my memory so bad?" she asked him.

"I don't know," said Lennon. "Some people just have a bad memory. Mine's not perfect either. He wondered if he should mention Willow's accusations. Maybe that way he might find out what was going on. Lennon opened his mouth to speak but couldn't think how to phrase the question. He then decided against it. It might upset her once more, and he wasn't sure if he could cope with it a second time. So, he just stood there, totally stuck on what he should say while Holly appeared to wait for him to speak.

Then Tiger Fawn bounded up to them and broke the moment. Holly squealed with delight. Lennon was relieved and looked at the cat with thanks. The cat looked back, his eyes wide, but reproachful. Then he ran off, and Holly, forgetting all about Lennon, chased after him, her laughter filling the air. He knew he shouldn't follow her. A lot had been said in the look the cat had just given him and he sensed that he had not only failed to save her and the garden, but he really didn't have the slightest idea of what was going on.

"*Well, that went well,*" he thought, ironically. "*Does anything in this place make any sense?*" He went over and over in his mind what had just happened but could not find any answers. He felt it was time to go home.

He was surprised and a little disappointed to find that Salvia had not returned. He was an odd man, but Lennon felt that he knew what was going on. If only he'd stop being so mysterious. He waited a few seconds. Once more, he became aware of a feeling of something nasty that seemed to be directed at him. He wondered if Willow was watching him. He wasn't sure if he was ready to meet her so soon again. Yes, it was time to get going and rethink everything.

The morning brought more rain. As he stared out of the window, Lennon felt strangely disappointed for it meant that he wouldn't be able to try out any of the gardening techniques he had learned

the previous day. It also meant that his aunt would find different things for him to do.

She decided it was the perfect morning for him to do a spring clean of the kitchen. Mary looked in after a couple of hours and saw he was done.

She thanked him and said he should get ready for Sam and Heather.

The afternoon came quickly, and soon he was putting his raincoat on and making his way to Heather's home. She was standing at the window and watched as he walked up the driveway. She greeted him warmly. He entered and saw she had some biscuits and drinks ready on the coffee table. She asked him if anything new had happened? He gave her a quick rundown on the latest events. She looked thoughtful, though she didn't say anything. "Sam might know," was all she seemed willing to say.

As on cue, the doorbell rang, and Heather let in a stout middle-aged man who was dressed smartly. She introduced him as Sam. He was a tall man, his hair still was mostly black, but was thinning, except for his big, bushy eyebrows that sat upon a large roundish face. He did look very fit for his age, though his face was slightly red. Lennon thought he had a slightly pompous look to him. He shook Lennon's hand with vigour and sat down for some of Heather's cakes before driving them to his home in his new Mercedes Benz, which was just a couple of blocks away.

"O' course, we could have walked there," said Heather, sounding slightly bemused, "but the forecast did call for heavy rain..."

Lennon wondered why they just couldn't stay at Heather's place. After all, all they were going to do was talk. They arrived soon at a large and impressive looking house. He had the impression that Sam was the kind of man who liked showing off what he had.

They went inside the house and he offered them some Devonshire Tea.

As he munched on a scone, Heather told him that Sam was widowed, and his two children now moved out of home. So now he was living alone.

Lennon looked around him. On the blue coloured walls were several portraits. He guessed, correctly, that they were all painted by Sam. They were mostly scenes of landscapes and forests, all done with obvious love and attention to detail.

Sam turned towards him and said: "So, Lennon, Heather tells me you've been having some unusual things happen."

"That's certainly one word to describe it," he said

"I don't know the details, so how about you tell me what you've already told Heather. I'm sure she won't mind hearing it a second time."

"Not at all," she confirmed.

"Well, there's this painting of two girls hanging in my bedroom," he looked at Sam for recognition.

"The Faces of Nature?" Sam's voice registered some surprise.

"Yes, I think that's the name."

"The one of Holly and Willow in a garden? Two young ladies."

"You know their names?" he said, incredulously.

"Of course, I did paint them. Actually, I did two paintings of them."

Lennon felt stunned and took a moment to take this information in. How could he have not realized that of course Sam knew them. It was obvious that he must have if he painted them. It also meant that the ghosts may not be as old as he believed they were. Somehow, he thought they were from the nineteenth Century.

It also meant that Sam must have known them sometime in the past 30 years.

"Do you know that they're dead?" said Lennon, trying to sound as gentle as he could in case Sam wasn't aware.

"Dead?" he said, sharply. "How so?" Lennon thought his response didn't make any sense. People did die, after all.

"Well," he said, slowly and carefully. "I've met their ghosts."

"Could that be why they've stopped visiting me?" he mused to himself. "But how? It shouldn't be possible." A faraway look came to his eyes. "They used to help me with the garden. They'd tell me what to do and when to do it, and everything bloomed brilliantly. We worked together with the seasons and little by little Holly stole my heart. Then suddenly it came to an end. I never saw them again. The heart went out of my gardening and the soul seemed to go out of the garden. I couldn't work with plants after that."

He got up and gestured at them to follow him. They moved to the back door and he dramatically flung it open. Before them was an enormous garden, but there was no beauty within, except for a large in-ground swimming pool in the middle of it. The grass was patchy and brown, and the trees and plants looked dead, too. Of course, being winter, this was to be expected. But Sam said: "Look at that. Have you ever seen a more lifeless garden?"

"I don't know much about gardens," said Lennon, "but it looks like that everywhere at the moment."

"It looks no different in the spring or summer. Nothing grows here. It's all dead and stagnant. It's a reflection of my life ever since they left me."

Lennon stepped out of the door and walked a few steps to look more closely. He had the strangest sensation that he had been there before, but he knew that there was no way he could have. A chilly wind blew at them and Sam ushered them all back inside before he had any further chance to explore.

It was toasty warm inside as they went back to the living room. "So, tell me, Lennon, what have you found out about my two girls. And how can you be certain they are dead?"

Lennon fumbled under Sam's intense look and as best as he could, he explained to him all that had happened over the past eight days. He started with how Tiger Fawn had visited him and jumped from one experience to another, sometimes going back when he remembered details he had left out.

He neglected to mention several things. The fact that the garden was dying, his feelings for Holly, and what Salvia had said to him.

He also wasn't too keen to share how his plan to save Holly and the garden came to nothing. For some reason, Sam made him feel very inadequate, and he didn't want to say more than was needed. He was sure he would have looked stupid, though he wasn't sure why. He had even forgotten to mention the part about the moon for he took it for granted that he must know how the portals worked.

He concluded his story by saying: "The only explanation that makes any sense is that it's a ghost garden populated by ghosts. That's why I think they're ghosts. How can it possibly be real?"

"It is real," said Sam, slowly. He looked deep in thought for a long moment and then said: "I've been there myself. Those paintings were created with the help of nature spirits, specifically Willow and Holly. They created a connection for me. But it failed in the end. This is why I passed them on to my parents. It pained me to see them. A portal closed, denying me any access or knowledge of those I loved most."

"Why didn't you go when the moon shone on them?"

"The moon? What's that to do with it?"

"Well, the portal only opens when the moon is full or near full. But you must already know that because of the poem."

"Poem? No, this is news to me. They don't work that way."

Lennon asked how they did work, and he explained that for a certain time, the portal would come to life, and the rainbows on them would glow with the seven colours, signalling that the way was open. "It was a strange set up. One would act as a generator, drawing energy in during the day, and it would then link its power to the portal painting to open it.

"The power was in the special paint I used on the rainbows." He went on to explain that the paint had been created by the girls.

"There's no rainbow in the one on my bedroom," said Lennon.

"No. It faded, and the portal was closed to me. The other faded, too, such was the short-term life of the paint."

"But the other one does have a rainbow. I remember seeing it."

Surprise, and hope showed in Sam's face. "This is indeed remarkable. It has reappeared? And you mentioned a poem. What did it say?"

He repeated the gist of it, for he couldn't accurately recall it. "And above that it says *Find a double rainbow*. Did you write that?"

"No," he said, jumping up, barely able to contain his excitement. "But from what you've told me, I will be able to visit them once more."

Heather interrupted. "Caution, Sam. You canna go up to his house and ask to pass through a portal. Them would lock you away, they would. Either that, or you'd have to explain to Mary what your business is, and then she'd go and ruin it all, you mark my words. She's a curious one, that Mary. No offence Lennon, but I must council this warning."

Sam looked pained. The opportunity to pass back to the garden had finally come to him, and he was being denied it. "But they are *my* paintings!"

"And passed onto your parents and left behind in the house. You would have trouble claiming them for your own, especially that which is behind a locked door."

"Then I shall go up to this Mary and buy them back for a large sum of money, if need be." Sam set his jaw and looked determined.

Lennon put his own thoughts in. He wasn't feeling too thrilled about Sam's intentions. He wasn't sure why, but he felt it would have been a bad idea. "I don't think that you are meant to pass through the portal," he said, quietly. "Tiger Fawn, the cat, led me. And from what I understand, I think it might be up to me to fix things."

"Fix what?" he snapped. "If they are in trouble or if they have forgotten me, then I am the best person to know what to do." His tone changed. "Please, I've got to see them again," he pleaded.

Heather supported Lennon. "Have patience," she said, gently to Sam. "You have not told us much of your story. Tell us more, and

we can have a clearer idea of what to do."

Sam relented, and agreed. He poured himself another drink and began.

16. The tale of Taiyler

When Sam was very young, he found that he could see things that others couldn't. He could see swirling coloured lights around all living things, and even energy fields around normal objects. He also would see many kinds of figures floating around and moving through walls, as though they were not there. And the most magical thing of all to him, he would see wondrous beings of light and colour in the gardens.

He didn't remember when he started talking to them. It was as though it always had been. He would talk to them all the time and he would hear them talk to him. Some looked like animals and some were humanoid in appearance. He soon learned that some of them could assume any shape they wanted to be. For a while, he took this all for granted and had no reason to believe that others could not see them. But as he grew older, his parents began to become concerned about his 'imaginary friends' and how he was always seeing and talking to things which simply weren't there.

He was told that it was time he started to put these childish games away and grow up. By the time he was seven, he had worked out that only he could see these things. This frightened him a little, and he wondered if he was normal.

His grandmother, a lady named Edna, had not been blind to his abilities, and having been born with a large amount of psychic ability herself, she had a good deal of experience on which to draw on. So, one day, she called him aside and said he was now old enough to hear some important facts.

She told him that he had a very special gift, and that he mustn't let others take it away from him by making him think that it was all make believe. His abilities ran in their side of the family.

Indeed, his great grandmother had been very strong with it and had been part of a coven of witches. Edna herself could see things to a limited degree, but she was more of a clairvoyant. It appeared to have skipped a generation with her daughter, but had manifested itself with full force for Sam.

She told him that instead of fearing his abilities, he should learn to love and nurture them, for they would enrich his world.

Sam was very relieved to hear that, and as he grew older, Edna would share her own experiences, which helped him to understand himself.

He loved the garden, and while other boys his age would be playing, he would spend his time in the large garden, playing with his 'invisible' friends. Edna had explained to him that these beings were very real. They were called 'nature spirits' and they tended the plants, flowers and tree, looking after them and helping them to grow.

He would see many different animals. Some of the nature spirits would take on various forms, taking on classic shapes such as dryads, fawns, or faeries. They delighted him more than anything else. They would play with him and they called him their nature friend.

He was always careful to keep this hidden from his parents, who simply didn't understand, nor did they believe in such things. His mother always used to make fun of Edna's clairvoyance, even though she would often correctly predict things. Of course, whenever she was right, his mother would conveniently forget her predictions.

His other passion was drawing, and he was quite the young artist. Every stroke was lovingly painted, and every detail was thoughtfully added. He was able to sell several of his pictures and made some money which was put in a special bank account for when he would be older.

When he turned thirteen, he began working in the garden. He would dig, plant, seed, tend, weed and water according to the instructions of his friends.

He had two special friends who had taken on the shape of two beautiful young girls. Their names were Holly and Willow. They were called that because Holly's job was to tend the holly flowers, amongst other plants. She explained to him that she was the essence of holly, which was the essence of love and universal compassion. He was always glad when she was about because she

filled everything with love.

Willow was, of course, the essence of the willow flowers and trees. She explained that her qualities were to bring acceptance and forgiveness. She radiated a childlike innocence and trust to everyone. She had the most beautiful blue eyes.

Years passed, and every day they would visit him and help his gardens to flourish and glow with the force of life. At the age of sixteen, Sam had started working for money in other people's gardens. His work was so magnificent, that his reputation grew and people from all over his suburb would demand his services. It didn't take very long before he had to hire other people to help him to cope with the workload, and by the age of twenty, he had a thriving business.

Up until that age, he had no interest in other women because he had always been too preoccupied with his work, and with Holly and Willow always by his side, he never felt lonely, or the need for companionship.

He was considered a very gentle man, if not a little strange.

Then near his twenty first birthday, he met Tabatha. She, like him, was a very spiritual person, and also very beautiful. She could see Sam for his true nature and fell in love with him almost from the moment they met.

Willow noticed that Tabatha could also see things that were normally invisible to other people, and she warned Holly to keep out of her sight. Holly told Sam of what Willow had observed, and he found his interest suddenly piqued. He had never met another human who could see what he could see. He started paying attention to her and discovered that they could talk on a level that he had never experienced with anyone else, not even Grandmother Edna.

He began to spend more and more time with Tabatha and discovered a new circle of like-minded friends who were also interested in spiritual matter. His time became more and more consumed by them and he spent less time working in the garden and with Holly and Willow until eventually, he happily announced that he was going to marry Tabatha.

Holly reacted strangely, and so did Willow. They said that they thought that he would be their special friend forever, but now he was deserting them. Sam assured the girls that while he would be spending less time with them, he would always still love and care for their friendship.

Willow seemed most unsatisfied with this and said that Tabatha could never really give him what he needed.

"But she does," he told them. "And we are deeply in love."

"Come over to our world," said Willow, and see if what you don't find there is better."

"Yes, Sam," urged Holly, "you must see what it's like where we live. The wonder and beauty is just beyond your soul's imaginings."

He laughed and said that he'd have to leave his physical body before he would visit their home, and so far, he hadn't managed to achieve that yet.

"But there is a way," explained Holly. Sam was immediately curious for he had always wanted to see what their home was like. They had painted such vivid descriptions of it with their words that he almost believed that he would know it the instant he saw it.

"How?" he had asked. They told him that he must paint two pictures of them standing in what he imagined to be the garden. In each painting, he must leave room for a rainbow, which would be the key to entering their land. The rainbow was to be painted with special paint. By putting them in the painting, he would create a special bond that would allow him to visit them.

Sam set to work and lovingly created the two portraits over a period of several weeks. At last, all was ready and one summer's night, when the moon was full, it was time to do the ritual.

All seven colours of the rainbow were put out in the garden. At twelve thirty, a very special ceremony took place. Sam beheld the most amazing and beautiful ritual that he could have imagined. With the full moon shining above, brilliantly illuminating the garden, the air was full of dazzling lights and gyrating colours.

They all centred around the pots of paint, and Holly and Willow weaved and danced their way through each of them.

He stood entranced for fifty minutes, and finally it all ended. They told him that he must paint the rainbows by the light of the moon while the magic was still potent. The nature spirits provided a beautiful light by which to paint, and paint Sam did. By the time morning arrived, both paintings had the most vivid rainbows on them.

They told him that each day, the special paint would work with the others to draw in mystical energies from the astral planes, and at twelve thirty each night, he would be able to enter their world through the second portrait he had painted. Because he had painted the girls, the opening would be drawn to their home.

Impatiently, he waited all day and finally the next night came. True to their promise, he was able to enter the painting, and was delighted to find himself in a wonderland that beggared description. The sights made all his work pale in comparison, and he truly longed for every moment he spent there.

In his own world, he could never touch the girls, but while he was in theirs, they were as real to him as a solid object.

Night after night, he would visit, and little by little, he did indeed begin to lose interest in Tabatha. Still, the wedding date was drawing nearer, and he had made no move to call it off. Tabatha had noticed that a certain aloofness had begun to develop about him.

Then one night, upon one of his visits, Holly took him by the hand and led him to a circle of flowers and had kissed him softly on the lips. He was then lost, his heart went completely to her, and he passionately kissed her back.

"I love you, Sam," she sighed. "Promise me you'll never let me go. Promise me that you'll always be with me."

"Holly," he sighed, "all else fades in comparison to you. I never believed that such feelings of love could be so complete, so whole. I've always loved you, and now I can be with you. I never thought it possible before, but now I know. Now I know."

"Sam, oh Sam," she breathed. "You'll be so happy here. I'll make you ever so happy."

They kissed, and it lasted for long moments, until Willow suddenly appeared and angrily demanded to know what was going on. Sam looked at her in surprise. Her eyes had turned ice cold. He had never seen her angry before, and it came as quite a shock to him.

Holly didn't seem to notice. "Willow," she exclaimed. "Sam's coming to stay with me."

"He can't," she snapped. "He's a mortal, and he really shouldn't be here in the first place."

Sam was amazed with this turnabout. Willow had always been more than happy about him being here until now, and suddenly she was hostile. "Willow, don't you want me here anymore?" he asked.

"What I want doesn't come into it," she said, coldly. "Holly should have known better. You must go back."

"No," she protested. "I love him, and he loves me. He can stay. There must be a way. I'll get permission. Love will conquer all barriers."

"Leave now, Sam," said Willow. "We will talk about this in the morning."

Sam looked confused and concerned, but Holly tearfully told him that he should leave until she had sorted things out. He passed back through the portal and took one last look at them both. "I'm sorry, Sam," were the last words he heard Willow say.

That was the last he saw of them both. The next day, when they didn't turn up as they usually did, he immediately began to worry. Something had to be wrong. They had never missed a day before, and now, suddenly, they had both vanished.

He anxiously waited until night and tried to pass through the portal to discover what had become of them, but the canvas was now unyielding and worse he noticed that the rainbows had both vanished overnight.

Shattered and heartbroken, he waited day after day, hoping against hope that they would return. But he never saw them again. His own garden began to fade, as if the life had been cut off from it. Indeed, he could barely bring himself to work in it, but he continued in the hope that they would turn up, as if nothing had ever happened, and all would be well.

Weeks passed, and Tabatha finally demanded to know what was ailing him. His wedding was only a month away, and he had paid no attention to her.

Here was a real woman. One that he had loved, and still did, though his heart now belonged to Holly. He had begun to understand that Willow had been right. He couldn't live with Holly. He was from another world.

He asked Tabatha for forgiveness, though he could not bring himself to talk about what had befallen him. The wedding went ahead as planned, and they had two lovely, gifted children. The years passed, but Sam never forgot Holly or Willow, and not a single day did pass where he did not think of them.

The time came when he could not bear to look at his pictures any more. He took them both and asked his parents to look after them.

He kept up his gardening business for many years but took little part in it himself. Finally, he sold it and retired. Soon after, his wife fell ill and passed away. Before she died, she told him that even though she had always loved him, she could tell that his heart had always belonged to another.

His children eventually moved out and he was left alone to live out a lonely existence. One that had seemed an eternity to him.

And now, finally, Lennon had come to him with news of Holly and Willow.

17. Sam's misgivings.

Sam had finished his story. He looked at both Heather and Lennon. Heather didn't seem the slightest bit fazed by it, however Lennon's expression showed that he was just trying to come to terms with the basic concepts.

Not that he thought that Sam was making it up, oh no. He seemed genuine enough, and the story did explain many things, such as why the gateway only opened at half past twelve and for fifty or so minutes.

What he was having trouble with was the overload of things that he had never dreamt existed. He had always found his own world to be boring and he'd often escape, with his imagination, to a land of fantasy where anything was possible. But now he had been told the most amazing story, and he, Lennon, had proof of it.

