



## THE SHANNON



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The seven trees were tall, slender hazels, golden-barked and bronze-leaved, though they were not true hazels. They were slimmer than a hazel should be and lighter of colour, their leaves too were smaller.

And significantly, no bird sang in their leaves, no bees hummed through the branches; even the very air around them seem softer, quieter, gentler.

One by one the druids stepped back, leaving the venerable arch-druid standing alone before the small pool of dark water that was ringed by the circle of the trees. The ancient plunged the tip of his long alder staff deep into the water, perfect circles widening across the almost glassy skin, green and gold light sparkling beneath the surface.

Bowing to the circle of trees, the arch-druid retreated onto the narrow animal track that led deep into the heart of the forest. Once they had left this place, the druids would use their magic to seal the entrance to this hollow forever.

One by one the druids made their obeisance to the trees and then each one stepped away, their portion of the ritual now complete.

When the last of the druids had left the circle, the leaves and bushes around the mouth of the track

rustled with life, vines twisting, turning, moving, looping across the entrance, creepers snaking across the ground, grass growing tall and rank, gorse and furze rising up to create an impenetrable thicket.

In the long silence that followed, the woman stepped out from her hiding place, a smile of triumph twisting her thin lips. She had been planning this for many days, ever since word had rippled through the De Danann community that it was time for them to leave the World of Men. The news was not unexpected - they had taken the place of the Fir Bolg on this tiny island, and now the Milesians were taking their place. But what the majority of the De Danann had been unprepared for was the swiftness with which these puny Iberian southerners had claimed the island.

The new invaders of this green land, the Sons of Mil, had brought with them the one weapon against which the People of the Goddess had no defence: iron. Perhaps iron had once been part of the De Danann lore, but if so, it had been long forgotten. When they had fled the De Danann Isle, they had carried away many secrets to the land that would one day be known as Erin: the secrets of script, of raising crops and cattle, of working the precious metals of gold and silver. They had brought with them song and music and the Old High Magic that was ancient when the De Danann Isle was young. Their medicines could cure most ills, their magic could ensure everlasting youth - but against the cold iron they had no defences. Its very presence

weakened them, it stole their magical power, its slightest cut could kill. So rather than face the Sons of Mil in battle, the proud De Danann race were retreating into the Secret Places, the hidden valleys, the floating islands, the land beneath the waves, the Otherworld.

But they were leaving their magic behind.

There was silence in the ancient forest...and then in the distance, throbbing on the heavy afternoon air, the woman heard the conch shells sounding in triumph as the druids emerged from the depths of the forest, their dangerous task complete.

Her smile broadened into a grin as she approached the pool. She was Sinann, Mistress of the Tuatha De Danann. She was slightly smaller in stature than the De Danann folk, and her features weren't so finely formed. There was Cluricaune blood in her veins, and therefore she was an outcast amongst her own race and the Small Folk. She had endured too many years of degradation because of an accident of birth: now she would have her revenge. Sinann looked at each of the trees in turn: these were the Seven Branches of Knowledge, the Seven Schools of Wisdom developed by the People of the Goddess. Here were the mysteries of the ancient world, the arcane magic of the gods...here was the sovereignty of the Tuatha De Danann.

Here was her revenge.

When the De Danann knew that they had no



choice but to abandon the World of Men, it had been decided to leave their knowledge as a legacy for future generations. Deep in the heart of the ancient wood, they had imbued seven hazel trees with ~~their~~ entire knowledge. As the trees ~~matured~~ the hazel-nuts would drop into the pool, there to await the Sons of Men when they had attained the necessary skills and wisdom to penetrate the forest's defences.

But Sinann was not going to allow that to happen. She had simply to eat the budding hazel-nuts to realise the complete knowledge of her race. And knowledge was power.

She looked at the trees. They were blossoming even as she watched, their leaves unfolding, the catkins appearing like golden threads, the hazel-nuts budding, swelling, hardening, darkening and then dropping - almost slowly - into the mirror-like surface of the pool. Each one entered the liquid without a sound and a single ripple shivered across the viscous surface.

Another nut swelled, growing almost within reach. The branch bent beneath the weight, and the nut fell.

Sinann's long-fingered hand shot out, clutching at the hazel-nut, and missed. She grabbed again, snatching at the large golden nut as it entered the water, her hand plunging up to the wrist in the icy liquid. She dragged her hand free of the tacky fluid, triumphantly clutching the hard nut.

It was hers...and the knowledge of the Tuatha De

Danann, was hers. It had been so simple. Now, she would have her revenge.

Sinann looked up, her brow creasing in a frown, silver water droplets glistening on her fingers. She was aware that ~~something~~ something had changed. It had been silent in the forest, now that silence had become deeper, almost palpable. Was it her imagination or was there a trembling in the air before her eyes, a shimmering haze? She suddenly wondered what guardians the druids had placed around the pool...within the pool! The thought came a single heartbeat too late.

The water erupted in a solid silver column. Sinann turned and ran. Even as she raced through the entangling briars and fronds, she knew it was too late. Her only hope now was to reach one of the blessed spots, places secure from the influences of magic. She wasn't even sure if they would protect her from the demon now taking shape behind her.

She raced south, using her limited magical powers to aid her, fleeing the growing thunder of the water-spirit that now pursued ever closer behind her. She spun petty spells in her wake, irritations that would have stopped a lesser creature, but which the well-guardian did not even feel.

Sinann knew if she reached the sea she was safe; salt was an anathema to most of the spirit world. She ran until her muscles began to tear with the

effort, and her heart was close to bursting and perhaps she would have made it...had she not looked back.

The sight that greeted her horrified gaze - a towering man-shaped figure of liquid, silver-skinned, with teeth of crystal and eyes of fire - caused her to falter, to stumble. Howling in triumph, its voice the roar of the water, the demon fell upon the hapless woman.

As it scooped her up in its maw, its monstrous shape dissolved, the water exploding across the earth, cutting a swath through the fertile countryside, the water spreading out across the fields, swamping the tiny De Danann villages, sweeping all before it into the broad Atlantic Ocean.

Sinann screamed and the creature took her voice; she struggled as it consumed her soul and her spirit, absorbing them into itself. Sinann *became* the mighty river.

The knowledge of the Tuatha De Danann, the knowledge she had so desperately sought, became hers...became the rivers. The Pool of Knowledge, which birthed the river, fed her now, the Seven Hazel Trees of Knowledge nourished her with their golden fruit.

And she was powerless to use it.

When the Tuatha De Danann approached the

banks of the mighty river, they heard her voice in the lapping waves, felt the magical power that surged through the waters, recognised the power that flowed through its depths.

And they named the river the Sinann in memory of the man whose greed and curiosity had been her undoing. The name also served as a warning to those who might be tempted to interfere with the ancient lore.