A week ago, he would have just dismissed Sam as a delusional crackpot who might have gone queer from being lonely, but now he felt he knew better.

At last he said: "So they're not ghosts after all." His voice sounded strange to his ears and his words felt lame.

Sam nodded. "Yes, yes, nature spirits aren't ghosts." Once again, he sounded somewhat impatient with him.

"I never could have imagined that such a thing was possible."

"There are many who wouldn't, Lennon," said Heather, "and who could blame them. We've all been brought up to believe that it's complete nonsense."

Sam turned and stared intently at Lennon. "Now you see why it's imperative that I go through my paintings? I must find out what's become of my two girls."

"I hear what you're saying," answered Lennon, cautiously, "but the question is how?"

He was trying to discourage Sam because, if the truth be known, Lennon suddenly had the strongest feeling that he mustn't let him anywhere near the portal. The very thought made him

uncomfortable, though he couldn't really say why. Maybe it was because it was his adventure now, and hadn't Salvia suggested that he could help put things right? Hadn't he been called?

Heather was a tower of support. "Sam," she said gently, "I understand your need, but I think you'd be in error to go traipsing off to find Holly and Willow, considering the circumstances."

"They are my paintings, painted by me, for the purpose of doing just that. I don't see what circumstances are preventing me from doing that."

"Ah, well, it's an odd thing, and you may not agree, o'course, but I've a feeling that the paintings work only for Lennon, and only because he might be able to somehow mend things. You blundering into God knows what, might end up making them worse. My feelings on it aren't good."

"Neither are mine," agreed Lennon. "Maybe if you left it to me, I might be able to help."

Sam's face grew red with anger. He stood up, his eyes almost bulging and said in a raised voice: "Do you think I am foolish enough to wreck it all? Can't you understand that I've waited every day for twenty three years for such a thing to happen? I'm not going to risk it all on some young chap who doesn't understand the first thing about such matters. Do you understand me?"

Lennon was stunned. He hadn't expected such a violent reaction. Instead he said: Well, if Sam felt that strongly about it, then who was he to stand in his way.

Fortunately, Heather came to the rescue, she, herself, becoming angry in turn.

"Now listen to me, Sam Taiyler, I may not see what you can, but I do have a woman's intuition, and a highly reliable one it is, too, for well has it served me during my life. And it's saying now that only a fool would rush into so obviously a delicate predicament. You rushing in could make things worse than they already are. Your reasoning is not functioning as it should."

"Then I should trust my future to Lennon," he said, ironically.

"Lennon here might not know all that you might, but he can see just as well as you."

Lennon's mind went into overload. What was Heather saying about him? She continued. "As I see it, for Lennon to see and do what he's done, he'd need to have some special gifts. He'd have to be a seer himself though he'd not be aware of that. There is no doubt more to him than meets the eye."

"Even so, that wouldn't automatically qualify him to help," retorted Sam.

"The cat came to him," she pointed out. "Why not come to Mary or Chris? Maybe because they mightn't see him or be the right sort for helping. But Lennon here, he must be able to help. Is it his fault that his talents haven't been nurtured? He could have been like you, with the right guidance, but he hadn't received it. And now opportunity beckons and his time might have arrived."

Lennon was too stunned to comment. He had never thought himself as having any special abilities, save in his fantasies. He had been told that all such things were the products of a delusional mind or just make believe. To be able to see things others couldn't was really too much for him to accept.

Sam sat silently for a few tense minutes, and no one spoke. It was clear he was turning things over in his mind. Lennon unconsciously held his breath. Finally, the aging man sighed and said: "Oh it pains me, it really does pain me, but you are right, goddamn it. I feel it deep inside, should I chance to listen to what my inner voice is saying." He turned to Lennon and said gruffly: "My apologies. I can't expect you to understand what it's been like for me."

Lennon thought about his own obsession with Holly and how he'd hardly been able to think of much else. He imagined what such a torment must be like for year upon year. "Yes, I do understand," he replied, "and I'll do all in my power to make things right for you. I promise."

It was getting late and Lennon felt that it really was time he was getting back. Unfortunately, Sam felt that certain things still had to be resolve before returning.

"I don't feel happy about leaving it with you. You're not exactly someone who seems to be a wealth of knowledge," he said, rather rudely, "but I don't seem to have much choice."

Thanks for the vote of confidence, thought Lennon. He secretly feared that Sam might be right. And worse, maybe Salvia had indeed called the wrong person after all. Even he hadn't shown much confidence in him. Perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity. Right now, he felt sure that there was. He had no new plan, no ideas and no knowledge which might help him, but he was all they had. Whoever they really intended for them to come to their aid hadn't shown up, and Lennon was it.

Naturally, he didn't mention this, because admitting that would be paramount to saying that he was going to mess it up. Instead, he said: "I'll be doing my best." He did not mention that he feared that tonight would be the last night for a while, if he was accurate with how the moon worked.

When it was obvious that nothing more could be said or done, Sam drove them back home. He did not look at all satisfied, but he gruffly wished Lennon luck before he drove away.

In his young life, he had never expected such a thing to happen. Not in his wildest dreams. He wondered how things had become suddenly so complicated. It was a relief that he was away from Sam's presence.

Heather turned towards him and noted his concern. "Worrying will do you little good," she said.

"You know a better thing to do?" His tone wasn't rude, though. Just quying. "I can't help it. What if I stuff it up?"

"All you can do is your best, Lennon, and that's all anyone can expect from you."

This did little to fill him with confidence. He asked her what she thought. She replied that things always had a way of working out. "Nothing is truly random," she said. "Trust in yourself, and things will be okay."

This sounded very simplistic to him, but he didn't have many options, and this was the best of a bad bunch.

"He's going to kill me if I get it wrong," he said.

"Don't think that way. There be negative thoughts and will doom you to failure should they seed like weeds in your mind. We all have our path to follow and each one of us will follow it, come what may."

He wrenched his eyes away from the horizon, turned towards Heather and said, urgently: "I think I've taken on too much. I don't know nothing about anything when it comes to all this hocus-pocus."

She shook her head. "Lennon, you mustn't let your fears stop you. Yes, Sam, he is relying on you, but I feel it in my bones that his would be a great misfortune if he chanced to enter that world once more." She looked intently at him and continued. "Is it me, Lennon, or did you choose to leave things out of your tale?"

He blushed. This lady was certainly very perceptive. "Yeah," he admitted. "I did, but only because they didn't seem important."

"Maybe it were best. Some things remain better left unsaid."

"Please Heather, can you give me any advice? I badly need some."

"Only the same advice I have given you before: Trust in yourself."

"Thanks, but that doesn't really help."

"It may if you try. Be your own inspiration. Find that which inspires you."

During dinner, he kept up a pretence that everything was fine. Though it was a little strained, Mary and Chris seemed to notice nothing amiss with him. He excused himself as soon as was polite and went up to his room. It was around six and was looking dark and gloomy outside. He feverishly hoped the moon would open the portal for him once more, and yet, part of him feared that it indeed would, and he would be obliged to try and fix things up.

He opened his diary and wrote for a long while. At last he had written down all the events of the day, and all his thoughts. As he read back over his work, he noticed it full of self-doubt and

disbelief.

"I mustn't think like that," he thought, to himself. *"That won't help me at all."*

He looked at the time. It was almost ten o'clock, but he was far too tense and nervous to even try and sleep.

He honestly had no idea what he should do. He looked at the painting and still could not wrap his mind about the fact they were nature spirits.

"Fae are crazy," said his inner voice.

No other words came.

18. The kiss.

The time had arrived once more. There was a clear night sky and the moon was visible from his window. It was certainly waning now. He gave a deep sigh. He had been doing that all night.

"Well, Lennon, old boy," he said to himself, "*here goes nothing!*"

He opened his door, when he heard someone moving around in the hallway. Uncle Chris was making one of his midnight journeys to the bathroom. He muttered an expletive and closed the door.

He waited another twenty minutes until finally, he had the nerve to open his door once more. The light in the bathroom was still on and the door was open. What was he doing in there?

Lennon decided that he would have to take a chance. It would only take him seconds to scoot down the hallway, past the bathroom and through the door. If he could act fast enough, then even if Chris saw him, he wouldn't find him once safely inside the room. But he certainly wouldn't find him in his bedroom either. A thought hit him. What if he chose to look in on him? How could he explain his absence? Maybe he'd better abort tonight's journey.

But he decided, no. If this was the last night, he would have to take the chance and run quickly and softly past. His heart beating rapidly, he made his start a dozen times, but fear always held him back. A thought seemed to be telling him not to do it. "*You'll get caught, you fool, and then where will you be?*"

To make matters worse, he heard Mary's voice calling from their bedroom. The sound of footsteps were indications that she was coming out to see what was up. It was now or never.

With a speed that he never knew he had, he bolted down towards the door. Alas, he was too noisy, and he alerted Chris, who was having problems with indigestion and had taken some antacid.

"Hello?" he called, uncertainly. But Lennon was through the door, and it was closed safely behind him. He was shivering with fright, but at least he had made it. He looked over towards the painting. Normally, he had his torch with him, but this time he had

forgotten it in his rush to pass Chris. In this darkness, he noticed that the rainbow in the painting was actually glowing, each one of the seven colours taking on its own life and spectrum. He entered.

The garden looked the same. The only difference was that Lennon looked at them with new eyes. If he was a seer, then he might see things that might normally be hidden. He now fancied that he could make out the faintest of a glow over the grass.

After a few more minutes, he decided it was probably his imagination, and having discovered nothing new, he decided it was time to get started with his plan. A vague plan it was, too. It involved finding Willow or Holly and somehow talking about what Sam had told him.

Without any warning, he once again felt he wasn't alone. It was that sense of evil or negative energy he had felt from time to time. It suddenly occurred to him that perhaps that was the source of the problem. He wasn't exactly sure how to define what he felt, except that it made him feel anxious and uncomfortable.

Maybe he should find Willow or Holly and take it from there. Not the best idea and it scared him. He felt awkward, though he had no idea why.

He walked towards the Willow tree. Now that he understood that Willow was a nature spirit, it made sense that she'd live near the tree.

When he got to the area, he looked carefully around. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Willow," he called, feeling foolish. "I know you're here. I just want to talk to you." *'Yeah, but about what?'* he thought to himself.

He looked directly at the willow tree, as if he expected her to walk out from it. Instead, there was a feeling of a cold hand on his shoulder. Like ice it was, and he felt it right through his shirt.

He spun around and found her. Her ice-cold eyes regarded him coolly. He broke contact and took a step backwards.

"Don't you like my touch?" she said, amusement playing on her

lips. "Perhaps you would have preferred it if I were Holly. I saw your ridiculous display the last time you were here."

"I... I just came to talk," he stammered. "I don't want to fight."

"We don't have to talk. Take my hand and you can experience it all first hand." She held out her hand, but Lennon took a step back.

"Um, no, stay back," he said.

"And if I don't?" It was a challenge, and she took another step towards him. Lennon vividly remembered what had happened when he touched the tree. He didn't want to find out what the spirit of the tree would be like.

"I've come to talk about Sam," he said, desperately. The moment the words left his lips, he regretted it. Anger blazed in her features and the iciness in her eyes almost froze him to the core of his being.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed. "Aye, I said that you was up to no good when I saw you snooping 'round the garden. You're working with Holly and Tiger Fawn, you are." She moved another step towards him. He quickly stepped back further from her.

"No," he said, his voice shaky, "I'm here to find out what's going on."

"Don't think I've not got eyes," she screeched at him. "I've seen you talking to Holly. I know what's going on."

"Well tell me then, and then we'll both know." Lennon stopped retreating. He was beginning to feel resentful towards her, and especially resentful to Sam who had gotten him into this mess. And Heather had just encouraged him into this situation. What were they thinking? They might have warned him that he was going to have trouble. Why had he let himself be forced into this?

Lennon didn't understand it, but he was rapidly succumbing to Willow's negative vibrations. A voice floated into his mind: Like his inner voice, but it felt different. *Stand your ground, Lennon. Don't let her intimidate you!* It felt odd, and he wasn't sure it felt right, but it was all he could think of. He drew himself up and stared

boldly at her. She wasn't going to intimidate him anymore.

"Don't even think about coming any closer," he warned.

"And what would you do if I should," she replied. "It's not as though you're anything special." She moved within striking distance.

"Try me!" he stated, standing firm his ground.

"Indeed, I shall," she said. Before he knew what was happening, Willow had embraced him and was kissing him full on his lips. They were ice cold, and he was flooded with a torrent of emotion, a mixture of love, pity, hate and grief. He tried to resist, but before he knew it, he responded to the pain and to her. It was as if he had torn open his heart and placed her being within it. Her feelings were his feelings, and for one perfect instant, he fully understood and sympathized with her. She was not evil or bad, but just... hurting. He felt his heart reach out to her in sympathy, and he was lost.

She finally stepped away, and he collapsed, tears welling up in his eyes. Now he fully empathised with her. He wanted to be her friend, to hold her, to comfort her, to try and make her feel better.

"Tell your precious Holly that there will be no rainbow," she said. Her face looked grief stricken. "And you... damn it all... now I will truly be damned, but I didn't know."

Lennon's sight became blurred by the tears of his reaction and pain. He wiped them with his hand to clear his eyes and Willow was gone. "Willow," he cried. "Wait, don't go."

Not only had he experienced who she was, but he knew she had somehow experienced who he was, and it had stunned her.

19. The higher level.

About an hour had passed, but Lennon still felt wretched. He now knew that he had made a huge mistake and was paying the price. The torrent of emotions that twisted through his soul were beyond his control. He knew that Willow had caused this, and he didn't wish to be affected, but his feelings knew no reasoning. And yet, another part of his soul desperately wished to be part of her. He wanted to save her.

Finally, the intensity started to fade, and he recovered enough to move far away from the willow tree, and from the no doubt watchful eyes of Willow. He tried not to think of her, for every thought brought a surge of regret and longing that overwhelmed him like a tidal wave. It was all he could do to stop himself from running back and begging for her to come out.

He needed help, and he remembered Salvia. "Salvia," he called. "If you're around, I really need to talk to you."

On cue, Lennon heard his name being called from a clump of bushes. "I am over here, Lennon."

He followed the sound and found him sitting crossed legged on the grass. He motioned for Lennon to join him. He sat down and looked at the curious small man, who he now figured must also be a nature spirit. Curiously enough, in his presence, his emotions ebbed somewhat, though not completely. Still, it helped bring some relief.

"It's a brave or foolish man who will confront a fae while she is in the negative," said Salvia.

"Or an ignorant one," said Lennon, almost apologetically. "You saw what happened?"

"It was not something I could have missed. I am always watching here."

"What has she done to me? Why can't I stop thinking about her?"

Salvia smiled grimly. "Things are very wrong here," he said. "Willow has become a victim of her own qualities."

Lennon immediately felt that this was going to be another cryptic conversation. He sighed within.

"Can you explain what you mean?"

"This area is disconnecting due to psychic attack."

"What? I've never heard of such a thing. What is it?"

"When someone uses their spiritual abilities to cause a negative outcome, that's a psychic attack. Are you not familiar with this already? You should be."

"I'm not sure why you'd think that. But then, I'm not sure about anything much, any more. I'm not even sure I'm the person you summoned here."

Salvia nodded. "Perhaps you are an emissary. I am unable to see who you are for some reason, but I know this of you. You are an empath. One who feels the emotions of others, and if that were not so, Willow would not have had such a dramatic effect on you."

"I've never heard of this either. I thought I was a seer."

"That you may be, but you can be more than just one thing."

"Whatever I am, I don't know if I can help. And if it's not me, then who?"

"You are the one. Though you may not be the one I called for. And perhaps that makes sense considering all that is going on there, however that is not relevant here."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you are just too cryptic for me. I don't know what you mean."

Salvia was silent for a bit, as though he was deep in thought. "Do you remember who "They" are?"

"I have no clue... it sounds like it's a pronoun."

"They have always been referred to as such, though they go by many names. I do not wish to use them here because they are attuned to such things. But if you can remember that, then you

will understand so much more."

"Thanks... I think. Do I have to do anything with this information? Will it help me help everyone?"

"I cannot say. You will have to work that part out yourself."

"Right now, I'm more concerned with how I'm feeling. What did Willow actually do to me?"

"You have empathically taken on her feelings and are experience it all as a soul call for help. As she is in the negative, you are experiencing this. This is a highly unusual state for a Fae to be in, and I do not understand how it came to be. Nothing here is as it should be."

"What exactly are Fae?"

"Those who are connected with The Gaia... the spirit of this world. But Nature Spirit is another term for them."

Lennon nodded. Somehow, he felt he knew this already, but had no idea why.

"I can't fix what she did to you. You will have to work that out. Maybe it might be a hidden blessing. Alas, I cannot aid you much. If I understood the problems that we face and what must be done, then I would have no need to call for aid."

"I think that helps. It does not change my feelings, but at least I understand why now."

Salvia stood up and bowed deeply to him. Lennon felt it was almost respectfully. He watched as he walked away.

So what now? If this was his last night here for the moment, then he really needed to find a way to fix things.

Maybe he should try finding Holly instead. If he only understood more about the psychic attack. What it was and how it was done.

He stood up and walked a few paces to look around for Salvia. He still felt he needed to speak more to him. A green, grassy patch of grass caught his eye. At first, he didn't comprehend what was different about it, then he realised that it was very much alive and

quite healthy looking.

It was the place where he had sat. Something had revived it. Somehow it had been brought back to life. But even before his startled eyes, it began to fade again.

He took a step backwards and looked at where he had just been standing. The grass did seem a little greener but seemed to fade almost at once. "What's making that happen?" He took another step backwards, and the effects was similar, but not quite as pronounced as the previous efforts. Who exactly was he?

He tried to think on what his next movement should be. Salvia had not reappeared yet, and he suspected that he might not until he was good and ready. He was certainly a strange little spirit, that one. He wondered for which plant or tree he might be the guardian of.

"If only he wasn't so cryptic about certain things! Maybe I'd finally be getting somewhere," he thought.

He was starting to feel anxious. He felt his time was running out, and this might be his last opportunity to fix things. He thought about how Sam would probably lynch him if he hadn't managed to achieve anything.

He resolved to find Holly again and then debated within himself whether that would be a particularly wise course of action. The mention of Sam's name had caused a volatile reaction in Willow. Did he want to risk the same thing happening in her sister? Plus, he especially didn't want to do anything to upset her, considering how he felt about her.

He realised that he didn't feel anything at all for her anymore. Willow must have somehow managed to stop those emotions. He wasn't sure if he should be relieved or not.

Salvia chose that moment to return. "Why do you linger, Lennon? Do you not feel the time for you to return is drawing near?"

"I was hoping to come up with something," he replied.

"Perhaps there is no answer here right now."

"I still need to try... but what will happen if I stay too long?"

"You will start to become part of the energy here and that you do not want. Holly could not pass through the portal and the same would happen for you."

This scared Lennon. He could feel Salvia was right. He should be heading back. He suspected he might normally have a longer window of time, but what had happened with Willow had most certainly made it shorter.

"I've got one last question. If you don't mind," he said. "If you are part of this garden, how come you've not been affected by what's going on here?"

"I am from another level. Come. You still have a little time. At least time enough for me to show you."

Salvia touched his hand and suddenly everything blurred. He found himself elsewhere. Here there was music and the energy of life. Plants were surrounded by mystical glows and the atmosphere was charged by a vibration that seemed to be almost like a feeling of wellbeing and love.

But it was a higher love than he ever could have imagined. The whole place was literally alive. Many nature spirits were moving around, all of them taking on wonderful shapes, varying in size. In one section, there looked to be a thousand lights swirling and eddying around and around in a glowing aura of blue. Each flower was alive, each petal standing starkly and proudly out in vivid, surrealistic colour.

"This is where I live," said Salvia. "This is what it was like before in the garden. This is what it was like before the corruption took seed. This is what it could be like should you find a solution. This is where I must return frequently lest I become stuck on the lower level."

In a wonderland of indescribable beauty, Lennon could only stand awe struck. If this is what Sam had experienced, no wonder he had wanted to live here.

"I am overwhelmed," was all he could say.

Salvia smiled. "Now you know what may be, take this back with you and may you find the solution."

20. Frustration.

When he returned, Chris was still in the bathroom and Mary was still walking down the hallway. He waited a few minutes and heard them talking. Then finally, both went back to bed.

Carefully, he opened the door a crack and listened. There was no sound and certainly no illumination of light. He opened it further and looked out. It seemed clear and he moved through the door, closing it gently behind him. He quickly made for his room, taking care to make no noise.

He had just reached the bathroom door when a bright flash filled the hallway. A sense of utter coldness came to him and once more, he had the impression of a hooded being.

Lennon just stood there gaping. Whatever that thing was, he felt it was not Fae. It felt bad. He reached for and turned on the light which was just inside the door. The glow spilled into the hall, dimly lighting it.

Then Mary appeared from around the corner. "Lennon?" she said, sounding almost frightened.

"Aunty?" he said, not quite sure how to react.

She looked at him and the bathroom door and said: "Did you just see a flash of light when you came out of the bathroom?"

Lennon nodded, very much relieved that he didn't have to explain why he was out of bed.

"I was up with Chris a minute ago, but something felt so... wrong. I thought it might be a burglar, so I came back to check."

"I thought I saw something too. What did you see?"

"It looked like a dark man wearing a robe. But it felt so menacing and cold."

"I don't think anyone has broken in, Aunty," he said. "And whatever that was, I think it's gone now."

He found he was shaking like a leaf. Too much had happened this

night and he just wasn't up to handling anymore.

"Come, Lennon," said Mary. "I think we'll do better for a while with some lights on and a hot cocoa." He couldn't have agreed, more.

She headed off down the stairs to put the kettle on, and suddenly Lennon realized he was still in his clothes. He rushed back to his bedroom and pulled them off and put on his dressing gown. He thanked his good fortune that Mary had been too rattled to have noticed otherwise. He quickly made his way down to join her.

Thirty minutes later, they had finally calmed down. He didn't remember falling asleep, but he slept soundly until it was time to get up.

That morning, everything was normal, and neither he, nor Mary, made any mention of the oddity of the previous night. In fact, you would have thought she had a good night's uninterrupted sleep. He couldn't be sure, but Lennon felt she really wasn't comfortable discussing such things and preferred to act as though nothing happened.

During that day, Lennon pondered on the problem of what he was going to tell Sam. He was sure he could explain to Heather what had happened without any trouble, but he believed that Sam couldn't and wouldn't understand. Even now, even in his own world, he could feel the effects of Willow's soul call on him. It was compulsive. He could not get it out of his mind.

It was raining again, and gardening was out of the question for him.

Perhaps the best thing he should do is lie and say that he was unable to get past his uncle until it was too late. He was sorely tempted, but something told him that this would be a mistake. He decided against this plan and hoped that he could put off as long as possible talking to Sam. In any case, his theory about the moon was only a theory. Perhaps the presence of any moon light might be enough to do the trick. He felt curiously negative about that being the case. He wished he had thought to ask Salvia about it. If anyone was to know, he was sure it would have been him.

All in all, he was not feeling very good. Emotionally, he felt exhausted. The future felt bleak to him. If only he had known what to do last night. If only. He gave a deep sigh. How did life suddenly get so messy.

As usual, he did his work in the morning and the afternoon was his to do what he wished.

He planned to go to the council and get his money back. He decided to also visit the library again and see if he could find anything on nature spirits.

Also, the uncomfortable thought about his studies came to him. He was in year eleven, and that had required some hard study to do well. But ever since he had opened the door, he had been so obsessed that he had neglected to even browse through his text books and already the first week of his break had almost past. He made a mental note to fit some serious studying in during the weekend.

More rain loomed as Lennon entered the council office. He found the lady working there who had initially helped him and so he asked her for his refund. She gave him a confused look and muttered 'refund?' and then reach from somewhere behind the counter and handed him a brown envelope. It was the information he had requested, and furthermore, it had arrived the day after he had requested it.

He almost lost his temper and complained bitterly about the service level that they provided. The lady smiled sympathetically, as though she'd heard it all before, and said that while she couldn't refund his money, she would put forth his complaint to the appropriate department.

Lennon grabbed the envelope and left in a huff. He went across to the public library and opened up the contents. All it told him was that the house was built in 1910, the floor plan and zoning details. From what he could see, there was nothing of use at all. What a waste of money that turned out to be. What was more, it was not accurate. It didn't even have the locked closet showing on the plans.

He took a second look at it. From what he could see, not only was

it missing, but it shouldn't even exist as it extended outside the house and he was certain there was nothing there. A thrill ran through him. The closet wasn't supposed to be there. Once again, he had the odd feeling as if someone was walking over his grave. It was just another part of the mystery.

He stuffed the envelope in his coat pocket and began to search for any books that could help him. There was nothing under Fae, nature spirits or the Gaia. He sighed. Next, he tried 'the occult'. There were several books referenced, but they mainly had to do with witchcraft. This didn't sound like the subject he was looking for, but he looked them up anyway. The books were filled with strange diagrams and rituals. They seemed to centre around calling up demons and casting magical spells whose effects ranged from making people fall in love to getting rich. He had a bad feeling that he shouldn't even be thinking of such a subject, though it was tempting to try out some of the spells. In the end, he put the books away and resumed his search.

"Not the kind of thing that would help you, you know?" said a familiar voice. Lennon knew it was Jess. He was starting to expect him as he seemed to appear every time he went out. He wondered why he was always in the library. Did he work in it?

"I almost feel like you're stalking me," he said.

"Hey, great to see you, too," said Jess. "So how did you go with the council?"

"Mostly frustration. Shouldn't have wasted my money on it."

"Never trust a council," he said with a glint in his eyes. "You know, I reckon that God Himself would have trouble dealing with bureaucrats."

Lennon had to laugh. "Yeah, I bet He would."

"Tell you what," said Jess. "How about I treat you to a nice lunch to make up for it."

"You don't have to," said Lennon, now blushing. "It's not your fault."

"Yeah, I blame society, but I'm hungry and could use some

company for lunch. I'm sure we could find things to chat about." He flashed a smile and Lennon found himself agreeing.

"So whatcha looking at?"

"Oh, just trying to find information again."

"There's not much in the way of useful stuff here. There wasn't last time I mentioned it and nothing new has come in since then." He picked up the book on magic. "Take this book," he said. "It's useless." He turned to a random page. "Now take this spell here for making useful books appear at your local library. Think it worked? Not on your nelly! A perfectly good waste of dragon claws."

"Dragon claws?" said Lennon, taking him seriously. He grabbed the book, but found it contained nothing of the sort. "Oh, you were joking!" he said, feeling a little bit foolish.

"So, I was. How sharp of you to notice. The dragon claws are not used in that recipe."

"Oh," he said, the joke being lost on him. "I'm trying to find out some information."

"Great! Let's chat about that over lunch, okay?"

Rain was now steadily pouring as the two teens entered a warm café. "Ah, rain and more rain. Someone has called forth a lot of it lately." He grinned at Lennon who looked at him as though he was completely mad. "Let's eat, buddy."

Jess led him to a table and handed him a menu. "Choose anything you like. My treat."

"Do you work around here?" Lennon asked.

"Library assistant," said Jess. "You might have thought I was just very learned, but that's how I make my living."

Lennon looked at the menu and saw "Café Gaia," on the front. "I don't believe this," he said.

"Yeah, I know the prices are outrageous. Still, I'm good for it." Jess laughed his merry laugh.

"No, the name of this place. Café Gaia."

"Well, you could say it's unimaginative, but it does have a certain ring to it, don't you think?"

"No, it's not that. I just came across that name last night."

Well, isn't that synchronous, and I'm still not sure if that's a word, you know?"

"What the heck does that mean?"

"Ah, well, it was a term good old Carl Jung came up with. Synchronicity. The apparent coming together of events that lead you to where you want to go."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, synchs are messages. Sign posts. They point you in the right direction. The best thing to do is to take notice of them and see where they lead."

Lennon nodded. He found such a concept unlikely. If that was all it took then surely, he would never want for any direction or answer.

The waiter came over and they ordered their lunch. Jess continued talking. "So, what you have to do is find out how The Gaia relates to you," he said, with a sly grin.

"Spirit of the Earth I'm told," said Lennon matter of factly. "I doubt there's much more to it than that."

"Things aren't always what they seem," said Jess, once again grinning.

"Will you stop saying that!"

"Sure, if it will help you. I could say things are always what they seem, but you know, it just doesn't have the same ring to it. But anything to make you happy, buddy."

In spite of himself, he could not help but laugh at Jess. This was the kind of person he needed right now to cheer him up. He found himself relaxing. Jess was still pretty much a stranger, but

he also seemed to know things. Lennon mused on how he would react if he told him about the garden of the nature spirits. Maybe not today. Still, perhaps Jess might be able to point him in the right direction.

"What I really need is some synchs that will help me understand who I am," said Lennon.

"Ah, the 'who am I' question. That's always a good one. Well, I'm no expert, but go and check out some books on meditation. You never know what you might find."

"Isn't that what cults do?"

"Nah, that's more like brainwashing. Not even the same ball park."

"I already tried that, didn't do anything for me."

"Maybe try, try again. It can work wonders."

"So, what does it do for you?"

"The brainwashing?"

"No, meditating."

"Oh, it helps you to still your mind and see things more clearly. Maybe you could find some meditation group or pick up a book on it."

"I already have one. It was dry and boring."

"Perfect." He grinned once more.

There wasn't much more to say, and Lennon headed back home soon after. As soon as he got back, Mary told him that Heather had rung and ask him to come over. She looked quizzically at Lennon. "I know she's a nice lady, but like I said, she's strange and a boy your age should be with other boys your age."

Lennon wasn't going to admit that he didn't really have any close friends his age, and he certainly wasn't going to tell her the truth. He shrugged and said that she was a pleasant person to be with and she was helping him learn a lot about gardening.

"Much good it will do you in this weather," she retorted. She paused for a moment. "You know, I can introduce you to someone."

She went onto say that one of her friends had a son who was roughly his age, and that tomorrow he could come and visit with her. Lennon protested, saying that he had study to do, but Mary had made up her mind. Lennon was doing too much work and not enough play for a boy his age.

He knew that there was no point in arguing. He'd have to see what would eventuate. The hope crossed his mind that maybe the son would know something about what he was trying to find out. It was a long shot, but at least it made the idea of visiting bearable.

"If I agree to go, can I go next door?" he asked.

"You can go next door without agreeing," she said. "Look, Lennon. I promised your mother I would look after you and so I am. And that means me making sure you don't end up a hermit. That's not healthy. So, humour me, okay?"

Lennon nodded. "Okay."

He then went over to Heather's house. Soon he was once again in her living room and telling her a little of what had occurred. She listened quietly. He left out a good deal, especially the part of what Willow had done to him. For the strangest reason, he felt embarrassed about it.

"Well, Lennon," she said, "there's always next time. Perhaps you just need to learn more." She shrugged her shoulders. "And I'd wager you once again left out details, but that's your call, dear."

"What do I tell Sam?" he asked, ignoring her shrewd observation.

"You leave Sam to me."

"Maybe we should tell him that I never got across."

"Now, Lennon," she said, sharply. "Don't you go making up stories to suit your purpose. That's dangerous, and they always have a way on catching you up and tripping you."

He nodded. "Yes, I guess I'm just a bit scared of him." He then mentioned about how his aunt commented about all the time he had been spending with her.

"Twaddle," she retorted. "Barely three days and her mind goes into scandal mode. If she has a problem, I'll be speaking to her about that."

Lennon asked whether she had heard from Sam yet. She had, several times. He had been ringing constantly since early morning. "What does he want?" asked Lennon, angrily. "All his problems fixed in an instant? Things just don't work that way."

"No, they don't," she agreed. "And it's good that you see that. Maybe I'll give him a ring now."

It was about fifteen minutes before she returned. Lennon had only heard snatches of her side of the phone call and wasn't sure what the outcome was. She looked satisfied, however, and told him that she had made him see that such a delicate matter would take a little time. Rather than being angry, Sam had been more subdued.

"I don't know how you managed that."

"Me neither," she confessed. "He sounded almost defeated, but I know you'll find a way, dear, and prove him wrong."

Lennon finally had to leave. He promised that if anything new occurred, he would let her know. He also suggested that he play it cool for a day to pacify Mary.

He wondered what the night would bring.

21. Sprites.

That night, Lennon decided to try reading the meditation book once more. It made meditation seemed like such an easy thing to achieve, but unfortunately for Lennon, it was anything but. At first, he found it hard to get comfortable, then he found that his mind kept on wandering and thinking of whether the portal would open once more.

After more than an hour of trying, he gave up. Perhaps he just needed more practise to have all the wonderful things happen to him that the book had promised.

He lay back and drifted off to sleep and awoke automatically at the right time. He looked out the window. It was a cloudless night and the moon was showing quite clearly. It had almost waned to the last quarter and wasn't shedding a lot of light anymore.

He got up and got dressed. He quietly stole down the hall and tried the door, but it was as he feared. It was locked. Several times he tried during the night, but the results were always the same. He felt disappointed about not being able to do any more. Maybe the break would help him to get over Willow. The feelings he had were starting to fade. He was glad because he knew he wouldn't have been able to function otherwise. He lay back down on his bed and yawned. He was tired and soon he drifted off to sleep.

The morning was in direct contrast to the previous one. The sun was out, and the temperature was warm. It was a good day for gardening, he thought. This caught him by surprise. Only a week ago he had little interest in gardening but now he was starting to look forwards to it.

He realised that he had been directly influenced by what he had experienced in Salvia's part of the garden. Such beauty had left its mark on him, and now he hoped to recapture at least part of it by working with nature.

He worked long and hard. Heather passed by, but only pleasantries were exchanged. She did not press him for any more information, and he did not volunteer it.

As he worked, a strange feeling of contentment stole over him. The feelings that Willow had left him with ebbed away to a vague feeling in the background of his mind. For the first time that he could remember, he actually felt content. His feelings were such that he would have happily worked all day in the garden, except Mary called him around midday and announced that they were to have lunch at her friend's house.

Lennon's heart sank. He really was not in the mood for it. But he had promised Mary, so he was committed.

Her friend's name was Mrs. Jane Worthington. She, her husband and son, Trevor, lived a couple of blocks down the road. While they walked, Mary gave him a very tedious account of the lives of the Worthingtons. He really didn't care for the details, and felt it was nobody's business, but Mary never seemed to notice that Lennon didn't want to know. Thankfully, they arrived quickly, and Lennon was soon introduced to Trevor.

Trevor was tall, blonde and lean with a face that reminded Lennon of a weasel.

Lennon was quiet throughout lunch, but no one noticed as the two ladies gossiped on endlessly about trivia.

After lunch, Mary asked Trevor to entertain Lennon. The son scowled but agreed.

They went out into the back yard, which was big and well maintained. Lennon took an involuntary breath and admired the beauty.

"Yeah, it's a big one, the garden," said Trevor. "So, what's your story?"

"My Aunt dragged me along, really," said Lennon, blushing.

"Honestly. We are old enough to run our own lives. The oldies always have to tell us what to do," he grumbled.

"I guess. I don't have much choice. I'm a guest at their house."

"As soon as I get a job, I'm going to move out and in with some wimim and have me some fun." He grinned.

"Sounds good," said Lennon, automatically. Something had caught his attention in the garden. Unless he was very much mistaken, he was seeing fae moving around. Why he could see it so suddenly puzzled him.

"What?" said Trevor, looking at the general direction Lennon was.

"Um, nothing, I just wanted to take a closer look here."

"If you want, it's just a big boring old garden. Mum goes on about how wonderful it is and how much energy is about. Yeah, whatever."

Lennon considered not taking a closer look, but he felt he would regret things if he didn't. He didn't want Trevor to think he was weird, but when he thought about it a bit more, he didn't really care what Trevor thought.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

"Yeah, go for it. Keeps us out of sight of the oldies," he said.

The nature spirits looked like sprites and moved around like little beacons of light. All seemed intent on doing their things. The flowers in this garden looked very healthy and the few trees were large and vital looking. None of the fae seemed to pay him any heed.

Trevor kept on making comments about how he wanted to go out clubbing and meet some 'wimim'. An obvious obsession of his.

"We should go down to the Gaia nightclub," he said. "They have underage nights."

"Gaia?" said Lennon, startled. "Is everything in this place named Gaia?"

Trevor looked as though the question was very odd, which, of course, to him it was. "Dunno." He sounded irritated. "It's a place for meeting wimim, that's all I know. You want to go one night?"

"I'm not sure. I've never been to a nightclub before, I take it you are into them?"

"Hell, I'm into anything that has wimim," he said, without

hesitation. "If it's got a skirt, then I'm interested. You got a girlfriend?" he asked.

"No," said Lennon.

"Why not?"

"I don't know many girls."

"You come out with me to the Gaia, mate. There's plenty of wimim there. Haven't you ever had a girlfriend?" he persisted.

"Well, no. I've never had the opportunity."

"You like them, don't ya?"

"Yeah, of course, I do."

"I mean, you ain't into blokes, I hope."

"Even though I'm not homophobic like some appear to be, I do like women. In fact, I fell in love with a girl only a few days ago." It was the truth, not that he would have told him the details about Holly or Willow.

"Yeah, I fall in 'love' a lot," he said with a sly grin. "So, what did you do about it?"

"I tried to get her to come home with me," he said, truthfully.

"And she knocked you back, did she?"

"Let's just say it didn't work out."

"Bitches!" he said. "That's what they are, mate, bitches. Still, they're good for one thing."

Lennon tried to change the direction this conversation was going. "What about you? You got a girlfriend?"

"Of course, mate, I've had plenty. If you want, I can set you up," he offered.

"Maybe," said Lennon vaguely as a passing sprite caught his eye.

"Yeah, mate, I can introduce you to all my old flings. I can keep you happy for months, mate." Trevor started to list all the girls he

had supposedly slept with. None of it sounded very plausible to Lennon and he tuned out as a running monologue began.

It was at that point a fairy like sprite hovered around his face and was quickly joined by another one. "Is that who I think it is?" he heard it say in a tiny voice.

"I think it is who you think it is. That energy is very distinct," said the other in a similar tiny voice.

"The time must be coming once more," continued the other one.

"It's been a while since the last time. Fancy seeing that right here."

With a shock, Lennon realized they were talking about him and he looked them straight in the eyes, but before he could say anything, the spirits became aware he could actually see them and in girlish shrieks, they darted away.

"Mother lets me do whatever I want," said Trevor, proudly. He had obviously finished his soliloquy.

Lennon felt irritated that he wasn't free to find out more. His irritation was clear in his voice. "So, is that all you do?" asked Lennon.

"Yeah?" he said, looking perplexed. "What more do you need, mate?"

"I like girls as much as the next man, but I've got other interest, too."

"Such as?"

Throwing caution to the wind, he said: "The supernatural."

"Yeah, horror movies and stuff." said Trevor, excitedly. "They're great. I saw one on a Ouija board and séances the other night. They called up the Devil himself. Maybe we should try that"

"That sounds a tad dangerous," he replied, mildly.

"Yeah," he continued, unabated. "Call up demons and make them give us power to control wimim." He certainly had a one-track

mind. He suddenly turned towards Lennon with a serious look in his eyes. "Wanna try?"

"What, hold a séance?"

"No, summon a demon. I reckon if it's true, we can have as many wimim as we want."

If Lennon wouldn't have had any experiences like the ones he recently had, he would have laughed out loud at the mere thought. However, now he was starting to believe that anything might be possible. In which case, he didn't want to get mixed up with something like that.

A strong feeling warned him that he might be unleashing forces that he might not be able to handle. How it would be possible, he didn't know, but the feeling was very strong within him. He thought that it was unlikely that they would actually be able to make anything happen, but somehow, he felt more sensitized to everything. Things around him seemed more alive. He wondered just how much power did he really have? "No, I think I'll pass," he finally said.

"Ah, Crap!" said Trevor. "It would be a blast. Surely you're not frightened?"

A mischievous glint came to Lennon's eyes. "No," he said, "but supposing our friends found out we were playing witches and ghosties. We'd look like a couple of gullible freaks for sure. The 'wimim' would end up laughing at us."

This hit a nerve, for the one thing that Trevor didn't want was to be branded a 'weirdo' by the ladies. And he had no guarantee that Lennon would keep his mouth shut. Instead he laughed and said he'd only been joking.

Lennon was once again distracted by tiny voices. "It is! It is!" they were saying, in excited tones. He turned his head and found more than a dozen sprites now looking at him. What! he snapped, angrily. If they knew something, he wished they would come right out and say so.

They immediately shrieked again and scattered laughing.

He turned back towards Trevor who had a confused look. "What, what?" he said.

"Um, what nothing," said Lennon, lamely.

"Sun too hot out here, mate?" he said. "I've had enough, let's go inside."

Reluctantly, Lennon followed him back in doors and to the lounge room. The adults were still in the kitchen gossiping.

The rest of the afternoon was deadly tedious as Trevor kept up a running monologue on his many conquests. It sounded like a load of garbage to him. He seriously doubted if he was as much a man of the world as he made himself out to be.

He breathed a sigh of relief when Mary was finally ready to go home. Trevor asked him to ask his aunt about the nightclub to see if he could go.

On the way home, he reflected on how different he felt from others. He was quiet, mostly serious, and withdrawn. Trevor appeared to be the opposite.

Mary interrupted his musings by asking what he thought of Trevor. Lennon hadn't thought much of his one-track mind and boring repartee, but he didn't want to tell his aunt that in case she thought he was making up excuses. One thing was for sure, he didn't want to return. How was he going to convince Mary of this? Then an idea came to him.

"Trevor's good," he said, excitement in his voice. "He's even offered to take me out to the night clubs and introduce me to some women which he said I'll really like."

Aunt Mary's lips thinned, and her face went pale. "Not while you're under my roof, Lennon," she said, sharply. "I know what goes on in those places. The papers are full of stories of drugs and gangs. I promised your mother that you'd be looked after and that includes protecting you from yourself." She ranted on for a few more minutes about the youth of today and how things were never like this in her time and while he was under her roof, he would be kept respectable.

Strangely enough, Lennon felt satisfied.

"Well, at least you know you won't have to worry about Heather leading me astray."

"Too true, my boy," she said. "Too true."

22. Meditation

The next week was uneventful. Lennon spend most of the time gardening, studying and trying to meditate.

The meditation was not going well. Every night, he tried for an hour, but made no progress. He found it frustrating, but he was determined to keep at it. He needed answers. More than that, he wanted answers. He could not make any sense of what the nature spirits were going on about. The sprites and Salvia kept on hinting that there was more to him than he knew. If he could work that out, then maybe he would know how to fix up everything.

Heather had contacted him, and he had reluctantly told her that the portal had closed. He explained about its connection to the moon and said that it might be a couple of weeks before it would reopen. He didn't ask about Sam as he didn't want to know his reaction, but a few days later, she contacted him again and told him Sam had given up on him. In fact, he had given up on the whole situation being resolved and accepted that some things were not meant to be.

Lennon felt both bad and annoyed about this, but there was nothing he could do. He had done his best and was still trying, but it wasn't going to happen overnight.

His own feelings, in regards to Willow, had now faded and were almost forgotten. Even the garden felt very unreal, more like a dream than anything else now.

School would resume the next day, and he wouldn't have a lot of time to think about anything but his study.

It was a good sunny day and it was perfect for gardening. The garden was looking very neat and well-kept now, and he could hardly wait for spring, so things would begin to bloom.

That night, Lennon went to bed early. He lay back and reflected how things had come to an abrupt halt in his quest to save the garden. He wondered if he ever was going to solve the problem, or, indeed, if he'd ever find exactly what the problem was.

One thing he was still certain about was that Willow had a lot to

do with it. He just wasn't sure what part she had played and where Holly and Salvia fitted in.

He also thought on the strange behaviour of the sprites in Trevor's garden. They had really gotten his curiosity up. Who did they think he was? What energy did they feel? He didn't understand it.

Perhaps he was someone amazing in a past life. That was assuming there was such a thing as a past life. He had read books about that subject and it seemed like a reasonable idea to him.

So, who might he have been? He tried to think of the great mystics in history but couldn't quite place any. He felt stuck for answers. Maybe it was time to try meditation again. He wasn't convinced it would help, but it was something he could try.

He propped himself up against his pillows and gave it a go. He made sure he was comfortable. He had found that by trying to sit in the lotus position, he ended up spending more time thinking about how uncomfortable he felt rather than on what he was actually doing. The book had suggested that position wasn't important, so he chose to do it in a sitting up position.

So far, though, no matter how hard he had tried, he had not achieved a thing. Tonight, he was doing it because he was sticking to his plan to do some every night in the hope that he would eventually learn it. But his true attitude had been that it probably was a waste of time, so why bother?

However tonight was different. Perhaps because of his practise or because he wasn't really trying, or both, something made a difference, for almost without being aware, his mind seemed to slip into another state. He didn't notice anything at first, he just started to muse over a flow of thought that seemed to come from within.

He began to piece together all the information he had so far received. Much of it forgotten in the overflow. He started to visualize the garden as he last saw it and the words of Willow came back to him. "*You are the reflection.*"

What did that mean? Where was the garden anyway? It certainly

wasn't on earth, or was it?

Suddenly there was a slight sense of dizziness, as though he was being pulled from within. Lights flashed behind his eyes and coloured circles span towards him.

An image formed in his mind. He saw himself in a place of dim light. He was aware that he was still in his bed, but at the same time, he felt that he was now somewhere else. He looked around and noted that the entire landscape was very non-descript and misty.

A tall, thin being materialized in front of him. His features were fair and his smile angelic. He was dressed in a light-coloured robe. "Ah, you've made it at last," he heard the being say to him. It wasn't so much speech that he heard but thought. It was though as someone was talking in his head and leaving impressions of what was being said. "Welcome to Heaven, Lennon. I wish you could see more of its splendour, but in your present state, you're not high enough to appreciate our wonders. The beauty of the astral is lost on you." The being smiled ruefully.

Lennon was completely taken aback. He was being told he was in Heaven? An awful feeling passed through him. He had no idea what it meant, though. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm a messenger of a higher power. You may call me Gabriel."

Lennon's mind did cartwheels. Wasn't that one of the archangels? The thoughts that he was indeed talking to the Archangel Gabriel and the higher power was God came to his mind easily.

"As in the Archangel Gabriel?"

"As in." Gabriel smiled at him.

"I don't understand, how did I get here?"

"You have been summoned." This felt true and he felt a thrill go through him. "I'm here to give you a message. Your courage and powers do you proud. Do you not feel pride in what you have achieved so far, Lennon?"

"No," he said. "I can't say that I do. I feel I've really messed things

up."

"Ah, my son, don't sell yourself short. You are one of the special ones. You're a shining light. A being of purity that does not belong in your world for it is too harsh for you."

Lennon felt his face heat up and muttered his thanks. "I think you've got the wrong person," he said.

"Now, now, Lennon. Enough modesty. It will only hold you back and you've got so much still to do. You must restore the garden back to its state of former health. Only you can do that, Lennon. Not Sam, not Heather, and certainly not your Aunt and Uncle. They don't half measure up to what you are. You are special Lennon. Very, very special."

"In what way?"

"Well, you already know you are a seer. Isn't that special within itself?"

"I guess... "

"So, who else would he call when he wants the job done right?"

In spite of himself, Lennon felt himself glowing with all this praise. Yes, he was special and had been allowed into the garden. And now the Archangel Gabriel was talking to him personally. "I do my best," he replied, trying hard to be humble. He noted that and took pride in that fact that he was humble. "But I don't know what I must do to help."

"That is why I am here," replied the being. "I am, after all, a messenger. I bear news on how you must accomplish this task. Now listen carefully..." He waited for Lennon to indicate he was taking full notice. "It was Willow who created the problems in the garden, and, as with anything, the source of the problem must be removed before healing can take place. It's like removing a cancer. You would agree?"

Lennon nodded his agreement. He was pleased to find that his suspicions were correct. Willow was the culprit after all. He felt a twinge of the empathy he had shared with her rise, unbidden, but he quickly suppressed it.

"Yes, Lennon. Don't let her manipulate your feelings. Falling under her spell is how she prevents you from righting things. You must defeat Willow."

This thought made him feel very uncomfortable. Yes, Willow was clearly responsible, he felt this, but defeating her, something about it didn't feel good.

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Oh, you won't have to do it alone. You will need to summon help, Lennon. There's a ritual in a hidden part of the garden where the energy is dark. It is protected by one who is in league with Willow. Do not trust him should you run into him. He is always watching you, and will no doubt take steps to prevent you from your success. Retrieve the ritual, and then, and only then will you unleash the power that can defeat Willow."

"But how?" he asked, getting exasperated.

"Tonight, we shall energize the portal and you may pass through it. There you will find a pedestal. There in that pedestal, lies the knowledge. Touch it and the ritual will be yours. But beware, Setapeth will try and stop you."

"Setapeth?" repeated Lennon. "Who..."

"The one in league with Willow. He will appear to you as a dark being. Beware, Setapeth is strong and you are not yet strong enough to take him alone. He will try to trap you, but you can call on us for help. But only once you've completed the ritual."

"Thank you," he said. "I have one other question. If this is Heaven, why does it look so dismal?"

"You are not high enough to see here. But succeed in this task and you will gain entrance. That is your reward."

The angel smiled and faded.

Lennon felt it was time to bring himself back but suddenly there was another presence. This one was darkness, but the body was wreathed in flames. He felt different than Gabriel. Lennon knew it was someone else.

"No!" said the being. "Don't be an idiot and listen to it."

"Who are you?"

"One of your guardians. I protect you."

Whoever this being was, he seemed dark and Lennon felt that he was dangerous.

"No offence, but wouldn't my guardian be an angel?"

To that, the being laughed uproariously. "This is more fun than I thought it would be," it said. "Don't be an idiot and listen to him. You can't trust them. It's my job to protect you."

There was a snap and suddenly Lennon felt like he was flung back to his body.

He was back in his room, though he had never really left there. Everything remained crystal clear in his mind, and before it could fade, he quickly took his diary and wrote down as much as he could.

He was pretty sure that the first being was angelic, but who was the second? Was that Setapeth? Did he just see a true demon?

Hours had passed, and Lennon had spent much of them thinking about his meditation experience. While it now seemed unreal and fanciful, it also felt as though it was something that had really happened. It amazed him that he was capable of making such things occur. He was almost tempted to try it again, however, ever since it had ended, he had felt something nasty was watching him. He couldn't be sure, but he was almost certain it was the same presence of darkness he had been feeling in the garden and the hallway. While it didn't scare him, it did give him pause for trying anything that might leave him vulnerable.

Finally, it was half past midnight. He looked out the window and found it was a dark, stormy looking night. There was certainly no moon shining to energize the portal, but Gabriel had told him it would be open. He got up and went to the door. He felt something following him. He had no doubt this was the being

called Setapeth.

The door handle moved and allowed him access into the room. Once in, it slammed behind him. He jumped, swearing under his breath at the noise it would have made. He hoped that his Aunt hadn't heard anything.

The painting was glowing gently. There was no rainbow. Instead, there was a dimly lit mist that seemed to seep in and out of the picture. He noticed that the presence had not entered the room. This puzzled him until he remembered that the door had closed behind him. He quickly pulled on the handle, and found it was stuck fast. Panic set in as he realized that he could be stuck here for good.

A voice seemed to whisper in his mind: "Leave now and I'll let you back out."

He knew that if he let this chance pass, all might be lost. "No," he said aloud. "Gabriel will protect me." Of this he wasn't certain, but it was all he had to go on. Before he could change his mind, he stepped through the portal and into another place.

23. The dark side of the astral

The scene that lay before Lennon was what he would have imagined hell to look like. The sky was full of exploding fireballs with fiery rain dropping all around him. None, thankfully, ever seemed to come close to him. The ground was a desolate scene with twisted, blackened trees with gnarled roots. Broken rocks littered the landscape which appeared to be devoid of any living thing. If this was a hidden part of the garden, then he could not imagine just how it had come to be. Still, what did he really know about how that kind of energy worked. Maybe everything would eventually become like that if he failed. The idea scared him.

Twisting around the hard ground was also a dark fog. In some patches it was thick and writhing whereas in others it was thin and almost non-existent.

For the moment, there didn't seem to be any sign of Setapeth. He looked around and didn't feel any evil presence. That puzzled him for a moment until he realized that he had left the evil presence back at the house. Maybe, if he took long enough to figure out that Lennon had stepped through the gateway, it would be just long enough to find that pedestal and get back.

With that thought in mind, he quickly began to search for it. In fact, it wasn't hard to find. After around hundred yards, one of the broken rocks became more clearly defined, and took on the shape of a pedestal which lay no more than thirty paces away.

With a sense of relief, he burst towards it, running with as much effect as he could muster. Without warning, something large materialized directly between him and his goal. It was all Lennon could do to swerve and miss it.

Quickly, he turned in the hope that he could still reach the object of his desire and saw it was the hooded being.

It was tall, silent and menacing. He could not see a face, nor were there any eyes. It was pure darkness.

The creature spoke, its voice was cold, commanding and it echoed in his mind. "This is a futile exercise. Leave here."

"Never," he returned, defiantly. "You can't stop me. I stand for what is good." It sounded so lame that he could hardly believe he said it.

"You know not what you deal with."

"Setapeth, right?"

"Names will not serve you here."

"You can't stop me."

He had the impression of cold laughter. "I only intend to delay you long enough for you to become trapped here."

Lennon certainly didn't like the sound of that, but it made perfect sense in light of what Salvia had told him.

"You believe you work for the Archangel Gabriel. Know that he misled you, so you could be trapped."

"Don't insult my intelligence. Do you really believe I'm going to believe that?"

In response, the being drew out a glowing rope from his robe. Lennon had no idea what it was, but something told him that he needed to avoid contact with it at all cost.

He did not know what this thing was, but its presence was terrifying plus it stood between him and the pedestal. He did the only thing that came to mind and ran right into the being in an attempt to knock it down.

Instead he felt no resistance and ran into the pedestal. The moment his hands touched it, he immediately received a complicated ritual that seemed to etch itself in his mind. He saw diagrams and learnt strange sounding words. Somehow, he just knew that he would be able to recall every detail whenever he should choose to do so.

He turned around to head back and saw the hooded being was facing him with the rope at the ready. "You will never leave here."

With all the speed he could muster, Lennon made the short dash across the harsh ground and threw himself into the gateway. He

put his arms out to prevent hitting the closet wall but there was no wall to hit. To his dismay, he saw he was still in the realm. He turned back to look at the portal and found it had vanished.

The one he suspected was Setapeth approached him. "The way back has been removed. There is no way home."

Dismayed, he searched in vain for his passage back, but found nothing. He looked around in the hope he had merely moved it, but if he had, then he had hidden it well out of sight. There had to be a solution. He knew he was missing something obvious.

"I will find a way out," he said defiantly.

"Even if you should manage such a feat, it will be many weeks, and the one called Willow will have succeeded and you will have failed."

"Succeeded in what?"

But there was no response. The figure loomed closer to him.

"I'm sure Gabriel wouldn't have sent me here if I was in danger of being stuck." Of course, why had he not remembered. Had he not been told he could call for aid if he needed it? "Gabriel, help me, please!" he shouted out.

Suddenly, a vortex opened and swept Lennon up into a spinning array of colours and light. There was an intense feeling of vertigo and suddenly he was back outside the closet door. He was not sure exactly how this was possible. But yes, he was back.

Shaking, he made his way back to his bedroom. Nothing seemed to be following him and for that he was grateful. He did not know what the thing was, but to him, it was terrifying. Still, help had come when he had asked for it. Now he needed time to process what had happened. He asked for protection and went to bed.

24. Disruptions

Lennon awoke the next morning. He felt very strange, as though his mind felt blocked. He couldn't quite place exactly what it was. He immediately thought about the previous night's events. Did it really happen, he wondered? He thought of the ritual and found he remembered every detail. There was no doubt in his mind that he had truly experienced it.

Was the hooded being Setapeth? It made sense that he was, but then who was the other being that claimed to be his guardian. The thought occurred to him that there may be two or more players he was dealing with, or were they the same being? He felt so confused.

Though he couldn't feel Setapeth, he somehow felt that he was not too far away. He thought over the entire episode and felt odd. It wasn't that he didn't believe it hadn't happened. It was something more. Whatever it was, didn't feel exactly right. His mind was pre-occupied as he got up to get ready for school.

The day was hectic, and with all the school work he had to do, he found that he had little time to think on the situation at all. The reality of it all was completely crowded out with him having to deal with the real world. The experience had now distilled itself and the essence of it was unpleasant. In a way, it was a relief that he had an excuse to stop thinking about nature spirits, about Sam, about his task, and concentrate on his studies and do his chores.

Even the thought of keeping an eye on the moon was put aside. Gardens and fae were all very well, but they weren't going to help him pass exams and safeguard his future, whatever that might be.

The truth was that his last experience had really unnerved him badly. He really did not want to have to deal with that being again. Fortunately, it was very quiet and nothing more seemed to happen for a few days.

The week passed quickly, and it was Saturday again. The day began quietly. He took the luxury of sleeping in as Mary had given him Saturdays off as he'd been working so hard.

He planned to do very little as any spare time was now precious to him as it was taken up by study. He thought about the garden. He had barely touched it, but he had gotten it to such a decent state that Mary no longer was focused on him fixing it on a daily basis.

He guiltily wondered if he should contact Heather and let her know what was happening. It had been days since they had last spoken, but what was there to tell? The portal was still closed, Setapeth wasn't something he wanted to discuss yet, and he did not want to talk about the ritual at all.

There was one thing that did bother him greatly, though. Ever since that night, he felt that something was missing. There was also a growing anxiety. Something felt wrong, but he couldn't quite work out what.

He wondered if meditation would help, but a great sense of weariness came over him when he thought about trying that. He didn't have the time. It was a lot of work for little gain.

But then, he had made some gain. In fact, he had come to a complete stop right after he had made his biggest breakthrough.

"Why stop now?" he mused. *"I've had some good experiences, too."* He remembered the sprites in Trevor's garden and somehow felt his life was richer having seen them.

That was something he wished to see again. Why had he been able to see them. What had changed, and could it happen again? Maybe this was something he could focus on, though his mind felt a sense of great weariness just at the thought of getting started.

The portal would not reopen for a few more days, and he felt there was little he could do in the meantime. But no, that was wrong. He knew that. He had a job to do. He had agreed to do it and he was a man of his word. He knew that he had to go on. He had seen too much to want to turn back. But he felt so tired. Maybe tomorrow, he thought.

It was how he always used to be with his homework. He would put it all off until the last-minute cram session. Tomorrow never came. And then he started his studying properly and remembered

just how much difference it all made. He reminded himself, if he had known that, he would have done it years ago. Well, this was the same. No matter what he felt, he couldn't afford to put it off to another time. He needed to do it now.

He groaned. "*Now is all I have,*" he thought, and today he would try to find out more and he would start by updating Heather.

25. Reflections

That morning, Lennon called in on Heather. She looked delighted as she answered the door and ushered him in. Excitedly, she asked him all that had occurred from the last time she had seen him. He began to tell her about how he had found out about the ritual when the oddest sensation halted him. He saw what he had to do in his mind's eye, and one of the conditions that telling anyone about it would nullify its power. He couldn't tell her. That he knew. It made no sense to him why, but as he didn't understand how things really worked, he just had to accept that unquestionably.

Instead, he explained once more that the portal had closed, at least for the time being and told her about the poem and the moons. She smiled ruefully. "Yes, I hadn't forgotten," she said, and gave him a queer look. Had she felt that he had been holding something back?

"It's just that there hasn't been much I can tell you. Except, well, I think in a meditation session, I saw an Archangel. Do you know anything about them?"

Heather nodded. "I know that they are there waiting to help us should we ever need help. We just need to call upon them."

"Funny, I don't think I believe in angels, and even archangels are hard to swallow."

She smiled. "Lennon, you don't have to believe in something for it to exist. Angels are all around us, and they will aid you. They don't care if you believe or not. But they only help if you ask."

"I don't think I asked."

"You may have asked without knowing. "

"I guess..."

"Pardon me for saying this, Lennon, but you don't seem right. There's something that is missing. I wish I could put it into plainer words."

"I have been busy with school. I guess I've not had time to focus

on things."

She shook her head. "No, it's something else and perhaps I'm not the one who can put their finger on it, but get this, an old friend of mine, Jonah, rang me last night to say hi and he's, in his own way, like Sam. He knows about these types of things. He does it for a living. Maybe Jonah will have a chat to you if I ask him nicely."

"That would be great," he said. Part of him screamed that he didn't have time for this, but he ignored that.

"I'll try now." She rang but got his answering machine, so she left a message.

She walked back into the room, looking thoughtful. "You can tell me to mind my own business, Lennon, but I have to ask, what was it that you were holding back from Sam?"

"Just things," he said, evasively. "Things that I wasn't ready to talk about."

"I wasn't meaning to pry. I was just curious, is all."

He explained that it wasn't that he didn't want to tell her, it was just so difficult to talk about it. "I just feel bad about it all, I feel so..."

Suddenly, he understood something. In a moment of clarity, he suddenly knew why. He felt guilty. The garden dying, his feelings for Holly, the time limit of the moon, and his reaction to everything; he actually felt guilty. Somehow, he had taken the responsibility for the whole situation and unconsciously blamed himself. It was ridiculous but knew it to be true.

"I just understood something."

"What dear?"

"I've been feeling like this is all my fault, but it isn't. I've been feeling guilty."

"Ah, I now see."

"But it's not me. I didn't create this. I'm just trying to help."

Heather nodded. "And you've held things back because you've felt responsible."

Lennon nodded. "But I'm still not ready to talk about things yet."

Heather nodded and promised she would let him know about Jonah.

That night, he settled down to do something he felt he should have done days ago. Ever since his run in with Setapeth, he had had trouble really thinking about things in connection to the garden.

While it was true that he felt he had been protected against Setapeth, he also felt that couldn't be the end of it. That past week, he had hardly felt his presence, apart from the occasional twinges that he was being watched. He felt it was the calm before the storm.

He picked up his diary with the intention of writing down his thoughts, but found that instead, he went into a day dream about what would happen when he did the ritual in the garden. In his mind's eye, he saw his enemy appear and try to stop him, but despite his best efforts, he was not able to prevent him from completing the ceremony. As he did so, beings of light appeared, and the entire garden came back to vibrant life, just like the one that Salvia has shown him.

Then he saw Archangel Gabriel appear and show him what Heaven looked like. Something about this didn't make a lot of sense, but he was unable to work out what.

Once more, he tried to think about the ritual itself. It was still crystal clear in his mind, but he couldn't seem to actually examine it. He made a concerted effort to do so and found that part of the conditions was that the more he thought about it, the less its power would be when the time came to cast it.

That explained why he had such a hard time talking about it, or even thinking of it. He concluded that some things were best left alone until their proper time. With that decision, he felt a sense of relief.

Something else was still bothering him, though. He realized he

had spent very little time thinking about why the garden was dying. He had taken it for granted that something had gone dreadfully wrong somewhere. He just didn't know what. Salvia had said that the place was disconnected due to a psychic attack, but he just couldn't see how anyone could actually attack a garden. When he occasionally stopped to think about it, he realized it would probably take a lot to kill an entire garden.

Willow had blamed Holly for the whole mess and Holly didn't seem to have her full mental faculties. Willow certainly wasn't the nicest being that he'd ever met and what she had done to him was certainly intended to be an attack of some kind. It was as though he had become her for a few intense moments. Her thoughts, her emotions, her secrets.

Her secrets! Maybe he could reconnect to that memory and find out what she had done. Over the past few days, he had managed to disconnect himself from those emotions, because they hurt too much, but he could still feel it if he chose to think about it. Maybe he could tap into this and find answers. But not right then. He was too tired.

He felt that he had done everything he could reasonably be expected to do, and the rest could wait. With that thought in mind, he settled down and slept soundly all night.

The next morning brought a warm day. Lennon decided that maybe if he sat in the garden and was surrounded by nature, he might be able to look at those feelings he had felt from Willow.

He sat on the grass and tried to tap into them. The answer might be found if he could connect with what she was feeling, for he should, in theory, be feeling the same. Cautiously, he connected to the pain, and was hit with a wave of it. This time, however, he tried to observe it rather than be a part of it. That approach appeared to work. He thought about Holly and felt a loathing, almost like jealousy, but it was also mixed liberally with love and guilt. Willow certainly did blame her for the state of the garden. In it was also a mixture of grief, regret and self-loathing. The last emotion was buried deeply, but having pinpointed it, Lennon felt it clearly. Willow hated herself.

All in an instant, the emotions completely dissolved, like a tightly

wound ball of elastic bands breaking and dispersing. It was as if they had run their course. His stomach untangled as the feelings ebbed away. Intuitively, he knew that only by acknowledging their presence could he have banished them. He was a little disappointed as he felt they were the key to understanding her.

But that aside, what else was there? The garden was dying, but why was that significant? What did it matter at this level.

Like a lightning bolt, he realised that Sam's garden was the same. Nothing would grow, and now that he thought about it, the house in the Nature Spirit's garden looked similar to Sam's, and the shimmering had to be the pool. No wonder he had thought it all looked vaguely familiar when he had visited.

The pieces were beginning to fall into place. He had just assumed that the garden was not well maintained because Sam couldn't bring himself to work in it after losing Holly and Willow. Now he knew that this was not the case. The garden was actually a reflection of the fae garden, and somehow it was connected to it. Whatever happened in the first one, would affect what would happen in the other.

Lennon became excited. Yes, that felt right to him. He had worked out a part of what was going on. Indeed, he had solved one of the mysteries, and he had done it by himself. All he needed to do was work out why this had happened in the first place, and he was starting to have a pretty good idea, though he knew that he was still missing a vital piece of the puzzle.

26. A reading.

It was two days later, on Tuesday, when Heather contacted him with the news that Jonah had finally returned her call. She told him that he was prepared to see him as a favour to her, but tomorrow, was the only time he had available for a while. He thanked her and assured Heather he would be there.

That night, the moon had reached its first quarter, and Lennon began to wonder just exactly when the portal would reopen. He would try tonight, just in case it was time, but somehow, he believed it might be too soon. There just simply didn't seem to be enough moonlight yet.

He had also been working on his meditation but found he was failing. He tried hard, very hard, but he just couldn't seem to slip below the surface of his mind. Why had he succeeded that other time? What was different now? He hoped that this Jonah might be able to help him.

He fell asleep, and slightly overslept the alarm for twelve thirty. Groggily, he got up and looked out the window. There were a few clouds drifting by, but enough of the moon was showing.

Down the hallway he went but found that the door was still closed. He was relieved in a way because this would give him more time, and he certainly needed more time, and more importantly, he needed more sleep. Gratefully, he went back to his room and slept soundly until morning.

The next evening, he made his way over to Heather's home. As he entered the living room, he saw a middle-aged man with greying hair.

"Lennon, meet Jonah," said Heather, simply.

"Hi," said Lennon, "and thank you for your time."

Jonah studied him for a few moments, then turned to Heather and asked if he would not appear too rude if she gave them a bit of privacy. She seemed prepared for this, and busied herself in the kitchen, making something for supper.

"So, Lennon," began Jonah, "you're looking for answers, I'm told."

"Kind of. How much as Heather told you?"

"Not much. I asked her not to give any details. I work better blind. Let me tell you a little about myself. I am a psychic reader who has spent most of his life studying and honing his abilities. I normally am in demand by celebrities and my name is highly regarded in certain circles. I'm also renown for my accuracy. In other words, Lennon, I think you'll find that I can help you."

"I really hope you can. I'm curious about many things that I can't find the answers to."

"Let me see what comes to mind," said the psychic. He closed his eyes and was silent for a minute. "It looks like you have a few guides. They are there to help and advise you."

"I see," said Lennon, though he did not see at all.

"You struggle with some things and are not sure how to deal with them. There are many questions in your mind but seek and you shall find."

He spoke like this for several minutes and Lennon felt he was extremely generic.

"And that's it. I hope this has helped you."

"Oh," said Lennon, disappointed. "Thanks, anyway. I'm not sure what that actually means for me."

"I'm sure the answer will come. Is there anything else I can answer for you? Any questions?"

"Well, yes. Do demons exist and what do they look like?"

"I'm sure they do but I'm not sure what they look like. I don't think I've ever seen one. I assume they would be similar to the archetypical image of Satan. You know, dark and wreathed in flames."

That sounded like a description of the being who claimed to be his guardian. "I saw someone like that during a meditation."

"I see. Well, remember, you can always call for help from your guides."

Lennon nodded but did not feel satisfied with the answer. He highly doubted that he had met Satan.

"One more question, if you don't mind. Who am I?"

Jonah paused as he considered the question. "You are a child of God, Lennon," he said at last. "We all are."

"Okay, but who am I?"

"That is something you must discover for yourself." Jonah smiled. "Anything else I may help with?"

Lennon shook his head. Then suddenly remembered. "Can you tell me about archangels?"

"Hmm, ah, well. In biblical terms, they are of a higher authority. They are said to be closest to God. Anyone in particular you were interested in?"

"Gabriel?"

"Well, you can call on Archangel Gabriel when you have lost your way or need help in finding your path. He is said to be the messenger."

"What would he look like?"

Jonah seemed flustered for a moment. "I don't know. Like an angel, I'd guess."

Lennon nodded. "Well thank you very much."

"You're welcome. May you find the path you seek."

Lennon returned home feeling very disappointed. He highly doubted if Jonah was as psychic as he claimed he was. Still, he did find the information on Satan very interesting. Even if it wasn't him, he did feel he could call for help from other sources. Plus, maybe he did have guides. It was something he had not considered before, but if he did, surely they could help.

For some reason, his thoughts jumped to Jess. He hadn't seen him

for a while. He wondered how he would react if he told him everything that had happened. No doubt he would reply 'Things aren't always what they seem.'. He wondered vaguely if Jess just used that when he didn't have a clue what the answers were, or if he actually knew more than he let on. He felt there was more to him than met the eye. Maybe he should visit the library again and talk to him.

In the meantime, he felt that if he could work out what Willow's part in all this was, he could finally come up with an answer.

He now knew that she was jealous of Holly, though, in hindsight, he thought that should have been obvious. Willow resented Holly and he was sure it was because she had tried to take Sam for herself. It did make sense that if she did want to get revenge on Holly, who better than to ask for assistance than from a demonic being. But did it really make her evil.

Tonight, he would once again check the gateway. Surely it was due to open before long.

As he drifted into sleep, the words 'psychic attack' kept on running through his mind. He had forgotten to ask about it. He knew that was how Willow had attacked him. But how did she do it?

Now that he had dissolved the attack, he felt confident he could withstand Willow this time. A thought entered his mind. *'She has such charm. You should give a charm bracelet.'*

Suddenly he made a connection. The dove charm, and the bracelet that Willow wore in the other painting. It reminded him of a charm bracelet. In all probability, it had to be hers. He wondered what he was going to do about it.

27. The Ritual and the demon.

The door and portal had not opened that evening. Lennon, though a little disappointed, was also relieved. He was not quite ready to return yet. The day went quickly as he was busy, and he was tired by nine. He suspected that interrupting his sleep the way he had been doing was wearing him down. Should he even bother trying tonight? If the way to the garden was open, then surely something would alert him to it. After all, that's what Tiger Fawn did in the beginning.

He could barely keep his eyes open, so he went to sleep with the intention of sleeping right through to morning.

However, whether by force of habit or something else, he woke up at half past midnight. He opened his eyes and saw the shape of Tiger Fawn staring him in the face. He fancied he could almost feel the whiskers tickling his nostrils.

Lennon knew that the portal must have at last opened. Talk about bad timing. He got dressed and made his way to the door. Once more, the rainbow was shining. Its glow seemed more glittery than the last time.

He checked his change pocket for the charm. It was still there. He fingered it, thoughtfully, and then moved through the painting.

As usual, on first appearance, no one was around, not even Tiger Fawn. That cat was hardly ever around, except to annoy him.

At last he was back in the garden. The energy seemed lower than before. He hoped that the ritual would fix things. Something urged at him to get a move on. He knew that time was going to be short and as usual, felt he was being watched.

He thought about the ritual and saw the instructions clearly in his mind. The first step was to draw a pentagram on the ground with the point pointing down towards him.

With his fingers, he drew one in the grass. He recited a phrase in an unknown language as he was doing this. He noticed he was leaving energy trails behind and a perfect star in a circle was formed. He stood up and looked on with satisfaction at this work.

The next step was to stand at each of the five points and call out words of power he had been given.

He stood at the first point and uttered the first one. Nothing unusual happened and he moved onto the next point. This all seemed too easy. If Setapeth was going to do something to stop him, it was going to be now or never. Still, nothing happened. He moved onto the third point.

Suddenly, something did appear, but it wasn't the menacing hooded shape, it was the dark, fiery being who claimed to be his guardian. The one he thought who looked like Satan.

"Lennon," he said. "Stop."

"I don't think so," he retorted.

"What you are doing, it will do you no good."

"You mean it will do *you* no good," he shot back and said the third word. He quickly moved on to the fourth point. If he had looked up above him, he would have noticed an odd shimmering appear.

"Lennon," said the demonic being. "Believe me when I say that you completing this ritual will amuse me to no end but trust me, you will really regret it."

"Give me one good reason why I should!" He uttered the fourth word and moved into position for the fifth one. The shimmering in the sky intensified ever so slightly. Just two more words of power left. After this one, all that remained for him to do was to stand in the middle of the pentagram and shout out the final word.

"Well, firstly, you will destroy the garden for good. You'll be summoning something that will destroy this place. They can then use it to enter other levels here."

Lennon paused. He seemed so sincere. Was he right? Was he really doing the wrong thing. But he had no reason to trust him. Whatever this thing was, he knew it was clearly demonic which was reason enough to believe that he could not be trusted.

He said the fifth word and walked to the centre of the pentagram. The energy in the sky seemed to change again and the

shimmering grew brighter.

The entity tried one more time to convince him not to complete the ritual. "Moron," he said, "You will be bound if you complete the ritual and They will enter. Only an idiot would bind himself."

Once again doubt came into his mind. He sounded so convincing. And the last thing he wanted to do was make Salvia's garden look like this one. One more word and it would be done, and yet, maybe he really needed to stop and think. The words 'things aren't always what they seem' came to mind. Maybe this was one of those cases.

"Who are you? Are you Setapeth?" he asked.

"That's a made-up name and I'm sure as Hell am not going to give you my name either. You can call me Zal'gan."

Lennon paused. He figured that if something was going to try and stop him, surely it would have done so by now. In fact, why was this so easy? One word was all it would take now, and he knew that he could say that word any time. He had nothing to lose, he thought, by trying to see what Zal'gan was really up to.

"Why do you look like a demon?" he asked.

"Because I am one. You want me to look like an angelic? No way that's going to happen." There was contempt in his voice.

"So, if you're a demon, then why help me?"

"It's complicated. Let's just say I owe you and I wish stopping you here would even the scales, but it won't. Plus, we have a common goal. The last thing we want is for Them to get a foothold here."

"Who or what is They or Them?" said Lennon.

"The Triquetra. You know, The Brotherhood."

Lennon looked blank.

"The Triple Goddess!"

"Okay, you've lost me. I've never heard of them."

"Yes, you have. But let's put that all aside. You are about to bind

yourself to them. If that's what you want to do, go right ahead, but don't expect me to fix things."

"You know, this doesn't seem right. Why don't you stop me then?"

"Because I'm not really here. I'm a projection. Just like that Nobody who keeps hanging around." Lennon's expression made him add: "You know, the Hood. The one who is working with Gabriel."

"Gabriel?" he said, dumbly. "The Archangel? But I know for a fact they are there to help us."

"Listen Lennon and listen closely. There are two version of each Archangel. One dark, one light. I won't get into why and how, but just trust me that you were communicating with the dark version. It and the Nobody are part of Tri."

"And Heaven?"

"It's not what you think." Suddenly Zal'gan seemed to grow weary. "Okay, fine. Go ahead and complete the ritual. It will be hilarious."

Lennon thought hard. He knew this had been way too easy. Plus, did he really understand what he was doing? Zal'gan just stood there watching him and even though he was a demon, he did not feel menacing. The Hooded being, on the other hand, most certainly did. He was so confused.

He looked at the pentagram and circle he had created. Would it really bind him? He tried to move but felt great resistance. Something told him that Zal'gan might be right and he did not want to find out the hard way.

"Alright," he said, slowly and turned to the demon. "I'll do as you ask, and not complete the ritual."

Lennon started to walk away from the pentagram. The moment he passed the circle, it vanished, the shimmering in the sky faded and the heaviness dissipated.

"Sanity prevails," said Zal'gan. "You know I hate Fae, right? I'd eat

them all if I could. The things I do for you. Aaaaand... I'm gone."

And with that, he vanished.

Lennon stood there alone for a long while trying to work out what had just happened. Zal'gan had told him that he owed him. What could he possibly have done that would have made a demon so indebted to him. Was it a trick? Had he made the right decision? Suddenly, Salvia appeared in front of him out of nowhere, breaking his train of thought.

"Did you just almost bind yourself and open a portal?" he said. He sounded disbelieving.

Lennon blushed. "You mean, that really was what I was doing?"

"You nearly just damned yourself and damned this world. Do you even know what you're doing?"

A cold flash of horror ran over him. So, it was true. Zal'gan really was telling him the truth. Was he really that gullible? Was he so easily duped? It called into question everything he was doing.

"I thought I did, but clearly I don't," he said at last.

"Lennon, everyone felt what was going on. We couldn't come here to stop you. They would have raped the land of all its energy and killed or enslaved us all. Do you understand what you almost did?"

Salvia did not sound angry, he sounded scared.

"I think I was deceived."

"I knew this was a bad idea the moment I saw you. I wanted to trust you and so I did. You need to leave and not return."

"I can't do that," he said. "I made a promise to try and fix things. I know I nearly brought ruin on you all, but I can't give up just like that."

Salvia shook his head, sighed and then nodded. "I can't stop you but promise me this... no more rituals."

Lennon promised, and the little man faded from view.

He stood there for a while longer. He realized that he was in shock, but he also realized that wallowing in guilt and self-reproach was not going to help anything. No matter how he felt, he needed to do something.

So, what now? Find Holly? Find Willow? Wander about until he stumbled upon something? Was he going to make another mistake and make things worse? One thing was for sure, Willow would not be impressed either. He decided to find her, so she could berate him, too and get it out of the way.

Lennon walked at a quick pace over to the Willow tree. With no fixed plan in mind, he was going to play it by ear.

He faced the tree and spoke with a bravado he did not feel. "Hello, again, Willow. I think it's time we had a proper chat."

As expected, there was no response. He called her name again and waited for her to creep up on him. There was still no response. He began to wonder if she was actually around. "I can wait all day," he said.

He turned his back to the tree in the hope that he might appear from the other side and found himself looking straight at her. She had obviously been waiting silently behind him. How did she do that?

"Hello, Willow," he said.

"Back again! You just don't know when you're not wanted, do you? I saw you nearly destroy what was left o' my home. What's your encore?"

She, too, sounded sad, but she didn't look particularly hostile. He knew that could change in a hurry. He would have to tread carefully.

"Yes, I almost messed up but that doesn't mean I'm going to stop trying. I wanted to talk to you. I know you tried to hurt me last time, but I'm not going to hold that against you."

"I did no such thing," she replied, indignantly. "It was not my intention to hurt. You stand fully unharmed before me, you do, so that'd be proof of that."

"Not physically. You know exactly what I mean. I meant emotionally."

Her blue eyes cast a stony silence over him. He felt that this conversation was, as usual, getting off to a bad start. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the dove charm.

"I think this might be yours. I found it on the ground the first day I was here."

She cautiously extended her hand and took it from his. The softness of her fingers rippled through his body in a strange way. Willow looked at it without expression.

"Is it yours?" If he had made a mistake and it actually belonged to Holly instead, then he knew that he was in big trouble.

Instead, to his relief, she nodded. "It was Sam's gift to me. On a visit here, he gave me a bracelet and this charm."

How, then, thought Lennon, if Sam had given this after he visited her, did the painting have her already wearing the bracelet? Was this something he had already foreseen? That was a puzzle to work out later.

"I really want to help you," he said.

"Why? What's it got t' do with you?" she snapped.

"Well, I know how you feel. I experienced your pain and emotions. If you want to feel like that, then fine, but if you want to talk about it, then I'm here."

"Why should you care? Why not go to Holly and talk with her instead?"

She was clearly resentful of her sister talking to him.

"I don't want to talk to her right now. I want to talk to you. I want to work with you and fix things."

"You don't have much sense with your choice of allies. If you understand me, then you'll understand that I wish to be left alone."

Lennon did understand her. He felt her. Understood her on a deep level that surprised him. "I don't think you do. I think you really want to talk. Well, I'm here to listen."

She flared again but did not make any moves towards him. "My, aren't we the greenhorn psychologist today. You don't know what I want. You don't know what I feel. You can't possibly understand the pain!"

Lennon did something totally unexpected to both of them. He stepped forwards and hugged her. It was a warm, spontaneous embrace. She seemed to resist for a moment, and then melted.

After a moment, he pulled away and nothing was said for some minutes. Lennon felt his emotions racing. The hug had made him feel giddy. He remembered that it might be due to the soul call, but she was so beautiful. He was entranced by her glamour.

The sense of falling in love with her was strong. He quickly caught himself. This was a nature spirit. He felt sure that a relationship between her and an earth bound young man could never work.

He then gently said to her: "I may not be much, but I can be a friend if you'd let me."

She looked at him. Her eyes seemed a little less icy. "I used to have friends, but that was a long time ago."

"What happened to them?"

She looked sorrowful. "Holly happened."

Lennon stifled the urge to ask more information. Somehow, he knew he must rely on her to tell him of her own volition. He also knew he had touched her soul wise. He wasn't sure how, but he knew that he had. He now had to take it one step at a time or risk losing the lot.

"Well," she demanded, suddenly sounding defensive. "Aren't you going to ask what she went and done?"

"I admit to being curious, yes," he said, carefully, "but I respect your privacy. It's up to you if you wish to tell me more."

"Why do you care?" This time it wasn't said angrily, it was a

genuine question.

"Because I do. And furthermore, I like you."

"Even after I attacked your soul and tried to sever your spiritual link?"

"Even."

She pulled him close again and initiated another embrace.

A while later Willow had not said a lot. It seemed to be enough for her just to sit with Lennon in the presence of his company. He didn't say much either. He found her nearness strangely pleasing. There was something about her that he found very attractive. She almost appeared to glow, like he felt a nature spirit should.

Finally, he asked her how she was feeling. A small smile crept onto her lips. "A little better than I've felt for many a year." They lapsed back into silence. She looked at him questionably. "Tell me, Lennon, what was happening here when you first returned tonight," she asked. "I mean, apart from the ritual I saw you begin."

"Can I ask what you saw?"

"It was odd. It was as though a fog had descended around where you were. I had no presence of mind to want to go there, but whatever it was, wasn't nice."

"Let's just say I was facing my demons," he replied.

She nodded and let the subject drop.

More time passed, and he became mindful of the time limit. It wouldn't do to become stuck here. He had already spent longer than he should have done. He wondered what would happen. Would time still march along in the real world? Would he starve? He realised that he never felt hungry or thirsty in the garden. He mentioned it to Willow as a casual observation.

"You wouldn't. Your body has been lifted to a higher vibration. Higher than can ever be sustained back on your home. You won't feel hungry for you draw energy from around you. The fact you are here must have been hard on you. Before Sam was able to

enter, he had to be attuned, and it made him very ill for a short while. She turned to him and looked very serious. "You really shouldn't be here, you know. You need special permission to come here and I doubt that you got it. She looked sad and said more softly so Lennon had to strain to hear. "Sam hadn't got it, neither. That's the realm of the ancient gods."

Lennon was actually certain he had somehow gotten that special permission. Didn't Salvia feel he was an emissary? He didn't wish to bring up the strange man so instead he said: "I'm willing to take that risk. I like being with you. I only wish you were..., well, that you could come home with me." He was almost going to say that he wished she were a real girl, but he caught himself in time. Anyway, she was real, not just in the way that he was used to.

"You're precious," she said. "But you could face serious consequences being here. Karmic ones. Just like Holly and I."

"Is that what happened?" he asked. "Are you being punished for bringing Sam here?"

"You could put it in such a manner," she said. "Karma is subtle in its ways. You can't escape it. Lennon don't bring your life to grief over me," she suddenly implored. Lennon didn't understand karma, but he had the strongest sense that it wasn't as clear cut as she made it out to be. Yet another thing to find out about for another day.

"I won't," he blithely promised. Though he wasn't quite sure if he wasn't breaking some law. He had more to learn than he could imagine, and he doubted that 'rules and etiquette in an astral garden' were in any text book back on Earth

"Do be careful," she once more pleaded.

Not much more was said. Time had rushed by, and he knew that he must get going or risk being stuck in the garden. He stood up and looked around him. Did things look a little bit healthier? Perhaps it was wishful thinking for if there was a change, it was very subtle.

"I must go back now," he announced.

She stood up and hugged him once more. "If you don't return, I'll

understand," she said under her breath.

Lennon still heard and replied: "Just try and stop me."

28. The value of a portal.

For Lennon, this was a bad week to be at school. He found it hard to focus on both study and Willow. All he could think about was getting back to her that night.

He sat at his desk dreamily until one of his classmates waved his hand back and forth before his face and said: "What's her name?"

"Huh?" he said, shaken out of his reverie.

"You look like you're in love."

"Maybe," he said and left it at that.

Love or not, he knew that a relationship could never work. More to the point, despite her youthful looks, he knew that she was ages older than him. It was a pity that his heart didn't take any notice of his head. He was really beginning to understand what Sam must have gone through when he suddenly lost them both.

This brought his mind back to the question of what had actually happened to the garden. Lennon now had his suspicions and they went along the line of punishment from some entity up on high. Willow had made mention of ancient gods, but he also knew that gods were just myths. He also felt that if such a thing happened to be really true, then he, plain old Lennon, was not likely to be up to facing one down. So, he dismissed the idea of such beings involved as improbable.

From Sam's story, he knew that Willow had been angry when she saw Holly kissing him. He now knew he shouldn't have been there in the first place, let alone contemplating living out his existence with her.

Had someone noticed what was happening? Some being who was in charge of the garden? Had he punished both the girls by forbidding them to ever go back to Earth and preventing them from ever seeing Sam again?

That theory made a lot of sense to him. It explained why Willow blamed Holly and why she resented her.

However, it still didn't quite explain why the garden was dying.

Was that part of the punishment too?

But why punish Sam as well? If this was the retribution of some master, then he certainly had shown little mercy or forgiveness. Yes, the theory did make sense. It made a lot of sense, but something still didn't add up. His mind thought back to the ritual he had almost performed. He had nearly forgotten about it, and he wondered if it might not answer some questions. Maybe the one called Setapeth was behind it all.

Lennon had not eaten much during dinner and Aunt Mary wondered if he was coming down with yet another cold. He assured her that he felt fine.

At last it was Friday and he had the whole weekend to himself, apart from what he had to do around the house. He thought about contacting Heather, but what was he going to tell her? The last thing he wanted to hear was that he shouldn't be falling for a nature spirit, and he feared that was exactly what she would say.

He went upstairs and pulled out his diary but didn't write a lot as his mind kept on wandering and thinking about Willow. He looked at the painting and saw her as she might have once been before she came to grief. The eyes were smiling, and her face was gentle and alive with the love of being.

The bracelet caught his eye. Was there something different about it. He moved closer and noticed that the dove charm was on it. He was certain this was new. He suspected that maybe the painting was reflecting things happening in real time. Considering everything else, it didn't seem that unlikely. Unless he had missed it somehow, but he had looked at this portrait so many times that he knew it by heart. He felt certain that it simply hadn't been there before. He would have noticed it and definitely would have known it was Willow's and not Holly's charm.

There was also something else that caught his eye now that he was closer. It looked as though the rainbow, which had all but vanished, was now in the background. It was very subtle, and unless you looked carefully, it could easily be missed. It was a colourless reflection of the other rainbow.

Once again, he wondered about the ritual. Could it hold hidden answers to unasked questions? He looked at it in his mind, and found it was still very clear. Considering what it was designed to do, he did not like that at all. He felt the time had come to truly examine it.

A knock at his bedroom door interrupted his train of thoughts. Mary entered the room and asked how he was feeling. He assured her that he was quite fine and explained that he was going to study for a bit.

Instead of leaving, however, she sat down on his bed and asked him how he liked living with them. He told them that he liked it very much and that he appreciated being allowed to live with them. His Aunt replied that he, too, had been a pleasure to deal with. "Have you heard from your mother at all?"

He nodded. She had sent him a letter nearly every second week that had been long and full of details about family and her health.

"You must miss her."

"A little," he admitted. "But I'm just too busy with school and things to miss her too much."

"You really don't mix very much with others," she said.

"Yeah, I know, but I'm okay with that."

"But you need company your own age, Lennon. Chris and I worry about your solitude. Surely you must have friends at school?"

This wasn't something Lennon felt like discussing right now. He explained that he wasn't really close to anyone. He repeated that he was too busy with his schoolwork to worry about it.

But Mary seemed to have a bee in her bonnet about it. Once more, she explained that she thought he was spending too much time with people who were too old for him and not enough time with those his own age. "It's not healthy for a growing boy to be that way," she insisted.

Lennon felt his heckles rising as he felt the situation leaving his control. Why didn't his Aunt just leave him be? "What do you

suggest I do instead?" he asked her.

"Bring a friend around from school," she replied, as if it were that simple.

"It's a rough school," he retorted. "They'd all be a bad influence on me."

The conversation seemed to develop into a mini debate on where he should go and what he should be doing with his life. His Aunt was unusually persistent, and Lennon wanted to yell at her to leave him alone. Instead, he took a deep breath and calmed himself down.

"Sometimes I find I work best when I'm alone. It's a choice of a sacrifice now with my social life or a sacrifice with my life career!" He tried to say it calmly, but it came out strained. To take attention away from that, he stood up and looked at the painting.

"Don't you just love this painting?" he asked, changing the subject.

Mary nodded. "It's a good one for sure. I wonder if it's worth anything? Wasn't I going to find out?" she suddenly said.

"Probably," replied Lennon, dismissively.

"I shall get it valued and sell it if it is." She mentioned that a friend of hers was an art collector and perhaps she might be interested in it. Lennon was stunned into silence, not that Mary noticed. She immediately looked at her watch and decided it was still early enough to ring this friend of hers and walked off.

Lennon went through the ramifications of what had just happened. He could hardly believe that his Aunt had acted in such a manner. What was more, he knew that Sam was an artist of some renown in the neighbourhood and the painting might definitely fetch some interest. And if it did get sold, he'd lose his way back to the garden.

He had an awful feeling that things were not quite what they seemed to be. He should have understood that much by now. His Aunt's behaviour had been almost out of character. Or rather, it seemed that her character had been at its most extreme.

"Setapeth!" he exclaimed. He was prepared to bet any money that he was behind this. He wasn't sure how, but he had the certainty that he was.

He did not sleep at all, his mind turning over ways to stop his painting being sold. He had little doubt that the art lover would want to buy it. It was just a feeling he had, and that, coupled with what he suspected about the hooded entity, left him with no doubt.

The passage of time passed relentlessly until the time came for the portal to open once more for him. If the painting was going to be sold, then he was anxious to maximize his time with Willow.

Gone were the plans for finding out what had really happened. Gone were any subtle questions and clever ploys that he might have contemplated during the day. He now realized that all he wanted to do was be with her.

She was waiting for him when he arrived. She stood near the portal and moved towards him as he stepped through. They fell into each other's arms and hugged tightly for a long while. Lennon noticed a perfumed scent that seemed to almost intoxicate him. She smelt like a flower.

They walked hand in hand towards the willow tree and once more sat down on the grass.

"I'm glad you came back," she finally said. "I wasn't sure if I'd see you again."

"I told you I'd come back," he replied. "What made you think that I wouldn't?"

"Karma. The law of the universe states that whatever you do will come back to ya."

Lennon felt an odd feeling. "I don't know why," he said, slowly, "but I'm not sure it actually works like that."

"Of course it does," she said. There was no anger in her voice. Only resignation.

"It's all to do with what we create." He suddenly stopped. He

realized what he was saying and thought he was the last person to have a clue about such things. Maybe Willow was right after all. The nagging feeling wouldn't leave him be, though. Well, one thing seemed certain. She certainly looked as though she was being punished.

Lennon suddenly felt very protective. He thought that she had been punished enough and said so.

She sadly shook her head and said: "It's not up to you to decide when it is enough."

"Yes, but you can hardly bare the full blame for everything, surely? What about Holly? How is she being punished?"

A queer look came into those blue eyes. "Why do you think she would be punished?"

"You told me that it was all her fault the garden was like this. I think I've worked out what happened and why things are the way they are."

"Have you?" she said, more as in challenge than a question.

He told her that he thought so, and when she prompted him a little further, he explained his theory. He was certain that he was right and he hoped that the time had come to seek a pardon and return things to their previous glory.

Instead of Willow confirming or denying his suspicions, she just hung her head in her hands and kept quiet.

"Willow?" he said, cautiously.

"It's still Holly's fault," came her words.

"Because she tried to bring Sam here for good?"

"That's what started it," she confirmed.

So, he was right! He very carefully tried to phrase his next question, as he knew he was on very delicate grounds. "Can't we speak to whoever put this sentence on you?"

"There is no one to speak to," she said, her voice becoming a

forlorn sob.

Lennon bit his tongue. He sensed that pushing the question could undo all the ground he had gained. He waited for her to continue, but all she did was continue to cry. There were no tears as such, but she seemed to blur a bit. He reached over, took her hands, and pulled it to his chest in a gesture of comfort.

She released it from his grip and stood up. "Don't waste your sympathy on me, Lennon, I'm not worth it."

"Yes, you are," he said, passionately. "I think you are, and I'm here whether you like it or not."

"You know nothing about me. You think you understand but you don't. You're just entranced with my glamour. Walk away now before we both get hurt."

But it was far too late for that and he knew it. "I can't do that, Willow. I've tried not to let it happen, I've strong feelings for you. I can't turn away. My heart belongs to you."

She sighed. "I should have learned with Sam. This cannot be, and I will not allow it. I think Lennon, that knowing the truth about me might just fix that problem. It wasn't Holly who caused this mess, nor was it some mysterious Diva. It was I, Lennon. Do you now understand? It was I!"

He was shocked. Certainly, he knew that she had to shoulder part of the blame, but taking on all the responsibility? Surely that couldn't be right. Was she playing the martyr?

"You can't blame yourself entirely," he soothed. "Surely Holly must take some part of the blame. You told me yourself she was the blame."

"Yes, that's me manifesting my negative quality. I blame others rather than taking responsibility for my actions. Look it up sometime when you've gone back. You don't know much. It would be so easy to lead you on, but I can't. I couldn't hurt you anymore."

"Willow, I don't care if you are to blame. It doesn't change my feelings for you. I never said this to anyone before, but I think I

love you."

"Then your poor fool heart knows no reason. But your head will. I will tell you my story, I will, and then we shall see how much you still love me."

29. What Willow did.

Lennon found that he was holding his breath as he waited for Willow's story. Surely, she couldn't have done anything that awful.

Willow began by explaining that nature spirits normally took care of their chosen plant or tree and were often imbued with certain capabilities that were useful for helping to heal others. Normally, the essence of their abilities were in the positive, but if one ever chose to use one in the negative, then there was a great chance of falling into the negative themselves.

One of her characteristics was helping to connect others with the spiritual world. "Do you understand how such a healing works?" she asked?

"Well, no. Are you able to explain it?"

Willow nodded. "I'll try. Everything is a vibration. For instance, your body vibrates at a higher rate, so you can come here." Lennon nodded. "Well, when I say everything, I mean everything, and that includes such things as your emotions and feelings. Even such things as resentment or love vibrates on certain levels. When all is well, you should get messages clearly from your greater spiritual self. The one that does connect to you and send you your messages. Understand so far?"

"So, would it be like another source sending messages the same way a transmitter sends to a radio?"

"Aye, and when all is well, you would be tuned in to hear and receive them. But often all is not well. The frequency gets changed, lost or damaged. When that happens, you no longer are getting direct guidance on those emotions."

"Okay, I actually understand this," he said, somewhat surprised. "So, it's like something has moved the dial and you no longer can make out the station clearly, if at all." Willow nodded.

"The healing force in some flowers is of that exact vibrational frequency and by taking the essence of it, it will restore the link. So, if you are feeling bitterness, taking an essence of willow

flower will restore that link and put it all into perspective again for you."

"That's amazing," said Lennon. "If only we could have a healing system like that on earth."

"Perhaps it does exist," she said. "Not being of your place, I could not tell you for sure."

"Okay," he said. "But what's this got to do with what you've done?"

"Do you understand that means that while I can embody the positive qualities, I do also hold the negative side as well? It must be so. For every positive there must also be a negative opposite, for it to exist. Well, should I use the negative side of my power, I can cut you completely off from your higher source."

"Well, it does make sense," he agreed. "But I'm not quite sure where this is going yet."

"Holly and I loved Sam. We had made the fundamental sin and fallen in love with a mortal. But part of Holly's nature is to open up one's heart in order to receive and give love. Is it so strange that on a lower astral plane it affected me too? It certainly had its effect on Sam. When he fell in love with Tabitha, we felt we would lose him. So, we contrived a plan to bring him here. We did, and we showed him what was once the true beauty of his garden."

This much Lennon already knew so he indicated that he understood so far.

"Then one night, Holly decided that she would declare her love for him. Using her natural powers, she bonded with his soul and drew him into a web of her love. He was lost to all but her, including me. I flew into a rage of jealousy when I saw what she had done. I had Sam go home and walked away from her."

She paused, as if it was painful to go on. "I'm forever ashamed of the next thing I did. I put her under psychic attack."

"How?"

"I overwhelmed her with the guilt of trying to keep Sam here for

herself, and then..." she paused once more.

Lennon looked on expectantly, though he had already begun to guess the ending.

"And then, I severed her connection with the spirit world."

Lennon looked uncomfortable. It sounded an awful lot like murder. But he had seen Holly, and she was still very much alive.

"Do you understand what that means, Lennon?"

"Not exactly," he admitted.

"It means that she forgot who she was. It means she can only now live a moment to moment existence. She is no longer connected with the greater reality."

"And the garden, too?"

"Yes, a by-casualty. When I attacked her, I also inadvertently hurt myself and severed my own link in a similar fashion, only I don't ever forget. This place has become a lower astral plane where things may fade and be attacked by lower entities. Now do you understand? My jealousy and attack has caused all this, and the bitterness and resentment has made it worse."

"And so, it will remain until the link is mended," stated Lennon.

She nodded.

"So, mend the link," he simply suggested.

"I can't."

"Why not? It is one of your abilities," he pointed out, reasonably.

"All you have to do is invoke it, surely."

She sighed. "I am in the negative now, and moreover, how am I to face Holly even if I could heal it. I just can't."

When Willow took her vengeance out on somebody, she certainly didn't mess about, thought Lennon. He felt he should have been disgusted at her behaviour. He knew that what she had done was wrong, almost to the point of evil. But who was he to judge, really, he thought.

His soul had touched hers. He knew that she wasn't evil. He knew that for all these long years, she had suffered every day for her mistake, probably regretting it every moment and wishing she could take it back. He also knew that time worked differently here, so God knows how much Earth time had passed in relation to here.

Yes, she had blamed Holly for this mess, but she blamed her because it was her actions that had driven her to this. He knew that she had done wrong and caused much grief and heartache, but still... still he couldn't hate her. Condemnation would serve no purpose.

His heart went out to her in total sympathy. He now stood up and kissed her on the lips and said: "My heart is still yours."

Nothing was said for a long time. The story she had told him was going around his head, over and over. Now that he knew what was going on, he had to find a way to put things right. Somehow, he suspected, that Willow was the only one who could do that.

It was nearly time to leave, but Lennon still hadn't managed to resolve anything with her. Now that she had finally confided in him, he had to have time to think.

"What do we do now?" he finally asked her.

"You can come and still visit me in this dead garden, or stay away," she replied, flatly.

"You know the answer to that." He did not want to mention that there was a real possibility that his entrance might be sold. She smiled ruefully. She did not seem convinced of his sincerity.

"What I meant was what do we do about fixing up everything?"

"It can't be done," she stated. "The damage is absolute, and I lack the power to fix things. Maybe you can petition The Gaia, but I doubt she will come." She seemed so certain that he accepted it without further debate.

He said goodbye and promised he'd do all he could to return. Willow smiled sadly, as though she really didn't expect him to.

He took one more look at the garden and hoped it wouldn't be his

last look. He felt very depressed as he returned to the house.

The next day he debated whether he should talk to Heather and inform her of what he had found out. At least she could tell Sam why he had lost contact with the girls and set his mind at ease. But he also felt that he was betraying a confidence. Though Willow had not asked for his silence, he still felt that he couldn't go and tell people about it without her permission.

It looked like he was on his own with this one, and what a problem it was. Willow had lost her powers and on top of it all, he had fallen in love with her.

He felt that maybe he could think better if he worked in the garden. The weather was warm and sunny.

All morning he worked until Mary called him in for a snack. She looked at him strangely and told him that he needn't work on a Saturday. She had decided to give it as his day of rest, that was unless he preferred Sunday.

He explained that he actually enjoyed working in the garden. She shrugged and said: Have it your way.

"Anyway, Lennon, best you be out and about this morning. Wendy is due to arrive and look at the painting in your room. She suggested it might fetch a fair price, too." She dismissed him with a wave and failed to notice the panic in his face. Things were moving just way too fast for him. If only he could find some way to stop it from happening.

The weather was holding out after he finished his snack, so he continued with his gardening. In the house he had found a packet of Camellias seeds. He thought that if he planted them, it would make a wonderful addition when they bloomed. He wondered when the best time would be to plant them.

"You might choose an easier plant to grow, Lennon," came a voice. He looked cautiously and saw a shimmer nearby.

"It's Salvia!" he said, out loud. "I don't believe it!"

"Hush," came the reply. "If people were to observe you talking to thin air, they'll believe that you've gone quite queer in the head."

Think your thoughts to me, I shall pick them up."

"I'm glad to see you!" thought Lennon to him. "But what brings you here?"

"You and Willow," he stated. "I've observed you both over the last couple of nights.

"You saw all that?"

"It was something I could not fail to miss. I have come to warn you that you are under some kind of attack from "Them". I don't have the answers for I have not seen you outside the garden, but you must work out if something is blocking you. I see some blackness within your energies. Something that has attached itself to you.

"I can't think of anything that would cause that."

"Think hard, Lennon. Have you done anything you shouldn't have. Gotten involved with something you should not have done. Anything?"

"Only the ritual, but I didn't complete that."

"The one you were performing. Yes, then you must examine and dissolve it. It's still part of you. Time is now short. You must not let anything distract you from achieving that."

Lennon's mind was spinning. It was true that he hadn't succeeded yet in really looking at what the ritual was all about for every time he tried, there was something that demanded his attention more. He nodded to Salvia and said: "And I thought you were here to tell me that I mustn't see Willow anymore."

"No, Lennon. You do have permission to enter into the garden, despite what she might think. You were the one we called. Your mission is to heal it."

"But it can't be done. Willow said so."

"Willow is an entity in the negative," pointed out Salvia.

"Yes, I know. And that's why it can't be done. She's lost her powers."

"Has she?" Salvia almost appeared surprised.

"Of course she has. She must know if it were otherwise."

"Then let me say this to you, Lennon. One of Willow's negative qualities is blaming others for their own misfortunes."

"So? I think I already knew that."

"There is more, but first you must deal with the ritual and then..."

"Hey, Lennon!" Someone called from the fence. He looked up and saw Jess. Salvia disappeared before his eyes.

30. The elemental.

Lennon let fly a string of curse words. "Yeah, great to see you, too," said Jess, laughing.

Lennon made his way over to him, looking very annoyed. "You have the worst timing, you know that?" he said.

"Nah, my mother has the worst timing. She'll always turn up just as I'm about to do something I don't want her to see."

Lennon tried to calm down. After all, to Jess, it must have looked as though he was just standing there doing nothing. "I didn't mean to be rude to you."

"No offence taken, buddy. I can't stay long," he said. "I just had something I wanted to give you."

"Wait, you came to find me? How did you even know my address?"

"Library records," he said, simply. Lennon noticed a twinkle in his eye. He pulled out a necklace that looked like a bird attached to a blue crystal. "It's a phoenix wrapped around a Siberian blue quartz," he explained. "It will help protect you."

"I can't take this," he said.

Jess looked at him. "Oh, it's very easy. You see, you hold your hand out, but make sure it's open, mind you, and being palm side up helps, too. Then I put it into your hand and you close your fingers around it. See? You can take it."

"No, I meant I can't accept this gift."

"I've no use for it," said Jess. "It's just going to lay around at home gathering tarnish and dust. I think you should have it. Make sure you wear it. It will protect you."

"Well, I'll pay you for it." Not that he could afford it, but he just couldn't accept such a gift. He barely knew him.

"No can do, buddy. This can only be given. Now accept it, or I'll start saying 'things aren't always what they seem' over and over

again."

Lennon laughed and reluctantly took it from him. Jess was the oddest person he knew, and that was saying a lot. "Well, thanks, then," he said. He suddenly felt very awkward. "Once again, I'm really sorry for snapping at you. I was just talking to someone."

"You mean the fae?" said Jess. "Sorry, I just assumed you always did that."

Lennon stood there stunned. "What?"

"Well, I must hurry off and let you get back to it. If the clock strikes midday, I spontaneously burst into flames... like a phoenix." He chuckled and before Lennon could reply, he had gone.

"Wait," he shouted out after him, somewhat belatedly. He wasn't sure if he should follow him or try and find Salvia again. He decided the latter was much more important.

He returned to the spot where he had chatted to him and softly called his name, but nothing happened. He tried a few more times with the same results. He cursed.

He looked at the phoenix in his hand and sighed. Another mystery. Who exactly was Jess? He wished he had more time to head to the library to find out, but he knew that the painting might end up being sold in his absence.

He turned over the pendant in his hand and decided that maybe he should put it on. If he needed anything right now, it was protection.

The moment he put it around his neck, he felt lighter. He also felt a pull to go to his room and meditate.

He had the strongest feeling that he could achieve something now. A door within his mind seemed to be opening and some heavenly force felt like it was pushing him through.

He went inside and headed upstairs to his room. He heard voices coming from within and felt annoyed that they had gone into it without even asking him. Yes, he was a guest, but surely, he was

entitled to some privacy. He walked through the door and was immediately introduced to Wendy who appeared to be gushing over the painting. She was a very plump lady, with a pink, round face, complete with round glasses.

Her greying hair was set in a bun and she spoke with a strong Australian accent. She must have arrived when he was talking to Salvia, and he had been too absorbed to notice.

Mary had a very satisfied look on her face. "Guess what, Lennon. The painting is worth a lot of money. Wendy has offered me two thousand for it."

"Damn," he said, softly and couldn't keep the disappointment out of his face.

"What's wrong, Lennon?" asked his Aunt.

"It's just that I really liked that painting."

"Nonsense, my boy," replied Mary. "We'll buy you something nicer with the money. No, not buy, I'll give you half. Can't be fairer than that, hey? After all it was you who gave me the idea."

To Lennon, that was a fortune and he was sorely tempted to say yes, but he knew that no amount of money was worth losing Willow and the garden.

"That's very kind of you Aunt, but I wish I could keep it here for at least one more night."

"Oh, no," said Wendy. "I can't wait another day for this one. It's just too good to leave behind." She giggled in a girlish manner and patted him on the behind. Mary scowled at her and suggested they go downstairs and have a pot of tea. "Could I have some time alone here," asked Lennon. "I just need to rest a bit after gardening."

"We'll be a while yet," said Wendy. "We've got lots to catch up on." Mary nodded and said it would be a while before they would want to take the painting from here. He sighed in relief as they left.

Lennon found that all thoughts of what he come in for was almost

gone. He hadn't forgotten his task, but now he was just too upset to meditate. It seemed that there was going to be little point now with the painting about to go.

"But no, damnit," he swore. He reasoned that Salvia must have known this was about to happen. Maybe he was trying to warn him, or maybe that's why Jess had appeared out of the blue. He had to try, come what may.

He got comfortable on the bed and focused on his breathing, and his mind started to feel calmer and more lucid.

He felt the phoenix at his chest tingling. At least it felt that way. Maybe it was the presence of something foreign there, but an odd, almost itch like sensation was growing around his heart.

For the first time since he started trying to meditate, he felt that he was easily able to slip below the surface of his conscious mind. He still wasn't sure what he was doing, but this felt natural. He also felt that time was running out.

He concentrated on a breathing technique described in the book, and the chatter of mind became stilled. For a few moments, he was in a blackness which seemed to stretch into infinity, and suddenly time seemed to cease to have any real meaning.

A picture formed, and he found himself in an enormous garden. He was on a blue path and on each side of him were streams of flowers and trees, each one individual and different. This was not any garden he had seen before, but the image was quite clear.

He felt serene. On one side of him there was a willow tree, it's branches glowing a bright orange yellow. It was also flowering, and he touched one of the flowers.

He felt the connection of universal acceptance and love. The taking responsibility for one's own actions and his part in his own reality.

The vision faded, and he was back in his bedroom. He could hardly believe what had just happened. He had never experienced such a blissful feeling or vivid vision.

He felt that something within him had shifted. He was now

empowered, energized... unstoppable.

Then a most urgent feeling came over him that he must now deal with the ritual right then and there. Somehow, he knew he could do it.

Once again, he drifted off into another lucid state of mind.

He saw a dark purple pentagram. It was hard to look at. Difficult to examine. He felt its resistance at being probed, but he was feeling strong now and overcame it. Impressions began to flow into his mind.

It appeared that the object had conditions that should he try to examine it, it would send out warnings that it should be left alone.

The first was a clear caution not to examine it too closely lest it disrupt its power. The actual ritual itself was extremely clear, but he felt himself struggling as he tried to focus on what they actually were.

The second was that the pentagram should not be discussed, for that would diminish its powers. So, it prevented him from bringing it up to anyone.

Now he really had to struggle to look further. However, this time, there were no interruptions and he managed to go on.

The next revelation was that it was an elemental. This puzzled him as he didn't understand what it meant. In his mind knowledge came to him. An elemental was something created from energy and thought to perform a specific task.

Then he knew why it had been so hard to look at. It was programmed to resist examination. Should he try to really examine it, the elemental would create the circumstances to prevent him from doing so. And indeed, every time he had tried, he was interrupted, or he was just too tired or busy to try.

Abruptly, he felt a wall crumble and he suddenly understood everything about the ritual. It was exactly as Zal'gan had said. It really was a ritual of summoning. The words of power had been in Angelic language and the final one was meant to bind him to them.

And with that understanding, the power of the ritual completely faded.

He felt himself drift back to reality. He knew what he had experienced was real. What was more, he realized that he had been helped by a demon. But why? That part made no sense, but he knew he had no time right now to dwell on it. He knew the painting was in the process of being sold and he needed to find a way to stop that.

Then a simple idea came to him.

Lennon ran down the stairs and asked his aunt if he could make a phone call. Mary looked questionably at him but gave her consent. Dialling quickly, he rang Heather. She answered within a few rings, much to his relief.

"Heather, it's me, Lennon," he said. "I need you to find out how much Sam thinks that painting is worth."

"Painting? The one of the two lasses?"

"Yes. The one in my bedroom. I've got to know immediately or sooner." He knew he sounded rude, but Heather seemed to catch the urgency in his voice and promised she'd ring Sam right after he hung up. Lennon told her to meet him at the garden fence after she did. He didn't want his aunt answering the phone and getting her suspicions aroused. He glanced furtively into the kitchen, where her and Wendy were still chatting over a cup of tea.

Less than a minute later, he was anxiously waiting next to the fence. Long minutes seemed to pass until Heather appeared. It seemed more like thirty minutes, but in reality, it was only five.

"I spoke to Sam, Lennon. He was as surprised by the question as I was, but he did tell me it was worth at least twenty thousand dollars, considering the composition and special paints he had put into it. The frame alone is worth two grand."

"Thanks," said Lennon, hurriedly. "I'll explain later." And he rushed back into the house.

Calmly he walked into the kitchen and smiled at them both.

Wendy and Mary smiled back. He said that he just wanted a drink of water and got a glass to fill at the sink.

"You must be pleased with your bargain," he said to Wendy, as he sipped the water.

Her face seemed to flush a little. "Oh, it's not really a bargain. I'm sure I was very generous with my offer," she replied.

"That you were," agreed Mary.

"Then Heather must be wrong, I guess," said Lennon.

"Eh? About what?" asked his Aunt.

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Lennon!" Her tone was warning him she expected no nonsense from him.

"Well, you know that she knew the owners of this house? Well she said that the painter, who was the son, reckoned it was worth around twenty thousand. I checked as you said you'd give me half and I wanted us both to benefit. The frame alone is worth two thousand."

Mary's eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

"No way!" she said. "I would have to hear it from the woman's lips herself!"

"I've got her number," offered Lennon, but Mary, being the type of person she was, already had it. In fact, she had every number in the entire block.

"Excuse me," she said and left the kitchen. They both heard her on the phone for a few minutes and when she returned, she looked at Wendy accusingly.

"What?" said her friend.

"It is worth at least twenty grand," she said, putting the emphasis on the 'at least'.

Wendy flushed and started to stammer. "Nonsense. It's worth six, tops," she blustered. "Not a cent more."

"Well, that's four grand up on two," snapped back Mary, "which, you told me was already a generous offer."

"Just imagine how much it would be worth when he dies," continued Lennon, innocently.

Mary did just that. This was an investment which she had almost practically given away. She stood up and decided that only a fool would sell it without knowing the full facts first. She said as much to Wendy, who suddenly lost her pleasant demeanour as her face went red with anger.

A quarrel broke out between them and Lennon knew it would be a wise move to make himself scarce.

Though he regretted having made them fight, somehow, he did not feel it was a bad thing. There was something about Wendy he did not like and was glad she wasn't getting the painting.

He made a quick move to his bedroom and lay down on the bed. He decided that he had better write down what he had learned before he forgot it and lose the importance of his revelations.

The time passed quickly, and as he was not a fast writer he had made a quick summary in point form, and then proceeded to write what he had experienced.

He pondered the Willow tree and how it felt when he touched it. He had experienced what it was like when Willow had touched him in the negative and now he knew what it felt like when things were positive. In fact, it felt very much how she had felt the last time they touched.

Like a stroke of lightning, the full impact of his revelation came to him. She had displayed a positive quality. She had turned a negative one into a positive one. She had told him that it couldn't be done, that she would always remain in the negative, but if that was so, then how could she have accepted responsibility for what had occurred?

To Lennon, this was proof that she could change back. That she didn't have to be like she was any more. He grew very excited and wish that he could rush off to tell her this revelation, but of course, he couldn't.

Still, tonight he would tell her the good news, and together they could work to heal the spiritual connection that had estranged the garden and Holly.

A few hours later, his initial enthusiasm had cooled off a bit. He had had a bit more time to consolidate things within his mind. He was now glad that he hadn't been able to reach Willow before for he realised that such a revelation might produce a contrary reaction if it wasn't handled properly. If she had decided that she was going to remain negative, then nothing he could say or do would make any difference, and she might even go back to blaming others for her misfortunes.

No, he would have to tread very carefully, and make certain that she would arrive at her own conclusions. Whatever the case, he vowed that he would be there to help and see her through it.

Early evening, Heather rang him to find out what had happened in regard to the painting, and also if Jonah had been of any help at all. Lennon felt very guilty. He had completely overlooked the fact that Heather would be wondering what was going on. For that matter, he had almost forgotten about Sam as well.

He explained what had gone on with the painting almost being sold, and how he had managed to save it. Then he told her that Jonah had not been all that helpful but thanked her anyway for providing him with the opportunity. He still felt very hesitant about revealing anything about what had happened over the last few days. One reason was because he felt that if things went horribly wrong, then no one but him would have to know. Another was that he felt embarrassed about how ignorant he had been.

Instead, he said, evasively, that he had made some progress, but it was too early to tell what effect it might have. "When things are over, I'll tell you all you want to know," he promised her. "Did he say anything when you spoke to Sam this morning? Have you heard from him at all?"

"Every few days," said Heather. "He rings to see if there's any news, but you know that he's not expecting much. It's not the most positive attitude, I think, personally."

He thanked her for her support and her friendship. "I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"Oh, posh! Something would have come along," she replied.

After he hung up, he went down to a nearby nursery which luckily was still open and bought a pot plant of orchids. Also, almost as an afterthought, he went into the newsagents and bought a 'thank you' card.

Heather was delighted with her gift and gave him a big hug. He told her that she deserved it and was sorry that he hadn't gotten around to it before. "I guess I'm not too used to people going out of their way to help me," he explained.

She told him not to be so silly, and that just being grateful was more than enough for her.

Evening came, and he was too excited to sleep. His chest itched, and he scratched it and felt the phoenix pendant. Should he wear it to the garden? He knew it was for protection, but he wasn't sure what would happen if he brought it to a different world. To be safe, he removed it and placed it on the bedside table in a small box he had handy.

Finally, the time arrived, and on cue, an almost full moon seemed to shine through his bedroom window. He looked at the painting and noticed that the moon seemed to be making it glow. On closer inspection, the effect seemed to be coming from where the rainbow should be.

Wasting no more time, he went to the locked room and entered the portal.

He had been a little scared that Willow might not be there this time, but to his relief she was waiting in her usual spot for him.

Her face lit up, and she ran towards him. "You came!" she said, kissing him. Lennon noted that she sounded almost as joyous as a child. It was music to his heart.

"I couldn't keep away if I tried," he replied, between kisses.

"I thought that, after my confession, you'd hate me."

"I told you that I didn't."

"You could have been saying that to be nice. I'm so happy that you returned," she sighed.

Her eyes were warm and affectionate, nothing like the cold iciness from the first time they had met.

Lennon knew that this relationship was impossible, but at that moment, he just didn't care. Just being with her was all that mattered to him now.

So entranced were they by each other that they did not notice their surroundings. If they had chanced to look, they would have spotted Holly, and she was headed towards them.

31. The spiritual equivalent of suicide.

"How are you feeling?" To Lennon, Willow looked a little different. Something was changed, but he wasn't sure what?

"I feel fine when I'm with you," she replied.

"Yes, I feel the same."

Willow suggested that they go back to her spot. They both turned to go, and that was when they both saw Holly. She was near now, and she would have been clearly able to see who they both were.

"Holly...", was all Lennon was able to croak out.

"Curse my tardiness. Now we are caught like two insects in a web," said Willow.

"What will she do?"

"What she will do, I canna say. I have not spoken to her since that night."

The comment both surprised and amazed him. How had she avoided her all these years, and more importantly, how would she react when she reached Willow.

"What will we do?" he asked her, but suddenly found that he was addressing thin air. Willow had done her vanishing trick and left him to face her all by himself. This was the last thing he needed right now, and he hardly knew what he was going to say.

He waited for her, resigned to his fate. He hardly could vanish like Willow, though at this moment he wished he could.

At last she reached him. She was as beautiful as ever, and he wondered how he ever could have forgotten such beauty.

"Hello," she said, gaily. "I think I remember you."

"Yes, you probably do," he replied.

"What is your name?"

"Lennon," said Lennon. What was he going to tell her if she asked

about Willow? He could hardly lie to her, even for Willow's sake.

"Lennon," she repeated. "Yes, I remember a Lennon. Hi, Lennon."

Her soft, sweet voice made him understand why he had fallen so hard for her in the first place. This was a voice that could melt butter, and despite the psychic attack on her, she had somehow maintained her loving nature and gentle disposition. If he had not been so in love with Willow, he would have once more been smitten with her.

She spontaneously seized his hand and said: "Lennon, who was that with you just before?"

The touch of her hand on his made it hard for him to concentrate for two reasons. One, it sent a ripple of delight up his spine. Two, he knew that Willow would be watching and would become enraged with anger.

He considered lying, but his gut feeling strongly told him that it was imperative to be truthful. Even a simple lie could cause irreparable harm to him and the garden.

"That was Willow," he replied, at last.

"Willow," she said, automatically. "Why did she go?"

"I'm not sure," he replied, evasively, though he had a pretty good idea.

"Willow was my sister. I remember that. We spent much time together. Why did she leave me?"

"I can't say," he said. "How come you never tried to find out?"

"I may have tried, but my memory isn't so good. I remember Willow and that my name is Holly, and my friend Tiger Fawn. Everything else is like a faraway dream."

Lennon wasn't sure what he should say, so he ended up keeping silent. Holly kept on looking searchingly at him, but he could think of nothing to say.

Finally, she said: "If you should see her again, tell her that... I miss her." She broke into a soft sobbing, and before his startled eyes,

faded away.

"Oh, my stars!" he exclaimed. "What happened to her?"

There was no response. He at least expected Willow to return, but as she didn't he felt that he'd have to go and look for her. The most obvious place was the willow tree. As he moved that direction, his mind was filled with questions on how he should try and handle this latest development.

Willow was waiting for him. Lennon noted with an uneasiness that the icy look in her eyes had returned. He was going to have to tread very carefully.

"She's gone, Willow," he told her.

"She's a curse," she responded. "I love a mortal and she comes and takes him away."

"Hey, that's not true. I'm still here," he pointed out.

"Don't think I didn't see her holding that hand of yours," she snapped.

"She took my hand, and all it did was make me think more of you. But that's not the issue here, is it?"

"What are you leading to here, Lennon. I'm not in the mood for games."

"Holly gave me a message for you."

"Well, out with it!"

"She said she missed you."

Willow looked suspiciously at him. "Aye, I'm sure she does."

"Can't you see? She doesn't hate you. She still misses your companionship and she can't understand why you went away. For that matter, how do you avoid her?"

"By remaining out of sight whenever she's about."

"Yes, that's certainly an annoying habit you have," thought Lennon.

She seemed to be going back to her old self. Holly had triggered off a reaction that he hadn't anticipated. He suddenly feared that she would cut him off and he'd lose her completely.

"Willow, listen," he said, urgently, "Isn't it time you resolved your relationship with her?"

"I can't," she said, "and nothing on this plane can make me."

"I think you can," he replied. He moved toward her, but she stepped back. It was almost as though she was creating a barrier of sorts between them.

A gale force wind seemed to pick up, swirling the energy around his head. A dark mist descended around the area and converged around her.

"It's much too late for everything," she cried. "Go, Lennon. Go now. You mustn't see this."

Lennon had a horrible feeling that she was going to do something drastic. He wasn't sure if she could commit suicide, but whatever she was about to do, it was going to be pretty final.

"Willow, don't do anything stupid," he begged.

"Go now, Lennon. All things must come to an end, and this ends now."

It was all or nothing. "NO!" he screamed, desperately. "You're not getting away that easily. Not from me, not from Holly, and not from the garden. You shall stop whatever it is you're doing NOW!"

She hesitated. He wondered if he was getting through. He continued, urgently. "It isn't too late, Willow. It's never too late. You say you can't be positive again, but you can, and you've already proven that."

This made her do a double take. "Rubbish. Your words are all but empty promises."

"They're not," he said, desperately. "Really, they're not. Listen, last night you took responsibility for your actions. That's one of your positive qualities, isn't it?"

She looked uncertain.

"Well, ISN'T IT?" he shouted.

Something was happening. The barrier seemed to disperse, the dark mist lifted, and the moment of crisis faded.

"Yes. Yes, it is," she replied, softly, and wept.

32. Find a double rainbow.

Lennon took her in his arms and comforted her. "We can make things right once more," he told her. "Together, you and I, we can work to make things whole again."

"I want to believe you, Lennon," she replied. "But how do we do it?"

For that, he had no idea, but he knew that he must not let on to her that he did not know. He searched deep inside for an answer and one came to him. Whether it was the correct one though, only time would tell.

"By confronting the past," he said. "By going to Holly and giving yourself over to her."

"I can't," she wailed. "How can I bear to even look at her after what I've done?"

"She still loves you. That's her quality, isn't it? And isn't one of yours forgiveness?"

"I don't deserve her love. I don't deserve her forgiveness."

"Forgive yourself, Willow, and maybe in turn she might forgive you."

"I can't," she sobbed. "How can I?"

Suddenly a line from the song Lennon had heard on his first visit came to his lips. "It's time to mend our heart," he said. "Willow, don't you see? You've suffered enough for your crime. These long years of a dying garden. The solitude, bitterness and loneliness. It's got to end. You yourself just told me all things come to an end. Well, you were right, but not in the way you thought."

To Lennon's surprise, she started to sing the song he had just quoted. Her voice was melodic and beautiful. She sang it to herself, under her breath.

*Find a double rainbow
Let all your dreams come true
May all the love I have inside*

Find its way to you

*Find a double rainbow
Though things have fallen apart
I pray for help to come to us
It's time to mend our heart."*

"You sang that?" he asked.

"Never sang it. At least not till now. Never spoke it neither. But I thought it up a long time ago. It was from me to Holly, but I thought on it often." She looked at him, her eyes were suddenly bright and hopeful. "You're right, Lennon. This is a sign, nothing surer. The time to mend the woes has at last arrived."

An uncontrollable grin surfaced on his face. Somehow, he felt lighter, almost as though he could fly. A heavy burden had been lifted from his chest, though he did not know that he had carried it until that very moment.

"How do we start?" he asked.

"If I revitalize our connection to the spiritual planes, and send healing vibrations to Holly, then it may well be a start. But once I have done this, she may well hate me for what I have done to her, and to Sam."

"Can you do that?"

"You pointed out that I still have my positive qualities. I'm sure I can."

"And at last you can stop hating yourself."

"If only it was that simple."

"All of us have done things we've hated ourselves for at one time or another, but the important thing is that we learn and grow from it. If you can do that, then good may come out of all of this."

Willow asked him if he would help her mend the links. Naturally he agreed, and they both sat together and began a meditation. They both held hands and formed a bond with each other. Time seemed to merge into one long moment as they both created forms of healing and sent them forth to where it was needed.

But such things couldn't be healed in a short space of time, and eventually Lennon knew that it was time for him to return.

"Do you think you can carry on without me?" he asked her.

"It's all I shall be doing. It's not easy, as I fear how Holly will be towards me, but I can do it with you being there for me. Maybe when you return, things may have healed a little more and perhaps things might be a little healthier for us all."

He kissed her goodbye and returned. He already knew that the next day would last forever for him. How he wished he could flick a switch and instantly skip that day.

Despite his fears, he fell asleep very quickly, and dreamt of flying the entire night. When he awoke, he felt light hearted and gaily jumped out of bed, ready for another day.

The first thing that caught his eye was the painting. The rainbow had started to fill out with colour. In awe, he went up to it and marvelled at how it was connected to the garden. The colours were still pale, but this had to be a sign that the spiritual link was healing. His heart was gladdened, and he bounded joyfully down to breakfast.

He wanted to spend the day gardening, but it had turned bitterly cold, and a constant drizzle was falling, making it muddy and unpleasant. He sighed and spent most of his time day dreaming about Willow and how things could be when she had reconciled things with Holly.

He began to also wonder about what would happen to his relationship. Would he be forgotten? Would it come to an end? Or perhaps someone like Salvia would appear and tell him that he had achieved his mission and was no longer allowed in there. Whatever the outcome, he knew he had helped mend things.

There were still so many questions unanswered. Who were They? Zal'gan had told him but that still meant nothing to him. Why had they tried to bind him and take over the garden? Why had Zal'gan, a demon by his own confession, helped and protected him. Who exactly was Jess? So many questions and so few answers.

That night he returned to the garden. The first thing that struck him was that the grass was greener, and he could detect a faint aura of life about it. The energy was now much stronger. This was heartening, and he ran over to the willow tree.

He expected to find Willow waiting for him but pulled up short when he almost ran into Holly. He had not anticipated this and wondered if her link had healed yet.

"Hello, Lennon," she said. Somehow her voice was different. Whereas before it was of a childlike innocence and naiveté, it now carried more assertiveness.

"Oh, Holly," he replied, taken aback. "Hello."

"If you're looking for Willow, she doesn't appear to be here."

"Oh." There was no doubt about it. She was almost a different person to the one he had met previously.

And yet another thought hit him. What if Willow had decided to commit the cosmic equivalent of suicide during his absence.

"Where is she?"

"Hiding from me." It was a simple statement, but it showed that Holly certainly knew what had been going on, or at least was aware of Willow's part in the decay.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her, cautiously.

"Restored," she said, but her voice was almost tense. "But without Willow I don't feel whole."

Lennon asked her if she knew why she was hiding from her. She smiled ruefully and said that she knew perfectly well why.

"I'm back in touch and I'm aware why my life was such a fog for these long years past."

"I suppose you feel resentful about it?"

She shook her head. "That's not me and I hope it never will be. Forgiveness is something that comes from my core, but I need to talk to her for both our sakes. If we don't reconcile then the garden will never fully heal."

He looked at her and thought what an exceptional being she was. No wonder Sam had fallen so hard for her. Put in her situation, he wasn't so sure that he could forgive so readily.

"Come out, Willow," said Holly to the willow tree. "I don't hate you."

"Maybe if you left, I could talk to her and try to convince her to talk."

"It's alright, Lennon," said Willow, emerging from the tree. Lennon could not believe his eyes. It was as if she had been part of the willow and walked right out from it. In hindsight, she was the dryad of the tree and it did make sense.

The two sisters looked at each other. He felt like an intruder and wondered if he should make himself scarce, but he had to see this and could not move away.

"I'm so sorry," said Willow. "I can't begin to make up or express my sorrow over what I've done."

"Things will be better now," promised Holly. "I'm not angry. Perhaps this was our karma for trying to bring a mortal man to live here and attempting to prevent him from following his own path and marrying."

"Then it was too high a price to pay."

"We did wrong. We should have just remained Sam's guides and friends, and not tried to make him our own."

"That still doesn't excuse..."

But Holly interrupted. "Willow, perhaps this had to happen. If we would have carried through our plan, my plan, then perhaps the long-term consequences might have been worse. Sam was never meant to come here. He had his own path to follow and the worst thing you can do is to block their path for selfish reasons. Don't you see, Willow. We tried to block his path, and in turn ours became blocked."

She did understand, and they embraced each other, each releasing all their hurt, grief and frustration in a teary

reconciliation.

33. An ending.

Lennon found that he was almost crying, too. Around him, things magically started to come back to life before his eyes. As far as he could see, the land was being infused with energy and beginning to look radiant. He knew that soon it would once again look like the other levels he had once seen.

He decided to be discreet and left the two sisters alone. As he walked, he could not get over the amazing and sudden changes that occurred. He went from bed to bed marvelling at the exquisite beauty of the flowers.

He even noticed that other beings were starting to appear. A few minutes later, he heard Willow call his name. He turned towards her and saw them both approaching him. He wondered what he was going to do now. The garden had been restored and his mission was complete. But his feelings for Willow had not changed. He still loved her, and he suddenly feared for the future of their relationship.

"What now?" he asked, as soon as they drew near.

"Don't you see, Lennon?" said Holly, gaily, "Everything's being restored, thanks to you."

"I didn't do that much," he replied.

"It couldn't have happened without you," assured Willow. "We're going to be very busy for some time to come, but we'll always make time for you."

"But what about us?" he said, unable to contain himself.

She looked sadly at him. "I'll never be away from you," she said, gently. "But for there to be 'an us', you must come and live here, and you know that's not possible."

"Why not? I want it to be possible. I'll sacrifice anything to make it happen."

"As would I and as we once did. Lennon, I truly do love you, but you must go back to your life and follow your life's path. Great hurt can only arise if you don't."

His heart almost burst with grief. He knew she was right but that did not make him feel any better. He could barely look at her he felt so shattered. "I'd better go and leave you to it, then," was all he could say. He could hardly bear to be in her presence any longer. It was much too painful.

She hugged him and repeated that she would always be there for him.

He walked back to the portal and returned to his room with his grief and cried himself to sleep.

He dreamt. He was walking in the other garden that Salvia had shown him. All around him were nature spirits, whirling and flowing as they went about their appointed tasks.

Beside him was Salvia himself. "Thank you, Lennon," he said. "We can now begin to heal the harms."

Lennon realised he was dreaming, and then suddenly felt that this dream was very real. His soul had travelled to where Salvia was, while his body remained in his bed.

"So, what happens now?" he asked.

"The portal will no longer work," he said. "When you awaken, you will see the rainbow restored to its vivid colours, but we've stripped it of its power."

"Why?"

"Because mortals do not belong here. They may reap the benefits of this astral plane, but they should not physically enter it. You were an exception. We called on you because you were able to help even though you didn't know it at the time. Because of the paintings, you were able to gain entrance to our world. You may have also noticed that due to the special connection our world has to the paints, the paintings reflected your progress."

"So, that's why I'd noticed different things at different times," he said.

"Yes, and we also created the verse on the portal painting and the door handle helped to attune you to this place. We apologize that

you got so sick because of it. We did all we could to help you, but in the end, it was you who helped put things right. You managed to prevent 'Them' from using you, but be warned, They will certainly try again. They know who you are.

"Who am I?"

"The one who helps the earth energy. He who walks with The Gaia. The rest is part of your own journey, Lennon. You will remember in time, but it must be in your own way. Remember, timing is everything.

He sighed. "And Willow? Couldn't I somehow be with her and join her in the garden?"

"That is not possible," he looked sad. "But we thank you and remember, if your love is true, then know that you will never be far apart despite how it may seem."

"Can she at least visit?"

"That is not up to us. If it were, you could be assured we would make it happen."

Lennon nodded. "Okay, I do understand. Please excuse me now. I need to be alone with my grief."

Salvia bowed and blessed him.

He awoke. It was morning and he still felt grief stricken. The dreams were clearly etched in his mind. He looked at the painting and saw that Salvia was right, the rainbow had returned in all its vivid colours.

But the beauty did nothing to heal his heart.

When Aunt Mary came to get him up for school, he found that he couldn't face that prospect. He told her that he was sick, and he didn't think that he could go.

She tut-tutted about him getting sick again and how she hated having to look after ill people, but seemed to accept his illness as legitimate, and took steps to look after him.

Lennon lay all morning in bed. He felt lousy and it was all he could

do to stop himself from bursting into tears whenever he thought of Willow.

Chris came in to see how he was. Almost immediately, he noticed the rainbow. "Did you do that?" he asked.

"In a roundabout sort of way," he replied.

"It's wonderful." He got up and inspected it, shaking his head in disbelief. "I'll not ask." He sat back down and looked carefully at him. "What's wrong, Lennon? You say you're sick, but you look more heartbroken than sick. I know that look all too well."

How right he was, but he couldn't even bring himself to start telling him about the incredible chain of events that had occurred over the past few weeks. Chris almost seemed to understand.

"Lennon," he said, gently, "I don't know what her name is, but know this. Life goes on. The right one will be there for you. I'm here if you need to talk, but let's just keep this between us and leave Mary out of it."

Lennon thanked him and told him he wasn't ready to talk about anything just yet.

Later in that day, Heather rang for him. Mary came up to ask if he was well enough to take a phone call and he told her that he was.

She was in a state of excitement, hardly being able to get the words out. Sam had rung her up and told that his garden had come back to life, and what was more, he had been visited by Willow and Holly. She told him that they had explained what had happened, and how Lennon had helped them.

"You can expect something nice from him, I say," she suggested, "I always had faith in you, Lennon, and you proved me right. God bless you."

He felt gladdened for Sam, but even this did not help much in lessening his own hurt. But Uncle Chris was right, life did go on. He knew he would have to go back to school tomorrow and get on with life. Maybe in time, he would be able to get over it and move on.

He went back upstairs and looked at the painting. "Good bye, Willow," he said to it. "I love you."

The next day came around too quickly for him, still he dragged himself out of bed. It was almost September, and even now spring was in the air. Soon the warm weather would return and then summer would come, and he could at last join his mother up north.

As he left the house, he noticed the flowers in the garden beginning to bloom, and the leaves growing anew on the trees. He looked hopefully around to see if he could see Willow, but there was nothing.

At school, he went to his class with the intention of throwing himself into his studies. At least that would help him to forget.

He was at his desk when he noticed a new girl walk into the class room. She walked over to an empty seat next to him and ask whether it was free. It was. He looked at her and noticed that she had the warmest blue eyes he had ever seen. Though he had never seen her before today, there was something oddly familiar about her.

"It's free. Are you new here?"

"Yes," she replied.

"I'm Lennon."

"Hello, Lennon," she said, with a shy smile. "I'm Willow."